The Horizon 2020 programme has so far received over 90,600 grant applications, with the success rate at around 12-14 per cent. How do these figures compare to the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7)?

First and foremost, we should bear in mind that the high volume of applications experienced in Horizon 2020 show that the programme is very attractive. With calls addressing key concerns of citizens, and attracting new participants with new ideas, the programme is achieving its goal of addressing the requirements of both the research and innovation community and European citizens. And let us not forget that competition spurs excellence. However, we have a finite budget, and the increase in applications has led to success rates between 12-14 per cent, lower than those we saw under (FP7), where the average was around 20 per cent.

We continue to carefully monitor the success rates and take measures to increase applicants’ chance of success. One way to do this is to ensure that the calls for proposals are clear on the impact they are expected to have, while not describing what the proposals need to contain. This gives the research and innovation community more opportunity to propose the best solutions.

On top of that, we are increasing the practice of two-stage calls, reducing the administrative burden on applicants. With this system of evaluation, applicants initially only submit short-form proposals. Those who do not make the cut are rejected before the second, longer application is required. From this year onwards, at least a third of proposals will succeed if they reach the second stage.

We also need to bear in mind the importance of striking a balance between a healthy degree of competition, which drives excellence, and ensuring a reasonable chance of rewarding the effort involved in submitting first-rate proposals. If we do not get this balance right, we run the serious risk of the top players in Europe no longer applying to our programme.

How might researchers improve their chances of success?

Applicants should read carefully what the calls are looking for – it is no good trying to ‘shoe horn’ a project idea into a call for proposals where it really doesn’t fit. As we have seen, the competition is fierce, and half-hearted proposals will not succeed. Let me emphasise here that there is no ‘hidden agenda’. The calls for proposals and the published criteria are the one and only reference.

Potential applicants to our programme should make use of the network of National Contact Points (NCPs). These contact people are an essential component of Horizon 2020’s
The widening gap in economic growth and productivity between the EU and the US is clearly linked to underinvestment in R&D and other basic drivers of innovation.

The Portal is the single-stop-shop for all calls for proposals, and contains all related information. It even has a helpdesk that answers questions on European research in general and Horizon 2020 in particular. In the first instance, look at all calls for proposals and find those of interest (through smart search tools). You can then look at the proposal template and the evaluation forms. Having filled in the forms, it is good practice to give your draft proposal to a neutral colleague, and ask him or her to evaluate using the same criteria that the experts will use. This can help identify weaknesses and allow improvements to be made before the deadline.

Thirdly, the European Commission organises information events where applicants can find out more about the calls – details of these information events are published on the Horizon 2020 website. These events also act as an opportunity to network with NCPs and other applicants, so you can learn from others in the sector who may have been successful in the past.

Finally, I would advise you to plan ahead. It takes time to develop and get support for ideas, to build the right consortium, and to develop a work plan.

Critics of the the Horizon 2020 evaluation procedure claim it is unpredictable and confusing because evaluators no longer hold consensus meetings to challenge each other’s scoring. Claims have also been made that the feedback is meagre, meaning applicants have no true sense of why their application might have failed. What is your view of the current evaluation procedure?

It is important to put anecdotal remarks into perspective. The more than 90,000 proposals received so far have each been the subject of an in-depth evaluation by independent experts. To see how the evaluation system is performing, we need to look at evidence from across the programme, both quantitative and qualitative. The evaluation process is fully documented, and a survey of evaluators is carried out systematically. At the last count, 96 per cent of the respondents to our questionnaire thought the system was excellent, good or satisfactory. Of those who had experience of national or other international systems, almost 99 per cent judged our system in a positive light.

We also engage independent observers – senior figures from the research, industry or public sector – who stand in on evaluation sessions, talk to experts, talk to programme managers and assess whether the process is fair and efficient. The observers write an independent report on their observations. These reports are read carefully both by the programme managers as well as by the central unit responsible for evaluation policy. Any recommendations for improvement are taken very seriously.

Of course, there may be rare glitches in the system, and so we have a redress procedure. This provides a structured and fair process for applicants to lodge a complaint if they feel there has been a shortcoming in the evaluation of their proposal. For the first calls of Horizon 2020, the percentage of applicants submitting requests for redress is around 2 per cent. This is half the level for FP7. The complaints are carefully examined, and as a result only a very small number of these are found to have suffered from a real shortcoming. When judged necessary, a re-evaluation is carried out.

On the question of consensus meetings, I can reassure you that these are still carried out for most of the programme. The only exception is under the European Research Council, where a referee/panel system is used, and the SME instrument, where high volumes and the need for speed have led to an approach based on standard phrases and averages of individual scores in the feedback provided to applicants. That notwithstanding, the NCPs as well as the Enterprise Europe Network are particularly active helping SMEs improve their proposals so they can resubmit to the permanently open call for the SME instrument.

