

Research activities of universities must continue to be supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

The Guild voices its concern that ending ERDF support to universities' research capacities undermines the goal of reducing the research and innovation divide in Europe.

The Guild members welcome the ambition of the European Commission and the Member States for greater synergies between the EU's cohesion and R&I policies. The Commission's vision for the European Research Area (ERA), published on 30 September 2020, calls for cohesion policy "to complement EU and national R&I programmes in upgrading knowledge infrastructures, building capacity and inducing structural transformations, on the basis of well-designed smart specialisation strategies".

We particularly welcome the announced synergies in view of voluntary transfers of Member States' Structural Fund (ESIF) allocations to Horizon Europe, State Aid simplifications and further promotion of the Seal of Excellence. We strongly urge the promotion of further initiatives to leverage Horizon Europe funding, such as the support for unfunded high-quality European Research Council (ERC) projects. Also, we welcome the Commission's support to lower performing Member States in order to increase the performance of their R&I systems towards excellence. Both the ERA and the smart specialisation strategies guiding the implementation of ESIF, if fully compatible, hold great potential for overcoming the R&I divide in Europe.

However, we are concerned about recent developments related to the 2021-2027 programming period of Structural Funds. Previously, many low performing R&I countries have successfully used Structural Funds, namely the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), to invest in capacity building activities in universities, to support their research infrastructures and human resources, young researchers, internationalisation and mobility. For example, ERDF-based funding accounted for 30% of research funds at Babes-Bolyai University in Romania in the 2014-2020 period, whilst the share of Structural Funds in the 2020 research budget of the University of Tartu in Estonia amounts to 15.1%. These investments have been crucial to increase the quality of research and higher education in EU-13 countries. However, this type of ERDF support for research will no longer be available, due to changes in the way DG Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) is interpreting the legislation for ESIF in the 2021-2027 programming period. DG REGIO has been clear about prioritising support for innovation activities and academia-business cooperation in the National Operational Programmes that regions and Member States are currently finalising, whilst leaving direct support for universities limited to actions that are related to innovation.

This narrow approach will disadvantage universities whose research activities heavily rely on the availability of ERDF, and also certain research areas that are not of direct interest to industry. In addition, in many EU-13 countries there is a lack of R&I intensive companies, resulting in most of the regional R&D growth stemming from the higher education sector. It is worrying that in DG REGIO's approach to the implementation of Structural Funds universities are viewed only as service providers to private businesses, rather than independent public actors that play a crucial role in the development of knowledge-based economies.

Besides supporting the regional innovation ecosystems, ERDF has acted as a "stairway to excellence" by increasing the capacity of regions and Member States to participate in Horizon 2020. These efforts have been coupled with investments from Horizon 2020 and the "Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation" actions. Although progress has been achieved, the R&I divide and participation gap still exist in Europe ¹.

Against this background, we call on DG REGIO and DG RTD to ensure that universities can continue to benefit from Structural Funds, and from their support for basic research, the mobility of researchers, wide-scale international cooperation and investments into research infrastructures. Since the legal provisions of ERDF already provide a basis for these activities, Member States and regions should be supported in including these research-focused activities in their operational programmes and smart specialisation strategies. Most importantly, university-based activities highlighted in the smart specialisation strategies should be supported regardless of the involvement of the private sector.

In the long term, the EU-13 economies need strong higher education systems, with an excellent science base and talented researchers, who can act as initiators and enablers of sustainable economic development. Therefore, the university sector needs to be included in the design and implementation of smart specialisation strategies, while policy-makers and Member States should maximise the potential of Structural Funds to build stronger R&I systems across the whole of Europe. Otherwise, we risk further deepening the R&I divide.

¹ Newer Member States (EU-13 countries) currently represent 8.3 % of the participations in Horizon 2020 and receive 5.6 % of the overall funding, which shows a slight improvement from the 7th Framework Programme with 7.9% of participations and 4.2 % of funding (Commission Staff Working Document accompanying A new ERA for Research and Innovation Communication, p. 40)