

Lessons from NCP Practice

Recurring challenges in
Horizon Europe participation



PEOPLE



IDEAS



IMPACT

This report brings together aggregated and anonymised observations arising from the work of the National Contact Points (NCP) Unit within UEFISCDI during the implementation of Horizon Europe, covering the period from October 2021 to June 2026. The analysis focuses on recurring challenges encountered by applicants, the evolution of support needs, and the operational lessons identified across the programmes covered by the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit.

The report is not intended as a comprehensive assessment of Romania's participation in Horizon Europe (2021-2027). Its purpose is to turn evidence and observations from NCP@UEFISCDI practice into organisational learning, recommendations for the development of support services, and useful contributions to understanding how participation in Horizon Europe works in practice.

Document prepared by the Horizon Europe NCP Unit within UEFISCDI ©. October 2026.

Author:

Antoaneta Victoria Folea

Contact:

Horizon Europe NCP Unit

Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding – UEFISCDI

30 Frumoasă Street (ground floor), Bucharest

ncp@uefiscdi.ro

<http://www.ncp.uefiscdi.ro>

Note on the preparation of the report and the use of AI tools

This report was prepared by the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit on the basis of data, documents, analyses and observations arising from its own activities. The report is intended for information purposes only and provides examples and recommendations.

This document was prepared by the Horizon Europe NCP Unit within UEFISCDI; however, it reflects solely the views of the authors, and UEFISCDI cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

Unless otherwise stated, reuse of this document is authorised under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is permitted provided that appropriate credit is given to the authors. For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by UEFISCDI, permission may need to be obtained directly from the respective rights holders.

Generative artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI), were used as supporting tools for structuring the material, language editing, translation and the preparation of selected visual representations. The selection of sources, interpretation of evidence, formulation of conclusions and recommendations, and final review and validation of the content remain the responsibility of the author. AI tools were not used as a source of empirical evidence and do not substitute for the author's professional analysis and judgement.

Contents

Executive summary.....	6
Key findings.....	6
Priority directions.....	6
1. Introduction	7
1.1. Context, purpose and scope of the analysis.....	7
1.2. Positioning of the report and limits of interpretation.....	9
1.3. Central question and analytical perspective	9
2. Methodology and evidence base.....	10
2.1. Analytical approach and sources used	10
2.2. Applicant survey	11
2.3. Unit of analysis and classification of challenges.....	12
2.4. Methodological limitations, confidentiality and anonymisation	13
3. Applicant journey.....	14
3.1. Motivation, readiness and opportunity identification	15
3.2. Interpreting the call, call fit and consortium development.....	15
3.3. Proposal preparation and submission.....	16
3.4. Evaluation and resubmission	16
3.5. Implementation, exploitation and future participation.....	16
4. Recurring participation challenges	17
4.1. Opportunity selection, call fit and proposal quality	17
4.2. Institutional capacity and research management.....	18
4.3. Partnerships, visibility and the Widening context.....	19
4.4. Horizon Europe complexity, procedures and fragmented support pathways.....	19
4.5. Expectations of NCPs and the conditions for sustainable support	20
5. Common elements and differences across programmes.....	21
5.1. Challenges common to several programmes	21
5.2. Programme-specific profiles.....	21
5.3. Differences between types of instruments	22
5.4. Evolution of needs and implications for the support model	23
6. The role of the NCP in a shared-responsibility model.....	24
6.1. Information, guidance and capacity building.....	24
6.2. Proposal support, partnerships and referral	25
6.3. Issues requiring action at several levels	25
6.4. A differentiated support model	26
6.5. Responsibility matrix.....	27
7. NCP practice as a learning and feedback mechanism	27
7.1. From individual case to recurring issue.....	28
7.2. Collecting, validating and aggregating signals.....	29
7.3. Using feedback to improve services	29

7.4. Confidentiality, institutional memory and the learning cycle.....	29
7.5. Emerging trends and implications for FP10	30
8. Evolution of the NCP@UEFISCDI model and the direction towards FP10.....	31
8.1. 2021-2023: building expertise and trust.....	32
8.2. 2024-2026: more specialised services and the sustainability of the model	32
8.3. From “Focus on the applicant” to applicant empowerment and shared responsibility	33
8.4. Service sustainability: equitable access, professional standards and resources	33
8.5. NCP performance and appropriate indicators	34
8.6. Mission, vision and a mature model for FP10	34
9. Recommendations and implications for the next period	35
9.1. Recommendations for applicants	36
9.2. Recommendations for universities, research institutes and other applicant organisations	36
9.3. Recommendations for the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit.....	37
9.4. Considerations for FP10	38
9.5. Priorities for the next period	39
10. Conclusions	39
Annex 1. Applicant questionnaire (2025)	42
Annex 2. Evolution of the main issues observed in NCP@UEFISCDI practice, 2021-2026.....	45

Executive summary

This report synthesises lessons arising from the practice of the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit during 2021-2026 and examines how the needs of applicants, organisations and support services evolved over the course of Horizon Europe. The conclusions reflect the experience of the Unit and do not constitute a statistical assessment of Romania's participation.

Key findings

- Support needs gradually shifted from access to information and basic orientation towards call fit and readiness, proposal quality, partnerships, institutional capacity, research management and implementation.
- The performance of NCP services should not be equated with the national success rate or with the volume of Horizon Europe funding attracted; these are outcomes of the wider participation ecosystem. NCP services should be assessed through accessibility, relevance, quality and the added value of the support provided.
- A mature service model should combine open access to information and capacity building with differentiated forms of strategic guidance and personalised support, delivered within clear, transparent and sustainable boundaries.
- Competitive participation depends on complementary responsibilities: the applicant is responsible for the idea and the decision to participate; the organisation for institutional capacity; the NCP for information, guidance, capacity building, facilitation and referral; and other actors for matters within their respective mandates.
- NCP practice can also function as a learning and feedback mechanism when recurring issues are collected, validated, aggregated and used to improve services or communicated to the competent actors.

Priority directions

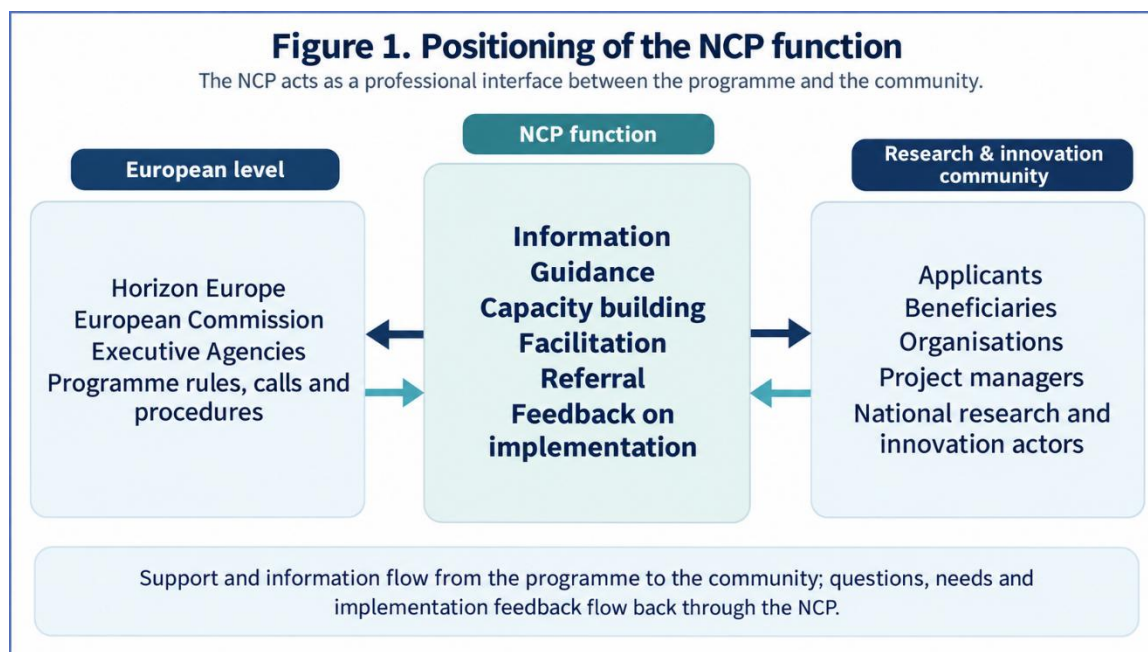
- standardise proposal support and proposal pre-check, including access conditions, timing of requests, level of feedback and number of review rounds;
- maintain equitable access, including a clear support pathway for newcomers and organisations with more limited institutional resources;
- strengthen knowledge management, referral pathways and service-quality indicators;
- distinguish between proposals requiring substantial revision and well-evaluated proposals that remain unfunded mainly because of limited call budgets, for which resubmission, other opportunities or complementary mechanisms may be explored;
- prepare the transition to FP10 through a new community consultation, adaptation of the service model and clearer guidance on the responsible use of AI tools.

Key message: the NCP has an important and distinct role, to act as a professional interface between European opportunities and the capacity of the community to turn them into strategic, competitive and sustainable participation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Context, purpose and scope of the analysis

National Contact Points (NCPs) play a specific role in the implementation of the European Union's framework programme, Horizon Europe. They connect the European programme with the national research and innovation system, the organisations seeking to participate, and the people who prepare and implement projects (Figure 1).



The NCP acts as a professional interface between Horizon Europe and the research and innovation community, while also conveying feedback from practice.

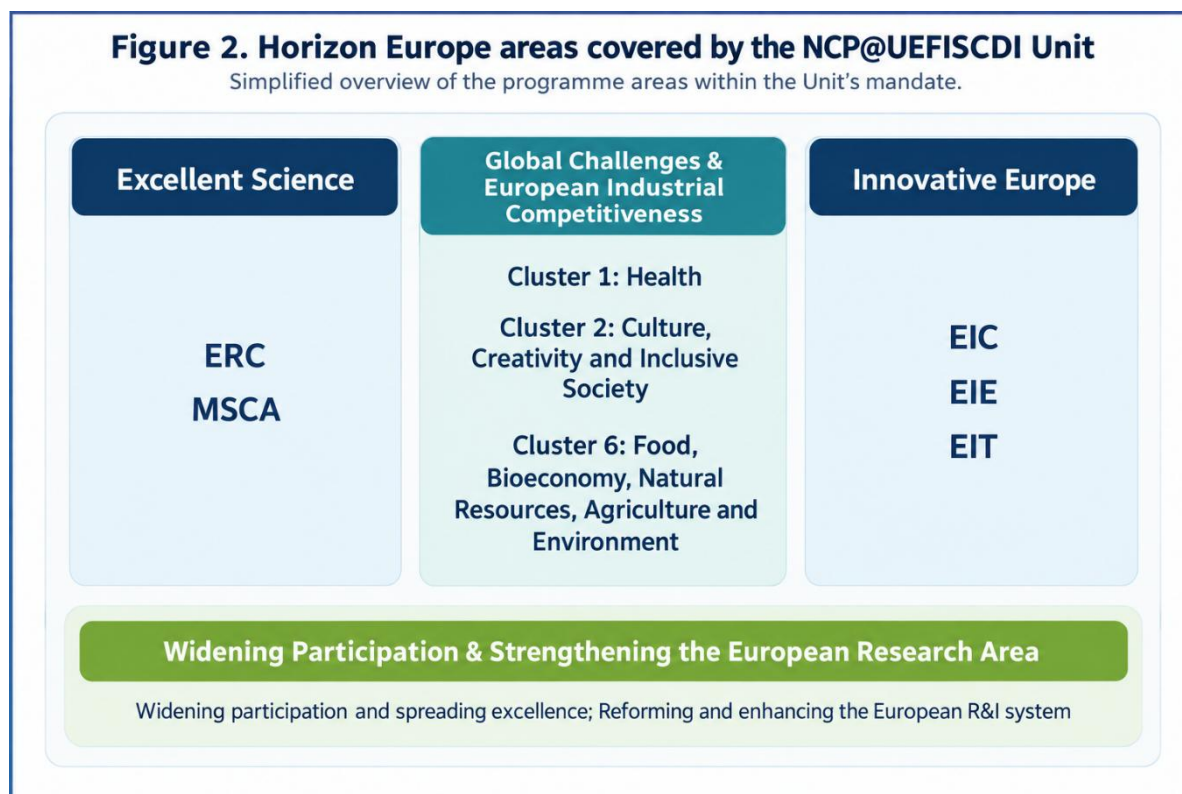
Through direct and continuous interaction with applicants, NCPs are able to observe aspects of how the programme works that are not always visible in participation statistics or formal evaluations. Recurring questions, difficulties in understanding certain requirements, challenges encountered within organisations, and changing expectations regarding support services all provide useful insight into how Horizon Europe operates in practice.

