

## Horizon 2020/Societal Challenge 1 - Assessment of first experiences and recommendations from the research perspective

**By the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres e.V.**

After the successful launch of the Framework Programme on Research and Innovation – Horizon 2020 – and its first calls in the societal challenge “Health, demographic change and wellbeing” it is time to reflect and comment from a research perspective. We have the common concern to promote competitive research in Europe, and we see major achievements in Horizon 2020 but also some issues where we believe the programme to be in serious risk of repelling the excellent scientists it needs. Notably these we would like to share with you and provide you with our reflections on where optimization would be useful and indeed necessary.

### **1. From research to invention and to innovation**

As basic research is closely interlinked with innovation it should not exclusively be funded via the European Research Council. It is of vital importance to include basic research in collaborative projects in societal challenge 1 in order to cover the full research and innovation cycle.

### **2. Impact of common diseases and contribution from basic research**

With regard to demographic change and ageing, common diseases (and co-morbidities) are of vast importance. They generate high costs and make it vital to massively invest into prevention, diagnosis and therapy in Europe. Taking important steps – understanding the principles and causes of diseases – towards personalised health and care is the overall objective of basic research. Only if we have an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms we can minimise the risk or even prevent diseases and thereby reduce the financial burden. As explained above, collaborative research projects in this field should therefore include more basic research than in the last work programme to prevent the innovation chain missing important links.

### **3. Challenge-based approach and associated requirements**

We strongly welcome the new approach basing on broader calls to tackle the societal challenges in a comprehensive way. Yet improved topic descriptions are required. The significant oversubscription reflects the popularity of the calls, but the fact of success rates below 5% is merely frustrating: Researchers compare the situation with a lottery. If this trend remains in the next calls, this risks further repelling the targeted top scientists who might stronger focus on other national and international programmes with better success rates instead. Applicants need a more precise and clearer definition of impact to better design the projects towards the best outcome. Project proposals can be more effective if the call contains concrete notes on e.g. expected endpoint of the project, definition of next- or end-user. A stronger and transparent involvement of stakeholders in the generation of topics is highly desired and will ensure a common understanding of topic contents to the benefit of all actors involved.

### **4. Oversubscription management towards a targeted success rate**

We are convinced that the interest in the WP 2016/2017 calls will be high and therefore will lead again to significant oversubscription and low success rates. In our view the only way to avoid waste of applicant time and effort is a workable 2-stage procedure, especially for broad topics. We are dismayed to notice that the European Commission plans to have only 1-stage evaluations in the upcoming calls.

Therefore we identified topics that are most likely to generate a high number of applications:

- SC1-PM- 01 – 2016: *Multi omics for personalised therapies*
- SC1-PM- 02 – 2017: *New concepts in patient stratification*
- SC1-PM- 07 – 2017: *Promoting mental well-being in the young*

- SC1-PM- 09 – 2016: *New therapies for chronic diseases*
- SC1-PM- 10 – 2017: *Comparing the effectiveness of existing healthcare interventions in the adult population*

We are convinced of the positive effects of the 2-stage evaluation system especially if the European Commission will continue to announce its broader topics. To maintain the excellence of research at a European level, it is however necessary to adapt the call and evaluation conditions for 2-stage calls in a way that ensures a 1:3 success rate in stage 2. This will manage oversubscription and minimise the disappointing success rate. In addition we would like to provide the following suggestions for your consideration:

- a. We recommend to expand the **number of pages allowed in the first stage proposal** (15 instead of 7 pages) to ensure that evaluators have the necessary information to select only the best proposals for the second stage.
- b. We believe that the use of remote **consensus meetings** in stage 1 would help save time and resources to find an adequate agreement on comments and scores.

#### 5. *Best quality of evaluation experts and summary reports*

A large number of experts is required to evaluate all the submitted proposals. Considering the significantly declining quality of the Evaluation Summary Reports (ESR) many researchers question the qualification of the evaluators. According to our scientific community the required expertise is not widespread available. This lack of suitable reviewers leads to proposal reviews that are not based on adequate knowledge. We strongly suggest to **reinforce your efforts to attract and select the best suitable experts and further improve the evaluation process by a shared interpretation of the evaluation criteria among the experts**. In addition to that we recommend to keep the identical panel composition in stage 1 and 2 evaluation to contribute to an optimal evaluation result. As ESRs often give very general rejection reasons and do not refer to any concrete problem with the respective proposal we stipulate to **develop a common set of minimum standards for the experts on ESR and ensure adequate level of feedback towards the applicants**. After making the comprehensive effort of preparing a proposal, the researchers merit to receive a proper and complete evaluation rather than a general, non-specific and consequently possibly not completely fitting rejection statement.

We welcome that Horizon 2020 offers the research community more and desirable room for ambitious ideas and for interdisciplinarity to tackle the societal challenge in terms of health, demographic change and well-being. To fulfil these challenging tasks in Europe the Helmholtz Association is willing to contribute its scientific expertise and seeks to work together with the European Commission and European partners. We are, together with many of our European partners, convinced that the suggestions above will significantly increase the impact of the programme and would be glad to further discuss them.

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#### *Brief portrait of the Helmholtz Association*

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