



# Briefing note

## Workshop

### HORIZON 2020 SME Innovation Associate

February 19, 2019

Brussels, Belgium

#### Contract reference

Service contract No. EASME/H2020/INNO/2017/002 – Accompanying study to the pilot action “European SME Innovation Associate – Pilot”.

#### Client

European Commission

Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME)

## Introduction

The H2020 pilot action "European SME Innovation Associate" is an innovation capacity building action supporting visionary SMEs and start-ups to recruit post-doctoral research associates from other countries to jointly develop creative business ideas into concrete innovations. The workshop is organised in the context of a study<sup>1</sup> aiming to provide the European Union with an assessment of the pilot action.

The workshop gathers a wide range of stakeholders<sup>2</sup> and its **main objectives** are to:

- Display the results of the EU pilot initiative – examples of successful projects.
- Exhibit comparable policy initiatives on regional/national and EU level.
- Present preliminary findings and recommendations from the evaluation of the pilot action.
- Discuss the best means to implement the action in the future with key stakeholders, bearing in mind other related policy initiatives.

### Key data from the first SME Innovation Associate call

**Number of projects:** 80

**Coverage:** 17 Member States

**Total funding:** 7.9 M EUR (100% EU funding)

**Placement period:** 12 months

**Sectors (number of projects):** Healthcare (28) | ICT, tech and robotic (19) | Industrial & business innovation (15) | Energy and Environment (10) | New products and materials (8)

**Citizenship of Innovation Associates:** EU 64% | Non-EU 36%

**Share of "Brain talents back":** 13%

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<sup>1</sup> The study is implemented by a consortium consisting of CARSA, Ramboll, LE Europe, DIW Econ and Ecorys.

<sup>2</sup> Supported SMEs and their Innovation Associates, Programme Committee members, representatives of Commission Services, representatives of policy initiatives on national/regional level, representatives of National Contact Points (SME/MSCA), EEN partners and EU-level SME and innovation associations.

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## Main findings of the accompanying study – to date

### Summary of the evidence base for the assessment



### Management of the call for proposals

The results show that the target group of the pilot action (innovative SMEs and start-ups) was well reached. There are no indications of unjustifiable selection patterns with regard to specific sectors or employee size classes.

The employed communication channels of the European Commission – e.g. the Horizon 2020 website, newsletter from EU services (EASME, Commission, Horizon 2020, etc.) and the EASME website – proved to be very effective to make the pilot action known among the target group. However, there seems to be potential for optimisation regarding the use of social media.

The application procedure of the pilot action is assessed as expedient, transparent and user-friendly. However, SMEs indicate potentials for optimisation regarding information about the scope and extent of the EU level training programme.

### Design and implementation of the pilot action

Overall, the elements of the pilot action are convenient and designed in the interest of the participating companies: The design of the pilot action as a grant funding scheme without thematic restriction is appropriate for its purpose and its target group. As the case may be, the grant's current aid-intensity of 100 percent could be reviewed. Almost all interviewed SMEs indicated they would have accepted a co-financing share. Furthermore, there is moderate dissatisfaction with the fixed start and end dates as well as with the length of the placement period and the strict requirements for the publication of job vacancies.

The support of EASME in the implementation of the pilot action was very well aligned to the needs of the SMEs. However, there is evidence of a low user-friendliness of the ECAS system.

The quality of the EU level training is considered very high, both by SMEs and Innovation Associates. But the results also show a lack of relevance: The training is considered to be not sufficiently targeted to the specific needs of SMEs and their Innovation Associates. In addition, the synchronisation between EU level and company level trainings could be improved.

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### **Impact on SMEs**

The preliminary study findings<sup>3</sup> show that for almost all SMEs, the pilot action had an impact on the hiring of their Innovation Associate. Only 6 percent of them could have employed the same Innovation Associate for the same conditions and at the same time if there had been no funding.

The interviews with selected supported SMEs indicated a high degree of target achievement in the implementation of innovation projects by the Innovation Associates. In addition, most Innovation Associates contributed positively to the company's innovation management.

### **Impact on researchers' careers**

The evidences gathered indicate that the pilot action has positive effects on the Innovation Associates' careers. After the placement period a significant part of them continues to work for "their" supported SME. In addition, the findings suggested that the pilot action and working for an SME have positive effects on the skills and capabilities of the Innovation Associate and broaden their horizons for careers outside of academia.

## **Preliminary recommendations from the study**

### **Short term recommendations**

- Further improvement of communication activities to increase the visibility of the pilot action in the target group
- Increase the scope of information provided to the applicant SMEs during the application process
- Optimising the focus and the relevance of the EU-level training scheme and better synchronisation between the EU-level and company-level trainings
- Improving data availability for future evaluations

### **Medium- to long-term recommendations**

- Extension of the placement period with simultaneous co-financing of the costs by the supported SMEs

## **Expected outcomes of the workshop**

The main findings from the workshop discussions will be presented in a Workshop summary report. Once approved by the EASME/DG GROW this report will be made available to the participants (and to the public) through the event website ([www.sme-innovation-associate.eu](http://www.sme-innovation-associate.eu)). Consecutively, the workshop findings will be used as input for the final recommendations, to be presented in the final report of the accompanying study.

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<sup>3</sup> An additional online survey related to the impacts on the supported SMEs is in progress.