

Eurodoc and MCAA Response on the Horizon Europe Interim Evaluation Report

On October 16, 2024, the Commission Expert Group on the Interim Evaluation of Horizon Europe, chaired by Manuel Heitor, presented [its report](#), “Align, Act, Accelerate – Research, Technology and Innovation to boost European Competitiveness”.

The Marie Curie Alumni Association ([MCAA](#)) and the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers ([Eurodoc](#)) appreciate the commitment to excellence demonstrated by Horizon Europe, as is also highlighted in the Expert Group’s evaluation report. **We particularly welcome the report’s call for a significant increase in the budget and its strong focus on improving researchers’ career conditions.**

Increased funding for Europe to not lose out

We fully support the expert group’s call for an “ambitious” budget of €220 billion dedicated to research and innovation (R&I) for the next framework programme. This is in line with what many stakeholders have called for and is much needed if Europe is to “**compete to win – and not to lose**,” as the expert group writes. The Member States have been urged to invest at least 3% of their GDP in research and development (R&D) over the last two decades. As of 2020, however, only four states have reached this target (the current average stands at 2.2%). Drawing attention to the many excellent projects that go unfunded, the expert group calls furthermore for the improved coordination of funding sources among the EU and Member States to ensure that excellent projects not funded by the EU receive the necessary support for realisation. We equally urge the EU and the Member States to increase their funding for research and the development of research careers.

We welcome that the expert group calls for a ring-fenced FP10 budget. It is crucial to ring-fence the overall budget, and specific individual budgets should be ring-fenced, particularly for highly underfunded programmes, namely the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and European Research Council (ERC). This is important not least to ensure that if new priorities arise during the run of FP10, they are addressed with an increase in budget and not, as has been the case under Horizon 2020, with a shifting around of, and thus a reduction in, existing budget allocations. To strengthen early-career researchers in excellent research and the production of skilled researchers across sectors, we, in particular, call for ensuring the structure, funding, and independence of the MSCA, as recently mentioned by [the MCAA in its statement on MSCA](#).

Strengthening the autonomy of ERC and MSCA

MCAA and Eurodoc find it imperative to address the ongoing concerns of whether or not the independence and strategic positioning of the MSCA and the ERC will be undermined by future plans of the administration. Both MSCA and ERC are vital for curiosity-driven, groundbreaking research, with MSCA, in particular, catalysing the careers of early-career researchers and strengthening the “brain circulation” across Europe. We also welcome the Expert Group’s understanding of the mobility of researchers in all three dimensions – international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral. This mobility across borders, disciplines, and sectors as especially made possible through the MSCA, fosters a vibrant, interconnected European

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Research Area (ERA), which is essential for advancing the careers of innovative researchers. The impact of the MSCA on researchers' career trajectories extends beyond academia, as evidenced by a recent [joint statement made by several stakeholders](#).

The success of the ERC with its independent Scientific Council and dedicated implementation agency is a testament to the effectiveness of programmatic autonomy. Rather than scaling back such autonomy, we strongly support the expert group's call to expand it through establishing a European Technology and Industrial Competitiveness Council (ERIC2) and an European Societal Challenges Council (ESC2) to mirror the success of the ERC Scientific Council and the European Innovation Council (EIC) Board. We equally call for more independent governance of the MSCA with direct inclusion of researchers from its programme.

Researchers careers: Investments in the present and the future

We welcome the expert groups' focus on researcher careers: no research happens without the people. As the report shows, however, the increase in the number of researchers has not been matched by the necessary increase in overall research funding or per-researcher expenditure – with detrimental effects on the attractiveness of research careers and for researchers' capacity to devote time to innovative and disruptive research projects. Notably, the expert group highlights that “the European average RD&I expenditure per researcher is about half of the US average”, with large differences between member states, undermining brain circulation. While the expert group highlights the persisting inequality across Europe, with many of the widening countries lagging behind in RD&I expenditure per researcher, this also concerns some of the large European countries.

It is not just that funding levels are too low, but equally consequential is the lack of quality of jobs/employment and the disparity between salary levels in the public and private sectors bridging these gaps will first and foremost require improving the research career pathways and the career possibilities of technical support staff for research. As the expert group writes, the need to address the precarity of researchers calls for urgent action. Both salary levels and working conditions need to be improved so they can be considered reasonable across all of Europe. The precarity many ECRs face not only stems from the lack of competitive compensation but also from inadequate access to social security. Research is a professional activity, and all research professionals, including doctoral candidates, should be granted the legal status of worker. This is particularly important, as [Eurodoc outlines in its response to the new ERA achievements and goals](#), as the realisation of the ‘fifth freedom’ in Europe – the circulation of knowledge – is a key goal for the coming years.

