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MONTAN UNIVERSITÄT LEOBEN

Competitive Proposals: Evaluation, Excellence & Impact

From Heritage to Horizon

Successful research proposal writing

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1. How evaluators read a proposal

3 criteria (Excellence, Impact, Implementation)

A common reading pattern is:

1. **Call Topic**
   - What exactly is the Commission asking for?
   - What are the expected outcomes?
   - What is the expected impact?
2. **Abstract**
   - Do I immediately understand what the project does?
3. **Excellence**
   - Is the idea original?
   - Does it clearly address the challenge?
4. **Impact**
   - Why does the project matter?
   - Will anything actually change?
5. **Implementation**
   - How will the project be carried out? Can this consortium deliver?

Central question:

"Does this proposal convincingly solve the problem described in the call?"

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2. What makes a competitive proposal?

1. Direct response to the call

Many proposals discuss interesting science without explicitly responding to every sentence of the topic description. Excellent proposals "mirror" the call.

For example, if the call asks for • citizen engagement • social innovation • digital tools • policy uptake

each should appear explicitly as a project objective, work package, deliverable or outcome. Evaluators should never need to infer the connection.

2. Crystal-clear problem definition

Weak proposal statement: “Climate change threatens cultural heritage.”

Strong proposal statement: *“Existing climate adaptation methods for stone heritage focus predominantly on technical* conservation while neglecting societal legitimacy, citizen participation, and long-term governance, limiting implementation *across European regions.”*

Immediately, the evaluator understands: **the gap / why it matters / why Europe should fund it**

3. Logical flow

Good proposals = a chain of reasoning

Challenge -> knowledge gap -> research questions -> objectives -> methods -> results -> outcomes -> impact

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- HORIZON-MISS-2026-01-CLIMA-05 "**Demonstrating solutions to protect and preserve cultural heritage from the impacts of climate change**“

Expected Outcome:

In line with the EU Adaptation Strategy and the objectives of the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change, successful proposals will support the **preservation of cultural heritage** (moveable, immoveable and natural with cultural significance) under a **changing climate**. Project results are expected to contribute to all the following outcomes:

- **Innovative solutions for protecting and preserving cultural heritage from the impacts of climate change** have been demonstrated and are made widely available for upscaling and deployment across the European Union and beyond. This includes **nature-based solutions**.
- **Regional and local authorities hosting cultural heritage are better prepared** to preserve it under a changing climate.
- **Relevant stakeholders** - including heritage scientists and managers, climate scientists, regional and local policymakers, civil society and representatives from the tourism industry - have **co-created** and put in place **climate-resilient solutions**. **Citizens and local communities** have also been engaged in the process.

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Solutions sought:

Proposals should identify, test and demonstrate innovative solutions to protect and preserve cultural heritage from the impacts of climate change and identify possible trade-offs and co-benefits.

The solutions may address different aspects of heritage protection and preservation such as, but not limited to, **innovative environmental assessment methodologies, monitoring technologies and systems, (green) conservation and restoration techniques, risk management and disaster prevention**, etc.
All of the following aspects should be considered:

- The **solutions are expected to be co-designed** by all the relevant stakeholders and to engage citizens.
- When relevant, **nature-based solutions** should be explored as a priority
- The solutions should consider the potential interactions and compound effects of **different hazards**.
- Careful consideration is necessary to **avoid maladaptation**.
- This topic requires the effective **contribution of SSH disciplines** and the involvement of SSH experts, institutions as well as the inclusion of relevant SSH expertise, in order to produce meaningful and significant effects **enhancing the societal impact of the related research activities**.

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Proposal statements:

A

"The project aims to develop innovative AI-based monitoring technologies to assess climate-related damage to cultural heritage sites and improve their protection through advanced conservation and restoration methods. The proposed technologies will be tested at selected pilot sites to demonstrate their effectiveness in preserving heritage under changing climatic conditions."

