

Evaluation Processes – Insights and challenges

Tour de capitales

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Outline

- Application of ex-aequo ranking criteria
- Use of Artificial Intelligence in proposal preparation and evaluation
- Oversubscription trends



Application of Ex-aequo Ranking Criteria

Proposals with the same score are ranked with the criteria announced in the Work Programme (General Annexes):

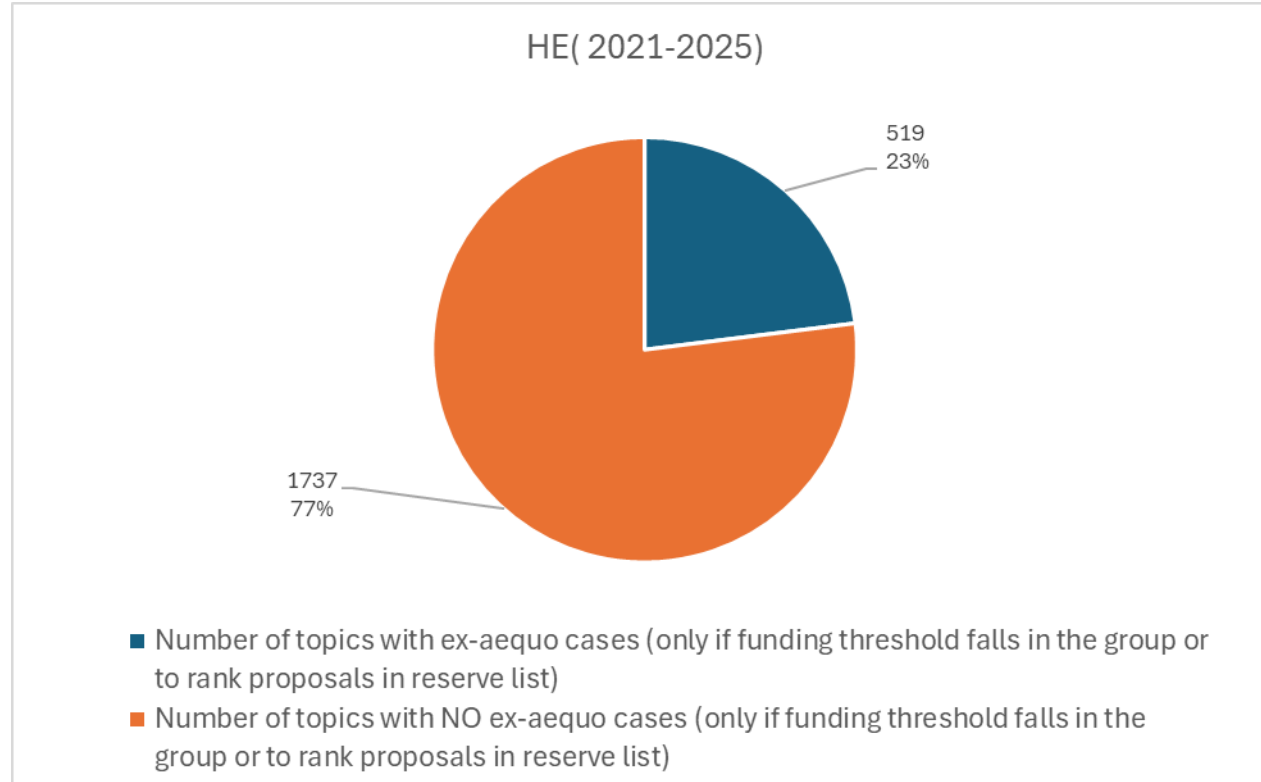
1. Proposals that address **aspects of the call** that have not otherwise been covered by more highly ranked proposals will be considered to have the highest priority.
2. The proposals identified under 1., if any, will themselves be prioritised according to the **scores** they have been awarded for 'Excellence'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on scores for 'Impact'. In the case of 'Innovation actions', priority will be given to the score for 'Impact', followed by that for 'Excellence'.
3. If necessary, the **gender balance** among the researchers with a leading role named in the researchers table in the proposal, will be used as a factor for prioritisation.
4. If necessary, any further prioritisation will be based on **geographical diversity**, defined as the number of Member States or Associated Countries represented in the proposal, not otherwise receiving funds from projects higher up the ranking list (and if equal in number, then by budget).
5. If a distinction still cannot be made, the panel may decide to further prioritise by considering **other factors**.

Ex-aequo criteria play a critical role in funding decisions in two specific scenarios:

- To rank the group of proposals where the funding threshold lies, and
- to rank proposals on the reserve list.



Frequency of Ex-aequo Criteria Application

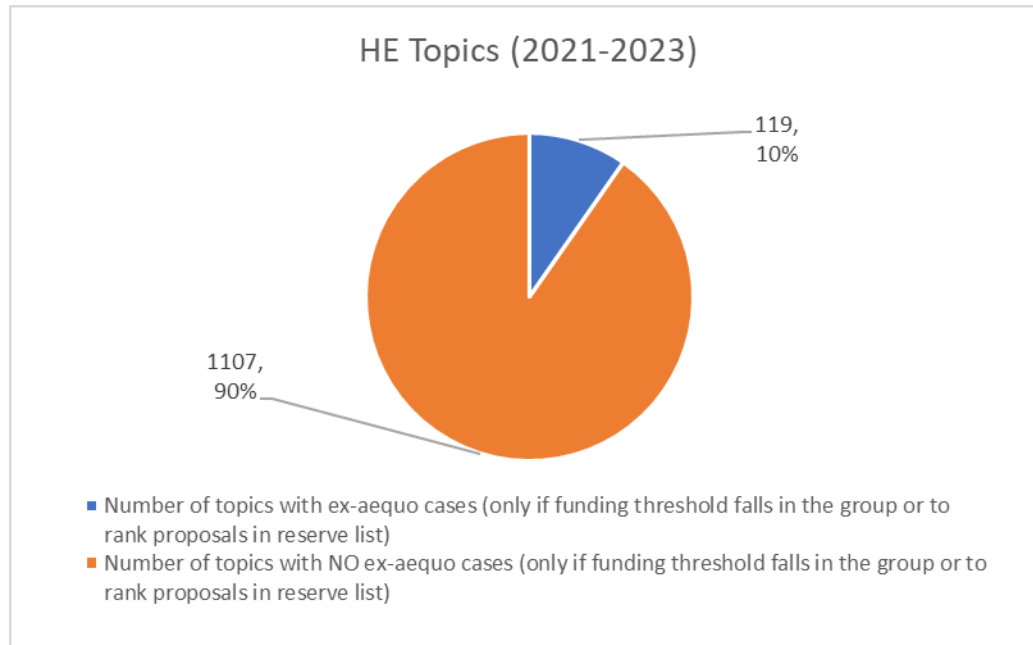


The ex-aequo criteria were applied in 23% of the topics (519 from a total of 2256 topics)

