

Proposals for enhancing actions for “Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence” – A practitioner perspective

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There is a strong consensus around the importance of bridging the research and innovation gap between the so-called EU-15 countries¹ (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the western members of the Union. The war against Ukraine underlines the urgent necessity to widen the perspective to candidate, potential candidates and future candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine). The EU has enacted a variety of programmes and actions with that goal. However, there is a general feeling that these programmes suffer from their complexity and lack of visibility; moreover, more decisive actions must be considered.

The proposals in this document are a contribution in that direction. They represent the highlights of the first session of the Widening Participation Workshop: “*A diagnosis of the situation in the EU*” organized by the Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE). This workshop was organised to provide an overview of the situation of the R&I systems in the EU-15 Member States and to facilitate the exchange of ideas with the ultimate goal of proposing realistic strategies that will have a positive impact on the EU-15 R&I systems.

The list of proposals is structured into short-, medium-, and long-term actions and are essential to address the gap in the R&I systems between EU-12 and EU-15 countries (as well as candidate countries). The proposals are based on the rigorous discussions with representatives from academia and national funding agencies. This report is expected to be shared with the European Commission, European Parliament as well as national funding agencies from the EU and Associated Countries to engage together in further steps for enhancing the actions for Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence.

Short-terms actions (1-2 years):

- ✓ **Create a strategy to promote a positive attitude change toward Eastern European researchers.** We recommend networking actions, which have proven to be very beneficial in clearing out the existing biases. It is necessary to involve all of the concerned stakeholders, i.e., universities, researchers and public institutions, with the goal of achieving change of attitudes. We encourage consistent communication actions towards the legislators advocating the need for all European countries to be engaged in finding solutions to this issue because widening participation is one of the most important challenges of the whole European Research system and is not only an EU-15 problem.
- ✓ **Enable a central role for National Contact Points (NCPs).** One of the objectives of the EC’s Implementation Strategy is to provide special support to NCPs in EU-15 countries, but no further details are provided. We recommend further training and additional resources to encourage, facilitate, and support a cultural change in EU-15 countries. In addition, being the first point of contact with the local research and innovation ecosystems, the EC should use the feedback from NCPs to adapt and improve its programmes, thus enhancing their impact.

¹ REGULATION (EU) 2021/695 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Article 2(17): [Publications Office \(europa.eu\)](https://publications-office.europa.eu)

- ✓ **Enable investment in the research infrastructures and in human resources, specifically promoting the increase of salaries for researchers to enhance the attractivity and competitiveness of conducting research in EU-15 Countries with respect to the EU-12 Countries.** Although national funding agencies in EU-15 Countries have aligned their national policies with ERC legislation, there is a need for training the national workforce to act as coordinators and work package leader roles in European projects.
- ✓ **Revise the time-frame** of research grants in countries where adequate infrastructures are lacking; in the present situation, we observe that grants are too short: by the time the grant expires, grantees have barely been able to establish an effective research group, and begin doing good work – and have to start again.
- ✓ Give a bigger visibility and accessibility to the existing widening programmes and involve all stakeholders in promoting them.

Medium-terms actions (3-5 years):

- ✓ **Provide incentives for both EU-12 and EU-15 to enhance integration of talent and infrastructures from lower performing regions in mutually beneficial (and sustainable) networks and consortia.** This will require shared efforts, national reforms and synergies between funding schemes. We recommend designing programmes and the selection process to encourage leadership roles (as coordinators and work package leaders) for EU-15 Countries. Coordinating institutions in EU-12 Countries should be rewarded with additional funding when EU-15 institutions are included in the consortium - this would be an incentive to actively seek EU-15 partners. In addition, we recommend fostering international links in areas such as recruitment, co-authored publications, PhD mobility, and representation at international organisations by enhancing collaborative R&I networks with top-performing organisations (for example, through joint proposals).
- ✓ **Transform the exchange networks for research results and ideas (COST actions) to research collaborations (RIA, IA, etc.).** To promote research collaborations across all 27 EU Countries, R&I framework programmes should provide instruments to connect the best EU expertise and to foster collaboration in EU R&I projects (RIA, IA) between researchers and research institutions from different countries.
- ✓ **Strengthen use of peer review processes.** EU-15 should link national funding opportunities to peer review processes at the European level. This should include speeding funding for proposals that receive the Seal of Excellence (European Commission, NDA). For example, some countries fund research projects of individual researchers who have been given the seal of excellence within the MSCA and/or ERC programmes.
- ✓ **Facilitating the use of Structural Funds to create EU project offices** in RTOs and Academic institutions to support researchers in widening countries in the submission process of EU proposals. Concerted efforts to re-purpose, e.g. Cohesion Funds and other suitable funding programmes should be made to transfer funds to R&I.

Long-term actions (+6 years):

- ✓ **Synergise with other EU programmes.** To support flexibility in the pursuit of ERA objectives and given the diversity of national R&I systems, incentives should be put into place to encourage Member States to use and/or transfer European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to strengthen national R&I systems. For example, ESIF could be used to support the mobility of researchers to widening countries, to modernise research infrastructures and/or to contribute to the creation of new ones, and the to create of new

jobs in research. Increasing national funding for R&I will also help build a much-needed research infrastructure and ensure appropriate salaries, and eventually address the innovation gaps between EU's Member States. It is important to note that each widening country has its own national R&I system. It is important to take these differences into account when looking for potential synergies between European and national sources of funding. Increasing the national R&I funding in widening countries is a necessary step in turning brain-drain into a brain-circulation process and enable the retention or return of excellent scientists to their countries.

- ✓ **Extend MSCA widening fellowships.** After the success of the programme in H2020, we recommend that 3.3% of the MSCA budget be made available for widening fellowships for EU-15. In addition, we recommend developing novel concepts to extend the impact of these actions to other programmes, in particular to the ERC, EIC Pathfinder instrument in HE, and Research Infrastructures, without compromising the criteria that made those programmes successful.
- ✓ **Develop a mechanism of analysing the (positive) systemic changes in the national governments/agencies.** The creation of metrics to monitor possible positive changes would be also beneficial.

Kindly note that these recommendations have been made with reference to the recommendation provided in the ISE Horizon Europe position paper.