

16. Action 16: Improve EU-wide access to excellence

1.1. Purpose of the Action and expected outcomes

By acknowledging the necessity for increasing excellence in order to make use of the full potential of scientific resources in Europe, Action 16 aims at improving access to excellence across the EU's R&I system and specifically support low R&I performing countries. Reaching this very ambitious objective will require the combination of many different existing tools and potentially new or reinforced ones, at both EU and Member State level. In this regard, Cohesion Policy, the Widening Programme under Horizon Europe, the R&I investments in the Recovery and Resilience Framework as well as the use of the Horizon Policy Support Facility or the Technical Support Instrument will play a fundamental, albeit insufficient role. In addition, concerned Member States will also need to prioritise R&I investments and reforms when needed in order to improve their R&I performance.

Against this backdrop, Action 16 will contribute to first, securing better coordination of R&I and Cohesion policy, creating a link between the two communities, including the setting up and strengthening of synergies between EU and national/regional funding programmes to raise impact and thus R&I performance; and second, identifying persistent bottlenecks to raise excellence and propose possible solutions that will also contribute to the closing of the existing innovation divide.

In order to meet these objectives, and following discussions in the ERA Forum, the Commission established the 'Access to excellence' – 'R&I and Cohesion Managing Authorities' Network (RIMA) subgroup to the ERA Forum to conduct the implementation of ERA Action 16 - EU-wide Access to Excellence.

In order to foster the interaction between the two communities, the Commission asked Member States for the nomination of two main representatives and two alternative representatives in this subgroup of the ERA Forum. Out of the four representatives per Member State, two (main and alternate) should be appointed from the national authorities responsible for research and innovation and two (main and alternate) from the national authorities responsible for cohesion policy in the area of research and innovation investments.

These representatives should maintain close links to national and regional authorities in charge of Cohesion policy and authorities in charge of the implementation of Horizon Europe in terms of collecting input and disseminating results. Associated Countries as well as other public entities and ERA stakeholder organisations were invited to the group as observers. The group is jointly chaired by DG Research and Innovation, DG Regional and Urban Policy and a Member States' representative (namely from the Czech Republic).

The first meeting took place on 7 June 2023. It focused on key novelties in synergies, and some indications on the future work resulting from the recent European Court of Auditors synergies' audit¹, as well as other relevant initiatives for joining forces to improve the overall impact of EU R&I investment, such as Regional Innovation Valleys², the latest developments on Widening actions³ as well as the new Community of Practice on Smart Specialisation.

Member States' presentations and discussions focussed on how to improve R&I performance across Europe by better interacting between the two key R&I supporting EU programmes, Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy. Member State R&I authorities and Cohesion policy bodies presented and exchanged experiences on a broad range of synergies. This included discussions on governance, such as existing cooperation between R&I actors at national level, and the exchanges on more operational aspects, such as first concrete cases of implementing the new toolbox for synergies as outlined in the published guidance notice on Horizon Europe – ERDF synergies⁴.

1.2. Implementation of the Action

¹ https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_23/SR_H2020_and_ESI_Funds_EN.pdf

² https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/support-policy-making/shaping-eu-research-and-innovation-policy/new-european-innovation-agenda/new-european-innovation-agenda-roadmap/flagship-3-accelerating-and-strengthening-innovation-european-innovation-ecosystems-across-eu-and_en

³ https://rea.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/horizon-europe-widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence_en

⁴ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.421.01.0007.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2022:421:FULL

The activities of Action 16 started officially in 2023 with the setting up of the Expert Sub-group and the organization of the first kick-off meeting.

Early achievements from these activities include the initial identification of synergies actions between Cohesion funding and Horizon Europe in terms of designing and implementing new synergies tools, such as possibilities of transfers from ERDF programmes to Horizon Europe, mobilization of ERDF to be used as national contribution for Horizon Europe Co-funded and Institutionalised Partnerships. This also encompasses the identification of data needs and existing gaps to better create and monitor the creation of synergies between both funding programmes, including the upstream and downstream synergies.

