

REFLECTION PAPER ON SOCIETAL READINESS

Introduction

On 2 October 2024, Ms Elena DUFOUR, Policy Advisor at DG RTD/Unit C1 'Strategy, Policy Coordination and Urban Transitions', was a guest speaker at the UnLiON Horizon Europe (HEu) working group to present the Societal Readiness pilot rolled out in the HEu 2025 work programme of cluster 5. Following that exchange of thoughts, some members of the [UnLiON HEu working group](#) put together this reflection paper.

Motivation to launch the pilot

DG RTD wishes to strengthen (multi-, trans- or) interdisciplinarity for collaborative research and innovation actions in HEu to boost Europe's competitiveness and citizens' well being. Indeed, many of today's challenges cannot be solved by one research discipline and require strong cooperation between several disciplines making innovative and thus challenging SSH - STEM collaboration on equal footing increasingly necessary.

Framework Programme 1 was set up as a Tech Programme. With the introduction of article 7.2 in the [Horizon Europe Regulation](#) of Framework Programme 9, "*Principles of the programme: The Programme shall ensure a multidisciplinary approach and shall, where appropriate, provide for the integration of SSH across all clusters and activities developed under the Programme, including specific calls for proposals on SSH related topics.*", equality between SSH and STEM disciplines and researchers and innovators was introduced as a core principle. With the launch of the Societal Readiness pilot, the European Commission acknowledges this game changer.

About the pilot

Formal documentation on the Societal Readiness pilot is available as a guidance text of three pages (pp. 13 - 15, version July 2024) in the work programme. To make the reflections below easier to understand, some basic information on the pilot is shared to start with.

The pilot seems to have the following characteristics:

- this pilot is called the Societal Readiness pilot;
- it is introduced at the request of the Programme Committee for cluster 5;
- it is inspired by the methodology of the Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI) (ref. [Partnerships for Regional Innovation Playbook](#)), more specifically by the citizen science part of the PRI. PRI aspires to become a strategic framework for innovation-driven territorial transformation, linking EU priorities with national plans and place-based opportunities and challenges. It has been described as the continuation of the [Science Meets Regions initiative](#);

- It focusses on a limited number (8x) of topics plus a CSA for monitoring and evaluation;
- the rationale is that possible misalignment between innovation and society creates bottlenecks, eroding trust and generating negative externalities. This leads to a waste of taxpayers' money and therefore, Societal Readiness could be useful;
- the aim is to have an end product that is fit for the end user;
- the main characteristics, as presented by DG RTD, are; interdisciplinarity, SSH partners to be involved from the start, flexibility, methodology based on Responsible Research and Innovation processes, monitoring and evaluation;
- Societal Readiness is a qualitative reflection by the HEu project consortium, rather than a quantitative categorisation of societal readiness, similar to the Technology Readiness Levels;
- all Societal Readiness call topics are attributed the SSH-flag and the corresponding SSH-text;
 - Please note that the other way around is not the case: not all SSH-flagged call texts are part of the Societal Readiness pilot.
- specificities of Societal Readiness, as presented by DG RTD:
 - an innovative interdisciplinary approach;
 - integrated societal dimension at each step of a project's life cycle;
 - SSH experts steering Societal Readiness work have their voices heard;
 - partners are owners of their Societal Readiness research;
- DG RTD sees Societal Readiness as a way to:
 - deepen relationships between R&I and society;
 - strengthen interdisciplinarity;
 - as a complementary societal approach to the existing TRL;
 - acknowledgement of the diverse areas of R&I activities;
- DG RTD considers there is no significant additional administration at the proposal phase created by this pilot -> 'normal preparation of proposal, only some specific content needs to be integrated in the proposal';
- In practice:
 - proposal writers are asked to address how the project will integrate Societal Readiness in the methodology section under the Excellence part of proposal templates;
 - consortia are asked to deliver a public report within the first six months of the project focussing on (i) the project's vision on Societal Readiness, (ii) reflections, (iii) preliminary responses and (iv) write more detailed plans;
 - consortia are asked to deliver another public report in the last three months of the project reflecting on (i) the project's experience with Societal Readiness, (ii) outcomes, (iii) challenges and lessons learned, (iv) engagement of societal actors, (v) their needs and concerns, (vi) recommendations for future projects;
- no additional budget is foreseen for activities under this pilot;
- other clusters have been invited to join, none have joined so far.

An analysis

We understand and agree with

- the initiative taken to **try to increase the participation of SSH- researchers** in collaborative projects;
- the **rationale** for this pilot;
- the **need to strengthen interdisciplinarity** for collaborative research and innovation actions to strengthen Europe's competitiveness and citizens' well being;
- the **need to strengthen the societal impact** of research done in HEu cluster 5;
- **citizen engagement being relevant** in many phases of research projects.

