



# Mutual Learning Exercises

## A proposal for a new methodology

Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility



Research and  
Innovation

## **EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

Directorate-General for Research and Innovation  
Directorate A — Policy development and coordination  
Unit A.4 — Analysis and monitoring of national research programmes

*Contact (H2020 PSF):*

Román ARJONA, Chief Economist and Head of Unit A4 - [Roman.ARJONA-GRACIA@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Roman.ARJONA-GRACIA@ec.europa.eu)

Stephane VANKALCK, H2020 PSF Head of Sector, Unit A4 - [Stéphane.VANKALCK@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Stéphane.VANKALCK@ec.europa.eu)

Diana SENCZYSZYN, H2020 PSF Team Leader, Unit A4 - [Diana.SENCZYSZYN@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Diana.SENCZYSZYN@ec.europa.eu)

Diana IVANOVA-VAN BEERS, H2020 PSF Project Coordinator, Unit A4 - [Diana.Ivanova-Van-Beers@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Diana.Ivanova-Van-Beers@ec.europa.eu)

RTD-PUBLICATIONS@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission  
B-1049 Brussels*

# **Mutual Learning Exercises**

## **A proposal for a new methodology**

### ***Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility***

Developed in the context of the Mutual Learning Exercise on  
measures to stimulate business research and innovation

by Terttu Luukkonen

Chair of the independent expert panel

***EUROPE DIRECT is a service to help you find answers  
to your questions about the European Union***

Freephone number (\*):  
00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(\* ) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you)

**LEGAL NOTICE**

This document has been prepared for the European Commission however it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

More information on the European Union is available on the internet (<http://europa.eu>).

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

PDF

ISBN 978-92-79-61298-5

doi:10.2777/292023

KI-AX-16-006-EN-N

© European Union, 2016.

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Cover images: © Lonely, # 46246900, 2011. © ag visuell #16440826, 2011. © Sean Gladwell #6018533, 2011. © LwRedStorm, #3348265. 2011. © kras99, #43746830, 2012. Source: Fotolia.com



**Contents**

FOREWORD..... 5

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 5

MUTUAL LEARNING PROJECT ..... 6

    Basic features..... 6

    Adoption of a topic for MLE project..... 6

    Commitment to the MLE project ..... 7

    A 'standard' MLE project ..... 7

    Requirements for the participating country..... 9

    Role of the PSF ..... 9

    Role of the coordinator and experts..... 9

    Outcomes ..... 100

    Stakeholders in the process ..... 100

DISSEMINATION ..... 11

EVALUATION OF THE MLE..... 11

ADDED VALUE ..... 11

COSTS..... 11

## FOREWORD

To support countries in reforming their research and innovation (R&I) systems, DG Research and Innovation has set up a 'Policy Support Facility' (PSF) under Horizon 2020, aimed at "improving the design, implementation and evaluation of R&I policies". The PSF provides best practice, leading expertise and guidance to Member States and Associated Countries (on a voluntary basis) through a broad range of services to address their specific needs.

In this way the Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility replies to the strong need expressed by the Member States (i.e. ERAC consultations) to offer more customer-oriented services to support evidence-based policymaking.

There are three main services offered by the Horizon 2020 PSF to the Member States and Associated Countries:

(1) Peer reviews of national R&I systems which are in-depth assessments of a country's R&I system carried out by a panel of experts and leading to concrete recommendations to the national authorities on reforms necessary to strengthen their R&I system.

(2) Specific support to countries which can take form of 'pre peer review' (providing a *solid evidence-base and focus areas for the full peer review*), 'post peer review' (providing *concrete advice on how to adjust the implementation of peer review recommendations*) and 'ad-hoc requests' (providing a *set of concrete recommendations on how to tackle a specific issue R&I policy issue and how to implement the reform*).

(3) Mutual learning exercises which are demand-oriented, focused on specific R&I topics of interest to several volunteering countries, more hands-on, and translated into project-based exchange of good practice.

The first PSF mutual learning exercise (MLE) was launched in 2015 on the topic of stimulating business investment in research and innovation. A specific task of the Expert Group appointed by the Commission to support this pilot mutual learning was to focus on measures to stimulate business research and innovation and to use that area as a testing ground for the methodology that would facilitate Mutual Learning. The Expert Group finished its work at the end of August, 2015.

