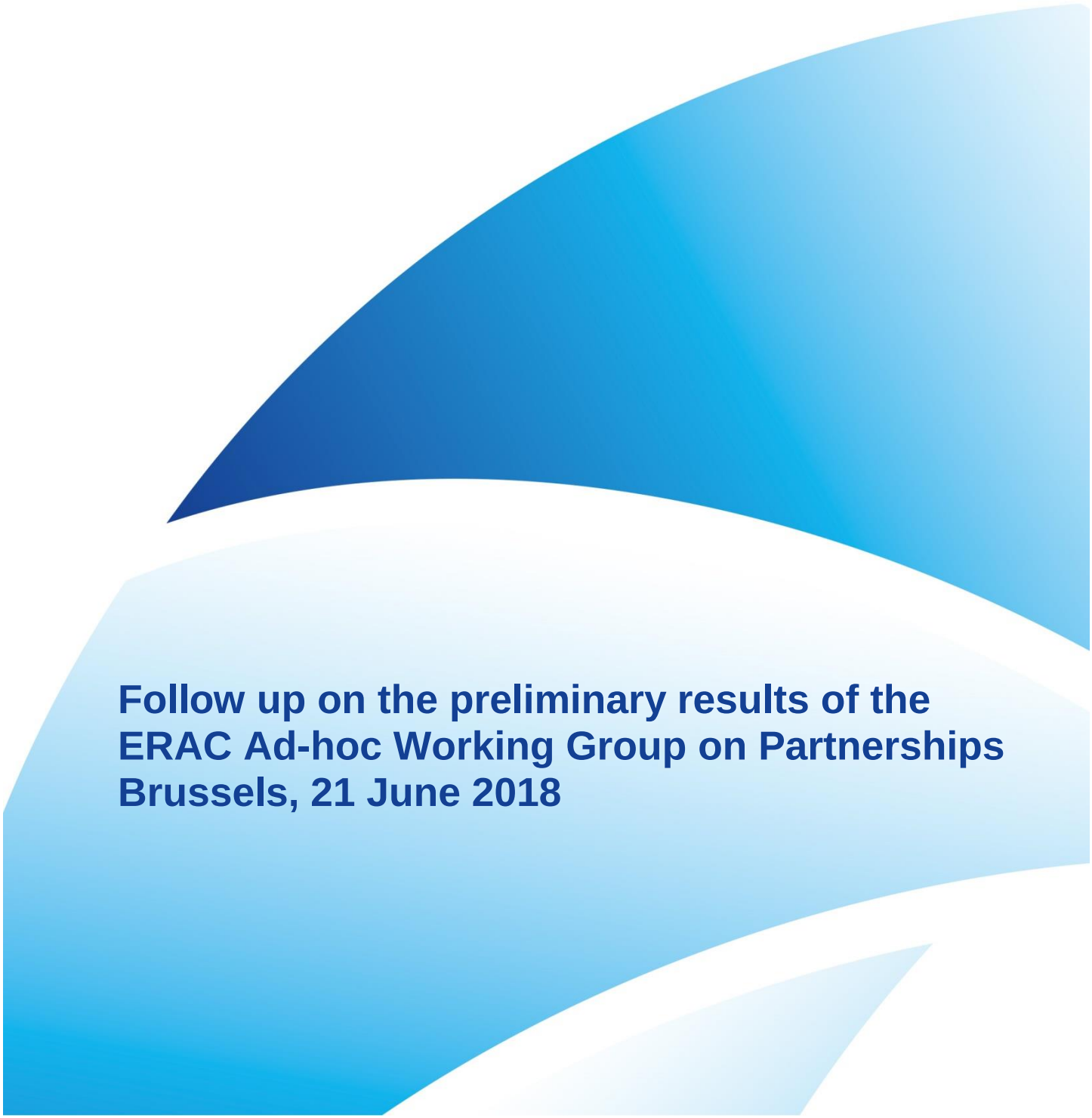
ERA LEARN

WORKSHOP REPORT

Workshop on Efficient Implementation of P2Ps



Follow up on the preliminary results of the ERAC Ad-hoc Working Group on Partnerships
Brussels, 21 June 2018

