

Mind the Gap

Supporting Excellence
across Europe in the 9th
Framework Programme

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Introduction

The research and innovation (R&I) gap between Europe's countries and regions, which slightly contracted a decade ago, is increasing again.¹ Closing it is essential to safeguard the quality and sustainability of science in the EU. It is also one of the preconditions for regional growth and prosperity, and for eradicating the economic divide across Europe which has led to elevated social tensions in the past years. Finally, closing the gap is central to ensuring that (1) citizens have access to high-quality, research-led education, (2) excellent researchers from all over Europe can succeed in applying for EU funds, and (3) Europe achieves its full potential by harnessing the talent and knowledge of its citizens.

Policies to overcome the research and innovation gap should focus on facilitating meaningful research collaborations, supporting mobility in all directions, creating new, durable and sustainable networks, and optimising the use of research infrastructures. We need effective measures to recognise, encourage and strengthen the excellence that exists in lower-performing regions, and measures to increase their capacity and support their collaborations with the best researchers throughout Europe. Although this requires a dedicated funding stream, which should eventually render itself redundant when the gap between lower- and higher-performing countries shrinks.

To this end, the Guild makes the following recommendations ahead of the adoption of the 9th Framework Programme (FP9):

1. Tackle the structural causes of under-performance

There are fundamental structural and cultural causes of underperformance in lower-performing regions that need sustained engagement at national and EU levels.

- a. We call on all EU states, including those in lower-performing regions, to honour their commitment to spend 3% of their GDP on research and innovation. Such an investment will not only drive economic growth and competitiveness, it will also create the dynamism required to stimulate change in research and innovation systems.
- b. We urge the EU to continue exploring ways to (1) support and encourage national reforms that eliminate participation and performance barriers in framework programmes, and (2) strengthen academic autonomy, supported by adequate funding.
- c. We advocate the introduction of a mechanism in FP9 to minimise the risk of the biased evaluation of proposals, which hinders fair access to framework programme funding. Where appropriate, we recommend the use of blind evaluations.

2. Invest in early-career researchers

Investing in young, early-career researchers is crucial for boosting the quality and capacity of

¹ European Commission analysis, *European Innovation Scoreboard*, 2017, <https://goo.gl/8Ykw3j>.

European research, as it builds on their particular openness to new ideas, mobility and language aptitude.

Therefore, we call for:

- a. Doubling the funding for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). Within this enlarged budget, we propose the introduction of 'returning grants' for MSCA scholars to encourage outward and returning mobility, and to stimulate the internationalisation of our research cultures.
- b. An assessment of the MSCA Widening Fellowships, introduced as a Horizon 2020 pilot in 2017, and the subsequent (and significant) expansion if the instrument proves successful. Since the Widening Fellowships are subject to the same admissibility criteria as all other MSCA individual fellowships, it is important that they bear the same MSCA imprint and are not regarded as 'second-class' fellowships.
- c. Enhanced support – through Erasmus+ – for foreign language acquisition, to increase the number of students who are proficient in a second or third foreign language.
- d. Support for mobility schemes, including joint, international PhD programmes and summer schools, that enable doctoral students to obtain training and carry out their research in more than one institution.

3. Improve synergies between the framework programmes (FPs) and the European Structural and Innovation Funds (ESIF)

- a. We call for a greater proportion of ESIF funding to be dedicated to research and innovation. Furthermore, a greater proportion of this ESIF R&I funding must be linked to excellence. A part should be ring-fenced to automatically fund projects awarded the 'Seal of Excellence', i.e. projects that passed the threshold for FP funding but are not financed due to insufficient budget. Their funding through ESIF should rely on the rigorous evaluation already carried out within the framework programme.
- b. We advocate a further clarification and transformation of state aid rules. To enable synergies, the acceptability of state aid should be

subject to criteria that are appropriate for R&I and consistent with Framework Programme funding rules.

- c. Widening Participation objectives should be better reflected and embedded in the national priorities of EU-13 Member States, to ensure scientific excellence, facilitate cross-border projects, and foster synergies with the Framework Programme and other funding sources. These objectives and actions should be guaranteed the necessary national financial contribution – for instance, to maintain the outstanding research infrastructure created under Horizon 2020 or ESIF.
- d. For the benefit of Europe's knowledge economy, universities and research-performing organisations must be involved in the design, establishment, and implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategies of their regions.

