

Shaping FP10 and ECF: A joint Nordic perspective

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The Rectors' Conferences of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are closely following the development of the future European research and innovation agenda. With this paper, we are presenting a shared vision to contribute to the shaping of the next European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe 2028-2034 (FP10), and its complementarity to the proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF).

Universities and higher education institutions across the Nordic countries stand united in promoting scientific excellence, open knowledge, and societal impact. This paper presents joint views to contribute to the shaping of F10; views shaped by our national higher education systems, research strengths, innovation ecosystems, national contexts, as well as by each Nordic nation's unique spirit.

1. Joint stance of Nordic Rectors' Conferences

The Nordic Rectors' Conferences greatly appreciate the ambition of the European institutions – the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council – to strengthen the competitiveness of Europe and of the European Union. Furthermore, we also highly appreciate the focus and importance that has been given to education, research and innovation in this endeavour. Competitiveness does not happen in a vacuum, as reflected in the different proposals, initiatives and reports presented over the last years.

The Nordic Rectors' Conferences want to highlight key aspects and support related to research and innovation in the next Framework Programme:

- A strong budget, supporting the proposed €220 billion for FP10 in the draft report from the European Parliament. Long-term funding and predictability are key to support groundbreaking research and innovation, to attract the most excellent and motivated researchers, and to support European competitiveness.
- A strong emphasis on research excellence in the objectives of FP10.
- An independent European Research Council (ERC).
- Avoiding any directionality in ERC and in Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).
- A Framework Programme open to the world: "As open as possible, and as restricted as necessary".
- Support to simplifications which have the end users in mind, i.e., the recipients of research and innovation funding.
- Support to the implementation of the European Research Area (ERA), and especially the goal of 3% national investment in the Member States and EEA, in research and development. Additionally, adding a national goal of public investment in research and development to 1.25% of GDP would further support the 3%-goal.

2. Support research and innovation to strengthen European competitiveness

In the following part, the Nordic Rectors' Conferences presents our deepened views and perspectives on FP10, including the connection to the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), based on the proposals from the European Commission, the Council Presidency compromise texts, and the draft reports from the European Parliament.

2.1. Protect excellence and autonomy in FP10

- FP10 should remain as the EU's primary programme for excellent, open, curiosity-driven, collaborative research, and early-stage innovation.
- The autonomy and the excellence and investigator-driven nature of the ERC should continue and remain central.
- Secure the independence of the EIC Board to enhance EIC's role in promoting Europe's breakthrough innovation.
- Simplification measures are highly appreciated, where the end user should be in focus. Regarding simplification tools such as lump sums, this should be used where they have been proven to work well but should not be introduced "by default" across the entire Framework Programme. Continuous evaluation and revision of lump sums would allow for continued learning, and application where best fit.
- The bottom-up, curiosity- and research-driven approaches in the ERC and MSCA are important parts of their excellence and success. Directionality and earmarking should be avoided to safeguard scientific excellence and freedom, and avoid narrowing the scope with ad hoc and/or short-term political goals.
- Evaluations in FP10 need to be carried out by independent, external experts, to safeguard quality and impartiality in the evaluation processes.

2.2. Supporting the establishment of the ECF – but with some necessary clarifications

- The ECF should strengthen Europe's competitiveness without distorting the purpose or priorities of the Framework Programme. It should remain complementary to FP10 and be excellence-driven.
- The ECF should be based on open competition and have transparent, excellence-based assessment criteria, free from short-term political goals. The integration of societal uptake, trust, and regulatory readiness into deployment decisions should be ensured.

2.3. Calling for a well-designed and clear FP10 – ECF connection and structure

- Clear definitions presenting clear and functional roles of FP10 and the ECF, with clear and straightforward rules for participation with the beneficiaries in mind, are necessary. There should be regular exchanges to ensure complementarity.
- Separate, but aligned, work programmes.
- Programme governance should support two autonomous programmes and a structured interface, with appropriate mechanisms and tools, to allow seamless continuation from research to manufacturing and to market deployment.

2.4. Strengthen Europe's research and innovation ecosystems and infrastructures

- There is a need for predictable long-term funding and investment in research and technology infrastructures.
- Universities play a pivotal role in research and innovation ecosystems. Greater emphasis should be placed on supporting the full research-to-innovation continuum.
- In Pillar II, the pre-competitive research collaboration between academia and industry is essential for European competitiveness. Technology Readiness Levels in Pillar II must be calibrated to preserve room for lower-TRL collaborative research, as well as university–industry–public sector consortia, including humanities-led and arts-based approaches. A drift toward high-TRL deployment-focused calls would narrow Pillar II's societal impact and exclude disciplines whose contribution lies in framing, interpretation, and critical reflection rather than technology demonstration. Introducing Research Actions could be a way to address this.

