LISTENING to BENEFICIARIES

insights from the Portuguese R&I community on the implementation of Horizon Europe

National Innovation Agency

www.ani.pt

16 July 2026

The Survey

beneficiaries main message

not asking for

FEWER CONTROLS

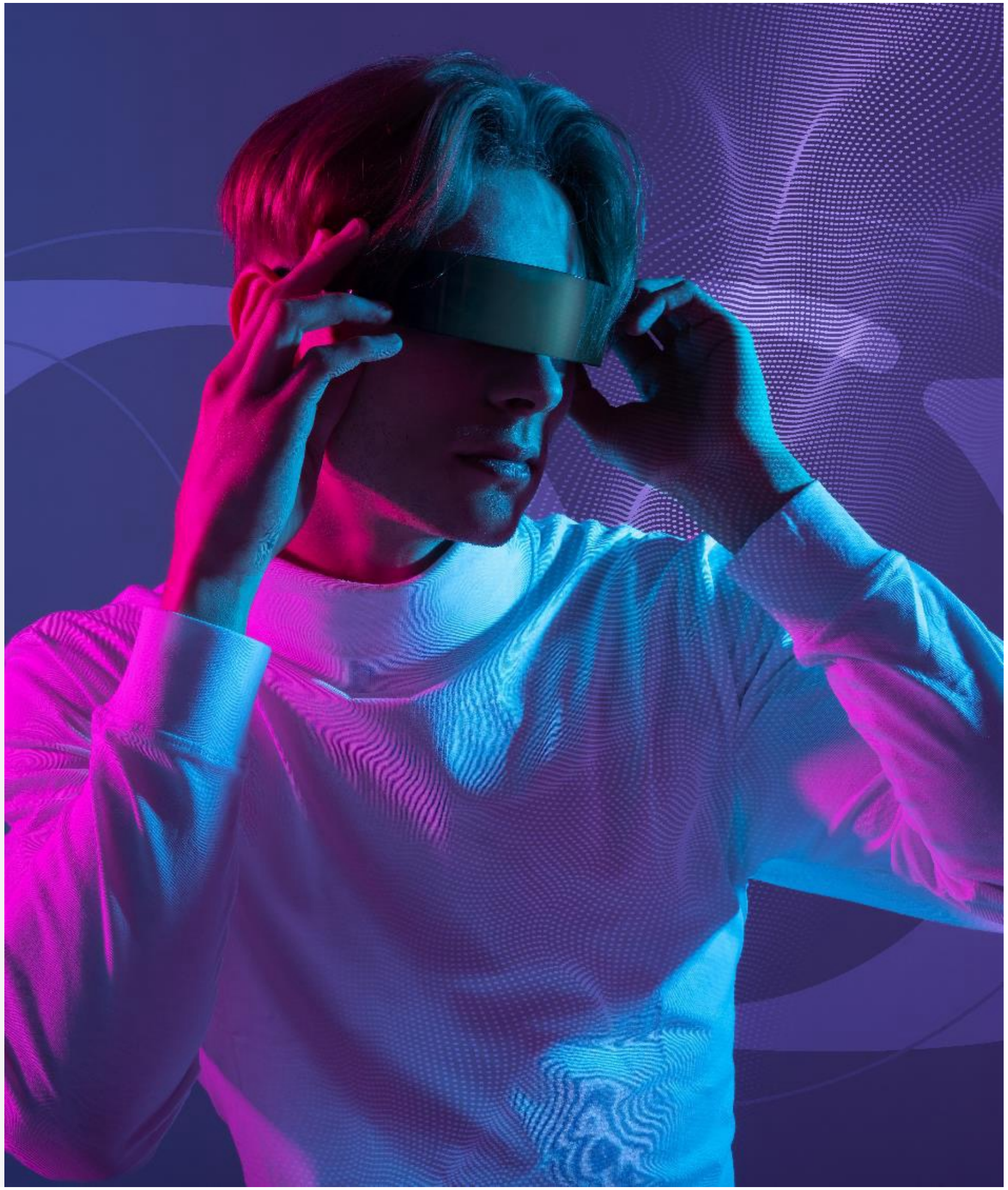
asking for

SIMPLER IMPLEMENTATION

more time to

EXCELLENT RESEARCH & INNOVATION

Context and Audience



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Evidence to improve Horizon Europe implementation

Why did Portugal conduct this survey?

17

Survey Period
29 May – 6 July 2026

Target Audience:
- **HEurope Participants**
- **HEurope Coordinators**
- **Research Managers**

ANI gathered evidence from the Portuguese R&I community to inform future simplification efforts

The audience

Who responded?

149

Individual Survey Responses

75%+ experienced participants with involvement in three or more EU Framework Programmes.

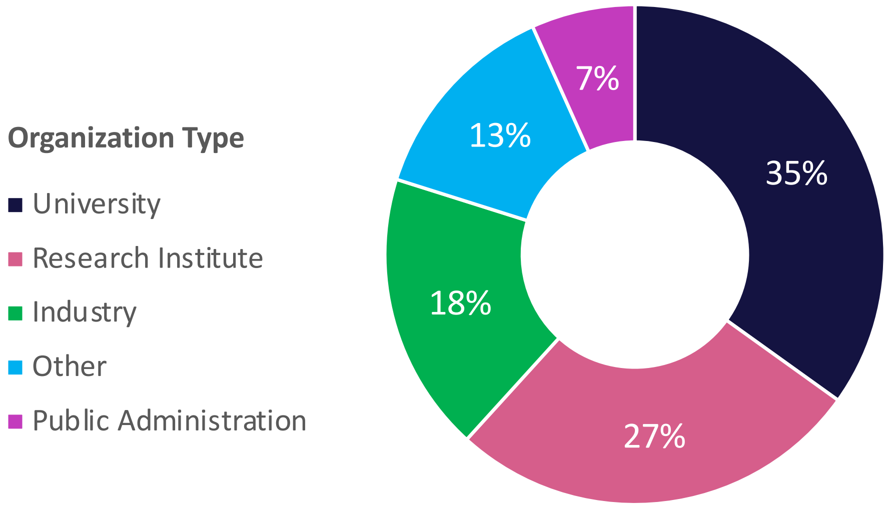
Balanced ecosystem coverage across academia, research organizations, industry, private enterprises, and researchers.

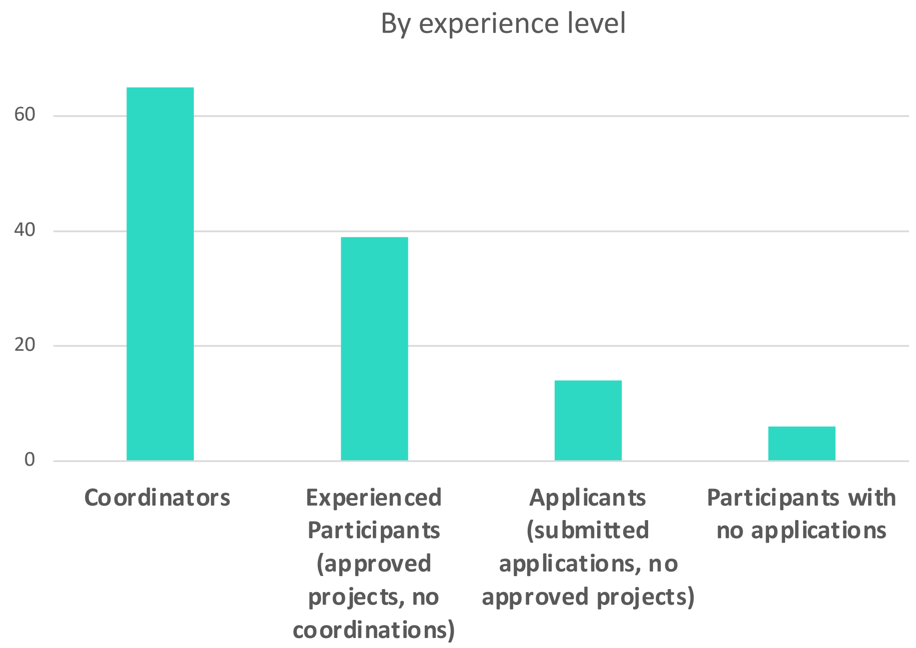
main finding

The PT community values compliance but calls for a simpler and more consistent implementation of Horizon Europe.

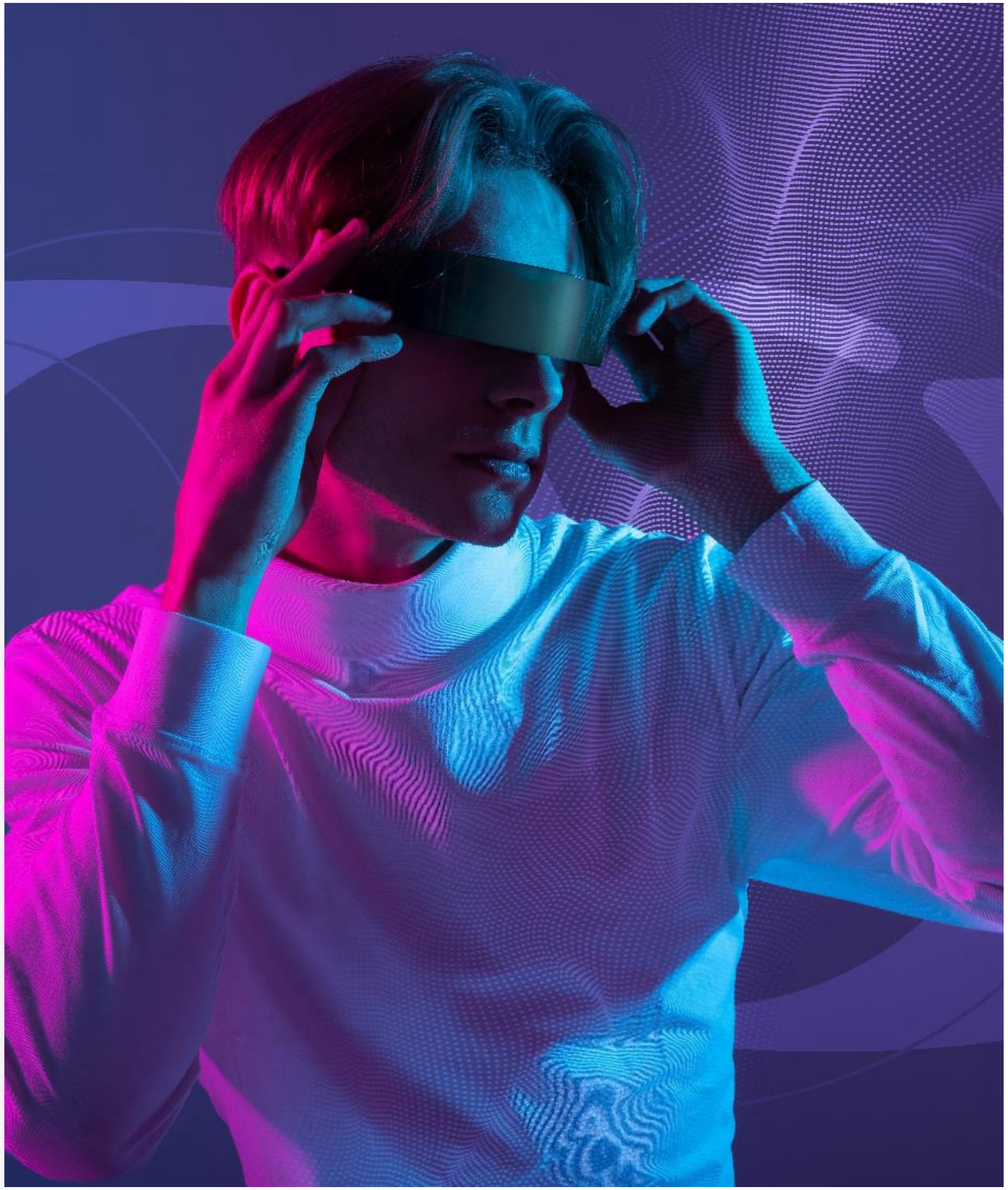
The audience

Who responded?





The beneficiary journey



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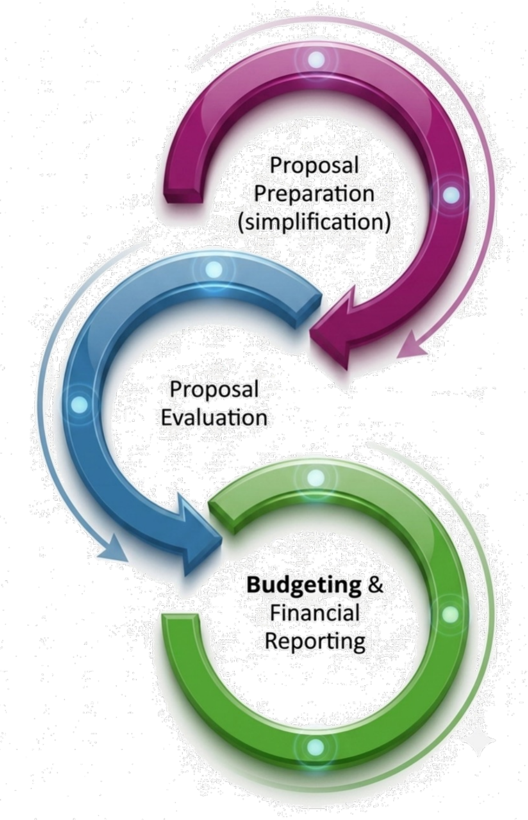
The Survey

Key categories



32 questions to collect structured feedback from the R&I community.

Part B Template of Pilar II

Evaluation process

Two-stage proposals

Lump-Sum mechanism

Personnel Unit Cost Option (PUC)

Financial reporting of actual costs grants

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The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (template)

Respondents do not simply ask for a shorter template

They ask for a clearer, less repetitive, more structured and more proportionate template.

HEU coordinators are less supportive of further reducing the number of pages in Part B.

