

Preserving the foundation of innovation: enhancing early-stage collaborative R&I in FP10

As the European Union sets out new proposals for the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10), it is vital to reiterate the importance of a crucial element of the current programme: **early-stage collaborative research and innovation**. This type of research, taking place before market competition and focused on low- to mid- Technology and Societal Readiness Levels (TRLs/SRLs), is the backbone of Europe's capacity to generate new knowledge, develop enabling technologies, and build shared infrastructures that underpin entire sectors.

Early-stage collaborative research is essential in shaping Europe's ability to address global challenges, reinforce strategic autonomy and sustain long-term competitiveness. It supports open, curiosity-driven exploration, fosters strong and diverse scientific communities, and enables the kind of cross-border, cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary collaboration that gives rise to scientific breakthroughs and resilient innovation ecosystems.

As we look at the future of European research and innovation (R&I), it is key that this indispensable part of the programme remains firmly anchored and governed in FP10, and is properly supported at the European level, where its unique scale, scope, strategic value and impact cannot be replicated by national or regional schemes.

Early-stage collaborative R&I is critical for Europe

Early-stage collaborative R&I takes place before market competition. Focused on low- to mid- TRLs/SRLs, it generates foundational knowledge, enabling technologies and shared infrastructures that support entire sectors. By fostering open-ended exploration and strong scientific communities, it lays the groundwork for future innovation, scale-up and long-term competitiveness.

Early-stage collaborative R&I enables collaboration across borders, sectors and disciplines that create fertile ground for the development of competitive and resilient R&I ecosystems. Bringing together academia, industry, public authorities and other actors, it is indispensable for advancing research with short, medium and long-term value – and generating the innovation capacity Europe needs to remain a global leader in the long run.

Funding collaborative R&I at European level is irreplaceable by national or regional funding. No national programme offers the scope or mandate to fund transboundary and multi-sectoral collaboration in the same way as the EU Framework Programme. Without it, the vital connections between universities, research institutions, industry, societal stakeholders, and international partners are significantly weakened.

Both the European Parliament and the EU27 Research Ministers have made a strong plea for the future framework programme “to offer an attractive frame for collaborative research, foster creation of new transnational R&I cooperation networks, bringing together R&I professionals of different disciplines and backgrounds”¹ (Warsaw Declaration), emphasizing that “collaboration would not occur without EU funding at a similar rate” without this “vital strategic tool”² (EP-ITRE Report). Likewise, stakeholder organizations have echoed this call, as seen in a recent statement broadly outlining the interplay between FP10 and the Competitiveness Fund³.

Early-stage collaborative R&I must be soundly anchored in FP10 principles

Whereas near-market, scale-up or deployment-oriented collaborative innovation at higher TRLs/SRLs can thrive under the industrially led formats that will be enforced in the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), low- to mid- TRLs/SRLs collaborative R&I requires tailored mechanisms that support open, flexible, excellent and curiosity-driven collaboration, free from the constraints of overly prescriptive calls. It is only at this early

¹ “Warsaw Declaration on the strategic role of the future EU R&I framework programme”, 11 March 2025, <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/warsaw-declaration-adopted/>

² “REPORT on the assessment of the implementation of Horizon Europe in view of its interim evaluation and recommendations for the 10th Research Framework Programme”, 26 February 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0021_EN.html

³ “Recommendations for closely connecting the European Competitiveness Fund to an ambitious and self-standing FP10”, 3 July 2025, <https://era.gv.at/news-items/university-groups-publish-recommendations-to-connect-competitiveness-fund-to-fp10/>

stage of the R&I process that genuine cross-fertilisation of ideas can occur, and high-risk, high-reward research can flourish – and FP10 is the framework programme to foster it.

While the future ECF could play a useful role in supporting high-TRL, scale-up and deployment-focused activities, it should not overshadow the **research-driven goal of FP10**. The two funds must be complementary, not substitutes, to preserve and enhance FP10's unique mission and impact. Therefore, we strongly recommend maintaining and reinforcing early collaborative R&I within FP10, envisioning a continuum of collaborative R&I from FP10 towards ECF's.

Improvements from Horizon Europe to FP10

Furthermore, to truly unlock the potential of early-stage collaborative research in Europe, **FP10 must address current structural weaknesses in Horizon Europe's Pillar II**. Its present structure imposes excessive complexity, rigid consortium requirements and a prescriptive approach to expected outcomes, with too high focus on short-term implementation rather than new knowledge, solutions and innovations. This weakness has been widely documented. For instance, the recent report from STOA on FP10⁴ mentions the "Emphasis on higher TRLs sidelining early-stage research, especially in Pillar 2", a trend that started already in H2020 as highlighted in data from relevant networks⁵. Such barriers hinder participation of researchers and innovators, particularly for researchers working at lower TRL levels, early-career researchers, SMEs and emerging actors. They limit therefore the transformative potential of funded projects.

Thus, FP10 must reorient collaborative research toward a more balanced approach across TRLs – particularly by strengthening support for low- and mid- TRLs/SRLs – within a simplified, flexible and researcher-friendly model. This includes fostering a culture that embraces risk and values the creation of new knowledge alongside impact. A greater

⁴ "Evolution and/or disruption. Designing the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation", June 2025, <https://op.europa.eu/publication-detail/-/publication/5f27b245-4fe4-11f0-a9d0-01aa75ed71a1>

⁵ EU-LIFE, "Collaborative research across the entire research and innovation spectrum: EU-LIFE recommendations for the Strategic programming of Horizon Europe's Health Cluster", June 2019, <https://eu-life.eu/newsroom/publications/eu-life-calls-impactful-collaborative-research-european-biomedicine>; EUA, "Future-proof Horizon Europe through balanced cluster calls, February 2023, <https://www.eua.eu/downloads/news/joint%20statemet%20future-proof%20horizon%20europe%20through%20balanced%20cluster%20calls.pdf>; EASSH, "Cross-border research collaboration: EU comparative advantage – Focus on citizens and society", 29 April 2025, <https://eassh.eu/Position-Papers/Cross-border-research-collaboration--EU-comparative-advantage---Focus-on-citizens-and-society~p1402>

diversity in project sizes should also be supported, allowing smaller, explorative initiatives to flourish and offer alternative solutions to complex challenges. Finally, increased funding is essential to improve the success rate of excellent proposals and sustain Europe's research excellence.

We therefore **call on the European Commission, European Parliament and Member States** to reaffirm and strengthen the **key role of early-stage collaborative R&I funding** within FP10. Europe's future competitiveness, resilience and global leadership depend on it.

Co-signed by:

