Universities UK International

Our vision for Framework Programme 10

The UK is now associated to Horizon Europe, the world's largest multinational research and innovation funding programme. As we look ahead to the next Framework Programme (FP10), we want to play a constructive role in helping to shape the successor programme so that it maximises its huge potential – ensuring that European research and innovation remains at the very forefront of global developments.

Introduction

The Framework Programmes have been hugely important to European science, research, and innovation, providing stable long-term funding and collaboration opportunities at scale, which cannot be easily replicated unilaterally at the national level. UUKi welcomed the news that the UK would be a full associate country to the current Framework Programme, Horizon Europe, and this began on 1st January 2024.

Recognising that the delay in finalising the UK's association created uncertainty for institutions and researchers in both the UK and in partner countries, we are committed to rebuilding our participation. We want to make a full and meaningful contribution to delivering on the shared objectives of the programme, as it is our strong belief that this will deliver a positive benefit to European science, research and innovation – and will help to maximise the positive global impact of Horizon Europe and enhance the competitiveness of European economies.

UK universities bring together education, research, and innovation, and lie at the heart of the UK's research and innovation ecosystem. They have a global reputation for excellence, and international collaboration is core to the strength and vitality of the UK system – and it is critical that our universities and researchers are able to collaborate with our partners in Europe at scale. We believe that our universities can, alongside research-intensive businesses and other research performing organisations based in the UK, make an important contribution to the objectives and ambitions of Framework Programme 10.

It is in this spirit of collaboration, mutuality, and a belief in the importance of cooperation – cooperation between the researchers, universities, and innovative businesses of the UK and our partners in Europe – that we offer our views on priorities for Framework Programme 10.

The ambition of Framework Programme 10 should be to ensure that European science, research and innovation remains at the very forefront of global developments, fostering excellence and collaboration in pursuit of shared goals. It should support the excellent frontier science and research that provides the basis for innovation – creating a virtuous circle that creates the new knowledge and shared prosperity that is critical to our individual and collective competitiveness. While ensuring robust processes are in place that protect the shared security interests of all partners, it is vital that barriers to participation are kept to a minimum.

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We recommend that Framework Programme 10 (FP10) should be based on the following five core principles.

1) **FP10 should retain its long-term, seven-year cycle with a clear programme structure and should continue to incorporate global challenges.** However, there should be a continued focus on enhancing the effectiveness of the programme and realising synergies between other EU policies and programmes.

- The long-term funding cycle of FPs provides certainty, enabling better planning and facilitating the preparation and development of collaborations- this should be retained. The current structure, with three pillars and two horizontal themes that underpin the pillars, works well.

- However, there is scope for enhancing the synergies that exist across different parts of the programme and to streamline aspects of the administration of the programme. There remain multiple funding instruments with complex rules and regulations. We welcome increased lead times for preparing applications, and it is also important to make call information widely available and accessible, as early as possible. This will enable more time for researchers and research managers to prepare high quality proposals. Some suggested areas for further action are:
    - Grouping within the pillars could be improved. For example, "Research Infrastructures" is not well aligned with European Research Council nor Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in Pillar 1.
    - Some of the more fundamental research opportunities (for example, EIC Pathfinder) that sit within the Pillar 3 European Innovation Council (EIC) would benefit from better communication so that researchers are better informed of and involved in delivering this aspect of the programme.
    - Rules for both participation in the programme and within individual schemes should be streamlined.
    - Evidence from pilot projects on, for example, lump sum awards and blind evaluation should be used to improve existing mechanisms and processes.

- The approach of the Missions introduced in Horizon Europe has been an innovative step towards developing an impactful approach to tackling global challenges. However, greater coherence and a simpler structure may be required for the Missions to deliver on their targets. FP10 should continue to provide a platform for delivering solution-based projects, enabling interdisciplinary, intersectoral and international collaboration to solve the world's most pressing challenges. A more streamlined structure, and a more coordinated approach across Pillar 2 in particular, would help ensure that the next programme can make an even greater contribution to addressing Global Challenges.

- There should be greater prominence of Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts (SSHA) within Pillars 2 and 3. Research in these disciplines is important in its own right and is essential to addressing key societal and technological challenges, for example the responsible use and exploitation of digital technologies, or effective responses to public health crises or Net Zero. FP10 should therefore continue to evolve a more interdisciplinary approach that seeks proactive participation of SSHA researchers and enables more SSHA-led research in the context of Global Challenges.