We note that

- **this pilot adds an additional bureaucratic layer** by asking researchers to (i) reflect on societal readiness in the proposal, (ii) produce two extra reports as well as (iii) coordinate with the accompanying Societal Readiness CSA;
- **it's already possible**
 - to include societal readiness aspects in HEu projects following standards rules, by outlining in the proposal the approach used, including via involving all relevant stakeholders, such as SSH researchers or innovators, to meet the project objectives and achieve impact;
 - for evaluators to assess the potential for societal impact of future projects, based on the content of the impact paragraphs in HEu proposals;
- in case the element of societal readiness (the context for impact) is indeed to be dealt with (see questions 1 and 2 below), **researchers could be asked to deal with societal readiness in a more explicit way in the impact paragraphs**;
- thanks to article 7.2 in the HEu Regulation, **there is no need to help raise the profile of researchers of some disciplines towards others** in other disciplines. After all, scientific, technological, economic, and societal impact are all contributing to Europe's competitiveness and Europe's citizens' well being.
- **the pilot is inspired by the Partnership for Regional Innovation (PRI)**, more specifically by the citizen science part of the PRI;
- **the pilot is rather about ensuring societal readiness** of the research done in HEu cluster 5 projects than a way to strengthen interdisciplinarity;
- **a stakeholder engagement exercise would be welcome** once the outcomes of this pilot are known and before proceeding with a full rollout;

We formulated the following questions that universities could discuss at a national level:

A) Questions to obtain more clarity:

1. How will the Societal Readiness concept relate to lower TRL, curiosity-driven research whose impact on society is unforeseeable?
2. How do we ensure that the Societal Readiness concept does not inhibit disruptive research and innovation?
3. In this pilot, researchers are asked to provide a normative framework regarding technologies to be developed. Shouldn't we be very careful with asking researchers

- to provide such a normative framework? Are we not making researchers responsible for decisions that should be taken by politicians?
4. While taking a broader view on the Framework Programme and considering discussions in other areas, like expanding the Gender Equality Plans, it seems many new requirements will likely be imposed on beneficiaries in the future. Collectively, these risk creating significant additional burden. How does the introduction of this pilot align with the aim of simplifying the Framework Programme for beneficiaries as expressed by Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva during her hearing in the European Parliament?
 5. In the ongoing pursuit of simplifying the Framework Programme for beneficiaries, the Societal Readiness approach appears to add administrative burden rather than reduce it. Given that the existing measures within the Framework Programme already support interdisciplinary approaches, how could the Societal Readiness approach be redesigned to strengthen these measures without imposing additional burdens?
 6. Is this pilot mainly about ensuring the societal impact of the research done in HEU cluster 5?
 7. How will this pilot allow SSH-researchers to deploy SSH research activities?
 8. Business consultants are in general strong at undertaking different kinds of services that connect closely to societal readiness, like market and audience assessments, change and implementation management, communication, citizen engagement activities, etc. Do we agree that there is a need to monitor if this pilot provides additional opportunities for business consultants?
 9. Should approaches to Societal Readiness focus on self-assessment or on independent assessment? And what does that imply for the workload for researchers and for the objectivity of the assessment?

B) Questions to help identify more suitable alternatives to strengthen interdisciplinarity:

Could it be an idea to

10. check all examples provided in HEU guiding material, the Modal Grant Agreement, the impact summary table, call texts, etc., to see if guidance is also available for SSH domains and for interdisciplinary projects (and not for STEM researchers and innovators only)?
11. write less prescriptive topics focusing on the challenges to be addressed?
12. turn around the current SSH flagging logic by starting to indicate when it is not an obligation to work together with SSH researchers in collaborative research and innovation calls?
13. support the set-up of an ETP-like structure for SSH?
14. introduce calls in HEU cluster 5 starting from an SSH question instead of a STEM question? This would allow (i) SSH researchers to undertake SSH-research and innovation activities on topics dealt with in cluster 5 and be in the lead while working together with their STEM colleagues, (ii) help STEM researchers to see more easily the usefulness of SSH researchers' input and (iii) make SSH researchers feel more secure about their essential contribution in the search for answers to STEM questions in a field that might not (yet) be one they are fully familiar with.
15. raise the bar for showcasing the added value of interdisciplinarity in HEU?

16. update the wording in call topics, more specifically the wording regarding the expected impact paragraphs in project proposals, without introducing a new burden while aiming to achieve the same objective?
17. make better use of the existing HEu rules to help cluster 5 researchers to invite SSH-researchers into their consortia from the start?
18. focus on awareness raising about the importance of taking interdisciplinary approaches, more specifically towards potential HEu/cluster 5 projects consortia partners?
19. when organising brokerage events, continue to invite researchers from various disciplines, including SSH disciplines?
20. review the wording on the slides to present the Societal Readiness pilot to make sure equality between STEM and SSH researchers is not jeopardised?

Concluding remarks

In this reflection paper, the introduction of the Societal Readiness pilot is questioned since it is introducing additional bureaucracy for something that is already perfectly well possible following current HEu Rules. We also question if researchers should be tasked with setting a normative framework and if this Societal Readiness concept is not inhibiting disruptive research. Furthermore, we suggest a stakeholder engagement exercise once the outcomes of this pilot are known and before proceeding with a full rollout.

The questions listed above are intended to help policy makers reflect (i) on the potential risks of introducing the readiness concept and (ii) on alternative, non-bureaucratic ways forward to strengthen interdisciplinarity in the Framework Programme. Both monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and innovation activities are needed to create a better future for the EU and its citizens. We hope that DG RTD will tap into the in-house knowledge of their staff with an SSH-background, including that of ENDS, continue their efforts to increase the number of SSH evaluators and pick up on our reflections to contribute to translating into practice article 7.2 in the Framework Programme Regulation to make it a game changer for the sake of EU's competitiveness and citizens well being.