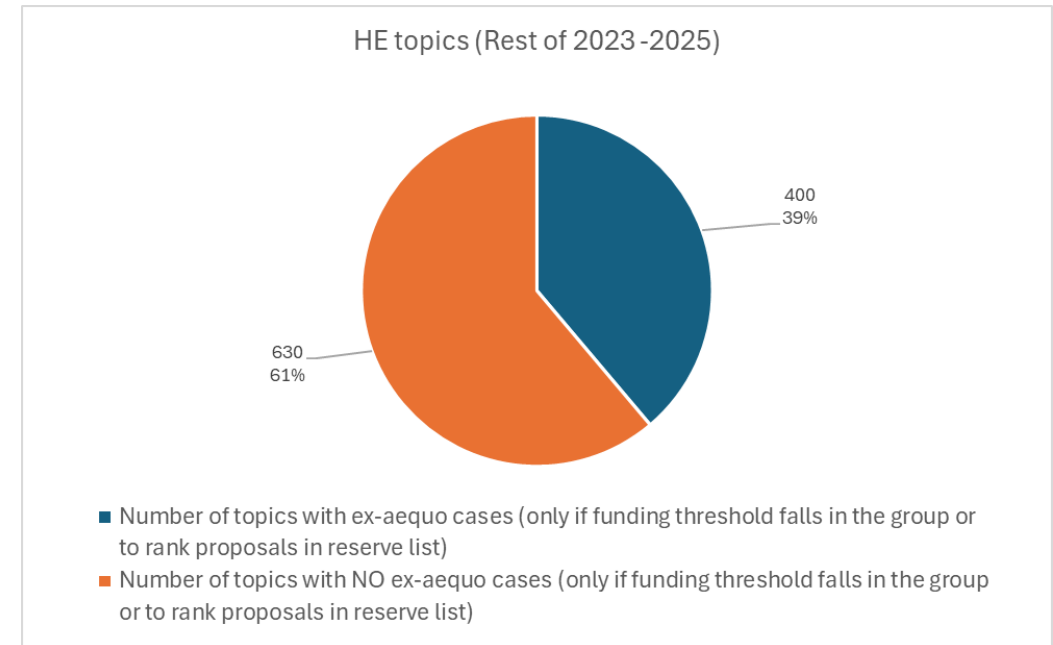
(*) The analysis counts only the use of the ex-aequo criteria in the two scenarios mentioned (to rank the group of proposals where the funding threshold lies and to rank reserve proposals) and includes all HE topics evaluated between 2021 and 2025, with the exception of MSCA, Widening, ERC and EIC topics (because different use of ex-aequo criteria, or no use).



Frequency of Ex-aequo Criteria Application (time perspective)



- The ex-aequo criteria were applied in 10% of the topics (119 from a total of 1226 topics)

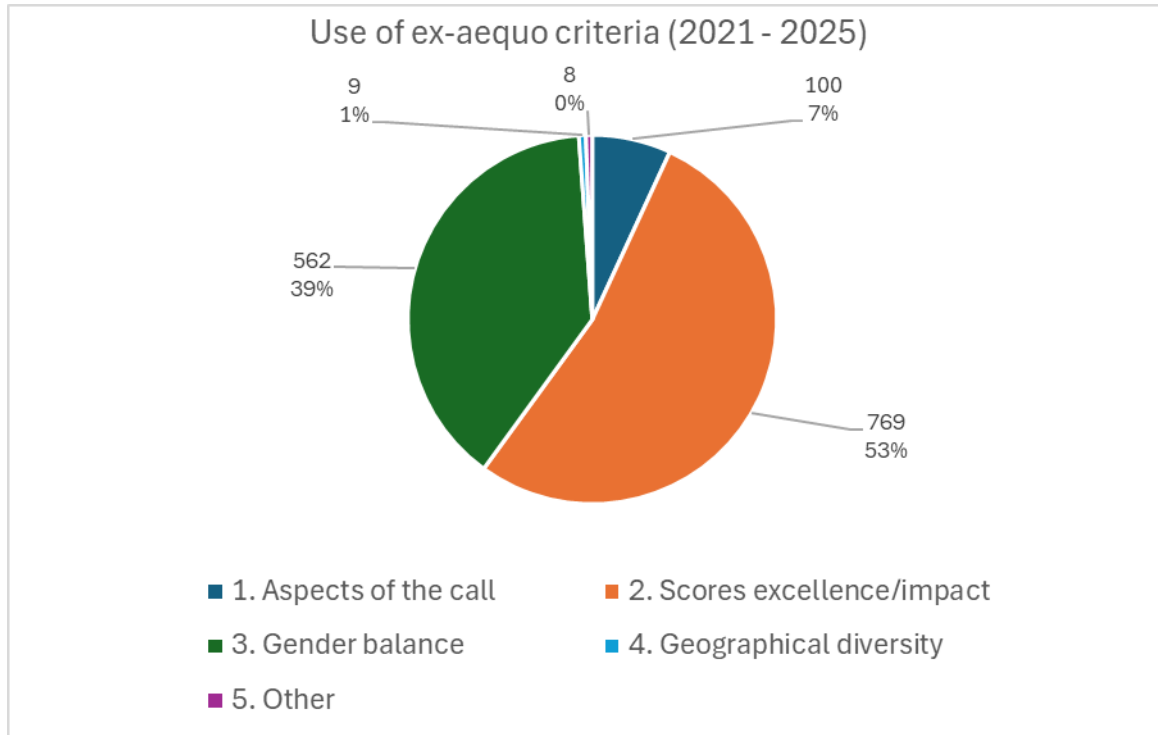


- The ex-aequo criteria were applied in 39% of the topics (400 from a total of 1030 topics)

The notable increase in the use of ex-aequo criteria in recent years is likely attributed to the significant rise in the number of proposals submitted. The growing volume of proposals has probably led to a greater need for ex-aequo criteria to be applied.



