

The header image features a dark blue background with several interlocking gears in various colors (orange, red, green, purple, teal). Each gear contains a white icon: a target, a network of nodes, a person, a star with a ribbon, and a hand pointing at a screen. The gears are arranged in a cluster, with some overlapping.

Aligning national research programmes through better preparation, governance and communication

Aligning and coordinating national research programmes has great potential to boost the payoff from EU Member States' R&D investments, by pooling resources, avoiding wasted efforts and achieving critical mass. And there are now a range of possibilities to do this – whether through Joint Programming Initiatives (JPIs), ERANets or Article 185 actions.

"I think the wealth in Europe is in the variety of approaches that we have, and MLEs finally give us the opportunity to learn from that."

Dr Jana Kolar, MLE Chair, executive director of the CERIC-ERIC research infrastructure

The PSF's Mutual Learning Exercise (MLE) on Alignment and Interoperability of Research Programmes has proposed a range of ways to do this better: from good practice examples and case studies, to a self-assessment tool that can be used by any country to identify potential improvements, and a commitment by all participating countries to meet again in one year to compare progress and identify next steps.

Challenges and solutions

MLEs involve a structured exchange of knowledge and best practice by national research and innovation (R&I) stakeholders from a range of European countries, supported by a team of policy experts. National participants raised a number of concerns and challenges they encounter in trying to get their research programmes to work better together.

The importance of engagement with other ministries was highlighted by many, as was the issue of political commitment beyond the research ministry, such as in parliaments. Others emphasised the need for a systematic process for deciding on which joint programming initiatives (JPIs) to join as the opportunities continue to increase. And most countries recognised the weakness of their monitoring and evaluation of joint programming – despite considering it a key success factor.

"Realising that other countries are facing similar problems but apply different solutions is a big added value," said Thomas Zergoi, who participated in the MLE on behalf of the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG).

The MLE therefore developed a self-assessment framework and learning tool to support countries in their analysis of their situations and opportunities for improvements. The tool, based on 16 key factors for alignment and interoperability of research programmes, helps assess the degree of alignment that exists already and the difficulty of improvements. The tool is annexed to the MLE's final report.

In addition, the MLE sought to identify transferable lessons that could improve all stages of the programming cycle – from strategy and planning, through funding and implementation, to evaluation and dissemination. Examples include:

From Estonia, scientific counsellors who engage with other ministries on behalf of the Ministry of Education and research

The Swedish funding approach, which uses a central research budget to leverage funding from other ministries

Selection criteria, to help decide which joint research programmes to join, used by Austria, Slovenia and Portugal

The German research ministry's success in working with parliament to secure political commitment for joint programming

Advice on networking and involving stakeholders – from Austria, Denmark, France and Portugal.

"I think the wealth in Europe is in the variety of approaches that we have, and MLEs finally give us the opportunity to learn from that," said the MLE Chair, Dr Jana Kolar, executive director of the CERIC-ERIC research infrastructure and former Director General of Science in Technology at the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology.

The MLE's final report summarises these good practices and lessons learned, as well as national overviews of the present situation in each participating country, its strengths and weaknesses, and potential actions to be implemented at national level. More detailed information is available in three reports on preconditions, governance and communications on the PSF portal.

"The MLE was an enriching experience for all those who would like to have in-depth knowledge about practical models used for JPI implementation," said Ioana Ispas, the Romanian participant from the Ministry of Research and Innovation (MCI).

"We received a great deal of ideas and direction on how to proceed, be more active and become a better ERA partner," agreed the Slovenian participant, Petra Žagar from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

Where do we go from here?

Launched by the ERAC Joint Programming Group (GPC) to boost national coordination, improve efficiency of public research funding and address major societal challenges, the PSF MLE on Alignment and Interoperability of Research Programmes ran from July 2016 to June 2017. The implementation of the results was discussed at the GPC meeting in September 2017.

"We now need to disseminate the MLE results," said the French representative, Emmanuel Pasco-Viel from the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. "We need to take the most important elements of the five reports and encourage other countries that did not take part in the MLE to do more about joint programming."

Participants found the process itself, and the contacts made, almost as valuable as the policy lessons it identified. They emphasised the importance of the self-assessment tool and good practices, but also the value of face-to-face discussions and the trust established.

"Getting a larger and closer network of colleagues in Europe is in itself alignment," said Karin Schmekel, from the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research. "The exchange of knowledge, problem solving and reflection on our own system and processes has been useful and encouraging."

"While we have always had close contacts at institutional level with other countries, the MLE brought us in touch with a new set of people to talk to," said Rui Durão, from the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education. "With them, we share a common understanding and experience which allows us to take the discussion further and into much greater detail."

Twelve countries participated in the MLE: France, Lithuania, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Estonia, , Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Sweden, as well as Turkey and Germany as observer countries. The MLE involved three fact-finding visits to participating countries to

meet local stakeholders and learn from hands-on experience. Discussions tackled the issues in three stages: from preconditions needed for joint participation, through national governance structures, to the role of communication.

Seeking to improve the design, implementation and evaluation of research and innovation policies, the PSF provides expertise and practical support to Member States in a number of ways: Peer Reviews of national R&I systems, Specific Support to policy reforms, and project-based Mutual Learning Exercises to improve policy-making and implementation. It is funded under Horizon 2020, the EU's research and innovation programme, with up to €20 million.

For further information:

The Final Report of the PSF Mutual Learning Exercise on Alignment and Interoperability of Research Programmes (LINK)

The PSF Mutual Learning Exercise on Alignment and Interoperability of Research Programmes

<https://rio.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/policy-support-facility/mle-alignment-and-interoperability-research-programmes-national-coordination>