The Horizon Europe NCP Unit (NCP HE) within UEFISCDI began its activity in October 2021, with the introduction of a dedicated model for organising the NCP function, based on full-time experts. The aim was to provide public support and assistance services free of charge, in line with the relevant recommendations of the European Commission and with Romania's commitment to developing and strengthening a national network of NCP experts for Horizon Europe. The introduction of this dedicated organisational model represented an important change in the way the NCP service was organised within UEFISCDI¹.

From the outset, the objective was not only to promote Horizon Europe opportunities, but also to provide professional support to applicants, foster international collaboration, and increase the visibility of Romanian research and innovation actors.

¹ <https://www.ncp.uefiscdi.ro/>

The NCP Unit currently provides the NCP function for the European Research Council (ERC), Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), Cluster 1 (Health), Cluster 2 (Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society), Cluster 6 (Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment), the European Innovation Council (EIC), European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE), the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), and Widening Participation & Strengthening the European Research Area² (Figure 2).



Simplified overview of the Horizon Europe programme areas within the mandate of the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit during the period analysed.

The NCP@UEFISCDI Unit Strategy for 2021-2027³ was built around information and communication, support for proposal preparation, internationalisation and network development, and the continuous training of NCP experts. From the outset, the Strategy also provided for the regular review of priorities and services in response to accumulated experience and changing community needs.

This report examines recurring challenges encountered in participation in Horizon Europe, how they have changed over the period 2021-2026, and what this evolution may tell us about the future needs of applicants, organisations and support services. The analysis covers the programmes within the mandate of the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit and does not seek to provide an exhaustive description of every programme or every possible challenge. Programme-specific analyses are used to identify recurring patterns and to observe how applicant needs change over time.

Differences between instruments⁴ are retained where they affect the nature of the challenges or the type of support required. An ERC applicant, for example, has different needs from an organisation

² <https://www.ncp.uefiscdi.ro/aboutus>

³ https://www.ncp.uefiscdi.ro/files/ugd/9d4366_a56118636f83408598b8a4f35a6c2648.pdf

⁴ E.g., ERC, MSCA, RIA, IA, CSA

participating in a Cluster 2 or Cluster 6 consortium, a company interested in the EIC, or an institution preparing a WIDERA proposal.

The report also includes selected cross-cutting observations and emerging issues identified through the work of the NCP Unit where these help to explain broader participation challenges.

Finally, the report turns accumulated experience into lessons and recommendations for the remaining period of Horizon Europe, for the future development of NCP services, and for the preparation of FP10.

1.2. Positioning of the report and limits of interpretation

This report is not a general assessment of Romania's participation in Horizon Europe, nor is it an evaluation of the national NCP system as a whole. It reflects the experience of the NCP Unit within UEFISCDI and its interactions with applicants, beneficiaries and organisations during the period analysed.

The findings should therefore be read as observations grounded in NCP@UEFISCDI practice, rather than as statistically representative results for all applicants and institutions in Romania. Conclusions are limited to what can be supported by the available evidence base.

The report does not seek to assign responsibility for Romania's level of participation to any single actor. Its purpose is to identify the factors that influence participation and the contribution that different actors can make to improving it. The perspective is deliberately that of the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit, because this is the empirical basis of the report. It provides insight into one part of the participation ecosystem without claiming to describe exhaustively the functioning of the entire national research and innovation system.

The value of the report lies in organising and interpreting practical experience accumulated through direct and repeated contact with the community. When the same questions, difficulties or needs recur across different years, programmes or sources, they can provide relevant insight into where participation becomes difficult and what type of intervention may be needed.

The report is not structured as a series of separate analyses for each programme. Its primary focus is on common patterns, while preserving differences between instruments where these are relevant to the interpretation of challenges or support needs.

Note on the use of the term “NCP” in this report

Unless otherwise stated, the term “NCP” in this report refers to the experts and activities of the NCP Unit within UEFISCDI. Observations and conclusions arising from the experience of this Unit are not automatically attributed to other National Contact Points in Romania. Where the report refers to the national NCP system as a whole, or to the role of NCPs as defined at European level, this is stated explicitly.

1.3. Central question and analytical perspective

In the early years of Horizon Europe, many of the requests received by the NCP Unit concerned identifying relevant information, understanding procedures, or using the Funding & Tenders Portal.

Over time, the nature of these questions changed.

Applicants increasingly seek support in deciding whether a call is a good fit, preparing a competitive proposal, developing project partnerships and consortia, interpreting feedback received after evaluation, or addressing difficulties that arise during project implementation. At the same time, situations in which internal support for project preparation and implementation is limited or fragmented have also become more visible.

This evolution raises two closely related questions:

- how should NCP services evolve as applicant needs change?
- which of the observed challenges can be addressed through NCP support, and which require the involvement of other actors?

The report is therefore built around one central question:

What can recurring challenges observed through NCP practice tell us about the support, institutional capacity and programme conditions needed for more competitive and sustainable participation in Horizon Europe and, looking ahead, in FP10?

Direct and repeated contact with applicants also provides insight into how Horizon Europe is understood and used in practice. A difficulty reported in a single case may reflect an individual situation. When the same issue reappears across programmes, organisations or different years, however, it may point to a broader challenge related to skills, institutional capacity, coordination between actors, or the way certain rules and procedures are designed and applied.

In this sense, NCP experience can also serve as a feedback mechanism on the implementation of Horizon Europe by identifying and aggregating recurring issues. This dimension is examined separately in the following chapters.

One of the ideas running throughout the report is that access to information is now only one component of participation. Increasingly important are the ability to identify the right opportunity, assess readiness realistically, build a competitive proposal, develop relevant partnerships, and benefit from institutional support before and after submission.

The challenge is gradually shifting from access to information towards the capacity to turn information into strategic, competitive and sustainable participation.

2. Methodology and evidence base

2.1. Analytical approach and sources used

The report uses a qualitative approach based on evidence accumulated through the work of the NCP Unit within UEFISCDI during the period 2021–2026. Its purpose is to identify recurring patterns in the Unit’s practical experience and to examine how these patterns have changed over time.

The analysis combines four main categories of sources: analyses prepared by NCP@UEFISCDI experts for different programmes and years; the NCP Unit Strategy and the related SWOT and gap analyses; the 2025 applicant survey; and cross-cutting operational observations arising from direct interaction with applicants and beneficiaries.

Programme-level analyses examine difficulties reported by applicants, challenges observed at institutional level, responses developed by the NCPs, and how these have evolved over time. The available documents cover ERC, MSCA, Cluster 2, Cluster 6, EIC, EIE and Widening & ERA, together with cross-cutting observations on the work of the Unit. For EIT, the Unit's mandate is included in the NCP@UEFISCDI Strategy, but the specific longitudinal evidence base is more limited. Conclusions concerning this programme are therefore formulated more cautiously.

The NCP@UEFISCDI Strategy 2021-2027 and the successive analyses associated with it provide a longitudinal perspective on the development of the Unit and on changing community needs. The Strategy is not used to estimate the frequency of particular problems, but to follow how these issues were identified and how service priorities and responses changed over time.

Cross-cutting operational observations come mainly from repeated interactions with applicants, discussions among NCPs, and comparisons of challenges identified across several programmes. They are treated as qualitative signals rather than as measurements of the national frequency of a problem. An observation is considered more robust when it appears in several sources, recurs across different years or programmes, or is supported both by NCP experience and by applicant feedback. Where an issue appears in only one category of source, it is treated more cautiously, as an observation or signal requiring further confirmation.

For some programmes, several versions of the same document are available, or different analyses partly overlap. In such cases, priority is given to the most recent and complete version. Older versions are retained only where they contain information that is no longer included in later documents or where they are necessary for tracing how an issue evolved over time.

2.2. Applicant survey

As part of the consultation exercise conducted in 2025, the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit developed a questionnaire addressed to current and potential applicants (Annex 1). It provides a direct perspective from current and potential Horizon Europe participants and complements the observations arising from the work of the service.

The questionnaire covered six main dimensions: the organisational profile of respondents, previous experience and intention to apply, level of familiarity with Horizon Europe, experience of NCP support, training and resource needs, and suggestions for improving support services⁵.

The questionnaire was sent to a database of more than 3,000 people and received 195 responses. Of these respondents, 62 completed the open-ended question on how NCP support could be improved, while 97 agreed to provide contact details for possible follow-up discussions. Universities and research institutes were the best-represented categories: 44.6% of respondents came from universities and 42.1% from research institutes. Other types of organisations were less well represented.

Respondents had different levels of experience with Horizon Europe: 41.9% had never applied before, 29.8% had applied but had not received funding, and 28.3% had previous successful experience. Regarding preferred forms of support, workshops on proposal preparation and improvement were selected by 82.2% of respondents, guides and explanatory materials by 72.8%, and individual applicant-NCP discussions by 69.1%.

⁵ https://www.ncp.uefiscdi.ro/files/ugd/9d4366_2db1bb220f8d4272be648dc3bcd27f3b.pdf

Survey interpretation note: the survey received 195 responses overall. Percentages should be read against the valid responses recorded for each question. Where a question allowed multiple selections, percentages are not cumulative and should not be expected to add up to 100%.

The 62 responses to the open-ended question were analysed thematically. Recurring needs were identified in relation to information and visibility, applied training, individualised support, partnerships and access to networks, practical resources, and the way NCP services are delivered. Examples included workshops adapted to different levels of experience, feedback on draft proposals and one-to-one sessions, matchmaking and promotion of collaboration requests, practical guides and examples, as well as expectations concerning equal access to services, clarity, promptness and transparency in communication.

Like any voluntary consultation, the survey has some limitations of interpretation. Respondents self-selected, and the data are not statistically representative of the entire Romanian research and innovation community. The respondent profile also means that the results reflect the perspective of universities and research institutes more strongly than that of the full range of organisations that could potentially participate.

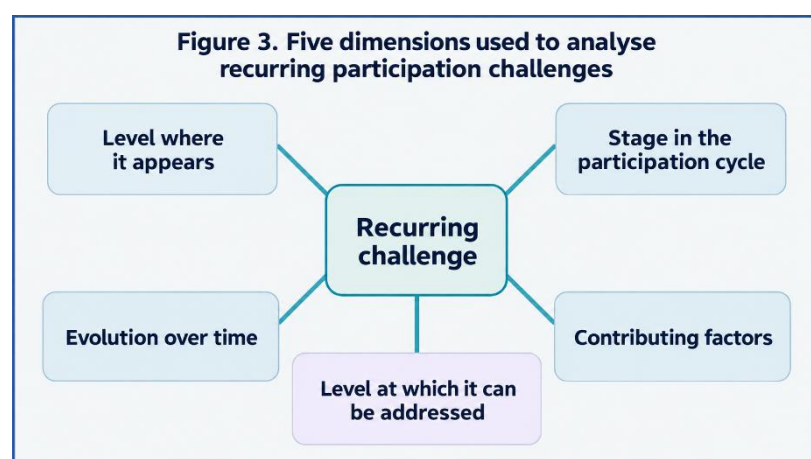
A response indicating no NCP support should not automatically be interpreted as a negative assessment of the service. In some cases, it may simply reflect the absence of previous interaction with an NCP.

The survey also captures a particular point in time. In spring 2025, 67.7% of respondents stated that they intended to apply to calls in 2025-2026, while 30.7% were still undecided. These figures reflect intentions rather than subsequent behaviour. More recent observations concerning fatigue after repeated rejection or a lower willingness to apply should therefore not automatically be interpreted as contradicting the survey findings.

In this report, the survey is used as an important source of direct community feedback, but not as a basis for statistical generalisation at national level.

2.3. Unit of analysis and classification of challenges

The unit of analysis in this report is the recurring challenge observed in NCP practice. For each challenge, five dimensions are considered: the level at which it appears, the stage of the participation cycle at which it becomes visible, its evolution over time, the factors contributing to it, and the level at which it can be addressed (Figure 3).



Each recurring issue is examined by considering where it appears, when it becomes visible, how it evolves, what contributes to it, and at what level it can be addressed.

This approach helps distinguish between challenges that may appear similar but have different causes or require different responses. Some relate mainly to the applicant, others to the organisation to which the applicant belongs, relationships with partners, support services, the national context, or the rules and procedures of the European programme.

Challenges are also examined according to the stage at which they arise. Some become visible during opportunity identification, while others emerge during proposal preparation, evaluation, resubmission or implementation.

The analysis also considers how these challenges evolve: whether they have been reduced, remained persistent, changed in nature, emerged more recently, or fall beyond the scope of direct NCP intervention.

Factors considered may include lack of information or skills required for participation, such as understanding the programme and evaluation criteria, proposal writing, project or research management, or legal and financial aspects; level of readiness; institutional capacity; access to networks; resource constraints; or characteristics of the programme and its procedures.