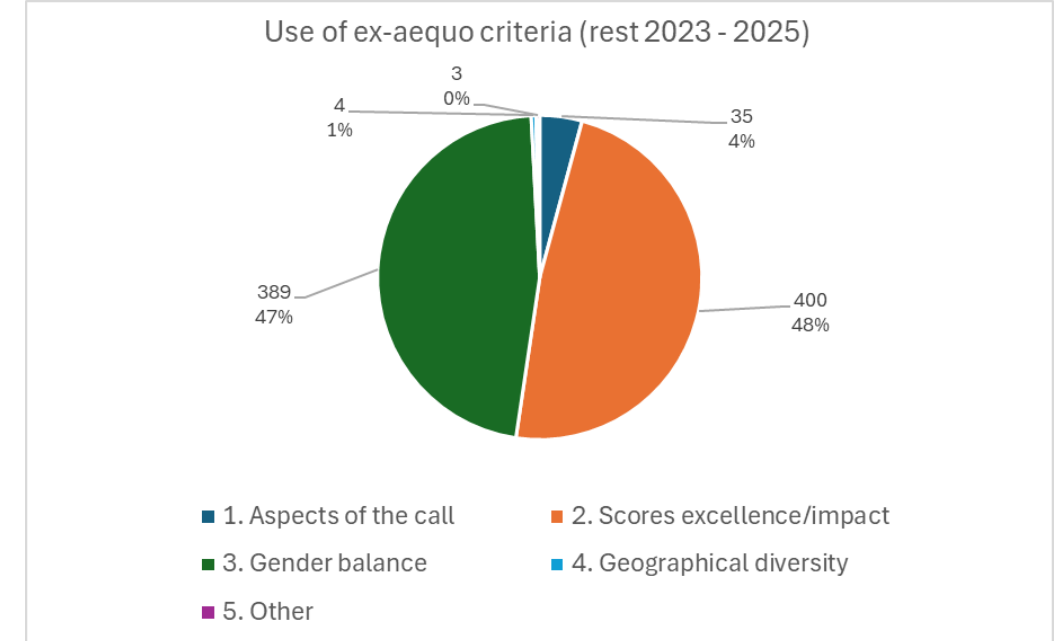
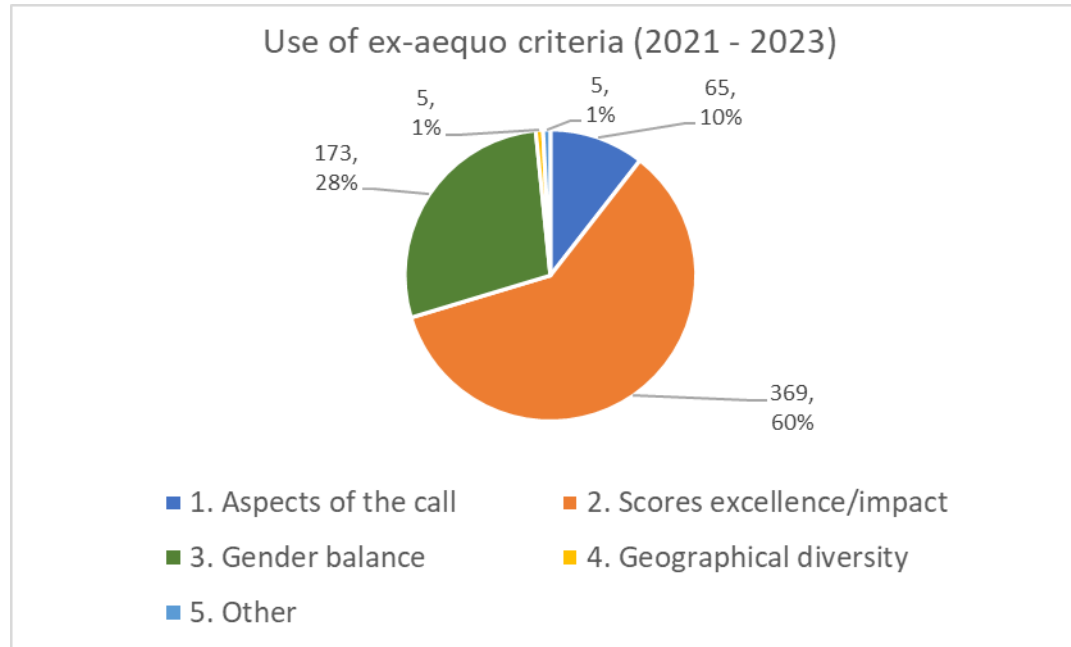
Most Frequently Applied Ex-aequo Criterion



The criterion used the most is the one looking into the scores of excellence/impact (53%), followed by the gender criterion (39%).

(*) The analysis counts only the use of the ex-aequo criteria in the two scenarios mentioned (to rank the group of proposals where the funding threshold lies and to rank reserve proposals) and includes all HE topics evaluated between 2021 and 2025, with the exception of MSCA, Widening, ERC and EIC topics (because different use of ex-aequo criteria, or no use).

Most Frequently Applied Ex-aequo Criterion (time perspective)



The criterion used the most has always been the one looking into the scores of excellence/impact, however there is in the latest years a major use of the gender balance criterion

The increase in the use of the gender criterion and decrease of the scores criterion in recent years is likely attributed to the significant rise in the number of proposals submitted, which leads to have more proposals with the same individual scores.