- The EU should continue to foster greater transparency and openness through sharing of knowledge, data, tools and results. FP10 should push the Open Science agenda further in terms of new, transformative approaches while utilising the principle of "as open as possible, as secure as necessary". However, it is important to recognise the tensions that may exists between Open Science and security and defence agendas, should these areas of focus be expanded, and the significant long-term, ongoing costs associated with the preservation and curation of Open Data. The ambitions of FP10 in this space need to be matched by appropriate investment in the necessary skills, capabilities and infrastructures required to properly embed Open Data within the programme.

- The programme could also evolve to support the development of the next generation of small-to-medium scale Research Infrastructures across EU Member States (MS).

- Finally, FP10 should continue to realise the synergies that exist within the wider policy and funding environment. It should align with Structural Funds to develop research and innovation capacity and excellence, which would help make a substantial contribution to the widening agenda; with Erasmus+ regarding mobility and partnerships; and continue to contribute towards the development of the European Research Area.

2) FP10 should be based on excellence and increase funding for fundamental research. This creates the knowledge that drives innovation and underpins economic and industrial competitiveness.

- FP10 should achieve an appropriate balance between delivering excellent fundamental research and delivering impactful applied research across the Pillars. While it is right to consider how FP10 supports the widening agenda, such policies should be pursued with the intention of driving excellence across Europe. Consideration should be given for how the experience and expertise of researchers in more mature research systems can help foster the systems, processes and expertise that underpin excellent research across Europe. However, within this context the priority of FP10 should be to fund research and innovation projects of the highest quality, led by the best possible investigators and consortia.

- FP10 should also consider boosting the role of fundamental and discovery research, committing a larger allocation of the overall programme budget to fundamental research. This underpins the long-term innovation capacity and potential of the research and innovation ecosystem. Due to the capped nature of European Research Council (ERC) grants, which has not increased in line with inflation, ERC has not seen increases to its relative funding allocation comparable other parts of the Horizon Europe programme. This has resulted in smaller grants being available to ERC-funded researchers (in real terms) with which to foster ground-breaking research that addresses Global Challenges and contributes to the wider EU Missions.

- In Pillar 2 Low Technology Readiness Level (TRL) collaborative projects should have a dedicated funding scheme 'Research Actions' ensuring that those initial fundamental ideas are supported. This would be followed by Research and Innovation Actions and then finally Innovation Actions higher-up the TRL ladder.

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3) **FP10 should support the development of the next generation of researchers and the highly skilled workforce.** This should include continued support for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), at scale, and new opportunities to support early career researchers.

- The development of future talent is vital to the long-term health and vitality of the European research ecosystem. FP10 should continue to support MSCAs at scale, as this an important aspect of the programme focussed on talent, career development, and mobility. The Actions are a benchmark for excellence in doctoral and post-doctoral training, in Europe and globally. As such they are incredibly popular due to the transformative nature of the doctoral and post-doctoral training on researchers. Since its inception in 1996, MSCAs have supported over 145,000 doctoral students and fellows.

- However, successful projects typically need to score above 95% to get funded. To improve success rates and ensure that a greater proportion of researchers benefit from these transformative Actions, consideration should be given to increasing the quantum of funding available as part of any increase in the overall budget.

- Opportunities for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to be more directly involved in the wider programme should also be enhanced. This would bring more stability to ECR careers and ensure continued support to the next generation of excellent researchers. There should be specific, small-scale ECR-led networking or pump-priming schemes, and bridging / follow-on grant funding at the end of doctoral training, to support the development of the future talent pipeline.

4) **FP10 should continue to be open to the world.** Long-standing and trusted partners should have the opportunity to play a full role in shaping and influencing the programme.

- We welcome the global reach of Horizon Europe with countries such as New Zealand and Canada associating to Pillar 2 of the programme and funding made available to low-middle income countries. This approach should be continued into FP10 to enable international cooperation and the co-creation of solutions with key institutions and experts around the globe. The association of more countries that share similar values to existing participant countries should be encouraged – and made easier.

