

ITALY POSITION STATEMENT

ON THE INTERIM EVALUATION OF HORIZON 2020 AND THE NEXT FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

In order to obtain a widely shared opinion on the current Framework Programme for European Research (FP), Horizon 2020 (H2020), which is now almost exactly at its halfway point, and on the most-wanted characteristics of the next FP, the competent Ministry of Italy (Ministry for Education, University and Research, MIUR) has designed and conducted a public consultation, addressed to people registered on the Italian researchers' database.

The results of the consultation (more than 5 000 responders)¹ represent the main input to this statement, together with the opinions of the National Representatives in the Configurations of the H2020 Programme Committee, in the governance bodies of the Joint Programming Initiatives, in the European Research Area Committee, and of the Ministry (Department for Higher Education and Research) leadership.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The main research policy objective of the European Union is the full implementation of a European research area (ERA), as per Article 179 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The multiannual framework programme (FP), as per Art. 182 of the Treaty, represents the main support instrument for implementing research at EU level.

Surprisingly, these two Pillars of Hercules marking the access to the concept of the European Added Value have historically evolved independently from each other.

Italy firmly believes that transnational research supported by the FP financial resources, involving multiple Member States (and Associated Countries) across the whole of Europe and beyond, is instrumental for the achievement of a fully functional ERA. Therefore, Italy expects that the ERA priorities² will be distinctly echoed in the formulation of the next FP.

MOST WANTED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEXT FP (as compared to H2020)

1. Research cannot be done without researchers. Furthermore, a fruitful, consistent dialogue between research and innovation for the good of the whole society cannot take place without researchers. Therefore, **researchers, with a special emphasis on first stage researchers and women researchers, should be at the core of the FP** much more than it has been the case in H2020, as they are the main effectors of socio-economic growth. This principle does not contrast at all with the need for promoting 'citizen science'; we agree with the Third Recommendation of the Lamy Report "*Educate for the future and invest in people who will make the change*", but these activities can only be mediated by researchers to produce tangible results.

¹ <https://consultazionefp9.miur.it>

² http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.htm

2. An exaggerated shift toward a finance-driven approach (“*loans instead of grants*”) would fatally displace the criteria and actors for decisions about R&I funding in other hands with respect to those of researchers (in the private and public sectors) and research (public and private) performing organisations, and in other places, which might have little to do with research quality and societal impact. **Italy could not support such a shift.** Similarly, the fact that the private component of the Italian research system felt that the emphasis on H2020 was too much oriented towards low TRL activities, while the public component felt exactly the opposite (too much emphasis on high TRL activities) indicates that presumably a right equilibrium was achieved in H2020, which **should not be dramatically altered.**
3. The **Joint Programming Process (JPP) has been and remains crucial** for providing an operational, concrete meaning to the concept of European Added Value and for progressively streamlining National and European research, with the aim of reducing fragmentation and eliminating unnecessary duplications. The JPP has already produced excellent results in its ‘hard-’ component, i.e. the research infrastructures (RI) of European interest and level, identified by a co-operative process through the European Strategy Forum for RI (ESFRI) roadmaps. The ‘soft-’ component of the JPP, i.e. the research programmes, is much less mature and structured than its hard-counterpart, although it has made significant progress during the first half of H2020, also thanks to the action of the *Groupe Programmation Conjointe* and to the launched Joint Programming Initiatives (JPIs). To simplify a landscape that sometimes may appear too complex and confused, **a progressive convergence of the soft- and hard- components of the JPP should be promoted.** The identified Major Societal Challenges should give rise, in a 1:1 ratio, to JPIs, which, as hubs for research and innovation in the relevant challenge, should assess their respective needs in terms of hard- and soft- components, and select the appropriate instruments (the number of which should be possibly decreased, definitely not increased) to make progress towards the solution of the challenge. Still, within the framework of the JPP, the **Joint Technology Initiatives** and the **Public Private Partnerships** should continue to play the positive role they had in H2020 also in the next FP, although a careful analysis should be done to verify whether they should be kept as separate entities or, rather, be unified as ‘special cases’ of Joint Programming Initiatives.
4. **The basic, 3-pillars architecture (and its content), introduced with H2020, should not be altered.** The Italian research system (but, we believe, is not the only one) demands for ‘stability’, having seen that the 3-pillars approach has contributed to deciphering the FP main areas of activity. The Excellent Science (or ‘Lab’, according to the Lamy Report proposed nomenclature) pillar should not be excessively polarised on the European Research Council (ERC). Italy strongly appreciates the role of the most recent evolution of the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) for promoting the relationship between innovators and researchers, between society and academia. Therefore, **we would like to see the investment on the MSCA re-equilibrated with that of the ERC.** Furthermore, fully sharing the considerations expressed in the recent Science Europe Statement on a More Meaningful Research Impact Assessment³, we would encourage ‘impact’ in its widest meaning to be included among the ERC criteria for proposals’ evaluation. As to the Societal Challenges pillar, and, most important, the **Societal Challenges-based approach**, it should be kept, avoiding drifts in the direction indicated by the Lamy Report. Only, we would like to see a re-evaluation of the Challenges identified in H2020 and, in particular, to see included two emerging, undoubtedly major and global, challenges, such as **Migrations (and Integration) and Disaster Risk Reduction**. The third pillar should **keep focus on the SMEs**, which, in many EU MS and AC, are lagging behind their competitors from Asia and North America. Innovation in SMEs, whether radical or incremental, is

