CESAER

Input note

Topic:	Revision of the EIT Regulation and Strategic Innovation Agenda – European Commission public consultation
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To:	European Commission
From:	CESAER

Key publications and references

As the strong and united voice of leading universities of science and technology in Europe, CESAER brings a distinctive perspective on the role of universities in innovation ecosystems, knowledge valorisation, entrepreneurship, talent development and the translation of scientific and technological excellence into impact. In particular, our input builds on:

Position paper 'Revitalise the European Institute of Innovation & Technology' (2024) - Calls for the EIT to return to its primary mission focused on innovation-oriented education, talent and knowledge-triangle integration; realign its funding model to better reflect the role of public and not-for-profit institutions; reduce administrative burden; and create stronger practical synergies with other European innovation instruments.

Joint amendments to Horizon Europe 2028-2034 (FP10) - Advocate for a strong and coherent European research and innovation ecosystem covering the full research and innovation value chain, leveraging the distinct contributions of universities, research and technology organisations, research and technology infrastructures, companies, investors and public authorities, and for knowledge-triangle integration within European Innovation Ecosystems. The amendments also explicitly maintain support for EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) within this architecture.

Joint statement 'Designing the European Competitiveness Fund: Key elements and the FP10–ECF interface' - Calls for autonomous but connected European instruments, with clear and operational pathways from research and innovation towards development, deployment and scale-up while preserving their different purposes, governance and intervention logics.

Overall assessment: There is momentum — be bold and revitalise the EIT

CESAER welcomes the European Commission's revision of the EIT Regulation and Strategic Innovation Agenda and entirely agrees with the need to strengthen Europe's innovation ecosystems, improve knowledge-triangle integration, develop and attract talent, reduce unnecessary complexity and ensure greater complementarity across the European research and innovation landscape.

The revision is particularly timely. Since CESAER published its position 'Revitalise the European Institute of Innovation & Technology' in 2024, the wider European innovation architecture has evolved considerably. The next Horizon Europe framework programme (FP10) and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) will together provide support across different parts of the research and innovation journey. The role of the EIT therefore needs to be clear, distinctive and complementary within this landscape.

CESAER considers that the starting point should be the distinctive added value of the EIT: its ability to integrate education, research and business through the knowledge triangle and build long-term innovation ecosystems across Europe. Universities of science and technology play a central role within these ecosystems. They generate frontier knowledge and technologies, educate researchers, engineers and entrepreneurs, create startups and spinouts, provide research and technology infrastructures and connect companies, investors, public authorities and regional ecosystems.

Our 2024 position already identified several challenges which are now reflected in the Commission's call for evidence. These include increasing administrative complexity, inconsistent approaches across KICs, excessive co-funding and flowback requirements, insufficient practical synergies with other EU instruments and an increasing focus on higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), which can limit the role of universities in EIT innovation activities. We warned that this risks turning the EIT's original 'knowledge triangle' into a 'knowledge pipeline', thus disrupting continuous interaction between research, education and business across innovation processes.

The revision therefore provides an opportunity not simply to make the EIT more responsive to new EU priorities, but to revitalise it by strengthening the functions that make it different from other European innovation instruments.

CESAER particularly welcomes the Commission's recognition of entrepreneurial education, skills, talent, early-stage innovation, innovation ecosystems and stronger links between universities and companies as important elements of the future EIT. At the same time, care is needed in implementing the proposed stronger alignment with the ECF. Strategic coherence should not result in EIT activities being primarily driven by the ECF's thematic priorities or downstream deployment logic. The EIT should complement the ECF, EIC and other parts of FP10 by performing functions for which it has distinctive strengths.

The same principle applies to financial sustainability. CESAER strongly supports effective use of EU funding, accountability and appropriate incentives for private investment. However, financial sustainability must not be equated with profit generation, financial return or 'flowback' from every activity or partner. Education, entrepreneurial skills, capacity-building and long-term ecosystem development generate substantial European added value even where they do not generate direct financial returns. Public and not-for-profit universities must therefore be able to participate on conditions compatible with their missions and financial models. This remains particularly important given the Commission's renewed attention to the long-term sustainability of KIC activities.

Core message: Revitalise the EIT as the EU's reference programme for innovation-focused talent development

CESAER calls for the EIT to return to its primary mission: innovation-focused education and training of science & technology talent through strong knowledge and innovation communities.

The EIT's distinctive European added value lies in combining this talent mission with the knowledge triangle of education, research and business. Its KICs should not seek to replace local and regional innovation ecosystems. Rather, they should connect and augment them at European level, enabling innovation-focused talent ecosystems to share experience and good practice, access complementary capabilities and partners across borders, and offer students, researchers and entrepreneurs opportunities that go beyond and augment what individual ecosystems can provide.

This should guide the revision of the EIT Regulation. Funding, implementation and synergies with other EU instruments should be designed around this primary mission: enabling talent, entrepreneurial skills and connected innovation ecosystems across all technology readiness levels, rather than moving the EIT towards a predominantly downstream, high-TRL and profit-oriented instrument.

