



Horizon Europe Application Experiences

Results of a survey of Researchers and Research Officers on their experiences of applying to Horizon Europe grant calls

Introduction

Horizon Europe introduced several changes and novelties to the application process. During quarters two and three of 2021 a significant number of Horizon Europe calls closed. This provided The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities with the opportunity to gather feedback from the Researchers and Research Support staff of our member universities on their first experiences using the revised application process and forms. Through this exercise we have identified areas of concern for both Researchers and Research Support staff and have developed a series of recommendations for improvement for the European Commission.

Executive summary

One hundred and ten Researchers and Research Office staff from across The Guild completed a survey to gather their experience of applying to the Horizon Europe programme. Respondents were asked about the ease of use of various elements of the application and to give their recommendations for improvement.

Overall, respondents were broadly positive about the application process; however, feedback revealed that seemingly minor issues to do with application form design can affect applicants' ability to fully express the relevance and novelty of their proposed research. Both Researchers and Research Officers found the application forms somewhat rigid, with a significant amount of repetition. Much of the available page length was consumed by the inclusion of mandatory tables; this is especially true for larger consortiums. This reduces the space available to discuss the impact, and most importantly, the excellence sections of the proposal. Allowing researchers to fully express the quality of their ideas and their capacity to break new ground should be the main concern of Horizon Europe applications. Space for describing research excellence should, therefore, be prioritised and secured.

A new feature of Horizon Europe is the "Impact canvas", a requirement for applicants to project their projects' long-term outcomes and impact. Respondents found this a challenging aspect of the application and questioned its usefulness. The fact that applicants are asked to state specific outcomes of their research years after the award has ended, at which point many other factors may have changed the R&I landscape, is of questionable legitimacy. Additionally, examples of how to complete the Impact canvas for social science and humanities should be included. Currently the only example provided focuses on an engineering/technology proposal.

The survey has produced detailed recommendations for improvements to the various elements of the application process. We propose these changes to enhance the applicants' capacity to demonstrate excellence by cutting down on duplication and improving clarity.

Survey

Survey responses were collected over a period of three weeks (3 to 24 November 2021). Surveys were sent to Researchers who had applied as coordinators to one of the six Cluster work programmes or to one of the three European Innovation Council (EIC) programmes. The Clusters and the EIC were selected as these were either new programmes or those where there was a significant change to the application form.

Research Officers who had supported any of the Horizon Europe programmes were requested to participate. Surveys for the two groups had slightly different emphasis. The Researchers' survey had a greater focus on completion of the Part B forms, while the Research Officers survey had a greater focus on the online application platform, Administrative Forms and Model Grant Agreement (MGA).

In total 110 responses were collected: 45 responses to the Research survey and 65 responses to the Research Officer survey.

Respondent profile

Respondents to both surveys were asked to identify which Horizon Europe programme they applied to (Researchers) or supported (Research Officers). In most cases participating Research Officers supported applications to more than one programme.

Figure One shows the breakdown of Researchers that applied to the relevant programmes. The greatest number of respondents applied to Clusters One (Health) and Two (Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society). There were five applicants to EIC Pathfinders. Applicants to Cluster Three and EIC Transition were not represented in our survey.

