Position Paper – Framework Program 10 & Interaction with the European Competitiveness Fund

With regards to the Draghi, Letta and Heitor Report and with Ursula Von der Leyen's Political Guidelines 2024-2029, IMT strongly aligns with the objective of putting research and innovation at the heart of Europe's economy to support competitiveness. Such ambition would best be ensured through a strong framework program for research and innovation in 2028-2034 (FP10).

Other reports, such as the European Competitiveness Compass (January 2025) and the European Commission's Communication on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 (MFF, February 2025), have pointed out the European Commission intention to embed Research and Innovation fundings within a European Competitiveness Fund "*to accompany European projects along the entire investment journey, from research, through scale-up, industrial deployment, to manufacturing.*"

Such road for the next MFF shall not hinder the capacity of Europe to fund research and innovation through an autonomous and financially ringfenced FP10, completing the industrial deployment and manufacturing investment capacity of the European Competitiveness Fund. Such architecture would allow both to support the R&I continuum for science-driven and challenge-based research, the European Research Area and the exploitation of research results through investments in deployment projects and infrastructures.

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1) Supporting the continuum basic research – applied research – technology transfer for European resilience and sovereignty

The technological and societal challenges can only be addressed if the entire research value chain is supported, from basic research for technological anticipation to applied research in support of European sovereignty and competitiveness.

By assuming the risk of investment in fundamental research, the EU will support the exploration of innovative concepts leading to scientific advances and technological breakthroughs. **By increasing the support to 'open' calls for research projects, e.g., *'research actions'*, the EU will help to secure Europe's scientific and technological leadership.**

At the end of the research value chain, by encouraging private investment in more mature projects, the EU shall stimulate the innovation ecosystem by encouraging collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Support for collaborative research is a key component of the Framework Program. Nevertheless, support for high impact research and exploitation of the results of research must be a central objective of the continuation of the R&I Framework Program, particularly in connection with the instruments of European industrial policy and future investment capacities for the deployment and exploitation of innovative project. Strengthening of the role and means of the program manager, in a logic of flexibility, would allow to accompany the development of projects and their exploitation.

To this extent, **Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are the framework for promoting knowledge transfer, speed up the industrialisation process and ensure that strategic innovations developed meet the needs of the market and society.** Still, strengthening the role of European partnership in the R&I agenda setting must be accompanied by increased transparency on their functioning and unified rules to ensure the effective participation of the European R&I ecosystem and a commitment to meet the requirement of scientific excellence.

Further supporting the valorization of collaborative challenge-based research could be achieved through the implementation of a "portfolio approach" with less prescriptive calls for proposals, ensuring support to various innovative projects. **The most promising Key Exploitable Results (KER) among projects targeting the same societal/industrial challenge could then be funded under a funnel scheme.** In addition, the development of less prescriptive calls for proposals would limit selection bias related to the design of the call for projects by focusing evaluation criteria on scientific excellence and project impact.

Strengthening all the components of the future FP10 and their synergies, taking into account their specificities, will ensure an essential balance between research, technological development and innovation in Europe**. Thus, IMT supports the strengthening of the *European Research Council (ERC)* and of the *European Innovation Council (EIC)* while deepening a funding pathway between these two instruments to create an innovation pipeline, from basic research to breakthrough innovation.**

Finally, the development of the European Research Area is key to build Europe's future capacities to be at the forefront of scientific expertise and to attract top-tier researchers**. European infrastructures and Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) programs are key instruments of the European RD&I landscape, by providing with excellent capitals to conduct research.**

The European Research Area must rely on strong regional innovation ecosystems that connects all the actors of the knowledge triangle. Therefore, cooperation with regional and national authorities should aim to increase coherence among regional, national and European research funding instruments. However, this should be supported through streamlined processes and harmonized cost bearing for co-funding schemes, including when applying to co-funded European partnership.

2) *Coordination within the European Competitiveness Fund – articulating the FP10 autonomy with strategic sectors and technologies*

The current 3 pillars structure of Horizon Europe has demonstrated significant strengths – notably the ERC, EIC and MSCA – and provides a relatively clear framework for research funding, distinguishing funding types, TRL levels and programs objectives.

