



NETHERLANDS FEDERATION OF
UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTRES

**The Netherlands Federation of University Medical
Centres final evaluation of Horizon 2020
and interim evaluation of Horizon Europe**

~Looking back and moving forward~

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Introduction

Horizon 2020 (H2020) and Horizon Europe (HEU) have proven to be appealing programmes for University Medical Centers (UMCs), and the response to the programmes has been very positive right from the start. The Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centers (NFU) commends the European Commission (EC) for all the work it has done to make both H2020 and HEU attractive programmes with ample opportunities for all types of research and innovation (R&I) activities, for different sectors, and for stronger collaboration across diverse disciplines.

With this position paper, the NFU reflects on the H2020 programme and offers an evaluation to contribute to the improvement of the current HEU programme. Furthermore, the NFU provides ideas on further development of funding opportunities to achieve the steep ambitions of the European Union (EU) regarding science, research and innovation. In order to deal with European and global challenges more effectively, we recommend developing a strong R&I programme, with a balanced budget and open to diversity of themes, disciplines, and financial instruments.

This NFU position paper aligns with and supports position papers of various European research networks, such as LERU, the Guild and EARTO, some of them already published¹. Furthermore, this paper provides **additional and specific recommendations and remarks focusing on biomedical research**.

¹ [EARTO Answer to the EC consultations on Horizon Europe interim evaluation & Horizon 2020 Final evaluation](#)

On NFU & UMCs

The NFU binds seven Dutch UMCs in their core common tasks. The general objectives of the NFU are: (i) to promote the interests of the UMCs; (ii) to play an intermediary role in overarching agreements, and (iii) to promote collaboration between the individual UMCs. The NFU stimulates the formation of partnerships with other healthcare parties and research institutes including universities on the regional, national, and international levels.

The UMCs provide excellent research and an excellent research infrastructure for innovative health-related research due to the combination of an academic hospital and the associated medical faculty. With the unique combination of education, research, patient care and valorisation embedded in their structure, UMCs are very well positioned to transfer science into innovation and to address the health-related challenges Europe is facing.

The H2020 and HEU programmes are an important resource to enable UMCs to innovate healthcare and to apply novel knowledge to treat, cure, care and keep the population healthy. These actions of UMCs thus directly address the priorities and challenges set forth in the HEU programme in line with the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)² with the EU flagship initiatives on Health through European Health Union³. We work together on protecting the health of citizens and collectively responding to cross-border health crises, while ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all. Having said this, the NFU also observed some points of improvement for the HEU programme in order to more effectively overcome the challenges in healthcare and to solve the EU's health-related problems. These improvements include specific additions and amendments to the HEU programme and infrastructure, outlined below.

UMC's participation in European programmes

Dutch UMCs have shown to be active participants in EU funded research and innovation programmes (H2020 and HEU), across all pillars and actions.

The share of EU grants in Health priorities in pillar 2 shows that UMCs represent the Dutch contribution to the programme in large numbers and shares in EU financial contribution in Health-related topics.

The Netherlands compared to the total EU contribution and participation

2nd place in EU contribution in H2020 SC1 and in IMI projects

3rd place in the number of participations in H2020 SC1

Dutch UMCs compared to the Netherlands

75% of Dutch contribution in Health-related topics in H2020 SC1 and HEU Cluster Health

Almost 50% of EU contribution in Health priorities in H2020 SC1 and HEU Cluster Health

Source: Horizon Dashboard, European Commission, Nov 2022

² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union_en

KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Key issues and recommendations for pillar 2. Cluster Health

In line with the priorities for Health as set out in the Strategic Plan for HEU, the NFU focuses on specific improvements to Cluster 1: Health.

First, a **stable budget for health priorities** in Cluster 1 Health needs to be secured for the coming years. There needs to be ample funding available for diverse initiatives to reach all the ambitions proposed by the EC and called upon by the society. Annual discussions on reshuffling the budget from one initiative to another should be avoided and having long discussions with and between the EU institutions on the importance of funding for research and innovation. This discussion has already taken place before the framework programme comes in force and should avoid imbalances in budgeting research and innovation activities and continuance of already started initiatives.

Second, the NFU recommends a **wide range of health call topics** over the next years, including additional attention to **mental health** research across fields. This research should encompass **prevention** and **data-driven** efforts and focus on strengthening the **translation** of fundamental research into clinical research and the strategy towards implementation in and outside the clinical environment. Therefore, R&I actions in the Cluster Health should provide enough opportunities for **fundamental, applied, translational and clinical research**.