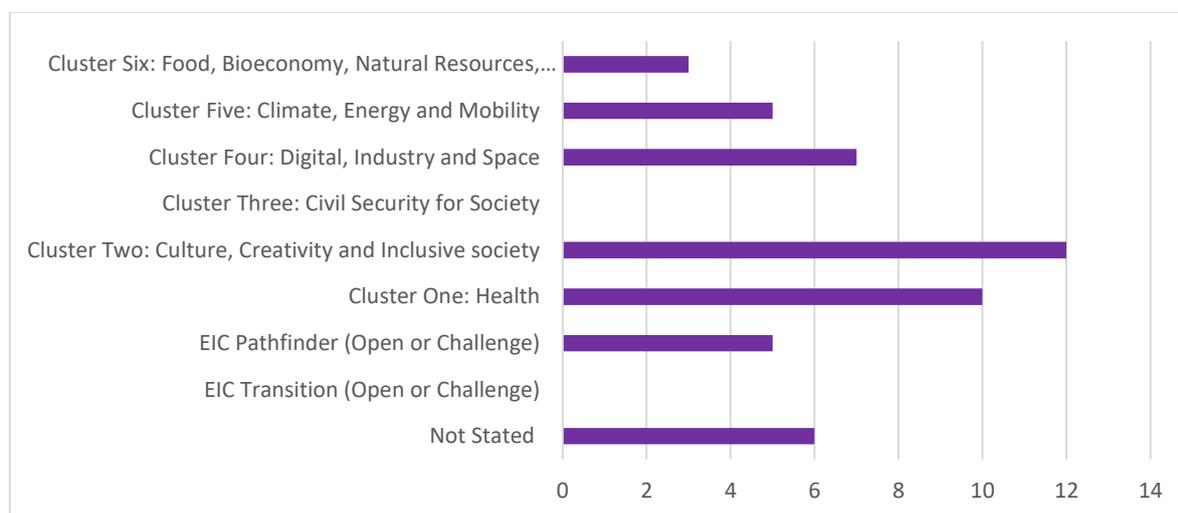


Figure One: Applications made Horizon Europe Clusters and EIC by the participating researchers

Researchers were asked what type of project they coordinated: Research and Innovation Action (RIA) Full or Stage-One, Coordination and Support Action (CSA) Full or Stage-One, Innovation Action (IA) Full or Stage-One, or EIC Pathfinder or Transitions. Figure Two shows the responses. Most respondents coordinated a full RIA application. Thus, most responses in the survey refer to this application type.

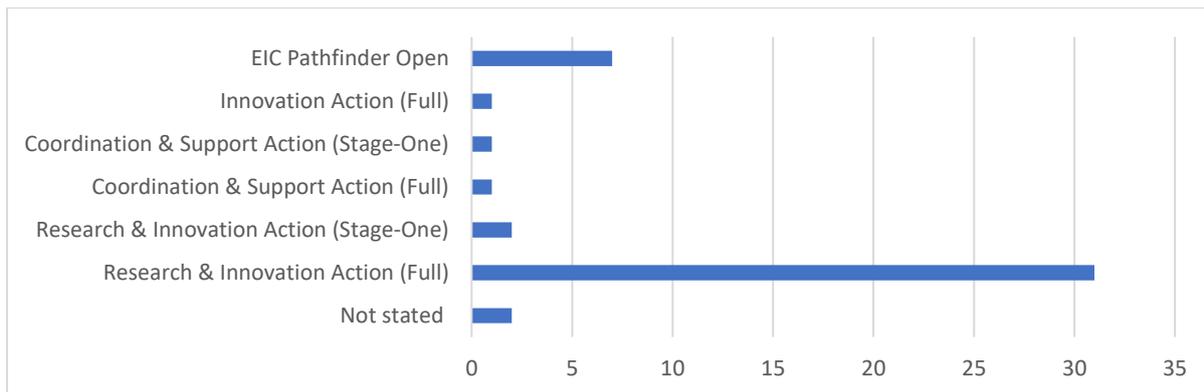


Figure Two: Application type coordinated

Figure Three shows the number of programmes supported by the participating Research Officers, supporting both coordinators and partners at their institutions. As most of these respondents supported applications to more than one Horizon Europe programme, the total number of programmes supported is greater than the number of participants. The figure shows that the Research Officers group has engaged with all programmes in Horizon Europe, with European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) the most common.