In addition, the initial identification of different governance modalities as a starting point for possible future improvements are also part of the initial achievements of this action.

A policy survey to better understand the use of synergies at Member State level as well as the identification of bottlenecks to do so is ongoing and will provide ground for future actions under the Expert sub-group.

Action 16 is in line with the **2021 Council of the European Union Recommendation** on 'Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality'. The latter explicitly welcomed widening actions, helping '*to design and implement reforms of the R&I systems*'.⁵

Action 16 was developed to complement and strengthen national R&I strategies and interdependent cohesion policy programmes and national, regional, and private investments. Several **instruments** are included in Action 16's package under Horizon Europe and aim at improving excellence, such as:

- **Teaming, Twinning, Excellence hubs:** Teaming actions aim to either create or modernise centres of excellence in Widening Countries. This is to be achieved by the establishment of strategic partnerships with leading institutions abroad.⁶ Twinning activities aim at enhancing networking opportunities between research institutions of the Widening Countries (acting as coordinators), and their leading counterparts,⁷ at least two research institutions from two different EU countries or Associated Countries, to facilitate the exchange of best practices. Excellence Hubs aim to strengthen place-based innovation and excellence through the establishment of cross-boarder partnerships of 'innovation ecosystems' in Widening Countries.⁸
- **The European Excellence Initiative:** This action aims at empowering universities as drivers of change in relation to R&D and create opportunities for cooperation between HEIs.⁹
- **For empowering brain circulation,** the action **ERA talents** aims for cross-sectoral talent circulation and academia-business collaboration, and the action ERA fellowships gives specific support for excellent researchers from Widening Countries not funded through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
- **Hop-on facility:** This action aims at providing opportunities to research institutions from Widening countries to join ongoing R&I actions under Horizon Europe Pillar 2 and the EIC Pathfinder.¹⁰
- **COST** is funding scientific networking that pools resources and results of nationally funded research activities. It serves also as an incubator for successful research proposals under Horizon Europe. 80%

⁵ Council of the European Union (2021), Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality - Council conclusions (adopted on 28/05/2021), p.7, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9138-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁶ European Commission (2023), 'Widening participation and spreading excellence', available at: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence_en

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ European Research Executive Agency, European Commission (2023), 'European Excellence Initiative', available at: https://rea.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/horizon-europe-widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence/european-excellence-initiative_en.

¹⁰ European Research Executive Agency, European Commission (2023), 'Hop-on facility', available at: https://rea.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/horizon-europe-widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence/hop-facility_en

of COST's budget is devoted to widening actions and 50% of its budget is invested in Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITCs).¹¹

- **ERA Chairs:** This action shall attract high-level researchers to a university or research centre located in a Widening country and establish a research team fully integrated in the coordinator's institution, thereby increasing its research capacity and considerably improving its research performance in a scientific domain of choice.¹²
- **For improving the quality and quantity of proposals** from widening countries – a special action is dedicated to the **strengthening of the National Contact Point network** by developing its services in pre-proposal checks, match making activities, consultation, etc.
- A new call **Pathways to synergies** has been introduced in 2023 as a dedicated action fostering upstream or downstream synergies (applicants may choose). This will provide support for additional efforts required for setting up the interfaces between two different funding systems where major barriers still occur due to the mismatches of regional versus European approach, consortium vs single beneficiary funding and Horizon thematic priorities vs national/regional smart specialization.
- Another new call in 2023 - **Dissemination and Exploitation Support Facility** is focusing on activities to strengthen or build D&E capacities in widening countries and will provide beneficiaries of the ongoing portfolio of widening projects with further opportunities for scaling up their research results and improve the sustainability of their actions.

