



Questions and answers about the 'Seal of Excellence'

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What is a 'Seal of Excellence'?

The 'Seal of Excellence' is a quality label, awarded to project proposals submitted for funding under [Horizon 2020](#) the EU's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. It is given to those projects which succeeded in passing all the stringent selection and award criteria of the Horizon 2020 evaluation, but could not be funded under the available Call budget. The 'Seal' identifies promising project proposals which merit funding from alternative sources (public or private), i.e. national, regional, European or international.

Why a 'Seal of Excellence'?

In a period of scarce resources, the impact on competitiveness and growth of our investments in Research and Innovation needs to be maximised: creating synergies between Horizon 2020 and other funding sources such as, but not exclusively, the [European Structural and Investment Funds](#) (ESIF) is a way to achieve it. This was also a clear mandate from [President Juncker](#) to Commissioners [Moedas](#) and [Crețu](#).

Who benefits from the 'Seal of Excellence'?

Every year, thousands of organisations in Europe apply to the Horizon 2020 Programme. The European Commission runs one of the most complete evaluation systems in the world, using international panels of independent experts.

The evaluation screens proposals against three defined criteria (excellence, impact and quality & efficiency of implementation) and identifies those proposals not mature enough to receive funding (below quality threshold) and those that are considered as meriting funding (above threshold). Only some of the above threshold proposals receive funding depending on the available Horizon 2020 budget.

The 'Seal of Excellence' certificate will be awarded to the applicants whose proposals are evaluated as above threshold but do not receive funding. A holder of the certificate can then approach alternative funding sources and present the certificate as a proof of a high-quality project proposal. This however will not guarantee support for the said proposals.

In this initial 'pilot' phase of the action, only proposals applying for [the SME instrument](#) will be considered, in particular all those SME instrument proposals evaluated above the quality threshold but not receiving Horizon 2020 funding. Later on it could be extended to cover more areas of Horizon 2020.

An opportunity for regions/Member States and their stakeholders

The 'Seal of Excellence' offers a unique opportunity for regions and Member States to fully exploit the high-quality Horizon 2020 evaluation process: to easily identify and possibly support quality proposals coming from promising innovative companies, with an ambition to grow and compete internationally. This will help them to gain time and money; increase research and innovation performance and local impact within their regions.

The Horizon 2020 '[SME instrument](#)' has been selected for the introduction of the 'Seal of Excellence' because of its relevance for regional and national development, and as the project proposals are mostly small scale research & innovation actions, close to the market with a clear local impact as they are led by a single SME.

Regions/Member States interested in funding these types of proposals could use ESIF resources (in line with their smart specialisation strategy, specific objectives of their programmes and in compliance with national and relevant EU rules, e.g. on state aid) to grant funding without additional evaluation of the quality of a proposal. This possibility is not confined to ESIF, other funding sources (public or private) are also welcome.

The SME instrument and the 'Seal of Excellence'

The Horizon 2020 'SME Instrument' Calls for Proposals are open to small and medium-sized businesses in all EU Member States and Horizon 2020 Associated countries and offer support for feasibility assessment activities (Phase I) and innovation development & demonstration activities (Phase II).

Thanks to the 'Seal', high quality proposals from innovative SMEs will have additional chances to be funded. The precious time and effort SMEs invested in the proposal and idea development will thus not be wasted.

A number of SME applicants for the SME instrument are already benefitting from the 'Seal of Excellence'-type of approach implemented by some Member States and regions using their own national or regional funding. They recognise the validity of the Horizon 2020 evaluation outcome as a basis for providing alternative funding to those SMEs at local level. Even Horizon 2020 associated countries can use their own national funding to support this type of proposals (ESIF covers only EU Member States).

Looking ahead

In the near future, it is foreseen to apply the Seal of Excellence to other selected Horizon 2020 areas, for instance starting from Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowships, European Research Council (ERC) proof-of-concept projects and other mainly mono-beneficiary type of Horizon 2020 programme parts, depending on the outcome of the pilot and responses by ESIF Managing Authorities and/or other funding bodies and the final beneficiaries.

How will the 'Seal of Excellence'-initiative be implemented?

It is up to the SMEs who received a 'Seal of Excellence' to approach national, regional public or private funding bodies and ask for alternative funding. There is no obligation for the SMEs to do so, no automatic transfer of information on the Horizon 2020 application and no automatic right to receive funding from the alternative sources.

Those Member States or regions that wish to provide their SMEs with such an alternative source of funding, need to establish funding schemes that are either specifically dedicated to these types of proposals or enable the provision of funding for SME Instrument type of projects as part of wider support schemes, in compliance with national and EU rules. They will carry out limited additional checks of the proposals in particular related to their location, compliance with smart specialisation priorities and other national/regional rules.

Adjustments of the financial set-up of the projects might be necessary. A growing number of Member States and regions are already studying the best options for implementation.

In order to allow for exchanges of know-how, the European Commission has established a '[Community of Practice](#)' exploring the best ways to implement funding schemes in support of high-quality projects with the 'Seal of Excellence' through ESIF or other sources. The 'Community of Practice' is reserved for national or regional authorities that have a funding power for research and innovation actions. It is also open to other Funding Agencies for Innovating SMEs (including private banks and investors).

Organisations interested in being part of the Europe-wide 'Community of Practice', may send an Expression of Interest by e-mail to: RTD-seal-of-excellence@ec.europa.eu

How can an SME find out whether there are any ESIF programmes that could provide SME innovation support and whom to contact?

In almost the entire EU territory one or more of the ESI Funds has earmarked budget for SME innovation, but the conditions and budget volumes will differ in line with the type of region, its smart specialisation strategy and specific objectives.

The contacts to the relevant Managing Authorities who can provide details on the local funding conditions and forthcoming calls can be easily found on the [InfoRegio web-site](#) (for European Regional Development Fund- ERDF) and on the [European Network for Rural Development website](#) (for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development's - EAFRD). Information about the smart specialisation strategy relevant for a country or region can be found on the [S3Platform](#) web-site. The [seal of excellence website](#) will also display concrete cases of existing funding schemes.

Will SMEs that got alternative ERDF funding thanks to the Seal of Excellence be considered in subsequent phases of the "SME Instrument" at equal footing to those SMEs that benefitted directly from Horizon 2020 support?

Any SME can apply to Phase 2 of the SME Instrument. The access to the phase 2 funding does not depend on having successfully passed through the 1st phase and its feasibility work. Phase 3 support services will only be introduced from [2016] for SMEs receiving phase 1 and 2 SME instrument grants. The Commission will work with regions participating in the Seal of Excellence to assess the demand for

such support services for SMEs benefitting from the seal of excellence and how they could be made available.

More information

[Seal of Excellence](#)

[Guide on synergies between different EU research and innovation related programmes](#)

[Horizon 2020 SME instrument](#)

[ESIF support for research and innovation](#)

[Stairway to Excellence pilot project](#)

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