



HORIZON 2020

The New EU Framework Programme
for Research and Innovation
running from 2014 to 2020

Minimum standards

and

Guiding principles

for setting up systems of

National Contact Points

(NCP systems)

under Horizon 2020

Minimum standards and guiding principles

1. Context

A system of National Contact Points will be established for Horizon 2020, building on the experience of previous Framework Programmes. To promote equal and consistent support, this document provides a common reference for all participating countries.

2. Mission

Highly professional support services operating nationally will form an essential component of Horizon 2020 implementation. By spreading awareness, giving specialist advice, and providing on-the-ground guidance, they will ensure that the new programme becomes known and readily accessible to all potential applicants, irrespective of sector or discipline.

3. Key principles and minimum standards

For the national NCP systems:

- a) The system of National Contact Points will be established, operated and financed under the responsibility of the Member States and countries associated to the programme. While acknowledging different national circumstances, the relevant national authorities will ensure compliance with these minimum standards and guiding principles.
- b) The relevant national authority will alone be responsible for nominating NCPs, in line with the common structure.
- c) A National NCP Coordinator will collaborate with the national authority in the operational management of that country's NCP system. In so doing the Coordinator will maintain an overview of the national system, to ensure overall operational consistency, and will liaise with the Commission coordinating services on any cross-cutting questions of operational policy, including training, and for horizontal objectives such as gender equality.
- d) Each national authority will ensure that measures are in place for the smooth operation of the NCP system within the country concerned, including sufficient administrative capacity, performance monitoring, and compliance with the minimum standards.
- e) Robust rules for ensuring confidentiality and for avoiding conflicts of interest should be established, in accordance with national law. In appointing NCPs, it is important to avoid situations that could later give rise to potential conflicts of interest, particularly where the host organisation of an NCP may itself become an applicant in a proposal.

- f) If a host organisation does act as an applicant, mitigating measures should be established within the institution if necessary (eg. "firewalls" between the departments involved in submitting proposals, and those responsible for the NCP function)¹.

Clarifications in relation to points (e) and (f) above:

In all circumstances, NCPs must act to avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest. Special rules apply for the participation of an NCP in a proposal.

In this context "participation in a proposal" means a named NCP identified as either carrying out the R&I activities, or in an advisory or supporting role (e.g. project advisory board)*.

(i) An NCP must not participate in a proposal in relation to the work programme part where he or she provides NCP services, unless, in exceptional circumstances, the Commission allows such participation, due to the specific nature of a given call;

(ii) If an NCP intends to participate in a proposal where he or she provides NCP services, the official notification from the national authority announcing his or her withdrawal from NCP functions must be received by the Commission before the opening of the corresponding call;

(iii) It may be possible for an NCP to participate in a proposal in relation to a work programme part other than the one where he or she provides NCP services. In these cases the host organisation must:

- put in place measures to ensure that the NCP concerned does not receive confidential information from other NCPs;
- inform the Commission and the national coordinator of the intended involvement of the NCP, and describe the measures mentioned above;

(iv) NCPs, acting in that capacity, shall not provide letters of support or similar documents in relation to specific proposals;

(v) NCP national coordinators must draw these standards to the attention of the responsible hierarchy in every host organization.

* An NCP may participate in an advisory or supporting role in a project, once grant preparation has started.

¹These concerns do not arise in the case of any calls for proposals targeted at NCPs themselves (e.g. transnational networks).

- g) Cooperation with the Enterprise Europe Network will be set up in each country, taking into account national circumstances. This will include provisions for a one-stop-shop service for SMEs, particularly newcomers, directing potential applicants to the most appropriate service.
- h) A Horizon 2020 web portal will be established by the relevant national authority in every country, building on existing web portals as appropriate. The portal will include relevant EU and Horizon 2020 visual identities, essential references, and clear links to all the relevant national support services (which may themselves be the subject of distinct web sites). The portal will provide a single point of entry for all participants, including SMEs, particularly those new to EU programmes. The Commission will establish a site on EUROPA that links directly to the national portals.
- i) The Commission will facilitate the organisation and operation of the NCP network, provide coordination where necessary, and help ensure compliance with the minimum standards and guiding principles.
- j) Third countries are also invited to nominate NCPs, in line with the common structure.

