



Strengthening Capacitation Impact in Horizon Europe Twinning Projects

Audience: EU Funding Agencies and EU Research Executive Agency (REA)



Capacitation activities are central to the mission of Horizon Europe Twinning projects, aiming to reduce regional research disparities and build excellence in Widening countries. However, evidence collected from the coordinators of 16 sister Twinning projects¹ (HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS-03 [HORIZON Coordination and Support Actions]) reveals systemic barriers in practice, limiting the long-term impact and sustainability of capacity-building investment.

These include inconsistent definitions across funding programmes, misaligned reporting frameworks that prioritise research and innovation outputs over capacity-building ones, and inadequate recognition of reusable capacity-building outputs/results. This brief provides targeted recommendations to REA and EU funding agencies to strengthen the impact and sustainability of capacitation in Twinning projects. These recommendations are based on coordination experience and aim to maximise the impact and return of capacitation investments while advancing the harmonization of excellence within the European Research Area (ERA).

STRATEGIC RELEVANCE Why this and why now?

Widening countries represent untapped research potential critical to European competitiveness. Horizon Europe (HE) allocated €1.4 billion across 2021–2027 to Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence (WIDERA) actions, including Twinning projects that link coordinator institutions in Widening countries with advanced partners to foster scientific excellence across ERA. Yet evidence of implementation in practice¹ and independent expert reasoning² suggest that current frameworks may not fully optimise these investments. The WIDERA Work Programme emphasises open science, research assessment reform, and institutional capacity-building for an ethical, equitable, and inclusive ERA. REA's commitment to simplification and increased focus on scientific-technical content over financial aspects creates a timely opportunity to align capacitation project requirements with its distinct primary objective: capacity-building towards scientific excellence rather than innovation breakthroughs. The ongoing definition of the next Horizon Europe framework programme (2028–2034) further underscores the relevance of these recommendations.

¹ Santiago et al. (2026). Good practices guide for widening projects' management, <http://hdl.handle.net/10773/46857>; Santiago & Pereira (2026). Survey data: experience in practice regarding the management of Twinning projects, <https://doi.org/10.48527/MJ5D4N>

² European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (2024). Align, act, accelerate – Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/9106236>

Key Evidence: Insights from the experience of sister Twinning projects



Terminology ambiguity hampers comparability and the uptake of best practices.

Coordinators across 16 Twinning projects hold divergent understandings of capacity-building formats (e.g., courses, schools, workshops, seminars), creating inconsistencies in planning, implementation, and hampering the ability to learn from each other's experiences and the feasible uptake of best practices.

Reporting frameworks misaligned with capacity-building objectives.

Current HE reporting templates are adjusted to register and characterize research and innovation outputs (e.g., publications, prototypes, innovations) as suitable for Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) and/or Innovation Actions (IA). However, reporting templates fail to clearly capture capacity-building as relevant and impactful outputs/results in Twinning projects (e.g., ECTS credits, best-practice flows, guidance). Moreover, the present reporting template compels coordinators to prioritise short-term metrics (e.g., participant numbers, hours delivered) that reflect implementation rather than efficiency for capacity-building activities.

Exchanges underutilise research managers and administrators (RMA) capacity-building potential.

Exchange activities in Twinning projects heavily favour researchers' mobility over that involving RMA staff, thereby missing critical opportunities to strengthen institutional science management capacity, which is essential for sustainable excellence. Institutional capacity depends heavily on research expertise, but also on management capability to best support scientists towards the growth of research excellence.

Capacitation results development remains undervalued.

Less than 50% of the surveyed projects plan to produce reusable capacitation results (e.g., internal science management and infrastructure guidance/templates, new syllabus for graduation or post-graduation, protocols). These outputs represent high-value, scalable tools for strengthening the Widening coordinator, while holding a broader potential for impact across ERA leveraged by open science policies.

Implementation barriers signal systemic issues.

Operational challenges reported across 40–60% of projects suggest structural problems related to the commitment of advanced partners. These are not random project management failures but predictable consequences of programme design. Partner engagement requires a clear articulation of benefits and well-defined capacitation role requests under call texts and, consequently, Grant Agreements.



Recommendations

1

Standardise capacitation activity definitions across EU programmes

By publishing harmonized official definitions and minimum quality standards for core formats in HE guidance and call texts for Twinning capacitation activities. These should include clear instructions on expected activities to be organized, in particular their structure (e.g., duration, format, theory vs. practice time distribution, prevalent learning methodologies), appropriate target audiences and their sizes, as well as examples of appropriate outputs and Key Performance Indicators that can be used to measure the level of achievement of capacity-building objectives of the project and/or its impact.

Enables consistent planning, comparable reporting, identification of best practices, and evidence-based programme evolution. Minimize the burden of pre-and post-award stages for applicants and coordinators.

2

Develop capacitation-specific reporting frameworks and indicators

By providing clear indicators within reporting platforms to enable robust performance assessment regarding capacity-building at the institutional governance level, concerning individual competence acquisition of the researchers and RMAs involved, and addressing the internal (within consortium) and external (beyond the consortium, within the ERA) value of exploitable resources developed by the project. Alternatively, an open format that allows coordinators to provide proof of achievement of each specific objective in a tailored manner (similar to COST Actions), could be considered.

Realigns project evaluation with Twinning objectives. Provides evidence for assessing institutional transformation and leverages the long-term success of the funding programme.

3

Promote RMA capacity-building components

By requiring Twinning projects to explicitly include RMA capacity-building activities (e.g., exchanges, joint workshops, training) with dedicated budget allocation, as already considered in the work programme for 2026 – 2027, and also by establishing criteria for the evaluation of these components in the proposal assessment (pre-award stage), then through reporting stages (post-award stage).

Builds institutional management/administrative capacity essential for sustained competitiveness in EU funding and improved project implementation quality. Fosters institutional recognition of the RMA career and leverages RMA's career development.

Horizon Europe's investment in Widening Participation represents a strategic commitment to European research excellence and cohesion. Evidence from EPIBOOST and 16 sister Twinning projects demonstrates that current capacitation activities deliver value but face systemic barriers limiting their transformative potential.

The REA's commitment to simplification and focus on scientific-technical merit creates an ideal policy window for these reforms. By aligning this with the distinct nature and objectives of capacity-building projects, REA can significantly enhance the long-term impact of Widening investments and strengthen a more inclusive and competitive ERA in the future Framework Programmes.



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- 1- EPIBOOST (GA 101078991)
- 2- TWIN2PIPSA (GA 101079147)
- 3- NanoCAT (GA 101079142)
- 4- FONDA (GA 101079134)
- 5- TwinVECTOR (GA 101078935)
- 6- SUPRALIFE (GA 101079482)

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