³ http://www.scienceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SE_PositionStatement_Impact.pdf

expected to keep all its importance for economic growth, social cohesion and wellbeing, now more than ever, within the framework of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

5. Europe is small, and its 28 National research systems individually are too small as compared with the global competitors, some of which are growing, by quality and size, at a speed which is an order of magnitude faster than those of the Old World. Thus, we cannot afford to further circumscribe our potential to a limited number of MS, and, worse, to a limited number of regions in a limited number of MS. On the contrary, we should tap into the full potential of all the MS and of all their regions. Therefore, Italy would strongly favour **a boost of the ‘widening participation and spreading excellence’ concept in the next FP**. This should include a revision of the criteria for selecting the potential beneficiaries, which should of course be selected on the basis of their promising return of investment, but also on a sounder evaluation of the baseline conditions than that adopted in H2020. The criteria for selecting the regions which benefit from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) could be a good starting basis.
6. Furthermore, for the sake of widening participation (and spreading excellence), the dimension of the projects/proposals eligible for funding by the FP should **encourage application by newcomers**, especially those from countries/regions historically less participating and less ‘winning’. This does not preclude of course the possibility to support big projects when justified by the scope, but the door has to remain open to small-to-medium dimension.
7. The principle of **establishing synergies between the FP and the ESIF**, duly promoted in H2020, has been extremely difficult to be practiced in view of the scarce compatibility (if not overt contradiction) between the respective regulations. Therefore, Italy recommends that, when defining the regulations of the next FP and the next ESIF cycle (or perhaps even in the last period of the current budgetary cycle), extreme care should be taken in verifying that the principle can be easily applied by all MS.
8. The **‘Seal of Excellence’** concept, applicable to all the mono-beneficiary programmes, has been welcomed by the Italian research system (in its private and public dimension) and should be maintained in the next FP. In addition, it should be studied the possibility to design a more sophisticated version 2.0 of the Seal, applicable to multi-beneficiary programmes as well.
9. The advantages of an **Open Science and Open Innovation approach** for the efficiency of the process and the quality of its results is so apparent that it should be pursued decidedly throughout the next FP. However, it has to be fully acknowledged that this implies new efforts and additional work for the involved individuals (researchers and innovators) and their organisations (universities, research centres, enterprises etc.). These efforts should be appropriately and adequately incentivised and rewarded in the next FP, at the level of evaluation of individuals (e.g. in applications to the MSCA programmes) or institutions (e.g. in research and innovation actions’ proposals). In coherence with what precedes, research performing organisation practicing the principles for **Open, Transparent and Merit-based Recruitment**⁴, which are in a sense a pre-requisite for a truly open science approach, should be appropriately incentivised.

⁴ https://cdn1.euraxess.org/sites/default/files/policy_library/otm-r-finaldoc_0.pdf