Coordinators place greater value on having enough space to explain project logic, methodology, work plan, consortium structure and implementation details

65%

agree to 5-page reduction in Part B

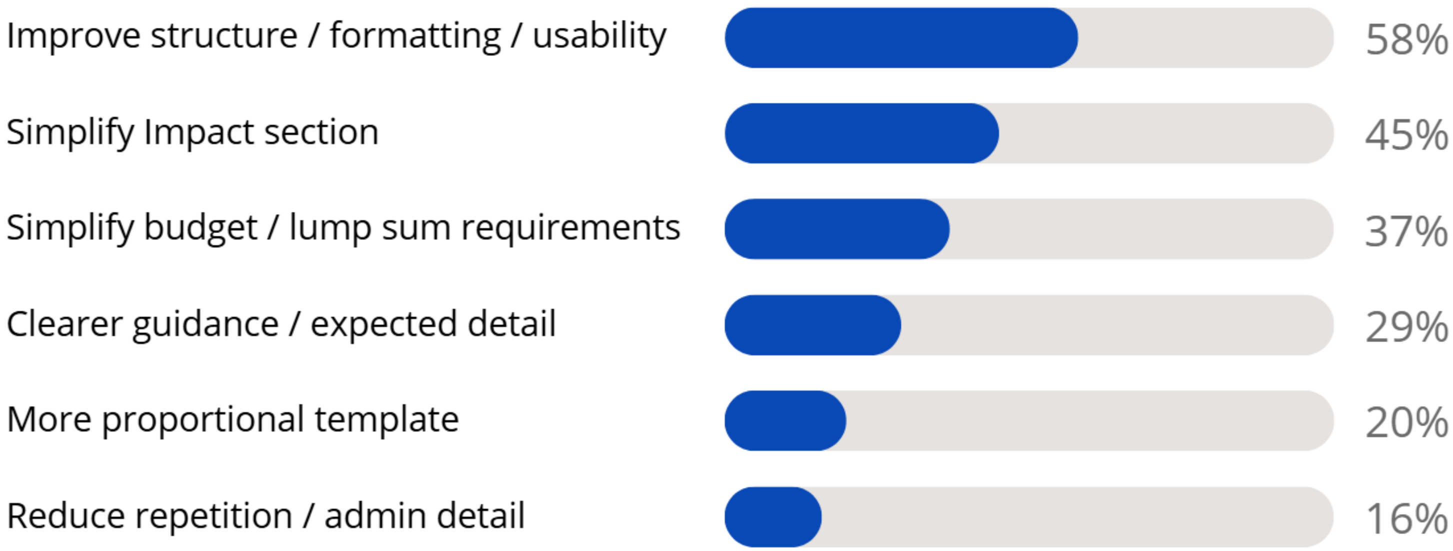
39%

are not convinced that further reduction is necessary

The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (template)

Summary of the open-text answers to the question: “Do you have any suggestion to simplify or improve Part B template?”



Part B Improvement suggestions: share of responses by theme

The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (two-stage & 1st stage blinded)

A strong overall thematic support for two-stage proposals

Two-stage proposals should be used in topics where oversubscription is anticipated.

The first stage proposals should be blind evaluated as default

The blind evaluation could prevent bias from evaluators towards less known institutions and widening countries

68%

agree to 2-stage proposals

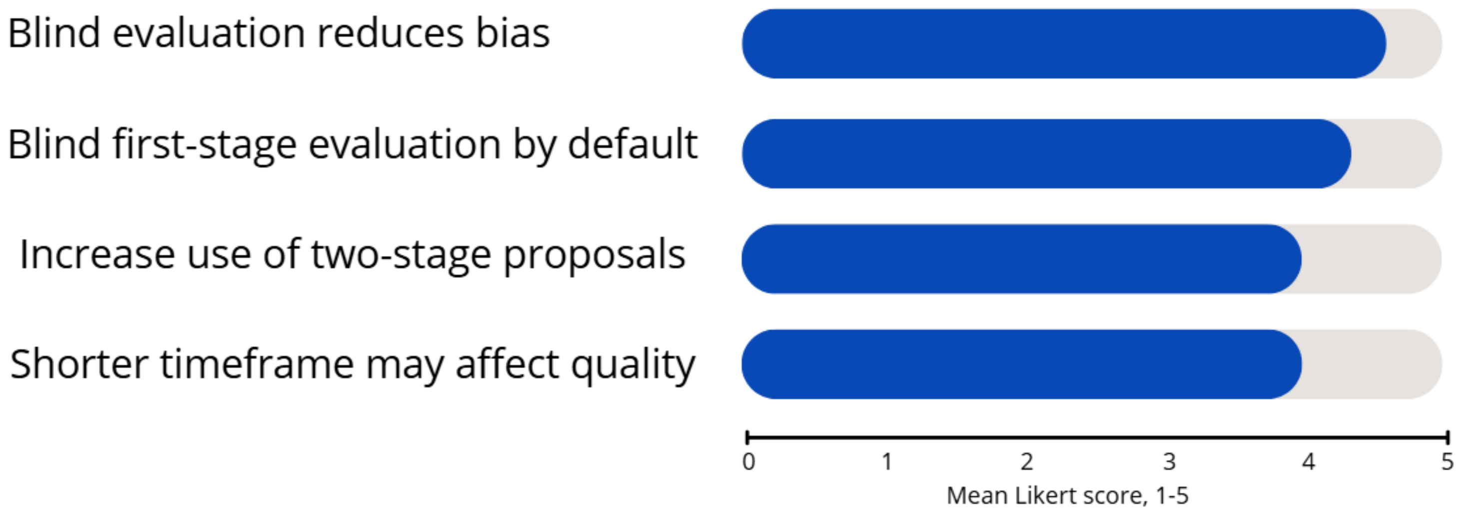
66%

fully agree that blind evaluation could prevent bias

The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (two-stage & 1st stage blinded)

Summary of the “highest-rated option” selected by the recipients



Strong support for two-stage proposals and blind evaluation

The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (lump-sum & PUC)

Lump sum is accepted conceptually, but operational confidence is weaker

Respondents support automatic upload of the lump-sum Excel table to the Funding & Tenders Portal and see lump sum as simplification but show low confidence on ex-post technical reviews and the absence of financial audits.

Awareness and understanding of the PUC methodology remain limited among beneficiaries

Further guidance and practical examples would facilitate a wider understanding and uptake of the PUC methodology. In addition, PUC should be revised to consider different personnel categories.

70%

agree that lump-sum should be increased

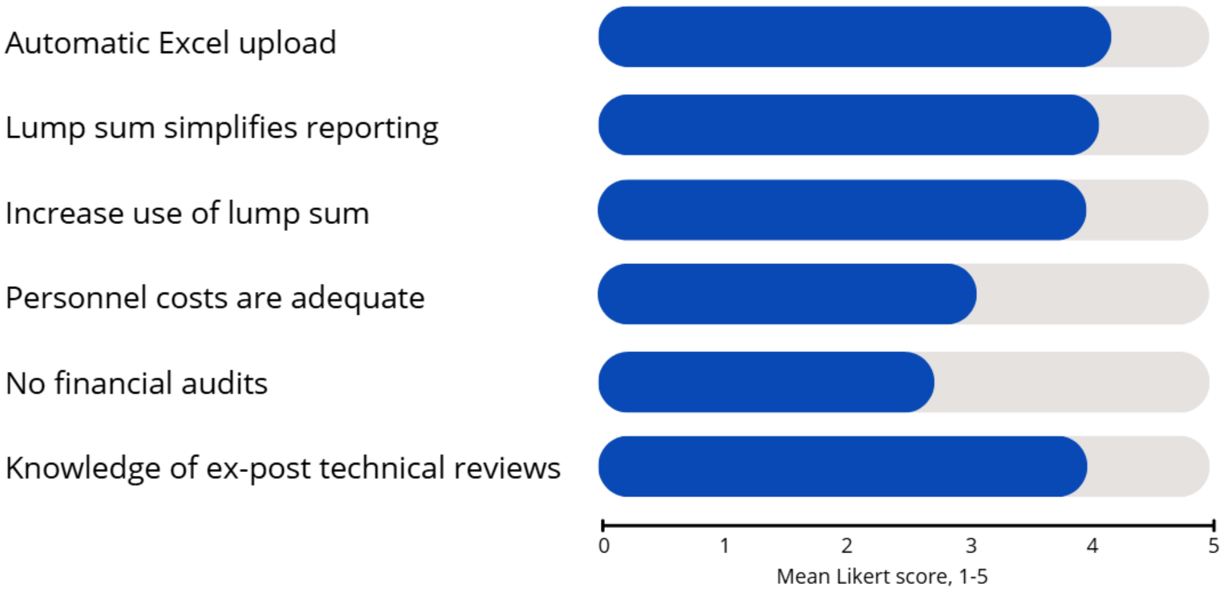
41%

neutral respondents regarding PUC as a simplification measure

The Survey

Proposal Preparation Simplification (lump-sum & PUC)

Summary of the open-text answers to the question: “Do you have any suggestion/comment regarding lump-sums?”



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Lump-sum simplification is acknowledgeable but operational confidence remains limited

The Survey

Proposal Evaluation

Online interviews are highly supported to ensure a fairer evaluation process

The introduction of an online interview as the first tie-break criterion is the most supported quantitative measure. Furthermore, beneficiaries agree that online interviews could lead to overall fairer evaluations.

Rejection of gender balance and randomization as decisive ex-aequo filters

Relying on gender balance as the decisive ex-aequo selection metric received the weakest support among respondents. Resolving ties through partial randomization was also poorly received.

84%

agree on the introduction of online interviews

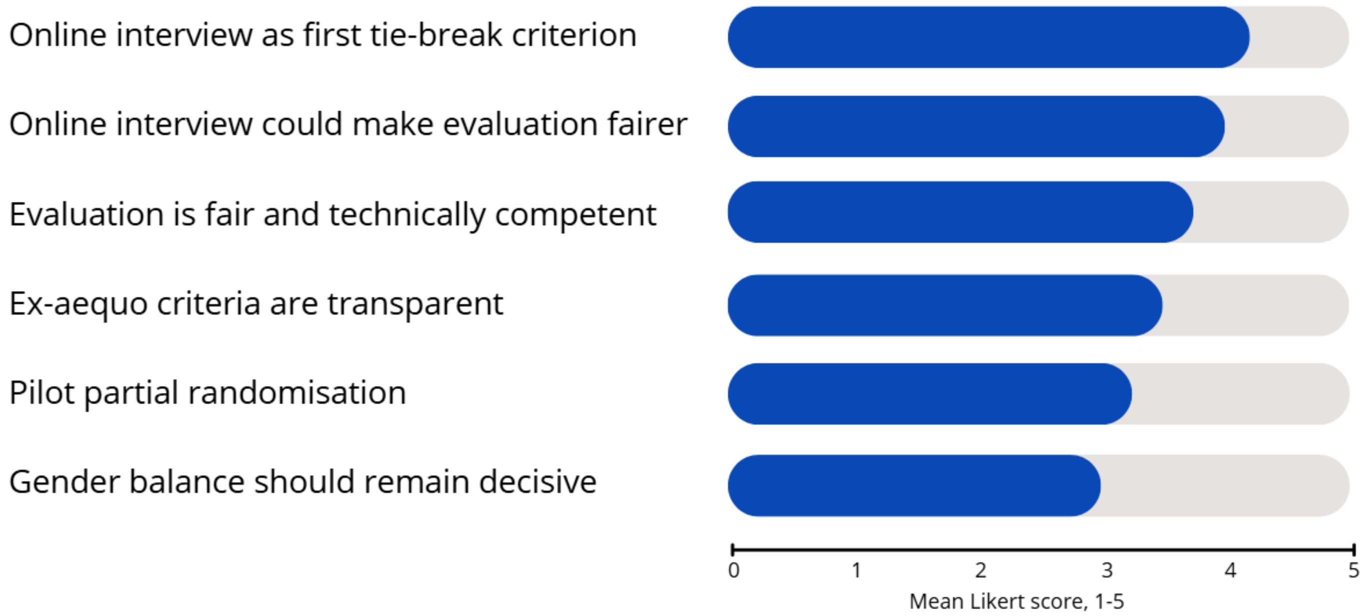
31%

Neutral responses for gender balance as a decisive ex-aequo selection filter

The Survey

Proposal Evaluation

Summary of the open-text answers to the question: “Do you have any suggestion to change or improve the evaluation process?”



The Survey

Budgeting and Financial Reporting

The AGA remains an essential but highly complex reference document

Most respondents rely on the AGA when managing financial aspects of Horizon Europe projects. However, many consider it complex and difficult to navigate, particularly for less experienced beneficiaries

Actual Cost grants continue to be perceived as more complex than Lump Sum grants

Actual Costs are associate with higher administrative effort, more complex financial reporting and increased audit risks

40%

Neutral respondents regarding the clear guidance of the AGA

22%

Disagree that actual costs should remain instead of lump-sum (36% are neutral)

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What works Well

✓ **Horizon Europe is recognised as a world-class R&I programme**

Strong support for scientific excellence, international collaboration and innovation.
High confidence in the overall quality and credibility of the programme.

✓ **Recent simplification measures are welcomed**

Shorter proposal templates are considered a positive step.

✓ **The evaluation system is generally trusted**

Evaluators are perceived as technically competent.
The evaluation process is considered robust and fair **BUT online interview is strongly recommended.**

✓ **Lump Sum funding is increasingly accepted**

Beneficiaries acknowledge its potential to reduce the administrative burden associated with financial reporting.

✓ **Two-stage proposals are strongly supported**

They reduce unnecessary effort for applicants while maintaining high-quality competition.

DIFFICULTIES

That beneficiaries still face

⚠ **Implementation remains administratively demanding**

Reporting requirements are still perceived as burdensome.
Administrative effort is not always proportionate to project risk.

⚠ **Lump Sum implementation**

Practical application remains challenging.
Beneficiaries request clearer guidance on budget preparation, technical reviews and supporting documentation.

⚠ **Personnel Unit Costs**

Current methodology does not fully reflect the diversity of institutional practices across Europe.

Main messages

From the Portuguese R&I community

- Simplicity must improve quality, not just reduce administrative burden.
- Fairer evaluations require greater transparency, better feedback and stronger ranking mechanisms.
- Blind evaluation and two-stage proposals are the highest-supported simplification measures.
- Lump sum is accepted conceptually, but operational confidence is weaker
- Online interviews could improve proposal assessment and tie-break decisions.
- The community calls for clearer guidance, proportionality and operational consistency.

