HORIZON 2020: WHO IS COMING OUT ON TOP?

With Horizon 2020 now well underway, International Innovation’s Becky Norman highlights some of the notable gains and losses in the funding programme’s first year.
AFTER THE FIRST year of Horizon 2020 (H2020) was completed in December 2014, the R&D community eagerly awaited the key outcomes – which countries and research institutions performed well, and which had fallen behind since the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). While it may be too soon to draw any conclusions from H2020 and extrapolate its long-term trends, the first batch of funding allocation offers a curious insight into the start of H2020’s journey to support European research and innovation.

The EC’s Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, Carlos Moedas, and Director-General, Robert Jans-Smits, published Horizon 2020: First results in 2015 to share data gathered on H2020’s implementation and tell the story of its progress so far. H2020 was reported to have kicked-off to a strong start; it was hugely popular (a total of 36,700 proposals were received) and attracted a significant number of new applicants, with nearly 40 per cent of successful proposals coming from those who did not apply for FP7 funding previously. This unprecedented demand for EU funding is perhaps not so surprising given that it is the EU’s biggest programme for research and innovation yet. Though, unfortunately, this popularity meant that the success rate of eligible full proposals under the first one hundred calls (14 per cent) was markedly lower than that for the whole of FP7 (20 per cent).

TOP PERFORMERS
In total, €5.5 billion was awarded to 3,200 projects in H2020’s first one hundred calls, and hundreds of new projects are continuously being added to H2020 each month – but who is coming out on top in this funding programme?

In a report on the Horizon 2020 Champions, EU funding expert Nikolaos Floratos analysed 4,190 H2020 projects and 7,804 organisations awarded a grant, based on the data provided by the EC under CORDIS in June 2015. In terms of the largest number of granted H2020 projects, the UK was the ‘champion’ with 2,341, followed closely by Germany (2,290) and Sweden (2,267). The countries with the largest populations have been most successful so far in terms of projects awarded, with the exception of Poland, which has the sixth largest population in the EU but is ranked in 15th position. This anomaly may be linked with the disparity noted in H2020 funding and project allocation between Western and Eastern Europe, with funding reported to be going to the wealthiest countries.

When looking at the amount of funding received, however, Germany is the obvious winner with almost double the amount granted compared with the UK in second place. This is clearly linked with the success of the German Max Planck Institutes, which received the most funding of a research organisation (€333.6 million) and almost three times the amount awarded to the French National Centre for Scientific Research in second position (€121.7 million).

TOP UNIVERSITIES
UK universities did extremely well in H2020’s first year of funding: University College London (UCL) was the best performing university, having received €69.9 million, followed by the University of Cambridge (€44.6 million), Imperial College London (€43.8 million) and the University of Oxford (€40.7 million). In total, 16 UK universities were on Floratos’ ‘Horizon 2020 Champions’ list, and the remaining universities that made it came from only nine other countries: Netherlands (8), Germany (6), Sweden (5), Ireland (4), Israel (3), Denmark (3), Belgium (2), Finland (2) and Italy (1).

To find out the reasons why UK universities, and particularly UCL, were so successful in H2020’s first year of funding, we spoke with Michael Browne, Head of European Research and Innovation at UCL back in August 2015: “This achievement is strongly linked with how we’ve been positioning ourselves strategically.” Browne stated. “UCL set its target high when, 18 months ago, it launched its strategic mission statement to be the number one coordinator in Europe for H2020. We felt that we were in a good position to understand and adapt to the changes that H2020 presented, compared with FP7.”

Browne also pointed out that UK universities, and possibly other Western European universities, are at an advantage due to the fact that proposals must be submitted in English: “Another aspect to highlight is the disparity in funding allocation between Western and Eastern Europe. Since all European proposals should be written in English, the UK has a good head start compared with other European counterparts, especially the further east you go.” Considering that no universities from Eastern Europe made it onto the champions list, this language barrier is indeed likely to have been somewhat responsible for hindering their success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SMES
Increasing collaboration between research and industry is one particular area that the EC endeavours to improve on through H2020 – and, according to the programme’s early results, Europe is making a step in the right direction. Compared with FP7, there has been a marked increase in participation from industry and SMEs in H2020. Of the successful applicants in the first one hundred calls, 1,100 were SMEs, which meant the EC achieved its target of allocating 20 per cent of the budget to SMEs. Moedas and Smits reported in Horizon 2020: First results that this increase was due to the programme’s focus on using proof-of-concept and pilot studies.

The importance of getting research across the so-called ‘valley of death’ and into industry was emphasised by Moedas in a previous interview with International Innovation: “It’s no secret that we have to get better at commercialising European ideas in Europe. There is still a great deal of work to be done, but getting ideas from the lab to the market is exactly what we want to accomplish with Horizon 2020 and we’re approaching the issue from many different angles”.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR H2020?
In October 2015, the EC revealed what funding opportunities will be on offer to universities, research organisations and industry in the next few years of H2020. €16 billion is being invested in the Work Programme for 2016-17 and will substantially contribute to the following priorities: the Jobs, Growth and Investment Package, the Digital Single Market, the Stronger Global Actor priority. Nearly 600 research areas are to be covered in this latest Work Programme, focusing on the most imperative societal issues and the EU’s long-term priorities, as well as tackling any emerging problems, such as the Zika virus outbreak.

As H2020 continues to progress, we will of course gain a more accurate picture of both the top performers and those losing out. But while analysis of the programme’s funding allocation may not yet be able to reveal key trends, it is certainly vital for shedding light on both early successes, such as the increased participation from industry players, and potential issues that need to be addressed, for example the funding disparity between Western and Eastern Europe.