

YERUN POSITION PAPER ON THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON HORIZON 2020, HORIZON EUROPE AND ITS STRATEGIC PLANNING

Key aspects to look at for a thriving future of Horizon Europe

February 2023





In December 2022, the European Commission launched a wide-ranging public consultation on Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and its Strategic Planning. The Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) welcomes the efforts made by the Commission to engage with the different beneficiaries of the Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation. It is our shared belief that these Programmes can be regularly improved through stakeholder engagement together with thorough and critical reflection in co-creation processes. We are looking forward to the publication of the consultation's results – both aggregated data and preliminary analyses – and we stand ready to contribute constructively to the ensuing debate on next steps.

YERUN and its member universities, as well as their staff and researchers, submitted their answers to the consultation open by the Commission. To accompany these answers, the present policy paper aims to highlight issues of particular importance to our members. These issues can be grouped in three categories: **priorities, simplification and funding schemes**.

Setting priorities to Horizon Europe

The European Commission has been seeking to align Horizon programming with EU policy priorities and objectives. The introduction of **Strategic Plans** with Horizon Europe feeds into this ambition, which benefitted from input from diverse voices including EU Member States, EEA countries, the European Parliament, stakeholders and citizens. While it commends the efforts made to set up a co-design process for the elaboration of the Strategic Planning for Framework Programme 9, YERUN invites the Commission to explore together with stakeholders the **practical conditions for a more successful co-design process**. Different types of interactions create different opportunities for and qualities of stakeholder involvement. While surveys present many advantages, they also solidify the debate around pre-set notions and questions and should be coupled with direct and open exchanges with relevant stakeholders wherever possible. The timing and rhythm set for the process is also paramount: it would be recommended to wait until the first generation of projects has been concluded before tackling the current Programme's evaluation and future planning.

Regarding the priorities set for Horizon Europe, YERUN stands firmly behind the ambition to leverage research and innovation policy and investments to address the challenges of our times, including the **green** and **digital** transitions, also in relation to sustainable **energy, health** – especially in ageing societies – as well as **social justice**. It applauds the leading role taken by the EU to advance **Open Science** across Europe and globally, including by deepening **Citizen engagement** and developing **Citizen Science**.

At the same time, the EU increasingly frames the challenges it faces in terms of “strategic autonomy”, alongside appeals calling for relying on fewer, chosen countries around the world for key resources, technological exchanges and partnerships. Although such calls may be well-founded in certain respects, YERUN reiterates its **commitment to the ‘Stick to Science’ initiative**: science collaboration opportunities should remain as global and open as possible with our partners, beyond the most immediate EU geopolitical friendships. In any event, **collaboration with UK and Swiss scientists** should be ensured as widely as possible.





Furthermore, it remains largely the case that the identification of the challenges to be tackled belongs largely to the EU (and national) political leadership, looking to science for help in rolling out successful policies. This often extends to relying on scientists to fulfill increasingly specific objectives and tasks, notably through clusters under Pillar II as well as missions and partnerships. YERUN warns against the **risk that policy-making ultimately frames or even directs the production of scientific analyses and evidence**, rather than being truly informed by science. In line with the current drive towards bottom up and co-created initiatives, **scientists should be allowed to play a greater role in flagging the hidden and future challenges which our societies face**.

More generally, YERUN cautions against exaggerating the opposition made between blue-sky research and challenge-driven research – and similarly, the opposition between basic and applied research. Indeed, investing in today's **basic research** is the best guarantee to have the means to develop intellectual and technical tools to tackle current as well as future challenges. For the same reasons, the practice of **earmarking** funding for policy-driven research **should remain circumscribed** and should **not be developed at the expense of funding for blue sky and basic research**. Adequate opportunities for funding should also be made across all levels of Technological Readiness research, with an increase in funding for low TRL levels research projects. Furthermore, the use of **Societal Readiness Levels should be considered**, alongside a **holistic approach** to the impact of research and innovation.