This approach helps avoid an overly simple conclusion that all difficulties lie with applicants or that all solutions should come from NCPs.

2.4. Methodological limitations, confidentiality and anonymisation

The evidence base used in this report has several limitations. Programme-level analyses were developed primarily for operational and strategic planning purposes and did not follow a single research protocol. The documents therefore differ in structure, level of detail and wording.

The available evidence does not allow the exact frequency of each challenge among all applicants in Romania to be estimated, nor does it allow causal relationships to be demonstrated. The report identifies recurring patterns and challenges without turning them into national estimates where sufficient data are not available.

This caution is also relevant for emerging trends. For example, NCP observations indicate high levels of competition and large numbers of proposals relative to the budgets available in Horizon Europe calls, while the use of generative artificial intelligence is increasingly present in discussions around proposal preparation. The available evidence does not, however, allow a causal relationship between these phenomena to be established.

Similarly, when a challenge is described as reduced or as having an operational solution, this does not necessarily mean that the underlying structural difficulty has disappeared. In some cases, it may only indicate that an operational solution has been identified for the specific situation.

For these reasons, the report deliberately uses cautious wording such as “observed repeatedly”, “reported across several programmes”, “may indicate”, or “requires monitoring”.

The report uses aggregated and anonymised information. Its purpose is to identify recurring patterns, not to assess individuals or organisations. Open-ended survey responses are analysed thematically, while observations arising from interactions with applicants and beneficiaries are used in a way that protects their identity and confidential information.

This approach is also important for maintaining the relationship of trust between NCPs and the community they serve, an obligation that applies explicitly to NCPs. Information arising from direct

interactions can contribute to understanding how the programme works in practice only when it is used responsibly and with due respect for confidentiality.

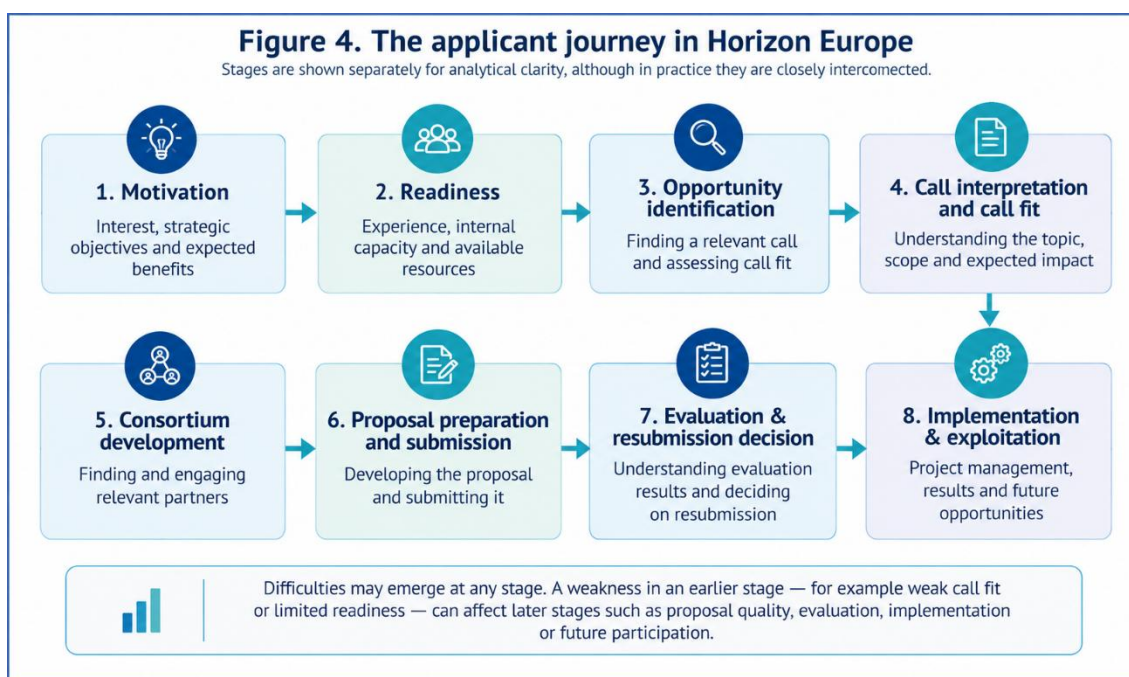
By combining different sources with these methodological safeguards, the report seeks to distinguish between individual situations and patterns that recur often enough to support the analysis developed in the following chapters.

3. Applicant journey

Participation in Horizon Europe does not begin when a call opens, nor does it end with proposal submission. It is a longer process made up of a series of decisions and stages: clarifying motivation and readiness, identifying the right opportunity, interpreting the call, developing partnerships and consortia, preparing the proposal, evaluation and, where relevant, resubmission, followed by implementation and the use of project results.

The experience of the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit shows that difficulties can arise at any of these stages. Sometimes the challenge appears very early, when the purpose of participation is not sufficiently clear or the level of readiness is overestimated. In other cases, the applicant struggles to identify the right call, lacks access to relevant partners, starts preparing too late, or encounters difficulties after evaluation or during implementation.

For the purposes of this report, the applicant journey is examined through eight main stages, presented in Figure 4. The stages are separated for analytical clarity, but in practice they are closely connected. A difficulty emerging at one stage can affect those that follow. For example, an unclear objective may lead to the selection of an unsuitable call; weak call fit may affect both the proposal structure and the consortium; and weaknesses in preparation may later become implementation problems if the project is funded. Early identification of difficulties is therefore important not only for proposal quality, but for the entire participation journey.



The stages are shown separately for analytical clarity, although in practice they are interconnected and may overlap.

3.1. Motivation, readiness and opportunity identification

The first difficulty often appears before a call has even been selected.

The need for funding is, naturally, one of the important motivations for participating in Horizon Europe. The difficulty arises when the search for funding is not accompanied by sufficient clarification of the project objective, its compatibility with the selected instrument, and the resources required. A Horizon Europe project may respond to a genuine funding need, but competitiveness also depends on the connection between the idea, the applicant profile, the opportunity selected, and the capacity to implement the project.

Readiness is equally important, but it is not limited to knowledge of programme rules. It may include scientific or innovation maturity, relevant experience, professional relationships and networks built over time, access to partners, available resources, and organisational support. In ERC, for example, recent analyses distinguish between familiarity with the programme and actual readiness, which also depends on scientific maturity, professional profile and track record.

The NCP can contribute to this preparation through information, guidance and capacity building, but some elements develop over time through the experience of both the applicant and the organisation.

For newcomers, the difficulty may still be one of basic orientation: understanding the structure of Horizon Europe, the available instruments, eligibility rules, and the Funding & Tenders Portal. For more experienced applicants, the challenge is more often to make a realistic choice of the right instrument based on the idea, profile and level of maturity.

Opportunity identification should therefore not be treated as simply finding an available call. It requires an initial assessment of the fit between the objective, maturity, available resources and the instrument.

3.2. Interpreting the call, call fit and consortium development

The fact that a call appears thematically relevant does not automatically mean that the project idea is compatible with the call requirements.

Applicants may focus too heavily on the topic title or its broad similarity to their field and not enough on the full set of requirements: scope, expected outcomes, impact, type of action, such as RIA, IA or CSA, maturity level, specific conditions, and consortium requirements.

This creates the risk of adapting an existing idea to a call with which the fit is only partial. In a highly competitive environment, a well-written proposal cannot compensate for insufficient alignment with the topic.

For collaborative projects, this stage is closely connected to consortium building. NCP Unit analyses repeatedly point to difficulties related to international visibility, access to established networks, and entry into consortia. The 2025 survey also confirms the need for support with partnerships, matchmaking and access to networks.

The NCP can support call-fit assessment, promote profiles and expressions of interest, point applicants towards relevant platforms and brokerage events, and facilitate contacts. It cannot, however, turn an unsuitable call into a suitable one, nor can it build the relationships and consortium on behalf of the applicant.

The essential question at this stage is therefore: is this the right call for this applicant, at this point in time, and with this type of partnership?

3.3. Proposal preparation and submission

Once the call has been selected and, in collaborative projects, the consortium has been formed, the applicant must turn the idea into a competitive proposal.

The 2025 survey shows a clear preference for practical forms of support: workshops on proposal development were selected by 82.2% of respondents, explanatory guides by 72.8%, and individual discussions by 69.1%.

The NCP Unit analyses confirm difficulties related to the formulation of objectives, methodology, impact, implementation planning, budget, risk management, legal and financial requirements, and use of the Funding & Tenders Portal.

At the same time, demand for personalised support has increased, including individual meetings, feedback on draft proposals, pre-checks and interpretation of the evaluation criteria. These services can form part of NCP support when they are provided within clear and transparent boundaries, without becoming proposal writing on behalf of the applicant.

The timing of the request for support also matters. Requests received very close to the deadline reduce the possibility of providing useful feedback. The quality of support therefore also depends on the applicant becoming involved in proposal preparation early enough.

3.4. Evaluation and resubmission

Evaluation creates a different type of support need. Applicants may need help understanding the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR), distinguishing minor comments from more fundamental issues, and deciding whether resubmission is justified.

Across several programmes, there have been proposals that received strong evaluation results but remained unfunded because of the budget available under the Horizon Europe call. Such situations can be particularly discouraging and may create the impression that only minor changes are needed.

NCP support at this stage may include reviewing the ESR, clarifying evaluator comments and providing guidance on resubmission. Resubmission should not, however, be treated automatically as the next step. In some cases, more substantial changes are needed: revisiting the concept, strengthening the consortium, developing a clearer impact logic, improving institutional support, or selecting a different instrument.

The value of NCP support at this stage therefore lies not only in explaining the evaluation, but also in supporting a realistic decision on whether, how and when the proposal should be resubmitted.

3.5. Implementation, exploitation and future participation

Receiving funding does not mean that difficulties disappear. Some become more visible during project implementation.

Challenges may concern relationships between partners, changes in the consortium, budget issues, reporting, legal and financial aspects, risk management, or the administrative and logistical support

provided by the organisation. In WIDERA, for example, project managers and coordinators have increasingly approached the NCP with questions related to partners and budget changes.

The 2025 survey confirms interest in this stage: 62.2% of respondents identified support for project implementation as a useful resource, at the same level as interest in case studies and examples of successful projects.

Further needs arise after the project has ended: exploitation of results, intellectual property, continuation of partnerships, maintenance of infrastructures or services developed through the project, and integration of results into the organisation's broader strategy.

This stage links directly back to the motivation at the beginning of the journey. When a project is integrated into a wider strategy, the results and capacities developed through it are more likely to be maintained and used over time.

Competitive participation depends not only on the quality of the proposal, but also on the quality of the decisions, capacities, partnerships and institutional support that come before and after it.

4. Recurring participation challenges

The programme- and year-level analyses show that the difficulties encountered by applicants are generally neither isolated nor specific to a single Horizon Europe instrument. They recur in different forms and often interact with one another.

For the purposes of this chapter, the challenges are grouped into five categories: opportunity selection and participation quality; institutional capacity; partnerships and the Widening context; programme complexity and procedural difficulties; and expectations regarding NCP support and the conditions for providing it sustainably. These categories are not independent. On the contrary, limited institutional capacity can affect call fit, proposal preparation and implementation; limited international visibility can restrict access to consortia; and repeated rejection in a highly competitive environment can contribute to applicant fatigue and lower motivation.

4.1. Opportunity selection, call fit and proposal quality

One of the most persistent difficulties is making a realistic assessment of the fit between the call, the project idea, the applicant profile and the organisation's capacity.

Applicants sometimes start from an existing idea and look for a call that appears thematically close. The risk is that the fit is only partial, particularly when attention is focused on the topic title or a few keywords rather than on the full set of requirements.

The issue takes different forms across programmes. In collaborative projects under Pillar II, call fit is often more difficult to assess because topics combine the thematic area with expected outcomes, impact, type of action, maturity level and consortium requirements. Simply working in the thematic field of a cluster is not enough.

In WIDERA, fit also needs to be considered in relation to the institutional objective of the instrument and the proposed consortium configuration. In ERC, interest in a grant does not automatically mean that the researcher's profile is sufficiently mature. In EIC and EIE, a scientifically valuable idea may

still be unsuitable if it does not match the relevant innovation, scientific or technological maturity, or market logic.

Proposal quality remains, at the same time, a cross-cutting challenge. NCP Unit analyses point to difficulties related to the formulation of objectives, methodology, the connection between results and impact, evaluation criteria, implementation, risk management, budget, and overall coherence.