Technology-led, narrow in focus
-> weak

B

"The project will co-design, test and demonstrate integrated, climate-resilient solutions for the protection and adaptive management of cultural heritage, combining advanced environmental monitoring, risk assessment and conservation technologies with nature-based approaches where appropriate, local and scientific knowledge, and participatory governance. Across diverse heritage contexts, it will assess the compound effects of climate hazards, evaluate trade-offs and co-benefits for heritage, ecosystems and communities, and develop practical safeguards against maladaptation. By embedding SSH expertise and engaging heritage professionals, public authorities and local communities throughout the research and demonstration process, the project will deliver validated, socially legitimate and transferable adaptation strategies that strengthen long-term heritage resilience and inform policy and practice."

Integrated, transdisciplinary, impact-oriented
-> strong

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3. The Excellence section

This section answers: "Is this the best possible project?"

Elements: **Objectives / Ambition / Methodology**

1. Objectives
(goals)
What is the project trying to achieve overall?

- pertinent
- measurable
- achievable

Poor objective:
"Improve heritage protection."
Strong objective:
"Develop and validate a participatory socio-technical framework integrating AI-supported monitoring, citizen science and governance mechanisms for climate adaptation of stone heritage across three European pilot regions."

2. Ambition
How is the project ambitious and goes beyond the state of the art?
Novelty of approaches, methods, tools, products, theories, etc.
Technology Readiness Level (TRL) – for IA (Innovation Actions)

Not: "We use AI."
Instead:

- new methodology
- new datasets
- new integration
- new interdisciplinary approach
- new governance model
- new theory
- first European comparison

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3. Methodology

This is where many proposals lose points.

Evaluators ask:

Is this methodology **coherent, justified, feasible?**

A good methodology includes:
- conceptual framework
- methods
- data collection
- analysis
- stakeholder engagement
- open science
- ethics
- risks

- Describe the concepts, models, assumptions underpinning the work.
- What are the challenges and how to overcome them?
- How will the methodology enable you to deliver the project's objectives?
- Describe relevant national or international research and innovation activities and links to the project
- Interdisciplinarity: integrate expertise and methods from different disciplines
- SSH integration: social sciences and humanities (where relevant)
- Gender dimension
- Open Science practices

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4. The Impact section

Evaluators ask: Why should Europe invest millions in this?

Not only: What will you produce? Instead: **What changes because of your project?**

Impact pathways (pathways to impact)

Impact – aspects to be taken into account.

- Credibility of the pathways to achieve the expected outcomes and impacts specified in the work programme.
- Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities.

The results of your project should make a contribution to the expected outcomes set out for the work programme *topic over the medium term, and to the wider expected impacts set out in the 'destination' over the longer term.*

Outputs – Outcomes - Impact

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Outputs (Results)

Produced directly.
Examples: datasets / software / framework / toolbox / training materials / publications

Outcomes

The changes during or shortly after the project.
Examples: stakeholders adopt methods / policy makers use evidence / companies test technology / citizens participate / researchers collaborate

Impact

Long-term societal change.
Examples: greater climate resilience / better heritage protection / new standards / green transition / regional development / policy change

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Project pathways towards impact

- Provide a **narrative** explaining how the project's results are expected to make a difference in terms of impact, **beyond the immediate scope and duration of the project**.
  - Describe the unique contribution of project results towards (1) the outcomes specified in this topic, and (2) the wider impacts, in the longer term, specified in the respective destinations in the work programme.
  - State the target groups that would benefit.
  - Describe requirements and potential barriers - arising from factors beyond the scope and duration of the project - that may determine whether the desired outcomes and impacts are achieved.

Measures to maximise impact → Dissemination, exploitation and communication

- First version of plan for the dissemination and exploitation including communication activities.
- Describe dissemination, exploitation and communication measures and target groups (who will use the results)
- Outline your strategy for the management of intellectual property, foreseen protection measures, such as patents, design rights, copyright, trade secrets, etc., and how these would be used to support exploitation.

