

Further time and perspectives needed to fully evaluate the Lump Sum Pilot

The Guild of Research-Intensive Universities promotes the facilitation of universities to perform cutting-edge research and calls for the development of European funding instruments that best contribute to this overall goal. While we broadly support innovations to reduce the administrative and management burdens of European grant funding, we have some reservations about the lump sum funding pilot of Horizon 2020 awards and conclusion drawn from the recently published assessment of this pilot¹.

Strong conclusions have been drawn about the suitability of lump sum funding for wide roll out on the basis of this survey. However, representation of universities as managing institutions was wholly missing from the survey. While we appreciate that university grant applicants, successful and unsuccessful, were included, university grant and financial managers should be included into any further evaluations on lump sum funding. Universities as legal entities take ultimate responsibility for the financial management of awarded grants. Management of grant budgets, mediating on potential disputes between partners or between grant holders and the European Commission will necessarily include university grant managers and financial directors. Thus, in evaluating whether lump sums provide a simplification from a university management perspective, and their suitability for all research types, it is essential that the institutional perspective is included.

We also wish to draw attention to the potential for lump sum funding to have unintended consequences by incentivising applicants to take a risk averse approach. This may impact their choice of partners (disincentivizing working with new partners) and research approaches (disincentivizing taking a greater risk in choice of design or methodology). While the survey report acknowledges the potential impact on new entrances to the programme who may struggle to gain access to consortia, we are particularly concerned how this may impact on the widening agenda. How the proposed hop-on grants for widening countries would work with lump sum funding is unclear. Also, research projects are embedded in a dynamic environment where new discoveries or circumstances may impact on the originally submitted project proposal. The necessity to complete work packages as described in the grant agreement could mean that researchers are less able to adapt to changing circumstances, thus less able to incorporate the latest elements and ensure the relevance of their research. We caution against a financial management system that unduly stifles innovation and flexibility during the project period.

¹ Ulrich Genschel, Bénédicte Charbonnel, Dionysios Kontoulis, Audeline Rauna. "Assessment of the Lump Sum Pilot 2018 2020: Analysis of qualitative and quantitative feedback." 2021

To summarize, we call on the Commission to further consider the following aspects before implementing a broader role out of lump sum funding:

1. It is essential that the institutional perspective is included.
2. It is premature to move towards broader use of lump sum funding at this stage.
3. Lump sum funding may have unintended consequences by incentivising applicants to take a risk averse approach, and negatively impacting on the widening agenda.

We welcome that there is substantive agreement in the sector that any decision to widely role out lump sum funding is premature and further consideration of negative side-effects should be taken.