Evaluation adds another layer of uncertainty. Well-evaluated proposals may remain unfunded, and evaluator comments may vary between successive submissions. Quality therefore needs to be understood more broadly than the quality of the written text. It depends on the concept, call fit, applicant maturity, consortium credibility, and the feasibility of implementation. AI tools may help improve wording and structure, but they do not address these underlying issues.

In this context,

the NCP role is increasingly one of strategic guidance: helping applicants recognise when an idea is well aligned, when substantial redesign is needed, when another instrument may be more appropriate, or when submission should be postponed.

4.2. Institutional capacity and research management

One issue that recurs in the materials analysed is the limited or uneven nature of institutional support for participation in Horizon Europe.

In the cases and situations reflected in the NCP Unit analyses, participation often depends to a considerable extent on the initiative, experience and individual networks of researchers, while the institutional functions needed to identify opportunities, prepare proposals and implement projects may be underdeveloped or fragmented.

The NCP Unit analyses repeatedly refer to situations in which the institutional approach to Horizon Europe participation is limited or fragmented: internal priorities and roles are not always clearly defined; legal and financial support may be difficult to access; internal proposal review is not available in all cases; and requests sometimes arise very late.

In this report, an institutional approach or strategy does not mean simply publishing calls or information on a website. It refers to the existence of priorities, responsibilities and internal mechanisms that support proposal preparation and project implementation.

The 2025 survey is also consistent with these needs. The high demand for workshops, financial guidance, implementation support and individual assistance points to services that, in organisations with more developed support structures, may be partly provided by research managers, grant offices or other internal functions.

The issue is not only administrative. Research management also includes strategic orientation, opportunity identification, proposal development, partnerships, budgeting, legal and contractual matters, implementation, reporting, and the exploitation of results.

The NCP can contribute to the development of these functions through training, guidance and good practice, in complementarity with the capacities developed within applicant organisations.

4.3. Partnerships, visibility and the Widening context

Access to international partners and networks is a recurring difficulty, particularly for organisations with limited European visibility.

The issue is broader than identifying a partner for a specific call. It relates to reputation, participation in networks, previous collaboration, institutional visibility, and the ability to enter consortia that are already taking shape.

Some of these challenges are particularly relevant in the Widening context⁶, where organisations may face less-developed networks, uneven institutional capacity, and limited research management resources.

The 2025 survey partly reflects this situation. Among respondents who indicated their roles in Horizon Europe projects, 61.6% reported participating as partners and 19.5% as coordinators. This distribution is not representative of Romania's overall participation, but it is consistent with the expressed need for support with access to networks, partnerships and visibility. The MSCA and Cluster 2 analyses also point to challenges related to institutional attractiveness, visibility and presence in European networks.

Support instruments developed by the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit through NCP-WIDERA.NET (August 2023-July 2026) provided opportunities for travel grants, brokerage, pre-screening, networking and expressions of interest. These instruments can reduce certain barriers, but they do not remove structural differences.

The Widening context is not only a constraint. Some WIDERA calls and, in certain cases, Pillar II calls create explicit opportunities for the involvement of organisations from Widening countries, for network development and for strengthening international visibility.

Experience suggests that organisations that actively use these opportunities, participate in European networks and invest in institutional relationships can use Widening status as an entry point towards more stable collaboration.

At the same time, high competition within Widening instruments means that proposals evaluated above the threshold may still remain unfunded. The Widening context does not justify poorly prepared proposals, but it helps explain the structural conditions in which they are developed.

Reducing participation gaps therefore requires more than proposal-writing support. It also requires the long-term development of institutional capacity, research management, internationalisation and networks.

4.4. Horizon Europe complexity, procedures and fragmented support pathways

Horizon Europe has a complex architecture, with different programmes, instruments, partnerships, missions, calls and cross-cutting requirements. For experienced applicants, this requires continuous updating; for newcomers, navigating the programme can be difficult without support.

This complexity includes differences between instruments, changes to procedures and templates, legal and financial requirements, data rules, open science, ethics, the gender dimension, maturity levels, commercialisation and co-funding.

⁶ https://rea.ec.europa.eu/horizon-europe-widening-who-should-apply_en

It also includes administrative and procedural issues related to the Funding & Tenders Portal, eligibility, budgeting, cost categories, reporting, grant amendments and consortium changes. In some periods, delays in receiving Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs) were also reported, together with the need for clear and timely information on available complementary funding mechanisms where these are relevant.

Fragmentation is also visible in the support system. An applicant may need the thematic NCP, the Legal & Financial NCP, support structures within their own organisation, other services or national institutions, and clarifications at European level.

Where referral pathways are unclear, delays and uncertainty about responsibility can arise. The NCP can explain applicable rules, clarify the available options, and direct the applicant towards the appropriate actor. Where an issue requires legally binding interpretation, decisions on co-funding, or intervention by the organisation's legal or financial services, resolution lies with the structures that hold the relevant mandate and competence.

Effective support therefore requires not only expertise, but also clearly defined responsibilities and sufficiently clear referral pathways.

4.5. Expectations of NCPs and the conditions for sustainable support

As applicant needs have become more complex, expectations of NCP services have also increased.

Applicants increasingly request personalised guidance, proposal feedback, support in finding partners, interpretation of evaluation results, resubmission support, and assistance with issues arising during project implementation. Some of these requests reflect genuine needs and gaps in institutional capacity or in the wider support system.

As demand for personalised support grows, it becomes increasingly important to clarify roles and the specific contribution of each actor. The NCP can inform, guide, train, facilitate, provide feedback and direct applicants towards the appropriate actor, while concept development, consortium building and project management remain responsibilities of the applicant and the organisation.

The 2025 survey shows that applicants value practical and personalised support and have expectations regarding accessibility, promptness and consistency of services. The open-ended responses also explicitly mention equal access to services and resources, without a perception of preferential support.

The Unit's services are open to the community through its website, public resources, support-request forms and dedicated contact addresses, and access should be provided in a transparent and equitable way. At the same time, the level of personalised support needs to reflect both the nature of the request and the actual capacity of the service.

A sustainable model therefore requires clear levels and standards of support so that personalised services can be provided consistently, transparently and equitably.

The central issue is no longer only access to information, but the capacity to turn information into strategic, well-prepared and sustainable participation.

5. Common elements and differences across programmes

Many of the challenges identified through NCP practice appear across several parts of Horizon Europe. Their specific form, however, differs depending on the logic of the programme, the type of applicant, the level of maturity, and the mode of participation.

The same need can mean different things from one instrument to another. Support for preparing an ERC application, for example, follows a different logic from support for a collaborative Pillar II project, an EIC instrument, or a WIDERA action. Similarly, access to partners is essential for some instruments and much less relevant for others.

The comparative analysis therefore points to a core set of common challenges, alongside programme- and instrument-specific needs. This distinction is important for the future NCP service model: some standards can be shared, while the content of support needs to be adapted.

5.1. Challenges common to several programmes

Despite the differences between instruments, several difficulties appear across most of the programmes analysed.

A first common challenge is selecting the right opportunity. For newcomers, basic orientation within the programme and understanding the instruments and rules remain important. For more experienced applicants, the challenge shifts towards making a realistic assessment of call fit, readiness, and the organisation's capacity to support a competitive application.

Proposal quality is another cross-cutting need. In different forms, difficulties arise around objectives, methodology, impact, evaluation criteria, implementation, and the overall coherence of the proposal. The 2025 survey confirms the importance of practical support for proposal development.

Limited or uneven institutional support also appears across several of the materials analysed. The absence or underdevelopment of functions such as strategic guidance, research management, legal and financial support, internal review, or early organisational involvement can affect both proposal preparation and project implementation.

International visibility and access to networks are recurring challenges, particularly for collaborative instruments. Matchmaking, expressions of interest and profile promotion can improve access to opportunities, but they cannot replace European relationships built over time.

More recent NCP practice also points to demotivation after repeated rejection, associated with the considerable effort required to prepare proposals, intense competition, difficulties related to consortia, and insufficient institutional support. In addition, support needs do not end with submission. Interpreting evaluation results, deciding whether to resubmit, and addressing implementation difficulties show that, for some applicants and beneficiaries, the support cycle is longer.

5.2. Programme-specific profiles

Beyond the common challenges, each programme generates specific needs.

ERC places strong emphasis on the scientific maturity of both the applicant and the project. The ambition and ground-breaking nature of the idea, positioning in relation to the state of the art,

researcher independence, CV and track record need to be considered together. Awareness may increase without readiness developing at the same pace. The NCP role is particularly relevant in helping applicants understand the criteria, assess whether the timing is right, and make a realistic judgment about readiness.

MSCA combines individual, institutional and networking dimensions. Challenges relate to proposal design, the relationship between the candidate, supervisor and host institution, organisational attractiveness and, in collaborative instruments, access to partners. Evaluation analysis and decisions on resubmission also remain important.

Cluster 2 often requires applicants to turn disciplinary or interdisciplinary expertise into a complete response to a broad and complex topic. Support needs have increasingly focused on topic interpretation, building a credible consortium, advanced proposal writing, impact, and international visibility.

Cluster 6 highlights challenges related to motivation to participate, call fit, alignment between expertise and the topic, access to partners, and late requests for support. In collaborative projects, integration into a relevant consortium is essential.

EIC and **EIE** bring the relationship between research, innovation, markets and ecosystem development to the forefront. Applicants need to identify the right instrument, assess the maturity of the solution, and build a credible development and exploitation logic, including the potential for commercialisation and scaling in global markets. The diversity of instruments and frequent changes increase the need for specialised guidance.

EIT follows a different logic from traditional grant schemes, being organised around Knowledge and Innovation Communities and the interaction between education, research, business and entrepreneurship. The main need is orientation within the ecosystem and referral towards relevant opportunities and actors.

Widening Participation & Strengthening the ERA has a more pronounced institutional dimension. Challenges relate to research management, network development, call fit, co-funding, implementation, and the sustainability of institutional change. In 2025–2026, requests increasingly came from coordinators and managers of funded projects as well, suggesting that support needs are extending across the full project cycle.

5.3. Differences between types of instruments

Beyond programme boundaries, the type of instrument directly influences the nature of the support required.

In individual-focused instruments, such as ERC and some MSCA actions, the emphasis is on the researcher's profile, professional maturity, the quality of the idea, and the relationship with the host institution. NCP support can be more personalised and focused on eligibility, readiness and evaluation criteria.

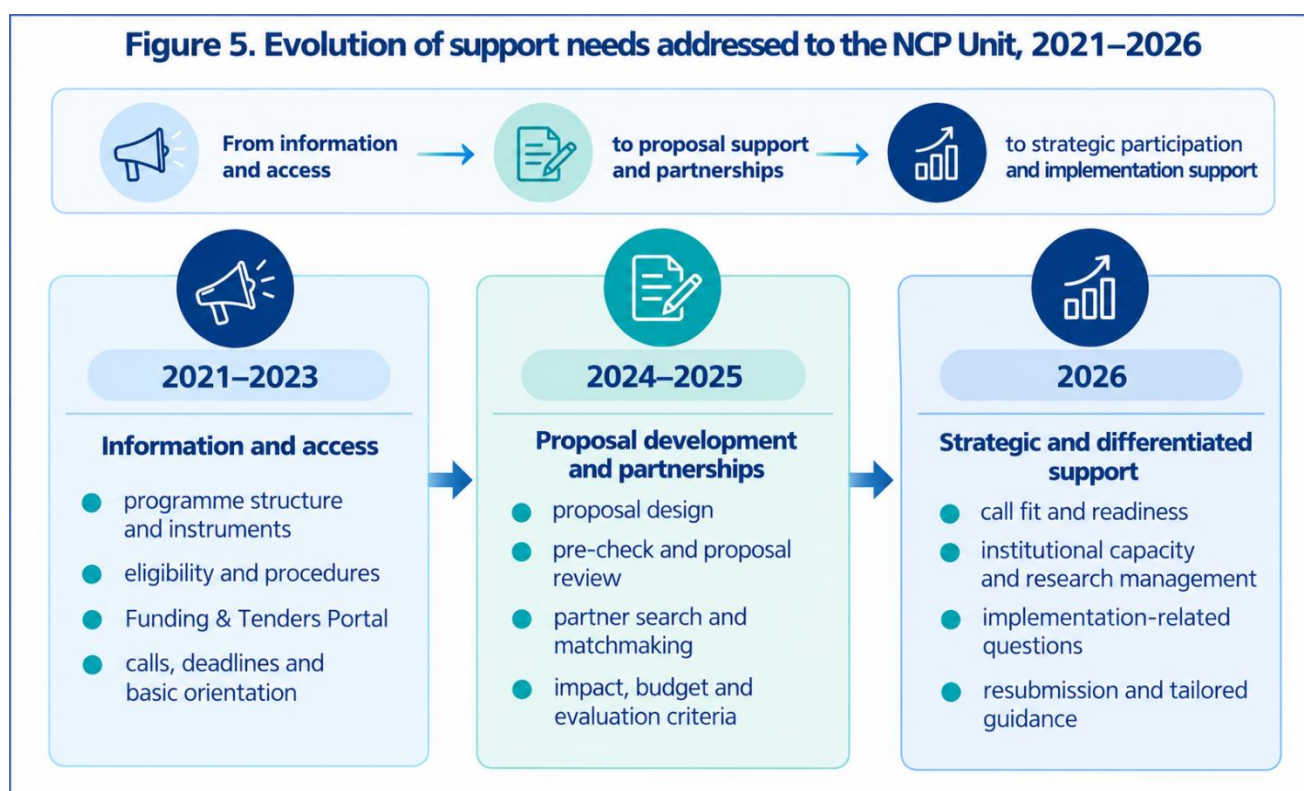
Collaborative projects involve additional challenges, including partner identification, complementarity of expertise, allocation of roles, governance and relationship management. Quality depends on the coherence of the consortium as a whole, while the NCP role is primarily one of guidance and facilitation.