This is especially important for the expert group's suggestion “**Choose Europe**” to be successful. If Europe wishes to increase the mobility of researchers within Europe and to attract talents from third countries, it is paramount to address the lack of worker status for many researchers, exacerbating their precarity. Within the MSCA, there are several examples of

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national initiatives that emphasise the need for the “Choose Europe” programme (see e.g. the calls from [Italy](#) and [Sweden](#))

Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)

We welcome the report's call to simplify funding application processes, which should, in our opinion, be implemented with sustainability as a key criterion: Highly complex procedures consume significant time and effort from applicants, reducing the available resources for conducting and supporting research activities. Simplification of the application process also lowers the administrative threshold and burden for applications.

We are pleased to see that the expert group highlights the importance of the CoARA principles, particularly in light of the need to “**modernise assessment, strengthening independent peer review** to consider not only the quality and impact of the proposed research but also the research environment, institutional support including **quality of research jobs and research support**”. We thus call for increased support to ensure the sustainability of CoARA, considering the key role it plays in achieving this necessary modernisation.

European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST)

We welcome the report's call that “widening instruments should be focused on excellence building, preserving and reinforcing initiatives that work.” However, the report does not explicitly mention the COST programme, which has been widely recognised as highly successful by many stakeholders, whose major funding source is Horizon Europe as a part of the Widening Programme. Unlike initiatives focused on financing new research, the COST program is dedicated to the creation of bottom-up networks that connect already existing researchers across Europe. Despite requiring a relatively small investment, COST has made a [significant impact](#) and contributes to the creation of a truly cooperative ERA in key ways. Given its effectiveness and simplicity, we strongly encourage the retention of the COST programme in FP10.

The importance of research culture for democracy

The expert group highlights the link between democratic values and academic freedom and a “**research culture** which is responsible, open, curious and tolerant.” This is equally at the core of Eurodoc's and MCAA's work.

However, the expert group also calls for an increased focus on research security, a requirement of which we, like many other stakeholders, acknowledge in light of contemporary challenges. Nonetheless, we would like to urge the community and the policy-makers to not primarily focus on knowledge security, the core concern should rather be with researchers' security.

We wish to underline that the European Union's democratic values can only be upheld if science and knowledge remain open and free to all citizens. The UN Human Rights explicitly lists the right to science and the principles of Open Science. In light of the democratic backsliding as

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also experienced in Europe, it becomes even more important to strengthen the pillars of democracy – and that includes Open Science practices, as [UNESCO's statement on Open Science](#) reminds us.

Thus, we welcome the report's call to “invest in and pool knowledge resources to understand and successfully navigate a more complicated and changing geopolitical environment” and emphasise that such an investment, first and foremost, starts with strengthening the researchers' and innovators' abilities to uphold democratic values and conduct their research as openly as possible while navigating this complex world.

The decisions on FP10 will be foundational for the research ecosystem in Europe. We hope that the decisions for and financial investments in research, innovation, and education will be taken such that in the coming years excellent research can be funded more thoroughly, that career pathways for researchers are truly modernised, and that autonomy and academic freedom are strengthened – so research can contribute fully to the strengthening of democracy and Europe's competitiveness and innovation.

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Suggested Reading

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Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, is a grassroots federation of 26 national associations of early career researchers (ECRs) from 24 countries across Europe. Eurodoc was established in 2002 and is based in Brussels. As a representative of doctoral candidates and junior researchers at the European level, Eurodoc engages with all major stakeholders in research, higher education, and innovation in Europe.



Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA), The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) is a global network of researchers who have benefited from or are benefitting from the Marie (Skłodowska) Curie Actions. MCAA supports and contributes to the advancement of knowledge for a global, diverse, and informed society. The main focus of MCAA is to promote career development, offer networking opportunities and contribute to shaping the research and innovation policy. Currently, MCAA has over 22,000 members from 150+ countries, covering all different career stages from diverse research fields. MCAA has 37 geographical chapters and 11 thematic working groups.