

RECOMMENDATIONS ON Shaping the Close Connection Between Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund

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Science Europe acknowledges the efforts to enhance the role of research and innovation in bolstering European competitiveness, by linking the legal bases for the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and a self-standing 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (R&I), also known as Horizon Europe. However, to leverage investments and maximise societal impact, it is critical that the process of linking is carried out correctly, connecting the stages of the knowledge value chain seamlessly.

The recommendations below are the result of frequent and ongoing dialogue between Science Europe's Member Organisations, encompassing the expertise of Europe's leading national research funding and performing organisations. To help in formulating the ideal connections between Horizon Europe and the ECF, these recommendations are structured in five themes: Objectives; Budget; R&I Development and Governance; Association to Horizon Europe and Participation of Associated Countries; and Additional Practical Issues.

Objectives

The main objective of linking the Horizon Europe and European Competitiveness Fund regulations should be the creation of a continuous knowledge value chain for a stronger, more competitive and inclusive EU.

This requires a broad and complementary notion of competitiveness that goes beyond short-term economic priorities: it should enable sustainable growth, reinforce societal and technological innovation, improve education and cultural development, and benefit all sectors and citizens of Europe. To this broader end, research and innovation must be core components of competitiveness.

- Horizon Europe must retain its own decision-making autonomy for the R&I activities carried out within all parts of the programme. The relationship and division of roles between Horizon Europe and the ECF must ensure that Horizon Europe can operate in a self-standing manner. The objectives of Horizon Europe should prevail over alignment with the short-term economic goals of the ECF.

Budget

Science Europe, while welcoming the €175bn budget, also reiterates the importance of a €200bn investment, echoing the call of the landmark reports ([Much More than a Market; The Future of European Competitiveness: Align, Act, Accelerate](#)).

- Each Horizon Europe instrument should have a clearly defined budget, that guarantees financial predictability for researchers for the entire funding period.
- The protection of this budget is crucial: R&I funds must not be redirected towards the objectives of EU programmes other than Horizon Europe. ECF funds should be able to complement Horizon Europe investments, only when they bring clear benefits to the priorities of both programmes.
- Unspent Horizon Europe funds should be re-allocated to their initial envelopes and not diverted towards other policy areas.

R&I Development and Governance

Horizon Europe should be built on the foundations of scientific excellence and the freedom of scientific enquiry. Excellence, as a governing principle for the programme, should reflect a broad understanding of research principles, as outlined the by [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#) and the [Pact for R&I in Europe](#). The links with the ECF, or the proposed single rulebook must not compromise this.

- All work programmes related to R&I should be designed under the aegis of Horizon Europe, including the components of the programme that constitute the close connection with the ECF.
- EU Member States, as well as associated countries, which might be associated only to Horizon Europe (and not the ECF), should be involved in the governance of Horizon Europe.
- The close links with the ECF should improve policy alignment with R&I, via instruments such as the Competitiveness Co-ordination Tool.

Co-ordination must be seen as a supporting process, while excellence must remain the key criterion. There should be no barriers to curiosity-driven research.

- The links between Horizon Europe and the ECF should not influence the autonomy, and researcher-driven nature of key components under pillar 1. It is of utmost importance that the European Research Council, and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions remain strong, bottom-up instruments, with ambitious budgets, and free from policy influence within their governance.
- It is crucial that the development of collaborative research work programmes within Pillar II - linked to the policy windows in the ECF - is firmly grounded in research and innovation.
- The ECF could enhance the valorisation of breakthrough innovation. While the entirety of the R&I pipeline is necessary for innovation, specific links between the ECF and an autonomous European

Innovation Council could be explored to support bridging the innovation gap.

Pillar 2 possesses the potential to foster a broad notion of competitiveness and sustainable growth, through collaborative research. However, in the current proposal, competitiveness- and society-related components are separated. This separation is unbalanced, and it risks the creation of an arbitrary gap between societal challenges and competitiveness. Addressing such challenges together, better contributes to a competitive Europe.

- According to the Horizon Europe proposal, only approximately 10% of pillar 2's budget is allocated to the "global societal challenges" component, that comprises collaborative bottom-up, and social sciences, humanities and arts (SSHA) calls. A more balanced budget distribution within the components of pillar 2 is necessary.
- The pillar should enable non-conventional approaches to collaboration, strive to enable multi-disciplinarity, and overcome silos. This approach must also apply to the 'policy windows.' Researcher-driven collaborative research should complement policy-driven approaches. There should be opportunities for curiosity-driven research to continue seamlessly within a policy window, if it appears to respond to the challenge set by it.
- Pillar 2 should support collaboration in all stages, and should have a balanced approach to technology readiness levels (TRLs), including fundamental research.

Association to Horizon Europe and participation of associated countries

Association to Horizon Europe should be treated separately to the European Competitiveness Fund.

- The proposals should provide more clarity to associated countries on participation in Horizon projects – especially in Pillar 2, where the policy windows which overlap with the ECF are concerned.
- Association to the policy windows in Pillar 2 of Horizon Europe should be pos-

sible without full association to the ECF. Otherwise, there is a risk that excellent research partners from outside the EU could be excluded from collaborative research. This could be addressed by enabling partial association to the ECF, or access to these windows via Horizon association only.

- Participants from associated countries may be excluded from calls (including policy windows) on the grounds of protecting EU strategic interests, according to the proposed Horizon Europe and ECF Regulations. The programme's "dual use by default" nature may also lead to limited access. The conditions which would allow participation in such strategic calls should be clarified.

Additional Practical Issues

One of the explicit aims of closely linking Horizon Europe and the ECF is simplification. No simplification measures should come at the expense of reducing the programme's autonomy or its strategic depth and R&I focus.

- Applicant-focused simplification is welcome. However, its consequences should be assessed and measures applied only if they do not compromise academic principles, and stringent ethical, sustainability, and inclusivity criteria.
- The quality standards and methodologies of the evaluation processes should be safeguarded, as this is essential to maintain the excellence of the projects.
- Removing explicit guidance from the legislative proposals could lead to increased uncertainties, and thus, increase complexities for researchers. In addition, such gaps may erode the system of checks and balances in the programme's governance.

Therefore, to provide the necessary clarity for applicants, and to guarantee balanced involvement by the European Commission, EU Member States and other

stakeholders, it is important to provide specific, legally binding guidelines.

The link between the ECF and Horizon should enable the ECF to adopt science-driven, evidence-based best practices from Horizon Europe.

The proposals make no mention of the 'Seal of Excellence' (SoE). The 'Competitiveness Seal' introduced in the ECF should not replace the SoE.

- Should the SoE be continued – this is the preferable scenario – Horizon Europe applicants should be awarded the Seal if they meet the conditions (assessed proposals deemed excellent but unfunded due to lack of available budget). In case the applicants explicitly express this, they should be assessed for the Competitiveness Seal as well.
- In case the Competitiveness Seal will be applicable to Horizon Europe projects instead of the SoE, it should be awarded solely on the basis of scientific excellence.

Continued dialogue between EU Institutions and R&I stakeholders is crucial to enabling an excellent and free research system. In this spirit, Science Europe is ready to provide evidence of best practices to develop an ambitious Framework Programme, and looks forward to further constructive collaboration.

Science Europe is the association of major research funding and research performing organisations in Europe.

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