

## MESSAGES FOR HORIZON EUROPE WIDERA WORK PROGRAMME 2023 – 2024

30<sup>th</sup> May 2022

As the Horizon Europe Work Programming for 2023-2024 is currently underway, ERRIN is pleased to share its messages and recommendations on the Horizon Europe WIDERA Work Programme for the coming period.

The following reflections are the result of an internal consultation meeting to analyse the draft WIDERA Work Programme 2023-2024 and to collect inputs and recommendations, organised by ERRIN's Management Board task force on widening and deepening engagement. These inputs also draw on some general considerations so far regarding tapping into underutilised research and innovation capacities, which is one of network's key priorities.

ERRIN's dedicated Management Board Task Force on widening and deepening engagement was established in 2021 with the objective to increase diversity in regional research and innovation activities as well as deepen engagement where collaboration between different stakeholders needs further encouragement. ERRIN is committed to strengthening the role of Eastern & Central European regions in ERRIN with increased roles of responsibility within the network, organising further activities driven by members from widening countries as well as welcoming regions and their ecosystems from those countries to create even more trusted relationships.

Bridging the innovation divide between regions is crucial for taking advantage of the full potential of the European R&I ecosystem. This was elaborated on in more detail in ERRIN's [contribution to call for evidence for the new European Innovation Agenda](#) from May 2022. Through its inputs and practical activities ERRIN wishes to continue a dialogue with the European Commission and become a partner in the efforts of widening and deepening engagement.

### General observations

Before outlining messages related to some of the proposed specific calls, we would like to bring forward a number of general observations regarding the widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area.

One of the key challenges to address for realising the full potential of the European R&I ecosystem as a whole, is low engagement of stakeholders from the widening countries – researchers as well as other quadruple helix actors – in the Horizon Europe programme. It is essential to look into reasons for this limited involvement, which can provide insights for designing calls that could further encourage widening actors to apply and allow them to improve the regional and local R&I capacities.

Reasons for this low engagement appear to be largely systemic. This means that there is a need for introducing further support measures or revising the support measures currently in place. Specific barriers for involvement include factors such as: support offices not being well developed yet, insufficient support in the project preparation phase (need for experienced support staff and additional well-tailored funding), relatively slow decision-making processes compared to the flexibility and short reaction time often required in projects, and focusing on a few big actors instead of wider ecosystem.

More sensitive questions also arise, such as easier access to funding opportunities from other (national) sources coupled with a limited capacity of the ecosystem, as well as the issue of fair division of the widening budget between countries. These factors are combined with general low confidence levels of widening countries potential applicants, especially when looking at more experienced partners, fear of lack of support, language barriers, feeling of discouragement after several unsuccessful applications and lack of cooperation between researchers, especially cross-country.

Another problem can be a limited knowledge of Horizon Europe and the wider research and innovation policy objectives, for example the ERA, by many widening countries applicants. This might lead to stakeholders not fully grasping what the projects are set to achieve.

## Comments on proposed calls

### Twinning

An increase in the budget per project of Twinning calls should be considered from 0.5-1.5 to 1-2 million euros, especially given that the research/innovation component cannot exceed 30%. This concerns primarily the Green Deal topic, taking into consideration its ambitious goals.

Another concern relates to the fact that the excellence partner is not entitled to any funding. A separate budget for the excellence partner should be introduced to provide incentive for institutions from non-widening countries to participate.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the actors from widening countries are sometimes more interested in working with relevant partners on specific thematic areas under Pillar 2 than using Twinning calls.

### Hop on Facility

The main concern regarding the Hop on Facility instrument is that it allows participation of only one partner from a widening country in each project, which is very limiting, including with respect to the potential impact. Many projects already have a partner from a widening country, which practically excludes them from using the instrument.

Moreover, while skipping the application phase to join the project at a further point can at least theoretically be attractive for some partners from the widening countries if their topics of interest match, the tool can have a discouraging effect for consortia to include partners from the widening countries in projects from the very beginning, which should be preferable.