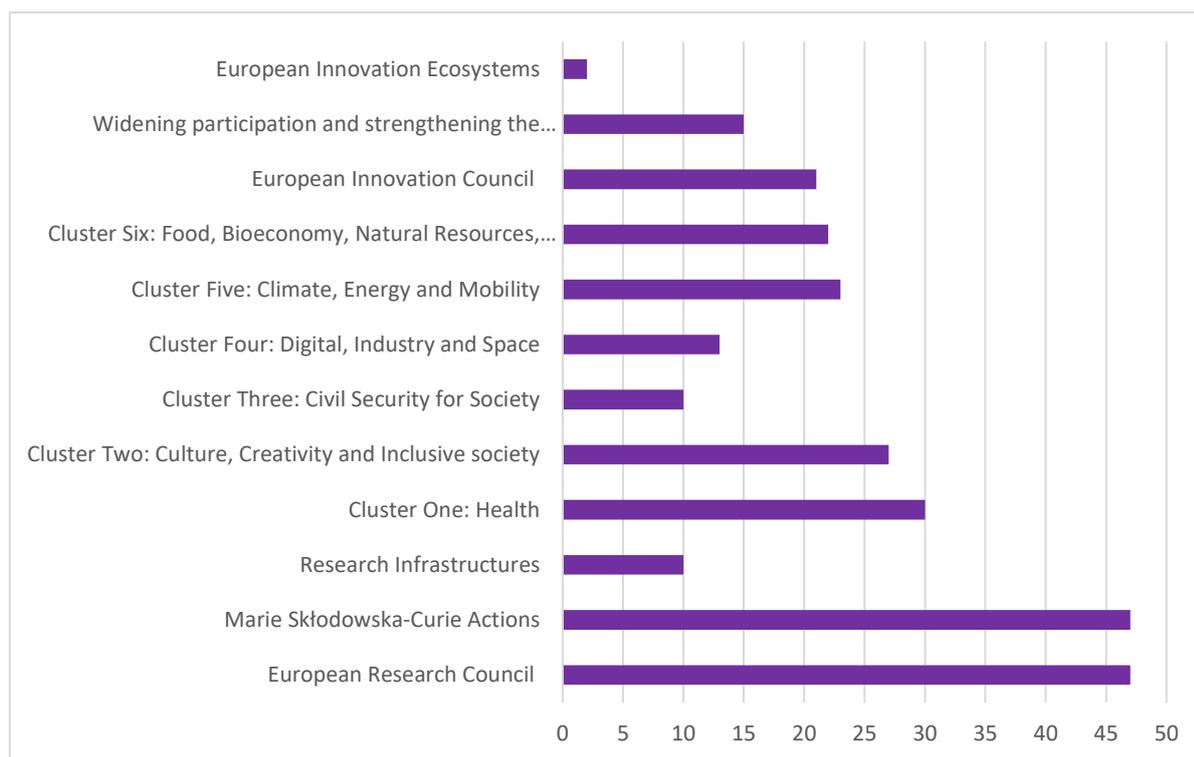


Figure Three: Applications supported by participating Research Officers

Both Researchers and Research Officers were asked about their previous experience with European Framework programmes, including Horizon 2020, FP7 and FP6. The figure below shows that both groups have significant experience with the previous programmes.

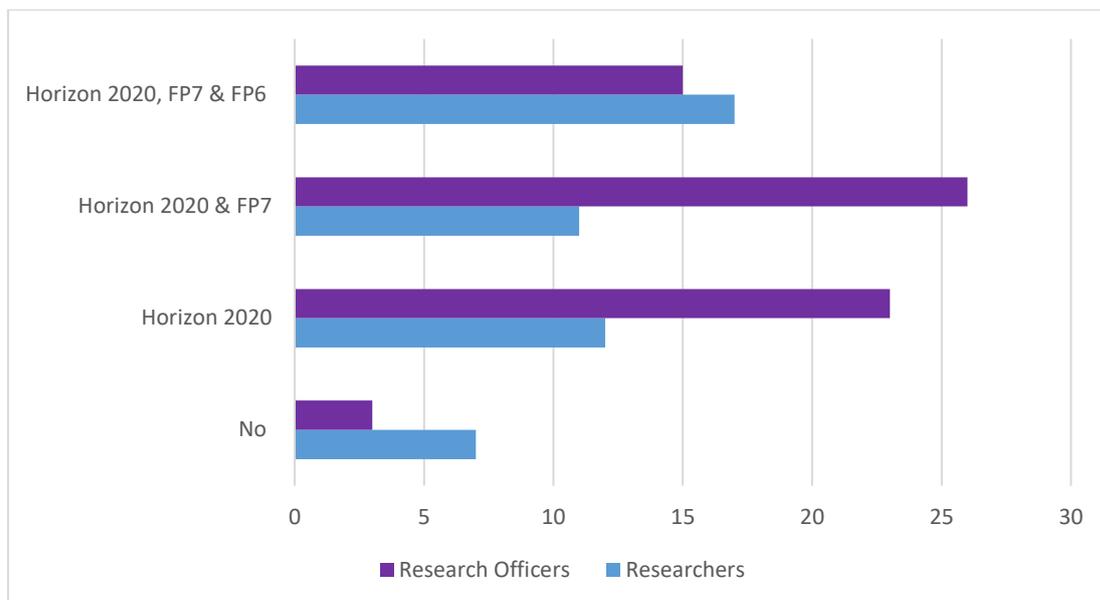


Figure Four: Number of participants with experience of previous framework programmes

Feedback on application experience: Researchers

Coordinators of Horizon Europe Cluster and EIC applications were asked questions on the ease of use/completion of various aspects of their applications. They were asked about the changes to the Part B page limits and how well the application form allowed them to express their project ideas.

The Researchers were asked to provide more in-depth information about their experiences and give their recommendations for improvements.

Table One shows the Researchers' views on the Guidelines for Applicants and the online application submissions service. Most applicants were broadly satisfied with these services.