There are also differences depending on the type of result the instrument seeks to achieve. Research instruments emphasise scientific quality and relevance; innovation instruments focus on solution maturity, users, markets and scaling; ecosystem instruments focus on relationships between actors and the sustainability of collaboration; while WIDERA, in many cases, focuses on institutional development and transformation.

NCP services therefore cannot be organised only by programme. They also need to take into account the type of instrument and the change that the instrument is intended to support.

5.4. Evolution of needs and implications for the support model

Comparison across the period 2021-2026 shows a gradual change in the type of support requested from the NCP Unit (Figure 5).



The emphasis shifted gradually from basic information and access to more strategic and targeted support related to proposal quality, partnerships, implementation and institutional capacity.

In the initial phase, the emphasis was mainly on information and access: the structure of Horizon Europe, eligibility, calls, the Funding & Tenders Portal, and procedures. As familiarity with the programme increased, requests increasingly shifted towards proposal design, interpretation of evaluation criteria, pre-check, impact, consortia, matchmaking, legal and financial aspects, ESR analysis, and resubmission.

In 2025-2026, needs became more selective and strategic. Questions increasingly concerned readiness, call fit, whether submission was appropriate, institutional capacity, partnerships, and implementation issues. This evolution may be associated both with the community's gradual familiarisation with the programme and with sustained information and dissemination activities.

This shift also affects the nature of NCP work. General information can be provided to large numbers of people, while strategic guidance, proposal analysis or interpretation of an ESR require more time and individual interaction. The more personalised the service, the more resource-intensive it becomes and the more difficult it is to provide uniformly.

For this reason, the support model needs to combine standardisation and differentiation. Standards can be common for accessibility, response times, call fit, proposal pre-check, referral, confidentiality and feedback, while the content of support needs to be adapted to the programme, instrument and applicant readiness.

The appropriate model is not “the same service for everyone”, but a common quality framework applied differently according to the instrument, the applicant’s experience and level of maturity. This direction is also supported by the 2025 survey, in which respondents asked for support formats adapted both to newcomers and to experienced applicants requiring more applied and specialised support.

The volume and diversity of these services are also documented through the Unit’s activity indicators for the period 2021-June 2026, including direct support requests, support materials, proposal design meetings, proposal review, matchmaking and networking activities, and the development of NCP expertise. These data complement the qualitative analysis presented in this chapter.

6. The role of the NCP in a shared-responsibility model

The analysis of recurring challenges shows that participation in Horizon Europe depends on the contribution of several actors. Some difficulties can be addressed directly through well-organised NCP services, while others primarily require action by the applicant, the organisation, or the competent actors at national or European level.

Clarifying responsibilities is not about shifting responsibility from one actor to another. Its purpose is to identify the specific contribution through which each level can support more competitive and sustainable participation.

The question, therefore, is not only “what support can the NCP provide?”, but also “who has the primary responsibility for the issue concerned?”.

6.1. Information, guidance and capacity building

Information and clarification are among the direct functions of the NCP. The NCP service can explain the structure of Horizon Europe, its instruments and types of action, participation conditions, eligibility, the structure of calls, the evaluation process and the use of the Funding & Tenders Portal, and can guide applicants towards the relevant documentation.

Beyond basic information, the NCP can provide strategic guidance on the fit between the applicant profile, the project idea and the call. This may include discussing call fit, readiness, alternative options and, where appropriate, whether submission should be postponed. This guidance is advisory in nature and does not constitute an official pre-evaluation. The NCP can provide an informed view, but cannot guarantee that it will coincide with the assessment of evaluators or that the proposal will receive funding. The final decision on whether to submit the proposal remains the responsibility of the applicant.

The NCP also contributes to capacity building through workshops, training, guides, checklists, peer learning, mock interviews, and support in understanding evaluation criteria and Evaluation Summary Reports. This type of intervention should aim to strengthen applicant autonomy. The purpose of support is to help applicants develop the capacity to prepare a better proposal, not to prepare the proposal on their behalf.

6.2. Proposal support, partnerships and referral

Personalised support may include pre-check, feedback on proposal structure and compliance, identification of gaps, and guidance on resubmission. It should, however, remain clearly distinct from proposal writing and from developing scientific content on behalf of the applicant.

In the area of project partnerships and consortia, the NCP can promote expressions of interest and partner searches, point applicants towards brokerage events and matchmaking platforms, facilitate contacts, and contribute to the visibility of organisations. The selection of partners, negotiation of roles, and building of the consortium remain the responsibility of the applicant and the partners involved.

Referral is also an important part of the NCP role. For legal and financial matters, audit, co-funding, grant amendments, implementation, or other issues falling within the remit of specialised services, the role of the NCP is to identify and direct the applicant promptly towards the appropriate actor.

Effective referral requires functional contacts and should help avoid situations in which the applicant has no clear route towards resolving an issue. Where possible, referral should include an up-to-date contact and a simple way of checking that the request has reached the competent structure. Facilitation is therefore an important NCP function, but it does not imply taking over the responsibility of the actor to whom the applicant is referred.

6.3. Issues requiring action at several levels

Some of the challenges observed require action that goes beyond a single service or actor.

At institutional level, these include situations where the institutional approach is limited or fragmented, research management functions are insufficiently developed, or access to legal, financial or implementation support is uneven. The NCP can highlight such issues, provide training and good practices, and contribute to capacity building. Decisions concerning internal organisation and resource allocation, however, remain with the organisation.

Other issues concern the national or European level, including co-funding, coordination of support instruments, complementarity between different funding sources, programme procedures, IT platforms, timelines, call budgets, or certain aspects of the evaluation process. In these situations, the NCP can identify and document the need for clarification, request information, and communicate feedback to the competent actor, without having the authority to change the relevant rules or decisions.

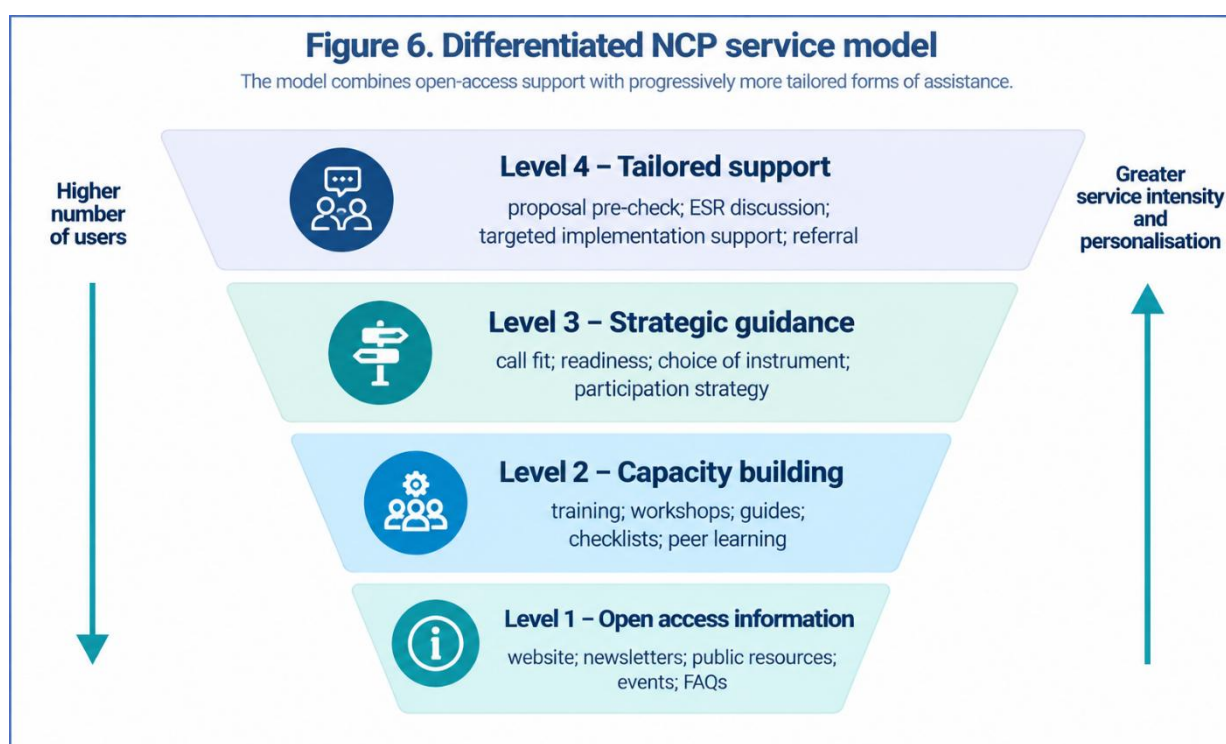
This distribution of roles does not reduce the responsibility of any actor. It shows that competitive participation depends on complementary contributions: the applicant is responsible for the idea and the decision to participate; the organisation for institutional capacity; the NCP for information,

guidance, capacity building, facilitation and referral; and other levels for matters that fall within their respective mandates.

Clarifying responsibilities does not diminish the role of the NCP. On the contrary, it makes that role clearer and more sustainable.

6.4. A differentiated support model

Based on the challenges identified, NCP services can be organised at different levels according to applicant needs and maturity (Figure 6). This differentiation also reflects the mixed profile identified in the 2025 survey: some respondents had never applied before, while others already had experience in submitting or implementing Horizon Europe projects.



A differentiated model combines open-access resources with progressively more tailored support, depending on applicant needs, maturity and the nature of the request.

Such a model allows resources to be used more effectively and makes it possible to direct more intensive support towards situations where it can add the greatest value. Differentiation of services should not, however, restrict access for newcomers or for organisations with more limited internal resources. They should retain a clear and transparent pathway to information, guidance, capacity building and, where justified, more in-depth forms of support.

6.5. Responsibility matrix

Table 1. Shared-responsibility matrix for participation support

Type of issue	Main contribution / responsibility
Lack of information	NCP
Interpretation of the call	NCP + applicant
Fit with the call	Applicant + NCP
Proposal quality	Applicant / organisation, with NCP support
Scientific concept	Applicant
Research management	Organisation
Partner identification	Applicant / organisation, with NCP facilitation
Consortium building	Applicant
Legal and financial matters	Organisation + Legal & Financial NCP
Co-funding	Authority / structure managing the co-funding mechanism
Project implementation	Beneficiary / organisation
Consortium management	Coordinator
Clarification of call / programme requirements	NCP; for official interpretations, the European Commission / competent executive agency
Call budgets and programme design	European Commission / competent European-level authority
NCP standards and coordination	National NCP coordination / authority responsible for the NCP system
Resources and organisational framework of the NCP service	Host organisation, within its organisational responsibilities

The matrix shows that participation in Horizon Europe is the result of contributions from several actors, and that the NCP service is one component of this wider ecosystem. Support is more effective when roles are clear and contributions complement one another.

The value of NCP support does not lie in doing more on behalf of the applicant, but in helping applicants and their organisations understand more clearly what needs to be done, when, and by whom.

7. NCP practice as a learning and feedback mechanism

NCP activity generates not only services for applicants, but also relevant information about how Horizon Europe works in practice.