CESAER response

1. Do you agree with the main problems and challenges identified in the call for evidence (here), including the need to strengthen Europe's competitiveness through more effective innovation ecosystems, stronger knowledge-triangle integration and better translation of knowledge into market impact? What are the main features of the EIT, common to all or most of its KICs, that have contributed most (and can further contribute) to strengthening Europe's competitiveness?

CESAER broadly agrees with the challenges identified. However, the EIT's contribution to European competitiveness should be understood through its distinctive mission of developing innovation-focused talent and connecting education, research and business through long-term European innovation ecosystems.

The knowledge triangle should remain at the heart of the EIT. The KICs can create clear European added value by bringing together universities, companies, students, researchers and other innovation actors across borders, and by connecting place-based ecosystems into broader European networks. These networks provide access to complementary capabilities, expertise and partnerships that can generate opportunities well beyond individual EIT-funded activities.

The EIT can also play an important role in supporting university–industry collaboration across the innovation continuum. In particular, it can provide opportunities for researchers to test technologies in real environments with companies and users, addressing gaps that are not covered by other EU instruments. At the same time, an excessive focus on high TRLs risks reducing the knowledge triangle to a linear "knowledge pipeline" and making participation less attractive to universities, researchers and students. Effective knowledge valorisation requires continuous interaction between education, research and business across different stages of innovation.

The EIT's distinctive role in translating knowledge into market and societal impact should therefore be defined more clearly. Some functions developed by KICs, including accelerators and small-scale innovation funding, increasingly overlap with activities delivered through the EIC and other EU instruments. The EIT should avoid duplicating these functions. Its comparative advantage lies in building and connecting innovation-focused talent ecosystems leveraging university–industry collaborations that also create the conditions from which technologies, teams and ventures can progress towards other instruments for scale-up and deployment.

This also requires clearer complementarity with European Innovation Ecosystems activities. These calls can support targeted ecosystem interventions, but they do not necessarily provide the same breadth, continuity and long-term community-building function as the KIC model. The EIT's added value should therefore lie in sustained European innovation-focused talent networks across the knowledge triangle, while avoiding duplication with more targeted innovation and scale-up instruments.

CESAER therefore supports retaining and strengthening the EIT's core mission, while clarifying its place in the wider EU innovation landscape: the EIT should connect and develop people and ecosystems, while instruments such as the EIC and the future ECF provide complementary routes towards technology scale-up, deployment and market uptake.

In short, we should revitalise the EIT as the EU's reference programme for innovation-focused talent development.

2. How could the EIT and its KICs better support Europe's attractiveness for talent, innovators and entrepreneurs across education, research and business, while reinforcing Europe's long-term innovation capacity?

This should be a central focus of the future EIT.

CESAER's 2024 position called explicitly for the EIT to refocus on innovation-focused education and talent development, particularly for early-career researchers and young talent through university-industry ecosystems. A useful comparison is that, while Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions supports research-focused talent development as the EU's reference programme for doctoral education and postdoctoral training, the EIT should be the EU's reference programme for innovation-focused talent development through the knowledge triangle leveraging the KICs.

The EIT should develop skilled and entrepreneurial talent through education, networking and training, including experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, exposure to industry and users, mentoring and opportunities for experimentation. Training future start-up founders is a valuable part of this mission, but the scope is broader: innovation capabilities are increasingly important across academia, industry, the public sector and the wider innovation ecosystem.

The European dimension is particularly important. KICs can provide students, researchers and innovators with access to companies, expertise, peers, infrastructure and opportunities across Europe that can go far beyond what exists within smaller ecosystems. EIT-labelled Master's programmes, industry-linked education and grants for exceptional students have demonstrated the potential of this model to attract high-quality international talent ('Choose Europe for emerging innovators') and connect education more closely with innovation and industrial needs.

Maintaining meaningful industry engagement is also essential. Industrial partners value access to highly qualified talent, expertise and research results, as well as collaboration around technologies at more advanced stages of development. The EIT should therefore retain sufficient flexibility to connect education and talent development with activities across the innovation continuum rather than artificially separating talent from the environments in which innovation takes place.

The Higher Education Initiative should be retained and strengthened, as it provides an important mechanism for further strengthening universities' innovation and entrepreneurial capacity. However, its delivery model should be reviewed. Funding conditions should encourage collaboration and complementarity between projects rather than the replication of similar activities, and successful approaches should be capable of being connected and scaled across the EIT community.

Overall, the EIT's distinctive contribution should be to create a European environment in which talented people can develop innovation capabilities through sustained interaction between universities, industry and wider innovation ecosystems, thereby strengthening both Europe's attractiveness to talent and its long-term innovation capacity.

3. How could the EIT and its KICs better collaborate with other EU innovation instruments and EU financial programmes in the next MFF, both within Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund, in order to ensure complementarity, clarity and coherent support while avoiding overlap and duplication across the investment journey?