Funding Shortfalls for Highest-Scoring Proposals

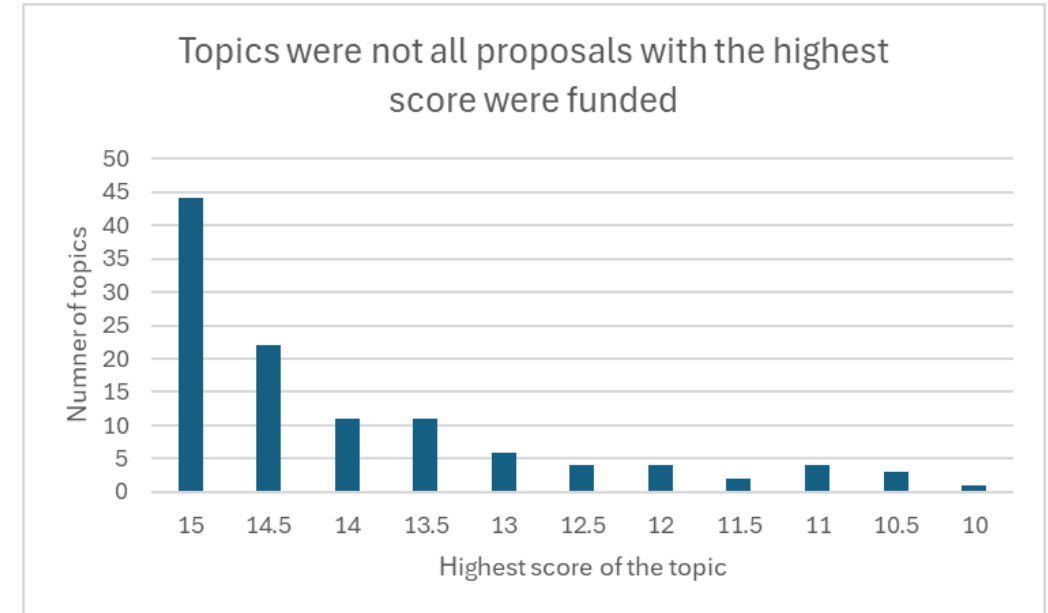
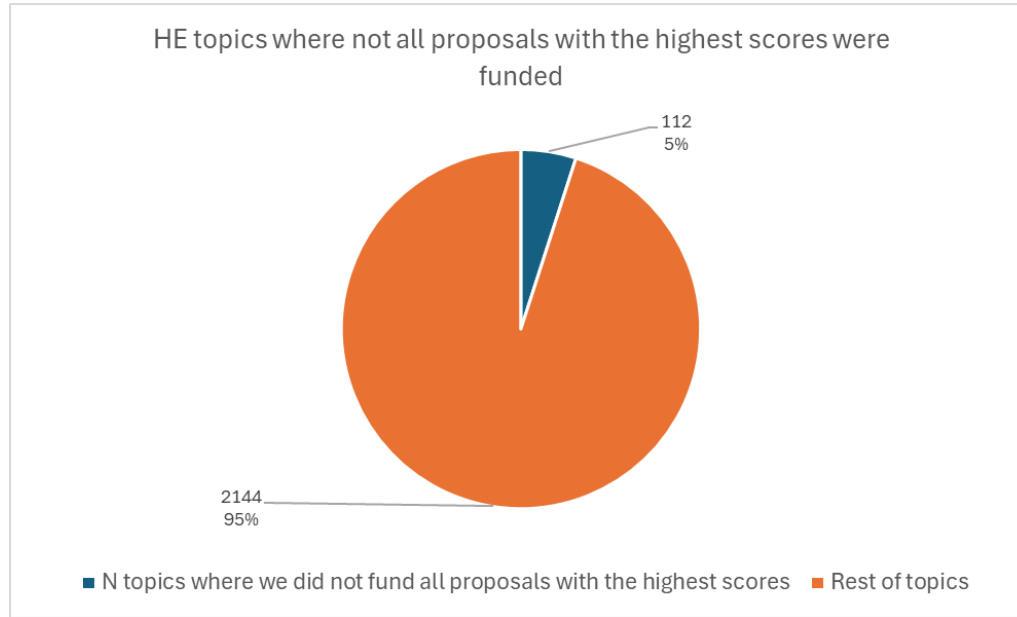
In some topics, the budget available is not sufficient to fund all proposals with the highest scores.

An analysis of these cases is relevant because the ex-aequo criteria are not designed to work with groups of proposals with the highest scores.

- **Criterion 1 ‘Aspects of the call’** cannot be applied as there are no higher-ranked proposals for comparison.
- **Criterion 2 ‘Scores Excellence/Impact’** can only work if the highest score is not the maximum (15).
- **Criterion 3 ‘Gender’** is likely to be the most frequently used criterion in these scenarios.
- **Criterion 4 ‘Geographical diversity’** faces limitations. It can only be applied in exceptional cases where the application of the gender or scores (if not the case of scores of 15) criteria have already resulted in higher ranked proposals, other than the ones where this criterion is applied. If the gender or score criteria do not differentiate between proposals, and thus no higher ranked proposals are achieved, geographical diversity cannot be used as all countries would be on an equal footing.
- **Criterion 5 ‘Other’** remains applicable in these situations.

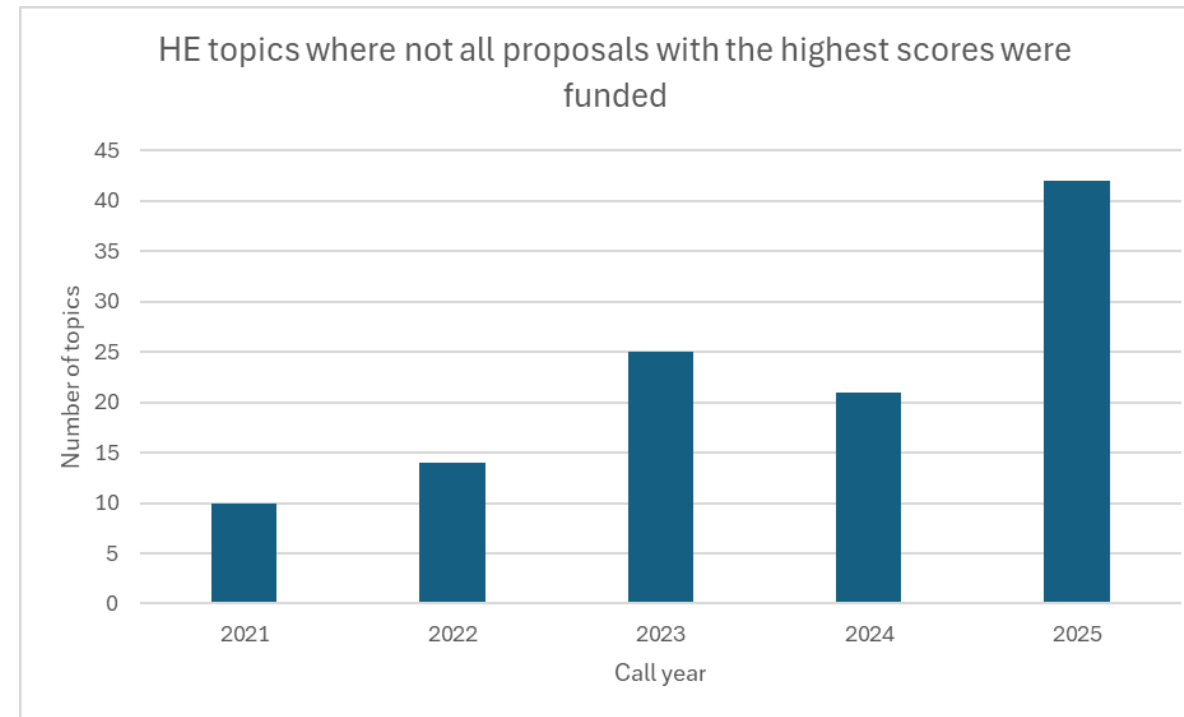


Frequency of Ex-aequo Criteria Application in Group of Proposals with the Highest Score



- In 5% of the topics, the budget available was not sufficient to fund all proposals with the highest scores (highest scores go from 15 to 10). In 39.3% of these topics the maximum score was 15.