For each NCP²:

- k) The work of NCPs will be guided by the principles of transparency and equal access to calls under Horizon 2020.
- l) NCPs should be supported within their respective host organisations or by their national authorities in terms of staff and equipment (eg IT) to a level commensurate with the scope of the mandate, and the size of the potential constituency.
- m) The NCP service should be accessible by e-mail and phone during working hours, with appropriate back-up arrangements in the case of absences. This should include a functional mailbox.
- n) Every NCP should be fully conversant with the objectives, principles and content of that programme part for which they are the nominated specialist.
- o) NCPs should be knowledgeable about all aspects of Horizon 2020, beyond their specialist area, thereby allowing effective signposting in line with the principle of 'no wrong door'.
- p) NCPs should at least be aware of opportunities provided by related programmes (eg. COSME, ESIF), and be familiar with the relevant sources of advice in the country concerned (e.g., Managing Authorities).
- q) All NCPs will establish mutually supporting relationships with the Enterprise Europe Network in their country, in accordance with the national arrangements.
- r) NCPs should be good communicators, and be able to adapt methods as necessary, taking into account the diversity of actors that make up their constituency (eg. academia, industry, including SMEs, public authorities etc).

² Because of their specific role, not all provisions of this document apply to the NCPs for the Joint Research Centre. (See annex 1 for more details).

- s) In line with the collaborative nature of EU programmes, and with the goals of the European Research Area, NCPs should be ready to participate actively in transnational networks. They may act as trainers or as trainees as appropriate.
- t) In accordance with national law, systems should be in place to ensure that confidential information that comes into the possession of NCPs is treated accordingly.
- u) NCPs must be free from conflicts of interest between their NCPs activities and the rest of their professional activities. NCPs will not be appointed as proposal evaluators in Horizon 2020.

4. Core functions of an NCP

Informing, awareness raising

- Circulate general and specific documentation on the Horizon 2020, including on conditions for participation, on possibilities and conditions for submission of proposals, and on project budgeting and reporting.
- Organise information and promotional activities – in liaison with the Commission services when appropriate- e.g. infodays, seminars, conferences, newsletters, web sites, fairs, etc.
- Raise awareness of:
 - the innovation activities in Horizon 2020, including the objective of enhanced participation of industry and SMEs.
 - funding opportunities offered through externalised measures, notably Articles 185 and 187 initiatives, and EIT KICs, within the scope of a specific NCP's mandate.
 - the interdisciplinary nature of Horizon 2020, especially with regard to the societal challenges.
 - the objectives to ensure gender balance in Horizon 2020, and of strengthening the link between science and civil society.
 - the activities of the Joint Research Centre, the in-house science service of the Commission, to relevant national stakeholders from the scientific community, industry and public authorities.
- Provide information as necessary on other European RTD-programmes in the field of research and innovation such as COSME, Eureka, COST, R&D related parts of European Structural and Investment Funds, and establish working links with the respective specialist support services.

Assisting, advising and training

- Assist researchers and organisations, in particular new actors and SMEs, with a view to increasing their participation in Horizon 2020.