In addition, support for collaborative research focused on societal and industrial issues is a real added value of public intervention at the European level. By linking the players in the European research and innovation ecosystem, the Framework Program for R&I promotes the creation of new knowledge and technologies by combining skills, knowledge and existing infrastructure at European level. Nevertheless, there are some real gaps when it comes to exploiting research results and articulating the program with funds dedicated to industrial deployment and investment in infrastructures (e.g., Innovation Fund, Digital Europe).

The FP10 must remain an autonomous program supporting research, technological development and innovation, ensuring stability and predictability in R&I fundings. The increased flexibility of EU funding should allow for a better adjustment of R&I funding within FP10. Furthermore, directly integrating funding for collaborative research into broader programs focusing on strategic sectors – also investing in industrialization and infrastructures – would undermine the clarity of the funding landscape and hinder the ability of European researchers to apply effectively. Moreover, research projects do not meet the same requirements as industrial projects (e.g., market readiness, integration within the value chain).

Furthermore, the FP10 should provide support to social sciences and for research project addressing societal challenges. While these domains may not always align directly with technological priorities, they play a crucial role in enabling technological development, particularly in terms of societal readiness level. For examples, industry 5.0 aims at supporting the development of a sustainable, resilient and human-centric industry. I this context, the contribution of social sciences is essential to ensure that innovative technology supports human empowerment at factory level.

Yet, a full alignment of R&I funding with strategic technology-focused programs could prevent social sciences expert and researchers working on societal challenges to apply for funding, thereby undermining the principle of excellence-based competition that underpins the European Framework Program. Such exclusion effect can already be observed in certain European co-programmed partnerships.

Instead, stronger articulation – not fusion – is needed. Thus, **FP10 shall be coordinated with industrial deployment and infrastructure investment tools that focus on strategic sectors and technology within a European Competitiveness Fund.** Creating synergies and funding pathways focused would improve the exploitation of high-TRL research funded under FP10 (i.e., creation of monitoring tools and European structures for technology transfer, mobilization of the STEP platform, strengthening public-private partnerships, among others). This could be supported through a stronger role of project managers, as well as by **specifying possible synergies upstream of calls for proposals focusing on high-TRL activities.**

In one hand, PPPs, aligned on strategic sectors and technologies, should further structure the collaborative research pillar of the FP10 tackling societal and industrial challenges, while accompanying the technological maturity of projects with calls dedicated to research valorization, while creating synergies with other instruments for deployment. Thus, Heitor proposal of creating two new Council to stir the collaborative R&I agenda could support such evolution while coordinating cross-partnerships calls topics. Still, this should be accompanied by a guarantee of independence, transparency and the prevention of conflicts of interest to ensure fair participation and competition.

To this extent, IMT welcomes the new approach developed by the European Commission in the context of the Clean Industrial Deal, including the launch of a Horizon Europe Flagship. By

developing cross-partnerships, less prescriptive calls topics focusing on "*fit for deployment*" industry-led project and requiring to develop a public/private funding strategy, including by mobilizing the Innovation Fund, the European Commission can preserve a balance approach between research and innovation while ensuring the valorization of research.

With regard to the current geopolitical instability and the war in Ukraine, **FP10 shall remove the exclusive focus on civil application allowing to support the RD&I in the field of dual use technology,** including in the field of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, cybersecurity, IoT, among others. Modern digital technologies are agnostic by design, e.g., research results for civilian critical infrastructure that can be used for military matters. To a larger extent, digital technologies are key tools to support both healthcare and well-being, and environmental, energy and industry transition. This would simplify project setup and the exploitation of their results within the European Defense Fund.

Nonetheless, IMT supports the Warsaw Declaration: *"science requires a bold budget to ensure that research outcomes and innovations strengthen the EU's competitiveness"*. It also emphasizes the importance of preserving the independence of the ERC and the EIC. The MSCA, particularly the Doctoral Network and COFUND programs, contributes to this goal by enhancing the innovation capability of academic institutions through research training and mobility, thereby supporting excellent science.

3) Toward an excellence-driven research and innovation framework program

IMT calls on maintaining scientific excellence as a core principle of the R&I Framework Program. It could be further developed through an increased number of open, less prescriptive calls and programs dedicated to curiosity-driven research.