4. From 'Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence' to 'Enhancing Collaboration'

We propose that the 'Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence' instrument be renamed 'Enhancing Collaboration'. Its fundamental purpose should be to strengthen collaboration and enhance a sense of mutual ownership of research and innovation across the R&I divide, a goal that is undermined by a notion that excellence should be spread in a single direction from one part of Europe to another, without any returns flowing the other way.

To help deliver the step-change necessary, we call for allocating 2.5% of FP9 resources to this instrument, and for ensuring the effectiveness of its actions, including:

- a. **Twinning:** The funding rules should become more flexible to maximise opportunities for collaboration and better reflect the multifaceted character of this action, which ranges from short trainings and staff exchange to public outreach. We endorse the recommendations of the Advisory Group on Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation² to:

² European Commission report, *Final Report of the H2020 Advisory Group on Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation*, 1 June 2016, goo.gl/JggWyn.

raise the bar for Twinning, require information on measurable outcomes, and strengthen the research and networking dimensions.

- b. **Teaming:** This action has served as a particularly effective lever for Structural Funds, but it has seen a highly uneven engagement within lower-performing regions, as well as among partners from higher-performing regions. We recommend that:
 - i. All proposals deemed excellent after Phase 1 (development of a business plan for a Centre of Excellence) be funded at Phase 2 (creation of the Centre of Excellence). The rejection of excellent projects has been particularly problematic under this scheme because of the projects' unique leverage effect for Structural Funds.
 - ii. There is greater encouragement to strengthen existing institutions. Universities and research organisations need to be empowered to ensure that new centres can deliver excellence within their institutions and embed that excellence within the wider organisation.
 - iii. Teaming projects embrace innovation across a broad spectrum, including social and cultural innovation. Such proposals need to be assessed on their merits, noting that their performance indicators will be different from technology-driven innovation.
- c. **ERA Chairs:** This action must make a real, noticeable difference to institutions and systems. The fourteen ERA Chairs who have been appointed throughout all lower-performing regions in Horizon 2020 will not be able to affect sufficient cultural and systemic change. We advocate that successful institutions have greater flexibility in appointment (for instance of younger research leaders), according to the principle of excellence.
- d. As the above actions are predicated on mobility, they cannot succeed if collaboration is hindered by a structural inability of lower-performing countries to attract international researchers. To ensure the international at-

tractiveness of positions created by the ERA Chairs and Teaming actions, we suggest that the method of calculation adopted for MSCA, i.e. optional unit cost with a country coefficient depending on the cost of living, be also used to determine salary levels for these actions.

5. Bring Europe closer together through networks

Effective bottom-up transnational networks are a precondition for enhancing R&I capacity across Europe and across science and technology disciplines. They are also critical for the implementation of FP projects. Yet, while Europe's top researchers and research systems are in general well connected through established networks, the links between EU-13 and EU-15 partners remain less intensive. We strongly support the use of EU funds to stimulate the creation of new networks across this divide.

In particular, we support further use of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) instrument, underlining that its focus must lie in building new networks rather than supplying funds to established networks. We propose that the key criterion for funding be first and foremost the capacity of a new network to create excellence through new collaborations, against sets of clearly defined criteria.

We advocate strengthening the COST inclusiveness policy to enable a greater integration of researchers from lower-performing countries into networks, and collaborative funding applications. We encourage a greater connectivity between COST projects and FP9 research initiatives, to incentivise the evolution from network formation to collaborative research under FP9.

6. Learn from regional initiatives that have great potential for promoting excellence

Since 2014, a number of initiatives have been pioneered by different actors with the aim of supporting excellence in lower-performing countries. In particular, we support learning from the best practice of:

- a. The EEA and Norway grants to strengthen research excellence in lower-performing regions, including enabling researchers awarded the ERC Seal of Excellence in high-

performing regions to receive funding in lower-performing regions. We also welcome the initiative's enhanced support for very good proposals that have only narrowly missed the quality threshold for funding.

- b. The Dioscuri Centres of Scientific Excellence – managed jointly by Germany's Max Planck Society and the National Sciences Centre of Poland, and co-funded by the German and Polish research ministries – is an initiative to create world-leading scientific centres of excellence embedded in universities. This model

could provide further insight for embedding and internationalising research excellence in lower-performing regions.



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