



YERUN input to the open consultation on the Amendment on the Regulation on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and the design of the EIT Strategic Innovation Agenda 2021-2027

YERUN welcomes the opportunity to present some feedback on the developments and activities of the EIT and the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) in particular. Our reply is based on consultation with our members, both participants and not participants in the EIT activities.

Innovation capacity in higher education institutions (HEIs) relates to the ability to evolve and undertake change in order to meet demands of society. This relates to the areas of education, research and innovation, and is translated often with the ability to create spin-off companies, to foster entrepreneurship and to develop educational programs that meet the needs of the labor market, thereby contributing to an innovative and smart economic transformation. All over Europe, universities are increasingly developing innovation capacity in this sense, being stimulated or motivated by a variety of (f)actors: financial, regulatory and political, to name a few. ‘Modernisation’ of HEIs is a constant process that occurs at different speeds but both across the EU, and within national and regional borders.

The EU’s research and innovation policies have played their role in increasing the innovation capacities in HEIs, but they always have to be matched with adequate public policies and funding in member states and regions, and an engaged and active industrial sector. The EIT, as part of the activities supported by the EU, has an impact in increasing the opportunities for innovative activities and networking capacities of its partners but that depends also on the solid record that partner institutions already bring to the KICs. The role of the EIT as a mechanism to mainstream innovation in a larger number of HEIs in Europe is much more limited in its current form. Although the EIT has supported innovation capacity development in HEIs, it seems that it has mainly benefited those that are part of the KICs.

Under the current development of Horizon Europe another dynamic is required for the EIT, and its role should be defined with care. In particular, a proper balance should be found between, on the one hand the EITs as a funding body enabling innovation capacity, and on the other hand its institutional character, composed of an integrated community of parties that are beneficiaries of European and member states’ support for innovation capacity development.

YERUN defines two recommendations regarding the role and functioning of EIT and its KICs:

1. Develop a business model for the KICs that ensures a more inclusive approach and a spill-over scheme of activities to HEIs in addition to the members of an EIT/KIC

The European Commission (EC) aims for the whole higher education sector to become more entrepreneurial, to collaborate with the private sector in order to design innovative curricula for students and PhD candidates, and to continue fostering research and innovation with the potential for valorisation. This is something that already occurs in large amount of HEIs that have their business incubators and accelerators schemes, partnerships with private and public sector for research collaboration and update of results and established venues for ongoing dialogue with external partners in the strategic process of HEIs. HEIs do not exist in isolation and they do normally lead an ecosystem in the area where they are established and its surroundings. That said, areas with a limited presence of industrial partners will have more difficulties in developing these innovation capacities. The EIT could take up a role in this enabling process, for example by facilitating a wider and remote access for cooperation with industrial sectors.

Currently, some of the existing KICs are perceived as closed clubs of entities. The current structures lag behind sufficient outreach and engagement with HEIs, and other actors outside the existing consortium. In future developments of the EIT, the activities, projects and lessons learnt of existing KICs must ensure a wider outreach to create awareness of the possibilities for different institutions. The individual KICs shall transcend from a community of beneficiaries to a community of enablers. More flexibility is required in core and associate membership of the KICs and a certain degree of renewal in partnership should be encouraged. Further advanced mechanisms for HEI that do not belong to the KICs immediate partners should be created to facilitate access to participate in KICs' mobility schemes and knowledge transfer activities. There are already some ongoing efforts in this regard through the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme. However, the opportunities for mainstream should be given for all European countries and regions as well and not be limited to the eligibility of countries to participate in this scheme.

A risk of KICs being closed clubs is that the institutionalised character of the KICs may give rise to a dual system of higher education in Europe, headed by modernised entrepreneurial universities labeled and structurally supported by the EIT, and with a related strengthened access to other EU and national/regional support schemes. This dual system may increase the innovation divide within the European higher education landscape. YERUN pleads for an open, inclusive and transparent EIT model that will contribute to a higher degree of modernisation of the innovation capacity across all European HEIs. This is also in line with the EC commission reflected in other initiatives, including the pilot for European Universities launched at the end of October 2018 by DG EAC.

2. Ensure a level playing field for parties in all the funding programs and instruments in Horizon Europe, whether connected to KICs or not

The current proposal for Horizon Europe (HE) advocates for the importance of synergies. These are to be developed within and in between the pillars of the program itself, but also beyond, through partnerships and cohesion funding instruments steered by the smart specialization agenda. This approach is expected to create impact by efficiently leveraging public spending.

At the same time, at the level of participation in the programs, this approach may challenge the principle of equal access and favor the participation and success of a specific groups of entities.

Universities that participate in an institutionalised community of a KIC will be in a more consolidated position to access other funds thanks to the network and structure they already have. The synergetic links created in between programs of Horizon Europe and the collaborative links within the KICs will positively influence their individual projects under other EU funding programmes. At the same time ‘institutional’ EIT support, leveraged by support schemes at member states level will further strengthen the position of these HEI. Acknowledging the positive effect that the participation in the EIT has for the institutions involved, the EC must ensure that these opportunities are open and that it is key to engage HEIs find opportunities to enjoy the benefits of the EIT. Otherwise, without adapting the current EIT model, a self-perpetuating loop is created, decreasing the fair competition, and affecting the opportunities for research, educational and innovation funding at EU level, and at the level of member states.

Guaranteeing a level playing field and fair competition is a crucial prerequisite for a healthy and effective R&I program, both for its public and private participants. In fact, equal opportunities for newcomers, including smaller players, ensure renewal and innovation of the European R&I system. Finally, openness, fairness and inclusiveness of European programmes are also an essential condition for their continuation and increased support in the future.

– *About YERUN* –

The Young European Research University Network (YERUN) is a cluster of highly-ranked young universities in Europe that strengthens and facilitates cooperation in the areas of scientific research, academic education and services which benefit society. In this context, YERUN members consider that adequate support to human capital is essential to foster the next generations of (European) researchers and innovators. Strong support for excellent early-career researchers is therefore a priority for all YERUN members.

– *YERUN members* –

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