

# Cross-border research collaboration: EU comparative advantage

## Focus on citizens and society

### **The paper in a nutshell**

The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is under discussion and institutional parties, namely the European Commission, the European Parliament and Member States are not yet in agreement on the architecture. One of the most debated issues is around the investment in R&I, the most prominent single budget managed directly by the European Commission.

The debate is currently being shaped by Europe's 'competitiveness' challenge identified by the EU Competitiveness Compass,<sup>1</sup> which misses any sense of balance with the broad social agenda which is central to EU developments. The wider global events will inevitably shape the MFF discussions and the research agenda.

In this paper EASSH wants to refocus the policy debate on three important principles that must be respected in any future EU budget:

1. Placing the needs of citizens and society at the heart of the debate: refocusing competitiveness on social well-being, and equitable and sustainable societies;
2. Recognising the fundamental importance of cooperation in scientific research as a pillar of the founding philosophy of the EU;
3. Improving multidisciplinary approaches to strengthen solutions to the social, political, and economic challenges the EU is facing.

SSH research is at the heart of understanding the threats to democratic processes and societal stability. It ensures and fosters critical thinking, helps engage and mobilise citizens, and counter-balances techno-centrism. A focused research programme to guide the strengthening of a democratic, culturally diverse and just Europe is critical.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Commission [A competitive compass for the EU](#) published 29 January 2025.

<sup>2</sup> See German Federal Ministry of Education and Research [European societies of the future: Research for a democratic, culturally diverse and socially just Europe](#) published April 2025.

**Principle 1. Placing the needs of citizens and society at the heart of the debate: refocusing competitiveness on social well-being, and equitable and sustainable societies**

European policies are fundamentally based on the aim to protect and promote rights and values of the citizens as mandated in the EU Treaties. The EU has created unprecedented stability and opportunity for citizens. However, today, Europe is in more uncertain territory than for many generations. We are witness to a new consensus on rearmament that reverses 80 years of global security architecture. Today, the trade war, emerging imperialisms and entrenched nationalisms are shaking our liberal societies. Scientific research is not only a tool of national (or regional) authorities to make an impact in the battle to increase competitiveness, but an instrument to serve established agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals.

EASSH has for many years called for investment in research that helps to better understand the effects of policies on society, on communities as well as the economy. Initiatives like a labour market observatory announced by Commissioner Minzatu, at the EU Social and Employment forum, demonstrates the power of research to help understand the current needs, and forecast future demands, for skills in the labour market.<sup>3</sup> Much of the EU economy is transitioning towards the services sector, which already has an economic output nearly three times that of the manufacturing sector,<sup>4</sup> and employs around 73.1% of the EU's workforce. The creative industries generate an annual market value of around €500 billion and employ about 6 million people across the EU. These industries, that rely on research from humanities and social sciences, are key players in European competitiveness. Furthermore, large EU programmes for Creative Europe, and "Citizens, equality rights and value", and others looking at cross-border education, training and solidarity as well as programmes about international cooperation, sustainable development and the global south have been neglected from European research investment.

The Framework Programmes have traditionally been the main source of European research funding and given the important and tense geopolitical conditions, EASSH argues for a strong and coherent long-term investment in socio-political research, humanities and culture to equip European and national policymakers with the evidence they need to design appropriate policies. This is as also supported by the recent focus paper of the German Federal government.<sup>5</sup>

Investing in critical research for policy-making, implementation, and monitoring is vital for advancing social progress, civil liberties, and human rights. Such research also supports key European economic sectors. EU policies, connected to citizens and communities, strengthen democratic societies. However, **the social sciences and humanities community is concerned that the 'competitiveness' framing of the discussion around the next MFF and Framework Programme have overlooked research critical for sustainable European societies. Strong societies are key to enhancing European competitiveness.**

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<sup>3</sup> [Union of skills. Investing in people for a competitive European Union](#)

<sup>4</sup> The services sector encompasses a wide range of activities, including transportation, telecommunications, professional services, financial services, retail, and tourism [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> See German Federal Ministry of Education and Research *European societies of the future: Research for a democratic, culturally diverse and socially just Europe* to be published [here](#).

## **Principle 2. Recognising the fundamental importance of collaboration in scientific research as a pillar of the founding philosophy of the EU**

EASSH has already aligned with many other organisations representing both public and private interests in the field of Research and Innovation on the need to have a standalone Framework Programme, appropriately funded with a ring-fenced budget.<sup>6</sup> We are also aligned with the demand of retaining an investment in fundamental research, implying ERC independence, and continuation of the MSCA programme, which we would expect to have more panels to better cover the SSH disciplines.

Commissioner Zaharieva, in early April, confirmed plans for a standalone programme which was already supported by the Warsaw Declaration<sup>7</sup> and the European Parliament in early March.<sup>8</sup> Despite this welcome news, there remains ambiguity over the future thinking around the continuation of funding for collaborative research. We are deeply concerned that undervaluing this mode of research investment may lead to further shrinking support for scientific cooperation across the EU and the capacity of European science to influence the global research agenda via its international collaborations. Therefore, in this paper we want to highlight the importance of cross-border collaboration and why it is vital for all disciplines, especially for the SSH, that the Framework Programme continues to encourage collaborative research.

