EARMA
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF
RESEARCH MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Simplifying FP10:

Policy Recommendations

EARMA

Brussels, 26 November 2025

The European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA)

From a small group of pioneers to a thriving international network, EARMA has spent 30 years supporting research managers and administrators across Europe and beyond, championing professionalism, recognition, and impact in research management.

Our community:

267 member organisations across 49 countries

10,000+ registered individual contacts

~9,000 LinkedIn followers

3,500+ participants in events and workshops each year

2,200+ participants from 67 countries at our latest congress

Thematic Groups:

Research Management & AI Tools | Open Science & Research Impact | Equality, Culture, Diversity & Inclusion | BESTPRAC | European Universities | Post-award Project Management | Research Ethics & Integrity (ERION)

EU-Funded Projects & Initiatives

EARMA coordinates Horizon Europe Coordination & Support Actions supporting the European Research Area (ERA), particularly ERA Action on Research Management.

RM ROADMAP: Creating Framework Conditions for Research Management to Strengthen the ERA. The EU initiative RM COMP was developed by this EU-funded project and CARDEA.

RM FRAMEWORK: Creating Framework Conditions for Research Management Training and Networking. Fully aligned with EU initiative RM COMP.

iRECs: Enhancing research ethics expertise.

SOPs4RI: Embedding research integrity in institutions.

PATTERN: Promoting open and responsible research practices.

RE4GREEN: Ethics and integrity framework for climate and environmental research.

Prepared by the EARMA Policy and Representation Committee (PRC)

The European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA)[1] welcomes the European Commission's ongoing commitment to simplify the rules of European Research and Innovation (R&I) Framework Programmes (FP) and acknowledges the progress made. Nevertheless, additional steps are needed to further improve access and implementation.

Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) play a critical role in translating complex administrative frameworks into actionable processes, as well as in advising management, stakeholders and ensuring compliance while supporting researchers in delivering scientific and societal impact. This paper derives from input received from a wide consultation of RMA stakeholders, then discussed and refined by the PRC.

For RMAs, simplifying the next Framework Programme means ensuring the clarity of documentation and rules, a smooth proposal preparation phase, an easy-to-use application platform, giving greater trust to beneficiaries and promoting harmonization across instruments. Simplification must improve usability and access for all, particularly under-resourced or less-experienced applicants.

This paper outlines pragmatic, actionable recommendations to reduce complexity, enhance trust, and enable the R&I community to focus on what matters most: delivering excellent research, innovation, and impact. It focuses on the following three key aspects:

A. simplification in the proposal application stage,
B. simplification in project implementation and
C. simplification of funding methods and instruments.

A. Simplification in the proposal application stage

The application process for the R&I Funding Programme calls remains highly complex. Applicants must navigate multiple online submission platforms, interpret extensive guidance documents, and comply with strict formatting and eligibility requirements. The Horizon Europe mid-term evaluation revealed that applicants and beneficiaries felt that "time and effort required to prepare a proposal is not always proportionate to the level of funding, number of partners, or complexity of the project."[2] Researchers – particularly those from smaller institutions or less experienced teams – face significant challenges in handling lengthy, technical, and administratively demanding procedures.

EARMA strongly encourages the European Commission to consider the following measures:

1. **Evaluate which parts of the proposal template (Part B) could be moved to Part A or transformed into annexes to reduce the complexity of the narrative proposal.** We welcome the simplification measures introduced for the 2025 Work Programme (WP) and encourage the Commission to take further steps in this direction in the final Horizon Europe WP. We suggest a review of the overall proposal template architecture, including a comparison against mandatory Grant Agreement requirements on transversal issues, which could help streamline proposal preparation and lower entry barriers while maintaining full policy compliance. A differentiated approach may also be appropriate depending on the programme – for example, retaining such elements in Pillar II calls while applying further simplifications in ERC and MSCA schemes, which operate under distinct rules and

[1] EARMA brings together a community of experts, research managers and administrators (RMAs) working at the forefront of building the European Research Area (ERA), operating at the interface between research funding organisations and the scientific community. RMAs play a vital role in bridging cultural and legal differences between countries, academia and industry. More information: www.earma.org.

