

Annex

By Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) – February 2023

Based on their experience with Horizon Europe, Dutch universities have additionally formulated a number of suggestions to further improve transparency, user-friendliness and accessibility of the Framework programme

Realise the association of the United Kingdom and Switzerland

It is time to move ahead with the association of the United Kingdom and Switzerland. The European research sector benefits greatly from collaboration with likeminded countries, yet agreements with two important partners, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, still seem a distant reality. The uncertainty surrounding cooperation with organisations in either country threatens to cause significant scientific damage, with consortia falling apart or collaborations falling through. Dutch universities ask the EU to prioritise these interests and realise association agreements.

Extend funding for the MSCA-Doctoral Networks

For Horizon Europe to be effective, instruments should correspond to the national research infrastructure systems as much as possible. A prime example for Dutch universities are the MSCA-Doctoral Networks. Currently, participants only receive three years of funding, while a standard doctoral programme lasts four years. It would be incredibly helpful if the MSCA-Doctoral Networks could switch to four year funding of PhD students to cover the full length of a standard doctoral programme.

Be cautious with the roll out of the lump sum grant model

The lump sum grant model is not a 'one size fits all': while lump sum funding works well with smaller projects it is not suitable for bigger projects with multiple stakeholders and higher risks. The first experiences with lump sum funding suggest that this approach does not lighten the workload, but instead intensifies it, especially at the proposal stage. Moreover, the administrative burden is shifted to the consortium level. Considering these harmful effects, it is too early to roll out lump sum funding on a large scale.

Support researchers in fulfilling horizontal requirements

Researchers would greatly benefit from practical advice on the parts of their applications that are further removed from their core activity: research. In terms of impact, dissemination, exploitation and communication of projects, researchers could use basic step-by-step instructions and practical workshops to improve their applications. There should also be a balance between the scientific and administrative part of proposals. It is important for applicants to report on aspects such as open science, ethics, and data management, but they should not overshadow the scientific core of the application.

Communicate clearly on criteria

The weight of different (especially new) criteria should be clear to the researchers. For a transparent application procedure, the evaluation criteria need to be more clearly linked to the instructions in the proposal template and the additional criteria from the general annex to Horizon Europe. The latter are currently not mentioned in the evaluation criteria themselves.

Ensure uniform and clear evaluations

Transparency and consistency in evaluations is crucial for a robust process and for researchers to improve upon their proposals. Researchers deserve uniform and clear feedback to their proposals, from dedicated evaluators

with the right expertise. Concretely, the Commission could improve its practices by integrating the principles of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment into its instruments and adding a rebuttal phase for ERC grants.

Time calls carefully

Calls should not be opened in the summer or have overlapping deadlines. Forming consortia over the summer is challenging and it is not logical to have calls close when the results of previous calls have not been published.

Improve infrastructure

The Funding & Tenders portal should be improved to make it more user friendly. Relatively simple changes, such as allowing for a change in order of partner beneficiaries or in the name of the project, can make a big difference. It should also be easier to save online forms and the system should clearly and early on indicate important deadlines and due dates.
