

### *Stairway to Excellence*

European research and innovation policy aims to promote European excellence in science whilst stimulating industrial performance.

These goals simply cannot be achieved without scaling up the environment in which research is conducted to at least a European level. Consolidating a common research area involves enabling as much cooperation as possible -- at a European, national and regional level -- so that structural capacities are enhanced, research networks are extended and individuals and ideas are able to circulate more freely.

Horizon 2020 – the new, European framework programme for the period from 2014 to 2020 – is the single largest funding instrument of its type in the world. In general terms, the programme aims to meet the goals defined above as this involves building a sustainable economy based on knowledge and innovation across the whole Union.

If the programme will equip Europe to deal with a number of major challenges – such as the ageing of the population, the fight against climate change or the security of energy supply – an adequately funded research programme is also essential to ensuring future prosperity. A central goal, in this respect, is that of improving Europe's research and innovation performance.

Excellence – without geographical constraints – is the primary criterion for participation in Horizon 2020. Against this background, a significant innovation is the creation of “stairways to excellence” concept. This involves teaming initiatives whose objective is to establish and reinforce partnerships between regional research units, countries and leading international counterparts.

This will enable Europe to foster units of embryonic excellence, such as small research groups and highly innovative start-ups. Such stairways to excellence will be able to lever support from the Cohesion Funds and this will contribute significantly to the creation of critical mass from existing seeding grounds.

More generally, with regard to how widening excellence will be fostered, six initiatives stand out. These are:

- the teaming of excellent research institutions and low performing RDI regions with the aim of creating new (or of significantly upgrading existing) centres of excellence in low performing RDI Member States and regions.

- the twinning of research institutions in order to significantly strengthen a given field of research in an emerging institution through links with at least two other leading institutions at an international level.

- establishing 'ERA Chairs' to attract outstanding academics to institutions with a clear potential for research excellence, in order to help these institutions fully unlock this potential and, hence, create a level playing field for research and innovation in the European Research Area. In this respect, a number of possible synergies with ERC activities should be explored.

- a Policy Support Facility (PSF) to improve the design, implementation and evaluation of national or regional research and innovation policies.

- supporting access to international networks for excellent researchers and innovators who, at the moment, lack sufficient involvement in European and international networks.

- strengthening the administrative and operational capacity of transnational networks of National Contact Points, including through training, so that they are able to better provide support to potential participants.

In parallel with these measures, it is also necessary to ensure greater complementarity between Horizon 2020 and various European, national and regional financial instruments. In particular, we require a multi-fund approach and a strengthening of the bridges that link Horizon 2020 and other, available funds and most particularly the structural funds.

In this respect, the structural funds have a complementary role to play with regard to what Horizon 2020 seeks to achieve. Upstream from Horizon 2020, the structural funds can be used for capacity building. Downstream from Horizon 2020, the structural funds will help smooth the passage from conception to market.

These measures, designed to widen participation, and the successful implementation of a multi-fund approach will certainly contribute to maximize European potential to produce science and technology of excellent standards.