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- 3 **Key Impact Pathways** (KIPs):

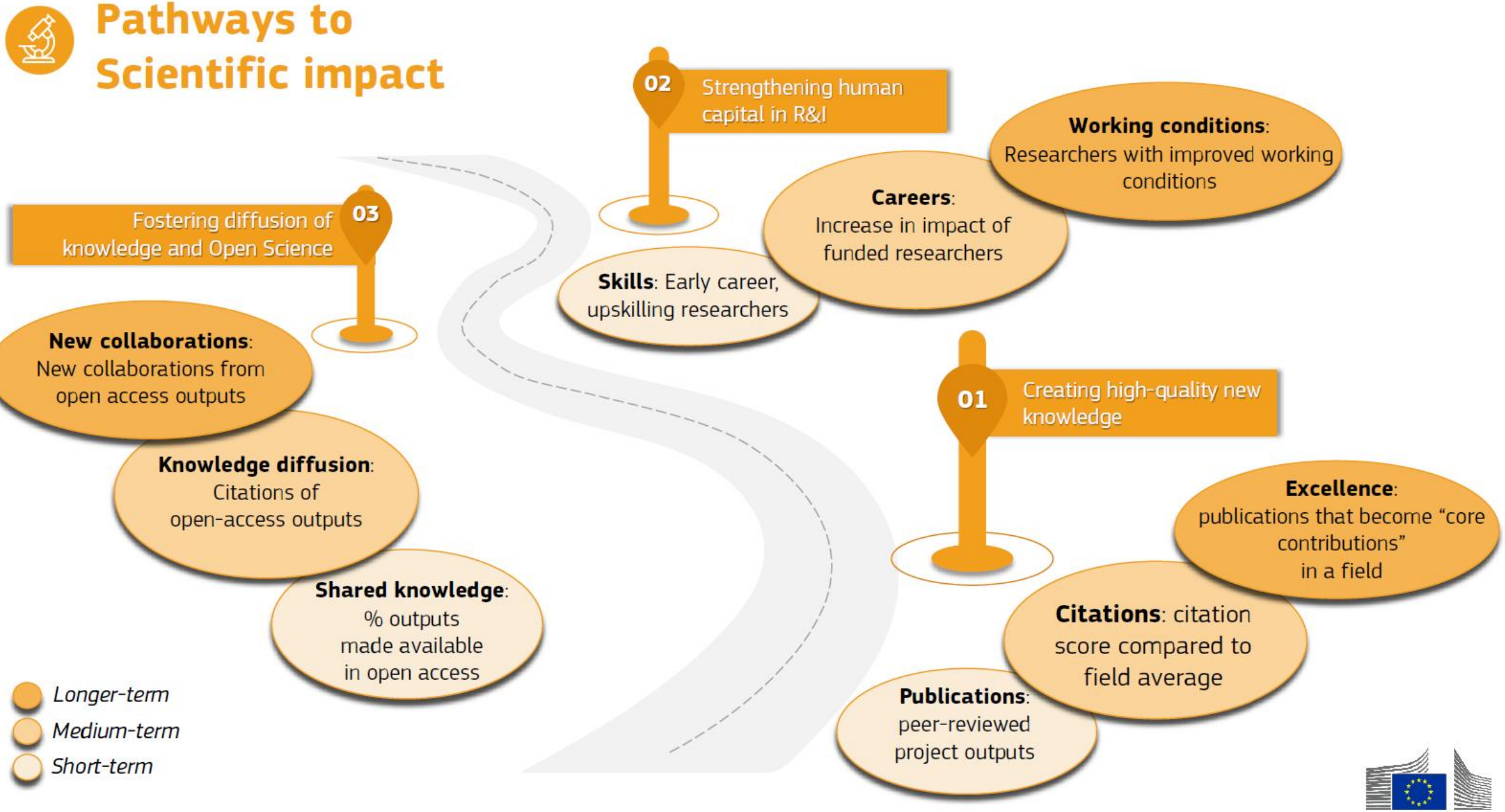
1. **Scientific Impact**: (1) Creating high-quality new knowledge; (2) Strengthening human capital in research and innovation; (3) Fostering diffusion of knowledge and Open source.

