



[FOCUS ARTICLE] The future of Widening support actions and their smart use in the Western Balkans

Calls for the 2023-2024 Cycle

Horizon Europe's [Widening actions](#) support those EU Member States, Associated Countries and Outermost Regions that continue to lag behind in research and innovation to boost the performance of their research and innovation systems and throughout the European Union and beyond.

The actions are supporting centres of excellence and establishing vibrant ecosystems, as well as aim to enhance capacity to access research networks, attract new talents and improve the skills of researchers overall.

The Widening actions receive 3.3% of the total Horizon Europe budget and play a central role in strengthening the European Research Area.

To maximise impact, synergies are being pursued with the [European Regional Development Fund](#) and funding for the Higher Education sector ([Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions](#), [European Excellence Initiative](#)).

Widening actions also contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals related to Quality Education, Gender Equality, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure as well as Partnership for the Goals.

Expected results and impacts Increased scientific and innovation capacities for all research and innovation actors in widening countries:

- Structural changes leading to modernised and more competitive research and innovation system;
- Reformed research and innovation systems and institutions, leading to increase attractiveness for talents;
- Higher participation success in Horizon Europe;
- Stronger linkages between academia and business;
- Strengthened role of the Higher Education sector in research and innovation;
- Better use of existing research infrastructures;
- More and better balanced brain circulation;
- More involvement of regional actors;
- Mobilisation of national and European resources for strategic investments

Assessment of implemented Widening measures in R&I

After the setup of the Widening programme under Horizon 2020, and budget increase under Horizon Europe, the measures were to be analysed as to their effectiveness. The European Court of Auditors has presented an assessment [report](#) earlier in 2022. The new Work Programme for 2023-2024 has just been launched.

The report found the Widening measures well-designed to address the limited participation of Widening Countries in R&I framework programmes, with some parts of the programme that seem to be effective helping to bridge the gap. Participation so far is still irregular, but the projects funded start showing first results through distributed unevenly. Challenges are still faced when it comes to complementary funding and sustainability. The report outlines that efforts need to be made on national levels to reinforce national funding and policy reforms and boost national investment in order to bring about the expected sustainable change.

Calls to improve the Widening programme

The audit recommendations to the EC as well as requests from the EU Member States concluded with the need for a more balanced participation in Widening measures, a stronger and more efficient facilitation of availability of complementary funding and enhancement of own capacities to exploit project results as well as improved efficiency in monitoring.

The EC was also requested by the Member States to identify indicators of the impact of Widening schemes on participation in other, more competitive parts of Horizon Europe.

Attempts to level up R&D capacity across the EU are to be tracked in a new monitoring system by the European Commission, to get a better idea of how the programme is being implemented and how to improve the performance of these funding schemes in order to making them redundant in future. This would mean that all EU economies build the capacity to compete in all Horizon Europe calls, without needing specialised schemes.

At the same time there is not just the need for researchers in the Widening countries to work harder on their performances and applications, but there is also an urgent need for EU funders to address and drop their hidden biases towards researchers from non-prestigious, non-western institutions and inequalities in opportunity distribution across all EU member states.

The bulk of the Widening money goes to three main funding schemes:

- [Twinning](#), which is intended to promote east-west cooperation;
- The [ERA Chairs](#) to build competencies and attract researchers;
- and the [Teaming](#) scheme to develop scientific excellence in a particular field.

What the Widening Work Programme 2023-2024 has in store

The recently published Work Programme “Widening participation and Strengthening the European Research Area (ERA)” in the new Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023 - 2024 includes the two main components: I: Widening participation and spreading excellence, and; II: Strengthening the ERA by reforming and enhancing the European Research and Innovation system.



Just as in other parts Horizon Europe, the Widening programme is run through calls for proposals. In the first two years of the programme, the calls target three main goals: improving access to excellence, attracting and mobilising talent, and enhancing and reforming the EU R&I system. Calls of the 2023-2024 cycle of special interest to the Western Balkans economies include:

The Twinning General Call & the Twinning Green Deal Call

To prevent further disparities, maximise investment in R&D and enhance economic growth, Horizon Europe is taking relevant actions under Widening participation and spreading excellence objective, with Twinning actions as one of the main instruments of this objective. Twinning aims to enhance networking activities between research institutions of the Widening countries acting as co-ordinators and top-class leading counterparts at European Union level, and with it building on the huge potential of networking for excellence through knowledge transfer and exchange of best practice between research institutions and partners.