Notes of the Workshop

Background

The ERAC Ad-hoc Working Group on Partnerships has been established to contribute to the discussion on rationalising the R&I funding landscape. One area of interest is the "identification of measures to increase the efficiency of partnerships' implementation" and the preliminary conclusions of the Group (on that specific subject) were that:

- There is strong agreement that further centralisation of activities related to joint calls is desirable.
- Centralised data management is considered key in improving the efficiency of the implementation of P2P calls and resulting projects, with a strong support for full centralisation of all proposal and project related data. This includes the monitoring and evaluation of projects and their results and impacts.

Clearly there are a number of options for technical realisation of the above conclusions and so the workshop was organised to enable stakeholder discussion on different options, their feasibility and implications.

Organisation of the Workshop

The workshop involved over 70 stakeholders including representatives of the ERAC Working Group, Article 185 initiatives, funding agencies responsible for the implementation of P2P calls, ERA-LEARN and its Advisory Board, and the European Commission.

It commenced with a summary of the work and preliminary conclusions of the ERAC Ad-hoc Working Group. This included a desire to streamline the EU R&I partnership landscape and increase the efficiency of implementation.

Three main scenarios were then presented with respect to implications on call preparation/design; call implementation and evaluation; and from end of evaluation to final reporting and monitoring and evaluation of funded projects. These were:

1. ***Business as usual – decentralised at network/partnership level:*** Each network uses its own IT solutions for proposal submission, evaluation and monitoring with data transferred as necessary to satisfy national grant management systems.

2. ***(Semi-) centralised MS/AC IT system:*** Agreement between MS/AC on the development of a single, or small number of, standardised IT solution(s) for proposal submission and evaluation.

3. ***Centralised use of COM IT systems:*** Use of Commission IT tools for proposal submission and evaluation with appropriate transfer of data to satisfy national grant management systems.

This paper attempts to summarise the key issues that were highlighted during the open discussions and, from this, a comparative assessment of the three scenarios.

Key issues and challenges

The workshop stimulated wide-ranging discussion amongst the participants and highlighted a number of issues/challenges that need to be considered.

What is meant by centralisation: Several participants indicated that there had been some confusion about the use of the word 'centralisation' in the survey of stakeholders that was carried out to support the work of the ERAC group. It seems that there was a lack of clarity about whether it meant centralisation at the level of an individual network/partnership rather than the whole community of partnerships. The survey questionnaire was, of course, intended to secure stakeholder feedback on the latter.

Objectives of more centralised implementation: The title of the workshop, and the ERAC recommendation, implied that the objective was about efficiency. It was clear, however, that there are at least two other potential objectives of centralisation. One of these is about the important subject of providing high quality data/evidence for policy makers. The other is concerned with simplifying procedures for researchers in submitting proposals in response to P2P Calls and implementing their R&I projects. All of these were considered to be valid.

Lack of consensus on the preferred scenario: There was no clear conclusion from the meeting on which of the three potential scenarios were preferred. Representatives from the partnerships, in particular, clearly preferred the current decentralised approach due to the perceived lack of flexibility of using COM IT systems. In contrast, several countries indicated that they had a preference for Scenario 3 (i.e. using COM IT systems) - so long as it would be free of charge for the P2P networks and MS/AC. Whilst there was less support for Scenario 2, as presented, there were some who felt that variations of this might be the best overall solution; for example, distributed systems that are interfaced with the COM system. This led to an open question on the current situation regarding the number of different management models and IT systems that are being used for the implementation of P2P calls.

