



# BRIDGING THE GAP: ALLIANCE4LIFE'S VISION FOR AN IMPACTFUL FP10

## Introduction: Achievements and Progress of the Region

Over the past decade, the Widening Countries have substantially progressed in integrating into the European Research and Innovation (R&I) ecosystem. Since the 7th Framework Programme, these countries have steadily increased both their participation and financial return within EU R&I funding schemes. Between FP7 and Horizon Europe, their share of participations among EU27 has grown from 16.6% to 20.2%, and their share of the Union's financial return has grown from 10.2% to 14.4%. Moreover, success rates are now approaching the EU average (20.0% vs. 20.7%), signalling a narrowing performance gap. These developments testify to the transformative potential of sustained support and targeted capacity-building efforts at the EU level.

At the same time, however, not all Widening Countries have developed at the same pace. While the overall divide between Widening and non-Widening countries has decreased, a new internal gap has emerged within the Widening group itself—some countries and institutions have made significant leaps forward, while others have seen only incremental progress. Some countries and institutions—such as those in **Slovenia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic**—have achieved strong performance and greater integration, while others continue to struggle with low submission rates and limited access to **coordinator roles in Horizon projects**. This growing heterogeneity highlights the urgent need for more differentiated, evidence-based, and context-sensitive support mechanisms in FP10.

Alliance4Life—a strategic partnership of twelve leading institutions from eleven Widening Countries—has been at the forefront of this transformation. By fostering long-term collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual learning, Alliance4Life has played a pivotal role in enhancing research excellence and managerial capacity across Central and Eastern Europe. Through active engagement with instruments such as Teaming, Twinning, and ERA Chairs, Alliance4Life members have implemented over 40 Widening projects and initiated numerous follow-up proposals, creating new centres of excellence, strengthening R&I ecosystems, and stimulating institutional change.

Increased mobility of researchers, improved grant-writing skills, and strengthened international partnerships are among the tangible outcomes of these initiatives. Most importantly, these efforts have empowered institutions to attract talent, build competitive research teams, and contribute to EU priorities in life sciences and biomedicine.



While many university alliances and large research-performing organisations have published their recommendations for FP10, calling for increased budgets and reduced administrative burdens, which we fully endorse, this position paper brings a complementary and region-specific perspective. Our recommendations are grounded in the practical experience of institutions from Widening Countries. They focus on the specific challenges we know well and propose actionable solutions to make the Framework Programme more inclusive, balanced, and ultimately more competitive.

Despite significant progress, structural barriers persist. As we look ahead to FP10, it is vital that the EU continues to invest in both excellence and equity, recognising the potential of high-performing institutions in Widening Countries and supporting the systemic reforms needed to unlock lasting impact. Alliance4Life offers this position paper as a contribution to shaping a future Framework Programme that is both competitive and inclusive, and that fully harnesses the scientific potential of all its Member States.

## **Priority 1: Fostering Sustainable Development of Research Talent in Widening Countries**

### **Challenge:**

Widening countries face persistent challenges in attracting, developing, and retaining research talent due to limited career prospects, low national R&I investment, and institutional barriers. This results in a continuing brain drain and the underrepresentation of talented researchers in competitive EU funding schemes, particularly among early-career researchers. Although talent is present, inadequate support mechanisms prevent individuals from realising their full potential locally.

### **Recommendation:**

FP10 should prioritise long-term investment in human capital development by supporting institutions in Widening countries to build attractive, competitive, and internationally connected research environments, especially for early-career researchers. Strengthening talent development systems would enable a shift from brain drain to brain circulation: instead of losing skilled researchers to more developed regions permanently, widening countries could become active contributors to a dynamic, mobile, and interconnected European research workforce.

This approach helps retain promising scientists and strengthens the ERA by broadening the geographic base of excellence, supporting research careers across all regions, and boosting institutional resilience. Supporting talent in widening countries is not only a matter of equity but a strategic investment in the EU's long-term scientific and innovation capacity.



#### Proposed Actions:

- Introduce a **dedicated instrument to support structured talent development pathways**, including high-quality PhD and postdoctoral training programmes, mentoring schemes, and transparent tenure-track models tailored to institutional maturity. While initiatives like MSCA COFUND already enhance excellent training programmes, a new instrument is needed to specifically build and strengthen structured career development systems in Widening institutions. This would address gaps where such frameworks are missing or fragmented, ensuring broader, long-term capacity building beyond co-funding existing excellence.
- **Provide targeted mobility schemes** with strong reintegration components, enabling researchers to gain international experience and return with new skills, networks, and ideas. These schemes should be designed to promote long-term engagement with the home institution and reduce talent loss.
- **Embed capacity-building for HR and RMA offices** (human resources and research management and administration) within all Widening actions to improve institutional support for career development, proposal preparation, and international collaboration.
- **Encourage partnerships between institutions** in Widening countries and leading European centres to co-develop structured doctoral schools, joint supervision models, and regional centres of research training excellence.

