



## **WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND STRENGTHENING THE ERA**

### **Alliance4Life's Recommendations for Horizon Europe**

#### **February 2021**

Alliance4life is an initiative of **twelve leading Life Science institutions** and research universities **from eleven** EU Member States of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which belong to the so-called **WIDENING countries**. The alliance is committed to stimulating institutional changes and having a say in shaping research policy at institutional, national, and European levels. In line with its mission to contribute to closing the divide in European health research and innovation (R&I), Alliance4Life fully shares the values of the European Research Area (ERA) and contributes to its implementation in a constructive way.

Members of Alliance4Life have so far **implemented a total of 56 WIDENING actions**, i.e. actions co-financed from the programme “Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation” of Horizon 2020, and gained considerable experience with all types of WIDENING actions, including Twinning, Teaming and ERA Chairs. Despite being the leading institutions of the CEE region, which **nurture pockets of excellence** in their respective research fields and countries, Alliance4Life's institutions are well aware of the impact of R&I disparities that weaken the EU's performance as a whole.

Alliance4Life welcomes the decision that **3.3% of Horizon Europe's budget** will be dedicated to **WIDENING, Strengthening the ERA and COST instruments** that address the networking gaps and deficiencies between research institutions in WIDENING countries and their internationally-leading counterparts. However, the ultimate desirable impact of these instruments should be in **increasing R&I performance** in WIDENING countries. Therefore, networking activities, training and other **general measures shall be balanced with the direct research support** provided to talented and ambitious individuals and teams conducting high-quality research in WIDENING countries. Such balance is to be maintained within the whole “WIDENING and Strengthening the ERA” financial package. Direct support of research activities would reinforce positive effects gained from networking and reduce the outward flow of talents and ideas from WIDENING countries. Alliance4Life would welcome in all WIDENING actions the eligibility of **seed scientific projects** (small scientific projects initiating new collaborations) **combined with bi-directional mobility**, and especially all support and favourable conditions for the **inflow and reintegration of talents**. This would stop the long-



term brain drain experienced by WIDENING countries, which is one of the roots of the R&I divide in Europe, and reverse it into the brain circulation.

In order to make use of the coordinated approach in sharing good practices across Alliance4Life's member institutions and to contribute in a constructive way to the current process of shaping the WIDENING programme of Horizon Europe, Alliance4Life provides the following **specific recommendations to be considered** by relevant stakeholders, especially the European Commission, national authorities in charge of EU research policy, and delegates in the Programme Committees of Horizon Europe.

## 1. TEAMING FOR EXCELLENCE

**Specification of expected excellence.** Alliance4Life suggests that a clear specification of expected excellence is provided for the TEAMING instrument. The understanding of excellence in basic science is different from "excellence" in proposals with a **strong focus on industrial applications achievable in the near future**. However, the urgency of creating the very capacity to address such purposes should not be underestimated, especially with regard to fast evolving research field such as life sciences. It is apparent that TEAMING favours projects with a tangible applied impact. The focus on applied research and fast industrial impact is, of course, more favourable for the "business planning" that is a substantial part of the TEAMING proposal evaluation. Although the industry is attracted to discoveries in basic research, the path to such an impact is longer, less predictable and not suitable for planning in terms of a defined return-of-investment, which may lead to a misunderstanding of what is expected by the term "Centre of Excellence". This misunderstanding and unclear perception of what is expected may result in the wasted effort of academic and basic research institutions preparing proposals for TEAMING.

**Coordination between the EU and national levels and concertation of R&I capacities.** Alliance4Life suggests a close coordination to be introduced between the European Commission and national authorities in charge, especially concerning the establishment of new Centres of Excellence. Numerous Centres of Excellence exist as a result of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), and their **sustainability depends on public budgets** as well as on the existence of **innovative industries** in WIDENING countries. The establishment of new Centres of Excellence alongside the already existing ones that resulted from the Cohesion policy means that the institutional financing from national sources is even more diluted and stretched. This often results in temporally ad hoc schemes that formally fulfil project criteria, but have little chance of sustainability beyond the required period. As a



consequence, it impairs efforts to build institutions with a strong brand and history. Concertation of capacities is needed in the entire ERA, not only in WIDENING countries, in order to achieve the sustainability of the recent investments in R&I for the foreseeable future, which is not feasible without national financing. Alliance4Life considers it essential to recognise already existing excellent research centres in WIDENING countries and to **support the quality that has already proved its potential and viability**. This concertation of capacities is necessary not only at national levels, but also across borders and trans-nationally. It represents a part of the answer at the level of national systems to the question of closing the innovation gap as a whole within the European Union.