Frequency of Ex-aequo Criteria Application in Group of Proposals with the Highest Score (time perspective)

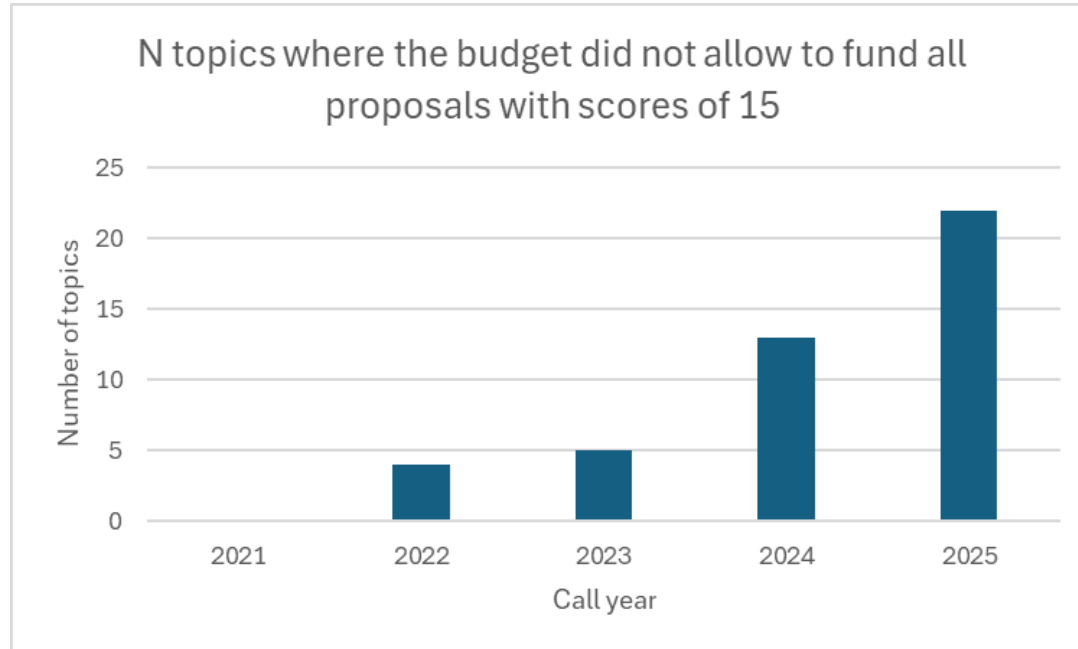


The increase in the number of topics where not all proposals with the highest scores can be funded is likely attributed to the significant rise in the number of proposals submitted.

An analysis of the distribution of scores by year didn't show significant differences across the years, meaning that the distribution of quality proposals receive seem to be stable (however, because we receive more proposals in the last year, we deal with a higher number of quality proposals).



Frequency of Ex-aequo Criteria Application in Group of Proposals with the Maximum Score



- The number of topics where ex-aequo criteria are used to rank proposals with the maximum score of 15 is increasing with the years.
- In these cases, the ex-aequo criteria do not work well. First and second criteria, 'aspects of the call' and 'scores' cannot be applied, and fourth criterion, 'geographical diversity' faces limitations. In most of the cases, only 'gender' and 'other' criteria can be applied.

Gender with Leading Role

From 2025 on, the gender ex-aequo criterion applies only to researchers with a leading role, as indicated in the researchers table (see screen shot below).

Definition of researcher with a leading role is published in [Portal FAQ](#)

A "researcher with a leading role in a project" refers to an individual responsible for guiding, managing, and directing the action's execution. They normally oversee planning, coordination, resource allocation, and stakeholder communication; set objectives, make key decisions, and ensure alignment with goals and timelines in addition to research activities. They may also formally hold management responsibilities over staff working on the action and in some cases, focus on coordinating contributions from the specific participant or group they represent.

Researchers involved in the proposal

Title	First Name	Last Name	Gender	Nationality	E-mail	Career Stage	Role of researcher (in the project)	Reference Identifier	Type of identifier
Prof						Category A Top grade re	Leading		Orcid ID
Prof						Category A Top grade re	Team member		Orcid ID
Prof						Category A Top grade re	Team member		Orcid ID
Prof						Category A Top grade re	Team member		Orcid ID
Dr						Category C Recognised	Team member		Orcid ID

AI in proposals submission and evaluation of Horizon Europe

Use of Generative AI for Preparation of Proposals

- Applicants **may use** generative AI tools when preparing proposals
- A disclaimer has been included in the proposal application forms ([Part B](#)) where applicants are reminded:
 - to exercise **caution** and **careful consideration** while using generative AI tools;
 - **to review and validate** thoroughly any AI-generated content to ensure its appropriateness and accuracy, as well as its **compliance** with intellectual property regulations;
 - that they **remain fully responsible** for the content of the proposal;
 - to be **transparent** in disclosing which AI tools were used and how they were utilised.
- The use of generative AI tools in drafting proposals cannot be considered by expert evaluators as a reason to penalise a proposal.



