

Inquiry into Horizon 2020

Evidence from Aberystwyth University

Comments from Aberystwyth University (AU) on the proposals for Horizon 2020

1 Introduction

Aberystwyth University (AU) broadly welcomes the proposals for Horizon 2020 proposals as they offer an excellent opportunity to streamline the 'innovation cycle', and so increase Europe and Wales' competitiveness.

Being based within a convergence area, AU welcomes the proposals in that research and innovation funding remain separate, but complementary with cohesion policies and instruments.

2.0 Potentially positive aspects of proposals for Horizon 2020 that AU recommends should be retained

2.1 EU support, particularly to Marie Curie Actions and European Research Centre grants, are likely to continue in Horizon 2020. These are helpful in drawing-in exceptional researchers from across the world into Wales, creating new highly skilled jobs, and generating research that can then be utilised in wealth creation. The proposed budget increase of 77% to support the European Research Council is welcomed.

2.2 The involvement with the FP7 Collaboration projects in particular benefits AU in many ways including raising the organisation's profile as a world-class research institution, allowing research peers from Europe and beyond to address together those grand societal challenges that are beyond the scope of individual Member States, nations and regions. This is likely to continue with Horizon 2020. A move towards more multi-disciplinary working in addressing grand challenges, is to be welcomed, as it enables collaborative teams to be drawn from across the University's departments. The capacity building undertaken through the Aberystwyth/Bangor partnership is likely to be exploited further under Horizon2020.

2.3 AU supports the commitment of Horizon 2020 to the use of excellence as the prime criterion for determining receipt of research funding in Europe.

2.4 AU welcomes also the commitment to increase funding for €80 billion, and calls on the European Commission and Parliament to support this figure as a minimum level of funding for Horizon 2020.

2.5 AU supports proposed measures to reimburse up to 100% of eligible direct costs. While the proposal for a single flat rate of 20% for reimbursement of indirect costs has received mixed reactions, there is broad consensus across the organisation that a higher rate of reimbursement for indirect costs should be considered.

2.5 AU supports the development of a clearer division of labour between Horizon 2020 and Structural Funds. However, much work needs to be done to ensure alignment of the Structural Funds with research and innovation priorities, and to clarify and facilitate synergies between Horizon 2020 and the Structural Funds.

2.6 AU would welcome the Commission liaising with stakeholders to develop details regarding how the societal challenges will be managed, and what they will look like at work programme level.

2.7 AU would encourage the European Commission and the Parliament to ensure that the impetus to include social science research structurally in Horizon 2020 is carried through to the programme's execution.

2.8 AU supports the three central programme objectives identified to underpin Horizon 2020, and considers the relative balance of funding budgets proposed to be broadly appropriate.

3.0 Aspects of the proposals for Horizon 2020 that AU recommends should be considered further

3.1 AU is disappointed at plans to remove the option for institutions to use full economic costing methodology to claim real costs. The University strongly urges the Commission to develop a simpler certification system for declaration of real indirect costs, and to include it in Horizon 2020 as an option for those institutions that choose to use it.

3.2 Flat rate and lump sum options can be useful in particular circumstances, but should be retained on an optional basis.

3.3 AU welcomes the continued commitment to the Marie Curie Actions (MCA). However, there is significant concern that in real terms the current proposals would see a drop in budget. AU calls on the Commission to increase the proportion of the budget allocated to the flagship MCAs, and to avoid the dilution of the flagship MCAs in favour of the Cofund Scheme which requires high levels of match-funding.

3.4 On the basis of what is in the proposal, the 'Inclusive, Innovative and Secure Societies' strand lacks coherence. AU would welcome articulation of how this challenge would operate. It is also important that it does not operate as a repository for strands that do not fit elsewhere in the structure, such as the intergovernmental European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) framework.

3.5 It is important that there is a clear justification for the ten-fold increase in funding for EIT activities proposed under Horizon 2020. AU also strongly supports plans to streamline the EIT's administration and governance structures.

3.6 AU supports the aspirations to adopt a more focused approach towards cooperation with countries outside the EU. However, there is a lack of clarity surrounding new plans for international collaboration. AU calls on the Commission to develop a transparent mechanism for translating high-level policy objectives into concrete and transparent opportunities, and to clarify how new solutions will be developed under Horizon 2020.

3.7 It is significant to realise that major industries, of which there are proportionally few in Wales, are likely to benefit far more in future under the proposals. Given that economic growth and increases in employment are best achieved when support is targeted at SMEs, AU would welcome a re-evaluation of structures proposed for Horizon 2020 to ensure that SMEs maintain the variation in advantage they currently have over larger companies under FP7.

3.8 Looking ahead to the discussions relating to the governance of Horizon 2020, Aberystwyth University (AU) is likely to welcome, in the interests of transparency and accountability, the development of a top-level committee with strategic oversight over the programme, and suggests that this could be modelled along the same lines as the ERC's governing group which successfully takes into account the interests of both Member State representation and research groupings. Were such a committee to be considered achievable and practicable, AU would welcome a re-examination of the terms of reference of other decision making groups with a view to clarifying accountability and decision-making, and minimising the risks of duplication.

3.9 Relating to the matter of the future management of the programme, AU has had good experiences with outsourced programme administrators, such as the Research Executive Agency, and would tentatively welcome further outsourcing to entities providing a consistently applied service is maintained across all EU states. AU particularly values direct contact with staff members with the Commission. AU would be opposed to the introduction of a nationally or regionally fragmented programme administration, fearing that too many inconsistencies in interpretation of guidelines could occur, thus disadvantaging a significant proportion of regions. The direct link that exists between AU (and other HEIs') grant beneficiaries and the European Commission on FP7 projects is appreciated and should be retained under Horizon 2020.