Additional instruments may be included in the future calls of the upcoming Work Programmes.¹³

The 2023 OECD STIP Survey offers some relevant insights on key themes related to Action 16.¹⁴

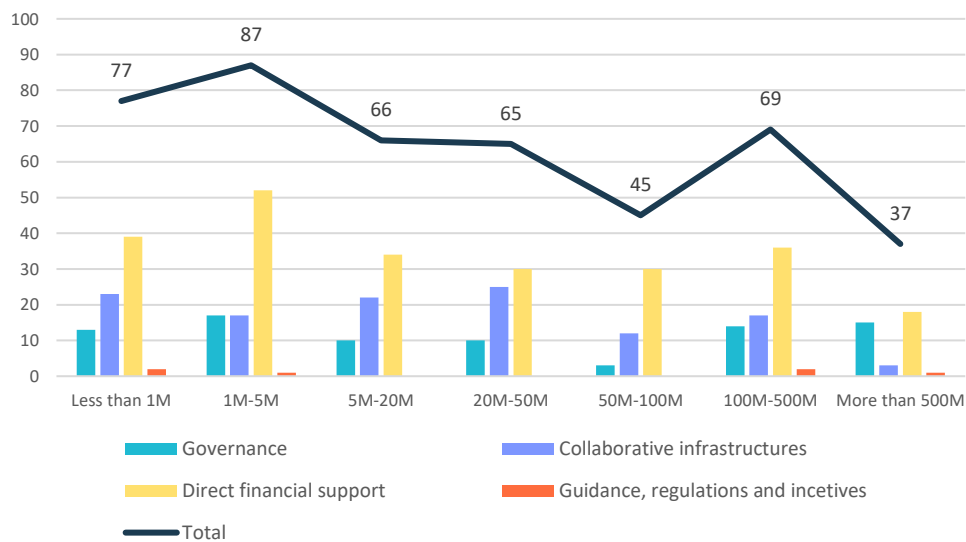


Figure 34: Action 16: Distribution of budget per policy instrument

¹¹ <https://www.cost.eu/strategicplan>

¹² https://rea.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/horizon-europe-widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence/era-chairs_en

¹³ DG RTD (2022), Action 16: Improve EU-wide access to excellence, available at: https://era.gv.at/public/documents/4605/16_-_Improve_EU-wide_access_to_excellence_explanatory_document_revised_xMUA1Go.pdf

¹⁴ OECD STIP Survey themes related to Action 16 are the following: Theme 16 'Public Research debates', Theme 24 'Research and technology infrastructures', Theme 26 'Cross disciplinary research', Theme 28 'Business innovation policy debates', and Theme 41 'Knowledge exchange and co-creation strategies'.

Figure 47 shows the distribution of **budget allocation** for policies related to Action 16 at EU level (27 Member States). It indicates that the majority of Action 16-related policies are being funded within a yearly budget between EUR 1M and EUR 5M or of less than EUR 1M. Thirty-seven policies benefit from large amounts of funding, with more than EUR 500 M. An example of an initiative with more than EUR 500 million is the Spanish State Plan for Scientific and Technological Research and Innovation 2021-2023¹⁵.

Lastly, the graph above shows that the key **policy instruments** related to Action 16 include direct financial support¹⁶ (42%), followed by governance instruments¹⁷ (32%). Collaborative infrastructures¹⁸ also represent an important policy instrument to implement policies related to Action 16 (24%). Guidance, regulation and incentives are the policy instrument used in a minority of cases (2%).

¹⁵ Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (2021) 'PEICTI State Plan for Scientific, Technical and Innovative Research 2021-2023' (PEICTI Plan Estatal de Investigaci Científica, Técnica y de Innovaci 2021-2023), available at: <https://www.ciencia.gob.es/InfoGeneralPortal/documento/e1f1deb1-7321-4dd9-b8ca-f97ece358d1c>

¹⁶ Direct financial support can include institutional funding, various types of grants, procurement programmes dedicated to R&D and innovation, loans, credit and scholarships, equity financing or innovation vouchers.

¹⁷ Governance tools refer as elements such as strategies, plans, reforms, regulatory tools, consultations of relevant stakeholders, the development of standards and certification, or public awareness campaigns.

¹⁸ Related instruments facilitate networking and collaborative platforms, provide dedicated support to research and technical infrastructures, information service and access to datasets.