In today's global context, characterized by uncertainty and rising economic, social and environmental risks., research is key in strengthening Europe's resilience and open strategic autonomy. Flexibility and agility in research are essential to further build our ability to adapt to the complexity of these challenges. Therefore, **the bottom-up approach offered by the MSCA and the ERC must be maintained and further supported through less prescriptive across the framework program**. Breakthrough innovation thrives because new knowledge is created through curiosity-driven excellent basic research.

Reinforcing the funding pathway between the ERC and the EIC – two key Horizon Europe programs supporting scientific excellence and disruptive technologies – would facilitate this process. Simplifying and boosting the transfer of projects from ERC to EIC would enhance the societal and economic impact of curiosity-driven research by fostering innovation at scale. To this extent, the EIC Transition represent a well fitted program to exploit low-TRL project, to develop spin-off and to accompany technological maturity of project coming from the ERC Proof of Concept or EIC Pathfinder.

This is not inconsistent with the need to further aligns with strategic sectors and technologies when scaling up innovation, e.g., EIC STEP Scale Up, to catalyze private investment. Later in the innovation journey, to address the "second valley of death", start-ups funded under the EIC could be further supported by the European Investment Bank and institutional investors, through the upcoming EU Tech Fund.

This ambition also means guaranteeing their operational autonomy while supporting synergies between these two instruments. The EIC's governance should also be improved through the participation of entrepreneurs, specifically to accompany the deployment of the *EIC Accelerator***.**

Moreover, **the exploitation of research results towards innovation requires enhancing knowledge across all stakeholders in the ecosystem**, including for researchers and support units for innovation at local, regional or European level. For example, innovation experts could be

identified among beneficiaries of EU fundings to be trained by the European Commission to create a common understanding of innovation matters among EU projects' stakeholders. To this extent, existing EU tools for innovation could be integrated within a **certified training program on "exploitation of results**". Such training program could then be offered to all researchers involved in EU projects on a voluntary basis.

Furthermore, European research institutions could be incentivized in aligning common practices and understanding on innovation through the **creation of a label on *"Excellent practices for innovation and exploitation of research results"*,** similar to the HRS4R. This could be based on the implementation of a **European Charter and Code of Conduct for Innovation for researchers and institutions**.

To further support the impact of research, the most promising Key Exploitable Results (KER) of challenge-driven research projects could benefit from a fast-tracked and simple follow-up seed funding, similar to the ERC PoC, *e.g.*, one KER/project. This will undoubtedly provide a successful and simplified framework for the exploitation of research results and TRL advancement. It could be implemented through a portfolio approach for funding, where the best KERs among the different European projects tackling the same industrial/societal challenges are exploited under a funnel funding scheme. Currently, exploitation of KERs follows the complex and uncertain pathway of European proposal writing, which can take a year at best: identification of a suitable call for proposals, consortium assembly, submission of a proposal.

4) Deepening the European Research Area

Supporting excellence in research requires strengthening the ERA to attract top scientists. This should be driven by greater support to European research infrastructures, open science, research mobility, and through the inclusion of funding opportunities for European universities alliances (EuUn).

Enhanced funding for infrastructure and state of the art equipment in Europe is needed to keep up with the large investments made in other areas in the world (e.g., China), to continue to attract talent and raise further funds from the private sector and other public funding bodies (e.g., national, regional).

The MSCA instrument plays a pivotal role in supporting excellence in research through mobility, encouraging interdisciplinary cooperation and exchange of ideas which are keys in scientific career development and knowledge creation. Furthermore, the possibility to involve non-academic players also means an alignment with societal, environmental and economic challenges, encouraging young researchers' involvement in promising areas for both industry and society.

EuUn play a crucial role in the European Research Era by steering the sharing of research infrastructures and resources. This collaborative approach enhances universities expertise by creating friction when exploring new ideas and providing opportunities for cross-border access to industrial partners, market and investors, thereby fostering innovation continuum, including through support to start-up development.

To further strengthen the impact of EuUn in the ERA, IMT propose the introduction of an "EU Bonus" within MSCA framework to support the development of Doctoral Networks (DN), particularly for Joint Doctorates. This would leverage existing, trustworthy academic networks to create doctoral programs that attract top PhD, while fostering joint research programs aligned with EU strategic priorities. Such framework would bring added value when attracting top-tier researcher in Europe by providing them with access to top students for conducting research.