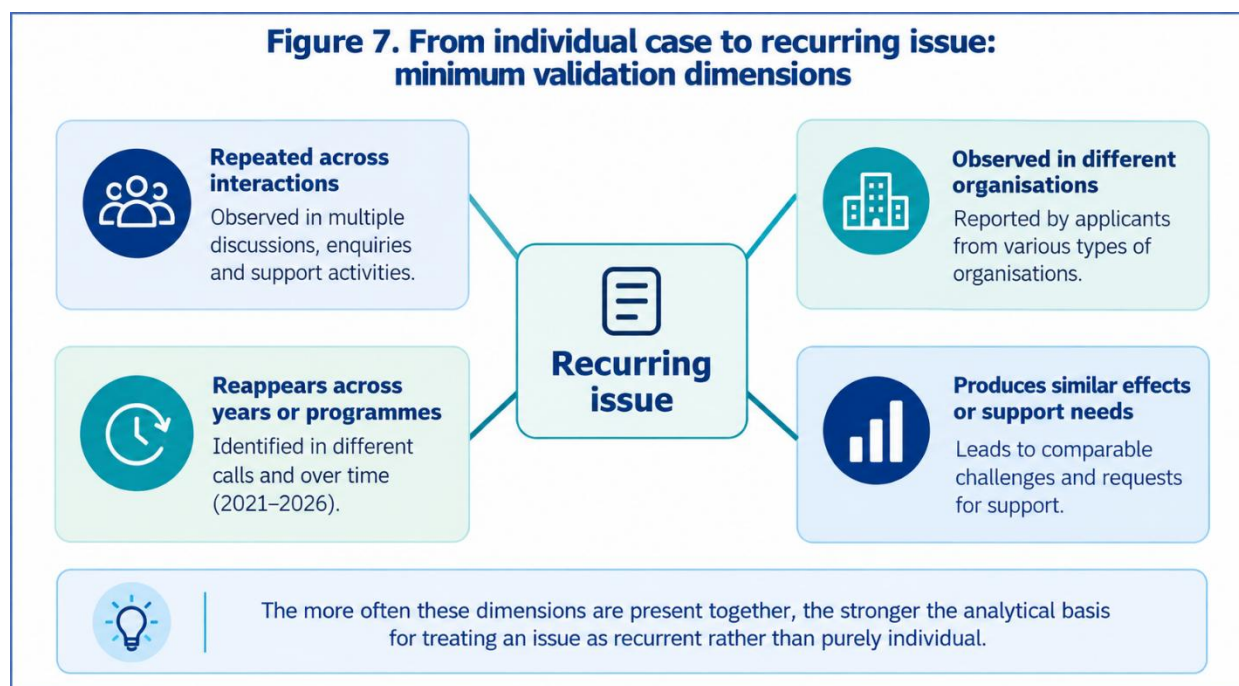
Through repeated interaction with researchers, organisations, beneficiaries and project coordinators, NCPs can identify recurring difficulties related to call interpretation, procedures, institutional capacity, access to partnerships, project implementation, or the division of responsibilities. They can also observe changes in applicant behaviour and motivation.

NCP practice also includes experience gained through European NCP networks and dedicated support projects. Participation in training, thematic meetings, peer learning and joint activities with NCPs from other countries contributes to expertise development, comparison of recurring challenges, and rapid exchange of solutions and feedback with European networks and the European Commission.

The NCP@UEFISCDI Strategy and the successive SWOT and gap analyses show that such signals have already been used to adjust services and support priorities. Their value does not lie in statistical representativeness, but in their ability to highlight recurring issues that may remain invisible in aggregated participation data. For this experience to be useful beyond the resolution of individual cases, signals need to be differentiated, validated, aggregated and communicated in a structured way.

7.1. From individual case to recurring issue

Not every difficulty reported to an NCP indicates a broader implementation problem. Some situations reflect an individual need for clarification, the context of a particular organisation, or an isolated case. The relevance of a signal increases when the same difficulty appears across several interactions, in different organisations, over several years or programmes, and produces similar effects. To avoid overgeneralisation, signals can be assessed across four dimensions (Figure 7).



A reported difficulty becomes more analytically robust when it recurs across interactions, organisations, programmes or years, and when similar effects are observed.

This classification should not become a bureaucratic exercise. Its purpose is to provide a minimum level of validation before operational experience is turned into a broader conclusion.

7.2. Collecting, validating and aggregating signals

During the period analysed, information on applicant difficulties came from direct requests, meetings, workshops, annual analyses, comparative documents, the applicant survey, exchanges between NCPs, and participation in European NCP networks. The Unit's activity indicators for 2021-June 2026 provide additional context on the volume of these interactions.

Looking ahead, this information could be integrated into a more systematic feedback mechanism that would allow issues to be tracked over time and compared across programmes.

For each issue, a small number of basic elements could be recorded: the programme and stage at which it appears, the source of the observation, approximate frequency, factors that appear to contribute to it, the NCP response, its evolution over time, and the level at which it can be addressed.

It is important to keep evidence, observations, interpretations and recommendations distinct. The fact that several applicants ask for support in finding partners is evidence; the recurrence of this request across several programmes is an observation; the conclusion that the issue may reflect limited access to networks is an interpretation that also needs support from other sources.

Keeping these levels separate increases the credibility of the analysis and reduces the risk that a plausible interpretation is presented as an established fact.

7.3. Using feedback to improve services

The first use of collected feedback is internal: to support the continuous development of NCP services. When an issue appears frequently, the NCP Unit can adapt its response by updating guides and FAQs, organising workshops, developing checklists or pre-screening mechanisms, improving referral, or adjusting the timing and type of services offered.

This logic is already visible in NCP@UEFISCDI practice. Difficulties related to proposal quality led to workshops and pre-checks; visibility challenges led to matchmaking and the promotion of expressions of interest; and legal and financial needs led to stronger referral to the Legal & Financial NCP. Support has also expanded towards ESR analysis, resubmission and, in some programmes, implementation-related issues.

In this sense, NCP activity can function as a continuous learning mechanism, rather than only as a channel for providing information. The ability to turn operational experience into service adjustments is one dimension of the maturation of the NCP@UEFISCDI function.

Where an issue goes beyond the mandate of the NCP Unit, feedback can be transmitted to the relevant level. At national level, this may concern needs for clarification or coordination related to research management, co-funding, or the complementarity of support instruments. At European level, it may concern topic clarity, procedures, platforms, frequent changes, or other recurring issues.

The role of the NCP in this process is to provide aggregated and documented observations that can inform the decisions of the competent actors.

7.4. Confidentiality, institutional memory and the learning cycle

Turning NCP experience into feedback must be done without undermining applicant trust. Information obtained through the support process should be used in aggregated and anonymised form so that individuals, organisations, proposals or consortia cannot be identified.

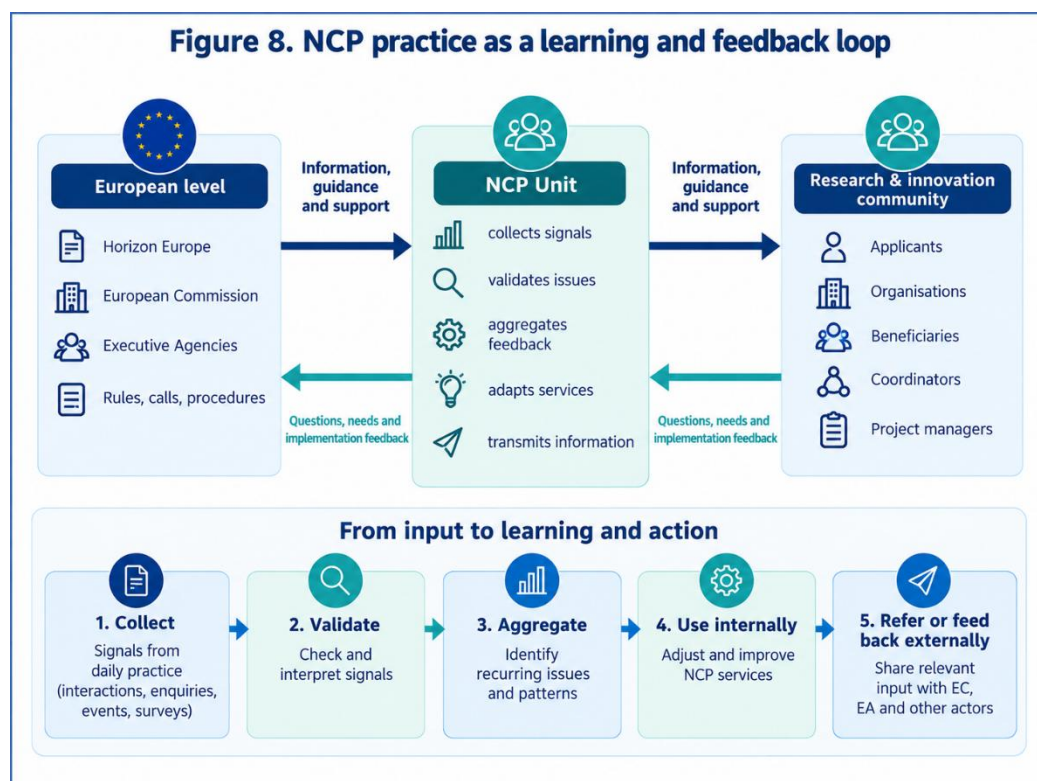
The same principle applies to open-ended survey responses and to observations arising from direct interaction with applicants and beneficiaries.

At the same time, information needs to be retained in a form that supports organisational learning and comparison over time. A simple learning and feedback loop is illustrated in Figure 8.

For periodic reporting, the same logic can be followed in an even simpler format.

This approach contributes to institutional memory and reduces dependence on the individual experience of a particular NCP.

Within this logic, the NCP operates in two directions: from programme to applicant through the NCP, and from applicant to programme through the NCP.



NCP activity supports applicants and organisations while also generating structured feedback that can be used to improve services and inform the competent national or European level.

The second direction is less visible, but it can be important for learning and the continuous improvement of the programme.

7.5. Emerging trends and implications for FP10

Some issues observed more recently deserve to be monitored separately, without yet being treated as established trends.

One example is the relationship between increasing competition, high proposal volumes, and the use of generative AI tools in proposal preparation. NCP Unit observations indicate a perception of more intense competition and, in parallel, more frequent use of AI for drafting. The available evidence does not, however, allow a causal relationship between the two phenomena to be established.

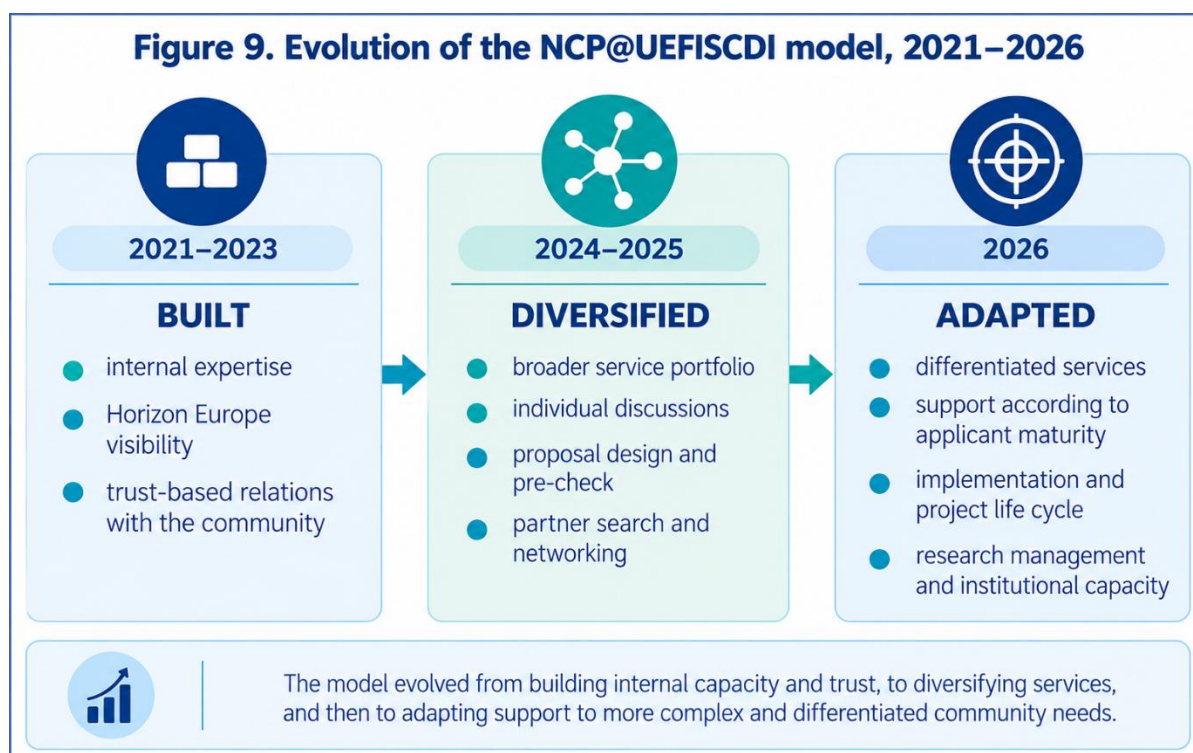
AI can facilitate drafting and text structuring, but it does not ensure better call fit, a stronger concept, a more credible consortium, or better-prepared implementation. For this reason, the substantive elements (readiness, concept quality, partnerships and implementation feasibility) become even more important.