	Guidelines for applicants	Online application submissions service
Very poor		2
Poor	2	9
Ok	18	14
Good	23	15
Very good	4	6

Table One: Researchers' views on the ease of use of application materials/services

"The funding and tender portal MUST be more stable – it is annoying to enter info and then next time I log on it is gone."

Responses to the open questions provided further feedback on the application submission service. A number of respondents found the system unstable and prone to crashing. Some respondents also described the online submission service as difficult to navigate.

Figure Five shows feedback on the ease of completion/use of various elements of the application process. The Researchers found completion of the interdisciplinary aspect and gender dimension the most straightforward aspects to complete. The Impact canvas was experienced as the most difficult element, with over 30% of respondents describing it as very difficult or difficult to complete.

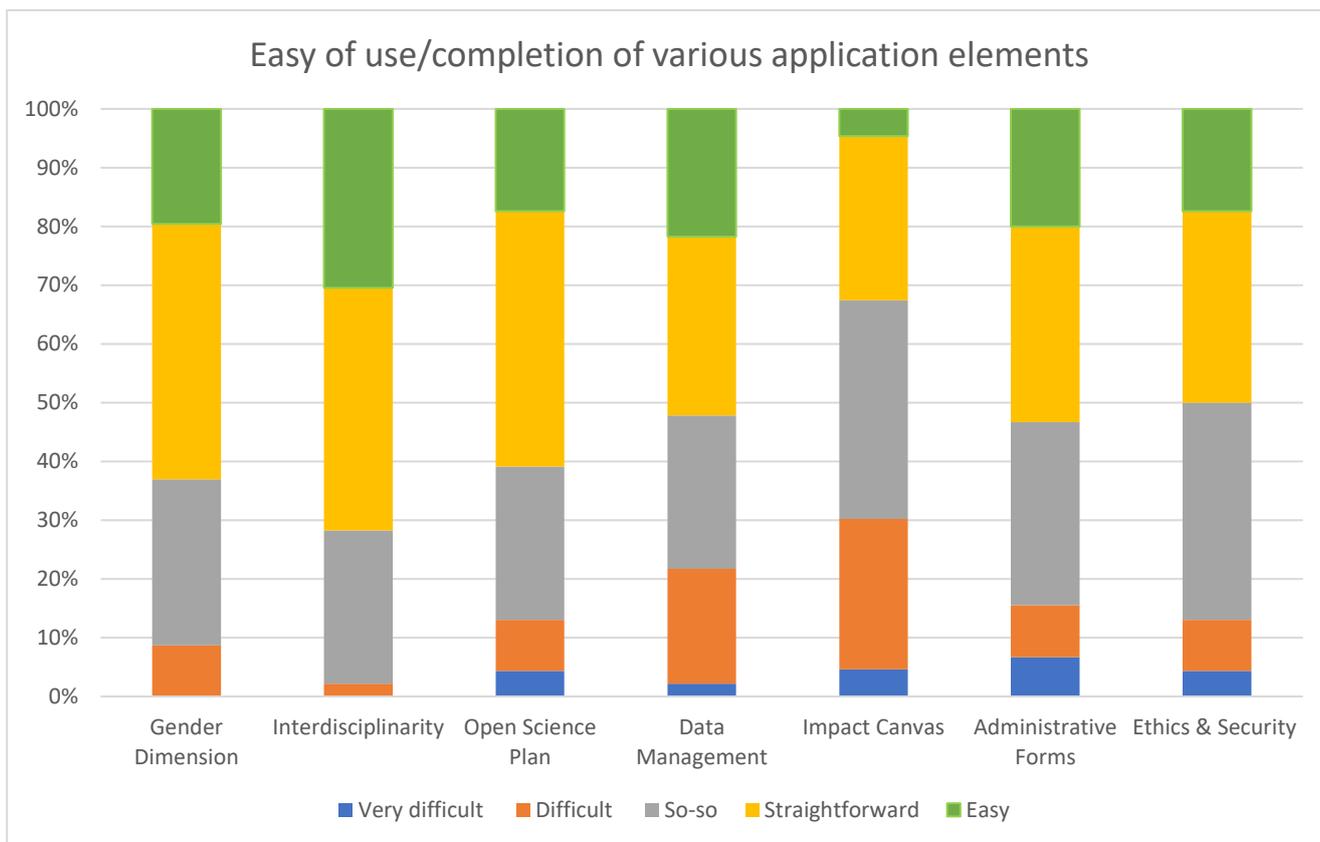


Figure Five: Researchers’ experience of elements of their Horizon Europe application

The various elements shown in Figure Five were also covered by in-depth answers given by respondents. Some respondents gave further detail on dealing with the impact section, saying it was difficult to understand the terminology, and to provide the level of detail required.