Third, we advise improving the **communication** to Cluster Health participants from diverse **disciplines** and sectors with examples on what might be expected in call topic description. Furthermore, the EC should clearly define the **link to the EU policies in the calls** and make practical **guidance** on how to respond to this link in their project proposals.

We call the EC to **publish the work programmes as early as possible**, so that the consortia can adequately assemble and prepare their proposals. When introducing new instruments or parts of the programme, we call for **transparency in communication** to the stakeholders and **clear guidance on implementation** of the specific instrument.

2. Clarification of clinical trials/studies

We welcome the introduction of opportunities for funding (randomised) clinical trials at the various stages. Our suggestions are to **clarify the definition of clinical studies** and to provide more **guidance** on the use of the clinical study template.

For example, it is not clear what essential information is needed when it applies to 'retrospective collection and analysis' or 'existing use/secondary data use'. Furthermore, the expected 'collection AND analysis' (not OR) is not applicable for cohorts in randomised controlled trials or biomarker studies, for which the data collection is already complete. Clarification on 'serious consequences' in the clinical studies should be given.

3. User-friendliness of the participant portal

Even though the portal has been updated, it is not yet functioning optimally. We strongly recommend making sure that the **portal is user-friendly** by simplifying it, in a certain way that is convenient for the users to handle and by making the software more stable (fewer crashes/outages).

The NFU offers the following **recommendations to increase user-friendliness**:

1. **Perform rigorous user testing** of the portal, including the online forms to ensure proper functionality before release. The NFU recommends a user-centred approach, which means actively engaging users in the process of creating and testing a user-friendliness portal and forms. Currently, there are many technical errors and bugs.
2. Include **functionality that allows users to make changes during the application process without consequences**. For example, information for each partner must be completed before another partner can be added; and once added, partners cannot be reordered or edited. This inflexibility is time-consuming and very user-unfriendly.

3. Provide a **video tutorial to help users with the different parts of the portal**. For example, information about how to answer the two questions in the ethical part and how to include affiliated parties in the portal is lacking.
4. **Send all automated messages only to the coordinator**. Only in specific cases, and as an exception, we recommend sending the message(s) to one or more partners. Furthermore, where appropriate, the automated messages should include a concrete action list.
5. **Increase functionality to allow LEARs to obtain and manage information**. For example, the LEAR should be able to obtain a list of projects in all phases in a readable format and to **filter the data as needed**. The LEAR should be able to **access** projects also during the grant preparation phase, to assist coordinators and consortium members with questions and documents accordingly.

4. Project implementation and collaboration with Project Officers (PO)

The NFU recommends **information about project implementation to be clear and consolidated**. POs should host **clear information sessions** for coordinators and project staff before the start of the project implementation. Thereafter, **continued communication with POs** could be improved by providing an additional, more direct channel (business email or phone) beyond the current portal. Furthermore, we recommend that all information be placed in the grant management system. We recommend establishing a **user panel** to improve implementation of the project, for example a sounding board with stakeholders to assist the PO's during implementation.

We recommend **POs to be skilled in project monitoring and project implementation, with a good knowledge of the legal framework of European programmes**. We suggest better **training of POs at the European Commission**, established standard operating procedures (**SOPs**) on how to deal with projects and their implementation, which will facilitate transitions in case of PO turnover. Finally, we call upon the EC to allow the POs to participate in more meetings than only review meetings.

We call for **better guidelines on the use of the Grant Agreement (GA)**, for both project coordinators and POs. We ask the EC to monitor the project **in line with the GA**. If any additional templates or requests are added by the PO, they should be properly discussed first with the project coordinator.

For project reporting, we advise opening the system for **preparation of reporting** earlier, so that the project coordinator could start the collection of needed data in time.

5. More specific and clearer evaluations

In general, the feedback seems fair and well-structured. The NFU asks the EC to make sure that the reviewers and committees provide **more specific feedback** (not generic comments) about the proposal in the evaluation summary reports (ESRs). A **specific ESR** is needed to give researchers sufficient insight into which parts of the proposal they scored lower and why.

We suggest that all **changes** in the instructions implemented by the EC after opening the calls to be indicated also in the template and included in the **instructions** for the evaluators and evaluation committee. This inclusion will ensure an up-to-date, **consistent evaluation procedure**.

