ECTRI INPUT

"European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"

March 2018

The European Conference of Transport Research Institutes (ECTRI) is an international non-profit association that was officially founded in April 2003. It is the first attempt to unite the forces of the foremost multimodal transport research centres across Europe and to thereby promote the excellence of European transport research.

Today, it includes 26 major transport research institutes or universities from 19 European countries. Together, they account for more than 4,000 European scientific and research staff in the field of transport. ECTRI as the leading European research association for sustainable and multimodal mobility is committed to provide the scientifically based competence, knowledge and advice to move towards a green, safe, efficient, and inclusive transport for people and goods.

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
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Objective of the consultation

Horizon 2020 simplification survey

The European Court of Auditors is conducting a performance audit on the simplification measures introduced in the Horizon 2020 research programme. The ECA wishes to evaluate the impact of these measures on the administrative burden faced by beneficiaries and make recommendations for the future FP9 programme running from 2021 to 2027.

Consultation page:
https://s.chkmkt.com/?e=104225&c=57175920&l=en&h=F84A7C721FA7842

Contact: **ECA-H2020-simplification@eca.europa.eu**

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Respondent report

Horizon 2020 simplification

IDENTIFICATION OF RESPONDENT

1. Name of your organisation

ECTRI, European Conference of Transport Research Institutes

2. What is your position in the organisation?

Administrative position (accounting, financial, legal, management, etc.)

3. Are you the Legal Entity Appointed Representative (LEAR) of your organisation?

Yes

4. Type of Organisation

International non-profit organization

5. What is the country of establishment of your organisation?

Belgium

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

6. How many FP7 projects have you personally been involved in?

2 to 10 (3)

7. How many Horizon 2020 projects have you personally been involved in?

2 to 10

8. Have you received funding from other publicly funded R&D programmes at national or international level?

No

9. In which Horizon 2020 Funding Instruments have you participated? (*please consider successful proposals only*)

Research and Innovation Actions (RIA), Innovation Actions (IA), Coordination and Support Actions (CSA)

HORIZON 2020 PROGRAMME ARCHITECTURE AND RULES OF PARTICIPATION

10. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

a) The architecture of the Horizon 2020 programme, with its 3 pillars (Excellent Science, Industrial Leadership and Societal Challenges), better responds to my research and innovation needs compared to FP7.

Agree

b) Horizon 2020 work programmes cover a time frame of 2-3 years, while FP7 was made up of annual work programmes. This extended work programme time frame better responds to my needs.

Agree

c) Themes and challenges covered by Horizon 2020 work programmes are usually much broader than FP7 equivalents. This broader scope better responds to my needs.

Disagree

d) The TRL (Technology Readiness Level) concept can be easily applied to my research field and helps me in understanding what is expected from my research proposals.

Agree

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

e) The range of funding instruments (e.g. Research and Innovation Actions, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, SME Instruments, etc.) provided under Horizon 2020 better responds to my needs compared to FP7.

Agree

f) Overall, it is easier to find the call and instrument that better suits my project under Horizon 2020 than under FP7.

Strongly agree

11. Please provide any suggestions or comments you might have on the Horizon 2020 architecture

Broader calls lead to more competition in both funding and thematic focus. It complicates the evaluation and limits the range of good evaluators that overlook the wide range of subjects addressing a specific topic. The benefits of broader topics can show in earlier research stages while technology development requires a narrowed focus.

12. Lump sums are pre-determined amounts deemed to cover all costs (both direct and indirect) incurred by a project participant. Reimbursement in the form of lump sums is triggered when pre-defined project goals or milestones are reached with no need for reporting of actual costs incurred by the participant.

Strongly agree

13. Please specify what positive or negative impact would be brought to you by a more extensive use of lump sums.

Lumps sums can help to reduce administrative burden particularly in smaller projects / work packages.

14. Inducement Prizes are challenge prizes, which offer a cash reward to whoever can most effectively meet a defined challenge. They prescribe the goal but not how the goal should be achieved. Please state to which extent you agree with this statement: I would welcome a more extensive use of inducement prizes.

Agree

15. Please specify what positive or negative impact would be brought to you by a more extensive use of inducement prizes.

Inducement prizes can help to drive specific subjects. This might not be the right tool to foster research in all TRLs.

16. The Model Grant Agreements (MGAs) and the Annotated Model Grant Agreements (AGAs) are periodically updated over the implementation of Horizon 2020. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

a) I welcome the regular updates as they allow to cater for the needs emerging over the implementation of Horizon 2020.