Thank you

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ANNEXES

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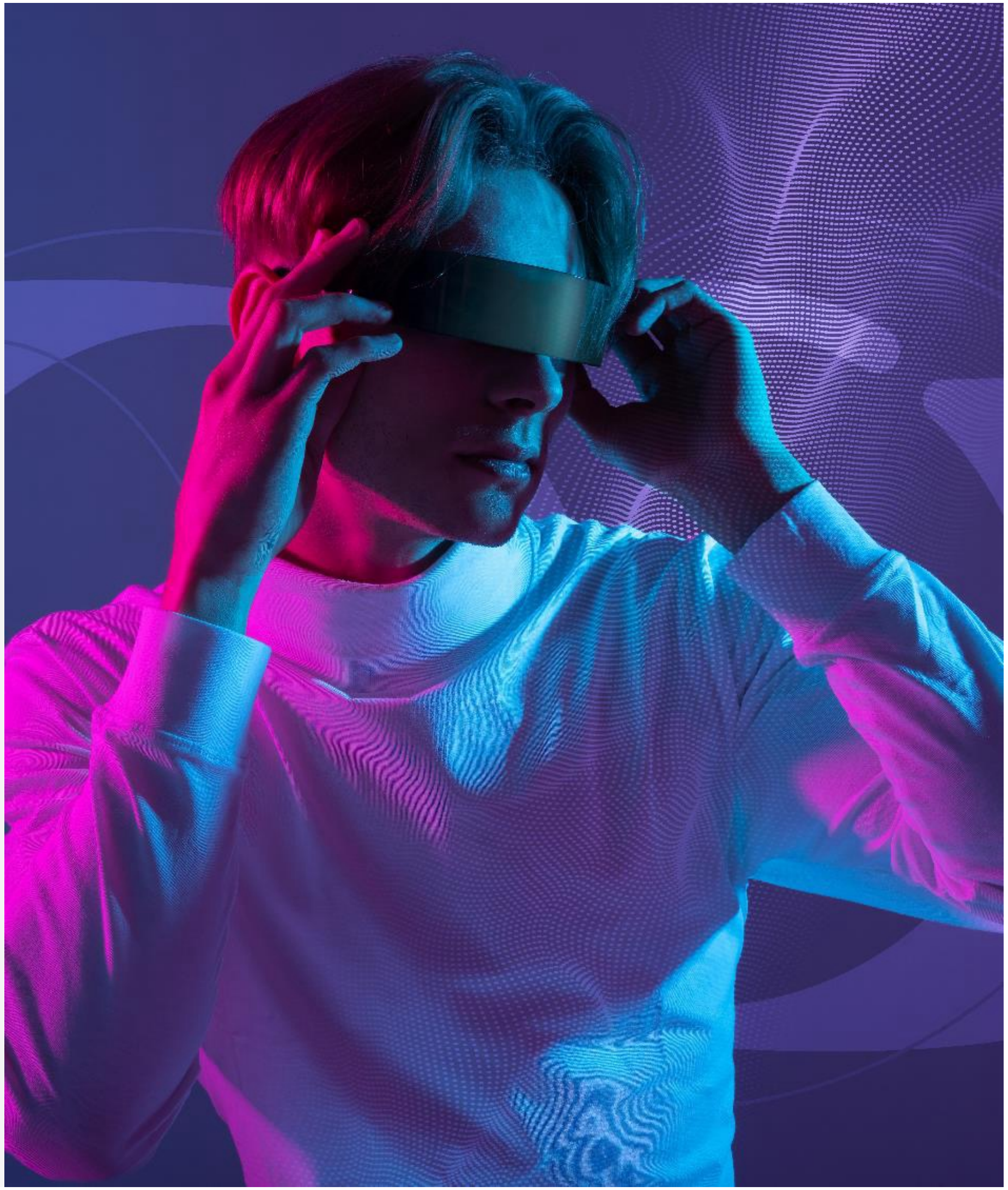
Part B Template of Pilar II



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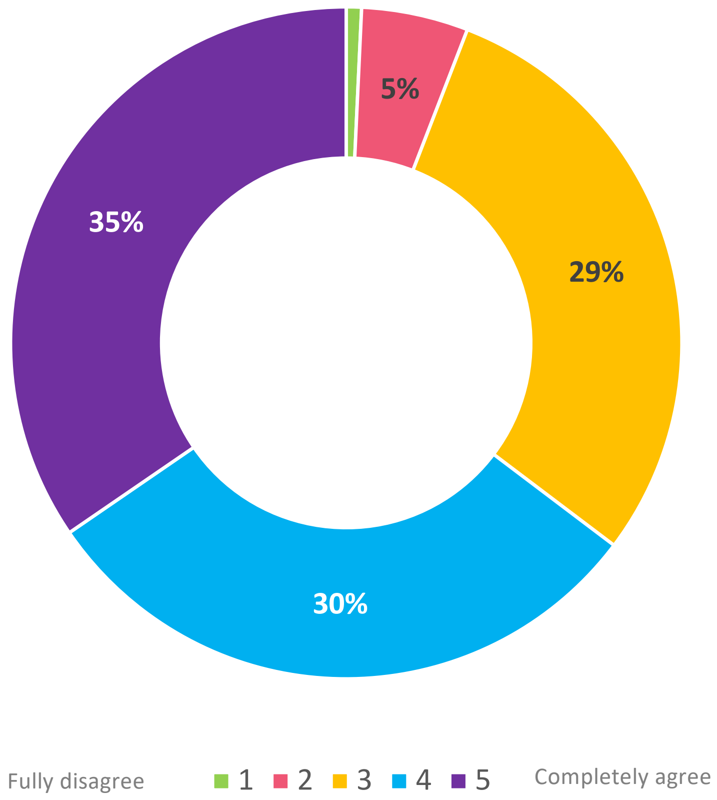
The reduction of 5 pages introduced in the Work Programmes 2026-2027 was a good simplification measure.



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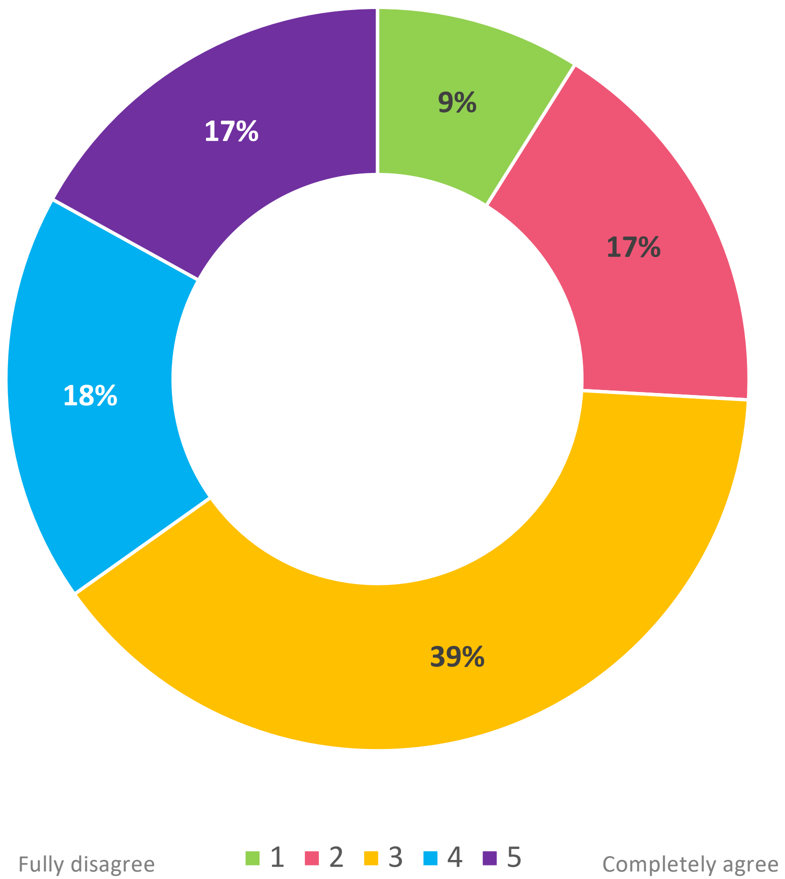
The number of pages could still be reduced in Part B.



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Q: Do you have any suggestion to simplify or improve Part B template?

"I believe that Part B, as currently structured, is a useful exercise for applicants to ensure the alignment of their project with the topic. However, the Impact section remains particularly challenging. In my view, this section could be simplified, perhaps by adopting a table-based approach similar to a simplified version of the Business Model Canvas."

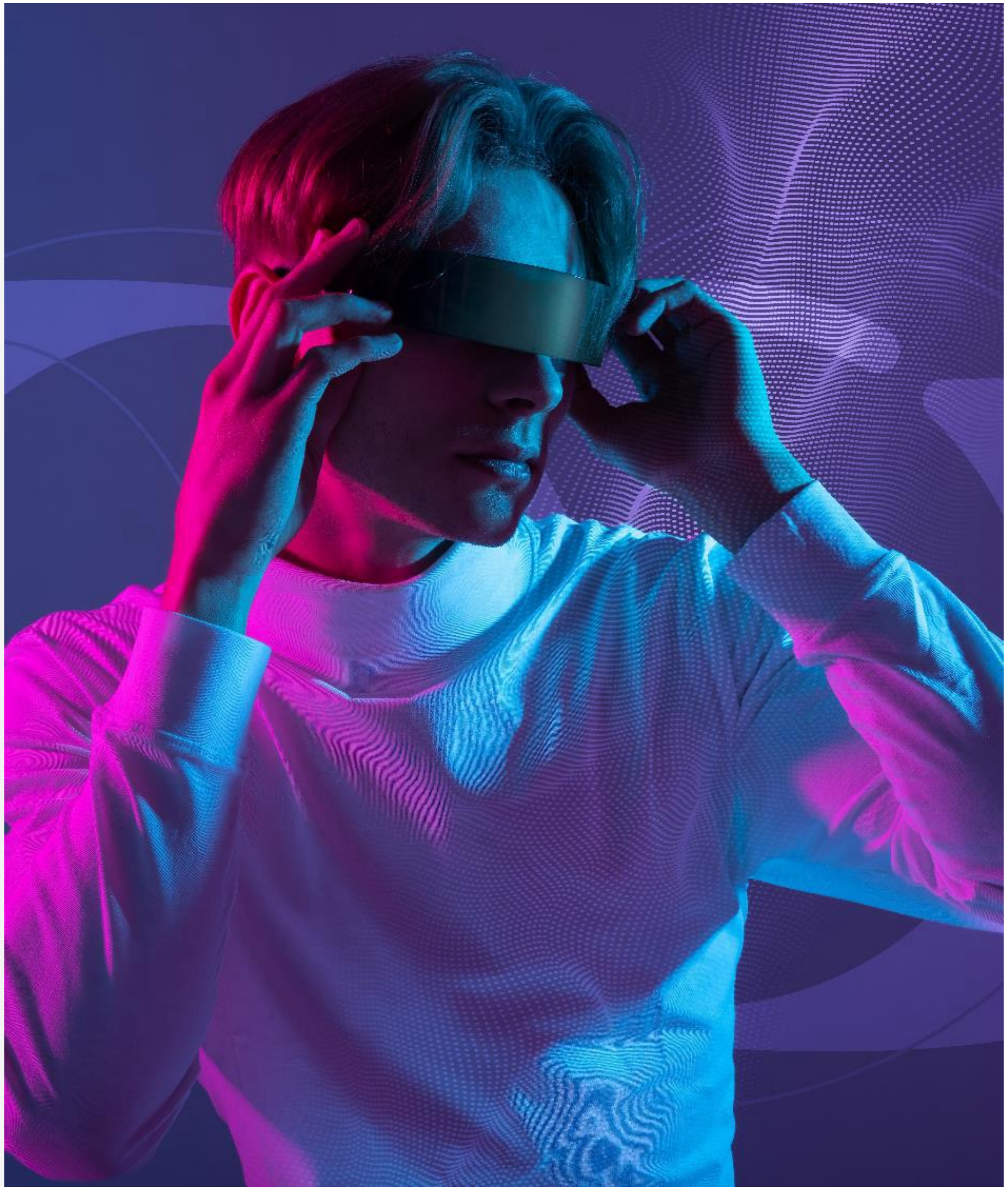
"Simplify the description of consortium management and governance structures, avoiding excessive administrative detail at proposal stage. Reduce duplication across sections, particularly regarding impact, exploitation, dissemination, risk management and implementation, which are often addressed multiple times in different parts of the proposal."

"Include additional tables with KER in the impact section and KPIs in excellence."

Key discussion points – Simplification of Part B template

- Reducing the number of pages does not necessarily lead to simplification.
- Simplification should be achieved through a clear and user-friendly proposal template, supported by comprehensive guidance that clearly explains what applicants should focus on to maximise alignment with the evaluation criteria.
- The proposal template should be as consistent and predictable as possible. Frequent or significant changes between Work Programmes create unnecessary complexity for applicants.
- An effort should be made to eliminate redundant information, both within Parts A and B and in relation to information that is already requested or described in the call topic.
- The evaluation criteria should be clear, transparent and well understood by applicants. The Part B template should be fully aligned with the evaluation criteria, enabling applicants to address them effectively and evaluators to assess proposals in a consistent and efficient manner.

Evaluation process



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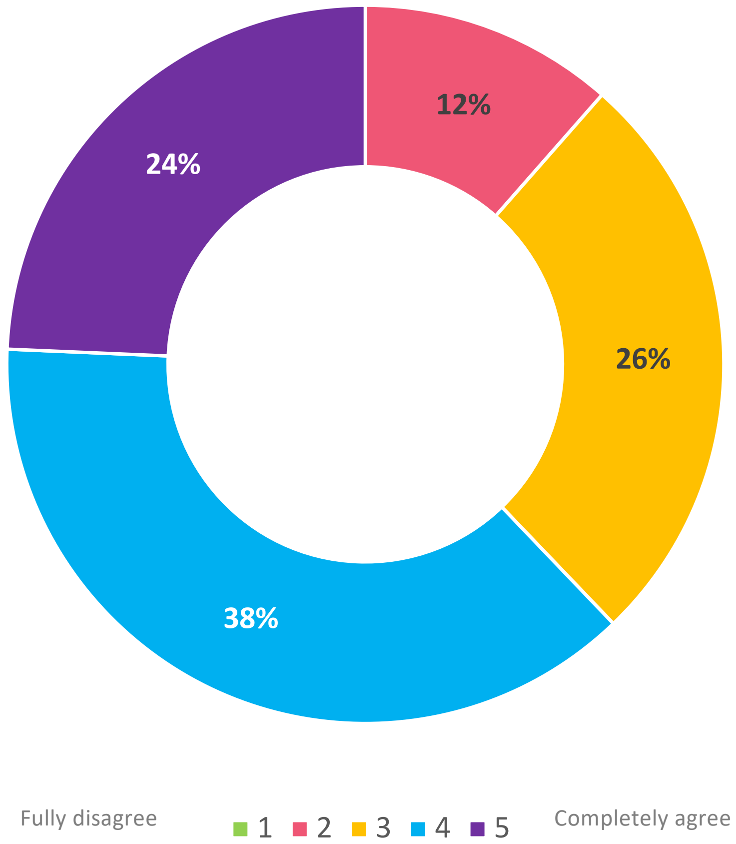
The overall evaluation process is fair, and it is made by technically competent evaluators.



