**FAQ Excellence hubs**

1) *What does place based mean in the context of this call and what geographical reference is needed?*

   It means that the ecosystem is operating in a specific territorial i.e. regional or local context and thus benefitting from geographic proximity favouring close links between actors especially academia and business. There is no prescribed geographical reference such as a territorial unit defined by NUTS. Nevertheless, it is expected that applicants briefly describe the territorial context and place based approach in the proposal. Border-crossing ecosystems (e.g. in EUregio context) including two or more countries are also considered place based.

2) *Must the quadruple helix consortium be formalised by a legal entity or agreement?*

   There is no obligation to have a dedicated legal entity that assembles all components of the quadruple helix. Nevertheless, for the sake of smooth management it is recommended to make use of existing umbrella organisations (e.g. clusters) to reduce the number of individual consortium members. A consortium agreement is mandatory according to the general conditions but no further requirements for formal agreements exist.

3) *What is the preferred option for the societal actors to be included in the consortium?*

   The call text lists a number of examples for societal actors who should be selected according to their added value for the project and it's R&I context. The sole condition is that such actors should be neither commercial nor part of the public administration. The added value, outreach and impact of such actors will be evaluated by the experts.

4) *Is there a definition for business entities (active established firms with relevant revenues)?*

   For ensuring an impactful economic rationale of the eco-system it is instrumental that companies from the 'real economy' actively participate and the consortium is not overly dominated by start-ups and consultants. Therefore, at least one of the business entities per ecosystem needs to prove that it is existing at least three years before the call publication and generates a significant annual turnover by commercial activity (not public funding). Balance sheets or extracts from annual business reports will be accepted as evidence and should be annexed to the proposals.

5) *For complex innovation eco-systems, how will the representation of quadruple helix partners function in practice?*

   For complex ecosystems with a large number of members and in absence of an umbrella organisation it is recommended that the ecosystem is represented by a limited number of core partners (at least two, one research + one established business partner) who sign the grant agreement (GA) while other members of the ecosystem are listed in the proposal including a short description of their roles but are not signing the GA. The associated partners will benefit from the knowledge generated and services offered by the project (e.g. training, study visits) and contribute with their expertise to the strategic work of the consortium. They are not eligible to incur direct personnel cost but compensations via service contracts, staff secondment to core partners, travel and subsistence for meeting participation and expert honoraria are possible. The use of linked third parties is also a considerable option if applicable. Associated partners should provide evidence for their roles and commitment by letters of endorsement to be annexed to the proposal.

6) *What is the ideal number of consortium partners in the context of this call?*

   There is no prescribed maximum number of participants. Under the assumption that a typical consortium will comprise two (minimum condition) to four place based ecosystems we may expect that a number of 8 to 16 partners would be an appropriate consortium size. Although there is no formal limit it is strongly recommended not to exceed the number of 20 partners due to the expected management difficulties for oversized consortia.

7) *To what extent and partners from non-widening countries may participate and how this can be justified?*

   The excellence hub action does not foresee advanced partners like in other widening actions. Nevertheless, it is open for participation of other countries as long as the co-ordinator is from a widening country and there is a clear center of gravity in widening countries. As a general guidance we would see this condition fulfilled if at least 70% of the financial resources of the project will be allocated to widening countries and the benefits for widening countries in line with the political objective of the programme are clearly demonstrated. This is for instance the case if there is an integration into value adding chains, support to internationalisation especially for SMEs from widening countries, the transfer of knowledge and good practice or a specialised expertise contributed from non-widening countries. In the latter case we may also foresee the inclusion of a single non widening partner (not necessarily a full fledged quadruple helix ecosystem).

8) *What shall be the content of the joint R&I strategy?*

   There is no template or standardised approach for the R&I strategy. Some key elements are nevertheless worth mentioning. There should be an analysis of research and development needs and gaps in the chosen domain and how the consortium wants to address it in a complementary manner. The pathway to commercial exploitation and how scientific results will be translated into the economy have to be described. Investment needs will be derived from this plan.

