



Brussels, 17 February 2020  
(OR. en)

5798/20

RECH 22  
COMPET 28

**NOTE**

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From: Presidency

To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

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Subject: *Preparation of the Competitiveness Council on 27-28 February 2020*  
Strategic approach to international cooperation in R&I  
- *Policy debate*

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Delegations will find attached a Presidency note on "Strategic approach to international cooperation in R&I" with a view to the policy debate at the Competitiveness Council on 28 February 2020.

**Strategic approach to international cooperation in research and innovation**

Science is of crucial importance for our future prosperity. Progress in many areas – from limiting the effects of climate change to improving health of our citizens or ensuring respect of democratic values – will depend on advances in research and innovation.

With one third of world's scientific publications, Europe is still one of the best performing systems in the world. However, its competitive position is challenged by the growing influence of its main global competitors. In addition, the Union faces internal challenges as well. One of the largest and strongest national research systems in Europe just left the EU and the Union is about to determine its future relationship with the UK.

This demanding context should be taken into account when defining the strategic approach of the EU to future international cooperation in research and innovation.

International cooperation in R&I has been an important aspect of the EU's external strategy. The Treaty establishing the European Union lists the “promotion of cooperation in research, technological development and demonstration with third countries and international organisations” as one of the core activities the Union shall carry out in reaching the objective of strengthening its scientific and technological bases. International cooperation should facilitate participation in joint actions, enable mutual access to excellence and research resources and allow the co-creation of sustainable solutions to global challenges, as embodied in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while at the same time ensuring that such cooperation serves the EU's long-term interests. Such collaboration also needs to be assessed against the current EU's priorities, such as the European Green Deal and making Europe fit for the digital age.

International cooperation should not only allow countries to achieve common goals and derive mutual benefits, but also facilitate the further development and implementation of the international dimension of the European Research Area (ERA). As such, international cooperation supports the systematic sharing and structuring of information, pooling of relevant knowledge and enabling free movement of researchers. Many third countries have long-standing and strong collaborative R&I links with the EU, and are involved in the implementation of the ERA since its inception. Their integration in the EU economy, as well as their geographic proximity, provide positive spill-over effects on EU economic growth. Existing strong scientific networks and connections are, thus, important.

One of the most important tools of the Union for international cooperation is its framework programme for research and innovation. International cooperation was fully mainstreamed with FP7, strengthened in actions under Horizon 2020 by opening them even more to international partners, and further prioritized in Horizon Europe proposal. In practice, however, international collaborations in Horizon 2020 have fallen when compared to FP7, which calls for a careful look at lessons learned for future implementation. These show room for improvement in attracting the world's best universities, e.g. by modifying the model grant agreement, simplifying administrative procedures, introducing topics of more relevance for international cooperation or maximising collaboration in areas of mutual strategic interest, as already requested by some third countries.

Close and meaningful collaboration with international partners needs to be based on solid criteria, which might vary from their relationship with the EU, their R&I capacity, rules-based open market economy, including intellectual property rights, or promotion of policies to improve the economic and social well-being of citizens.

Along those lines, international cooperation in R&I takes into account different factors and might differ depending on the countries to cooperate with, existing frameworks and issues to be addressed. Openness is an important dimension in this regard but some conditions might need to be put in place to safeguard Union's interests. While researchers themselves are often the voice defending openness and the unifying force of science, they also raise concerns over risks of opening up.

Considering all said above, the Presidency believes it is very timely to hold the debate on the strategic approach the EU should have towards international cooperation in R&I. Against the above setting, the ministers are asked to elaborate on the following questions:

1. *In light of the advantages of international cooperation in R&I, how should the benefits of R&I cooperation be balanced against safeguarding Union's interests? In which cases should cooperation with specific entities be restricted?*
  2. *How can the EU ensure best mechanisms of attracting talents from outside the EU, while retaining its own talent pool?*
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