Access to centralised data: Most seemed to agree that access to centralised data on transnational R&I projects funded through partnerships is desirable. However, there were concerns expressed about the potential use of eCORDA. There would also need to be a unique identification system for beneficiaries (researchers) unless the Commission's PIC model was accepted by all. Several mentioned that the data on eCORDA is not open access to the national

funding agencies (although it seems that there are many informal ways to gain access) and so there were concerns expressed about the level of data that is needed, its granularity and access rights. Some concerns were also expressed about the management of beneficiary data, which is an issue that has intensified with the implementation of the GDPR.

Perceived lack of flexibility with a centralised implementation system: There were many concerns expressed about trying to create a 'one-size-fits-all' system for the implementation of P2Ps such as how to deal with specific criteria for the thematic area and/or the particular national systems. Other practical issues could be last minute changes of national participation. Whatever system is used there will be a need for customisation that is country or initiative-specific to avoid a very complex universal system. Some felt that a pilot would be a logical way forward to explore the feasibility.

Exchange of data with the different national systems: Strong views were expressed during the workshop about the risk of creating more bureaucracy and inefficiencies if partnerships are required to create interfaces with a central system as well as the diversity of national systems. The structural barriers to harmonisation of national systems is well known, but the reality for most partnerships is that the national funding rules are non-negotiable. It is, therefore, difficult to envisage a situation where the implementation of P2P calls could be centralised unless there are practical data exchange systems with each national funding organisation that address all legal and data protection issues. For example, some funding agencies keep all project data confidential whilst others put at least some information in the public domain. Again, it was felt that a pilot should be carried out to assess the feasibility of addressing these issues and achieving more efficient processes.

Motivation to provide data and/or have access to a centralised implementation system: Several of the participants considered that the P2P networks would need some motivation to either use, or contribute to, a central system that would support the implementation of joint calls. Whilst the benefits to the partnerships (or at least those with optimised implementation systems) remained unclear it was accepted that better access to data for national policy makers is an important objective.

Comparison of the scenarios

There are a number of ways to compare the three scenarios that were presented and discussed at the workshop. One way is to compare their relative strengths & weaknesses at different stages of joint call implementation. Another is to compare them with respect to the perceived objectives, or benefits, of centralisation. A third way is to consider their relative 'cost' and 'practicality' of setting up any new system before the start of Horizon Europe.

Comparison at different stages of implementation

The workshop included a discussion on issues at different stages of implementation including call preparation/design; implementation and evaluation; and from end of evaluation to final reporting and monitoring and evaluation of funded projects. A simple, generalised comparison for each stage is shown below.

Effectiveness of implementation	1	2	3
	Business as usual	(Semi-) centralised MS/AC IT system	Centralised use of COM IT systems
Call preparation/design	Customised activity	Customised activity	Customised activity
Call implementation and evaluation	Optimised for mature partnerships	Could be based on best P2P practice	Established submission & evaluation systems
From end of evaluation to final reporting	Optimised for mature partnerships	Could be based on best P2P practice	Established but complex system for monitoring project progress
monitoring and evaluation of funded projects	Weak area but improving	Could be based on best P2P practice	Established database for monitoring

The first step in the life cycle of a joint call is ***Call preparation and design***. This is an activity for the national/regional funding organisations within the partnership so would be difficult to centralise.

The second step (***Call implementation and evaluation***) is where there is clearly scope to utilise the Commission infrastructure rather than have a variety of distributed systems. How this would actually work in practice is less clear as it would presumably require the direct involvement of staff from the Commission and/or the Agencies. The mature networks have highly optimised processes, which have been refined over multiple calls, and so will be resistant to change. They would probably argue that using the Commission infrastructure could be less efficient in their case except on a selective basis (e.g. access to the database of evaluators, use of the PIC system). This could, however, be an attractive option for new partnerships. The work of ERA-LEARN has helped to spread good practice and so it could be more practical to envisage some kind of semi-centralised system.