“Essential data about clinical trials. The instructions were extremely vague, but sometimes asking for impossible information. No indication for number of pages.”

The Administrative forms were called out by some respondents as being insufficiently clear about what information was needed. An additional aspect that respondents identified as difficult was the completion of the Annex forms for clinical studies. Those that raised this Annex questioned its design and suitability for all types of research.

“Pathways to impact. It is very cryptic what they want to know, and in general it seems to be written with the hard sciences in mind (where impact can be more tangible). It is very difficult to imagine impact for social sciences projects. More so if one is asked to think about several years down the line.”

Figure Six shows the respondents’ opinions on page limits for applications to the Clusters and EIC. Most respondents found the maximum page length for their given application about right. This would indicate that most respondents approve of the reduced maximum allowable application page length.

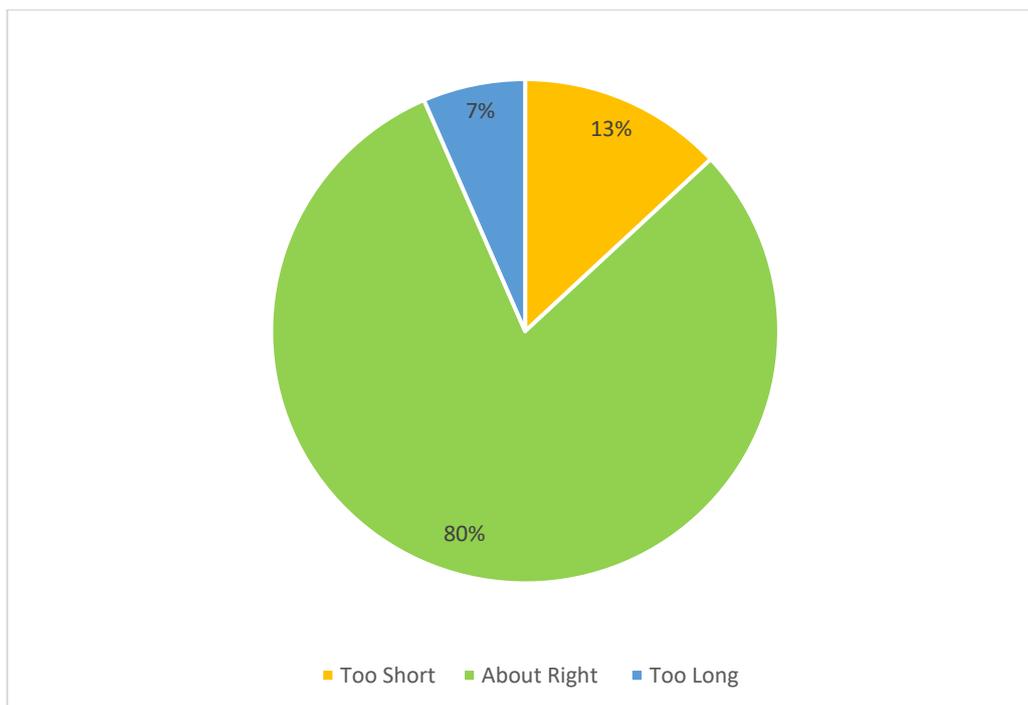


Figure Six: Perception of application page limits by percentage of respondents

Page limits were brought up by several participants in the open questions. While most approve of the reduced page limit, respondents noted the difficulty of including all required information within the page limit. The multiple tables that must be included, particularly those that repeat information given elsewhere in the application (e.g. the milestone and deliverables tables) were discussed as a source of frustration. One specific suggestion was to make further use of the

“If you believe in science, give more space and emphasis to scientific excellence.”

administrative forms for some information, thereby freeing up more space in the Part B forms. There was also a query about the inclusion of references into the application, with a recommendation that the bibliography should not be part of the page count.

“Get rid of all summary tables from Part B (milestones, deliverables, summary of WP and PM effort etc) and add them to Part A, where one could then calculate and update e.g. sums of PM per WP and as a whole automatically while freeing up space in Part B.”

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Finally, respondents were asked to give an overall appraisal of how well the Horizon Europe application form allowed them to express their project idea. Respondents were asked to rate this in terms of one to five, with one indicating the lowest satisfaction with the application form and five indicating the highest. As may be seen in Figure Seven, most respondents scored the application form a four out of five.