Agree

b) I welcome this practice but updates are too frequent.

Indifferent

c) This practice increases legal uncertainty.

Agree

d) This practice increases the administrative burden

Agree

OVERALL OPINION ON HORIZON 2020 ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

18. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

a) The overall administrative burden linked to the entire lifecycle of a research and innovation project (from conception to reporting and auditing) is lower in Horizon 2020 than in FP7.

Disagree

b) Despite the statistical rate of success for proposals being lower in Horizon 2020 than in FP7, I am still motivated to apply for funding.

Agree

c) The administrative burden of Horizon 2020 is lower than for other comparable research and innovation programmes I am familiar with (national and international).

Disagree

20. What would you prefer to see in FP9?

Priority should be given to further simplification.

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

21. In case of participation in more than one Horizon 2020 project, have there been any cases where identical or equivalent situations or requests were treated inconsistently by various Commission/Implementing Agency/officers?

Yes

23. To be notified of possible cases of inconsistency, the Commission set up a dedicated back office via the Research Enquiry Service. Were you aware of this service?

Yes

IT INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPPORT TOOLS

25. Several tools have been put in place to support participation in Horizon 2020. Please state whether you agree that the following support tools are fit for purpose.

a) Participant portal

Agree

b) Horizon 2020 online manual

Agree

c) Annotated Model Grant Agreement

Strongly agree

d) Research Enquiry Service/Help desk

Agree

e) IT Helpdesk

Agree

f) FAQ

Agree

g) Information days

Strongly agree

h) National Contact Points

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

Agree

i) Enterprise Europe Network

Agree

PROPOSAL PREPARATION AND SUBMISSION

Please consider a specific project with which you are particularly familiar and reply to the following questions.

27. Which typology of Funding Instrument does the project under consideration fall into?

Coordination and Support Action (CSA)

28. Which is approximately the overall budget (in thousands of €) for the project under consideration?

3 000 000, 00 EUR (including 300 000 EUR for ECTRI)

29. Which is the role that you played in the project under consideration?

Co-Coordinator in a multi-partner project with third parties

30. For the specific Horizon 2020 project considered, how did the proposal preparation effort compare with a similar FP7 project?

Higher

31. How much working time (person days) did you spend in preparation and submission of your proposal?

51-100

32. During the preparation of the proposal, did you make use of consultants external to your organisation?

No

36. How would you evaluate the information provided in the call for proposals?

a) The information was clear.

Disagree

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

> Provide a more focused description of topics instead of broad scope and a more specific information on the allocated budget / size; do not make any explicit reference to previous projects (bounding to previous initiatives and biasing the competition); be more explicit whether proposals should address part of the topic / bullets or the entire topic; keep same funding schemes (RIA, CSA) which are well understood by participants.

b) The information was exhaustive.

Disagree

> Provide a more focused description of topics instead of broad scope and a more specific information on the allocated budget / size; do not make any explicit reference to previous projects (bounding to previous initiatives and biasing the competition); be more explicit whether proposals should address part of the topic / bullets or the entire topic; keep same funding schemes (RIA, CSA) which are well understood by participants.

c) The time allowed for the preparation of the proposal was adequate.

Disagree

> Place the calls deadline in a "usual" working period (March and October). Align the deadline dates for a similar call (whatever it is 1 or 2 stages-evaluation) to avoid confusion.

d) The proposal template (administrative forms and project proposals) was adequate for the preparation of the proposal.

Agree

38. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

a) The wider adoption of two-stage calls would reduce the efforts and resources used for the preparation of proposals as compared to single-stage submissions.

Disagree

> Single stage evaluation. In general, the single stage evaluation is well adapted to the transport sector and mostly preferred by its research Community.

b) Setting a formal limit to the size of consortia in calls for proposals would help reduce the administrative burden and related costs.

Disagree

PROPOSAL EVALUATION

39. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

a) Horizon 2020 evaluation criteria (including their simplified weighting) are easier to understand than those of FP7.

Indifferent

b) The evaluation criteria are appropriate for identifying the best projects.

Agree

c) The quality of the evaluation feedback (Evaluation Summary Report) under Horizon 2020, for comparable instruments, has improved compared to FP7.

Disagree

40. The Seal of Excellence is a high-quality label awarded to projects submitted to Horizon 2020 (SME instrument and MSCA grants) which were deemed to deserve funding but did not receive it due to budget limits. If any of your projects has been awarded the "Seal of Excellence", did this help obtain funding from other sources?

No

42. If no, the reason was:

I did not look for other sources of funding.