The third step, ***from end of evaluation to final reporting***, is where there is less doubt about the added value of a centralised database. For example, ERA-LEARN has recently demonstrated that the national visibility of co-funded transnational projects is quite limited. The obvious solution is to utilise the eCORDA database but there were many concerns expressed about this ranging from lack of flexibility to access rights.

The final step is ***monitoring and evaluation of funded projects*** after completion***.*** This has traditionally been an area of weakness, particularly for those partnerships that had a short life cycle (e.g. FP6 and FP7 ERA-NETs), but the situation has been improving. ERA-LEARN has helped by preparing guidance material and is exploring a centralised approach to gather feedback from project beneficiaries after the end of the project.

Comparison by objectives

The workshop indicated that the best solution should consider three overall objectives rather than just 'efficient implementation'. A simple comparison of these (generalisations) is shown below.

Fit with Objectives	1	2	3
	Business as usual	(Semi-) centralised MS/AC IT system	Centralised use of COM IT systems
Efficiency of implementation	Medium	High	Medium
High quality data/evidence for policy	Low	High	High
User friendly for researchers	Medium	High	Medium

As far as ***efficiency of implementation*** is concerned, the best solution could be a semi-centralised MS/AC system. The more mature networks, however, would probably disagree as they have spent many years optimising their implementation systems.

Less controversial, would be to conclude that centralised systems are better in terms of providing ***high quality data/evidence for policy makers***.

The question of their relative merits in terms of being ***user friendly for researchers*** is also open to debate but the semi-centralised MS/AC IT system would probably be best as it is likely to be less onerous than the COM system. On the other hand, researchers are unlikely to be engaging with multiple partnerships and so the different decentralised partnership models may not be an issue for them. A lot depends on prior experience of the researchers. Some will be familiar with the COM system (i.e. H2020, FP7), others may only have experience of their national system. The negative feedback in the survey seemed to be related to double submission/reporting (due to the different national systems/rules) and neither of the two centralised options would address this fundamental issue.

Comparison by cost and practicality

The other main factors, to assess the relative merits of each option, is to consider their relative cost and practicality in terms of having the infrastructure in place by the start of Horizon Europe (i.e. 1/1/21). Again, this is highly subjective but an indicative comparison is given below.

Cost and Practicality	1	2	3
	Business as usual	(Semi-) centralised MS/AC IT system	Centralised use of COM IT systems
Cost to MS/AC	Medium	High	Low
Cost to EU/Commission	Medium	Low	High
Degree of difficulty for 2021	Low	High (unless)	Possible

For the ***Member and Associated States***, there would clearly be set-up costs for a semi-centralised MS/AC system and it is difficult to judge if there would be operational cost savings, or not. The expectation from the workshop was that the ***Commission*** would not seek to make a charge for use of COM IT systems under Option 3 and so would need to commit significant resource for both set-up and operational activities.

As far as ***degree of difficulty for 2021*** operations is concerned, the worst case would appear to be Option 2 if a totally new platform needs to be developed. Some at the workshop felt, however, that a variation of this Option could be practical.

Open questions

The workshop stimulated an excellent discussion on the subject of centralisation but concluded with more questions than answers. The following open questions, therefore, need to be explored before any informed decisions can be taken:

1. How many different implementation models are used by the partnerships and is there a dominant one that could be the basis for a (semi-) centralised MS/AC system?

2. What are the practical processes that would be needed to utilise the Commission infrastructure for joint call implementation and evaluation?
3. Could the eCORDA system be used selectively to provide a higher level of centralisation and visibility and, if so, what is the essential level of data (granularity) that is needed?
4. How feasible would it be to implement automated data exchange systems considering the huge differences between national systems?
5. Are any partnerships already utilising the Commission infrastructure to implement joint calls – if so, what is the experience?

As mentioned above, it would seem wise to further explore the technical and economic feasibility of Options 2 and 3 before a clear decision can be made on these, or potential hybrid options.