

Radbound University's position regarding Horizon Europe: a response to the interim evaluation procedure

For a regional university at the Dutch border, Horizon Europe and the framework programmes that came before it have facilitated our researchers to explore new frontiers of science, collaborate with renowned European partners and grow as scientists. The first two years of Horizon Europe, Radbound University encouraged its researchers to participate in the full extent of the programme, which translated to a relatively high number of proposals and projects granted. However, dimensions of the framework programme, as well as the fierce competition for specific calls, may impede a wider participation at an institution that focusses in the first place on curiosity-driven and fundamental science. With this paper, Radbound University gratefully makes use of the possibility to give back our experiences in Horizon Europe as part of the interim evaluation. This paper is complementary to the position papers of [The Guild of European Research Intensive Universities](#) and [Universities of the Netherlands](#).

Innovation starts at the conception of ideas

Curiosity-driven research is the cornerstone of the academic world. Without this type of research, the world's knowledge increase and innovation prospects would stall. It takes an initial question to be able to go along a new path and possibly make world-changing discoveries. The European Research Council and the Marie S. Curie scheme are essential for continuing to answer curiosity-driven research questions in their earliest stages. It opens the world to both starting and established scientists by allowing them to see where their inquisitiveness and passion leads them. We urge the European Commission to continue to uphold the standard of funding needed for frontier sciences and impactful discoveries.

Radbound University's researchers are looking to participate more actively in pillars 2 and 3. However, sometimes, the required (higher) TRL levels are a hurdle to many, especially concerning the calls in the second pillar. What is missing are exploratory calls to find new ways or alternatives to existing solutions to the societal challenge. Why only look at innovating a plastic bottle, when you can also research alternatives for the plastic or the bottle itself? The solution could be to add a new type of call like 'research action' that focusses on preliminary ways to approach a challenge or a possible solution. After all, when innovation always starts from a clear point, one might develop tunnel vision. A curiosity-driven, low TRL, type of collaborative call would be an addition to the framework programme, as the ERC currently doesn't allow for large consortia to apply. Additionally, it would encourage interdisciplinarity and a long term vision. For many in the SSH disciplines, valorisation of their research practices may not result in technology, but are essential for impacting human behaviour, policy or society actors. Letting go of a technology readiness level for the project and its output would help to bring these researchers together and allow SSH researchers to be included from the inception phase of projects. Additionally, clear flagging on SSH-calls in all clusters would help support SSH-researchers willing to contribute to the interdisciplinarity of Horizon Europe projects.

Flexible and long term approach to global challenges

To provide even more inclusiveness of researchers who may not initially consider participating in Horizon Europe, the work programmes could offer a more flexible approach to calls. Apart from the lower-TRL calls as mentioned above, the European Commission could consider adding open calls to a topic or cluster. By only indicating the direction the project should take, but not outlining the call specifics – which in many cases are either too narrow or too broad – the researchers are invited to think outside the box, possibly across disciplines and may come up with surprising proposals that may

be more innovative and solution driven than proposals for more outlined calls. Additionally, the strategic plan and work programmes for the different clusters could allow more room to apply a portfolio approach, like is the aim for the Horizon Europe missions. This approach may lead to more synergies across the width of the framework programme, as (valorisation of) project results logically lead to a new research or innovation projects. It may also be easier to create synergies with other funding programme, like Digital Europe or the Regional Development fund. This way, the framework programme would also offer a long term perspective, inviting researchers to see their projects through all stages or TRL levels.

Practical remarks

The considerations above are aimed to provide the European Commission with ideas on how to make Horizon Europe more inclusive to researchers in all stages of their careers and across all disciplines. This inclusivity is especially important to us as broad research-intensive university, but it should also increase the overall output of the framework programme.

It is worrying that for some calls the response rate is low. This may prevent the calls from reaching their potential results as the proposals that are accepted for call 1 maybe of lower quality (just above the threshold) than others for call 2, that – even with a very high score – might not be granted the project due to a larger number of competitors. In the case of low response to a call, the evaluation should safeguard a threshold and, if the standard is not met, not grant the project. It would be way more beneficial to allow the funding to be transferred to the runner-up of another call if that proposal is better evaluated. Additionally, for calls with a large number of competitors, the budget can be distributed across more and smaller projects, rather than just across 1-2 bigger projects. In this way, the impact of EU funding would be wider.

Lastly, we happily acknowledge that new rules and regulations connected to Horizon Europe have not led to an increasing administrative burden. Adjustment to reporting and financial management have been logical and allowed the administration to carry out as per usual. However, some apprehension exists about the increasing use of lumpsum financing for collaborative projects and the planned pilot for the ERC Advanced Grant in 2024. These developments may increase the workload of the administrative services in the proposal development phase and may lead to internal struggles for the consortia and the individual universities involved. It will be more difficult to keep track of financial progress of projects and to hold partners to their promised output. A common fear is that one partner can hold the project hostage by not delivering. We also worry that budgeting mistakes will creep into proposals, especially in the first calls that use lump sum financing, due to inexperience of the researchers and support staff involved, and as a result an increased administrative burden for all parties involved. We call on the European Commission to be lenient with and supportive of the universities' struggle with implementing this new financial approach and hope for a critical review after the first years, in order to establish the actual value and usability of lumpsum financing.