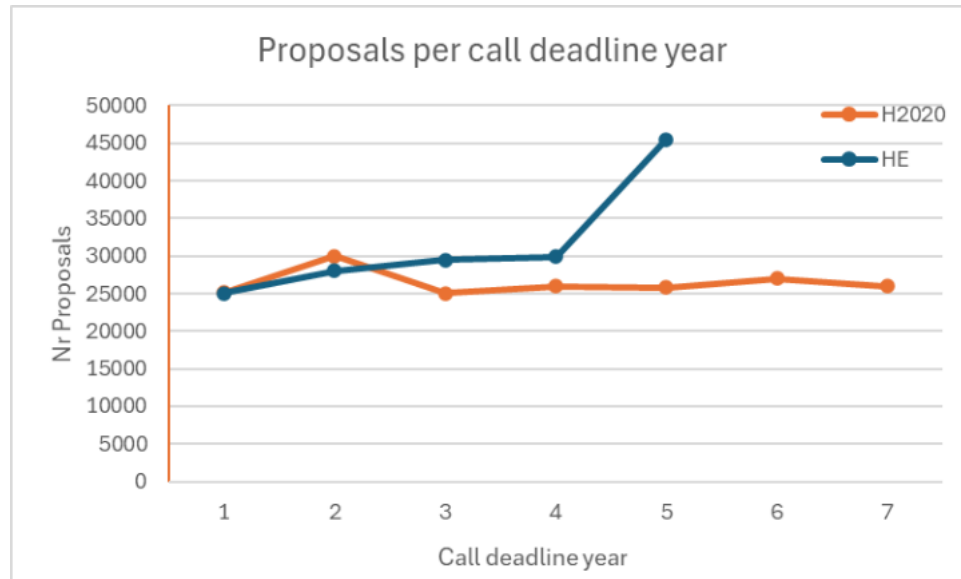
Use of Generative AI for Evaluation of Proposals

- The Code of Conduct included in the expert model contract ([link](#)) has been updated to clarify boundary conditions for AI use; It states that:
 - “AI tools may be used only for strictly **ancillary purposes**, under their full responsibility, and that any such use **must be documented** and made available to the contracting authority upon request”
 - Evaluators are responsible for keeping the **confidentiality** of the proposal information and ensuring its adequate protection and for adopting appropriate measures to ensure the protection of **personal data**.
- **Any use** of gen AI tools by the expert evaluators **remains their own responsibility and must respect legal obligations**.
- The **HE Standard briefing slides for experts** ([link](#)) are continuously updated to inform evaluators on this evolving topic. They are informed of:
 - the risk of breaching confidentiality obligations, which may be subject to the measures outlined in their contract.
 - they should avoid over-reliance on AI tools and acknowledge its potential limitations (hallucinations and biases).



Oversubscription Trends

Total Number of Proposals Received

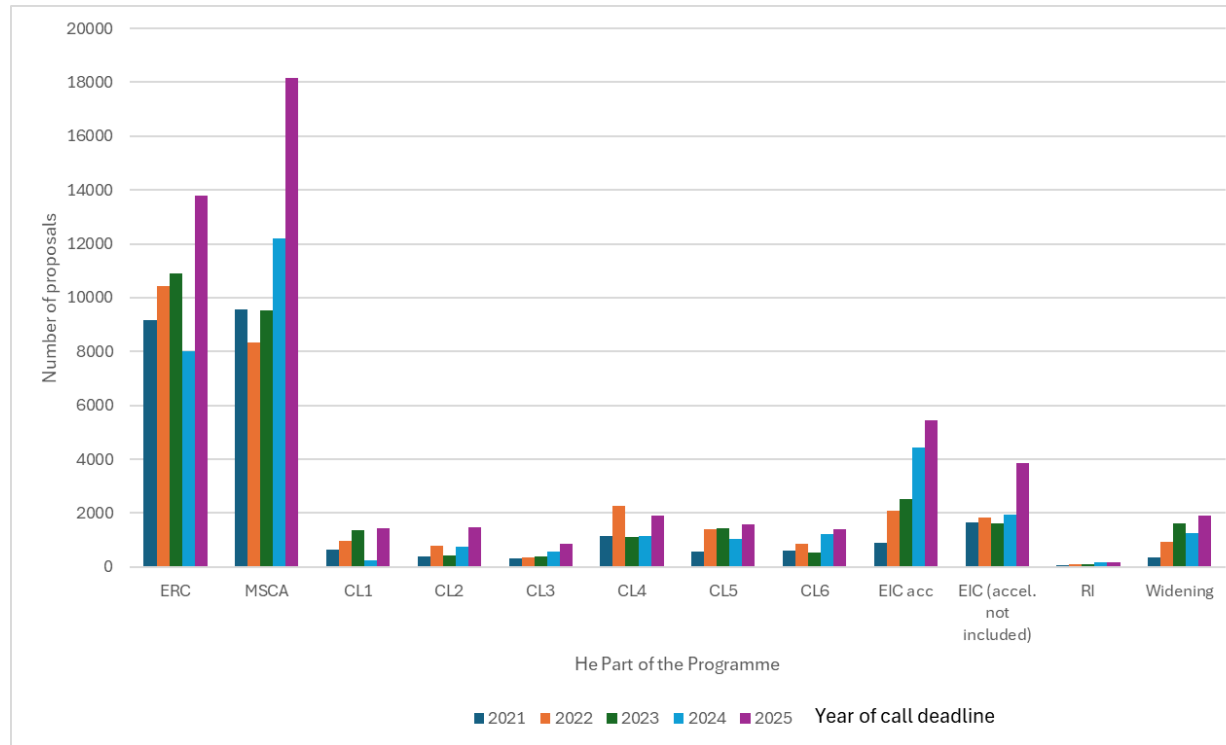


- Number of proposals received per call deadline year, comparison of Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe.
- While numbers of proposals in Horizon 2020 were rather stable for the entire duration of the programme, Horizon Europe has seen a rise of proposal already in early years, with a very sharp increase in 2025.

* Only 'standard' calls considered: No prizes, no IBAs, no FPA/SGA.
For two-stage calls, only proposals submitted to first stage are considered.
For the sake of comparison, no JU calls, EIC accelerator (HE) and SME instrument (H2020) are considered.



