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# H2020 mid-term review: Implementation aspects

Contribution to the implementation procedures under the  
H2020 mid-term evaluation

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This declaration is included in EU-LIFE's contribution to H2020's mid-term evaluation process.

## H2020 implementation

Despite substantial improvements especially regarding the participant portal and simplification, EU-LIFE members have identified some issues based on the experiences of the first calls of H2020 that require further improvement.

### Development of work programmes

#### 1. *General focus of the work programmes*

So far, H2020 has shown an unbalance towards close-to-the market research. For example, clinical and applied research have been the core of the work programmes for Health in the Societal Change pillar 1 (Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing). The limited inclusion of fundamental research in these calls has demonstrated a linear view of the research process and promoted a dichotomy basic / fundamental research, which effectively widens the gap between research and innovation. Basic research provides insights crucial for the development of new therapies and can validate the efforts of applied science. H2020 has offered very few opportunities for collaboration across Europe for fundamental researchers, which, if continued, will have a negative effect on the excellence and competitiveness of European research, but also on innovation in Europe. This seems also to have led to an oversubscription of ITNs in the Excellence pillar as the main collaborative instrument open to basic researchers and in consequence to extremely low success rates.

The H2020 approach also fails to adequately encourage collaboration between disciplines such as biology, physics, chemistry, mathematics etc. H2020 lacks the cohesive strength to truly catalyse transdisciplinarity and foster collaboration across the research continuum from basic to close-to-the-market research.

2. *Topic selection.* The topic selection of calls in H2020 is markedly different compared to FP7: while increased budget flexibility, broader topics and the two-year work programmes have been positively received in the research community, unfortunately the topic selection process is still not fully transparent.
3. *Call understanding.* The increased translational and applied focus is a core strategic element in the H2020 agenda, but the expectations that arise from this strategic focus are often unclear in the call descriptions. There tends to be an imbalance with translation-heavy proposals receiving criticism for lacking the basic biological analysis, while more basic-research-focused proposals are losing points on lacking innovation potential. A viable balance between the two is not easily implemented in the timeframe of a H2020 project. We would welcome a clearer definition of the expectations so that an appropriately balanced consortium can be designed to achieve the goals of the call.
4. *Impact.* The impact of the proposal has also received increased focus in H2020. While we understand the need to show impact, we would prefer to see a clearer description in the call of what impact is exactly expected from a successful project. Impact is a very generic and overarching term and cannot be precisely predicted, cannot easily be measured and usually takes long (longer than the project duration)

to become evident. The same holds for scientific excellence. A proposal could have a great impact in one sector and minimal in another. We would propose a formulation in the text where specific sectors on which the proposal should have impact to be clearly described. This could be further supported by using the relationship between impact and technology readiness levels (TRL) as a guide, adding a TRL expectation to the call text which is associated with the appropriate level of impact e.g. opening up new areas of potential innovation for early TRLs to developing therapeutic targets for higher TRLs.

## Evaluation

There is room for improvement in evaluation feedback, even though in some cases it is not prone to criticism.

1. *Stage 1 feedback.* There is insufficient feedback at stage 1 of 2-stage calls, preventing constructive assessment of the potential for re-submission to future calls. Standard and repetitive statements are regularly featured and no further insight is given as to the rationale behind different scoring. Enabling failed submissions to be a constructive learning process will increase the quality of proposals. We therefore urge the Commission to provide this feedback at stage 1.
2. *Stage 2 feedback.* The quality of feedback is highly variable: key evaluation findings are presented in many ways and it is often unclear which elements of the project the comments are aimed at. In some circumstances, generic criticism is given such that applicants cannot identify the specific shortcomings and thus no effective understanding emerges regarding which parts of their proposal need improvement. Therefore, we propose to avoid the use of generic sentences such as 'not described in sufficient detail' or 'too vague', or 'not clearly explained' without addressing the exact shortcomings. For meaningful feedback it is needed to link the comments in the evaluation report to the evaluation criteria in the call and the contents of the proposal.
3. *Re-submission.* For re-submitted grants, reviewers should be given the ESRs from the first submission.

## Financial administration

We recognise and welcome the efforts on simplification of financial administration of projects in H2020 and also acknowledge the great improvement of the participant portal. However, there are some areas that unfortunately have become more complicated.

1. *Internal cost allocation* (Art. 6.2.D.3 AGA). Institutional Core Facilities are an essential provider of services for researchers all over Europe. In FP7, auditable tracking was sufficient to identify the "price" of internal service units (e.g. gene sequencing, mass spectrometry, animal facilities etc.). The administrative burden in H2020 is now much higher, as the costs per unit must be split into different cost types. For example a person preparing a sample for gene sequencing in the wet lab must track each sample with time-sheets. As the preparation only takes a few minutes, this leads to dozens of time-sheet entries per day (and hundreds per month). While we fully appreciate that the internally invoiced costs need to be auditable and not misinterpreted or misused, this new measure is unworkable and will have a major impact on European research infrastructure and European

science: services will be subcontracted which we anticipate will increase costs and highly specialised in-house infrastructure and expertise will be lost. We do not believe that this was the goal of this article. It therefore requires urgent revision. EU-LIFE, as an alliance of top research centres in life sciences, strongly supports the "Joint statement on the current problem of internal cost allocation (ICA) in Horizon 2020", dated January 2016, written by the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres e.V., Legal Advisor Brussels Office.

2. *Personnel costs / time-sheets*. We welcome the possibility of simplification regarding the time-sheets for people who work exclusively on a single H2020 project. As tempting as this "declaration of exclusive work" seems to our researchers, some questions and fears have not yet been addressed. Currently many institutes do not use this apparent simplification due to the nature of working at a research organisation. For example, a person may work exclusively on a H2020 project, however attendance at an event that is not directly related to the project in, e.g., month 10 results in those personnel costs being ineligible. Most institutes have one or more events (e.g. retreat, recess, outing) per year, which are not project-related. These few days prevent the use of this simplification. We propose that the declaration of exclusive work allows for these activities as they are important for both the researcher and the wider context of the project.



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