

Universities Scotland submission to the European Commission's public consultation on the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020

Introduction

1. Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) highly value partnerships with European colleagues and institutions, as well as being highly valued international partners themselves. As a sector we place great importance on our involvement with Horizon 2020 therefore Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to input to the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020 and contribute initial views on the development of the successor Framework Programme
2. We also note the submission from Universities UK International and would highlight our broad support for their response.

Benefits of involvement with Horizon 2020

3. There is a clear link between international research collaboration and research excellence¹ therefore Horizon 2020 as a platform for collaboration is vital for the success of the sector in Scotland and the wider UK.
4. The added value of European funding mechanisms is far greater than the monetary value as this:
 - Facilitates cooperation with partners from other countries which includes sharing of knowledge to raise the quality of research across Europe and support the development of internationally-linked and experienced early career researchers
 - Delivers a consistent approach to funding across national boundaries enabling academics to work together without a need to negotiate several funding systems
 - Allows a pooling of expertise (including data) to reach critical mass to undertake research into worldwide societal challenges; this scale would not be possible at a national level
 - Through participation in Framework Programmes (including networks), Scotland-based researchers have developed strong relationships with researchers based elsewhere in Europe which enables the further development of research projects
 - Creates added value to individuals of receiving funding on a European scale to underscore the quality of their work and enhance their reputation/profile in a global research environment
 - Delivers a long-term funding settlement which provides the opportunity for a longer term approach to research
5. In the context of the referendum result that the UK will leave the European Union a key priority for the Scottish higher education sector is maintaining the closest

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263729/bis-13-1297-international-comparative-performance-of-the-UK-research-base-2013.pdf

possible relationship with our European partners (through the European Research Area and constituent programmes) as part of a mutually beneficial relationship. The EUA recently noted that the role of the UK ‘cannot be replaced’ in European research and innovation stating ‘the European system as a whole will suffer if this contribution is diminished as a result of Brexit’.² For example, the UK coordinates 20% of all H2020 projects which is a significant contribution to the functioning of the programme.³

Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Framework Programmes

Tackling inefficiencies due to low success rates

6. The low success rates in Horizon 2020 represent a significant inefficiency in which bids receive top marks but not funding – this could most easily be solved by growing resource so high quality bids can be funded
7. Low success rates increase the cost of applying to Horizon2020, these costs have been estimated as 30-50% of the total value of Horizon 2020⁴ which is a concern. Further development of the two stage application process could be valuable to reduce costs to institutional applicants.
8. The new participant portal, two-stage application process and simplified funding rates have all received positive feedback from institutions

Simplification across programmes

9. There are many initiatives under the Framework which can be a confusing landscape for institutions and individual researchers so aligning participation rules wherever possible would increase the efficiency of the system.
10. More widely, having similar rules for other research programmes (e.g. those run by other Directorate Generals such as health or environment) would enable more institutions to contribute, particularly smaller institutions with lower capacity to manage multiple funding initiatives

Facilitating capacity building

11. We would see scope for improvements under the ‘spreading excellence and widening participation stream’ to increase the number of ERA Chairs (potentially by applying MSCA salary levels to enable recruitment of ERA Chairs to institutions with lower standard salaries) and to focus on building capacity in existing institutions (for example, removing the emphasis on new Centres of Excellence through the Teaming action)

² <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-role-european-higher-education-irreplaceable>

³ <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/eua-brexite-factsheet-research-collaboration-and-student-mobility>

⁴ <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/press/university-funding-trends-eua-launches-dialogue-at-funding-forum.pdf?sfvrsn=6>

Open to the world

12. There should be renewed effort, aligned to the European Commission's vision of 'open innovation, open science, open to the world', to engage with third country partners.

Looking forward to Framework Programme 9

Research

13. The EU investment in research and innovation should continue to be focussed on supporting research excellence, wherever it is found. Funding excellent research does lead to societal and economic benefit⁵
14. The Commission should seek to grow highly valued, effective provision such as European Research Council grants and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and more widely increase funding for curiosity driven research under the Excellent Science pillar.
15. We would recommend providing greater support for bottom-up, curiosity-driven research across all programmes (including Pillar 2 and Pillar 3). In particular, social sciences and humanities should be a key driver under Societal Challenges and more should be done to strengthen the number of European Commission funded 'bottom up' social sciences and humanities research projects
16. There is a danger in focussing too much on specific priorities or close-to-market research as this could cut off new areas of inquiry, at the detriment of fundamental research in Europe.
17. This principle of funding for excellence does not negate the importance of capacity building across Europe. By supporting capacity building for research excellence the competitiveness of the system will increase, leading to better returns on investment. This could be achieved through synergies between Horizon 2020 and Structural Funds as outlined below (paragraph 23)
18. It is important that the European Commission continues its focus on equality and diversity in order to maximise the contribution of all research talents in Europe. The UK Athena SWAN Charter may be an area of good practice for consideration in Framework 9.

Innovation

19. Investment in research and innovation enables economic growth and job creation. It is crucial that excellent research is funded as the bedrock of the innovation system.
20. We note the development of the European Innovation Council and recognise the value of such developments in streamlining support for the European innovation system (including improving connectivity to current Horizon 2020 research programmes) and the potential for more significant changes under FP9. We would

⁵ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2016/refimpact/Title,108841,en.html>

caution against increased funding for the European Innovation Council at the detriment to research, particularly Pillars 1 and 3

21. In funding innovation, particularly in developing a pipeline from basic research (ERC funded, for example) through to economic impact, the Commission should reduce its focus on high technology readiness levels in assessing innovation funding proposals
22. We would highlight to the Commission the impressive return on investment of both the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) in England⁶ and the Universities Innovation Fund (formerly Knowledge Transfer Grant) in Scotland⁷ in supporting universities to generate economic impact, including working with businesses through consultancy and training, and recommend these as a model to explore.

Delivering synergies between Horizon 2020 and EU Structural Funds

23. Alignment of Horizon 2020 and Structural Funds could be a valuable mechanism for supporting economic development across Europe.
24. Synergies between Structural Funds and Horizon 2020 are potentially an excellent route to building research capacity, for example, this may include support to promote the professionalization of research management
25. Scotland's Interface connects academic researchers to SMEs through Standard Innovation Vouchers which are partly funded by ERDF⁸. We consider this a useful model for how the Commission might bring together the distribution of Structural Funds through Horizon 2020 to grow the economic impact of universities across Europe. Such programmes can help to enable universities to deliver their missions to have beneficial impact, provide a clear linkage for industry through various discrete funding streams, all while protecting the priority given to excellence focussed research

About Universities Scotland

We are a membership organisation working for the Principals and Directors of Scotland's 19 higher education institutions. We develop higher education policy and campaign on issues where our members have a shared interest.

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⁶ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Evaluations,of,HEFCE,funding,for,knowledge,exchange,the,Higher,Education,Innovation,Fund/2015_heifeval1.pdf

⁷ <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/YIAD-Research-Impact-spread-view.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.interface-online.org.uk/how-we-can-help/funding>