

# Safeguarding European R&I, a delicate balancing act

*Building guardrails to deal with foreign interference has become a key talking point following publication of the EU's [Global Approach to Research and Innovation](#). In this edition of EURAXESS Worldwide newsletter we explore the context, latest developments, and tools Europe is using to achieve the fine balance between scientific openness and safeguarding strategic interests.*

Europe is making “significant progress” in its efforts to boost international cooperation in R&I while at the same time strengthening its leadership and safeguarding its strategic interests in the world, according to the first biennial [Global Approach Implementation Report](#).

The recently published report provides a snapshot of Europe's performance in meeting its [strategic goals](#) according to themes identified in the 2021 Commission Communication launching the 'Global Approach' to international R&I cooperation in a changing world.

Progress has been reported in multilateral R&I cooperation to deliver science-based solutions promoting fairness in the green and digital transition as well as better security, preparedness, and responses to crises.

International partnerships to reduce strategic dependencies in key technological areas have been strengthened, and “strategic autonomy” in critical areas has been better factored into global value chains.

## **New horizons for cooperation**

Since the launch of [Horizon Europe](#) – the current framework programme – also in 2021, the EU has successfully implemented new provisions for scientists in non-EU countries to take part in funded framework programme initiatives, and established joint commitments with a number of partners to help shape global R&I governance.

Being formally accepted as ‘associated country’ to the EU's framework research programmes means their researchers can participate in collaborative research, approved entities can join consortia applying for EU funds and may even take the lead in specific research initiatives (see which third countries are [associated to Horizon Europe](#)).

A clear mandate was added to Horizon encouraging ‘open access’ to publications and to make sure ‘open science’ principles are considered throughout, as explained in the related [Open science fact sheet](#). The seven-year programme also introduced a boost to “objective-driven and more ambitious partnerships” with industry, a widening remit for the [European Research Area](#), and stressed the need for more multilateral research and ambitious missions to tackle global challenges.

## What does the Global Approach mean in practice?



In the end it seeks a balanced approach to promoting open scientific cooperation with like-minded international partners while installing the necessary guardrails to protect the EU's strategic assets, interests, autonomy, and security.

But how did it come about? The Commission published the Global Approach Communication to signal its leading role in supporting multilateral R&I partnerships capable of delivering innovative solutions to the problems facing the world.

At the same time, it reaffirmed Europe's openness to purpose-driven R&I partnerships based on a common understanding of fundamental values and principles guiding them, including academic freedom, gender equality, and research ethics.

"Today, more than ever, global challenges require global solutions for which research and innovation act as catalysts," remarked Research and Innovation Commissioner Mariya Gabriel on the Global Approach. She added that the "openness in research cooperation that characterises our actions is nevertheless taking place in a transformed global environment". Promoting a "level playing field" in multilateral research needs to be based on reciprocity and mutual respect.

### Achieving balance on a level playing field

A level playing field means finding a balanced approach to better safeguard EU interests, but also to further boost collective resilience to global shocks, such as pandemics and climate crises.

It also implies more determined promotion of fair innovation ecosystems, open and transparent standard-setting, protection and the enforcement of intellectual property rights, and non-discriminatory use of state support for science and innovation. Preventing foreign interference in multilateral research is a critical component in maintaining this balance, too.

Strategic partnerships and negotiations over research association agreements with third countries are typically complex and time-consuming. To achieve consistent results, notes the European Commission, it is important to agree on targeted bilateral R&I roadmaps with priority non-EU countries, and to present guidelines on dealing with foreign interference targeting EU R&I and

higher education organisations. Developing a code of practice on the smart use of intellectual property (IP) in an international context is also recommended.

### Foreign interference toolkit

A year after the Global Approach was launched, the Commission delivered a toolkit to help national research organisations and universities, in particular, tackle potential foreign interference in science and policy amid what [Science Business](#) called heightened “fears over technology espionage”.

At the request of several EU Member States, a set of guidelines were drafted as a toolkit to safeguard the Union’s fundamental values, key research findings, and intellectual assets. They form part of what is being described as a “constructive management approach” to relations with third-party countries and their access to EU research funding.

“The guidebook is also meant to underpin the newly revamped European Research Area, which the Commission sees as at potential risk from foreign interference because of its objectives of supporting free circulation of researchers, knowledge, and technology, and of supporting cooperation between all sectors in research and technology development activities,” notes *Science Business*.

To protect European values, the guidelines encourage universities to identify countries and partner institutions that may not be respecting R&I values and principles, using a multi-step checklist arranged under several key themes.