In general, a consensus discussion for full proposals means face-to-face meetings of the evaluators here in Brussels. We have started to organise consensus discussions remotely for the first stage of two-stage calls. These first stage proposals are outlines only – 10 pages long – and the feedback to applicants, compared to that for a full proposal, is naturally more concise. During these remote consensus discussions, there is an interaction between experts and the officials. Of course, the quality must not suffer, and we need to monitor this approach and improve the way we supervise the process, as well as to offer the necessary IT support.

Overall, the evidence is clear: we continue to have a first-class evaluation system. But we are not complacent. We have a means for correcting the rare instances when standards have slipped, and we continually monitor quality and look for ways to improve.

You have asked for more money to be provided for Horizon 2020 in advance of an EU spending review. Why do you think it important for the EU to increase its budget spend on research and innovation?

We recently published a report on the EU’s performance in science, research and innovation. One key finding...
was that the widening gap in economic growth and productivity between the EU and the US is clearly linked to underinvestment in R&D and other basic drivers of innovation. We have made progress since the crisis, with the EU’s R&D intensity increasing to 2 per cent GDP after years of stagnation, but we still have a long way to go to meet our 3 per cent target. In other words, in order for Europe to fill the substantial innovation gap with its competitors, it needs to increase its research and innovation spending. This is especially necessary as regards fast-growing innovative enterprises, where we are lagging behind.

At the same time, Horizon 2020 statistics show that only one third of the applications judged by independent expert evaluators to be ‘excellent’ will be funded. This means that in the current situation many opportunities for contributing to jobs, growth and the solving of societal challenges are missed.

The Commission’s proposal for the mid-term review of the seven-year EU budget, which is due by the end of this year, cannot be pre-judged at this stage. We all know that the demand is very strong for research and innovation funding, and the success of the programme is well recognised. However, we also understand the various pressures Europe is currently under. I would expect the Commission will do its utmost to find the best balance.

Grants to non-EU countries have dropped under Horizon 2020. What are the implications of this and what are you doing to attract non-EU research partners?

Being ‘Open to the World’ and engaging in international cooperation is a strategic priority for Europe. It allows us to attract talent and investment as well as to access knowledge and resources worldwide. It also facilitates participation in global value chains, provides access to new and emerging markets, helps solve global societal challenges more effectively, and gives us a leading voice in global debates. Not engaging with non-EU countries means we are missing out on all these opportunities.

Horizon 2020 is a strong vehicle for international cooperation, and any drop in third country participation means less interaction with people, organisations, facilities, and markets outside Europe. A large part of the drop can be explained. One reason is the change in Horizon 2020 funding rules for Brazil, Russia, India, China and Mexico, as well as recent conflicts and socio-political developments in Europe’s neighbourhood, and a decrease in the number of calls for proposals that make having an international partner mandatory.

We are making an effort to boost international participation in EU funded projects. The number and the combined budget of topics specifically targeting international cooperation is 20 per cent higher in calls covering 2016-17 than in the calls for 2014-15, and communication activities and targeted partnering events have been strengthened. Furthermore, co-funding mechanisms have been set up with a range of international partner countries in areas of common interest and mutual benefit. If these actions are not enough, we will have to look at more in the next cycle of calls.

Following a Swiss vote to reintroduce immigration quotas for EU citizens last year, researchers in the country are only permitted to apply for a handful of Horizon 2020 programmes. To what extent is Horizon 2020 being used as a political tool?

Cooperation in research and innovation between the EU and Switzerland has a long history and is mutually beneficial. Switzerland was associated with the two previous framework programmes, and has been associated with the fusion research programme since its start in 1978. However, the Swiss popular vote on 9 February 2014 in favour of introducing immigration quotas had a direct impact on its further association, because it went against one of EU’s fundamental principles as well as against a specific agreement between the EU and Switzerland on the Free Movement of Persons (FMOP).

EU policy towards any third country has an overall purpose and coherence, and the EU cannot accept a situation where the application of an agreement is not extended to all its members. This is why the Member States decided that Switzerland would not be fully associated with Horizon 2020 and other EU programmes until it applies the free movement principle to all EU citizens, including Croatians. However, it did allow partial association, which is why Switzerland has been associated, on a transitional basis, with parts of Horizon 2020 (actions under the ‘Excellent Science’ pillar and the ‘Spreading excellence and widening participation’ activities), the Euratom Research and Training Programme and the ITER project.

This agreement provides significant benefits to both Swiss and EU researchers, but it only lasts until the end of 2016. After that, Switzerland will either become fully associated with the whole of Horizon 2020, Euratom and ITER once the Croatia Protocol is ratified, or the current agreement will be terminated. Of course, we are pleased that the Protocol extending the FMOP to Croatia has now been signed, and we are looking forward to its ratification by Switzerland.

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