

EUA reaction to the report of the Commission Expert Group on the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe

October 2024

On 16 October 2024, the European Commission's Expert Group on the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe published its [report](#) with recommendations on maximising the impact of EU Research and Innovation programmes in the future.

This report, developed by representatives from various sectors of the research and innovation (R&I) community, delivers a clear message: make the programme stronger and protect its budget. The European University Association (EUA) fully support this and is pleased to see that many of the recommendations align with the Association's own [vision for the tenth Framework Programme \(FP10\)](#). EUA especially values the report's recommendations on increasing the overall allocation for the programme and ring-fencing the budget, reinforcing the European Research Council (ERC), the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and the European Innovation Council (EIC), as well as its strong emphasis on simplification for beneficiaries.

However, the Expert Group also makes recommendations that require careful consideration, such as the proposal to split the current Pillar 2 into two Councils – an Industrial Competitiveness and Technology Council and a Societal Challenges Council. This division could create silos, potentially undermining the programme's collaborative spirit, which is essential for addressing complex societal challenges and boosting Europe's competitiveness.

A more detailed analysis of the report's proposals is provided below.

On R&I investments:

- EUA supports the report's emphasis on the need to fund the entire spectrum of R&I. This is especially important as the growing focus on competitiveness can lead to prioritising public R&I funding for projects that deliver quick, marketable outcomes. However, this shift should not come at the expense of other areas, particularly basic research. The latter is crucial as it underpins breakthrough innovations and is essential for developing transformative solutions to global challenges. Therefore, a better balance of funding across the full spectrum is needed to ensure that the EU can effectively address global challenges and respond to emerging crises. Achieving this balance is especially important in collaborative R&I projects, most of which are currently funded under Pillar 2.
- EUA endorses the call to increase the budget to €220 billion and appreciates the strong evidence provided to justify this request. For the EU to truly become a global leader and safeguard its autonomy in strategic sectors, it is essential to strengthen Europe's position at the forefront of global R&I by making sufficient investments in R&I at the European level. Additionally, we support the call to ring-fence the programme's budget.
- Additionally, we strongly support the report's call to increase national expenditure on R&I. While increasing the Framework Programme budget is a priority, it is equally important to ensure adequate national investments in R&I, aiming to reach the target of investing 3% of GDP in R&I set in the Lisbon Treaty. This recommendation should address all member states that do not currently meet this target, and not only widening countries.
- EUA welcomes the report's recommendation to fund all high-quality, yet unsuccessful proposals through national funding using the Seal of Excellence. It should, however, be taken into consideration that there is a significant limitation in funding multi-beneficiary proposals through such a scheme.

On strengthening competitive excellence:

- The report rightly highlights the success and importance of the ERC, MSCA and EIC, as well as the need to reinforce their structures, governance and budgets. In particular, the Expert Group recommends a doubling of the ERC budget and places a strong emphasis on the importance of open, non-prescriptive calls in the programme. EUA fully endorses the reinforcement of these schemes, as there is substantial evidence demonstrating their high added value and success.
- EUA fully supports the call to ensure the full independence, authority, and quality of the ERC Scientific Council and the EIC Board. It is crucial to safeguard these aspects to enable both bodies to effectively perform their key roles in strategically guiding the two schemes. Similarly, the Association supports the call to maintain the MSCA as a separate scheme within the Framework Programme, thus avoiding its merger with the ERC or its transfer to Erasmus+.
- The proposal to establish a new ‘Choose Europe’ initiative under the MSCA programme with the goal to foster young researchers’ careers is an idea worth exploring. Nonetheless, the report lacks sufficient details on this potential new initiative to fully assess its added value to the MSCA and its other instruments.
- EUA supports the recommendation to stimulate more disruptive innovation through the EIC. The Expert Group suggests that this could be done similarly to the [ARPA model](#) in the US. However, although both the EIC and ARPA-like agencies aim to drive breakthrough innovation, they do it in different ways. The EIC has more bottom-up flexibility and supports a wide range of projects across various scientific fields, often with a longer-term perspective. ARPA-like agencies, on the other hand, are more challenge-driven, focusing on national priorities with quicker, tangible results in areas like defence, energy, and health. If an ARPA-like model were to be integrated into the EIC, especially its Pathfinder and the Transition schemes, it would need to keep a bottom-up and interdisciplinary nature. In addition, any such model should still focus on supporting projects at low technology readiness levels (TRLs), i.e. at the pre-commercial stage.