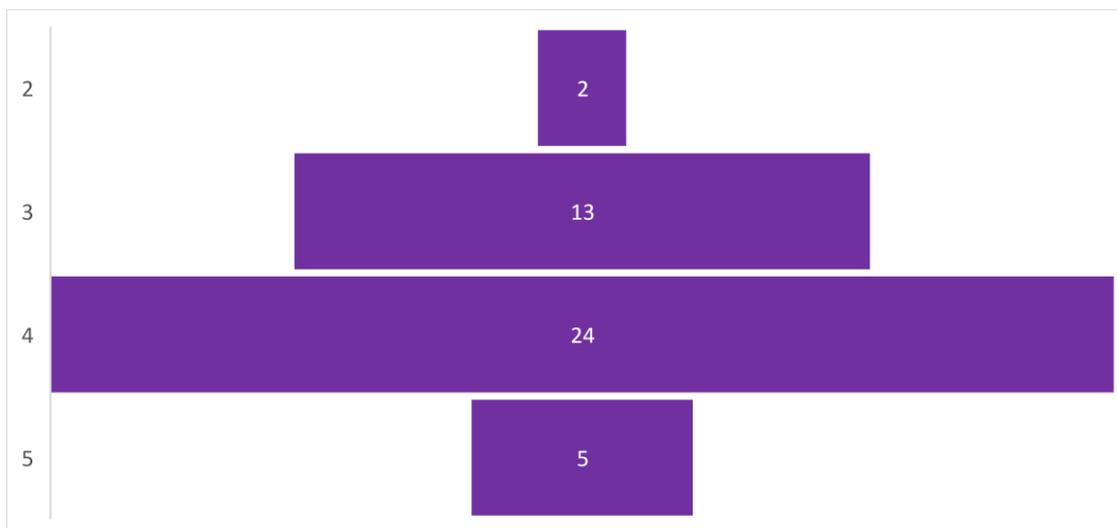


Figure Seven: Participants' score of overall satisfaction with the Horizon Europe application form

Feedback on Horizon European application process: Research Officers

Participating Research Officers provided their feedback on various aspects of the application process and were asked to provide detailed feedback on various aspects of the application process.

Figure Eight shows overall opinions about various aspects of the Horizon Europe submission process. Overall, satisfaction rates across the various elements were quite high. The Model Grant Agreement was regarded as the most difficult element by the Research Officer group.