2. **Societal Impact**: (4) Addressing EU policy priorities and global challenges through research and innovation; (5) Delivering benefits and impact through research and innovation missions; (6) Strengthening the uptake of research and innovation in society; and

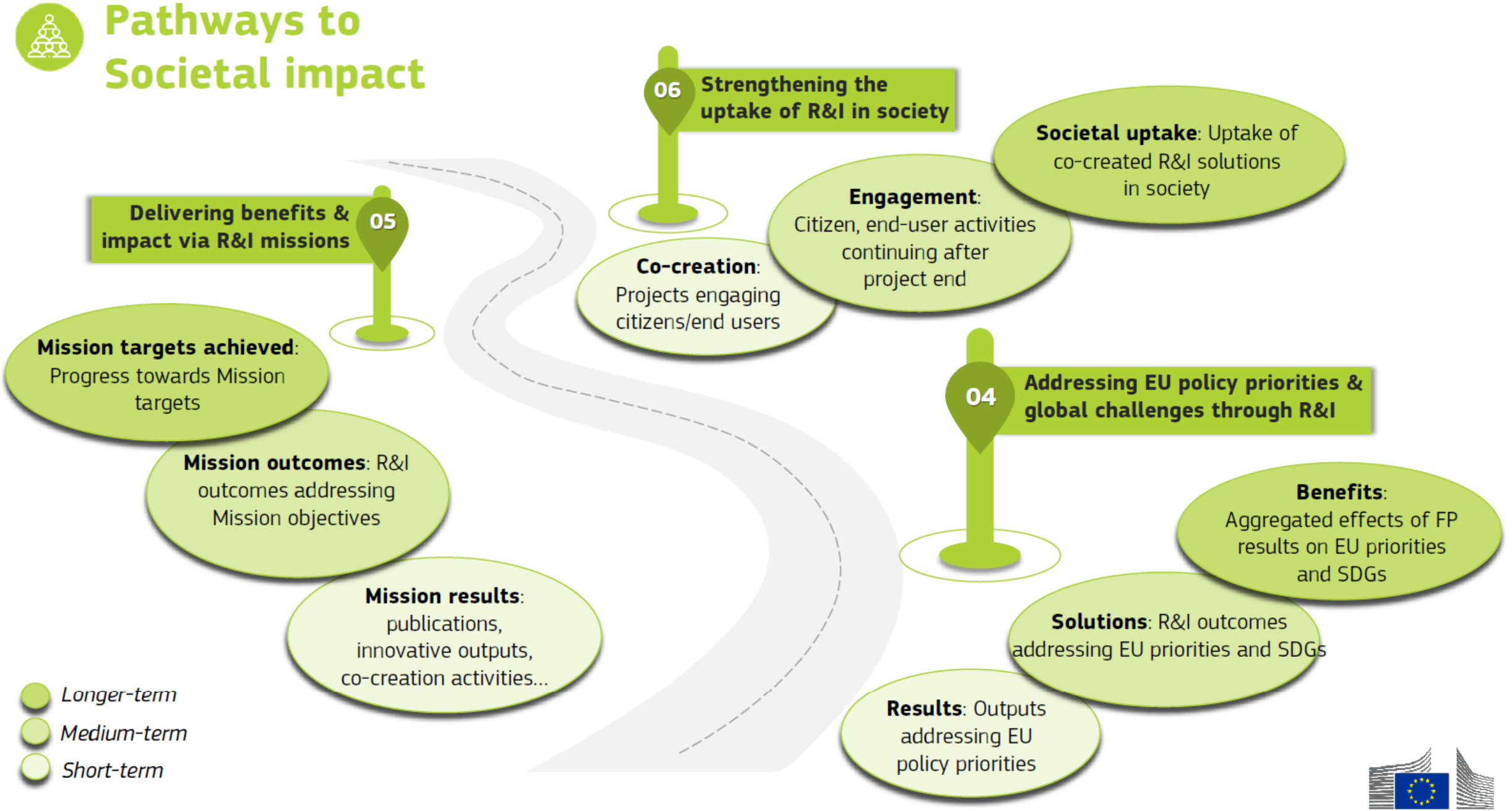
3. **Economic / Technological Impact**: (7) Generating innovation-based growth; (8) Creating more and better jobs; and (9) Leveraging investments in research and innovation.