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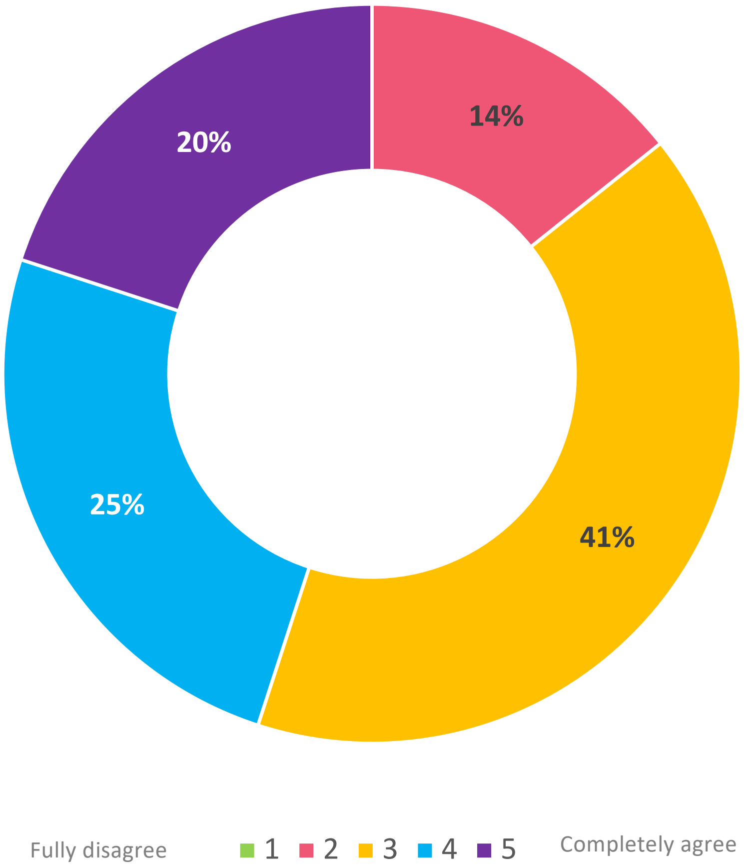
The current ex-aequo criteria for proposals with the same scores are transparent.



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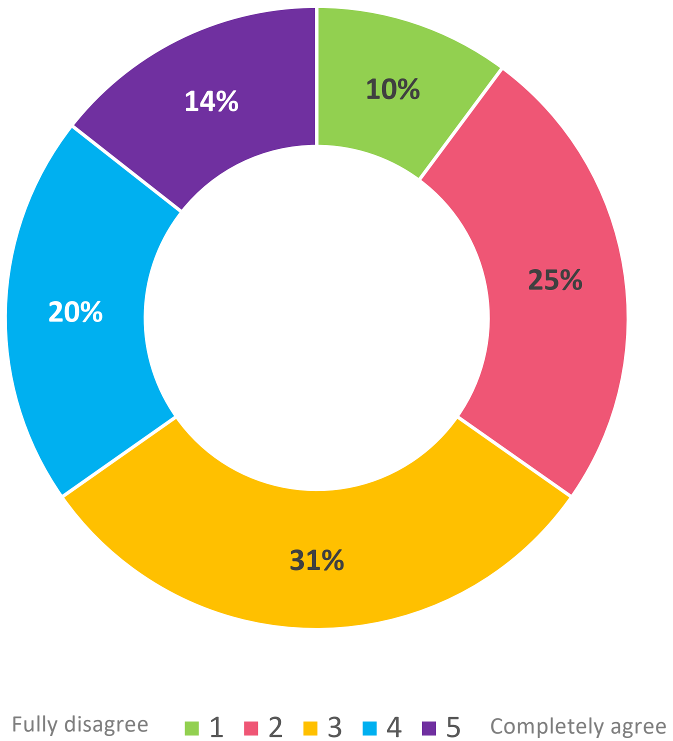
Gender balance criteria have been the decisive criteria to rank equal score proposals, and it should continue to be used.



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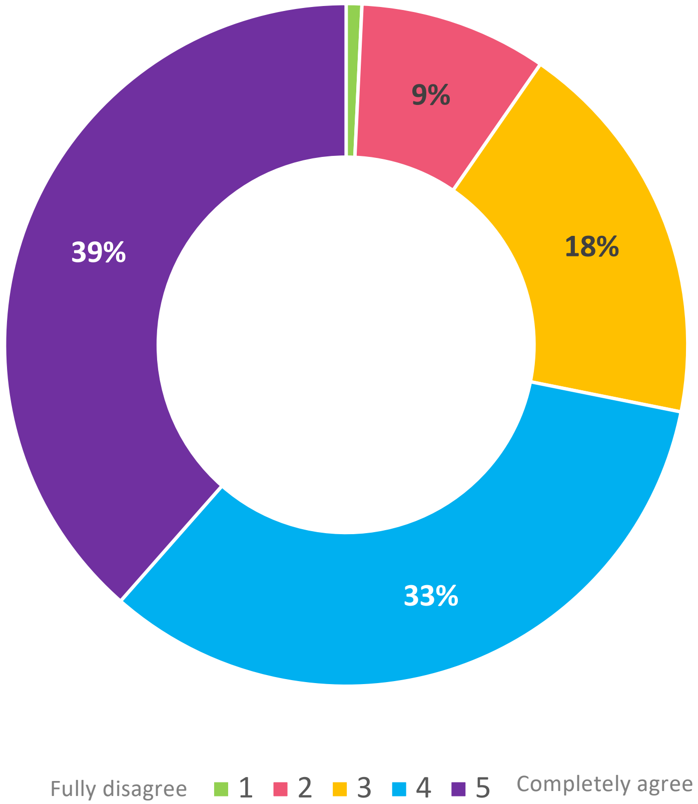
The introduction of an online interview with the evaluator panel during the evaluation process would make the evaluation fairer and would provide an opportunity for applicants to clarify possible misunderstandings of the evaluators.



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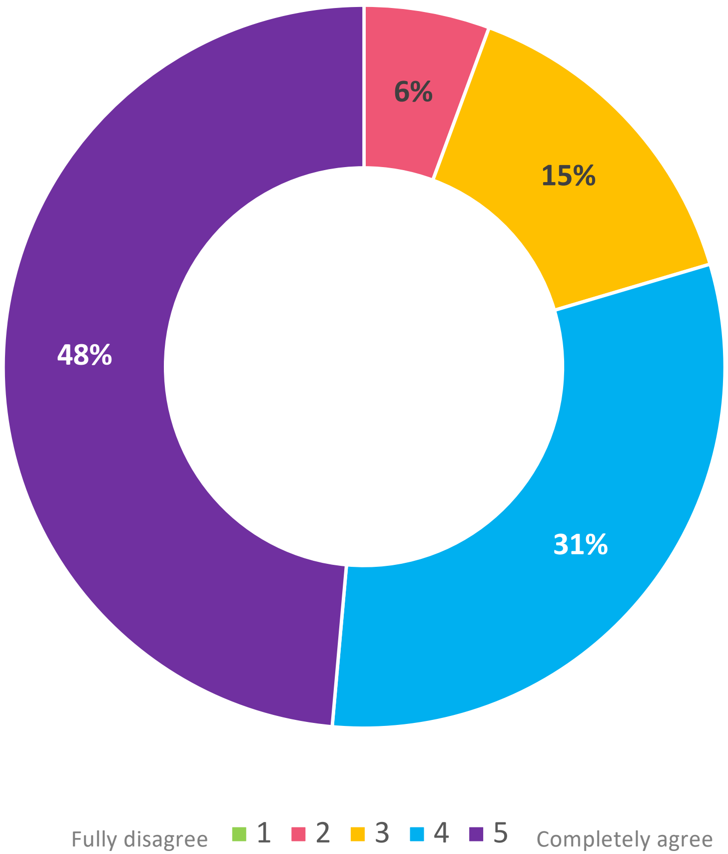
The introduction of an online interview as a new and first ex-aequo criteria for proposals with equal score, could be a better criterion for tiebreaker.



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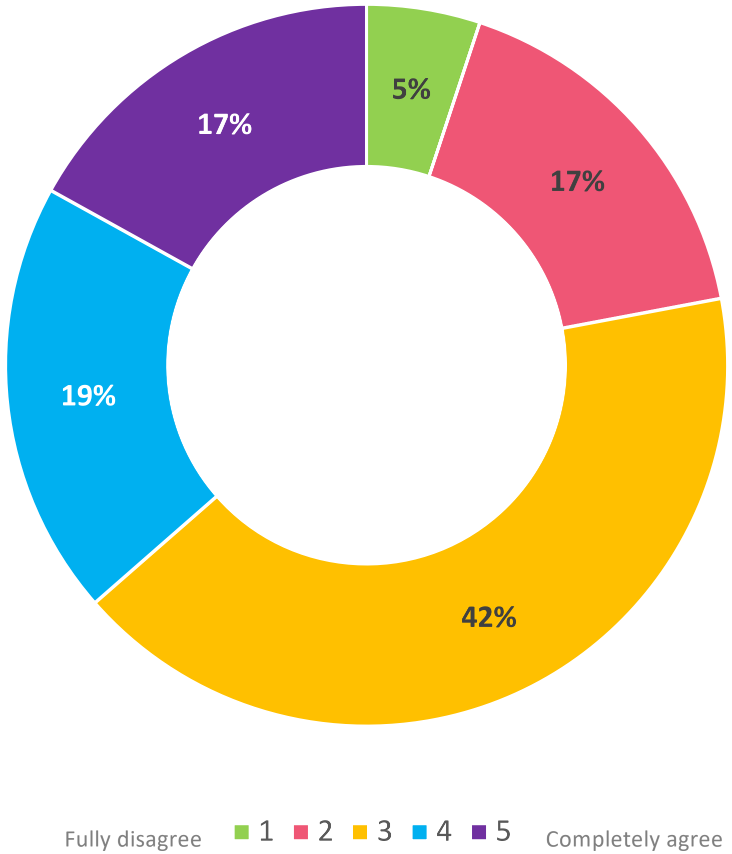
I agree with the introduction of a future pilot that introduces partial randomization.



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Q: Do you have any suggestion to change or improve the evaluation process?

"As criteria to rank equal score proposals, number of participating countries should come 1st than gender balance. Also, the gender balance criteria is unfair the way it currently is, as the research team that is reported in proposal stage may be completely changed during project implementation."

"The selection of the evaluators is key. Sometimes, by the way they write, it seems that they are not experts in the field, and lack basic knowledge."

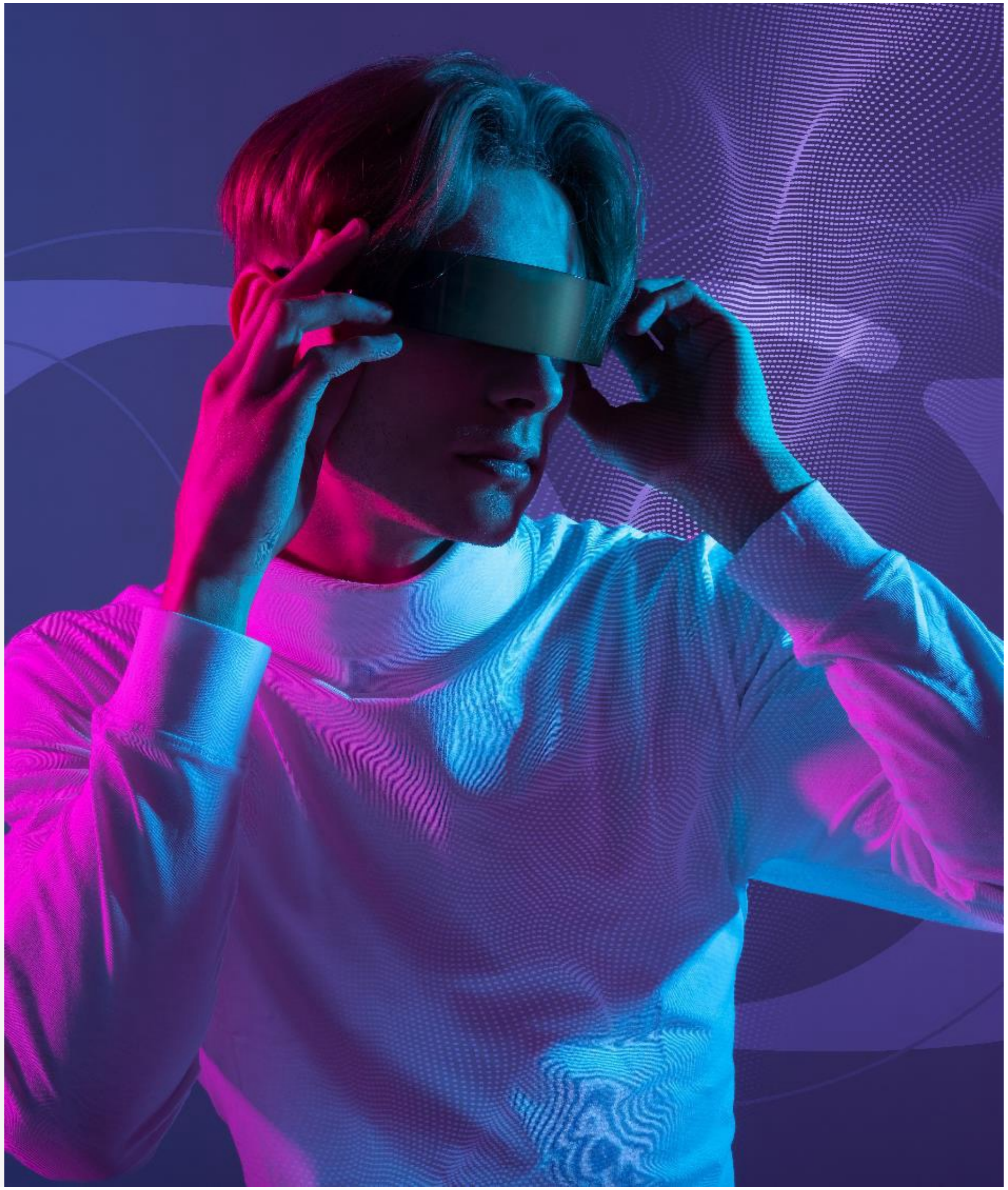
"See as positive a lower average number of partners per proposal, and decrease the max budget per proposal, in order to distribute the money in more ideas and technology developments. Many partners in teh consortia bring less efficiency and less control of each partner's activities (i.e. more easy to dilute the smaller contributions in the work done by the most active partners - the coordinator always want the project to go well and never will disclose weaknesses in the way)."