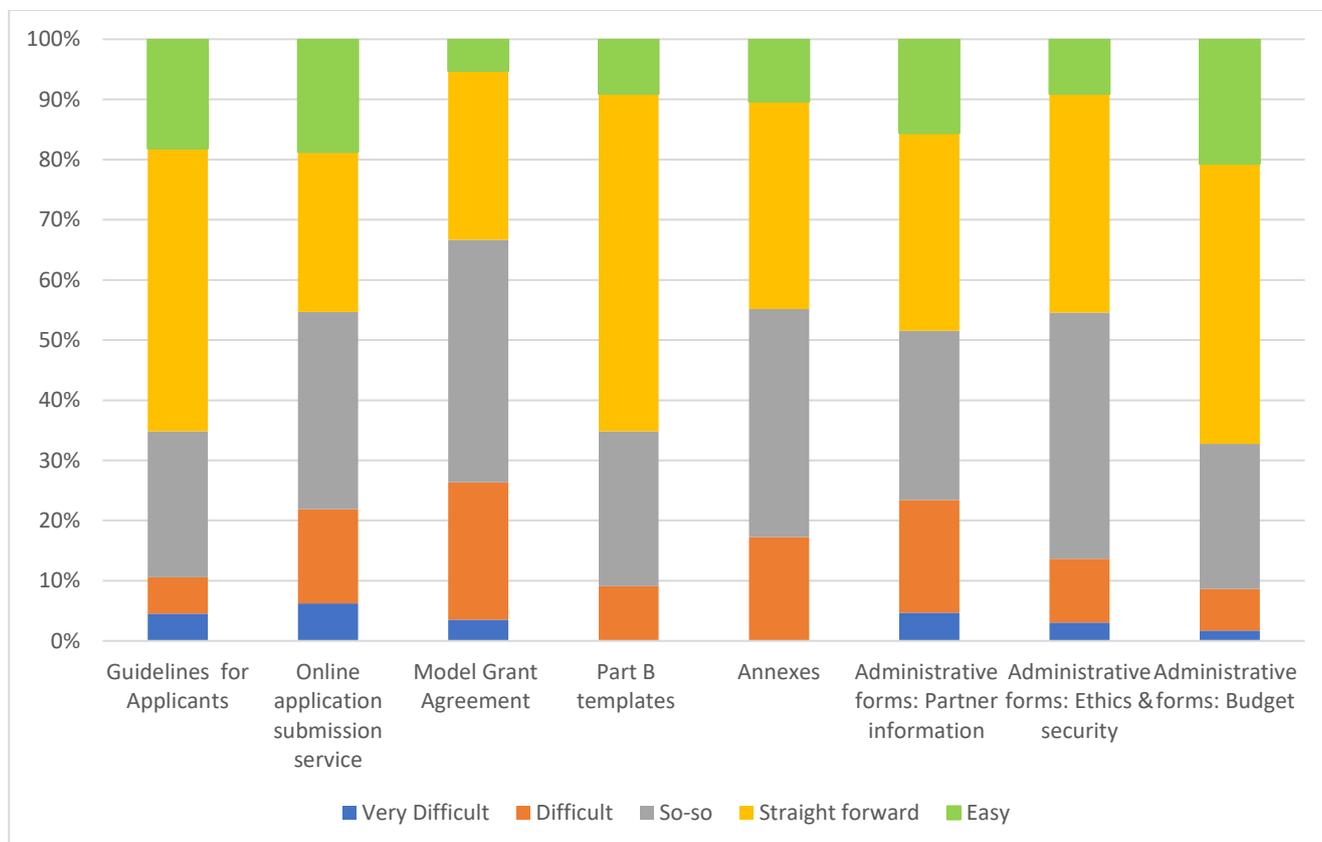


Figure Eight: Perceived ease of use of aspects of Horizon Europe applications.

The Research Officers were asked to give detailed feedback on the administrative forms, the Part B forms, the Model Grant Agreement, and overall feedback on the submission process. A summary of feedback on these various elements is as follows:

Administrative forms: Navigation of the Administrative form was brought up as an issue by several participants. The inability to rearrange the order of partners was a particular frustration. Respondents also discussed problems with partners being able to add information to the administrative forms, particularly if two people attempt to fill in the form at the same time.

“The descriptors for various fields, particularly the ethics and security sections, could be clearer. Clicking on the information icons rarely delivers any extra insight and there are several points in the ethics self-assessment guidance document that do not help to expand on the questions to aid the understanding of the applicant.

MSCA was particularly called out as having several issues around lack of clarity. For MSCA post-doctoral Fellows, participants stated that in several places it was unclear whether the requested information was in reference to the applicant or the supervisor. There were also issues with the character limits on describing publications and achievements.

Overall, navigability of the forms, the need for better instructions in places and stability of the platform were described as the main areas in need of improvement.

“It was previously possible to re-order the participants by dragging into the desired order. This seems to no longer be possible and creates the possibility of a misalignment with the order given in the Part B.”

There was a lack of clarity about what information should be included for several sections. These include the Ethics and Security sections, information about partners that are not researchers, and information on publications.

“For the MSCA PF some points were confusing, e.g. formulation of the resubmission question, no guidance on completing the role of the host checklist and the new questions on projects and publications.”

For MSCA-DN there is requested information about published papers and infrastructure both in Part A and Part B. I cannot see why there are two places for this information.

B Forms: As with the Researcher respondents, the Research Officers offered feedback on the reduced Part B page limits. Some respondents questioned whether the new page limits were too short, others suggested revisions to the template to make better use of the space available. Like the Researcher group, the Research Officers felt that there was too much repetition. The respondents

Move the Gantt chart out of template B and into a table in Part A (comparable to the budget form). Now quite often due to space limitations the readability of the Gantt chart is questionable in some applications.

suggested further elements could be moved to the Administrative forms to free up space in the B Forms. The Gantt chart was suggested by several. The summary tables in Section 3 were also identified, with several respondents suggesting that they repeat information already given elsewhere in the B form or the Administrative forms. A reduction of repetition was called for.

A lack of clarity about required information was also experienced for the B forms. The Open Science and sections, inclusion of scientific background for CSA applications and several of the Section 3 tables were identified as areas where further instruction is needed.

Table 3.1h represents a complication compared to Horizon 2020 - as it introduces this concept of 'remaining purchase costs', carrying the following instructions: 'The record must list cost items in order of costs and starting with the largest cost item, up to the level that the remaining costs are below 15% of personnel costs.' This is completely incomprehensible to this native English speaker.

