

European Research Area must focus on strengthening research excellence across Europe as a whole

The Guild calls for the new European Research Area (ERA) to develop and implement a holistic vision to strengthen and deepen excellence in less R&I performing (Widening) countries.

Whilst a focus on excellence will essentially foster excellent research at Europe's leading institutions, we should also ensure that the research capacities across all regions are boosted. ERA is uniquely placed to enable and encourage researchers from universities in less performing countries to succeed. Therefore, the first ERA Policy Agenda, must include meaningful initiatives aimed at improving access to excellence, alongside strengthening the excellence of European science overall.

Several 'Widening participation and strengthening ERA' instruments with excellence in its title have been introduced by now (Teaming for Excellence, Excellence Hubs, European Excellence Initiative etc.). It is time to define an overall vision that is bigger than the sum of its parts. The Guild urges a clearer articulation of how these instruments relate to each other, and what the ultimate objective is. This is essential for inspiring universities and researchers to engage, and for policy-makers to gauge success.

In articulating an overall vision for 'Widening participation', it is essential to consider the entire research pipeline. It is impossible to strengthen our universities' place in the regional innovation ecosystem without better supporting its research capacities. Universities should be supported in their core missions that the ecosystem depends on. Any vision for 'spreading excellence' must include a focus on how fundamental research can be better supported by European and national actors, and how these instruments align. The ERA Forum should take on the role of articulating this long-term vision.

The Widening perspective should be considered when discussing all ERA policy priorities, since they might lead to unintended consequences for Widening countries. For example, the Open Science demands would effectively mean that low performing countries would need to advance in both excellent publications and in open access publishing. Universities which have relied on internationally listed journal publications to strengthen their quality assurance mechanisms need to develop new ways of creating international peer review mechanisms when systems of peer evaluations are stretched already. Institutions which lack appropriate infrastructure, human and financial resources, should be provided with bespoke support both at the national and European level to avoid deepening the gap.

Attracting and retaining research talent remains one of the key concerns of less performing countries. We welcome the efforts of the Commission and the Council to work on providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions. For example, when designing the ERA4You mobility scheme, we invite the Commission to consider specific needs of the less R&I performing countries: intersectoral mobility needs to work both ways. We welcome further opportunities for employment and career development of researchers beyond academia, but universities should also be supported in attracting excellent researchers from the private sector.

Finally, national governments must be held accountable for the level of investment and reform efforts to create a favourable R&I environment. In doing so, Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy need to work together. Despite efforts for more synergies, universities still experience inconsistencies related to co-financing which was evident in the recent Teaming call for proposals. The Guild has previously raised [concerns](#) about the use of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to support universities' research capacities. These investments, which have been crucial to increase the quality of research and higher education, are now limited to innovation activities and academia-business cooperation.

The Guild suggests that the ERA Forum complements the ERA actions proposed by the Council with the following recommendations:

- A dedicated sub-group under the ERA Forum should design and monitor the fit-for-purpose measures in ERA and Horizon Europe for researchers and institutions from Widening countries
- Develop guidelines for enhanced synergies between EU's funding programmes and national and regional funding schemes
- Provide dedicated support to young researchers in developing outstanding research proposals and encourage more coordinator roles in Horizon