In addition, YERUN would like to emphasize **once more** the important contribution of **Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (SSH)** to the world of research and to technological as well as social innovation. If one is to believe EU legislative texts, Horizon Europe “shall, where appropriate, provide for the integration of SSH across all clusters and activities developed under the [Framework] Programme, including specific calls for proposals on SSH related topics” (Article 7(2) of Regulation 2021/695). Yet, YERUN members observe that in practice, there is a lack of specific calls for SSH topics and researchers, a lack of seats for SSH experts in evaluation boards, as well as a lack of consideration generally given to SSH work, in so far as the latter is often only included as an “add-on” to pre-existing projects. YERUN encourages the Commission to **recognize the proper added value of SSH and to follow through with a rebalancing of the related funding, representation and project opportunities on offer**.

Finally, YERUN regrets that too often, funded projects do not lead to further take-up or to new initiatives building upon them after completion. It calls on the Commission to consider how to provide for more **follow-up opportunities after completion of these projects**. Relatedly, YERUN encourages the Commission to facilitate access to data on related projects and to produce centralized tools to get a concrete picture of the aggregated impact that completed EU funded projects had in relation to stated policy objectives.

Simplifying & improving Horizon processes

YERUN welcomes the efforts deployed by the Commission to clarify and explain the functioning of Horizon Europe and of its different components. Yet, these improvements do not make up for the fact that the structure and functioning of Framework Programme 9 remains extraordinarily complicated. New and additional instruments, conditions for access



and governance structures apply in parallel even where similar aims are pursued. This creates a burden on both individual researchers and institutions, which must invest time, develop expertise and often assign personnel just to understand how to navigate the EU funding landscape. Particular sticking points in this regard are **missions**, whose added value is not yet fully demonstrated, and **partnerships**, of which three types exist, only adding to the complexity of these instruments. This brings upfront the **inequalities in accessing R&I funding that are dependent on the level of R&I support and research-management expertise available** to research institutions, including financial capacity for external consultancy support in project generation and management.

This high access threshold creates a striking disparity between **insiders** (who know the system well and can benefit from it) and **new or less well-resourced players**. Too often, applicants need to have already been involved in networks or consortia in the past to be able to compete on equal terms, also because the level of complexity of the process triggers a need for past experience and connections to ensure success. Opportunities for **newcomers** remain exceedingly low with regards to universities, who saw **only 2,5% of H2020 funding** go to academic institutions who had not already obtained funding under the previous Framework Programme.

More generally, the multiplication of instruments and of policy objectives means that less funding is available for each one, **spreading the EU's R&I funding capacity increasingly thinner**.

Therefore, YERUN considers the present consultation as a meaningful step which should lead towards **a wide-ranging and profound simplification of the Framework Programmes structure**, as well as the provision of easier **access-routes for new players** to gain the necessary level of expertise and experience to both benefit from Horizon funding and contribute to its aims.

Beyond difficulties in the **pre-award** stage to understand, navigate and apply to Horizon instruments, the problem also translates at the **post-award** stage in organisational difficulties at several levels. For instance, participants in research projects under Pillar II clusters are expected to get information and coordinate with an increasingly large set of partners and institutions in consortia. The funding available simply does not cover sufficiently the **costs in time and personnel resources that comes with these coordination requirements**.

YERUN also urges the Commission to **wait** until it has a sufficiently fine-grained understanding of the merits and defects of **lump sum funding in different types of situations before rolling it out further**. Whereas lump sums would intuitively be welcome as tool for the simplification of the management of costs, YERUN has **already** signalled some of the adverse effects of this method, which may arise both pre-award (more time and efforts being needed to account for lump sums in proposals) and post award (with increased uncertainties and financial risks for institutions and/or their partners in cases where the projects they take part in would not go as initially planned). YERUN warns that such financial risks tend to be even more difficult to bear for smaller, younger or less well-resourced uni-

-versities. It is also clear from experience that the figures presented on the lump sum dashboard are not adequate with regards to effective costs in some Member States.