## 2. TWINNING

**From networking & training to seed scientific projects.** Alliance4Life welcomes the decision that research costs shall be eligible within the TWINNING Coordination and Support Actions of Horizon Europe. Up to now, the main focus of the TWINNING activities was typically networking and training. However, in science the most effective initiation of collaboration is through solving a common scientific problem / project, which may only be of a very small scale but provides real **proof of the potential for R&I actions** of Horizon Europe. Sending a PhD student / Early Stage Researcher to the partner institution for a few months works best, but it is not possible without research costs being eligible. Many scientists in WIDENING countries continue to experience the problem that a lot of their time and financial resources are dedicated to support activities rather than to research. The larger the support, i.e. the **higher percentage of cost eligible to directly initiate the scientific collaboration** with advanced partners through seed projects and small-scale mobility, the faster the persisting gap in participation in Framework Programmes will be solved.

## 3. ERA CHAIRS

**Extension to the mid-career stages of the ERA chair.** The ERA chair scheme is very ambitious in terms of attracting top-level senior researchers to the WIDENING countries and especially of reaching a long-term impact on the hosting institution. The experience shows that the managerial and interpersonal skills of the chair are important, but an equally important asset is the possibility to influence the strategic decision-making processes of the hosting institution in the long-term. This is challenging if the ERA chair leaves the hosting institution after consuming the grant because the hosting institution cannot provide a sustainability package. Furthermore, it is not easy to recruit an experienced ERA chair candidate. Scientists at a more senior level are in general less mobile because of their established career track at a



home institution, and often also due to their personal situation. ERA chair projects are often implemented with candidates that commit only part of their time, whilst keeping their position in their original country. As a consequence, they are naturally less engaged with the WIDENING institution and retract to their pre-ERA chair position upon project completion, which decreases the potential for the long-term impact of the ERA scheme. The suggested mandatory appointment of a permanent leader of the research group would not improve the research environment of the hosting institution as it would support inbreeding. In order to increase the chance of reaching the long-term impact of the ERA chair scheme, Alliance4Life recommends focusing not only on the top-level senior individuals, but extending this scheme also to outstanding talents that are in the earlier mid-career stages and are looking for an independent career phase. Experience shows that the chance to attract and also retain such motivated individuals to and in the institutions that are, thanks to ESIF, well equipped with the state-of-the-art research infrastructure is very high. With such an extension of the ERA chair scheme conditions, the long-term practical impact on the hosting institutions and the local research community in WIDENING countries would be amplified.

#### 4. HORIZON EUROPE AND THE RENEWED ERA

Alliance4Life provided a [position paper](#) to the new ERA communication and welcomes the plans for Horizon Europe's contribution to the renewed ERA. The alliance especially welcomes deepening the ERA in line with the initiative "**Towards a 2030 vision of the future of universities**" with goals and transformation modules that Alliance4Life is already piloting. We appreciate the planned "destinations" that shall improve **access to excellence, attract and mobilise the best talents**, and boost **national R&I reforms**. For the success of the renewed ERA, which is very broad with its 14 actions, Alliance4Life recommends keeping the **structure of calls and actions** of this part of Horizon Europe **simple and straightforward**. Having experience with the complex administration of ESIF projects, which are mostly extremely overloaded R&I systems in WIDENING countries, the Framework Programme has always been seen as a good practice grant scheme. The newly planned **hop-on scheme** may be risky in terms of formal invitations to beneficiaries from WIDENING countries and this new rule should be carefully introduced and the implementation and impact properly followed. Alliance4Life also welcomes the **integration of COST under WIDENING**, including the condition that 80% of actions must have a significant WIDENING dimension. The experience of Alliance4Life's members shows that COST has become a great scheme for widening participation and sharing excellence.



In conclusion, if the **ultimate goal of increased R&I excellence in WIDENING countries** is to be reached, then the much-needed transformation agenda of the WIDENING and ERA package **must strike and maintain a balance** between direct support for research – especially bottom-up, curiosity driven research – and supporting and organisational measures.

**For more information:**

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**Alliance4Life is a bottom-up initiative of twelve leading life science institutions from eleven countries of Central and Eastern Europe that aim at closing the divide in European health research and innovation. Members of the Alliance are progressive research institutions that have the necessary strength to stimulate institutional change. For more information on the recommendations from Alliance4Life, see the [WHITE PAPER](#) that highlights key factors for speeding up the process of closing the R&I divide in Europe.**

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University of Zagreb School of Medicine (UZSM), Croatia

University of Tartu (TU), Estonia

Vilnius University (VU), Lithuania

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