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# Monitoring the *Horizon 2020* Application and Evaluation Process

## Broader, more challenge-based topics

The more open approach to the call topics is widely supported, it encourages the development of strong, cross-sector collaboration, bringing together a critical mass of actors such as researchers, higher education institutions, the business community and public authorities in order to create multi-dimensional synergies and increase capacities. We support the EC in maintaining this challenge-based non-prescriptive approach, although we do recognise this in itself brings oversubscription issues.

Having consulted with our members we would like to present some suggestions for improvement.

- We would like to see more **clarity in topic descriptions**, especially the **Impact statement**.
- We also feel it would be beneficial to applicants if the call text could **specifically outline the strategic rationale** for the inclusion of the topic. Including more specific information on the **strategic rationale, impacts** and reference to **background** documents in **call text** will allow applicants to more closely address the strategic impacts expected.
- We also feel it would be beneficial if the **Technology Readiness Levels** (TRLs) at which the project should be pitched are also **made explicit**.
- We would like the **difference** between **multidisciplinary** research and **interdisciplinary** research **better explained** and presented in guidance documents. These are both high level priorities for Horizon 2020 but there appears to be little emphasis on this in specific calls. It is currently unclear to applicants if these are aspirational but not entirely necessary for a successful project.
- We would like **explicit reference** to **multidisciplinary** and **interdisciplinary** approaches included in call documentation.

## Proposal Preparation and guidance provided

The new Participant Portal is viewed positively and does go some way to helping applicants with little or no experience navigate the system. However, some concerns have been raised that only those with years of experience know that, for example, you **MUST** download the full work programme and not simply look at the topic text in isolation. The documents themselves, once you find them, are of good quality and clear. We are also aware that some Member States and Associated Country National Contact Points offer a pre-proposal checking service, but we are concerned that such a service is not consistently available to all applicants thereby putting some at a disadvantage. We again have a few suggestions for the Commission to consider.

- The **list of Call Documents** provided for each individual call is often inconsistent and can be confusing to those moving between different Pillars, for example, as it may appear documents are missing. We suggest that the document list more **clearly indicates** which documents are **required** for individual calls, which are made available additionally for **guidance** and which relate to the **legal basis**. These documents should consistently be **grouped** by these categories and always appear in the **same order throughout**.
- The use of **acronyms** throughout online information should be limited to or at least combined with a **facility to view full name and explanation** of what they mean, and we suggest embedding this within the call text, such as TRL, GMP, LEIT, SC, ERC, KET, KIC, PPP (clearly explaining when this is Public-Private Partnership and when Public-Public Partnership) etc.
- We would also like to see **more information** provided to applicants where, for example the **cross thematic** PPPs, such as FoF, EeB, SPIRE, GV, FI-PPP etc, fit and how. Some fall within LEIT NMP and others in LEIT ICT.
- As already addressed by others, we would like to also advise that we agree the **search facility requires further improvement**; at present people are finding it easier to use Google, this in itself presents problems since the results of that search may not provide the most up to date version of the documentation, an example of this is where Work Programmes published for 2014-2015 calls had separate versions for the 2014 and 2015 calls.
- We would like to suggest that the outputs from a **search** within the Participant Portal be **exportable** to for example MS Excel and that it be possible to **save** search terms for the future for those logged into the system and that a **My Searches** area be added.
- The **SSH and International flagging** functionality needs to be more precise, this also relates to the call text being clearer. Only topics, which require meaningful and necessary involvement, should appear in search outputs.
- **Pre-Proposal checks** should be offered by all **National Contact Points**. The advice given must be well **informed** and **reliable, consistent** within each Member State and Associated Country and in each challenge area.

## Two-stage application process

Broadly, the increase in the number of two-stage calls is welcomed as this can greatly reduce workload. However, there are some issues emerging that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency by the Commission. We would like to use the PHC Health calls as an example. It is becoming clearer that far too many proposals are being selected for the second stage. Initial analysis of the outcomes of the first 2-stage PHC calls suggest that a large number of proposals which passed the first stage then failed at stage-2 on 'Excellence' which was the only criterion evaluated at stage-1, and those proposals were then not reviewed further at stage-2.

Not only does allowing too many proposal through to stage-2 remove any benefit from having a two-stage evaluation process in the first place, it results in more than 50% of proposals being selected for second stage, which in turn results in a success rate of less than 10%. This is a major disincentive for applicants and goes against the 'norm' with two-stage application processes which would have those excellent proposals requesting say 2 to 2.5 times of the available budget going through to the second stage and 45-50% of those being selected for funding. Higher success rates would be positively viewed by applicants and there would be a genuine reward for the effort of preparing a stage-2 proposal.

It must be recognised that stage-1 is already time consuming since the consortium needs to be formed, clear ideas about work packages developed and budgets set. The development of a 7 or 15-page application is often more complex than preparing a full proposal as preparing a coherent and persuasive message requires skill and effort.

One negative comment on two-stage calls is that SMEs may not be able to wait for the eventual outcome of proposals and may favour single-stage calls.

