

POSITION ON THE TWO-STAGE APPLICATION PROPOSAL

Two years after the introduction of Horizon 2020, it is clear that the chance of successfully winning funding is even lower than it was during the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). The success rate has fallen from an average of around 20% in FP7 to somewhere between 12% and 14% in Horizon 2020. This picture becomes bleaker in the Societal Challenge 6 (SC6) - the main source of support for social science and humanities research, where the success rates can be as low as 2%.

EASSH agrees with the Commission that the oversubscription to H2020 does need to be addressed. When the chances of a proposal being selected for funding fall to this level, the low success rates become a disincentive to serious researchers to engage in the programme. This fear was echoed by Director General Robert-Jan Smits in a recent interview.

The Commission's preferred response to the falling success rates is to introduce two-stage applications more widely across Horizon 2020. Under this approach, applicants would submit a first stage application of perhaps 10 pages; an 'outline' application. According to the plans outlined by DG Smits, around 20% of these applications would be invited to submit full proposals and perhaps as many as one third of these would ultimately be successful.

According to the Commission's report¹, the first round of calls for SC6 produced around 950 applications of which 31 proposals were awarded. If the two-stage process as outlined by DG Smits had been implemented for the first round of calls then more than 60 projects would have been funded under SC6. This would represent a doubling in the number of SSH projects gaining support.

The first best solution would be to allocate significant additional funding for SSH research. As we understand that this may not be the case before the end of H2020, we question the feasibility of the new approach being effective unless other measures restrict the initial number of proposals are also being considered.

We are concerned that the two-stage approach will simply exacerbate the existing problem. Reducing the "cost of entry" to the process by requiring only a 10-page outline proposals may result in an increase in the number of applications. The evidence for this is provided by looking at the use of the two stage process in Societal Challenge 1².

If the measure does generate more proposals we are concerned that this will stretch even further the capacity of the evaluation process to cope with such a number of applications. The burden on evaluators is already on a grand scale and any increase in first round applications will put the system under an enormous stress. We ask whether a system placed under such stress can continue to guarantee quality and fairness of evaluations.

We believe that any policy changes in DG Research and Innovation should be on the basis of better understanding of the applications process and the drivers which encourage researchers and research

¹ Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, Budget and Disciplines (October 2015) <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/news/integration-social-sciences-and-humanities-horizon-2020-participants-budget-and-disciplines>

² See a recent study published by UK Research Office (UKRO), "Horizon 2020 Health: Results of 2015 Two-stage Call", 12 October 2015, H2020 News, <https://www.ukro.ac.uk/>

teams respond to calls, which will explain the origins of oversubscription. Should the Commission decide to investigate some of the issues around what is driving the serious oversubscription to the research programmes, we suggest three specific areas for immediate scrutiny during the mid-term review of Horizon 2020:

- **Investigate why the share of submitted applications that fail to meet the fundable threshold can be very high.** In some challenges, between 46% and 56% of all applications received fall below the fundable threshold. The mid-term review should consider deeper analysis of the reasons why applications fail to meet this threshold. Lessons learned from this should lead to immediate implementation in remaining calls of Horizon 2020.
- **Review the level of information for applicants to assess the indispensable criteria for a successful application.** In particular, review if the guidance provided by the Commission is sufficient for individuals and institutions to undertake a critical self-assessment of their proposal before it is finally submitted? The mid-term review should look closely at the guidance and support given to potential applicants to allow critical self-assessment prior to submission of proposals
- **A more in-depth analysis on the changing patterns of research funding in member states may reveal that the national research systems put pressure on applicants to seek funding from Horizon 2020.** A careful study of current trends and dynamics – including the interplay of national, European and alternate sources of support for research in Europe -- needs to be undertaken to better understand how oversubscription at the EU level reflects changes at the level of the member-state.

If the Commission will address and report on the above issues, it will emerge more clearly the nature of the community to which the European funding programmes are addressed and some of the key conditions of the research funding in Europe.