We are concerned that a narrow view of “competitiveness” may limit the scope and diversity of research investment across the EU. Competitiveness requires diversity and variety in terms of original ideas, supporting innovative solutions. Being over prescriptive actually undermines competitiveness, whereas scale, effort, and diversity promote it. The European Research Area fosters scale and diversity through national research systems that need a platform for collaboration to combine effectively. Framework programmes have transformed European research, and we should leverage a future “cooperation” programme to continue this progress.

International collaboration is also good for supporting world class science. Studies have provided evidence that international collaboration in research – both within the EU and internationally – boosts ‘scientific excellence’ and has contributed to broader cross-EU integration.<sup>9</sup> European scientific cooperation is not just an accessory to integration, it is its cornerstone. Over successive Framework Programmes, the EU has fostered a vibrant transnational research landscape that has elevated European science globally. Studies confirm that international co-authorship—particularly within the EU—has driven a dramatic increase in research output and excellence. Between 2009 and 2018, research publications rose by 46% in EU-15 countries and 30.9% in EU-13, with international collaboration being the primary driver.<sup>10</sup>

EASSH believes that the EU Framework Programmes have raised the visibility of European science, that they have supported research output that is increasingly excellent and builds Europe’s reputation as a scientific powerhouse. Alongside the scientific advancements

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<sup>6</sup> See our latest position paper [A Prosperous and Competitive Europe - Joint position paper on SSH in FP10](#) published jointly with another 13 large umbrella organisations on 02 December 2024.

<sup>7</sup> [The Warsaw Declaration on the Strategic Role of the Future EU R&I Framework Programme](#), 11 March 2025.

<sup>8</sup> [European Parliament non-binding report](#), 10 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Kwiek, M (2024) “What large-scale publication and citation data tell us about international research collaboration in Europe: changing national patterns in global contexts” in *Studies in Higher Education*, 2021, VOL. 46, NO. 12, 2629–2649. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2402.09407>

<sup>10</sup> Dag W. Aksnes, Gunnar Sivertsen. Global trends in international research collaboration, 1980-2021<sup>Ⓢ</sup>[J]. *Journal of Data and Information Science*, 2023, 8(2): 26-42 <https://doi.org/10.2478/jdis-2023-0015>

supported by EU funding, there is evidence that the ‘cooperation’ pillars of the Framework Programmes have supercharged European research across the disciplines and that Europe benefits significantly from the programme.

### **Principle 3. Improving multi-disciplinary approaches to strengthen solutions to the social, political and economic challenges the EU will face**

Truly multi-disciplinary research offers huge opportunities to deliver on the objectives of the EU’s Political Agenda. Over the last decades, the FPs have dedicated over 95% of the overall funding to technical innovation and ‘hard’ sciences,<sup>11</sup> thus neglecting the social dimension of technological and economic developments. A genuine multi-disciplinary approach would better ensure widespread impact of Research and Innovation funding.

Emerging concepts such as “One Health,” “Planetary Health,” and “Responsible Innovation” underscore the necessity of multi-disciplinary settings. These concepts, which sit at the critical intersection of research and policy, depend on diverse expertise that can only be achieved through robust cooperation in teams drawing together talents and insights from a range of disciplines. The next generation of research investment in the EU must, therefore, support research environments where disciplines interact freely, fostering innovations that meet the complex needs of modern societies.

Data shows that challenge 6 in Horizon 2020 and cluster 2 in Horizon Europe, both SSH-led parts of each programme have responded extremely well to the interdisciplinarity challenge and delivered important projects and case studies with a breadth of contributions from across disciplines.<sup>12</sup> However, this story of integration is not the same across other areas of the FPs. SSH integration was negligible in the Health cluster, or in Climate and Environment cluster, despite the flagging of topics that required SSH contributions. For example, of the projects funded under the Health cluster in Horizon Europe, less than 2% of the total scientific contribution was from SSH research.<sup>13</sup>

While we are confident that policies can be developed to encourage interdisciplinarity, we know that the design of how policies are implemented is the key factor that actually determines the outcome. To ensure truly interdisciplinary research, SSH scholars and expertise are needed through all stages. This starts with including scholars in the design of all areas of cooperation programmes, in advisory boards, in expert groups helping to prepare less prescriptive work programmes and call texts and continues to ensure SSH expertise is engaged in proposal review and selection. Finally, SSH scholars should also be involved in reviewing the implementation of projects. All this will radically improve the system of flagging calls at the heart of the integration process.

*EASSH is the largest umbrella organisation for SSH in Europe with over 70 members including universities, disciplinary associations, and corporate associate partners. Our mission is to promote learning and research in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) as a resource for Europe and the world, and to engage with policymakers and research funders in support of the social sciences and humanities.*

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission [Prioritization in funding portfolios](#), published 5 March 2025.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission [Integration of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020](#), published 2023.

<sup>13</sup> More data are available in EASSH position paper [SSH Integration Analysis: a research-on-research approach to EU FPs](#), published in October 2024.