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Pathways to Scientific impact



Pathways to Societal impact



Pathways to Economic/ Technological impact

09 Leveraging investments in R&I

Co-investment: Public and private investment mobilised

Scaling-up: Additional public or private financing collected by beneficiaries

Contribution to 3% target: Contribution to MS' progress toward 3% GDP spending in R&D

08 Creating more and better jobs

Total employment: Direct and indirect job creation in the EU economy

Sustained employment: Causal Increase in jobs in supported organisations

Supported employment: Jobs created and maintained in participating entities

07 Generating innovation-based growth

Economic growth: Growth of companies developing FP innovations

Innovations: Patented inventions, new firms created

Innovative results: products, processes, IPR applications...

Longer-term

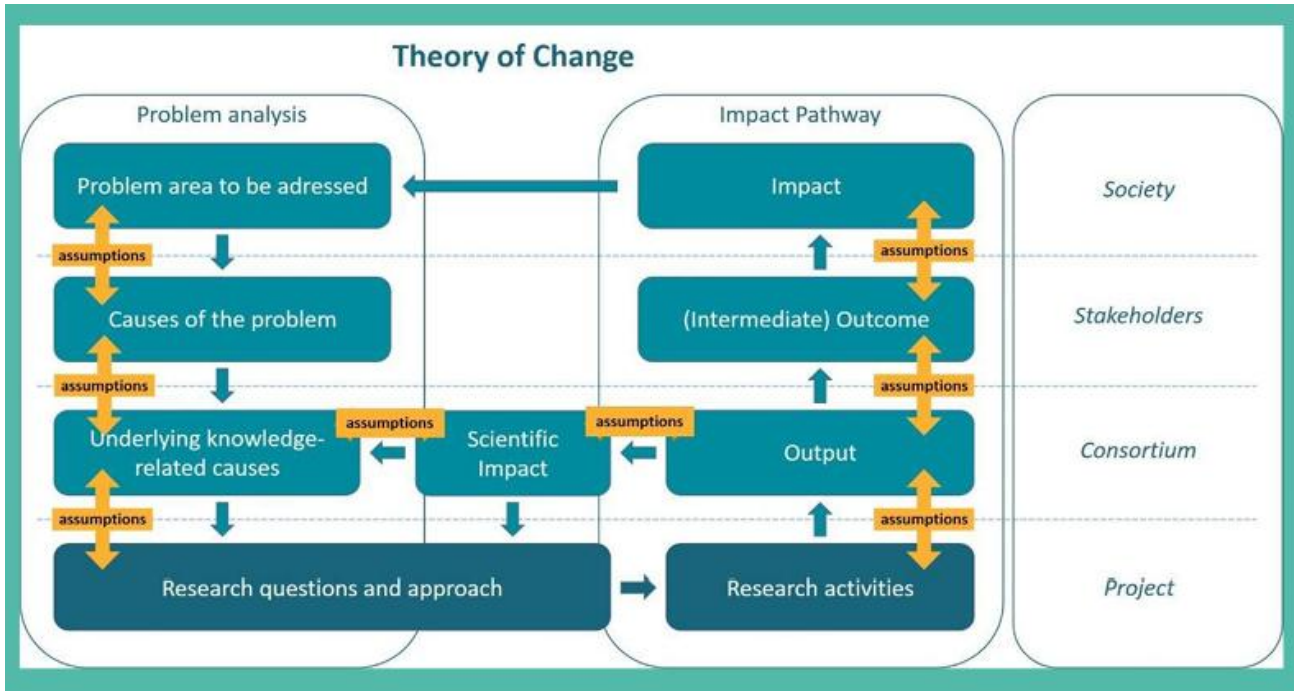
Medium-term

Short-term

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Using **Theory of Change** (ToC) in the impact section:

- A theory of change maps how your proposed activities produce **outputs**, lead to **outcomes**, and eventually generate sustainable **societal impacts**.
- Helps evaluators understand the journey from objectives to real-world change.
- **Step-by-step:**



1. Identify problem
2. Discuss causes
3. Identify knowledge gaps
   - ➢ Informs methodology & work plan
   - ➢ Research activities
4. Outputs (results)
5. Outcomes
6. Impact

ToC makes explicit how **the research activities will lead to results (output)** and how the exchange of knowledge and the uptake of research output will contribute to desired changes in behaviour, relationships, actions and **activities of partners and stakeholders (outcome)** that are considered essential to achieving the **desired impact**.