## Priority 2: Tailored Widening Instruments Reflecting Diverse Levels of Institutional and Regional Readiness

#### Challenge:

Widening countries are not a homogeneous group. Significant differences in research capacity, infrastructure, and institutional maturity persist not only between various widening countries but also within them. While some countries—such as **Slovenia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic**—have achieved above-average participation and financial returns in Horizon Europe, others face low proposal submission rates and weak coordination experience. This internal divergence has widened: although the gap between Widening and non-Widening countries has decreased, the disparity *within* the Widening group has grown. A one-size-fits-all approach risks reinforcing these internal imbalances and failing to meet the specific needs of emerging institutions.

#### Recommendation:

FP10 should adopt a differentiated approach to widening support, offering a **modular and flexible instrument toolbox that reflects** the diversity of readiness across institutions and regions. The following framework programme should enable both capacity-building in less advanced institutions and excellence-based scaling in stronger centres.



#### Proposed Actions:

- Apply **differentiated eligibility criteria** (e.g. “core group” and “transition group”) based on objective indicators such as innovation performance and financial return from EU programmes, as outlined in recent policy analyses.
- **Expand and adapt Excellence Hubs** to support thematic clustering of more advanced institutions, while reserving tailored capacity-building tools (e.g. ERA Leaders, Teaming) for those with structural gaps.
- **Design calls with flexible funding rates and project requirements**, adjusting the level of support and complexity according to the applicant's institutional maturity and development needs.
- **Further develop mentoring-based schemes that pair emerging institutions with experienced ones** to build capacity over time, offering tailored incentives to encourage sustainable collaboration. Provide flexible sequential instruments that allow institutions to create a development trajectory, progressing from foundational to more competitive calls.

### Priority 3: Structured and Predictable Support for Long-Term Institutional Development

#### Challenge:

The impact of Widening measures is often weakened by two interconnected issues: a lack of strategic coordination between instruments and unpredictable, poorly sequenced calls. Even successful projects struggle to maintain momentum without a clear pathway for institutional progression or visibility on future opportunities. This fragmentation limits the structural impact of EU investments and makes it difficult for institutions, especially in Widening countries, to align national co-investments, retain staff, or plan long-term development strategies.

#### Recommendation:

FP10 should adopt a more strategic and predictable approach to widening support by introducing a stepwise development model—similar to Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) used in innovation policy—where institutions can progressively build their research and innovation capacity over time. This should be combined with multiannual programming and continuity planning to ensure that gains are sustained across funding cycles, talent retention is supported, and widening measures are aligned with broader EU and national R&I strategies.



#### Proposed Actions:

- Develop a **“Widening Development Pathway”** that logically connects instruments (e.g. network-building → capacity-building → integration into Pillar II), enabling institutions to scale their efforts step-by-step.
- Introduce **multiannual planning** for Widening calls with transparent timelines announced in advance to improve alignment with institutional and national strategies.
- Require applicants to present a **long-term development roadmap**, showing how proposed activities fit into their institutional trajectory and build on past EU-funded efforts.
- Promote **cumulative participation**, where prior success in Widening schemes enhances access to more advanced instruments and collaborative funding opportunities.
- Implement **bridging mechanisms** (e.g. short-term staff retention grants or administrative support) to avoid talent loss and maintain continuity between projects.
- Align the **timing and thematic focus** of Widening calls with other parts of the Framework Programme to facilitate integration, particularly into Pillar II.
- Encourage **coordination with national and regional co-funding** by synchronising timelines and providing incentives for policy and investment alignment.

## Priority 4: Enhanced Complementarity Between EU and National Funding Instruments

#### Challenge:

The long-term impact of Widening measures is limited when they operate in isolation from national and regional research and innovation ecosystems. Structural change can only be achieved if EU funding, particularly from FP10, is strategically aligned with national investments and reforms. However, practical synergies between Horizon Europe and other instruments, such as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), are still significantly underutilised. Divergent rules, fragmented planning, and incompatible timelines often prevent coordinated action and reduce the overall effectiveness of public investment in R&I.

#### Recommendation:

FP10 should promote deeper integration and alignment between Widening measures and national or regional funding schemes, especially cohesion policy instruments such as ESIF. By facilitating co-funding models, harmonising evaluation criteria, and encouraging joint programming, the EU can maximise the leverage of its investments and support sustainable institutional development across the European Research Area.



#### Proposed Actions:

- Introduce **common guidance for synergies between FP10 and ESIF**, including compatible rules for cost eligibility, evaluation, and reporting. We recommend that a significant share of ESIF allocations (e.g., at least 10–15%) in Widening countries should be directed towards strengthening research, innovation, and talent development.
- Encourage using **the Seal of Excellence** to unlock structural funds for high-quality but unfunded FP10 proposals from Widening countries.
- Develop **templates for joint investment planning** between Member States and the Commission, enabling institutions to build complementary funding strategies.
- Align **call schedules and strategic priorities** across FP10 and ESIF to facilitate co-investment and reduce administrative burden.
- Monitor and report on **effective synergy use**, providing transparency and best practices to improve uptake across Member States.