"Be clear and transparent in the use of AI to support the evaluation process"

Key discussion points – Evaluation Process

- Several limitations of the current ex aequo procedure have become increasingly evident. An increasing number of funding decisions between equally scored proposals are being determined by the gender balance criterion.
- It is worth considering whether the current ex aequo criteria remain the most appropriate mechanism for ranking proposals, particularly those awarded the maximum score (15/15). As gender balance is assessed at the proposal stage, the current approach may create wrong incentives for applicants to optimise consortium composition primarily to satisfy the tie-break criterion.
- A revision of the ex aequo procedure should be made. One possible approach would be to introduce interviews for the highest-ranked proposals, or for proposals with identical scores, with the outcome contributing to the final ranking.
- The approach used in the EIC Work Programme, where gender balance is assessed on the basis of Work Package Leaders, could provide a more robust and transparent alternative. This would enable evaluators to better assess leadership responsibilities while reducing the risk of artificially constructed gender balance.

Two-stage proposals



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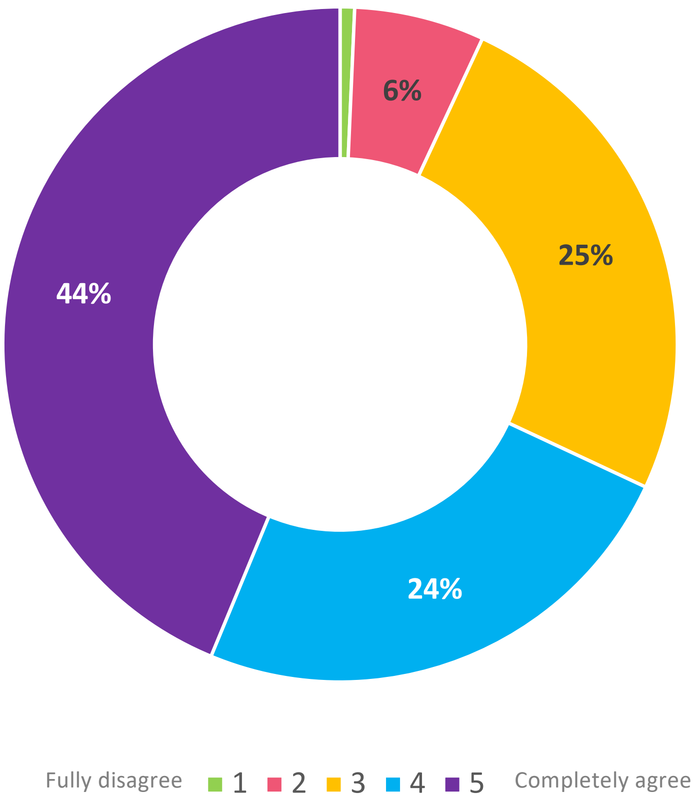
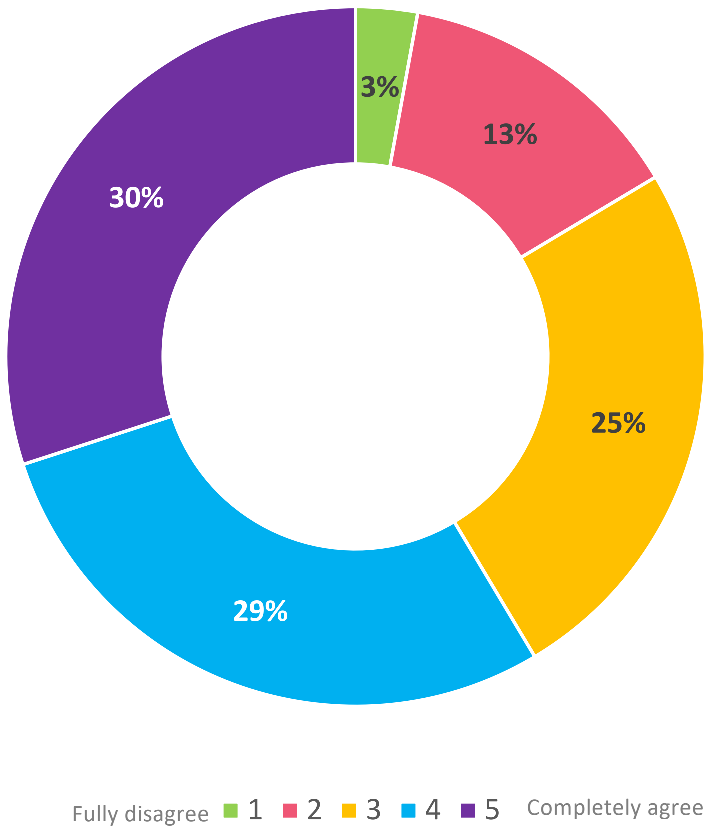
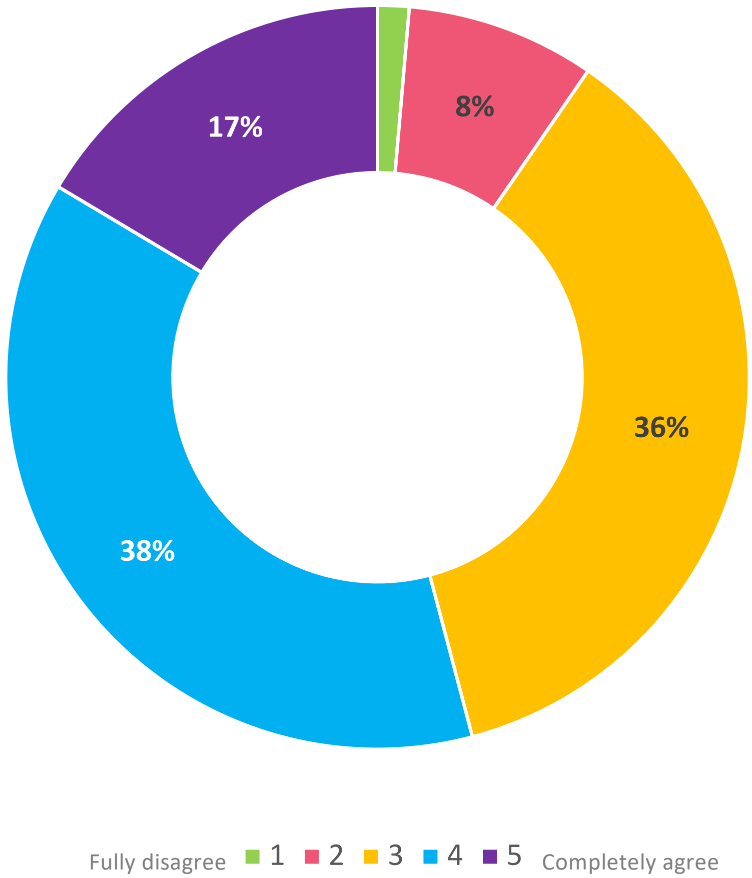
The usage of 2-stage proposals should be increased, especially in topics that might have a large number of proposals submitted.



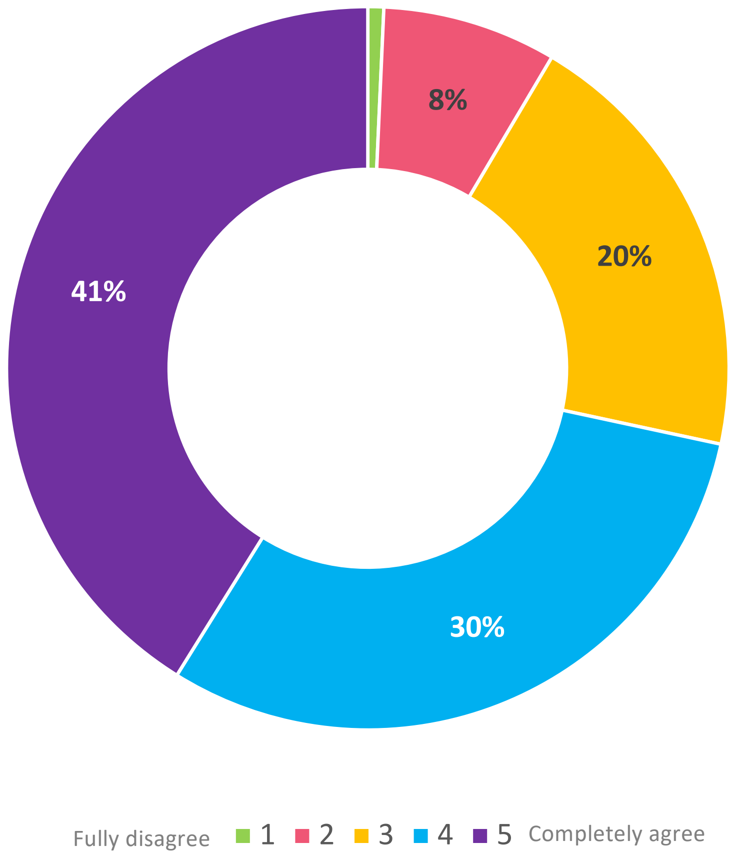
Two-stage proposals reduce the amount of work involved in the preparation of a proposal when compared to a full proposal.



Do you agree with the current template for two-stages proposals?



The reduction in time (one month) between the notification of approval of the first-stage and the submission deadline for the second-stage may affect the quality of the proposal submitted in the second phase.



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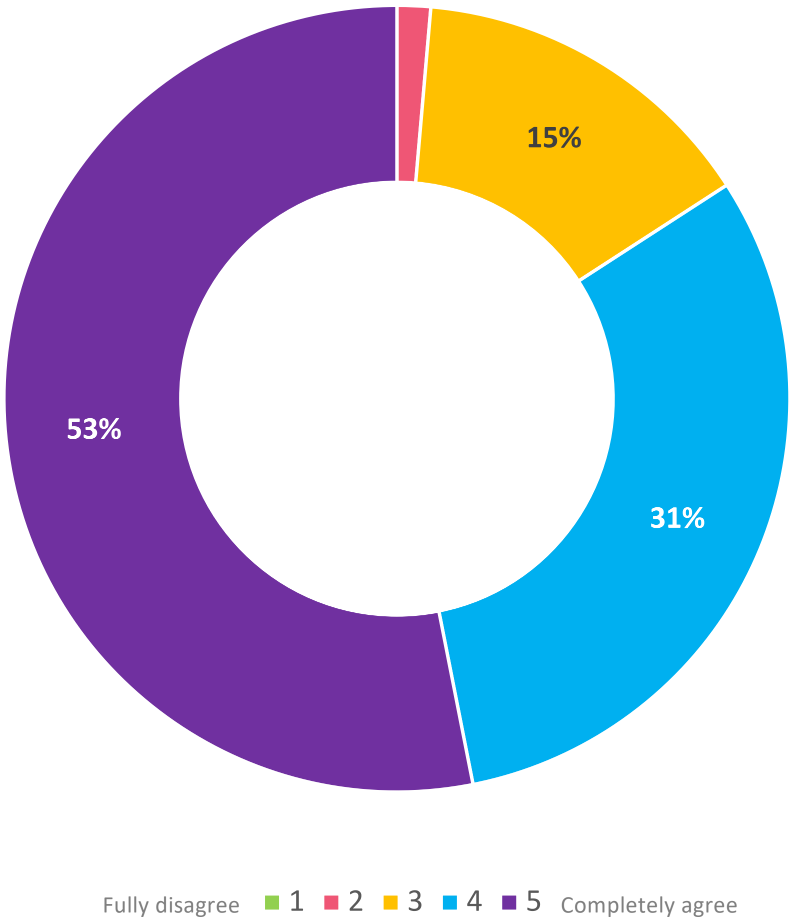
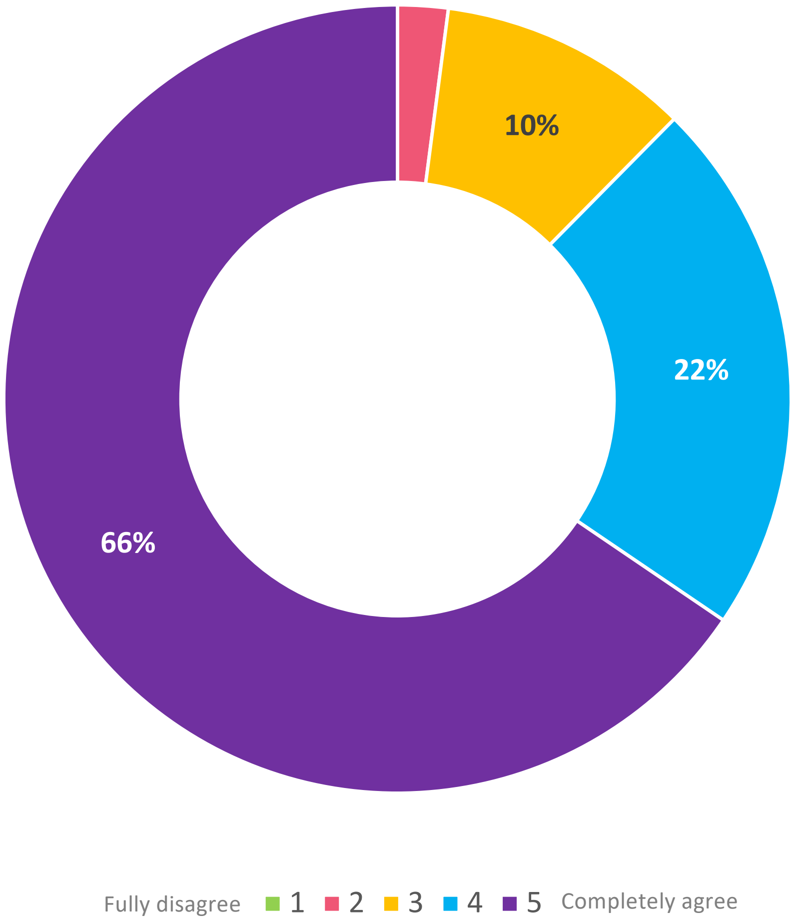
The first stage proposals should be blind evaluated as default.



The blind evaluation could prevent bias from evaluators towards less known institutions and widening countries.



Q: Do you have any suggestion regarding two-stage proposals?

"Two-stage calls should be used more often in oversubscribed topics, as they reduce wasted effort for applicants and evaluators. However, the time available between first-stage success and second-stage submission is often too short and may negatively affect proposal quality and consortium preparation. Blind evaluation at first stage could also be useful to reduce potential bias and place more emphasis on the idea and expected impact."