- **Success rates** at stage-1 should be significantly lower than for stage-2.
- **Low success** rates are a **disincentive**.
- Not all topics **clearly show if** a call is **1- or 2-stage**.

## Evaluation Process and feedback

We would like to advise the Commission that the level of feedback received for those rejected at stage-1 of a 2-stage process is widely considered as disappointing. The text is often too generic and does not aid those wishing to learn from their experience and submit future proposals. Similarly, the feedback received at stage-2 is often felt to be inadequately detailed and/or specific as to the reason the proposal has failed. We would support the publishing of the ranking list for the call results.

The comments of evaluators should be made available and should form the basis of the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR), rather than a 'watered down' generic set of comments, which are not specific to the individual proposal.

Concern has also been raised that the ESR do not always match the structure of the application form. This is confusing and does not help improve future applications. ESRs are widely viewed as too inconsistent, for example sometimes long paragraphs of feedback are provided and sometimes just a short sentence, and in turn do not completely match the score given. Often comments are all positive, with perhaps a couple of small negatives and the proposal is cut by a whole point. There needs to be much greater clarity in identifying exactly where the proposal has lost points and why.

As indicated earlier proposals which pass stage-1 are assumed to have scored at least 4 out of 5 for 'Excellence', however, the outcome at stage-2 often shows a big discrepancy with some scores dipping below the threshold. This suggests the evaluation criteria are more rigorously applied at stage-2. Additionally, feedback for successful stage-1 proposals is not received, it is therefore difficult to know where there may be areas for improvement at stage-2.

In order that the challenge based approach rewards interdisciplinary projects we would like to request this be explicitly outlined within the Implementation section of the ESR. We would also like to suggest that where efforts have been made to build an appropriate inter-sectorial/inter-disciplinary consortium this be rewarded with higher marks. We would also like to advise that it is important budgetary constraints are not imposed which restrict the building of an inter-sectorial/inter-disciplinary consortium. It should be more clearly explained that the budgetary guidelines are just that, guidelines. Exceeding this budget should not automatically disqualify a proposal. The strength must be the idea, the work plan, the consortium, the deliverables and impacts. The budget should have no negative influence on the success of a proposal.

Addressing the scoring system used by the European Research Council (ERC): We would like to propose the ERC considers re-establishing the more transparent evaluation reports, the numerical scoring system indicating the scores for both Parts B1 and B2 separately, and the average total. We understand this evaluation method is still used internally by the panels when ranking proposals but this is not made available to applicants. The current approach where the percentage ranking is based on a composite number with the scores for B1 and B2 combined is not sufficiently transparent in our view. For those who are considering re-submitting their application it is extremely beneficial to know whether the B1 is truly competitive as the current approach of designating the applicant as "outstanding", "excellent", "very good" or "non-competitive" is very subjective, given no two evaluators give the same response.

- ESRs should provide **consistently detailed comments**. Successful proposals currently receive more feedback than unsuccessful ones; this should be reversed to **encourage higher-level quality proposals** in the future.
- We would like to suggest that **ranking lists** are **published** when outcomes are announced.
- **Feedback** should be provided to those **successfully through to stage-2** before the second-stage application is submitted.
- We ask that the **ERC** re-instate its more transparent **numerical scoring system**.

## Other Comments

**Personnel Costs.** The requirement within the MGA states, “If a financial year is not closed at the end of the reporting period, the beneficiaries must use the hourly rate of the last closed financial year available”. This means that although institutions can show and prove actual costs for the current financial year when reporting they are not permitted to use this as they were in FP7. It is acknowledged the EC believes this reduces errors, however, having to return to a previous financial year will require institutions to undertake a manual process, which deviates from normal accounting practices. We believe this new approach will actually increase error rates. Having to use this approach will also result in a financial loss as we are deviating from using actual incurred costs. We believe this equates to around a 1.5-2% loss of income per staff member per year and offers no simplification.

**Contract Preparation.** We would like to ask that the financial information within the portal be downloadable as Adobe PDF or MS Excel. Institutions require a record of information at each stage of the signature process (both at the time the Declaration of Honour and Grant Agreement Accession are signed).

**Definition of Terms.** A more readily available and accessible definition of an SME should be available. Currently there is no minimum size only a maximum. Call documentation should also indicate the minimum size of organisations expected to participate; this would help determine whether an SME has the capacity to participate. The ESR should also refer to the capacity of the SME partners in evaluated projects as this would give the consortium an indication of whether the optimum SMEs were involved and whether the same SMEs should be retained for future re-submission or not.

The Commission needs to provide a clearer definition of the term ‘Innovation Management’ and how this differs from ‘Exploitation Management’. ESRs should also include reference to the appropriateness of the Innovation Management presented.

**Participant Portal.** We are very happy with the new system and feel it is working well. We would, however, like to propose some further improvements specifically surrounding the information LEARS have access to. The LEAR, as part of the circle of trust, should have automatic access to all projects where the PIC number is used. This should automatically give the LEAR access to all project related information and documentation.