This paper presents a new methodology for conducting the PSF mutual learning exercises which was developed in parallel with the roll-out of a pilot mutual learning on policies to stimulate business R&I investment in 2015.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the new methodology the Mutual Learning Exercise (MLE) is a project-based mutual learning whereby participating countries jointly examine a challenge-driven question in more detail and which involves information acquisition and information sharing activities. The starting point in the process is the recognition of a policy challenge and a need to implement change in country's policies. It is an in-depth and informal process whereby participating countries intending to learn by doing form a project and explore specific questions in more detail, aiming to implement change in their specific policy mix.

The aim of the MLE is to identify good practice, lessons learned and success factors based on robust evidence about the impacts of the measures and the contextual factors that may explain the impacts. In addition, the objective of this exercise is to support countries in designing, implementing and/or evaluating different policy instruments, adopting a more hands-on "learning by doing" approach.

Learning within a MLE project is supported by experts providing background knowledge of the take-up and effectiveness of policy instruments used to tackle the specific challenges as identified by the participating countries. Learning from peers, other participating countries, is a vital element of the process. All participants exchange knowledge and experiences on an equal basis. There is emphasis on hands-on learning and learning by doing whereby the process might indicate more or less

effective ways for goal-achievement to implement the initiatives planned by participating countries, but not to recommend policy choices.

## **MUTUAL LEARNING PROJECT**

### **Basic features**

A MLE process is *demand-driven* and *policy challenge*-based where a selected number of countries, e.g. three or four, that are faced with similar or closely related policy challenges wish to explore the best ways to tackle them, acknowledging a need of change in the design and/or implementation of particular policy instruments and wishing to learn from evaluation and experiences of these instruments in other countries. Process thus represents *learning by doing* supported by external expertise. Learning is not confined to EU countries but can be directed to interesting relevant country cases outside the EU.

This will lead to a project-type of collaboration for a set period of time (in principle, up to one year) with defined resources and goals.

Each participating country is expected to gain tailored information and expertise from the process, but is also open to other participants to learn from their circumstances/experiences. Thus, the project is based on open, frank, and confidential knowledge exchange between the participating countries. All participating countries are expected to participate actively, in a forthright manner, and to provide friendly peer support for mutual learning. The specific knowledge interests around the identified policy challenges may vary to some extent between the participating countries, but they are sufficiently close in order that the process can benefit all participants and that learning is mutual. This process is called *peer supported learning*.

### **Adoption of a topic for a MLE project**

A MLE project requires the engagement of typically 3-4 participating countries, although it is not confined to this number, wishing to learn from each other on a specific topic and tackling a challenge applying policy initiatives or policy instruments. The aim is to be better informed in implementing change. Even when a policy instrument is the target of interest, it is usually a question of the policy challenges that countries are faced with. Thus, a commonality would involve recognition of a joint challenge, though this can take somewhat different forms and usually has a different socio-economic or policy context.

The Horizon 2020 PSF can promote the process and help countries recognise their common interests through multiple ways. In addition to the annual PSF expression of interest which invites countries to propose potential subjects for MLE processes, the PSF can also suggest a joint MLE process to a number of countries which seem to be preoccupied with similar types of questions, helping these countries to organise a specific planning meeting and negotiating with them about the process. Appendix 1 gives an indicative structure of the MLE project proposal which the participant countries are expected to write. They will be assisted in this task by the Horizon 2020 PSF.

The process can also benefit from an interactive workshop organised by the Horizon 2020 PSF for matchmaking and identifying joint interests in a MLE project. The major challenge with such a workshop is the fact that different policy areas need different type of participants, for example, coming from different administrative domains. Even ministries and agencies within the same administrative domain can have slightly diverging knowledge needs; with the former being in charge of and more focused on general policy choices while the latter interested in more day-to-day and instrumental issues in policy design, implementation, and evaluation. There is no easy solution to this challenge. Exploring in advance potential divergent interests and encouraging the formation of interested groups around specific issues may help, and the Horizon 2020 PSF can provide its services in this, but there is also a need for countries themselves to be able to suggest new topic areas and seek potential interested partners at the workshop.

## Commitment to the MLE project

The countries express their commitment to a MLE project through two measures, as follows:

- The interested participating country will give an expression of engagement in the project in a written form signed by a high-level official or Minister (Deputy Minister).
- The country will write a short, preliminary version of the *background report* (see box 1) describing the major challenges in the policy area/change they wish to address in the process, former measures taken to address them, and expectations concerning the MLE project. This is to ensure that the joint interests of the participants are converging enough to make the MLE relevant and that the countries are sufficiently engaged and will contribute to the process.

