

From Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe: Changes in Widening countries

The widening programme has been a very special one – not only because it supports capacity-building in research-based institutions, but because of its special geographical eligibility criteria.

Countries that are low performing in the area of research and innovation (70% of the EU average) are considered to be Widening countries. This means that organisations from these countries can be the coordinators of science-based schemes, namely ERA Chairs, Twinning and Teaming, and thus have the opportunity to be mentored by internationally leading partners of their choice, the so-called advanced partners. Based on such partnerships, Widening institutions will be able to receive transfer of knowledge and best practices and engage in joint research cooperation with their advanced counterparts. This may lead to improved research and innovation capacity and ultimately reinforce participation in the European R&I process. In Horizon Europe, the package will include new Widening instruments: Excellence Hubs, Excellence Initiative, and ERA Fellowships.

Compared to Horizon 2020, the list of Widening countries in Horizon Europe has changed to some extent. Among member states, Luxembourg is no longer considered to be a Widening country, while Greece (which was not a Widening country in H2020) joins the group. Furthermore, the outermost regions of Spain and France are now also considered Widening countries and have the same full rights as the rest of the countries who belong to this special eligibility group.

Widening countries in Horizon Europe

Member states: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal (including the Azores and Madeira), Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia; plus the outermost regions: Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion, Martinique, Mayotte and Saint-Martin (France), and the Canary Islands (Spain).

In H2020, several associated countries were also considered Widening countries: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, North Macedonia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine. These countries have expressed interest in associating with Horizon Europe. The final list of Widening countries with an association status will be confirmed once the association agreements have been completed.

Greece as a Widening country

Greece has been delighted to be included in the Widening group. Both policymakers and the academic world view this development in a positive light. Especially because Widening will enable academic and research institutions to become a reference point through Teaming for Excellence proposals. Furthermore, research groups consider applying for Widening instruments such as Twinning and ERA in a strategic manner. They anticipate that the instruments will help them overcome structural barriers to unlock their excellence, such as a re-orientation of activities and a systemic connection to the Greek ecosystem of industry and other research/academic institutions, underpinned by a mutually benefiting agenda.

The Widening theme is an interesting 'twist' among the thematic priorities of EU framework programmes. It requires not only knowledge of the work programme, but also on various cross-cutting subjects, such as smart specialisation strategies, cohesion policies, a ranking of countries in terms of research and innovation performance, place-based traits of regions where applicant institutions are based. Furthermore, it is a programme that can provide an NCP with hands-on experience, in contrast with other thematic priorities, in support of applicant institutions – the coordinators.

Now that Greece is a Widening country, being a Widening NCP requires intensive knowledge on proposal pre-screening as well as on various legal and practical subjects relating to Teaming for Excellence and ERA Chairs. Thorough knowledge is required from the onset of the programme, when NCPs from previous Widening countries had an entire framework programme to learn and acquire hands-on experience.

As soon as Greece became a Widening country, we started a communication effort to inform the Greek community. At the second stage, we informed policymakers of the obligation to provide complementary funding by producing an extensive report on the best practices of Teaming-2. In order to compile the necessary information, fellow NCP colleagues from Cyprus, Czechia, Poland and Portugal were very helpful in disclosing information on how their countries financed the Centres of Excellence. This would not have been possible without the close relationships with Widening NCPs forged in the framework of NCP_WIDE.NET.

The Network of NCPs & NCP_WIDE.NET

Being an NCP in a new Widening country, even an experienced one, can be challenging. This is because of the amount and depth of information needed from day one in order to provide timely and reliable information to a value chain of parties, from policymakers, rectors and research teams.

This initial strategic and effort-intensive steps would not have been possible without NCP_WIDE.NET, the network of Widening NCPs. Over the course of the six-year-long project, NCPs had numerous chances to meet, work together and exchange best practices. Throughout the project, new friendships sprung up, leading to mutual trust, which meant mentoring for the Greek NCP by its fellow colleagues. An example of the support the Greek NCP received is the one-day visit to the Cypriot colleague for hands-on information and a visit to Teaming beneficiaries, while the NCPs of Czechia and Poland liaised with their authorities for direct contact. Last, but not least, the Portuguese NCP provided support on the best practices of its country.

As an NCP, I am grateful to be part of the NCP_WIDE.NET project, a network of Widening friends.



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