### EU toolkit tackling foreign interference

Foreign interference in R&I occurs when activities are carried out by, or on behalf of, a foreign state-level actor, which are considered coercive, covert, deceptive, corrupting and/or contrary to the sovereignty, values, and interests of the European Union.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and research-performing organisations (RPOs) need a comprehensive strategy for tackling foreign interference that covers key areas of attention grouped into the four categories: **1) values, 2) governance, 3) Partnerships, and 4) cybersecurity.**

Several tips and steps are provided under each category, for example under the ‘governance’ section it is suggested that HEIs and RPOs publish a code of conduct for foreign interference under several headings:

- > academic freedoms, data security and intellectual property;
- > excellence and openness in research, teaching and support for learning;
- > ethics, integrity and trust;
- > procedures for identifying data breaches, ethically unsound research, etc.;
- > whistleblower protection; and
- > dealing with internal conflicts of interest.

It also recommends integrating foreign interference into existing institutional structures and responsibilities for awareness-raising through:

- > education and training;

- > monitoring of potential risks;
- > management of research data and intellectual assets in international cooperations;
- > providing advice and support to research groups involved;
- > risk management and risk mitigation; and
- > investigation of suspected incidences of interference.

Read the steps/tips for all four categories in the full toolkit ([staff working document](#)).

The guidelines emphasise awareness-raising within academia and R&I, noting that researchers may be unaware of their own vulnerability to foreign interference, or that security implications of some technologies may be complex or difficult to define, such as “dual-use” (civilian and military) innovations/technologies – specialist microchips, applications for artificial intelligence, biological agents, etc.

The toolkit is seen as being deliberately “country-agnostic”, or geopolitically neutral, in order to achieve the delicate balance between encouraging the benefits of scientific cooperation and researcher mobility – whether tackling an emerging disease threat or developing novel renewable energy solutions – while not leaving Europe exposed to risks associated with that relationship.

In the end, the guidelines are aim to facilitate more responsible collaboration through awareness and by using the toolkit to identify the risks of foreign interference, and learn how to respond.

## **EURAXESS Worldwide and the Global Approach**

During a series of workshops earlier in 2023 on the Global Approach and Horizon Europe, EURAXESS Worldwide (EWW) representatives were trained on the main issues affecting international cooperation in R&I, the increasingly important role of science diplomacy, what to look out for in terms of foreign interference and safeguarding European interests, and more.

Maria Cristina Russo, Director for Global Approach and International Partnerships at DGRTD (European Commission) pointed out the essential role of EWW in promoting the EU’s research programme outside the EU, and the importance of building on concrete ways to enhance its relationships with global partners through Horizon’s Pillar 2 projects addressing global challenges and European industrial competitiveness.

Martin Penny, head of DGRTD’s International Cooperation I unit (Europe, Americas and thematic coherence) stressed at the workshop that openness in EU policies and programmes is an essential part of its strategy, and that EWW needs to continue promoting this but in “modular ways” adapted to different countries, regions, and themes.

It amounts to a more nuanced stand on “openness”, where partnerships and cooperation should be based on a level-playing field to ensure fairness, and incorporate accepted R&I values and principles.

He reminded EWW delegates that the Union reserves the right to restrict participation in certain “critical areas”. In March 2023, only 3% (31 out of 900) of Horizon Europe topics were restricted under the specific clause (Article 22.5). “Only five are completely closed and are related to security and space,” according to original reporting from the event, and may indeed still be open to associated countries and OECD members.

## Values and principles

These two words are used often in European policymaking. But what do they mean in the context of science diplomacy? In June 2022, the European Council set out a series of “[Principles and values](#)” for international cooperation in research and innovation”, including scientific freedom, gender equality, research excellence, and protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights in a changing world. EU leaders agreed to launch a multilateral dialogue with the EU’s main partners on the basis of those principles and values with a view to ensuring “balanced and mutually beneficial international cooperation”. This built on the Council’s recommendation on a [Pact for Research and Innovation](#), in November 2021, as a governance layer for the ERA.

Martin Penny emphasised during the training programme that such “principles and values” underpin research, how science works, and the whole science system. They are not a European preserve, he stressed, and they may be applied slightly differently from one country to another, even within the European Union.

Depending on adherence to these principles and values, the EU can “modulate its cooperation” accordingly, he said, and that Horizon’s Article 22.6 allows the Commission to restrict cooperation, but also to open and encourage closer collaboration for like-minded countries/regions, such as formal negotiations for association starting with Canada and formal agreement signed with New Zealand, in 2022 and 2023 respectively.