### **Box 1. A list of questions to address a policy challenge and to prepare the country's preliminary background report**

What is the major challenge that needs to be tackled in the country concerned

How was the challenge identified; the basis of the judgment

Earlier attempts to tackle the challenge; experiences

Current attempts to tackle the challenge; policy-mix

Perception of major drivers for failure in the attempts to tackle the challenge:

- features of earlier attempts to tackle the challenge, potential evaluation of impacts
- framework conditions that are relevant

What is expected to be a potential way to tackle the challenge now

Expectations concerning the MLE process

Which other Member States may be interested in this project

If there are several MLE candidates with sufficient engagement by participating countries, the Horizon 2020 PSF will negotiate with the countries about the timing and organisation of these. There can simultaneously be several MLE processes going on at the same time.

## A 'standard' MLE project

The following table describes a 'standard' MLE process with an indicative time schedule. The process should be regarded as modular, where all or a selection of the phases may be required, depending on the specific topic and available knowledge of the selected topic.

| <b>Phase</b>                    | <b>Description of the activities</b>   | <b>Time/month</b>     |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Preparation of challenge papers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selected experts prepare background challenge papers to frame the theme for the project</li> </ul>  | -2 to 0 month         |
| Joint theme and partner search  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1. Countries search common interests using different means including an interactive ERAC MLE workshop organised by the Horizon 2020 PSF as a platform.</li> <li>• This workshop can be animated by experts who have prepared <i>challenge papers</i> on potential MLE project domains.</li> <li>• After the workshop further exchanges of interests and information needs among potential MLE participants, e.g. through emails, teleconferences, and potentially an early planning meeting, helped by Horizon 2020 PSF and coordinator/experts (e.g. the organisation of a teleconference).</li> </ul> | 1 <sup>st</sup> month |

| <b>Phase</b>  | <b>Description of the activities</b>   | <b>Time/month</b>                        |
|---|--|--|
| Expression of country's commitment for a MLE project <sup>1</sup> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A high-level official or Minister (Deputy Minister) signs an expression of interest in a MLE project.</li> <li>• Interested MLE participants prepare short, preliminary <i>background reports</i> (see above).</li> </ul>   | 3 <sup>rd</sup> month                    |
| <i>Decision of a MLE</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horizon 2020 PSF makes a decision on a MLE project</li> <li>• Horizon 2020 PSF appoints a coordinator and experts with appropriate experience for the MLE project.</li> </ul>   | 3 <sup>rd</sup> month                    |
| Planning of the MLE project                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With the help of the coordinator/experts and Horizon 2020 PSF participating countries hold a planning meeting for the MLE project where they specify the policy challenge that is the focus of the MLE project.</li> <li>• The countries agree on the nature and focus of the more detailed background papers to be prepared by the participants.</li> <li>• The countries agree on the evidence and analysis to be supplied by the expert(s) about the specific challenge that has been identified as the focus of the MLE project.</li> <li>• The participants make the work plan including identification of specific data needs, specific set of activities, landmarks, and deadlines as well as a plan for the country visits and the budget.</li> </ul>   | 4 <sup>th</sup> month                    |
| Checking the progress   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MLE participants hold a teleconference (organised by coordinator/Horizon 2020 PSF) to check project progress including the planning of the programme of the country visits</li> </ul>   | 5 <sup>th</sup> month                    |
| Visit to country A and B  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MLE participants, the coordinator, the experts, and a Horizon 2020 PSF representative make an information acquisition visit to two MLE participant countries (if justified, one of these can be a non-participating country).</li> <li>• They interview experts, policy-makers, and other stakeholders about the policy challenge and the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the instruments or a policy mix to tackle the challenge, to improve their understanding of the specific challenge identified for the MLE project.</li> <li>• MLE project participants (animated by coordinator/experts) hold a working meeting during the country visits to draw conclusions of the learning made.</li> <li>• The coordinator/experts will write a summary report on the visit.</li> </ul> | 6 <sup>th</sup> to 7 <sup>th</sup> month |
| Internal workshop   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The coordinator/experts and Horizon 2020 PSF organise an internal workshop for the discussion of project findings and for drawing conclusions.</li> <li>• Each participating MLE country presents what it has learned of relevance from all the information provided in the</li> </ul>  | 8 <sup>th</sup> month                    |

<sup>1</sup> A MLE project can also start with this commitment if participating countries have identified sufficiently aligning challenges in their previous interactions.