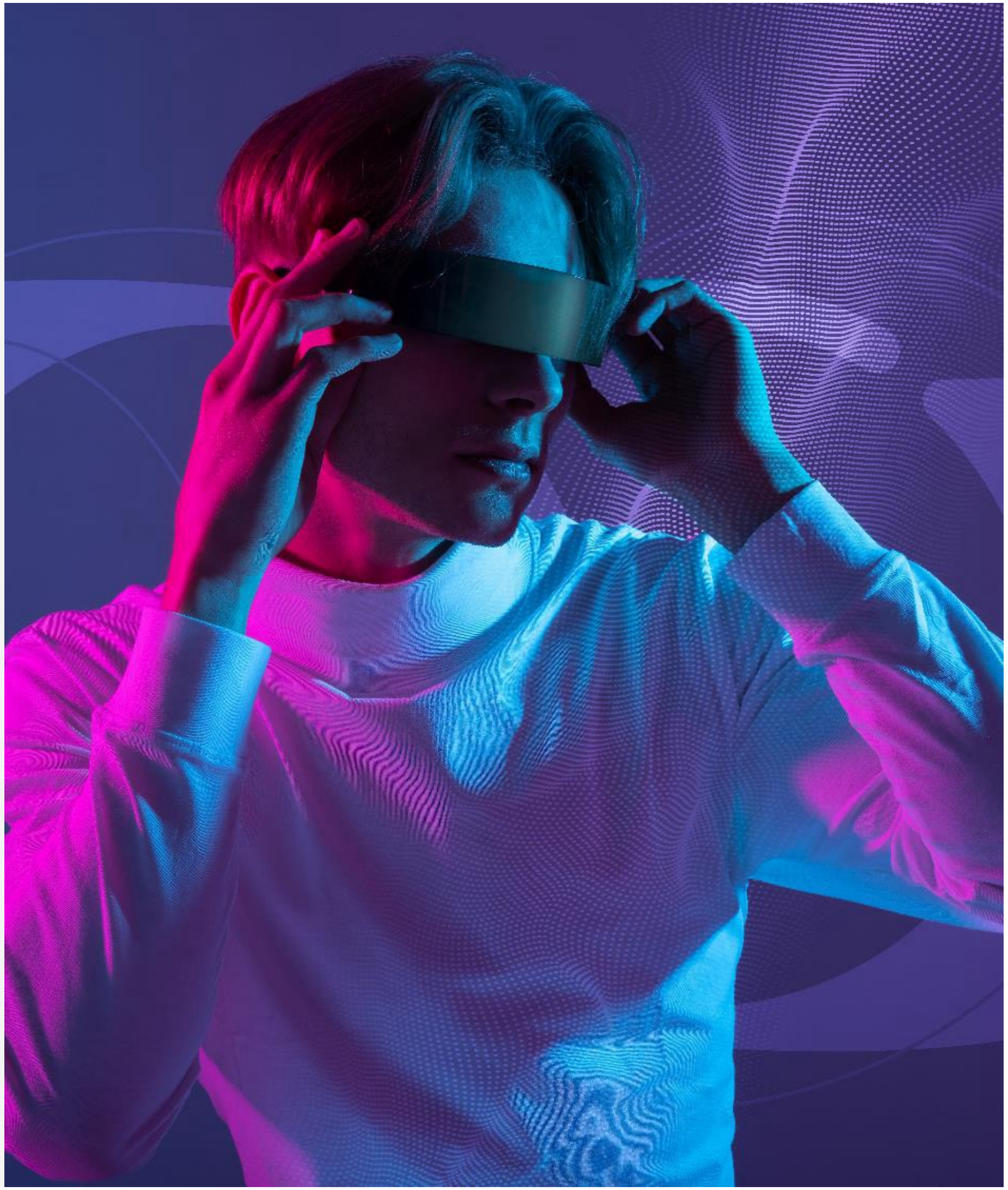
"A dedicated section for the work plan should be included. It does not need to be overly detailed, but should present the main work packages, associated tasks, and assigned responsibilities. The Impact section could be shortened to accommodate the work plan, while keeping the overall limit at a maximum of 10 pages."

"Avoid it. The work for first stage is similar to one stage only."

Key discussion points – Two-stage proposals & Blind evaluation

- Two-stage proposals can be an effective approach for topics expected to be highly oversubscribed, reducing the workload for both applicants and evaluators while focusing resources on the most competitive proposals.
- As two-stage proposals are expected to be introduced across different parts of Horizon Europe, it is essential to ensure the highest possible level of consistency in their design and implementation.
- Blind evaluation at the first stage could be a valuable tool to reduce the risk of unconscious bias and reinforce confidence in the fairness of the evaluation process.
- The timeframe between the first and second stages should be carefully assessed to ensure that successful applicants have sufficient time to build strong consortia and prepare high-quality full proposals.

Lump-Sum mechanism



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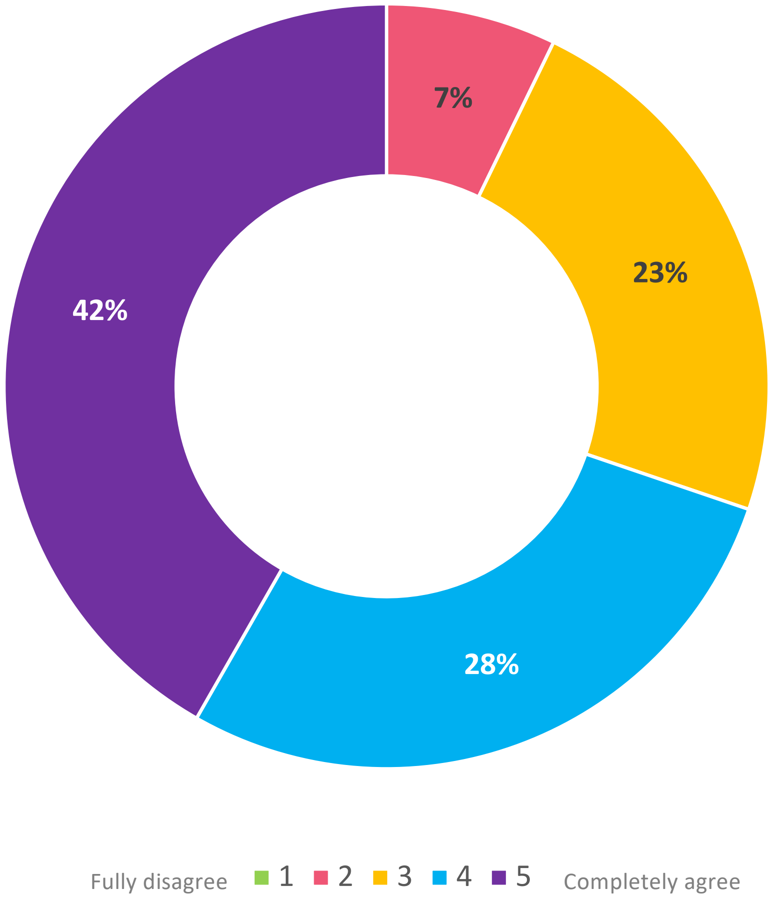
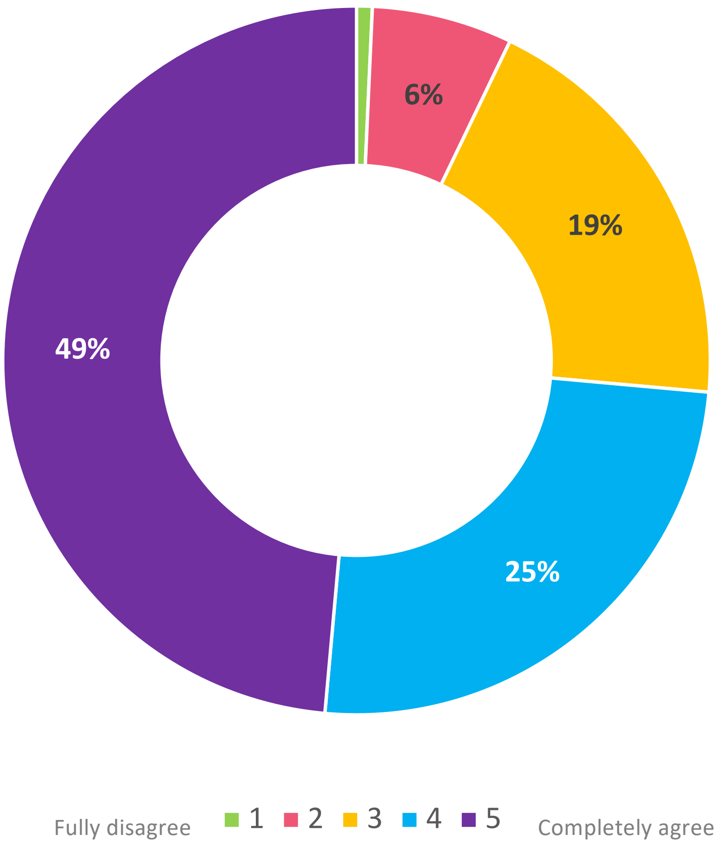
The usage of lump-sum should be increased and surpass the actual cost grants.



Lump-sum is a great simplification measure since no complex financial reporting is required.



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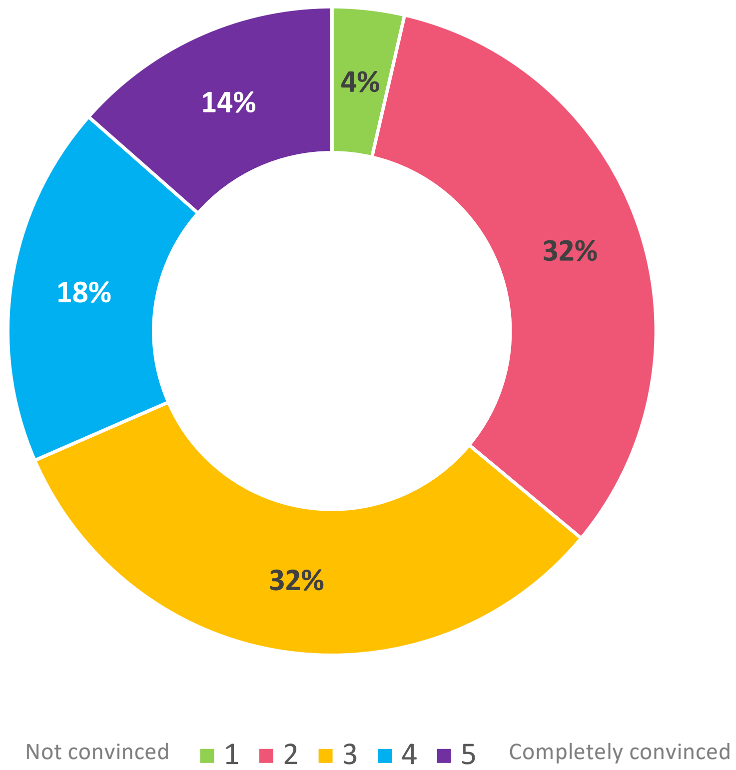
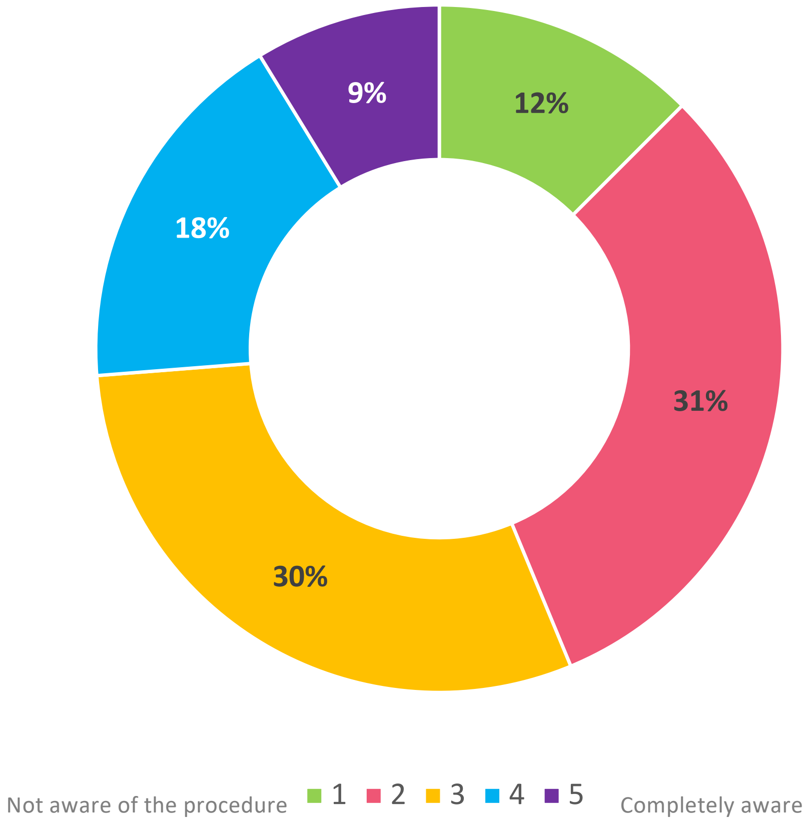
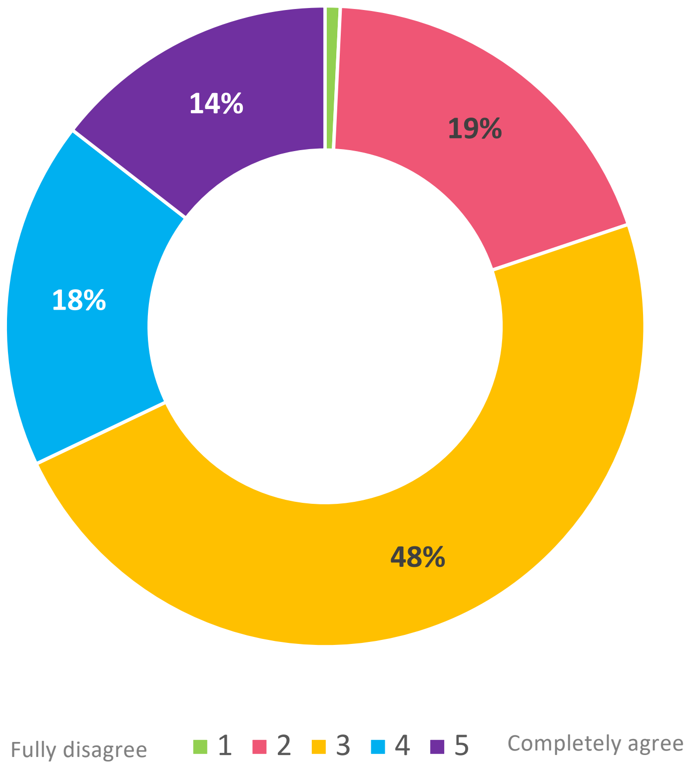
Are you fully convinced that no financial audits would take place for projects implemented through lump sum?