As regards the **Twining Green Deal**, climate change is the biggest challenge and the European Green Deal considers it is an opportunity to build a new economic model. The European Green Deal set the blueprint for this transformational change. Becoming climate neutral will create new opportunities for innovation and investment and jobs. It includes research and innovation actions related among others, to transport, industry, energy, buildings' ecological efficiency, nature and health protection, boosting global climate action. The Twinning Green Deal will therefore focus on a defined area of research / innovation directly linked to at least one of the actions listed in the European Green Deal strategy, notably: Climate research; Green technologies; Renewable energy; Sustainable mobility; Biodiversity research; Sustainable use of natural resources (land, water, air).

European Excellence Initiative

The European Excellence Initiative in its widening dimension aims to raise excellence in science and in knowledge valorisation of Europe's universities through cooperation. The action will engage with universities and empower them further to be actors of change in R&I. Through the geographically inclusive cooperation and practice exchange, universities from different capacities benefit and institutional changes towards increased attractiveness and access to excellence are accelerating.

Excellence Hubs

Excellence hubs are part of the European Excellence Initiative and complement the science-oriented schemes Teaming, Twinning, ERA Chairs and the European Excellence Initiative for universities by a dedicated innovation component. Excellence hubs will focus on innovation by allowing innovation ecosystems in Widening countries and beyond, to team up and create better linkages between academia, business, government and society. This will foster a real place-based innovation culture in Widening countries based on a strategic agenda aligned with regional or national smart specialisation strategies. The excellence hubs will be the basis in Widening countries of the pan-European Innovation Ecosystem of the new Innovation Agenda for Europe.

Teaming

Teaming helps countries establish new research facilities or modernise existing ones with the help of other leading institutions.



The talent part of the work programme aims to foster brain circulation by bringing ‘**ERA Chairs**’ - outstanding scientists and innovators, to Widening countries to run permanent research groups, thus creating ‘pockets of excellence’. There are also **ERA Fellowships** which support postdoctoral cross-border fellowships in Widening countries, run through Horizon Europe’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions researcher mobility programme, as well as the **ERA Talent programme**, a type of grant that covers researcher training and mobility expenses in Widening countries.

Examples from the 2021-22 cycle and projects starting now

A [number of projects](#) have been started in the Western Balkans thanks to funding received from calls in 2021/2022. During the previous cycle, a [special Twinning call](#) had been launched for the Western Balkans region to contribute to the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans aiming to spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union.

The Twinning calls objective was to help strengthening the research management and administrative skills as well as the research profiles of staff at the coordination institution as well as to raise the research profile of the institution from the region overall. The Twinning action also intended to enhance networking activities between the research institutions of the Western Balkans and leading counterparts at EU level to country as well including a special focus on s from the Western Balkan Country.

To bridge the knowledge gaps to enhance access to funding possibilities under the Framework Programme, the [NCP WIDERA.NET](#) project aims at support the capacity and effectiveness of **WIDERA National Contact Points** with a special attention to less experienced entities in low performing Member States (MS) and Associated Countries (AC). Through strengthening and enhancing the role of the NCPs, the project supports international networking and coordination, as well as helps improving the quality of proposals from legal entities from low R&I performing MS and AC providing them with better access to services during the application process in particular with regard to Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area, as well as Pillar II actions. NCP_WIDERA.NET focused on identifying and sharing good practices within NCP community and raising standards of support offered by NCPs to the applicants, taking into account the diversity of actors that constitutes both the Widening and ERA parts.

In order to better understand the different Calls and Requirements, the European Commission is organizing a special [Horizon Europe Info Day](#), that aims to inform (potential) applicants about the new topics included in the WIDERA work programme of 2023-2024.

Besides that, a **Widening Corner with the NCP_WIDERA.NET project will be organized as part of a [brokerage event on Cluster 6](#)**. Participants will have the opportunity to meet NCPs from this network and to exchange with them on participation and funding opportunities for institutions from widening countries. In addition, the NCP_WIDERA.NET project will in future also offer its own grants and support opportunities.

For more information on news and opportunities on the Widening programme, visit the Western Balkans Info Hub portal within the [Widening in Horizon Europe](#) section!