| <b>Phase</b>                   | <b>Description of the activities</b>   | <b>Time/month</b>                         |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
|                                | <p>reports and visits.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need for final additional information is checked.</li> <li>• Expected outcome is the identification of recommended ways to tackle the challenge that is the focus of the MLE project.</li> <li>• The coordinator/experts write an end report of the conclusions.</li> <li>• A few other countries can participate as observers if the participants agree on it.</li> </ul>   |   |
| End workshop for all countries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The coordinator/experts and the Horizon 2020 PSF help organise an end ERAC MLE workshop, where all Member States and Associated States can participate, to discuss the findings of the MLE project.</li> <li>• Each participating country will actively participate in the workshop to present the learnings they made in the process.</li> <li>• The purpose of the meeting is dissemination of the learning about the policy challenge made in the project.</li> <li>• Expected outcome is the start of a new MLE process cycle with identification of potential common challenges for new MLE projects.</li> </ul> | 9 <sup>th</sup> to 10 <sup>th</sup> month |

### **Requirements for the participating country**

The MLE project requires specific action and resources from the participating country.

- These have to appoint a sufficiently high-level person as their participant, a person with experience and knowledge of the policy challenges and instruments in the domains selected and in a position to engage their ministry or administration in the process. S/he may be assisted by technical or other national experts in the task. However, it is important that this officially nominated country representative regularly participates in the MLE events.
- Another requirement is that the country concerned provides resources – normally in terms of labour - to prepare *the background report* – more thorough than in the preliminary stage - describing their major challenge and the measures taken to tackle it.
- The country provides further, potentially new data and information that the process requires.
- The country allots time for their participants to attend the meetings and potential country visits.
- If a country visit is made to a particular country participating in the MLE, it helps to organise the programme of the country visit.

### **Role of the Horizon 2020 PSF**

The Horizon 2020 PSF provides administrative and substantive support to the MLE project. It engages the project coordinator and together with the coordinator identifies and then engages the topic-specific experts (1-2 per topic) who will provide expert help to the project. The Horizon 2020 PSF has an important role in the promotion of new MLE projects and helping countries recognise their common interests through a variety of activities, as outlined in this report.

### **Role of the coordinator and experts**

The project coordinator is a person with experience and understanding of the topic substance area but also, and importantly, experience in managing interactive processes.

- In close collaboration with the participating countries and the Horizon 2020 PSF, *the coordinator* helps
- to define the focus of the MLE project,
- in close interaction with the representatives of each participating country helps them to identify their information needs and plan the activities
- helps to organise the meetings, the workshops, identifying and communicating with experts, and writing the reports the process will produce
- with the Horizon 2020 PSF identifies a potential need and engagement of topic-specific experts in the process
- will ensure that the experts will prepare appropriate material and provide help in the process
- keeps track with project progress and helps to solve potential problems encountered

*The topic-specific experts* (1-2 per topic) will provide expert help to the participating countries including writing the *challenge papers* and providing further and more tailored information of the policy areas within their expertise, the need of which has been identified during the project. They also contribute to the project end report. The MLE project can invite additional experts to its meetings to be able to have oral communication with them.

The background documents, *the challenge papers*, which the topic-specific experts prepare, are challenge and practice-driven overviews and not just scholarly reviews of the topic area. They should include information of the uptake of the particular policy instruments within and outside the EU, a list of challenges and options governments have in the policy area (when adopting particular instruments) in the design, implementation, and evaluation phases of the policy initiatives, and available knowledge on the effects of the policy instruments and the conditions promoting success or failure. The experts need to be acquainted with relevant research literature, evaluations made of the specific tools that are relevant, have experience of interaction with practitioners, and be aware of *policy needs*.

## **Outcomes**

In addition to tacit learning, in the end there should be a written report drawing lessons for policy design/ implementation/ evaluation, but protecting the confidence of the participating countries. The conclusions of the report will be consulted with participating Member States to ensure the right balance between confidentiality and support for mutual learning.

Because of the 'learning by doing' approach, it is expected that the major outcome from the process will be better informed policies and a well implemented policy change. Such an outcome is intangible and not easily measurable. However, *ex post* evaluation can detect some of these outcomes through qualitative information gathering methods.

## **Stakeholders in the process**

Stakeholders, most notably, those who are targets of policy measures constitute an important factor in the national contexts of policy making and are an important part of what is here called framework conditions. Depending on the country context, their views are taken into account through different processes and to different extent. A general principle is that for policies to be successful, when designing them it is important to understand the rationale and incentives of policy target groups. However, when policies aim to promote a renewal of economic activities and to generate novel patterns of action they can be adverse to existing state of affairs and to existing interests. The involvement of specific stakeholders in the process can thus easily become a promotion of specific interests. Stakeholders can, nevertheless, be involved in the MLE process such as the workshops or be interviewed in in-country visits to present valuable information of policy effects of a specific policy action.