### ERA Chairs

The duration of grants under the ERA Chairs call should be extended to up to six years, to allow one year for creation of a team and applying for research funding. Furthermore, the grants should cover research costs at the level of at least 15% of the EU contribution, to increase feasibility.

### ERA Fellowships

The impact and added value of the ERA Fellowships should be considered in the context of the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships. In 2021, 1156 MSCA-PFs were awarded, while only 50 additional ERA Fellowships were offered to researchers who wish to implement their projects in the widening countries. This number should be higher for several reasons.

Most importantly, it could help address the phenomenon of brain drain from the widening countries, with scientists leaving to Western Europe. Higher relative number of ERA Fellowships in comparison to MSCA-PFs could create a greater incentive for researchers to plan their projects in the widening countries, as their chance of receiving a grant would be further increased.

Another argument for increasing the budget of the ERA Fellowships is the considerable number of the widening countries in relation to the non-widening ones.

Finally, host organisations in the widening countries seem to have inherently lower chances of succeeding in the MSCA-PF competition. This is because the MSCA-PF scheme includes a specific evaluation criterion related to the quality of the host institution and the supervisor, which on average is expected to be lower in the widening countries.

Based on this, efforts should be focused on creating a more balanced flow of researchers between widening and non-widening countries. The budget for ERA Fellowships should be increased and it should be promoted much more in the context of the MSCA-PF scheme.

### [Calls relating to regional ecosystem thinking](#)

Some calls in the draft WIDERA Work Programme 2023-2024, such as Excellence Hubs, Experimentation and exchange of good practices for value creation, and laying the groundwork towards Europe-wide citizen science campaigns, put particular emphasis on the regional ecosystem approach, underlining the importance of engaging quadruple helix stakeholders in projects. Such calls will be crucial for mobilising the broader R&I ecosystem and support the leadership role of actors in the widening countries.

In this context, the creation of a European policy forum for regional and local R&I ecosystems should be examined, which could serve as their yearly meeting place. Building on the Week of Innovative Regions in Europe (WIRE), ERRIN sees an opportunity to create in-depth dialogue on R&I practices and challenges across European regions. Such a policy forum could also be part of the upcoming new European Innovation Agenda. This WIRE 2.0 would be a European policy forum where policy makers, public authorities, academia and business would meet, exchange and further develop and strengthen regional innovation ecosystems, create connections between the ecosystems as well as address the coherence of the EU R&I ecosystem as a whole. These points were elaborated on more extensively in ERRIN's [recommendations on the future of the ERA](#) from June 2020.

## Conclusions

Finally, some overarching considerations when designing future widening programmes:

Firstly, combining widening and the European Research Area objectives in one programme can be challenging. Calls related to the ERA are very strategic, often relating to higher level policy objectives, whereas the widening calls tend to be more operational in nature. Having a number of widening calls with clear and strong policy objectives would also be welcome. At the same time, one should keep in mind that some widening elements, or criteria, could be rather included in Pillar II calls than kept in a separate programme.

Secondly, when looking at the statistics related to the WIDERA programme, the biggest beneficiaries of the programme do not actually come from widening countries. The reason for this should be further assessed to make sure that calls are not being taken over by project promoters. This would risk the programme not attaining the goals it sets out to achieve.

Finally, more should be done to engage further the different actors across the R&I ecosystem to provide inputs to the WIDERA work programmes. Regional authorities should also be considered as important partners in this process, also creating further synergies with Smart Specialisation Strategies and regional funding.

ERRIN (European Regions Research and Innovation Network) is a Brussels-based platform that gathers around 120 regional organisations in more than 20 European countries. ERRIN aims to strengthen the regional and local dimension in EU Research and Innovation policy and programmes. ERRIN supports members to enhance their regional and local research and innovation capacities and further develop their research and innovation ecosystems.

The ERRIN members primarily collaborate through 13 Working Groups (WG), covering both thematic areas and overarching policy issues. The Working Groups are based on members' priorities and current funding opportunities. The WG meetings are at the heart of ERRIN's activities, as this is where our members meet regularly to exchange information, present regional examples, build new partnerships, develop joint projects, network and much more.

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