GRANT PREPARATION AND SIGNATURE

43. The Horizon 2020 implementing rules allow for a total of 8 months between the final date for proposal submission and signing of grant agreement. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

a) The five months set aside for eligibility checks, evaluation of the project proposals and notification of the funding decision should be further reduced.

Indifferent

b) The three months set aside after the notification of the funding decision for drafting and signing the contracts should be further reduced.

Indifferent

44. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statement: the no-negotiation approach is a positive measure and should be maintained.

Agree

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

46. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statement: limiting ex-ante financial capacity checks (to private coordinators of projects of more than 500.000 €) accelerated the grant preparation and reduced the administrative burden.

Don't know

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

Please consider again the specific project that you chose in the "Proposal preparation and submission" section of this questionnaire and reply to the following questions.

47. For the specific Horizon 2020 project considered, how did the administrative burden of project management and cost reporting (in terms of both internal personnel and external consulting) compare with a similar FP7 project?

Same

48. Did you make use of consultants external to your organisation for the management and reporting of your project?

No

51. Please state whether you agree or not that the following simplification measures have reduced your administrative burden compared to a similar FP7 project.

a) Single funding rate for the eligible costs.

Indifferent

b) Changes to the overall methodology for calculating personnel costs.

Indifferent

c) >> Calculation of personnel costs: reduced time-recording requirements (i.e. abolition of time-recording obligations for staff working exclusively on and Horizon 2020 project).

Indifferent

d) >> Calculation of personnel costs: monthly hourly rates now accepted alongside annual hourly rates.

Indifferent

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

e) >> Calculation of personnel costs: use of average personnel costs calculated by the beneficiaries.

Indifferent

f) >> Calculation of personnel costs: use of unit costs for SME owners and natural persons without a salary.

Indifferent

g) >> Calculation of personnel costs: acceptance of supplementary payments of up to 8k€/year/person for non-profit organisations.

Indifferent

h) Internally invoiced costs (declared as unit costs) more in line with beneficiaries' usual accounting practices.

Indifferent

i) New treatment of external consultants.

Indifferent

j) Eligibility of non-recoverable VAT.

Agree

k) New rules to distinguish between contracts vs. subcontracts.

Agree

l) Introduction of cascade funding.

Indifferent

m) Single flat rate for indirect costs.

Agree

n) Introduction of the Certificate on the methodology for unit cost (CoMUC).

Agree

52. Is there any other measure introduced under Horizon 2020 that REDUCED the administrative burden linked to reporting of the project costs?

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

The fact that virtually all funding instruments offer the same rules of reimbursement makes the choice of calls/topics easier.

Keep using and improving the current administrative/financial rules as participants are getting used and comfortable with them.

53. Is there any other measure introduced under Horizon 2020 that INCREASED the administrative burden linked to reporting of the project costs?

The wider implementation of JTIs e.g. Shift2Rail increase the burden to participate in those as associate or founder in a specific sector e.g. rail research. Two-stage proposals bind significant resources for the first stage despite mediocre successes rates in the second stage. This increases the effort in contrast to FP7. Oversubscription and low-quality evaluations have been a problem particularly pressing during the first years in H2020 adding to burden for participants. Keep using and improving the current electronic system i.e. "participant portal" as main tool for information and proposal submission as participants are getting used and comfortable with.

54. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statement: compared to FP7, Horizon 2020 rules on the reimbursement of project costs rely more on the acceptance of beneficiaries' usual accounting practices.

Agree

55. In order to manage your Horizon 2020 projects:

a) Do you need to run a parallel accounting system?

Yes

b) Do you need to run a parallel time-recording system?

Yes

56. In order to manage your FP7 projects:

a) Do you need to run a parallel accounting system?

Yes

b) Do you need to run a parallel time-recording system?

Yes

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

CONTROL AND AUDITING

57. Please state to which extent you agree with the following statements.

a) The overall audit burden on Horizon 2020 projects is lower compared to FP7.

Disagree

b) Reduced number of Certificates on Financial Statements (CFSs) (in particular: no certificates for interim payments and for final payments of actual costs below 325.000 €) have reduced my audit burden compared to a similar FP7 project.

Agree

c) The level of detail in CFSs is appropriate and does not give rise to unnecessary administrative burden/related costs.

Indifferent

d) The audit burden should be further reduced.

Agree

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

58. Overall do you find Horizon 2020 to be simpler than FP7?

Yes

ECTRI Input to "European Court of Auditors performance audit
- Horizon 2020 simplification survey"
March 2018

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