2.5. Support talent, skills, and university-based capability building

- Predictability and long-term funding are needed in order to attract talent, as well as for building skills and capabilities.
- Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities (SSAH) should be integral across FP10, including the competitiveness part of Pillar II. The shift to a 'horizontal' SSAH approach should not erode the dedicated funding base for these areas, which remain critical for European cohesion and democratic resilience.
- The Society component of Pillar II must retain robust funding for research on democracy, cultural heritage, and societal transformation. These themes are essential for addressing the societal, ethical and cultural dimensions of Europe's competitiveness and resilience.
- Strengthened lifelong learning, reskilling, and upskilling efforts through the ECF. Facilitate the strengthening of interdisciplinary and transversal skills, support industry–academia talent mobility, and create synergies with Erasmus+ and the European University Alliances where possible.
- Aim for complementarity with existing education and skills programmes such as Erasmus+, but without adding budgetary pressure.

2.6. International cooperation should be safeguarded

Excellence knows no borders, and to address common global challenges excellent collaborations are needed. We therefore call for:

- FP10 to be “as open as possible, and as restricted as necessary”.
- Consistent treatment of EEA and EFTA countries under the EEA Agreement, ensuring equal rights and obligations.
- Meaningful association of non-EU countries, including geographically distant states, under equal conditions.
- Research security should support researchers to make good decisions in their international collaborations, should be clear and justified, and not become a burdensome “add on”.

2.7. A strong budget for research and innovation

The European Commission proposed a budget of €175 billion for FP10. This is a positive development from the current Horizon Europe's budget. However, taking into account aspects such as success rates and inflation adjustments, the Nordic Rectors' Conferences supports the proposed €220 billion in the draft report for FP10 from the European Parliament. The reasons are the following:

- The success rate in the ongoing Horizon Europe programme has seen a steady decline. Excellent project proposals are not receiving funding, which is a direct loss in European potential, knowledge, and future innovation.
- There is a need to adjust for inflation and increasing costs in research and innovation. This would also safeguard the attractiveness of the FP10.
- The “Seal of Excellence” can work as a quality stamp to facilitate and attract alternative funding for excellent proposals. We propose it should be further discussed with research funders, in order to evaluate its possible future relevance.

3. Nordic perspectives, views and questions on new tools and initiatives

The Nordic Rectors' Conferences have, with great interest, reviewed of the draft reports on FP10, the Specific Programme, and the ECF of the European Parliament. We welcome that these draft reports to a considerable extent take on the suggested joint amendments made by the leading European university associations and networks. For certain proposals, further information would still be needed in order to take a position on the following points:

- **Fast Track to Excellence, and Fast Track to Innovation:**
The bottom-up approach of the Fast Track proposals is highly appreciated. Regarding funding for such initiatives, it is important that it comes with additional funding, and is not taken out of other parts in either Pillar I or Pillar II.
- **Delegated acts on the implementation of EU preference in the ECF:**
We highlight the need to safeguard the openness and attractiveness of the Framework Programme globally. A delegated act must be risk-based and reflect the principle “as open as possible, as secure as necessary”. Could there be a risk that the Framework Programme would be negatively affected by delegated acts, and their implementation?
- **ERC Sectoral Plans:**
The goal of the ERC is to support bottom-up, curiosity-driven, excellent research. Introducing any form of directionality could risk these key aspects. More information on how Sectoral Plans would work in practice, and an evaluation of their implementation, is needed before any such measure could be taken.
- **Researchers at risk:**
For safeguarding academic freedom and maintaining global scientific quality – and at times even protecting lives – it is essential to support researchers at risk. The proposal from the European Parliament has been viewed with great interest, and the Nordic Rectors' Conferences will continue to follow this development.
- **European partnerships in FP10:**
European partnerships are a means to address some of our most pressing challenges. However, the landscape and rules of the European partnerships should be streamlined and simplified. In-kind contributions should continue to be used to allow public research organisations and universities to contribute to the resources of the partnerships.

3.1. A Nordic regional perspective – a push for Arctic research

Arctic research today extends far beyond climate and sea ice studies and encompasses societal, ecological, and technological issues such as sustainable resource use, biodiversity, Indigenous rights, energy systems, infrastructure, and technological development in sensitive environments. These perspectives are increasingly relevant for the Nordic countries, Europe, and globally, as the Arctic both reflects global change and is strongly affected by geopolitics, climate change, and economic interests. The region has also gained greater strategic importance in the current security policy context. Overall, this underscores the need for interdisciplinary Arctic research that can provide knowledge to address both regional and global challenges.

- A call for an Arctic partnership in FP10:
For the Nordic region, Arctic research is of utmost importance, with excellent research spanning for decades. In evolving the European partnerships, an “Arctic partnership” in the future FP10 would contribute to further strengthening this research ecosystem, and also provide support to European security and competitiveness.

The Nordic Rectors’ Conferences – Universities Denmark, the Council of Rectors of Finnish Universities, the Icelandic Rectors’ Conference, Universities Norway and the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions – cooperate within the Nordic University Association and represents more than 100 Nordic higher education institutions.