[2] European Commission Communication on Horizon Europe: Research and Innovation at the heart of competitiveness. p.10. 30.04.2025. Available at: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1a80e2e1-df28-4f1a-8a52-a0e1b47a1860_en?filename=ec_rtd_he-evaluation-communication.pdf

objectives. Particular attention should be given to avoiding manual duplication of information and redundant data transfers during the Grant Agreement Preparation (GAP) phase, as these increase administrative burden and the risk of errors.

2. **Provide more guidance and training on cross-cutting issues.** The Commission could provide targeted training opportunities on impact, open science, ethics and the gender dimension to make it easier for applicants to address these sections effectively. A broader range of best practice examples should be made available – either embedded directly in the proposal template or, preferably, accessible via an external EC tool linked to the template.
3. **Explore two-stage applications as the norm for collaborative proposals.** EARMA supports two-stage evaluations to reduce unnecessary proposal work and improve efficiency for both the research community and evaluators. Streamlining the evaluation and granting process and ensuring that the first-stage threshold allows a fairer selection of high-quality proposals, would help increase efficiency and maintain applicants' motivation.
4. **Maintain regular and consistently occurring call deadlines**. This will ensure predictability in the system, which will enable better planning and career development, not only for researchers but also for research managers and administrators, as well as evaluators.
5. **Reorganise application deadlines to support the work–life balance of all stakeholders.** Submission dates immediately following major holiday periods should be avoided, as they significantly limit the time available for coordination and drafting. Deadlines in September often follow the summer break, when many researchers and administrative staff are on leave, while January deadlines fall right after winter holidays, when institutions operate at reduced capacity. Adjusting the calendar to prevent such bottlenecks would contribute to more balanced workloads and higher-quality proposals.
6. **Continue updating guidance on the responsible and ethical use of AI in proposal writing.** Clarity and consistency should be ensured across funding schemes, including practical examples and clear boundaries regarding acceptable AI-assisted practices. Human oversight, accountability, and judgement must remain central throughout the proposal evaluation process.
7. **Enable automatic Part A data transfer from past proposals to facilitate resubmissions.** Enhancing the technical functionality of the submission system would make Part A more user-friendly and interoperable. Automatic transfer of administrative data from previous submissions, with an option to update, would reduce administrative burden and the risk of errors. Moreover, allowing all partners to independently export and import their respective sections would enable a more efficient, decentralised, and collaborative approach to data entry across large consortia. These improvements would streamline resubmissions and support applicants managing multiple or recurring proposals.
8. **Review the evaluation process to enhance consistency, transparency, and feedback quality.** Applicants would benefit from more specific and constructive feedback, particularly in cases of non-selection, to better understand how to improve future proposals. EARMA recommends strengthening the training and guidance provided to evaluators to ensure a uniform understanding and application of evaluation criteria across panels and calls, in order to ensure applicants receive a quality evaluation.

B. <u>Simplification in project implementation</u>

During project implementation, accountability and transparency are essential; however excessive administrative burden diverts resources away from R&I. It is therefore essential that the next R&I Framework Programme (FP10) maintains – and even extends – a "trust based" approach towards

the beneficiaries. This can also be enhanced by reducing audit frequency, promoting consistency during audits and implementing a more transparent and streamlined audit system rather than random scrutiny. EARMA would be very willing to set up pilot projects or case studies showing how simplification in research reporting can reduce burden without compromising accountability.