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- **Problem**: Cultural heritage is increasingly exposed to climate risks, while existing protection and adaptation approaches may not adequately integrate material vulnerability, local environmental conditions, heritage values, community needs and long-term adaptation risks.

- **Causes**: Compound hazards, limited risk data, gaps in monitoring, fragmented governance, competing heritage values and insufficient stakeholder involvement.

- **Knowledge Gaps**: What protection solutions work? How can technical performance, social acceptance, environmental co-benefits and maladaptation risks be assessed together? How do public perceptions and competing interests influence the acceptability and implementation of climate adaptation measures?

- -> informs **methodology & work plan**: Co-design, climate-risk assessment, technological testing, stakeholder research, comparative pilot demonstrations and evaluation.

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Outputs (tangible products/results of research activities):

Validated technologies, risk assessments, decision-support tools, adaptation guidelines, participatory governance methods.

Outcomes (changes in knowledge, capacities, decisions, behaviours that occur when target groups use the outputs):

Heritage managers and public authorities adopt improved assessment and adaptation practices; communities participate in decisions; maladaptation risks are better managed.

Impact (the wider, longer-term changes to which the project contributes):

Cultural heritage becomes more resilient to climate change, with adaptation that supports sustainable heritage management and delivers societal and environmental benefits. Community input influences adaptation plans and decisions, including perspectives of underrepresented groups. Organisations incorporate validated methods or recommendations into management plans, adaptation strategies or operational procedures.

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5. How to maximise scores

Common weaknesses

- Objectives that are too broad or vague.
- Work packages that do not clearly support the objectives.
- Weak links between outputs and expected impacts.
- Ambition that is asserted rather than demonstrated.
- Excessive emphasis on dissemination instead of exploitation and uptake.
- Generic stakeholder engagement without defined roles or influence.
- Insufficient consideration of risks, ethics, or gender where relevant.
- Poor integration between disciplines, with partners working in parallel rather than collaboratively.
- Limited evidence that the consortium has the capacity and complementary expertise to deliver.

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How to maximise scores

For **Excellence**, ensure that:

- Every objective directly addresses the call.
- The knowledge gap and innovation are explicit.
- The methodology is coherent, justified, and reproducible.
- Interdisciplinary integration is genuine.
- Scientific and technical risks are acknowledged with mitigation measures.

For **Impact**, demonstrate:

- A clear pathway from outputs to outcomes and long-term impacts.
- Specific target users and adoption mechanisms.
- Concrete exploitation, dissemination, communication, and sustainability plans.
- Strong alignment with relevant EU policies and strategic priorities.
- Quantifiable indicators wherever possible (e.g., number of trained stakeholders, policy briefs adopted, pilot sites implementing solutions).

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The "evaluator's checklist“

	Question	Why it matters
1	Is the problem important and clearly evidenced?	Shows relevance.
2	Does the project address every element of the call?	Demonstrates fit.
3	Is the innovation convincing and beyond the state of the art?	Supports excellence.
4	Are the objectives specific, measurable, and achievable?	Builds confidence in delivery.
5	Is the methodology appropriate and well justified?	Shows scientific robustness.
6	Does the consortium have the right expertise and roles?	Supports implementation credibility.
7	Is there a credible pathway from results to societal and economic impact?	Supports the impact criterion.
8	Will the project's benefits continue beyond EU funding?	Demonstrates sustainability.