For FP10, the Horizon Europe experience suggests that the NCP feedback function could be used more systematically through common categories for classifying recurring issues, clear feedback channels, and more structured exchanges between NCP networks and the European Commission.

This would not turn NCPs into programme-evaluation bodies. Rather, it would make more effective use of a source of information that already arises naturally from their day-to-day work. NCP practice can complement participation statistics by helping to explain how difficulties emerge and evolve in the concrete experience of applicants and beneficiaries.

8. Evolution of the NCP@UEFISCDI model and the direction towards FP10

The experience accumulated during 2021-2026 makes it possible to examine not only applicant needs, but also how the NCP@UEFISCDI service model has been built and adapted over time (Figure 9).



The model evolved from building expertise and trust, to diversifying services, and then to adapting support to more complex and differentiated needs.

The NCP Unit Strategy was designed from the outset, in 2021, as an evolving document. Its implementation plan envisaged building internal capacity and strengthening relations with the community in 2021-2023, intensifying services in 2024-2025, and evaluating and refining the model from 2026 onwards. The current stage therefore represents a maturation of the initial model, rather than a departure from its underlying principles.

8.1. 2021-2023: building expertise and trust

In 2021, UEFISCDI was in the process of building a new NCP service model. For the first time, the organisation had full-time NCPs for a European research and innovation framework programme.

The priority was to build internal expertise through European Commission training, in-depth study of programme documents, and participation in European networks. At the same time, the relationship with the community was developed through information activities, newsletters, events and direct interaction.

The NCP Unit Strategy aimed to develop an “NCP center of excellence” based on professionalism, trust, efficiency and effectiveness. Its mission emphasised “tailored guidance, support, and information”, while one of its core values was “Focus on the applicant”.

In 2022 and 2023, attention gradually shifted towards the difficulties faced by applicants and organisations: confidence to apply, institutional strategy, international visibility, proposal-writing support, and legal and financial support.

By 2023, trust-based relationships with applicants were already identified as a strength of the NCP Unit. At the same time, growing demand for support absorbed more of the team’s available time and made the need to organise and prioritise services more visible.

A first recurring service challenge therefore became visible: as trust in and use of the service increase, expectations and demand for support also increase.

8.2. 2024-2026: more specialised services and the sustainability of the model

During 2024-2026, the challenges observed became less related to basic access to information and more closely linked to motivation to participate, call fit, readiness, international networks, institutional support, late requests for assistance, and demotivation after repeated rejection.

At the same time, the range of services provided by the NCP Unit expanded. General information was complemented by individual guidance, proposal design meetings, proposal review and pre-check, training, matchmaking, expressions of interest, networking, and support related to evaluation and resubmission.

This evolution responds to genuine demand and reflects a maturing relationship with the community, but it also raises the question of how personalised services can be provided consistently, equitably and sustainably. Multiple rounds of feedback, detailed reviews, and requests received very close to submission deadlines increase the resources required to provide support.

Experience accumulated over the period suggests that continued expansion of highly personalised support may affect available time, consistency, equitable access and quality.

The next stage is therefore not about reducing support, but about drawing a clearer boundary between justified intensive support and taking on responsibilities that properly belong to the applicant or the organisation.

8.3. From “Focus on the applicant” to applicant empowerment and shared responsibility

The original value “Focus on the applicant” remains relevant, but can be reinterpreted in light of the experience accumulated.

In the initial stage, an applicant-centred approach meant accessibility, rapid response, direct support and building trust.

In a more mature model, the same orientation should focus increasingly on developing the applicant’s capacity to make informed decisions, take responsibility for participation, and become more autonomous in preparing future applications.

This evolution can be summarised in two principles:

Applicant-centred support should not mean applicant substitution.

Capacity before dependency.

This distinction is consistent with the functions described in European Commission guidance on NCP services. The guidance assigns NCPs roles related to information, assistance, advice, training, signposting and cooperation; drafting the proposal on behalf of the applicant is not included among these functions.

Competitive participation therefore depends on complementary responsibilities. The applicant is responsible for the idea, content and decision to participate; the organisation for the institutional framework and capacity; the NCP for information, guidance, capacity building, facilitation and referral; and other levels for matters within their respective mandates.

A mature support model does not transfer responsibility to the NCP. Instead, it clarifies the responsibility of each actor and strengthens their capacity to exercise it.

8.4. Service sustainability: equitable access, professional standards and resources

European Commission NCP guidance emphasises the principles of transparency, equitable access, independence and impartiality, and states that NCP resources should be proportionate to the scope of the mandate and the size of the community served⁷.

These principles have direct implications for the organisation of NCP services.

To ensure equitable access and scalability, proposal support needs clear limits and standards regarding the timing of requests, the level of detail, the number of feedback rounds, and applicable deadlines.

Availability is equally important. The requirement to be accessible by email and telephone during working hours establishes a standard of professionalism and continuity, not unlimited availability. A sustainable service is based on predictable availability during working hours while preserving the time needed to maintain and update expertise, rather than assuming permanent availability before submission deadlines.

⁷https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ncp-guiding-principles_he_v2.0_en.pdf

At the same time, the organisation of the NCP service needs to take into account the volume and complexity of the mandate. Increasing NCP resources alone, however, cannot compensate for limited institutional capacity within applicant organisations.

A sustainable model therefore depends on complementarity between the NCP service and the research management functions developed within participating organisations.

8.5. NCP performance and appropriate indicators

The original NCP Unit Strategy included among its intended outcomes an increase in the number of proposals, improved success rates, and stronger international visibility. After five years of experience, the relationship between NCP activity and these outcomes needs to be framed more carefully.

The NCP can influence awareness, skills development, call selection, proposal preparation, access to networks, and learning from evaluation. It does not, however, control the scientific quality of ideas, applicant maturity, institutional resources, consortium configuration, the intensity of competition, call budgets, or evaluation outcomes.

The performance of NCP services should not be equated with the volume of Horizon Europe funding attracted nationally or with the national success rate. These outcomes reflect the functioning of the wider participation ecosystem.

This does not reduce the responsibility of the NCP Unit for the quality of its own services, which should be assessed through clear indicators related to accessibility, relevance, quality and the added value of the support provided.

Activity indicators, such as events, newsletters, requests, materials, meetings or proposals reviewed, remain useful for measuring service volume and coverage. They can, however, be complemented by indicators relating to response time, user satisfaction, accessibility, quality of referral, updating of expertise, usefulness of training, and the capacity to identify and communicate recurring issues.

A mature performance model should measure not only how much the NCP does, but also how well the service performs within the areas it can reasonably influence.

8.6. Mission, vision and a mature model for FP10

Based on the experience accumulated during 2021–2026, the mission of the NCP Unit could evolve towards the following:

The NCP@UEFISCDI Unit supports informed, strategic and competitive participation of the Romanian community in the framework programme through expertise, guidance, training, capacity building, facilitation of collaboration, and feedback on implementation, while also contributing to applicant autonomy and stronger institutional capacity.

The vision could be formulated as follows:

The NCP@UEFISCDI Unit should be a trusted national centre of expertise, recognised for professionalism, impartiality and service quality, supporting strategic and sustainable

participation, connecting applicants and organisations with the national and European ecosystem, and turning implementation experience into learning and improvement.

Table 2. From the 2021 model to a mature 2026-FP10 model

2021 model	Mature 2026-FP10 model
Building expertise	Maintaining and deepening expertise
Awareness	Strategic guidance
Information	Call fit and readiness
Focus on the applicant	Applicant empowerment
Prompt assistance	Service standards and equitable access
Proposal support	Capacity building and feedback within clear boundaries
Finding partners	Partner-search facilitation
Responsiveness	Responsiveness within sustainable limits
Applicant success	Shared responsibility for participation
Volume of activities	Quality, coverage and added value
NCP service delivery	Service delivery + implementation feedback
“Go the extra mile”	Professional, equitable and sustainable support

This evolution reflects UEFISCDI’s capacity to turn accumulated operational experience into organisational learning, service development, and adaptation of the support model to the changing needs of the community.

A mature NCP service should be distinguished by the quality and expertise of its support, not by the unlimited expansion of individual intervention.

9. Recommendations and implications for the next period

Experience accumulated during 2021-2026 shows that support for participation in Horizon Europe needs to evolve alongside applicant needs, organisational capacity and programme complexity.

Information and clarification of rules remain important functions, particularly for newcomers. More recent challenges, however, point to a growing need for strategic guidance, call fit and readiness assessment, capacity building, access to partnerships, research management, and support across a broader participation cycle.

The recommendations below are formulated for the levels for which the analysis provides a direct basis: applicants, participating organisations, the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit and, in more general terms, the design of FP10.

9.1. Recommendations for applicants

Participation should start from a strategic rationale. Applying should not be driven only by the existence of an open call. Applicants should clarify the objective they are pursuing, the maturity of the idea, the resources available, and how the project fits into a broader scientific, institutional or innovation pathway.

Call fit should be assessed before major effort is invested in drafting. The topic should be analysed as a whole: scope, expected outcomes and impacts, type of action, specific conditions, consortium requirements and maturity level. Good writing cannot compensate for weak fit.

Preparation should begin early enough. Consortium building, budgeting, checking requirements, contacting the NCP and reviewing the proposal should all be planned in advance.

Partnerships should be developed continuously. Networking, visibility, participation in networks and international collaboration should not begin only after a call is published.

Resubmission should be a strategic decision. Evaluator feedback should be considered together with any changes to the call, the maturity of the idea, and the realistic scope for improvement.

Responsibility for the proposal remains with the applicant. Support from NCPs, consultants or AI tools can assist the process, but does not transfer responsibility for the concept, methodology, data, content, quality or confidentiality.

External support should strengthen applicant capacity, not substitute for it.

9.2. Recommendations for universities, research institutes and other applicant organisations

Integrate Horizon Europe into the institutional approach. Researcher initiative remains essential, while institutional support can complement it through clear priorities, access to information and expertise, support mechanisms, and conditions that enable proposal preparation and project implementation. The specific form can vary between organisations and should preserve researchers' scientific and decision-making autonomy.

Strengthen research management functions. Sustainable participation benefits from internal functions covering opportunity identification, proposal development and review, budgeting, legal and financial support, project management, data management, ethics, reporting, exploitation and networking. The organisational form may vary, but these functions need to exist and be accessible.

Ensure quality and continuity of support. Institutions can develop internal review, peer review, proposal clinics and mechanisms for using lessons from ESRs. Support should also continue after funding is awarded, through grant preparation, implementation, reporting and exploitation of results.

Develop internationalisation. Access to partners requires long-term investment in visibility, networks and collaboration. NCP services can facilitate access to platforms, brokerage events, expressions of interest and contacts, but international relationships are built and maintained over time by researchers and organisations themselves.

Strengthen internal support functions. Proposal development, project management, legal and financial support, and other research management functions should be developed in complementarity with NCP services, so that each actor contributes within its own area of responsibility.

Institutions are better positioned for competitive and sustainable participation when strong research capacity is supported by the organisational conditions needed to prepare and implement projects.

9.3. Recommendations for the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit

9.3.1. Update the Unit's strategic model

The NCP Unit Strategy should be reviewed for the final phase of Horizon Europe and the transition to FP10, while preserving its applicant-centred approach, expertise, professionalism, trust and accessibility, and introducing more clearly the principles of applicant autonomy, shared responsibility, equitable access and service sustainability.

9.3.2. Introduce a differentiated service model

Support services can be organised at different levels: information, capacity building, strategic guidance, proposal support, and post-award support and referral, depending on applicant maturity and need.

Within this model, call fit and readiness should be used more systematically to identify early situations in which an application may be premature or insufficiently aligned.

9.3.3. Standardise proposal support and clarify the scope of intervention

Proposal pre-check should be governed by clear rules concerning access conditions, the minimum time before the deadline, the level of feedback, the number of review rounds, confidentiality, and the aspects that remain outside the NCP role.

At the same time, an explicit distinction should be maintained between feedback and consultancy. The NCP can guide, comment and identify gaps without taking over proposal drafting or development.

9.3.4. Maintain expertise and the sustainability of the NCP service

Time for studying European Commission documents, training, peer learning and updating expertise should be explicitly planned within the team's work.

The NCP support service can use standards for response times, working hours, functional mailboxes, back-up arrangements and proposal-review deadlines, so that availability remains predictable and sustainable.