## Priority 5: Leveraging Higher Education and Training to Boost Research and Innovation Competitiveness

#### Challenge:

Higher education institutions are pivotal to Europe's research and innovation (R&I) capacity. In many Widening countries, universities serve as the primary centres of knowledge creation and talent development. However, their potential remains underused due to limited research mandates, underfunded doctoral education, and fragmented connections between teaching, research, and innovation. Compared to Western Europe, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries continue to face challenges such as lower R&D investment in universities, fewer structured PhD programmes, and limited access to international collaboration and mobility opportunities. This slows the development of a competitive and resilient research workforce and weakens the regional contribution to the European Research Area (ERA).

#### Recommendation:

FP10 should actively support initiatives integrating education, training, and research within higher education institutions, particularly in Widening countries. By funding structured doctoral programmes, mentoring schemes, and international collaborations, FP10 can strengthen the research dimension of higher education, facilitate talent development, and enhance institutional capacity to contribute to Europe's strategic R&I objectives.



#### **Proposed Actions:**

- Support the development of structured, internationalised PhD programmes that foster interdisciplinary collaboration and attract diverse talent.
- Fund mentoring and staff development initiatives to build academic leadership and support early-career researchers.
- Promote institutional capacity-building projects that align higher education reforms with research excellence goals, ensuring education and research reinforce one another.
- Encourage collaborative participation of universities in Widening actions and FP10 projects to foster knowledge transfer and long-term partnerships.
- Align FP10 initiatives with existing EU-level tools and platforms (e.g. ERA Talent Platform) to provide integrated support for researcher training and career development.

Alliance4Life institutions have already demonstrated the impact of such approaches through ERA Chairs, institutional reform projects, and international partnerships. With targeted support, universities in Widening countries can become drivers of excellence and innovation, helping to secure Europe's long-term competitiveness and cohesion.

## **Conclusion: Our Added Value to Europe**

Widening Countries have demonstrated that they can become dynamic contributors to Europe's research and innovation landscape with targeted investment and commitment. Over the past decade, institutions across Central and Eastern Europe have increased their participation, improved success rates, and strengthened their competitiveness in EU Framework Programmes. This progress reflects the impact of EU support and the growing ambition and excellence within the region.

Alliance4Life institutions are a case in point. With over 40 widening projects implemented and numerous follow-up initiatives launched, we have built research capacity, catalysed institutional reform, and strengthened the international visibility of life sciences and biomedicine in our region. We have shown that sustained collaboration and cumulative development pathways can generate long-term impact and advance shared European goals.

At the same time, significant untapped potential remains. While some institutions have moved closer to full integration within the European Research Area, others still face structural barriers and resource constraints. A more inclusive and effective FP10 must reflect this diversity, not by dividing countries, but by empowering all institutions to grow. Differentiated support, better alignment with national strategies, and a coherent, stepwise logic across instruments are essential to unlocking excellence wherever it exists.



Investing in life sciences and biomedicine is not just a matter of competitiveness—it is a foundation for Europe’s health, sustainability, and resilience. From early disease detection and personalised medicine to biotechnology and climate-resilient agriculture, our research institutions are helping to address the most pressing societal challenges of our time.

This is the moment to build on the progress already made. A united, strategically aligned European Research Area—one that leverages the strengths of all its members—is essential for Europe to remain globally competitive, socially responsive, and scientifically sovereign. With the right tools in FP10, widening institutions stand ready to lead and to contribute. Let us make FP10 a turning point for excellence and cohesion across Europe.

## Summary of Key Recommendations

### ◆ Foster the Sustainable Development of Research Talent

Support tailored instruments for PhD and postdoc training, reintegration schemes, and institutional HR capacity-building in widening regions—empowering researchers to thrive locally and globally.

### ◆ Tailor Instruments to Different Levels of Readiness

Move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches by differentiating tools based on institutional maturity. Combine capacity-building for emerging institutions with excellence-focused support for advanced ones.

### ◆ Ensure Strategic and Predictable Long-Term Support

Establish a “Widening Development Pathway” with well-sequenced calls and multiannual planning to guide institutions from networking to leadership in competitive research.

### ◆ Align EU and National Funding for Sustainable Change

Promote practical synergies between FP10 and national/regional funds, especially cohesion policy instruments, through harmonised rules, timelines, and using the Seal of Excellence.

### ◆ Strengthen Higher Education as a Driver of Innovation

Boost the research dimension of universities through structured PhD programmes, international mentoring schemes, and integrated education-research capacity-building initiatives.