On creating two new Councils for Industrial Competitiveness and Technology and Societal Challenges:

- EUA agrees that there is a need to reinforce European industrial competitiveness and address societal challenges more effectively. However, industrial competitiveness and societal challenges cannot be effectively addressed in isolation. These two spheres are deeply intertwined, requiring collaboration between a variety of partners from different sectors, including universities, industry and civil society organisations. There is a risk that dividing the current Pillar 2 into two separate councils – an Industrial Competitiveness and Technology Council and a Societal Challenges Council – could create silos. This would weaken the programme’s collaborative spirit, which is essential for addressing complex challenges that span both spheres. Any new governance structure of the programme must encourage, rather than hinder, cross-sector collaboration. A concerning aspect of this proposed split is that the Societal Challenges Council may be sidelined, as the report suggests that the Industrial Competitiveness and Technology Council will take the lead on societal challenges that have significant potential for industrial involvement. This could undermine the primary role of the Societal Challenges Council in addressing these important issues.
- EUA welcomes the recognition that “Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) need to be accorded a more central role both in research on and the development and implementation of solutions to societal challenges”. Including experts, researchers and

academics from SSH fields in the Societal Challenges Council would be a welcome first step towards unleashing the full potential of interdisciplinarity.

On fostering an attractive and inclusive R&I ecosystem:

- EUA welcomes the recognition of the important role of universities and university alliances in the European R&I ecosystem. Further facilitating and strengthening the transnational cooperation of universities, within or beyond the European Universities Initiative, is a prerequisite to achieving Europe's full potential through research, innovation and higher education.
- The recommendation to shift the narrative around the widening instrument from the paradigm of 'supporting' schemes to a paradigm of 'Advancing Europe' is welcome. This is in line with EUA's recommendation for FP10 to empower institutions from countries with lower R&I capacity to strengthen their role as R&I leaders, through a mix of national-level investments and EU-level support. This will be key to addressing the persistent R&I gap across EU member states. The Association also supports the report's call to evaluate the effectiveness of the current widening instruments, maintaining and strengthening those that have proven to work well and potentially discontinuing those that are less efficient.

On driving simplification:

- EUA greatly appreciates the report's strong focus on simplification, with an emphasis on reducing complexity, increasing agility, and improving user orientation. Simplification is crucial for improving success rates and broadening access to the programme, and should therefore be prioritised in the design of the future programme. The proposal to introduce more open, non-prescriptive calls is particularly welcome as a way to support this effort.
- EUA also supports the report's call to reduce the programme's complexity by streamlining its instruments. The programme should be made more straightforward, enabling beneficiaries to navigate opportunities more easily. The components of the programme should be harmonised, with any overlaps carefully assessed and eliminated to ensure the highest added value of the various instruments.

On the approach to international cooperation:

- The report recommends that the EU adopt a proactive, strategic approach to international cooperation, based on a balance of 'defensive and offensive policy interventions'. This is in line with EUA's call to ensure that responsible openness is the default option for global cooperation, where responsibility entails a fundamentally open, but risk-aware approach to cooperation and risk is assessed systematically and in various dimensions. However, the implementation of this approach in the future programme should avoid creating an overly complex and fragmented landscape for beneficiaries. Clear guidelines should also be developed to support beneficiaries in identifying and assessing potential security risks in their collaboration with international partners.

Finally, EUA appreciates the efforts undertaken to ensure an inclusive process in developing the report, which included stakeholder consultations. The Association remains committed to a continuous constructive dialogue to develop a robust and impactful R&I Framework Programme, guaranteeing that our collective efforts continue to strengthen the European research and innovation landscape.