The volume and type of requests, and the time required by different services, should be monitored periodically to support prioritisation and resource planning. Such monitoring can inform subsequent decisions on service organisation, working tools and resource needs, without implying that expanding NCP resources can substitute for the development of institutional capacity within applicant organisations.

9.3.5. Strengthen knowledge management and internal feedback

Recurring issues, solutions, referral pathways, lessons learned and programme-specific developments should be retained in a common system that supports continuity and organisational learning.

The objective is not the continuous expansion of services, but the development of a clear, coherent and sustainable model in which resources are concentrated where they can add the greatest value.

9.4. Considerations for FP10

The Horizon Europe experience highlights several aspects that may be relevant to the design of the future framework programme.

First, simplification should aim not only to reduce administrative burden, but also to improve the clarity of instruments, requirements and participation pathways. Complexity and fragmentation increase the cost of navigating the programme for both newcomers and experienced participants.

Second, experience from Widening ecosystems suggests that procedural simplification alone is not sufficient where the underlying issue is institutional capacity. Instruments supporting research management, internationalisation and integration into European networks can play an important role in enabling more competitive participation.

Partner search and networking mechanisms could also be better connected and more strongly oriented towards expertise and complementarity, without transferring responsibility for consortium building to NCPs.

In addition, the direct experience of NCPs could be used more systematically as a source of implementation feedback, through simple mechanisms for collecting, comparing and communicating recurring issues.

The use of AI in proposal preparation is another area that will require monitoring and probably clearer guidance on confidentiality, data protection, intellectual property and responsibility for content. At this stage, the report does not support conclusions about the effect of AI on proposal volume or success.

Another aspect worth considering for FP10 is continuity of support after evaluation, particularly for proposals that receive strong evaluation results but remain unfunded because of the available budget. It is useful to distinguish between proposals that require substantial revision and those for which the evaluation indicates high quality but funding was not possible mainly because of the call budget limit. For the first group, support may focus on revising the concept, consortium or impact logic. For the second, in addition to considering resubmission, other calls, existing complementary mechanisms, and ways of maintaining collaborations or preparatory activities may be explored. The NCP can document this need and guide applicants towards relevant opportunities without taking responsibility for funding. The relationship between these needs and possible support instruments for high-quality unfunded proposals deserves further consideration in the design of the future programme.

The relationship between these needs and possible support instruments for high-quality unfunded proposals deserves further consideration in the design of the future programme.

For FP10, the challenge is therefore not only to simplify the programme, but also to create conditions that enable participation to be better prepared, more strategic and more sustainable.

9.5. Priorities for the next period

Table 3. Priorities for the next period

Time scale	Priorities
Remaining Horizon Europe period	standardise proposal pre-check; clarify service standards; introduce call-fit and readiness tools; strengthen referral mechanisms; protect time for expertise development; improve knowledge management and service indicators; conduct a new round of consultation with applicants, organisations and key stakeholders to update needs and priorities
Transition to FP10	review the Unit's mission and vision; operationalise the differentiated service model; strengthen capacity building for NCPs and applicants; prepare guidance on AI; adapt tools and services to the new programme; use the results of an updated consultation to prepare the transition
FP10	strengthen institutional capacity; improve networking and partner-search mechanisms; increase simplification and clarity; strengthen implementation feedback; assess NCP services through indicators of quality and added value

The recommendations are based on the idea that competitive participation cannot be improved by intensifying a single element of the system. More NCP activity cannot compensate for a lack of institutional strategy, limited research management capacity, weak networks, or proposals that are insufficiently aligned.

At the same time, stronger organisational capacity does not remove the need for professional, accessible and well-prepared NCP services. The two levels need to complement, rather than substitute for, one another.

10. Conclusions

This report has examined recurring challenges encountered by Horizon Europe applicants through the experience accumulated by the NCP@UEFISCDI Unit during 2021-2026. The analysis is not intended to provide a statistically representative assessment of Romania's participation, but to identify recurring patterns, show where difficulties arise, and clarify the levels at which they can be addressed.

One of the clearest developments observed is the changing nature of applicant needs. In the early years of Horizon Europe, support focused largely on access to information, understanding the programme, eligibility, and use of the Funding & Tenders Portal. These needs remain important, particularly for newcomers, but they no longer explain the main challenges of competitive participation.

More recently, the focus has shifted towards selecting the right call, call fit and readiness, proposal quality, access to partners, institutional capacity, research management, implementation, and demotivation associated with repeated rejection and high levels of competition.

The main barrier is no longer only access to information, but the capacity of applicants and organisations to turn information into strategic, well-prepared and sustainable participation.

The challenges identified are interconnected. Selecting an unsuitable call can affect the entire proposal; limited institutional support can contribute to late preparation and implementation difficulties; limited international visibility can restrict access to partners; and repeated rejection can reduce willingness to continue. Targeted interventions are useful, but they cannot by themselves resolve structural issues.

The report shows that NCP services are one of the components that can influence the quality of participation. Through information, guidance, training, facilitation, feedback, and connecting applicants with relevant expertise, the NCP can contribute directly to better-prepared participation. Final outcomes, however, depend on the interaction between these services, the capacity of applicants and organisations, consortium configuration, and programme conditions. For this reason, the performance of NCP services should not be equated with the national success rate or with the volume of Horizon Europe funding attracted. These outcomes depend on a much wider set of factors.

Another major conclusion concerns the importance of institutional capacity. Successive analyses repeatedly point to needs related to Horizon Europe strategies, research management, legal and financial support, internal review, networking, and continuity of support after funding is awarded.

Sustainable participation depends on complementarity between NCP services and the capacities developed within applicant organisations. The NCP can contribute through training, guidance and good practice, but participation benefits when organisations develop and exercise their own support functions.

The experience of 2021-2026 also shows the maturation of the NCP@UEFISCDI model. From building expertise and trust, the service has evolved towards increasingly specialised and personalised forms of support. The next stage, however, is not the unlimited expansion of individual intervention, but the consolidation of a clearer, more differentiated and more sustainable model.

An applicant-centred approach should lead to greater autonomy and capacity, not to the substitution of the responsibilities of the applicant or the applicant's organisation.

In a highly competitive environment, participation needs to be approached more strategically. The success of support cannot be measured only by the number of proposals submitted. Sometimes, a good decision may mean choosing another call, postponing submission, strengthening the applicant profile, or developing partnerships before applying.

Similarly, access to partnerships should be understood as a matter of long-term positioning and internationalisation, not only as a one-off need for partner search. The NCP can facilitate access to networks, but cannot build reputation, trust and collaborative relationships on behalf of the applicant.

NCP practice also provides a valuable source of feedback on the implementation of Horizon Europe. Direct contact with applicants and beneficiaries makes it possible to identify bottlenecks, uncertainties and emerging needs that may remain invisible in aggregated statistics. When these observations are collected systematically, validated and aggregated, they can contribute to improving services and to learning from programme implementation.

For FP10, the main lesson is that an effective support system needs to combine access to information with strategic guidance, capacity building, research management, networking, effective referral, and feedback on implementation.

Competitive and sustainable participation is not built by substituting one actor's responsibility for another's, but by strengthening the capacity of each actor to fulfil its own role.

Within this framework, the NCP has an important and distinct role: to act as a professional interface between European opportunities and the capacity of the community to turn them into strategic, competitive and sustainable participation.

Annex 1. Applicant questionnaire (2025)

Questionnaire for Horizon Europe Applicants

Purpose: This questionnaire aims to collect feedback from current and potential applicants on their level of familiarity with Horizon Europe and their support needs during the application process.

General information

1. Type of organisation:

- ☐ University
- ☐ Research institute
- ☐ Large company
- ☐ SME
- ☐ NGO
- ☐ Public authority
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

I. Experience and intention to apply

1. Previous experience in applying to Horizon Europe:

- ☐ I have never applied
- ☐ I have applied but did not receive funding
- ☐ I have applied and received funding

2. How many funded Horizon Europe projects have you been involved in?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1–5
- ☐ More than 5

3. What is/was your role in the Horizon Europe projects in which you are/were involved?

(Select all options that apply)

- ☐ Project Coordinator
- ☐ Work Package Leader
- ☐ Task Leader
- ☐ Partner
- ☐ Third Party
- ☐ Other

4. Do you intend to apply to future Horizon Europe calls?

- ☐ Yes, to calls in 2025–2026
- ☐ I am not sure
- ☐ No

5. If yes, please indicate the programme(s) to which you intend to apply:

- ☐ ERC
- ☐ MSCA
- ☐ Research Infrastructures
- ☐ Cluster 1. Health
- ☐ Cluster 2. Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society
- ☐ Cluster 3. Civil Security for Society
- ☐ Cluster 4. Digital, Industry and Space
- ☐ Cluster 5. Climate, Energy and Mobility
- ☐ Cluster 6. Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment
- ☐ EIC/EIE
- ☐ EIT
- ☐ Widening Participation & ERA
- ☐ Other programmes (please specify)

II. Knowledge of Horizon Europe

(Please select your level of familiarity: 1 – Low, 2 – Good, 3 – Very good)

1. Level of understanding of the Horizon Europe programme structure:

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3

2. Familiarity with the Funding & Tenders Opportunities Portal:

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3

3. **Clarity of the procedure for submitting project proposals through the Funding & Tenders Opportunities Portal:**
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
4. **Knowledge of project evaluation criteria:**
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3

III. Support received and identified needs

1. **Have you received support from an NCP (National Contact Point)?**
(Please indicate the level of support received: 1 – None, 2 – Moderate, 3 – Very good)
 - ☐ ERC
 - ☐ MSCA
 - ☐ Research Infrastructures
 - ☐ Cluster 1. Health
 - ☐ Cluster 2. Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society
 - ☐ Cluster 3. Civil Security for Society
 - ☐ Cluster 4. Digital, Industry and Space
 - ☐ Cluster 5. Climate, Energy and Mobility
 - ☐ Cluster 6. Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment
 - ☐ EIC/EIE
 - ☐ EIT
 - ☐ Widening Participation & ERA
 - ☐ Other programmes (please specify)
2. **Which types of NCP activities do you think would help you most?**
(Select all options that apply)
 - ☐ General information sessions
 - ☐ Guides and explanatory materials
 - ☐ Workshops on proposal development/improvement
 - ☐ Support through individual discussions
 - ☐ Other:

IV. Useful training and resources

1. **Which types of training or resources would help you most in preparing a Horizon Europe proposal?**
(Select all options that apply)
 - ☐ Guides explaining eligibility criteria and participation requirements
 - ☐ Support for increasing the visibility of the applicant's profile
 - ☐ Workshops on improving proposal quality
 - ☐ Training on horizontal aspects (Open Science, gender, ethics, citizen engagement, citizen science, etc.)
 - ☐ Webinars clarifying financial rules
 - ☐ Support for project implementation
 - ☐ Workshops on the exploitation and valorisation of results, including IPR
 - ☐ Case studies and examples of successful previous projects
 - ☐ Other training and resources:

V. Suggestions and comments

1. **What suggestions do you have for improving the support provided to applicants by Horizon Europe NCPs?**

VI. If you would like to discuss these issues further, please provide a valid email address

.....

Data Protection Notice (GDPR)

In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR – EU Regulation 2016/679), the information collected through this questionnaire will be used exclusively for analysing the needs related to National Contact Point (NCP) services and for improving the services provided.

- The information you provide will be treated confidentially and will not be shared with third parties without your consent.
- You may request access to, correction of, or deletion of your personal data at any time through UEFISCDI's official contact channels and, where applicable, by contacting the institution's data protection officer.
- Completion of this questionnaire is voluntary. By submitting your responses, you consent to the processing of your data in accordance with the GDPR.

Annex 2. Evolution of the main issues observed in NCP@UEFISCDI practice, 2021-2026

Interpretation note: the terms used in the table (for example, “frequent”, “persistent”, “increasing”, “decreasing” or “more visible”) describe qualitative assessments arising from the sources analysed and from NCP@UEFISCDI practice. They do not represent frequencies measured through a uniform monitoring system and should not be interpreted as statistical estimates at national level.

Theme	2021-2022	2023-2024	2025-2026	Observation over the period
Access to information	frequent	decreasing	mainly newcomers	less dominant in recent requests
Call fit / readiness	emerging	more visible	frequent	more visible in recent analyses
Proposal quality	persistent	persistent	persistent	present throughout the entire period
Partnerships	persistent	persistent	persistent	present throughout the entire period
Institutional capacity	emerging	more visible	recurring	appears more explicitly in recent analyses
Research management	limited visibility	increasing	important	becoming a more visible theme
Demotivation / resubmission	limited	visible	frequent	more prominent in the recent period
Implementation	limited	increasing	increasingly visible	appears more frequently in recent requests
Intensity of personalised NCP support	internal	more visible	increasingly visible	demand is becoming more complex and resource-intensive