9) *How European relevance is defined in the context of this call?*

European relevance means that there is an added value of a joint European funding versus presumably isolated regional/national activities for the participating ecosystems. The consortium has to demonstrate that is more than the sum of its parts i.e. the individual ecosystems. Applicants should demonstrate the strategic benefits of a European collaboration as a whole through the envisaged collaboration.

10) *Should the common investment plan already be presented in the proposal?*

At proposal level no full-fledged investment plan is required since this should be derived from the joint R&I strategy to be elaborated during the project. Nevertheless, some key elements of the investment plan should be outlined in the proposal, notably the purpose and type of investment and the envisaged funding sources as well as the approach to ensure its sustainability and expected impact.

11) *Is there a commitment from regional authorities or other sources for a complementary funding already needed at proposal stage?*

The commitment of the regional authorities at proposal stage will be sufficiently demonstrated by their participation in the proposal. Financial commitments will be subject to the investment plans to be elaborated in the project.

12) *Is there any preferred approach for the choice of the R&I domain e.g. regional smart specialisation vs European policy priority?*

In principle there are two possible and equally valid approaches for the definition of the R&I domain:

a) <u>Based on regional smart specialisation strategies (RIS3):</u> The consortium needs to identify a common denominator in the RIS3s of all placed based ecosystems involved and set-up the project around this topic. The reasoning behind needs to be explained in the proposal.

b) <u>Based on European policy priorities</u>: In this case the topic selection is based on EU policy priorities notably the green and digital transition. Consortia need not explain what particular aspect of these priorities they will address including the economic benefits.

It is of course also possible that these two approaches converge in a single project.

13) *Will SMEs be privileged in relation to large companies?*

The concept of ecosystems implies an adequate mix of large and small companies that may differ according to the chosen domain and business sector. Therefore, no preference for either type of company will be indicated. In any case SMEs are welcome and the call is SME friendly.

14) *What TRL levels are targeted by this call, is there a mandatory indication?*

The call does not prescribe a particular TRL level. According to the type of activities funded under this call we would expect that a range of TRL 3 to 7 would be appropriate for these funded actions.

15) *How shall we establish the required conceptual model for the nexus of collaborative links within the ecosystem?*

The functional relations within of each the placed based ecosystem and the interaction of main actors (collaborative and/or competitive relations) should be visualised in a graphical format and annotated by a short text. Alternatively, a verbal or tabular presentation will be accepted.

16) *How shall we define the research component and embed it in the overall work plan?*

The research component needs to be presented as a distinct work package broken down to meaningful tasks and sub-tasks in a similar manner like a traditional research and innovation project (RIA). Apart from a convincing work plan a clear reference and link to the R&I strategy needs to be included. The work package needs to clearly demonstrate that it will strengthen the link between science and business and its results will feed into a commercialisation and investment path.

17) *What kind of cost can be funded for the development of pilots and demonstrators?*

The procurement of major equipment, R&I infrastructure and construction cannot be funded by the projects. Nevertheless, a number of preparatory actions for the development of pilots and demonstrators can be covered. Without indicating a closed list we consider activities such as specification and pre-development of major equipment, pre-planning cost for infrastructures and feasibility studies eligible for funding under this call.

18) *How shall we develop the accompanying measures? Is it mandatory to address all options presented in the work programme?*

The types of accompanying actions as presented are as a kind of optional shopping list that needs to be customised to the scope of the project. Particular emphasis is paid to the development of human resources, transferable skills, brain circulation and entrepreneurship.

19) *How does this call relate to the broader initiative on ERA hubs?*

ERA Hubs is a new policy initiative proposed in the ERA Communication aimed at stimulating placed-based innovation and upskilling, intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity, as well as fostering a broader transnational cooperation through the mobilisation and empowerment of national, including regional and local R&I systems, networks and actors. More specifically, the ERA Hubs initiative aims at creating an overarching networking framework and platform of collaboration for knowledge ecosystem actors based on operational, programme and strategic considerations, such as smart specialisation strategies and international value chains.

At the time of call publication the ERA hub initiative will not yet be officially launched but we expect that results of projects under tis call will contribute to this initiative.