Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences
Reaction to the hearing of Horizon Europe – European Partnerships to be implemented as joint undertakings).
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Haaga-Helia supports the European Commission's objective to strengthen the strategic impact, coherence, and investment leverage of European Partnerships and Joint Undertakings. The emphasis on aligning research and innovation with EU priorities and improving the pathway from research to market is well justified.

Universities of Applied Sciences play a pivotal role in bridging research and real-world implementation by enabling innovation uptake, close collaboration with business and society, and regionally grounded deployment of new solutions. Their systematic and visible inclusion strengthens the Union's ability to translate research outcomes into practical impact, supports SME-driven innovation ecosystems, and contributes directly to regional resilience and competitiveness.

Our key concerns:

If the focus of Joint Undertakings increasingly shifts towards higher TRL levels, a stronger emphasis on investment-driven, near-to-market solutions will naturally highlight the role of industrial actors. Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) are uniquely positioned to contribute to these areas through piloting, testbeds, living labs, and close collaboration with SMEs and regional ecosystems. The initiative's recognition of the need to strengthen private participation and improve links to industrial deployment further reinforces the role of UAS as integrators between research, business, and society. It is therefore important that Joint Undertakings live up to potential of diversifying participation by lowering barriers to participation and by encouraging broader stakeholder involvement - including SMEs and new entrants. UASs play a critical role in orchestrating this ecosystem. For example, it could be explicitly recognized that piloting, testing, and implementation are core activities within Joint Undertakings and allocate dedicated funding for real-world experimentation environments (e.g. living labs, testbeds).

Rising expectations for private co-investment pose challenges especially for SME-driven and regionally embedded innovation ecosystems. At the same time, development of regionally embedded ecosystems is broadly aligned with the general direction of European R&I policy. Universities of Applied Sciences play a critical role in facilitating the development of these ecosystems and are also actively strengthening their company-funded research and long-term industry partnerships. To strengthen SME-participation, it would be advisable to apply flexible co-funding models that account for SME-driven and regionally diverse ecosystems and avoid over-reliance on large industrial partners as gatekeepers. In addition, the objective of improved accessibility could be followed e.g. by monitoring participation diversity across organization types and regions.

Stronger steering towards EU-level strategic priorities may reduce flexibility for purely bottom-up or locally driven activities; however, in practice these EU priorities are increasingly well aligned with regional development agendas. This creates opportunities to combine European strategic objectives with applied, regionally anchored innovation, and implementation.