Number of Proposals Received per Part of the Programme

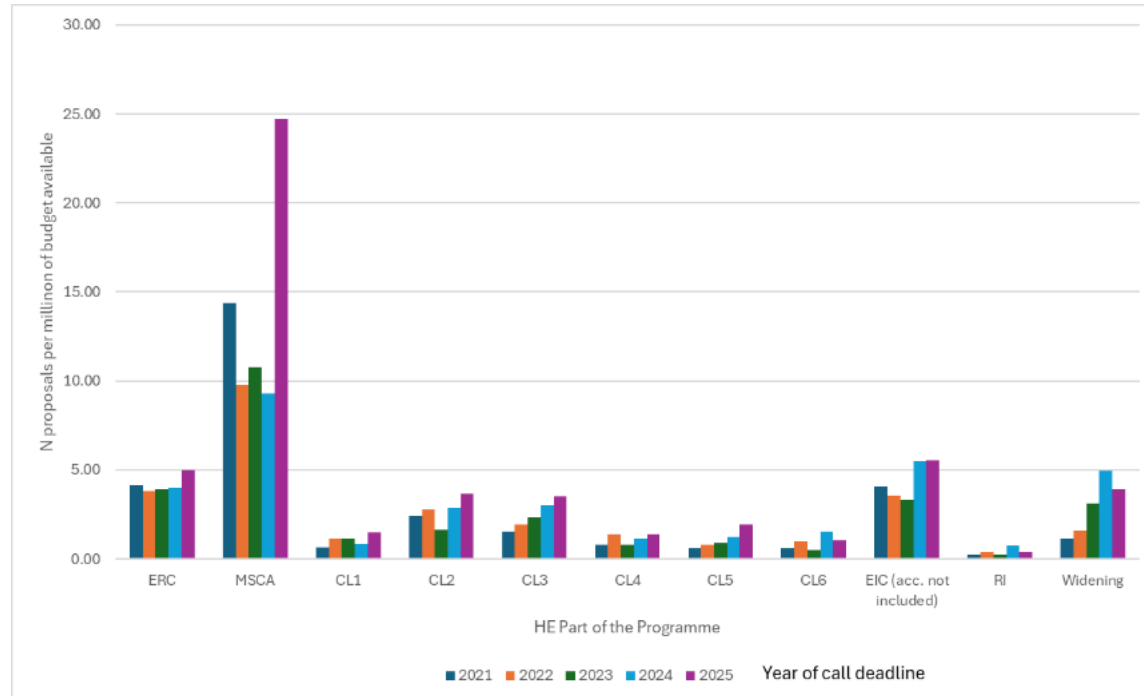


- Number of proposals received per call deadline year in Horizon Europe and per cluster/part of the programme.
- Nearly all parts of the programme show a clear increase over the years, with the largest increases, both in absolute and relative numbers, being in bottom-up calls (ERC, MSCA, EIC)

* Only 'standard' calls considered: No prizes, no IBAs, no FPA/SGA.
For two-stage calls, only proposals submitted to first stage are considered.



Number of Proposals Received Relative to the Call Budget

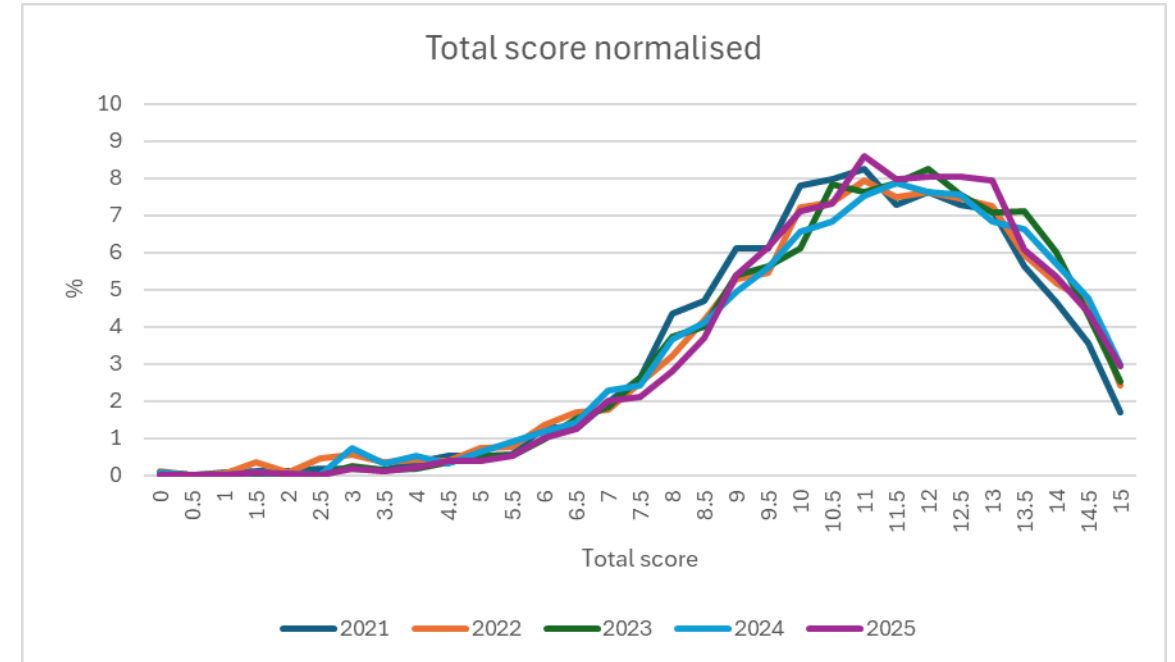
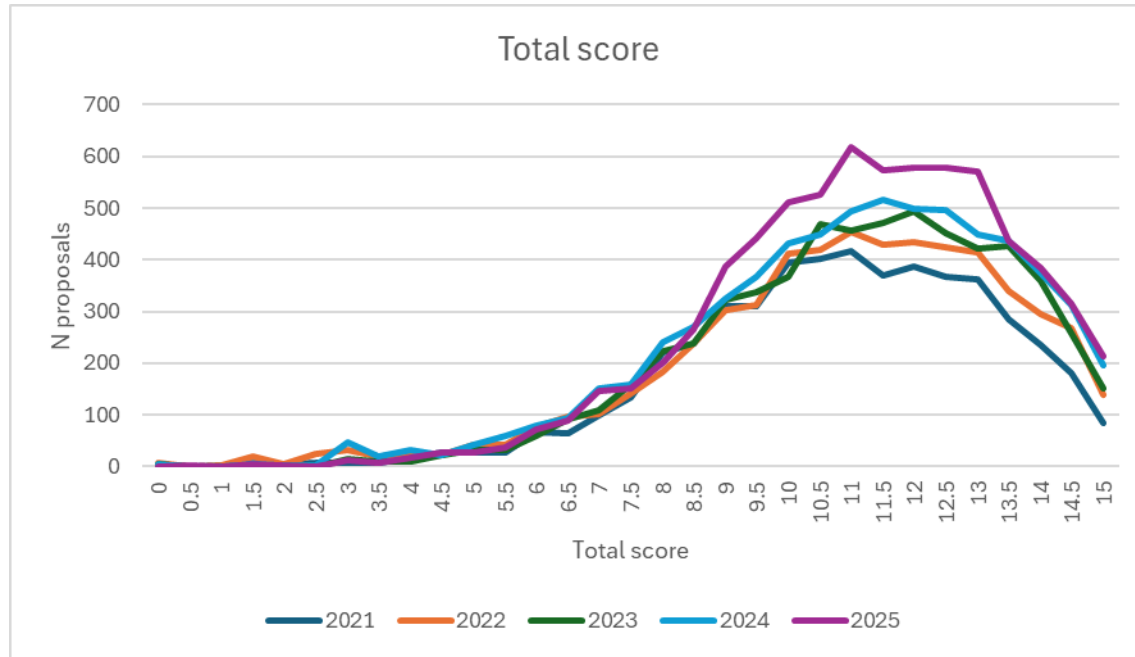