EARMA strongly encourages the European Commission to consider the following measures:

1. **Introduce simplified amendment procedures to allow for agile project management.** Currently, the need for frequent amendments due to rigid financial structures can delay research progress. This could include a pre-approval process for amendments which would allow an amendment to be accepted in principle (e.g. minor modifications of Part A and B), enabling the project to proceed accordingly without being blocked, while the detailed administrative aspects are finalised in parallel. Additionally, minor or administrative errors should be made possible to amend directly in the F&T portal without requiring a formal amendment process, thus reducing unnecessary administrative burden and delays, while ensuring that the Grant Agreement (GA) accurately reflects the project reality.
2. **Streamline the SyGMA platform, reporting automating and data importing processes and simplifying its use** in Horizon Europe and future FP10, thus reducing overlapping/redundant reporting. In addition, it is important that the European Commission - potentially through National Contact Points (NCPs) – provides training to all users who are involved in SyGMA platform reporting. This ensures that everyone, including but not limited to central institutional finance officers managing EC funding, has the necessary knowledge to comply with EC requirements and stays informed about any changes to reporting rules. Reporting should follow clear, straightforward regulations, consistent across all EC Project Officers. The use of AI in this system could be trialled (e.g. automated reporting, intelligent dashboards, predictive compliance checks). This should be done with due caution and following EU regulation as well as developing best practices.[3]
3. **Update, or (where not yet the case) develop standardised, automated templates for key standard deliverables,** such as the Data Management Plan or the Dissemination, Exploitation, and Communication Plan. This would save time and ensure consistency across projects. At the same time, the overall number of deliverables should be kept to a reasonable minimum, with a simpler and more focused structure.
4. **Clarify in the Grant Agreement whether the use of the lump sum model exempts projects from EU auditing**. For example, as part of their reporting, timesheets are still requested by certain institutions in order to prove non-duplication of European funding, as well as compliance with national or institutional rules.
5. **Reduce audit frequency and implement a more transparent and streamlined audit system.** Excessive auditing discourages participation, especially from smaller and less experienced institutions, while maintaining oversight on public spending. Currently, divergent interpretations of rules between EC and external auditors create uncertainty and administrative burden for beneficiaries. To address this, audit practices should be harmonised, and a centralised coordination mechanism within the EC should provide authoritative guidance to ensure consistent application of rules. Training tools, webinars, and periodic upskilling sessions by the EC and NCPs could further support institutions and

[3] See e.g. Funding by Algorithm - A handbook for responsible uses of AI and machine learning by research funders (ISBN 978-1-7397102-2-4)

auditors, promote clarity and reduce inconsistencies. Cross-reliance on audits with other EU programmes should also be actively implemented.

6. **Reduce the workload bottleneck around Periodic Reporting.** Periodic reporting is important but can significantly disrupt the technical work and is a heavy workload for researchers and project managers. We recommend adjusting Periodic Reporting frequency to fit with project duration (e.g. M18, M36, M54, M60 reports are required in 5-year projects, resulting in 2 heavy reports within 6 months).To simplify periodic reporting, we recommend removing duplication in the Technical Part B – such as repeating deliverables, milestones, financial data, and person months already covered in continuous reporting and financial statements. These redundancies cause parsing errors and unnecessary rejections due to minor discrepancies. We also urge against clustering deliverable and milestone deadlines around periodic reporting dates. Ideally, none should fall in the same month, as this creates excessive strain on the consortium.

C. Simplification of funding methods and instruments

The EU funding landscape with its numerous funding methods and instruments is too complicated and complex even for the more experienced applicants. FP10 must ensure that these instruments are simpler, standardised and consistent across all programmes.