Finally, YERUN proposes that any funding body operating in relation to the Framework Programme should be required to make **special provisions for the inclusion of newcomers**, notably universities. Moreover, YERUN calls for a critical evaluation of the **business model of the EIT** and its added value where elevated membership fees have the effect of excluding less well-resourced players. At the same time, YERUN recommends that the **EIT HEI Initiative** be prolonged, albeit in a revised and simplified format.

Funding schemes, conditionality and synergies

YERUN expects the present consultation to bring to light imperfections in the funding schemes made available under Horizon Europe. For instance, **co-funding schemes** under Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions may entail a **significant financial burden** for host institutions in certain Member States, due to the way salaries are calculated under EU rules. In a majority of cases, they also fail to cover coordination and managerial resources that are needed to put these programmes in place.

The design of different funding schemes under Horizon Europe also entails certain perverse effects which appear to disproportionately affect smaller or younger universities. For instance, ERC grantees may be incited to leave their (smaller) institutions of origin to use their ERC grants in better equipped, better funded and often long-established universities. This leads to a **brain-drain and concentration of talents** in an unnecessarily small number of institutions, to the detriment of the very institutions which had spotted them and helped them flourish in the first place.

Other and more structural issues have to do with the conception of **EU grants** as connected to a time-bound project. This has a direct effect on the type of contracts which can be made available in universities – **short or fixed-term contracts** –, especially for early career researchers. YERUN calls for a critical reflection to be conducted on the **impact of Horizon funding schemes on research careers**, alongside the discussions bearing on ERA Action 4.

Looking more generally at the overall EU funding landscape, YERUN member universities find that the establishment of links between Horizon and programmes such as ERASMUS+ or the Digital Europe Programme has been productive, but continue to observe (too) **limited synergies on the ground** with other important EU funding programmes, notably with European Structural and Investment Funds, the European Fund for Strategic Investment, and funds under the Common Agricultural Policy.

In addition to these well-known issues regarding synergies and silos, new ones have taken centre stage with the adoption and implementation of Next Generation EU, with regards to funding under the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** (RRF). In line with the RRF Regulation, reforms and measures to be taken in each Member States have been proposed and accepted via National Recovery Plans (NRP) in connection to very substantial amounts of EU funding. The implementation of those plans may have **important research and innovation**



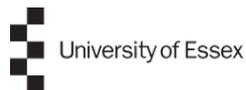
implications in Member States and are of direct interest to the university sector. **Yet, very little engagement has taken place with relevant stakeholders** on the negotiation or implementation of these plans, whereas structural issues of **underfunded research management capacities remain largely unaddressed** in enabling research institutions to undertake much needed reforms. Little has been communicated on the involvement of experts in research and innovation policy in discussions on NRPs, nor on the extent to which efforts have been made to connect these measures with initiatives under Horizon Europe and in relation to the New European Research Area. Given the importance of the funds at stake, YERUN believes that these questions should be clarified and that the expertise of stakeholders should be relied upon wherever appropriate in the future.

Concluding statement

Taking the above into account, YERUN wishes to stress on the following key recommendations in order to improve Horizon Europe and its future iterations:

- Policy-driven research funding should not lead to an outsize use of **earmarking** and should in any case not be developed to the detriment of basic or blue-sky research. **Scientists** should be also trusted to **identify and address current and future challenges for our societies**.
- Science should remain as **open, global** and **collaborative** as possible. Scientists should be allowed to engage and work with colleagues around the world – and especially with colleagues in the UK – as seamlessly as possible.
- The EU instruments governing the European research landscape are still failing to offer a level playing field allowing all talents and universities to thrive. To the contrary, some of the very features of Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe have or still do entail hidden costs, financial risks or enhance competitive disadvantages, especially for young research universities. YERUN stresses on the **importance of properly funding at EU level adequate research support capacity** for researchers in navigating and managing EU funded projects.

- YERUN Members -



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For questions about this document please contact Ms Silvia Gomez Recio: secretarygeneral@yerun.eu



www.yerun.eu



YERUN Office - Rue du Trône, 1050 Brussels