- Number of proposals received per call deadline year in Horizon Europe, relative to the call budget.
- For nearly all parts of the programme, the increasing trends are very clearly visible even when considering variations in the available budget.
- These will also indicate an increasing of oversubscription across the entire programme.

* Only 'standard' calls considered: No prizes, no IBAs, no FPA/SGA.
For two-stage calls, only proposals submitted to first stage are considered.



Distribution of Total Scores

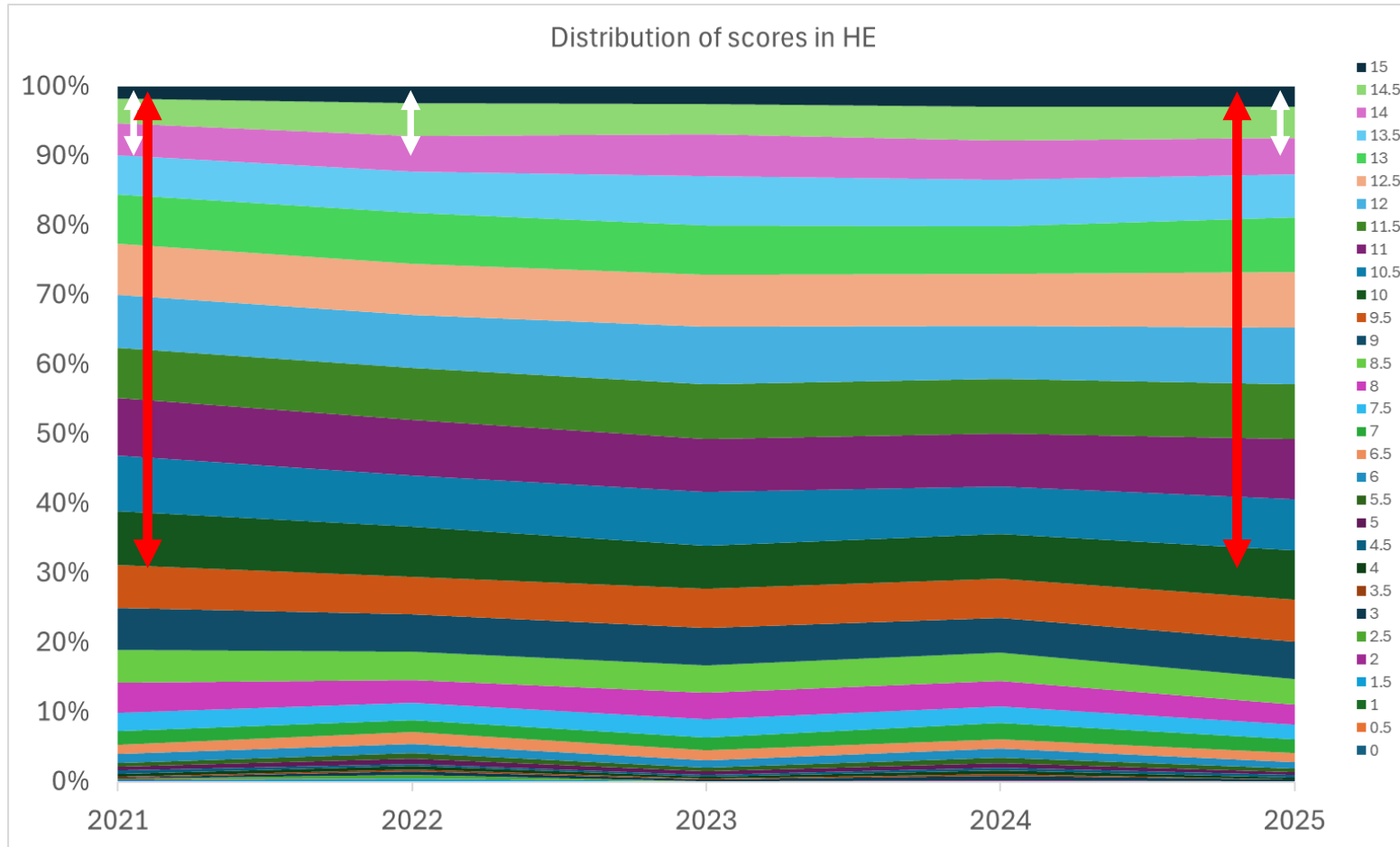


- Distribution of scores in Horizon Europe, across the entire programme.
- The quality of proposals is -roughly the same for 2025 as for previous years, with approximately the same share of excellent, good and poor-quality proposals.
- However, as the absolute number of proposals is higher, and not proportional to the budget, the average funding threshold has likely increased.

* For two-stage calls, only scores of second stage are considered.



Distribution of Total Scores



- No increase, or very small, of percentage of excellent proposals (scores 14-15) from 2022 on (a small increase is observed from 2021 to 2022) (see white arrow)
- A light increase in the percentage of above threshold proposals from 2021 to 2025 (scores 10 and higher) (see red arrow)
- The quality of the proposals received seem to be more or less stable. The increase of proposals received in 2025 was not accompanied with an increase of the quality of the proposals received.
- We observe more proposals with highest score simply because we receive more proposals.

* For two-stage calls, only scores of second stage are considered.





Thank you!

HorizonEU

<http://ec.europa.eu/horizon-europe>



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