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The UK and Horizon Europe: Better Late... But Time and Opportunities Wasted

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On 7 September 2023 the government finally announced that the UK will rejoin Horizon Europe, on the basis of a new deal with the EU – and Copernicus, the EU's Earth observation programme. UK researchers can now again apply for grants and bid to take part in and lead projects under the Horizon programme, with formal association starting on 1 January 2024.

This is unequivocally excellent news. Horizon is the EU's science and research framework, the current instalment of which started in 2021, without the UK involved, and runs till 2027, with a budget of £82 billion. Cooperation with the rest of the EU over Scientific Research was always one of the great success stories of UK membership of the EU. Before Brexit UK science was preeminent in Europe, influential in the choice of priorities for support, and consistently vying with Germany as the biggest beneficiary of the Horizon programme, as regards both grants and leadership positions – taking more funding out than it was putting in. The UK led a long and successful fight to give science and innovation a much bigger slice of the EU Budget. Participation in Horizon became common for many UK universities, broadening their activities, giving access to leading scientists in Europe and providing financial support, the full replacement of which was not given by HMG. Universities whose research activity had received EU Structural Fund support were doubly damaged.

The view of the UK science community has throughout been unambiguously clear: outside Horizon the UK was losing influence on the scientific activities of one of the three greatest research blocs in the world – the others being North America and East Asia (around China). The Royal Society and the other national Academies, the Francis Crick Institute and many more argued throughout for the UK to participate in Horizon and that an alternative British programme would simply not be an adequate substitute for Horizon. There was therefore much discontent as the UK/EU agreement on Horizon first reached in late 2020 fell through as the Commission held participation hostage to tensions over the Brexit terms for Northern Ireland, and again proved elusive after the settlement reached in the Windsor framework last February – because of remaining concerns on the part of the British government.

It is thus very good news that those concerns have now been assuaged. Under the terms of the new deal the UK will not need to pay into the Horizon budget for the period for which it was absent, with its contribution beginning again only in January 2024. And there is a clawback mechanism, whereby the UK will be compensated if (perish the thought) British scientists receive significantly less money than the UK puts into the programme.

On the down side, there is also an overperformance provision – what you might ironically call one of the “benefits of Brexit” – providing for an increase in the UK’s contribution if its receipts in grants exceed its financial contribution by more than eight per cent over two successive years, whereas when it was a full member of Horizon the UK’s very substantial returns from the programme were never subject to any limitation.

Nonetheless, this outcome enables us to build on the highly successful collaborations of the past in order to maximise the scope for working together with EU member states in the years to come. Our scientists have long had a very strong record of active participation in previous instalments of Horizon, which they will now aim to resume and expand.

Sadly, however, it must be registered that our three year absence from Horizon has been far from cost free. During it UK scientists have lost not just the dominant leadership position they had till we left, which will take a lot of effort to rebuild, but also many chances to lead international consortia in their respective fields. The UK science community is now a taker rather than a leader. Moreover, the UK has become a less attractive destination for scientific talent from the EU.

Ewan Kirk, Chair of the Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences at Cambridge, argues that he is not yet ready to celebrate the UK’s return to Horizon. He claims that our absence from the project has done deep, long term damage to the UK’s science and technology ecosystem, which will require a concerted effort from the government to repair. The number of EU researchers working in the UK has plummeted: post-Brexit visa restrictions have made the UK much less appealing for talented EU researchers and their families, while many scientists have had to leave the UK to continue accessing Horizon grants and working collaboratively with European colleagues, and leaders have tended to take their research teams with them – one example being the team working at the Francis Crick Institute in London on human and livestock parasites, which in 2021 left for Portugal. Kirk argues that we need an independent inquiry to uncover the extent of the damage to UK science, and to make proposals for remedying it. He is also pressing for commitments from all the major UK political parties to renew our membership of Horizon after the current funding cycle ends in 2027; and for a new streamlined visa system targeted at bringing skilled EU researchers and students to the UK.

He is not alone. Many prominent UK scientists agree with him, and point out that if it had been in Horizon during the last three years the UK would have had opportunities, now missed, to take up key leading roles in major programmes on (inter alia) climate change, AI and new medicines. There is a widespread view that UK/EU tensions and absence from Horizon made cooperation with the UK scientific community of less interest to many EU colleagues, which will take a long time to regain.

Many relevant examples were quoted during the House of Commons debate on Horizon Europe on 18 April 2023.

Above all, both the European Commission and the British government must come to realise that in this of all fields it is quite simply wrong to take UK membership of Horizon hostage because of other UK/EU problems or disagreements. UK and EU scientists have long held this view. As the record shows, when it comes to scientific cooperation the UK has a major contribution to make, to the benefit not just of the UK itself but of the rest of Europe and

indeed the rest of the world. It would be foolish in the extreme to put at risk any further the added value which can be expected to flow from proper pan-European scientific cooperation.

When the time comes in 2025/26 to review the UK/EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, both sides should make it unambiguously clear that they are committed to ensuring the UK's continuing involvement in the Horizon programme, when it is next renewed. Our commitment to Horizon, after all, never meant neglecting scientific cooperation with the rest of the world: it was always a both/and, never an either/or. The stronger our scientific links with the EU, the more the rest of the world will value close collaboration with us.

A past example from Horizon was the University of Sheffield's Amos project, under which the university's nuclear advanced manufacturing research centre led a four year collaboration between European and Canadian aerospace manufacturers and researchers. The project was supported by Canadian funding agencies, who liked it the more because it involved not just the UK but also the Horizon programme.

In its drive to remain a global science superpower, the UK should be able to derive strength not just from its own Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) and universities but also from the strongest possible links with fellow scientists and researchers in the European Union.

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European & International Analysts Group

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