EARMA strongly encourages the European Commission to consider the following measures:

1. **Harmonise Framework Programme rules with other EU-funded programmes and funding schemes.** The variety of funding opportunities and their evolving and complex rules and regulations can create confusion for applicants and institutions. In its '10 Recommendations for FP10' position paper (2024)[4], EARMA identified this as a major obstacle and recommends aligning funding conditions across the different instruments in an independent FP10 programme. Exploring the links between the European Competitiveness Fund and the future FP10 provides an opportunity to simplify rules across programmes.
2. **Ensure that a balance between bottom-up and top-down collaborative research is reached**. Across the programme, there should be space for projects at all TRL levels and a variety of interdisciplinary topics, and in Pillar II, not only top-down calls, but also bottom-up actions leaving freedom to researchers within the boundaries of a challenge-driven approach.
3. **Streamline the funding instruments currently in use, valorising the strong 'brand' (such as ERC and MSCA) and refining the scope of the others (e.g. Pillar II clusters)**. Pillar II clusters tend to suffer from broadness of purpose, often unclear objectives, complex implementation, and a lack of visibility. The Pillar II clusters lie at the heart of the FP, and their topics allow a large degree of interdisciplinarity, which shall be continued. EARMA recommends that future Pillar II calls are better framed, have clearer objectives in line with policy intervention areas, simpler language, and improved visibility. In this way, inclusivity and interdisciplinarity is preserved while addressing the concerns of complexity and a lack of focus.
4. **Reform the EIT.** EARMA recommends exploring potential synergies with the Pillar II clusters, EIC or EIE programmes to ensure much leaner governance and application processes, including the use of standard EC reporting tools, templates, application rules and financial instruments.
5. **Re-focus the Missions on their original goal.** The mission-oriented approach in Horizon Europe was introduced to tackle major societal challenges, or "moonshots". However, the

[4] https://earma.org/media/documents/earma-fp10-position-paper.pdf

current Missions landscape has become too broad and fragmented, making implementation difficult and diluting impact. Missions should ensure greater clarity, better allocation of resources, and stronger political and public engagement. Integrating Mission-related R&I calls directly into relevant Pillar II Cluster work programmes, while maintaining the strategic profile of EU Missions, would streamline programming, improve coherence with other actions in the Cluster, and reduce confusion among applicants.

6. **Explore further the opportunity of introducing minimum standards on low quality collaborative resubmissions.** These measures will reduce oversubscription and workload at least in certain programmes, e.g. EIC Pathfinder (2% success rate in 2025).
7. **Find a better balance in Pillar II between timely publication of Draft Work Programmes and transparent involvement of stakeholders.** Whilst EARMA welcomes the publication of draft Work Programmes on the Comitology Register, it also recommends that the EC considers releasing non-binding pre-draft outlines or consultation summaries. This would enable early feedback from applicants (preferably with online functionality), thereby reducing the information imbalance, avoiding the inevitable leaks, assuring prompt and equitable access, and improving proposal preparation readiness across Member States. More structured involvement mechanisms such as thematic advisory groups or dedicated Councils, as mentioned in the Heitor Report, could be a solution.
8. **Introduce a clear investment pathway for European Universities.** Across the EU, Alliances need to manage several funding sources such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, national programmes and regional funds. Each comes with different rules, timelines and reporting systems, which makes it difficult to plan and deliver projects effectively. There is growing support among Alliances to create a dedicated investment pathway to access funding for education, but also research, innovation under one framework, thus aligning funding schedules and support long-term collaboration and impact across all universities' missions.

Conclusions

Stakeholders have long called for simplification, yet the term often remains abstract in practice. This paper builds on EARMA's *"10 Recommendations for FP10"* position paper and presents concrete, actionable proposals to simplify the application and implementation of EU research funding in FP10, as well as across the broader landscape of EU funding instruments. While maintaining accountability, transparency, and alignment with the EU's fundamental values and strategic direction, FP10 should place greater trust in beneficiaries, reduce administrative burden, and harmonise rules across programmes. Achieving these objectives will require a coordinated effort between the European Commission, Research Managers and Administrators, and the wider research community.

Representing a diverse network of Research Managers and Administrators professionals (including financial, impact, strategic, innovation, and policy experts), EARMA stands ready to engage in operational discussions and dialogues with the European Commission to identify practical ways to improve and facilitate the implementation.


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