

Widening participation inside the EU R&I framework programme

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that inside the EU borders there are big disparities in terms of research, innovation capacity and performance. One way to empower the low-performing countries is by encouraging the participation of their research and innovation institutions in international networks, namely in EU R&I programmes. However, considering the high level of competitiveness inside those programmes, and in particular within the framework programme Horizon 2020, the access to funding for participants coming from some EU member states remains lower than expected. This is in spite of the fact that Horizon 2020 includes a specific part in which exclusive measures for spreading excellence and widening participation were developed. In order to solve this problem, a number of countries argue that member states should go further with those measures and increase the number of topics of the framework programme specifically targeting what we commonly call "the widening countries"¹.

The Belgian delegation does not support this idea. Although Belgium acknowledges and regrets the lack of participation of some member states in EU R&I initiatives and agrees that this R&I divide in Europe requires attention and action, "the main principle of the framework programme, a pan-European competitive selection based on excellence, cannot be watered down by adding corrections of a geographical, political or financial nature"². In addition, disparities in participation should not only be considered under the perspective of the old/new member states divide; they hide different realities, such as regional disparities within member states and more difficult access for smaller stakeholders or newcomers. An in-depth and broad reflection about the causes and remedies of that low participation is therefore required.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Excellence should remain the main criterion when assessing research and innovation proposals. Research and innovation of the highest quality is necessary to generate valuable technological and

¹ Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Associated Countries (subject to valid association agreements of third countries with Horizon 2020): Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine.

² In "Position of Belgium on the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation ("FP9")", 09/05/2017 (see https://www.belspo.be/belspo/coordination/doc/scienPol/BE_Position_paper_FP9_VF.pdf).

societal impact, and to contribute to the attractiveness of the European Research Area (ERA) towards the rest of the world. All projects, irrespective of their type, should be “simply the best”, in accordance to the goals and targets defined beforehand. Excellence, therefore, not only covers scientific excellence but also other kinds of excellence such as innovative or entrepreneurial excellence.

We would like to bring forward some possible solutions to the participation problem.

One of the bottlenecks may be the evaluation process, strongly relying on ‘track records’ of individual applicants (notably on previous participations in the framework programme), rather than on the combined potential of the members of the network and on the expected impact of a project proposal from a prospective view. This type of approach tends to favour the “usual suspects” and leaves little room for newcomers. There is therefore a **need for a sharp briefing of the evaluators and for a clear, unambiguous definition of the criteria and goals of the evaluation.**

An important added value of the European framework programme consists in promoting the collaboration between research and innovation partners from different countries on cross-cutting themes. The EU funded R&I brings together the best expertise in Europe and connects ecosystems, providing added value and leverage effects to national and regional funded projects. Smaller players (SMEs, small research units or non-profit organisations) benefit as well from connecting to the European ecosystem. **The next FP should provide ample room for small- and large-scale, bottom-up, collaborative research programmes.**

Coherence is needed between all European, national and regional R&I policies. The framework programme should not only be **better articulated with other European R&I policies** (ERA, EU-cohesion policies...) **and initiatives** but aim at a **clear division of labour with national/regional R&I policies** as well. In that perspective, an in-depth reflection is needed to ensure optimal synergies between the framework programme and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). Some suggestions are provided below.

Belgium supports the development of co-funding projects, bringing together regional and transnational development perspectives, combining thus the development of regional assets with openness and collaboration with European partners, capitalising on the smart specialisation approach. **New management rules must be developed to allow simultaneous mixed funding of innovative projects from different sources** (public/private, EU, national, regional funds, tools, domains, and across regions). Therefore, some practical obstacles need to be overcome, notably relating to timing, eligibility rules, need for a derogation to state aid rules, etc. Learning from, e.g., the “Vanguard initiative”, new approaches could be developed under the next framework programme regarding cross-border interregional cooperation. This could result in a more inclusive approach of the framework programme, building on strong synergies between different sources of funding.