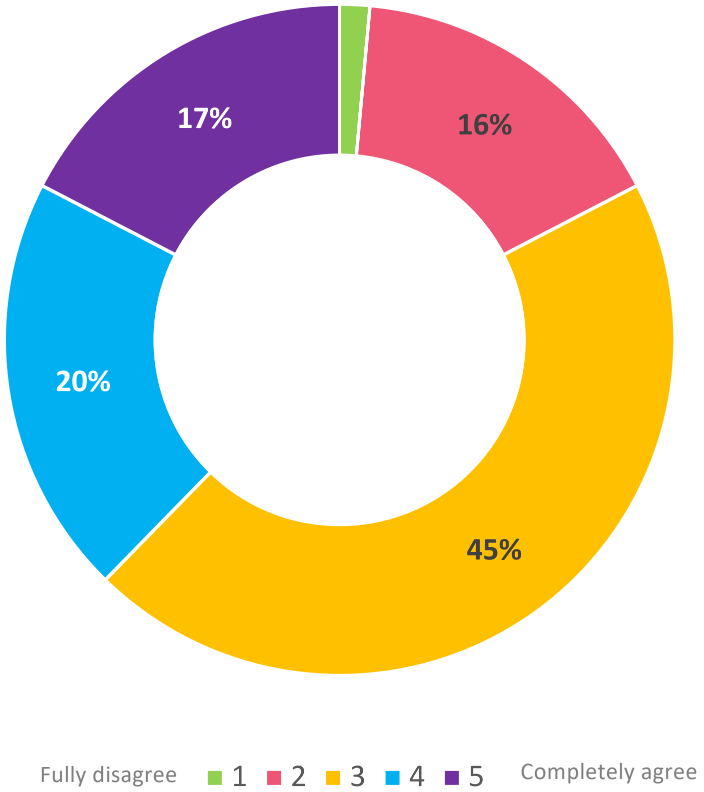
Do you know how the ex-post technical reviews will occur?



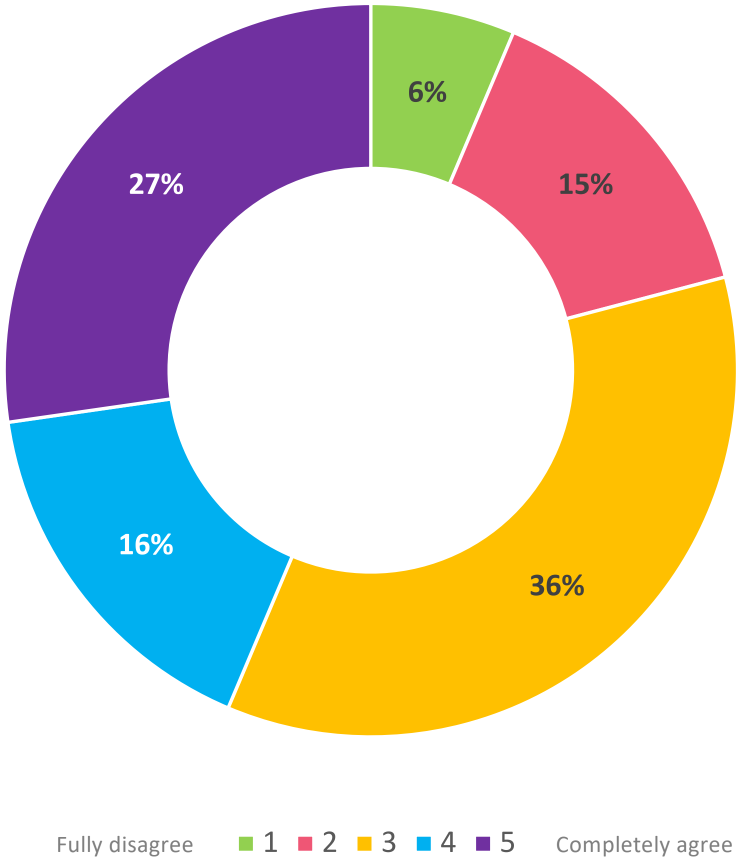
The personnel costs presented in the lump-sum dashboard are in-line with my institution personnel costs.



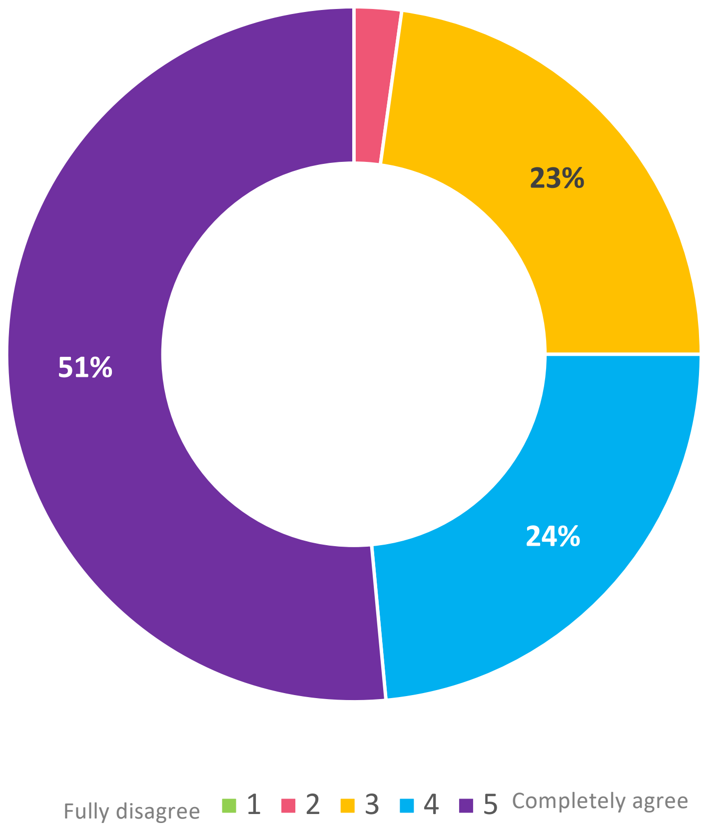
The lump-sum budget excel is easy to fulfil and the guidance is sufficient.



The lump-budget table should be fulfilled only in the Funding and Tenders Portal (no excel).



The excel lump-sum budget table could be uploaded to the Funding and Tenders and the data introduced automatically in the designated fields.



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Q: Do you have any suggestion/comment regarding lump-sums?

"We do not find the Excel file very easy to use (in fact, it is quite intimidating), and we would like it to be improved and simplified. However, we consider it far worse if it disappears and we are required to enter all information directly into the Portal. The option of uploading the file and having the Portal extract the information is the best solution."

The dashboard for personnel costs is very out of date when it comes to the average salary costs, which can make proposals seem inflated, even if explained in the comments. It should be based on the countries salary tables for public employees as most proposals are submitted by public universities. Private institutions could make use of the "Any Comments" section.

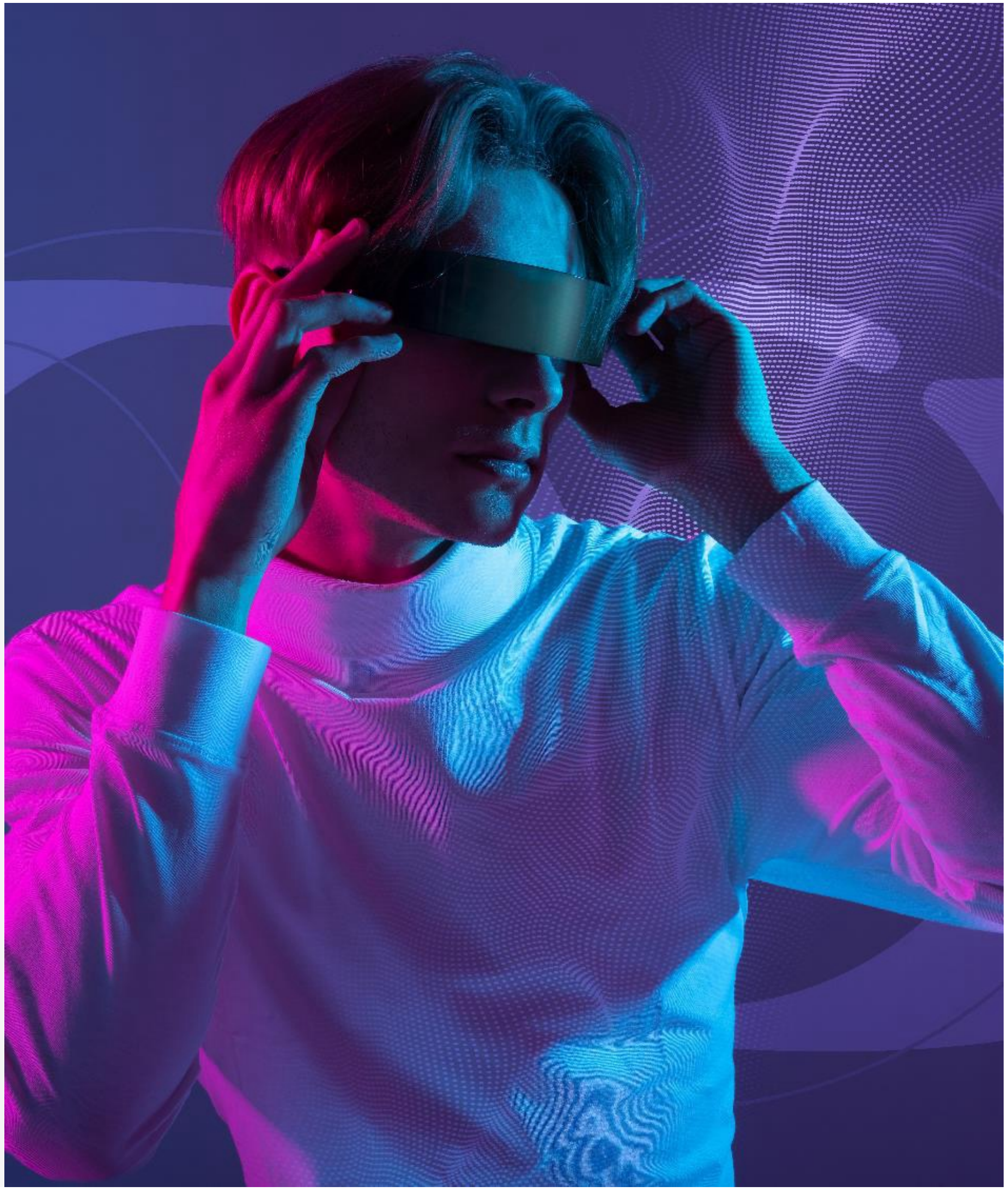
"Lump sum can be a useful simplification measure, particularly during implementation, but it should remain an option rather than become the dominant model for all actions. There is still uncertainty in the community regarding the practical implications of ex-post reviews and the level of financial risk that remains. The budget preparation process could also be improved, especially through better digital integration between the Excel tool and the Funding and Tenders Portal."

"Specify what the audits will look into if they occur and the ex-post technical reviews. Clarify if alterations in personnel can be made."

Key discussion points – Lump Sum

- The lump sum funding model has clear potential to simplify project implementation. However, further guidance and clarification are still needed to ensure a smooth and consistent application of the model.
- The purpose, methodology and possible consequences of the ex post technical reviews should be explained more clearly. In addition, more evidence should be collected and shared to better understand the main findings of these reviews and the reasons for any financial reductions.
- The Funding & Tenders Portal pilot for budget preparation presented several challenges for applicants. Preparing the budget directly in Part A is a complex, time-consuming and error-prone process, which runs counter to the overall objective of simplification.
- The possibility of uploading the lump sum Excel budget table directly into Part A is welcome. In practice, consortia continue to prepare the budget offline using Excel, making the current duplication of work unnecessary.
- Actual Cost grants should remain available as an alternative funding model. Different types of organisations, particularly universities and Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs), may continue to prefer this approach depending on the nature of their activities and internal financial management systems.

Personnel Unit Cost Option (PUC)



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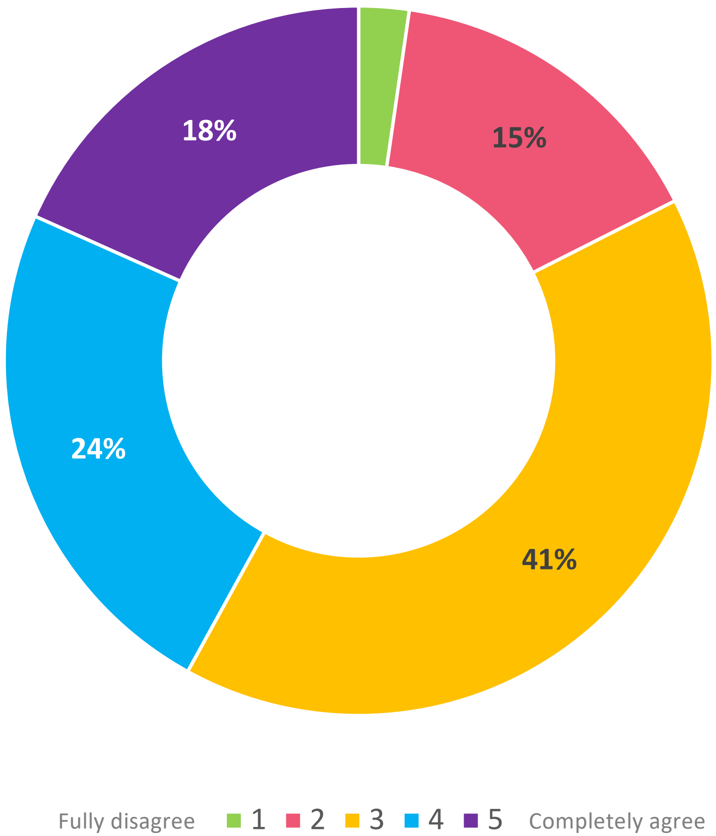
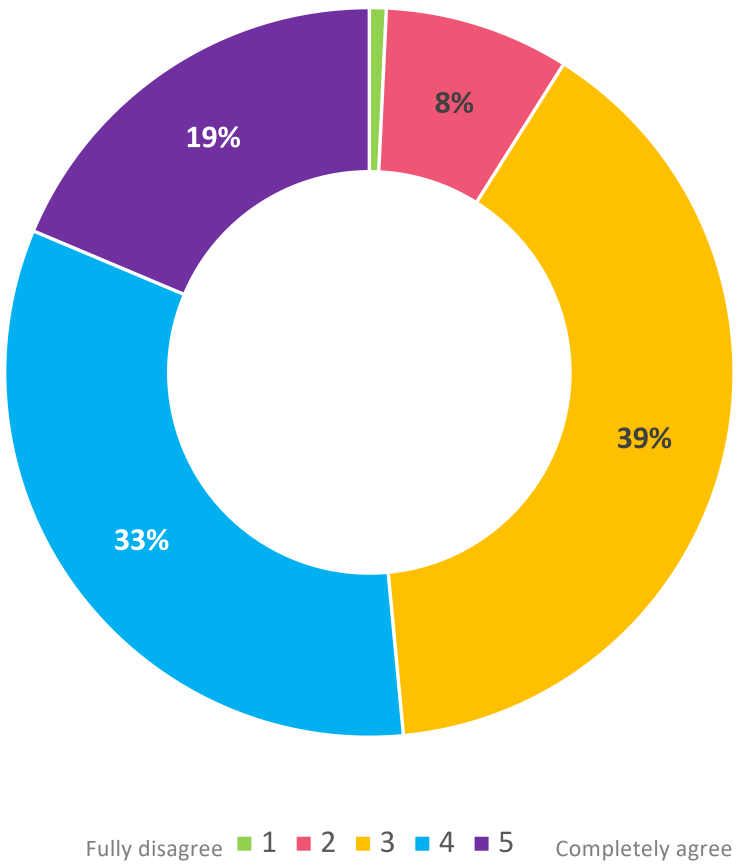
The personnel unit cost (PUC) option currently is a good way of simplification, and it can be adopted by my institution.



