

Draft orientations towards the 'main' work programme 2026-2027

Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area

1. Destination title: *Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence*

Draft expected impacts:

1. Increased science and innovation capacities for all actors in the R&I system in widening countries
2. Structural changes leading to modernised and more competitive R&I systems in eligible countries with increased attractiveness and retention of research talents
3. Mobilisation of national and European resources for strategic investments
4. Higher participation success in Horizon Europe and more consortium leadership roles
5. Stronger linkages between academia and business and improved career permeability and effective institutional reforms in research institutions
6. Greater involvement of regional actors in the R&I process
7. Excellent talents attracted to institutions and research infrastructures
8. Balanced circulation of R&I talents including intersectoral mobility , and improved gender balance
9. Improved linkages and increased mobility between academic and business, notably by overcoming sectoral barriers
10. Free circulation of knowledge and expertise in line with ERA priorities

Main expected outcomes:

1. Establish excellent and sustainable place-based research and innovation (R&I) ecosystems in widening countries and beyond, focusing on relevant domains of cutting-edge science and innovation.
2. Develop common investment plans for R&I, including infrastructures, leveraging national, regional, and European funds, as well as private capital, in a synergistic manner.
3. Facilitate the acquisition of new competencies and skills for working in transnational projects, including research management, dissemination, and exploitation.
4. Encourage institutional reforms and transformative processes in the R&I systems at national and regional levels in widening countries, in alignment with ERA principles.
5. Mobilize national investments to enhance R&I capacity in widening countries.
6. Raise the standards of excellence among R&I actors in widening countries through strategic partnerships with leading European and international institutions.
7. Increase the participation and success rates of widening actors in research and innovation projects across other parts of Horizon Europe.
8. Foster more balanced brain circulation, including inter-sectoral mobility for researchers and innovators.
9. All expected outcomes will focus on strengthening R&I capacity of the widening countries to enhance Europe's resilience and competitiveness.

Addressing main policy priorities:

The widening component aims to tackle the R&I gap to move towards a truly integrated and cohesive European R&I ecosystem in the EU. Disparities between R&I leading and lagging countries should be tackled through structural policy reforms at national and regional level aimed by, e.g. improving the attractiveness of research careers, increasing the international dimension, increasing the effectiveness of management and governance of R&I institutions or matching activities with EU initiatives (e.g. seals of excellence). Closer links between Widening actions and actions under Pillar II and enhanced intersectoral cooperation between research institutions and business are key to bridging these disparities between countries. By building on their ‘pockets of excellence’ and connecting them to broader ecosystems, this component will support less R&I advanced countries in upgrading their R&I systems and performance, allowing the EU to level up.

In 2026- 2027, the widening part will focus on calls for well-established actions such as Twinning, ERA chairs and Excellence Hubs (with certain modification), while proposing a small number of additional actions. These modifications and new actions address e.g. the lack of research management capacities, and the need to increase mutual learning among actions to support their collective long-term sustainability. At the same time, it is proposed to start phasing out some types of actions (e.g.; ERA Fellowships, Hop-on Facility).

Work programme 2026

- **Twinning:** as in 2024 (drawing budgets from 2026 and 2027), Twinning bottom-up and top-down thematic (to be defined);
- **Hop-on Facility:** with an additional eligibility condition for host projects, restricting it to projects in the first reporting period to allow a meaningful participation. Communication and collaboration with thematic clusters and their NCPs for improving matchmaking will be intensified;
- **ERA fellowships:** as in previous work programmes, in full alignment with MSCA;
- **Excellence Hubs:** as in the work programme 2024, with two modifications: the optional mentoring of an emerging place-based innovation ecosystem will not be maintained, since there was little response to that. The funding rate will be reduced to 70% to leverage additional public and private investments (drawing budgets from 2027);
- **New: A Teaming Synergies action,** responding to the report of the European Court of Auditors issued in June 2022 that recommended to the European Commission to ensure the sustainability of centres of excellence funded under the Teaming calls. A dedicated action, building on the “Teaming club” will foster the development of thematic clusters within the Teaming portfolio, creation of larger European initiatives alongside these thematic strands, common R&I strategies, and mutual learning about exploitation of results, linking up with business and using synergies with other community funds;
- **New: A pilot for a Research management and administrative support facility** will address research management and its multiple dimensions. The facility will provide training and consulting services to institutions in widening countries that lack such capacities, or do not have sufficient access to expertise, e.g. for setting up grant offices and research management teams to empower them for taking over consortium leadership tasks;

Work programme 2027

- **EIC pre-accelerator - widening.** Follow-up to the 2025 pilot call, bridging the gap between steps 1 and 3 of the EIC Accelerator process for SMEs from widening countries by enhancing their business and technological readiness, providing grants, business acceleration services, and access to the Accelerator Fast Track. Subject to the possibility to amend the work programme 2027, lessons from the 2025 call will be used to adjust the topic description.
- **ERA chairs:** with two call topics. The first call topic follows the same ERA chairs as in the previous work programme: the recruitment of an ERA chair leader (researcher). The second call topic is **new** and pilots the recruitment of an ERA leader for research management at the host institution.
- **Excellence Hubs:** as in the work programme 2024, with two modifications: the optional mentoring of an emerging place-based innovation ecosystem will not be maintained, since there was little response to that. The funding rate will be reduced to 70% to leverage additional public and private investments.

Other types of actions

A number of actions not subject to calls for proposals will be included:

- Specific Grant Agreement for COST
- WIRE conference