Complementarity should start from a clear division of objectives through complementarities in created EU value-add.

The EIT should focus on what makes it distinctive: innovation-focused education and talent development, knowledge-triangle integration, and European networks connecting such ecosystems. It should not duplicate the role of the EIC or become a downstream instrument of the future European Competitiveness Fund.

CESAER already called in 2024 for stronger practical synergies with the EIC and European Innovation Ecosystems through streamlined processes, shared resources and coordinated activities. This remains important. The growing number of EU innovation instruments makes it increasingly necessary to ensure clarity in their respective purposes and ensure that beneficiaries can navigate between them without unnecessary complexity.

The relationship with the EIC should therefore be based on complementarity. KICs can support a broad range of innovation actors, ventures and pathways centred around innovation-focused talent development, while the EIC provides targeted support for high-risk and high-potential technologies and companies. Where appropriate, technologies, teams and ventures emerging from EIT communities should be able to connect easily with relevant EIC support. Existing cooperation and fast-track arrangements should therefore be reviewed and strengthened where possible.

At the same time, activities developed by KICs should be assessed carefully where they increasingly resemble support already available through the EIC or other Horizon Europe instruments. The objective should be to avoid duplication while preserving the broader talent ecosystem and knowledge-triangle role of the EIT.

Similar clarity is needed in relation to European Innovation Ecosystems. These instruments can be complementary: EIE calls generally support more targeted ecosystem interventions, while KICs can provide broader and longer-term European networks. Better coordination should ensure that these activities reinforce rather than duplicate one another.

Looking ahead to the ECF, the priority should be to create effective connections between EIT-supported talent, technologies, ventures and ecosystems and relevant opportunities for scale-up, deployment and uptake. These connections should reduce fragmentation and administrative repetition while preserving open and excellence-based access to support.

More broadly, the future architecture should enable smoother progression between instruments acknowledging that innovation rarely follows a linear pathway. The EIT, EIC, other parts of Horizon Europe and the ECF should remain distinct but interoperable, with clear interfaces and complementary roles across the innovation process.

4. What changes to the funding and implementation model would best improve flexibility and governance, reduce complexity, and strengthen support for ecosystem-building, entrepreneurial skills and early-stage

innovation while preserving incentives for impact and private investment? How could the KICs ensure closer alignment with the protection of the EU's financial interests and ethical rules?

The funding and implementation model should be realigned around the EIT's primary education, training and ecosystem-building mission.

CESAER's 2024 position stressed that strengthening innovation ecosystems and fostering innovation and entrepreneurial skills are primarily capacity-building, education and training activities, not profit-making activities. Financial sustainability should therefore not be equated with generating financial surplus. Public institutions such as universities should not be subject to inappropriate flow-back or profit-generation expectations, excessive co-funding requirements should be reassessed, and in-kind contributions should be recognised more flexibly.

A one-size-fits-all approach to co-funding and flow-back is not appropriate for the diversity of KIC activities. Technology development and validation towards market uptake inherently involve risk, while education, ecosystem-building and capacity development generate forms of value that cannot always be captured through direct financial returns. Current requirements can distort incentives and discourage university participation, ultimately weakening the knowledge triangle itself.

Administrative processes should also be substantially simplified and harmonised across KICs. Partners active in several KICs should not have to navigate different membership procedures, partner categories, platforms, templates and reporting requirements each time. Greater use of common or compatible systems, including, where appropriate, established Horizon Europe and Funding & Tenders Portal processes, would substantially reduce unnecessary complexity.

In general, the EIT should seek to be much more closely integrated with well-established and well-functioning processes and procedures used across Horizon Europe. This could include exploring the use of the work programme model standard across much of Horizon Europe, implemented through open and competitive calls on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal, with implementation managed through an executive agency.

Monitoring should be proportionate and focused on impact rather than compliance. The number and design of KPIs should be reviewed, with greater attention to qualitative outcomes, including talent development, educational impact, strengthened university–industry collaboration and ecosystem capacity. Requirements should reflect what different types of activities can realistically deliver.

The Higher Education Initiative should be retained, but its implementation should become less prescriptive and more adaptable to institutional and local needs. Current requirements can encourage similar activities to be replicated across Europe rather than supporting differentiated approaches where additional capacity is genuinely needed. Funding levels should also reflect the real cost of delivering high-quality entrepreneurship and venture-support activities.

Greater consistency and transparency in project information and reporting would also be beneficial, including a clearer overview of EIT-funded activities alongside other EU-funded projects.

Overall, the KIC model should preserve its distinctive role in building and sustaining innovation ecosystems, while reducing administrative complexity, ensuring proportionate co-funding and financial-return expectations, and maintaining sufficient flexibility to accommodate different partners, activities and innovation pathways. Governance and oversight should support these objectives through clear, consistent and proportionate rules that safeguard the EU's financial interests and ethical standards without creating unnecessary additional burden.

Contact

For more information, please contact the CESAER Secretariat.