Finally, suggestions were made in relation to improving the formatting of the form. Formatting the form so that the correct margins and fonts are already in place, rather than asking applicants to make those modifications. For applications other than ERC and MSCA, clarification of whether and how references should be included was requested. The design of the Impact canvas was also questioned by some respondents.

Model Grant Agreement: A minimal number of respondents gave specific feedback on the MGA. Those that did described the MGA as “extremely long and complicated”, “clunky and dense” and “unclear”.

“Words and concepts that are not immediately understandable especially in the beginning of the document hinders the understanding/accessibility of the information e.g. UNIT GRANTS (HORIZON UNIT MGA — MULTI & MONO) etc. What does it mean? Why is some text highlighted with colour?”

There was lack of clarity on some of the terminology used and a request for more examples and explanation. The respondents also found it a difficult document to navigate. It was also noted that the MGA and Annotated MGA were published very late.

Overall: The Research Officers were asked to identify those elements of Horizon Europe applications that are working well and those that need improvement. Respondents were generally positive about the reduced Part B page limits, the inclusion of more applicant information into the Administrative forms and the provision of more templates and examples. The stability of the online submission portal is described as needing further improvement. Problems with saving and other glitches with

the system were described. The Research Officers also felt that the navigation and useability of the portal could be improved.

“Portal is still non-intuitive; a lot of applicants struggle with where to find what info. Make it simpler: one list with all forms/templates on the website, one spot where to upload all, not behind several buttons in several corners, on several pages/tabs without info next to it. Applicants still get lost all the time; at some point they loose overview of the amount of layers and buttons to pass through, as if it was a video game with several levels/words. Extraordinary that we have to give workshops on how to fill out the portal to these hyper intelligent people.”

“I think it is a great improvement that there is more guiding information in the templates.”

“What is really helpful is that there are not too many changes compared to H2020 and that all programmes follow more or less the same procedure.”

Recommendations

Overall, attitudes towards the Horizon Europe application process were broadly positive. The results of both the Researcher and Research Officer surveys provide clear recommendations for improvement of the Horizon Europe application process. These focus on providing greater clarity, the stability and useability of the online platform, and making better use of the application form page allowance.

1. Multiple areas of the application process were identified as needing further clarity. This is particularly important for the Research Officers in order for them to facilitate high quality applications from their Researchers. Specific areas of concern are:
 - a. What information should be added to the Administrative forms for non-research partners.
 - b. What information is required for the Ethics and Security sections.
 - c. Information needed for questions on publications and previous projects was considered unclear. Whether these questions relate to the individual or institution and how to provide information about publications need further instruction.
 - d. Administrative form information for MSCA. In the case of applications to the post-doctoral awards, whether requested information was in relation to the post-doctoral candidate or their proposed supervisor was unclear to many applicants. For Doctoral Network applicants, inclusion of the same information in both Administrative and B forms was criticised. Institutional pre-agreements needed for Doctoral Networks were also regarded as unclear. For all MSCA programmes there needs to be clarification of whether and how references should be included.
 - e. The Annex form on clinical trials was considered very unclear and not relevant to all proposed research.
2. Respondents from both groups found the online submission platform unstable, prone to crashing and failing to save entered data. Creation of a more stable submission platform

must be an urgent priority. The ability for all the various partners in a consortium to access and enter information into the online forms, and the ability to amend information in the forms, should be ensured. The ease by which applicants can find relevant information and the navigability of the submission system could be improved.

3. The reduction of page limits for the Part B application form was broadly well received. It is essential, however, that space to discuss the background and key scientific concepts is protected. The current Part B format can require consortiums to devote a considerable amount of space to the implementation section, inevitably reducing the space available to discuss excellence and impact. This is especially true for large consortiums. A simple and effective way to resolve this issue would be to reduce the number of tables and the requirement to repeat information already provided, and to move further sections into the Administrative forms. To better use the available space, we make the following recommendations:
 - As information on work packages, milestones and deliverables has already been provided in Table 3.1b: “Work Package Description”, consolidate or remove tables 3.1c: List of Deliverables, 3.1a: List of work packages, and 3.1d: List of milestones.
 - Relocate Tables 3.1f: Summary of staff effort, 3.1g: ‘Subcontracting costs’ items, 3.1h: ‘Purchase costs’ items (travel and subsistence, equipment and other goods, works and services), 3.1i: ‘Other costs categories’ items (e.g. internally invoiced goods and services), and 3.1j: ‘In-kind contributions’ provided by third parties, into the budget section of the administrative forms.