

# Perspectives on Horizon Europe and Cluster 2

## "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society"

### Input for the Interim Evaluation

*Horizon Europe, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, was launched in 2021 and will run until 2027. After the experiences of the first three years of the programme, it is time to reflect: What is going well? What could be improved?*

The following recommendations for the programme with a focus on Horizon Europe's "Cluster 2 - Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society" are based on the results of an online survey and a number of expert interviews that the German National Contact Point for Cluster 2 conducted between May and October 2023 on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The aim of this paper is to support the inclusion of the perspectives of the German Cluster 2 research and stakeholder community in the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe and upcoming discussions on its successor.

## Recommendations

### Attractiveness of the programme

Horizon Europe, Cluster 2, is attractive above all because it offers the opportunity to conduct joint research with European partners - on topics of high social and political relevance.

- Collaborative research should remain at the heart of the European Research Framework Programmes.
- The thematic foci of Cluster 2 on "Democracy and Governance", "Cultural Heritage and Cultural and Creative Industries" and "Social and Economic Change" are highly relevant and should continue to play an important role in European research and innovation funding beyond Horizon Europe. A sufficient budget must be provided for this.

### Barriers to participation

The high effort connected with submitting applications, perceived low success rates and the need to identify thematically suitable funding topics are the greatest barriers to participation in the programme.

- Continued efforts are needed to reduce effort and bureaucracy - in the application phase, but also with regard to project management.
- In Cluster 2 thematic areas with a particularly low success rate, such as "Cultural Heritage / Cultural and Creative Industries", measures should be taken to increase the possibility of funding (e.g. two-stage application procedures, multiple calls for proposals for heavily oversubscribed topics).
- Support for applicants, especially newcomers, should be further expanded (e.g. through glossaries, step-by-step instructions, specific events).
- Low-threshold start-up funding for the application phase is needed, e.g. on the national level. Such funds should also support the grant agreement preparation phase.

### Framework conditions and organisation of calls for proposals

Applicants want clearly and unambiguously formulated topics. Some of the respondents expressed a desire for more openly phrased topics, that allow for a higher degree of thematic freedom in the design of proposals.

- Call topics should be published for significantly longer than three months.
- Topic texts should be formulated more clearly and consistently. Important, ambiguous terms should be clearly defined.
- The work programme design process should be communicated more transparently to the outside world.
- The topic texts and the research dimensions to be addressed must be adequately reflected in the proposed budget per project: Often, the integration of many different research aspects within the projects are requested, so that only large consortia can address the topic appropriately. A budget of € 3 million can already be too tight for large consortia.
- More attention should be paid to the reflection of the actual state-of-the-art within the topic texts.
- As a pilot trial with a small part of the overall budget, future work programmes should foresee supporting collaborative projects on bottom-up topics - within the general thematic framework of the destinations.

### Impact

The presentation of the "impact pathways" in proposals and also the expectation of the impact to be achieved represent a major challenge for many applicants. The views of applicants concerning Horizon Europe's emphasis on impact vary.

- More "impact success stories" and more specific examples of impact pathways in Cluster 2 topics are needed, especially from projects in the humanities and social sciences.
- When formulating the "expected outcomes" of topics, a realistic view must be taken of what research and innovation projects can actually achieve.

### Evaluation process

Overall, many respondents described the evaluation process as fair, objective and well-functioning.

- Purely written communication between evaluators via the electronic system should be replaced by video or face-to-face meetings to facilitate discussions and enable an actual exchange of views.
- The comprehensibility and informative value of the evaluation summary reports should be further improved.
- Great care should be taken when selecting suitable evaluators. More transparent lists of evaluators, which name the cluster in which the experts carried out evaluations, could prevent rumours that the evaluators are not sufficiently qualified.

*Data basis for online survey and expert interviews: The online survey was conducted between 16 May and 7 July 2023 via an open, anonymous link. The survey was distributed via various channels such as relevant newsletters. A total of 48 people completed the survey in full and were included in the analysis. The data was analysed descriptively. In addition, a total of 16 semi-structured, guideline-based interviews were conducted between 11 September 2023 and 12 October 2023. The interviewed persons included applicants (some of which had been selected for funding), multipliers of university funding departments and evaluators. All interviewees had a special focus on Cluster 2 and/or the social sciences and humanities. The protocols were analysed using MAXQDA software.*