## **DISSEMINATION**

Major means to disseminate information and experiences of the MLE processes to other than participant countries include the reports the process will produce and workshop type of events that are open to participation by Member states and Associated Countries.

## **EVALUATION OF THE MLE**

The major project outcomes of MLE projects are expected to be intangible by nature. It would not be possible to envisage all the potential outcomes in advance, but these could be multiple including no visible change in participating countries if that is the learning provided by the project.

After the first few MLE projects, the Horizon 2020 PSF will conduct an evaluation of the perceived usefulness, benefits and drawbacks of the process, and more systematically to explore further development by using independent, external expertise. The evaluation of MLE projects cannot be based on hard data because of the intangible nature of the expected outcomes. These outcomes can still be evaluated using various qualitative means of data collection.

If the evaluation of MLE will uncover that the process is not fulfilling the expectations, the process should be radically renewed or abandoned.

## **ADDED VALUE**

Participating countries visit each other and exchange information of their policies and policy outcomes on their own initiative. The added value of the MLE process with regard to the self-initiated activities is to actively promote informal exchange of information and experiences among participants, helping to provide access to high quality, well-structured, and pertinent expert knowledge, and covering an important part of the costs of this; at the same time, providing peer and expert-based support for the process of designing and/or implementing policy change or improvement in the implementation of policies.

The MLE will complement other forms of ERAC activities and its design has taken into account existing tools for policy learning in other international organisations and forums and will not be overlapping with them. In relation to options for mutual learning offered by the OECD, Eureka or other international forums and organisations, the MLE process is a more focused and tailored learning exercise within a relatively short period (from 6 to max. 12 months). It provides a small number of countries an opportunity to iterative and active self-learning, to hands-on and in-depth policy learning on country-specific challenges, an opportunity that other organisations and forums do not offer.

The countries are in an equal position in the process and neither experts nor co-learning countries make recommendations concerning the choices a country should make. The expected benefits include a policy change/improvement which is based on improved understanding of the most effective ways to tackle the specific policy challenges that a participating country has.

## **COSTS**

H2020 will contribute to the costs associated with the appointment and work of the project coordinator and experts and the travel costs of two national representatives delegated to MLE project-specific meetings and fact-finding country visits as well as external interviewees invited to the MLE project meetings. The countries will cover the costs of preparing the background material and reports for the project. The countries will cover the travel costs of their representatives to the preparatory and final dissemination workshops and if they participate in MLE project meetings with restricted participation.

### **Indicative list of questions to be covered by a MLE project proposal**

Definition of the instrument type or policy area suggested for a MLE project

The focus of the suggested MLE project

Reasons why this focus is motivated as a MLE project

Special challenges faced by the participating countries in the area of the MLE project

Short description of what is expected to be done and achieved

### **Type of information to be provided by participating countries concerning policy instruments that are under focus in a MLE project - A list of tentative questions**

The challenge which is tackled by the proposed/planned/implemented instrument

What are the indications that the challenge is relevant

Are there other instruments addressing the same challenge; the policy mix addressing the same issues

Is there specific targeting of the instrument (industry, firm size, stage and age)

Other specific features of the instrument; including the planned duration (exit strategy)

Which organisation will implement/is implementing the instrument

Monitoring and ex post evaluation; plans, data collection, findings

Criteria of success: The desired state of affairs that the instruments are expected to achieve

Major drivers for success or failure: framework conditions (e.g., industrial structure and absorptive capacity; human capital aspects, such as existence of capabilities in R&D and innovation; financial markets; business tax rates; efficiency of tax collection etc.)

## How to obtain EU publications

### Free publications:

- one copy:  
via EU Bookshop (<http://bookshop.europa.eu>);
- more than one copy or posters/maps:  
from the European Union's representations ([http://ec.europa.eu/represent\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/represent_en.htm));  
from the delegations in non-EU countries ([http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/index_en.htm));  
by contacting the Europe Direct service ([http://europa.eu/europedirect/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/europedirect/index_en.htm)) or  
calling 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (freephone number from anywhere in the EU) (\*).

(\*). The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

### Priced publications:

- via EU Bookshop (<http://bookshop.europa.eu>).

This publication describes the new in-depth methodology for Mutual Learning (MLE) between national policy-makers under the Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility. It outlines the principles of this methodology representing hands-on project type of collaboration among a small group of countries and is driven by policy challenges as identified by the participating Member States.

*Studies and reports*



Publications Office