- Assist in partner search activities notably by using internet based tools, co-operation networks, European Enterprise Network partnership services for SMES etc.
- Advise on administrative procedures, rules and issues (e.g. role and responsibilities of participants in a consortium, costs, rights and obligations of participants, ethical rules and for the principles laid down in the Commission Recommendation C(2005)576 on the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for their Recruitment). Where necessary this will be in liaison with the specialist Legal and Financial NCPs.
- Advise participants, in particular smaller organisations and SMEs, on the setting up of appropriate management and legal structures in projects with large budgets and/or numerous participants.
- Explain the scope and the modalities of funding schemes to be used in Horizon 2020.
- Organise courses and training sessions on Horizon 2020 where appropriate, for intermediaries and information multipliers to ensure high quality of advice.
- Where appropriate, organise courses and training seminars for specific target groups (SMEs, universities, business organisations, women in science etc.) or on specific topics (legal aspects, modalities for participation, research and innovation areas covered by several specific challenges and programmes, financial rules etc.).

Signposting and cooperation

- Signpost to other business support network services those potential participants who require assistance, for example on general EU matters or matters relating to internal market, technology transfer, intellectual property rights (IPR) or regional development typically dealt with by these networks (e.g. EEN, EIB, Structural Funds, YourEurope, Solvit etc).
- Signpost to national funding services and programmes and to ERA Net Projects.

5. Cooperation between NCPs and Commission services

The Commission considers NCPs to be important partners in the implementation of Horizon 2020, and the main structure for providing practical information and assistance to potential participants.

Main interactions

The Commission will:

- Provide general and specialist information on Horizon 2020 related to the mandate of the NCPs.
- Invite NCPs to participate in information and awareness actions related to the activities that are organised by the Commission services, and reimburse their travel and subsistence costs, consistent with the Commission rules and policy.
- Invite NCPs to thematic conferences and seminars which the programme directorates organise and when possible reimburse their travel and subsistence costs, consistent with the Commission rules and policy.
- Provide information at the earliest possible time on work programmes and roadmaps, upcoming calls, changes in priorities or administrative procedures, particular provisions related to externalised bodies; statistics of calls and evaluations (including the externalised measures), relevant information on funded projects etc., striving for equally high quality of information flow throughout.
- Together with the national coordinators, periodically draw up a programme for general and specialist training courses across the NCP network, and coordinate and monitor its implementation.
- Inform NCPs about the results of any possible invitations to submit expressions of interest.
- Provide leaflets, brochures and other relevant information for further distribution by NCPs.
- Provide the data and information necessary for the proper performance of the NCPs. In particular, the EU and Associated Country NCP coordinators will receive, immediately after the Programme Committee has been informed, information on the outcome of proposal evaluations, in a similar form to that provided to the Programme Committee members.
- Where practicable, and consistent with the legal framework, NCPs in third countries will receive aggregated evaluation data, and selected data on proposals.

Practical modalities

The Commission will:

- Nominate contact persons for NCPs in the Commission services, mirroring the NCP structure.
- Identify a contact point for encouraging mutually supporting relationships between NCPs and EEN
- Establish and operate an NCP web area for supplying information and as a discussion forum.
- Support transnational networks of NCPs, as a means of stimulating European cooperation in research and innovation, and as a contribution to the realisation of the Innovation Union and the European Research Area.
- Ensure that NCPs are fully informed about the reimbursement rules for NCPs attending meetings, and any updates to these. These will again be spelled out with every invitation to an NCP.

- Where practicable, NCPs in third countries will be invited to participate in the activities and events mentioned above, but will in general not receive any financial support from the European Commission services unless specifically agreed otherwise.

Maintaining and improving quality

- The transnational networks mentioned above will, among other objectives, foster the minimum standards and enhance the competence of NCPs where needed.
- For the NCP system as a whole, the Commission will convene meetings of the national NCP coordinators to provide an opportunity to discuss the collaboration based on the minimum standards, share experience, to identify good practices and to address problems. The training programme mentioned above will be developed in this context.
- The meetings will include an invitation for national coordinators to describe lessons learned from the national monitoring exercises.
- When invited to do so by a particular national coordinator, one or more countries could undertake a "friendly peer review" of that country's NCP system, possibly through a transnational network project, with a view to benchmarking performance and making recommendations for further improvement. The approach to be used will be developed further at the meetings of the national NCP coordinators.