The introduction of novelties in the evaluation of some instruments such as the **portfolio approach** and the **rebuttal** for the European Innovation Council Pathfinder Challenges and Pathfinder Open programme is an interesting development in HEU. We suggest that **clear guidelines, defined procedures, and explicit evaluation criteria be made available** for these new features to guarantee transparency.

We ask the EC to evaluate:

- i. if and how the **rebuttal benefits** the evaluation committee, and whether rebuttals change the ranking of the proposals, and
- ii. whether our **transparency concerns** are legitimate and more clearly defined guidelines, procedures, can be implemented.

6. Amendments to MSCA applications

In general, the proposal templates as well as the evaluation criteria are very clear, but there is still room for improvement in the MSCA program.

The NFU strongly recommends, annually or every two years, to **index the allowance and living costs**. Due to the rapidly rising costs of living, energy and working within Europe, it is necessary that the EC regularly reviews (and amends as needed) the EU contribution for these costs, including the country correction coefficients.

We suggest providing **more information or clarification**. First, on the supervisory board in MSCA projects, especially about who should participate in this board and why. Second, information should be available not only in the FAQ but also in all other documents. Third, we need more clarification in the guidelines about the role of non-academic partners in the MSCA consortium.

A final suggestion is to avoid different “Letter of Commitment” instructions for legally related partners each year.

7. ESRs for ERC interviewees

The ERC programme has proven to be a very attractive programme for ambitious and excellent researchers that are active at the frontiers of science. The NFU notes that ERC is by far **the most clearly and simply written programme**, both in guidelines and procedures, compared to the other HEU programs.

We suggest that **interview** candidates receive their ESRs prior to their panel interview, which would allow the candidates to better prepare.

8. Reduce repetition in part B of RIA/IA templates

The NFU finds redundancy in the requested information in part A and part B of RIA/IA templates. We suggest reducing this repetition to streamline the proposals and evaluations, and thus improve their quality.

To prevent repetition, we suggest the following:

- List deliverables only once.
- Exclude the financial justification tables in the page limit.
- Include consortium infrastructure either in the online portal or the proposal, not both.

This should allow more room to address the activities in the description of Work packages and give the needed frame to excellent research and innovation proposals.

9. Clearer guidelines and improved training

The NFU also recommends **improved guidelines** about:

- How to handle Open Science practices when intellectual property rights (IPR) might arise within the project (e.g. sharing data and publishing versus filing a patent)
- For Pathfinder, the science to technology breakthrough. Clarifying this terminology will be helpful to applicants.
- How scale and significance can be addressed in the case of (bio)medical projects. We advise the EC to provide concrete examples relevant for the health cluster.

We suggest providing an **e-learning module on “pathway to impact”** to support researchers and reviewers on how to evaluate the new approach.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Moving forward, paving the new avenues

The H2020 and HEU Framework programme are important instruments to fund research and innovation activities of UMCs to contribute collectively to address EU and global challenges.

Stable budget invested in a wide range of health call topics over the next years, is an important impetus to generate knowledge on health challenges. Many of them need to be addressed across borders to find solutions for inclusive healthcare, improved health and well-being for all citizens. In order to achieve that, R&I actions in Cluster Health should include opportunities for fundamental, applied, translational, and clinical research across scientific disciplines and sectors.

The programme should be more accessible with less bureaucracy, simplified explanations and rules for the participants.

In addition to this, a well-defined synergy with the EU4Health as well as Digital Europe programs is needed, well explained and clearly aligned with each other. Researchers often experience that dedicated health-related calls in the Digital Europe program are not clearly described, leading to misunderstanding or even non-understanding and eventually wrongly being regarded as non-applicable to their research.

Bringing synergies in practice is only possible when the participants receive clear and transparent information on the programmes and on the use of programmes. At the moment, the variety of relevant programmes available make the R&I programmes ecosystem too complex, where making the practical link to create synergy is not easy.

We call on the EC to include the stakeholders not only on the policy level, but also on implementation level by directly contacting the participants, introducing the user panel, allowing open feedback to improve the programme and the synergies between other relevant programmes.

In order to effectively address EU and global challenges, the EU Framework programmes should have a well-defined synergy with other programmes and involve stakeholders in both the policy and implementation level with clear and transparent information provided to participants. By doing so, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and effective healthcare and well-being solutions in the future.



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Colofon

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Editorial

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January 2023

NFU-23.00189