A dedicated ERA-net CoFund could be a useful instrument for bringing together different funding sources, in particular from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). One of the positive effects of an ERA-net is the introduction of new or young R&I performers or players. The research performers themselves experience participation in an ERA-net as a step-up and learning process towards the highly selective and competitive framework programme. It seems to be a good tool to open up existing networks and/or to establish new ones. In addition, the ERA-net CoFund instrument, in a slightly adapted form, has the features to combine various funding flows, in this case funding of the framework programme and of ERDF. Nevertheless, one must be careful with this instrument to avoid attracting almost only participants from less R&I performing countries.

A currently popular way to ‘back up’ lack of framework programme funding is the use of **the Seal of Excellence**. The Seal is attributed to excellent proposals which cannot be funded by the framework programme because of budget constraints. It assumes that national/regional funders will step in and fund those excellent proposals (e.g. by making use of the ‘capacity building’ funding under ERDF) as

they are assured of their quality by the Seal. However, the practical value of the Seal of Excellence as a label possibly giving access to national/regional funds is currently limited due to state aid rules. It is also unclear whether the Seal has a perceptible value toward private investors, so its **reputation should be strengthened**.

As research infrastructures may play an important role in enhancing the attractiveness of individual research performing organisations (RPOs), another possibility is to **use ERDF to support the creation of suited research infrastructures at individual RPOs** (e.g. new labs). The focus should be on RPOs that have a track record in one or more specialised domains (possibly linked to the regional smart specialisation strategy) and show sufficient potential for successful participation in the framework programme. This would induce a brain-remain and even a brain-gain effect. **Training sessions** linked to (large) research infrastructures could also be developed and used as opportunities for researchers from widening countries to become acquainted with the latest state of art and/or cutting edge technology.

Each EIT-KIC is supposed to design a regional innovation scheme to enhance the innovation capacity of modest and moderate innovating countries by transferring KIC good practice of the knowledge triangle. As this also applies to entities that cannot (yet) become KIC partners, RPOs from less R&I performing countries must be able to participate in EIT-RIS programmes and activities. The research **infrastructures roadmap of the various EIT-KICs must clearly** (and SMARTly) **describe which RPOs from which countries are eligible for participation**. The number and quality of such research infrastructures' activities is to be included in the KPIs of each KIC, and **should be regularly evaluated or monitored**.

Also, **various initiatives to train the NCPs should be strengthened based on the “train the trainer” principle**. However, if not combined with a good regional/national organisation of the work of the NCPs, this kind of measures will not be fruitful. The Policy Support Facilities, for example, can be used to organise several mutual learning exercises for NCPs. **Support for NCP networks, explicitly aiming at reducing the participation divide**, such as the network NCP_WIDE.NET, **could be mainstreamed over the entire framework programme**. We could also **consider opening up ‘Teaming actions’ to include support to “programme-related” activities**, based on sharing of best practices on subjects such as how to make research careers attractive or on how to promote technological transfer. The network of Legal & Financial and Coordinating NCPs, NCP Academy, also provides training with a leverage effect on less experienced NCPs (including in Associated Countries) and that could be a key instrument of quality enhancement in the transition between H2020 and the next framework programme.

Finally, we would also like to recall other measures which can contribute to a wider participation of all member states in the framework programme, such as those concerning **simplification**. A lot of progress regarding simplification of procedures (e.g. the electronic signature) has been made but much **more has to be done** if we want to increase the participation of newcomers in the framework programme. Last but not least, also **JPIs** can be used by the widening countries to contribute to the global societal challenges and in return these countries might also expect a concrete impact from JPIs in their country. **COST** can be an important tool as well to foster the development of networks between countries with different profiles and different needs.

We hope that these ideas will contribute to the current debate on spreading excellence and widening participation and to the definition of beneficial solutions to R&I in Europe and our societies in general.

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