- The EU and UK are long-standing partners with values and structures that are particularly well-aligned in science, research and innovation. Our collaboration in research has delivered significant reciprocal benefits. UUKi wholeheartedly welcomed the UK's association to Horizon Europe as a fully Associated Country (AC) and it is imperative that the future programme remains fully open to AC participation, in return for an appropriate financial contribution. Through Horizon Europe, we collaborate with many likeminded nations across Europe, including but not exclusively EU MS. This is a great strength of the programmes. Alignment of policies supporting research and innovation offers a significant benefit, as does a clear articulation of the areas of cooperation that deliver the most benefit.

- To maximise the benefits that can be realised through cooperation, we would strongly urge that FP10 is open to the meaningful engagement of ACs at all stages. In particular, we believe there is a strong case for incorporating long-standing and trusted ACs, for example where there is an establish security relationship, into formal decision-making processes. This should include opportunities to co-create both FP10 as a whole and individual Work Programmes and calls.

- To properly leverage the benefits of the full and active participation of ACs it would be beneficial for all parties if the association process was less administratively burdensome. This would enable ACs to join FP10 in a timelier fashion and be involved in the programme from the first round of FP10 calls. This would maximise the opportunities for researchers in both EU MS and ACs and enhance the value-proposition for all partners.

5) FP10 should take a balanced and proportionate approach to fostering secure and trusted research collaborations. Barriers to the participation of associated countries in fields related to critical and emerging technologies must be minimised.

- There has been an increasing public and political focus on the role and status of dual use technologies. In the UK, we recognise that universities and research and innovation are at the forefront of emerging security challenges and have established a robust regulatory infrastructure that includes close collaboration with European partners and government-to-government security cooperation. However, given the broad and often uncertain scope of *potential* secondary uses of both frontier research and emerging technologies it is important that regulation is proportionate.

- FP10 must be based on shared values, maintaining an appropriate balance between the openness of research and innovation and the need to safeguard against threats to research security and the regulatory framework must strike a balance between mitigating risks and imposing non-trivial costs and barriers to participation that limit the potential to develop high-quality research collaborations and deliver reciprocal benefits. An overly risk-averse and exclusionary approach to research security stands to undermine the overall excellence and attractiveness of the programme to prospective ACs.

- FP10 must continue to support the development of – and collaborations within – research and technologies that has the potential for dual use, for example areas such semiconductors, advanced materials and quantum. These domains are likely to have a transformative impact on research and economic competitiveness. However, if regulations become too restrictive collaboration between EU MS and long-standing and trusted ACs will become prohibitively difficult and the potential contribution of FP10 to competitiveness, prosperity and security will be undermined.

- There is, therefore, a shared interest in ensuring that such research fields are open to the engagement of and collaboration with ACs as far as possible. We would strongly urge that long-standing and trusted partners, for example those in ACs (such as the UK) where there is a clear, robust and well-evidenced history of collaboration and security cooperation, should not be excluded from important parts of the programme due to overapplication of (for example) definitions of ‘dual use’.

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- As a critical partner of the EU in research, trade, and security, cooperation through FP10 in fields related to critical and emerging technologies will support the economic development and resilience of both the UK and EU.

- A similar approach should be extended to other prospective ACs with a similar profile. This approach would be mutually beneficial and ensure that trusted partners can access and add value to strategically important parts of the programme and contribute to developing shared European capabilities and resilience, which in turn will foster excellence which ensures that European nations remain at the forefront of global research and innovation.

- The European Commission has also proposed allowing technologies with both civil and defence applications to be funded in the next programme. As the European University Association has stated, universities – including those in the UK – already play an important role in developing security-related and military technologies. However, FP10 should remain focussed on fundamental research and civilian applications and should have a balanced regulatory framework that protects academic freedom and creates synergies with the European Defence Fund as appropriate but is not driven by or overly focussed on defence priorities.

Next steps

UUKi welcomed the news that our universities would be able to participate in Horizon Europe as an associated country. Our focus now is on supporting our members to rebuild our participation, so that we maximise the potential benefits of this opportunity to deliver shared benefits – and contribute to the development and leadership of European research and innovation.

This will be the best possible argument in favour of the UK's participation in FP10, which is our long-term goal. We are ready to support the development of the new programme, to help ensure that researchers and universities in the UK and EU will continue to benefit from the transformative potential of collaboration though the unique opportunities presented by FP10.