If the PUC adapted its methodology to different personnel categories, this could be more attractive, and I would consider their usage.



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Q: Do you have any suggestion/comments on how the PUC methodology could be improved so that institutions could effectively benefit?

"The PUC option may be attractive as a simplification measure, but its practical usefulness depends on how well it reflects the real personnel cost structure of institutions. A methodology that distinguishes different staff categories would make the system more realistic and more attractive for adoption. Greater predictability, clearer guidance, and examples adapted to different institutional profiles would also help."

"It would have to be with this method - PUC adapted to different personnel categories

"The PUC methodology could be improved by allowing differentiated personnel unit costs by personnel category, such as senior researchers, junior researchers, technicians, administrative staff, and other relevant staff profiles. A single average personnel rate may not reflect the real salary structure of some institutions.
A category-based or banded PUC methodology would make the system more realistic and attractive, because it would better align reported effort, salary structures, and budget implementation. This could reduce distortions in financial reporting while preserving the simplification benefits of the PUC approach.."

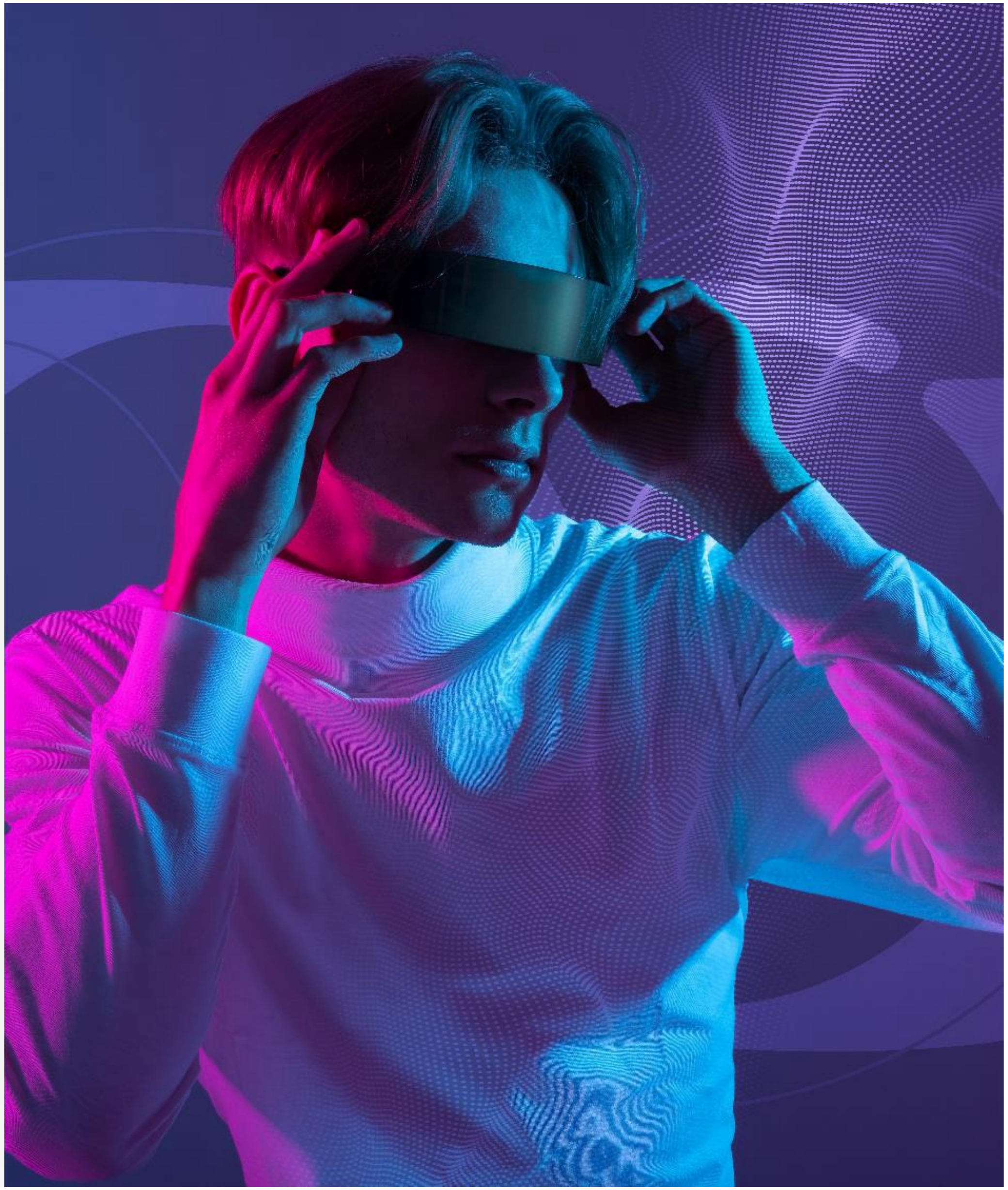
"Not familiar enough with the concept"

"I am not very knowlegeble in this part"

Key discussion points – PUC

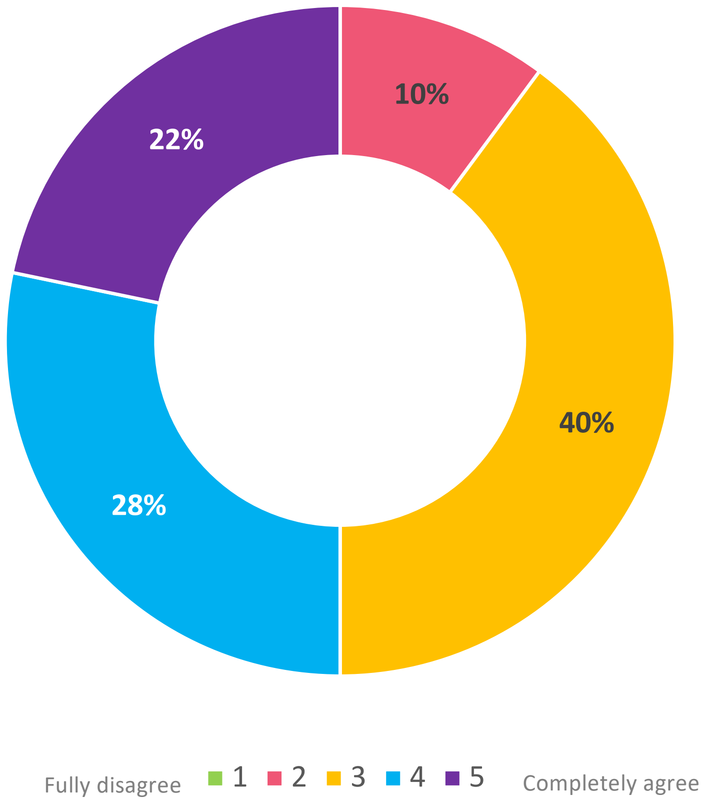
- We understand the rationale behind Personnel Unit Costs (PUC) and recognises their potential to become a genuine simplification measure for both the proposal preparation and project implementation phases.
- However, the current uptake clearly indicates that the model is not yet delivering the intended results. Further improvements are needed to significantly increase its adoption.
- Introducing staff categories, similar to those used in the Lump Sum budget table, could make the methodology more attractive and easier for organisations to adopt.
- Another possible improvement would be the automatic annual adjustment of certified personnel unit costs, based on the EU annual inflation rate, thereby reducing the need for frequent recalculations and certifications.
- Personnel Unit Costs should remain an optional methodology for calculating personnel costs and should not become the default funding model under FP10.
- The survey also revealed a limited level of awareness of the PUC methodology among respondents, highlighting the need for further communication, guidance and capacity-building.

Financial reporting of actual costs grants

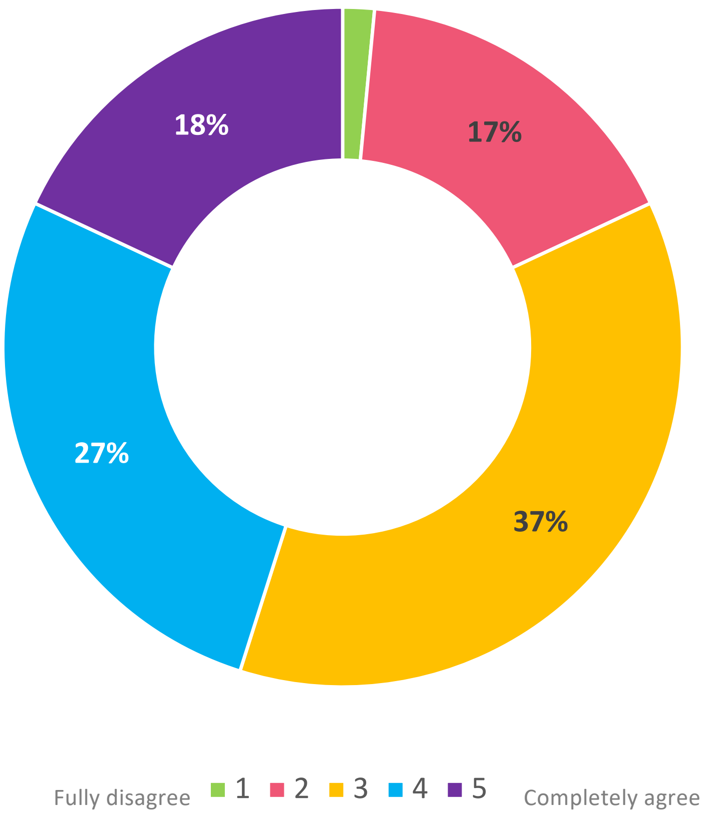


INNOVATION STARTS HERE

The Annotated Grant Agreement (AGA) provides a clear guidance to legal & finance aspects and it is easy to consult.

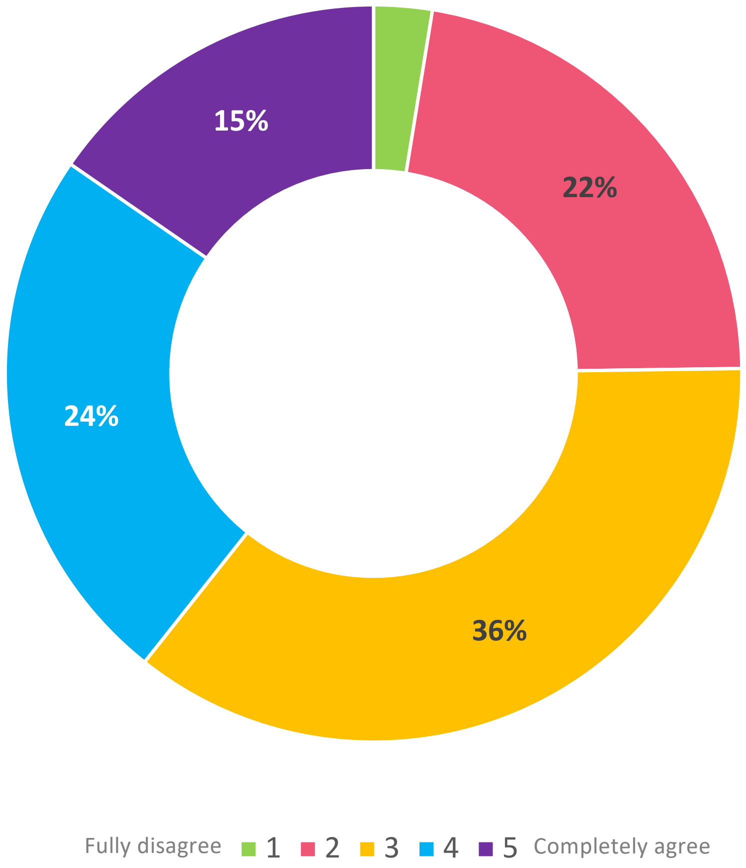


I am fully aware about the methodology to calculate the personnel costs, and I have no doubts that I am doing it right.



INNOVATION STARTS HERE

Actual costs grants should remain an option instead of lump-sum.



INNOVATION STARTS HERE

Q: Do you have any suggestion/comments about the budgeting and financial reporting?

"Continue updating the Annotated Model Grant Agreement to provide clearer guidance on financial reporting, supported by more practical examples, FAQs and case studies covering common financial management situations."

"Chose one method. This mixing of budgeting methodology and reporting is killer. It means the institutions have a very hard time preparing their research managers to optimize internal processes for one or the other."

"Practical examples for each member states would be useful, as well as sharing good practices."

"Actual cost grants should remain available as an option, since they are still more appropriate for certain project types and institutional contexts. Further simplification should focus on clearer rules, more user-friendly guidance, and greater consistency in interpretation, particularly regarding personnel cost calculation and supporting documentation. Digital tools and examples tailored to typical beneficiary situations would also be helpful."

"It is an overly complex process that makes it much more difficult for smaller institutions, particularly those without well-developed financial departments, to participate in funding applications."

Key discussion points – Financial reporting & AGA

- The Annotated Grant Agreement (AGA) should be updated regularly to reflect recurring questions and clarifications, particularly those already addressed through the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Practical examples are an invaluable tool for promoting a consistent understanding and application of the rules.
- Actual Cost reporting remains prone to errors, particularly in the calculation of personnel costs, which is still not fully understood by many beneficiaries. Additional guidance and dedicated training sessions delivered by the European Commission, focusing on the practical calculation of personnel costs, would be highly beneficial.
- While we support the objective of a single rulebook, simplification should not come at the expense of clarity. The diversity of funding instruments under the European Competitiveness Fund will require clear guidance and careful implementation to ensure that beneficiaries can easily understand and apply the new rules.

Thank you

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