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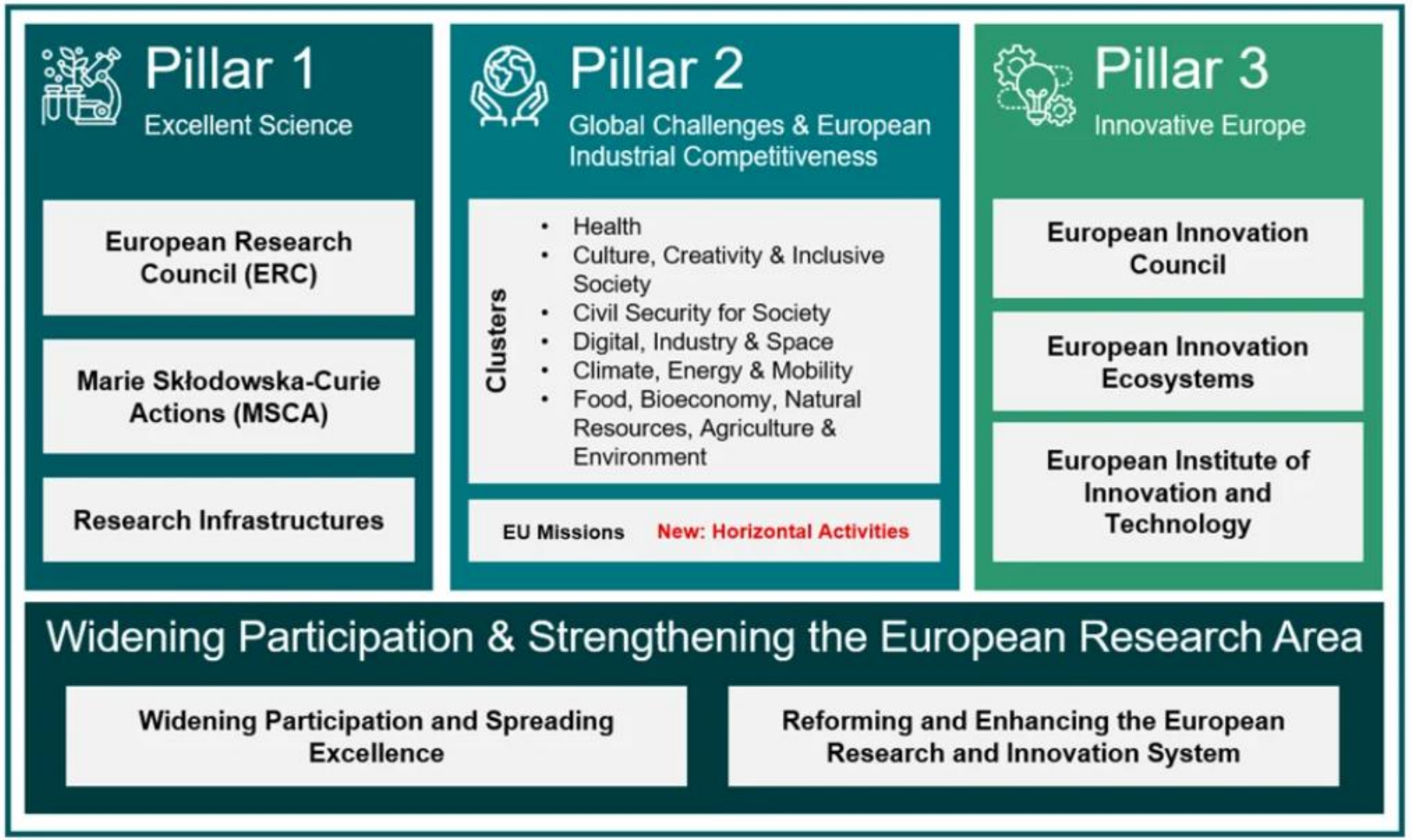
- **Applying this to WIDERA proposals:**

- For Widening calls, evaluators also look for more than excellent science. They expect convincing evidence of **capacity building, institutional transformation, knowledge transfer, and long-term integration into the European Research Area (ERA)**. Competitive WIDERA proposals explain not only what research will be done, but also how participating institutions will strengthen their **research excellence, international networks, management capacity, and strategic positioning** after the project ends. These **structural changes** should be treated as core project outcomes, not secondary benefits.

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6. Horizon Europe 2026/27 Work Programme Priorities



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