6. Nomination and recognition process

The names and contact details (address, telephone, email etc.) should be sent officially on behalf of the relevant national authorities. These notifications should be addressed to the Director-General of DG Research and Innovation, with a copy to the official in charge of coordination.

Any subsequent changes to the nominated persons should be communicated in the same way. However, simple changes of contact details (and not of the nominated persons) can be just sent to the Commission coordinating service.

The Commission will publish the nominated NCPs on its online NCP database, and refer to this database in the guides for applicants and in other information material.

If it becomes apparent that an NCP, or group of NCPs, is failing to comply with these minimum standards, the Commission services will raise the matter with the national NCP coordinator, or with the national authority, as appropriate. The aim will be to identify how best to improve the services, and to propose remedial actions.

If the problem persists, or in the case of grave misconduct, the Commission will inform the national authority (and/or Permanent Representation). If necessary, having first consulted the national authority, the NCP(s) in question will be "de-recognised" and the national authority concerned will be invited to nominate a replacement NCP.

"De-recognised" means that the NCP will be removed from the mailing lists and will no longer receive information directly from the Commission, including any confidential information. The NCP will no longer be listed on the relevant EU web site.

7. Confidentiality

A written declaration from the relevant national authority will be required by the Commission, confirming that the necessary measures are in place with regard to the handling of any confidential information, (e.g. the outcome of the evaluations).

Annex I: NCP Structure

1. National NCP Coordinator
2. Legal and Financial aspects
3. SMEs*
4. Access to Finance*
5. European Research Council
6. 'Future and Emerging Technologies';
7. 'Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions on skills, training and career development';
8. 'European Research Infrastructures';
9. 'Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)';
10. 'Nanotechnologies, advanced materials and advanced manufacturing and processing';
11. 'Space';
12. 'Health, demographic change and wellbeing';
13. 'Food security, sustainable agriculture, marine and maritime research and the bio-economy'; & 'Biotechnology';
14. 'Secure, clean and efficient energy';
15. 'Smart, green and integrated transport';
16. 'Climate action, resource efficiency and raw materials';
17. 'Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies';
18. Spreading excellence and widening participation
19. Science with and for Society
20. Secure societies
21. Euratom
22. Joint Research Centre**

* Task to be performed in liaison with Enterprise Europe Network, according to the national situation.

** As the in-house science service of the European Commission, the JRC is in charge of direct research under the Horizon 2020 framework programme. The JRC NCPs act as a key intermediaries and operational contact points between the JRC and the relevant stakeholders from the scientific community, industry and public authorities of the EU Member States and Associated Countries.

The JRC NCPs' main missions are: to raise awareness about the JRC in their country; provide information about the JRC to relevant stakeholders in their country; advise and support relevant stakeholders regarding the practical modalities to collaborate with or work at the JRC; foster the contacts and collaboration between the JRC and scientific stakeholders in their country; act as a source of information and support for activities of the JRC in relation with their country.

Besides its close contacts with the special JRC NCPs, the JRC also liaises with and associates the thematic NCPs responsible for the 'societal challenges' priority under Horizon 2020 in its activities.

Annex II: Terminology

Client: Any potential applicant or other participant in Horizon 2020 seeking assistance from an NCP. (The term does not imply payment for services rendered.)

Commission coordinating service:

Official in charge of coordination of the network as a whole. Liaises primarily with the national NCP coordinators.

Commission NCP correspondent:

Officials in charge of exchanges with the individual NCP functions.

Host organisation:

The legal entity (ministry, agency, research body, company etc) to which an NCP is affiliated.

National authority:

The relevant government department responsible for the Horizon 2020 NCP system. NCP nominations are made officially on behalf of the national authority.

National Contact Point (NCP):

Individual officially nominated by the national authority to perform one or more of the NCP functions in line with the common structure.

National NCP coordinator: NCP in charge of coordinating the national system, and other horizontal tasks, and the main interlocutor with the Commission on operational policy questions.