

Industry News



Why UK participation in Horizon Europe matters to you

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IN THE run up to the election of a new Conservative party leader and Prime Minister, GAMBICA wrote to all eight initial candidates asking them about their views on Horizon Europe. You might not be surprised to hear that none of them replied. Perhaps they regard the future of the UK's research capability as too risky to have an opinion on, but UK scientists, business leaders and GAMBICA members see it as a key competitiveness issue and GAMBICA is determined to raise it up the government's agenda.

Horizon Europe is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation with a budget of €95.5 billion. Before we left the EU, the UK generally won more in funding from Horizon Europe than it contributed. Under a plan drawn up as part of EU withdrawal, the UK would have paid £15 billion as an associate member into the Horizon Europe scheme over seven years and UK scientists could still bid for Horizon funding. Grants were awarded on this basis, but contracts could not be signed until the UK was formally awarded associate status. Associate status for the UK has since been withheld because of the dispute over the Northern Ireland protocol. The European Research Council announced in June that: "The 115 ERC grants offered to UK based researchers will be terminated". It has since emerged that at least 19 UK based scientists of the 115 who will lose their Horizon Europe grants are preparing to leave the UK.

As GAMBICA members have pointed out, failure to come to a positive conclusion on the Northern Ireland protocol means that the UK risks our scientists moving abroad to find grants and collaboration opportunities with the result that:

- far fewer world leading academics will remain in the UK to teach and inspire coming generations
- opportunities for UK collaborations with leading innovators from the rest of Europe will reduce
- there will be fewer academic spin-offs developing commercial products from university research
- there will be a declining UK market for research equipment, laboratory space, education and scientists, and
- exports will decline as technological innovation elsewhere leaves our UK products behind

The government has now announced a new package of transitional measures should the UK be unable to associate to Horizon Europe. It will allocate funding to new R&D programmes in the UK including a UK Guarantee scheme for projects already in operation run by UKRI and uplifts to existing UK talent schemes. It is also aiming to continue Third Country Participation in Horizon Europe. The bids for UK Guarantee support are being managed by Innovate UK and close on 31 December. To bid, visit <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/apply-for-horizon-europe-guarantee-funding/>.

Sir Adrian Smith, president of the Royal Society, feels that this doesn't match what we are losing however, commenting: "While the UK government's underwrite will support scientists to continue their research, the best outcome for both UK and European science is full association to Horizon Europe. The priority must be resolving this political impasse so that the valuable collaborations and relationships that have been built up over decades are not lost."

Horizon Europe grant recipient Giovanni Rosotti, of the University of Leicester, is one of those planning a move out of the UK. [While] "It's not the only factor... losing access to ERC funds was a big reason behind my decision to move back to Europe," he said. "I decided to move because the ERC is not simply a large amount of funding, it's also very well-known and therefore it attracts the best talent from all over the world when hiring students and post-docs, which I'll need to do in the coming months. There's no guarantee that the alternative replacement scheme from the UK government will do the same. Also, without access to the ERC, the



Sir Adrian Smith



Giovanni Rosotti

funding for science in UK will massively decrease, and so betting long-term on the UK didn't sound a wise choice to me."

GAMBICA has urged the UK government to find a solution with the European Union to allow the UK research community to continue participation in the Horizon Europe programme saying:

"If the UK is excluded from funding for important collaborative research projects, then it will be a severe disadvantage not only to the UK's research capabilities, but to wider society and business that rely on innovation to improve many aspects of our daily lives. Once lost or diminished, it will be difficult to recover the talent, expertise and resources in the UK research community.

"Alternative UK replacements for the Horizon Europe funding would be by far a second-best option. Funding is only part of the issue, but a very important aspect is to be part of a multi-country collaborative research programme to get the best outcome and value."

Magdalena Skipper, Editor in Chief of scientific journal, Nature, agrees, saying: "When Nature was first published back in 1869, single-author scientific publications were the norm. They are not only an exception but a true rarity today. Science has become a 'team' activity.



Magdalena Skipper

"As our knowledge expands, science is becoming more and more collaborative. Practitioners of increasingly distant disciplines come together, recognising the complexity of some of the most important problems that face us; science lies at the heart of the solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a perfect illustration of a complex crisis that has brought together molecular biologists, epidemiologists, clinicians, social scientists, engineers, material scientists and many others."

Recent examples of multi-stakeholder collaborations providing opportunities

to facilitate interaction among researchers and other players include the European Union's Innovative Medicines Initiative which has established more than 40 consortia with financial and in-kind investments totalling two billion euros. Some projects focus on specific health issues, such as Alzheimer's disease, chronic pain, diabetes and obesity. Others tackle bigger issues, such as drug and vaccine safety and the use of stem cells for drug discovery. The initiative is likely to be extended for a further 10 years with an additional 3.5 billion euros and its success has prompted imitators; last year, the US President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) recommended the US develops something similar.

The government has some supporters for its approach. Christopher Smith of government funding administrator, UKRI, has said the government's position paper, Supporting UK R&D and Collaborative Research Beyond European Programmes, 'pledges attractive routes for top talent from the rest of the world to join us here'. And he offers some reassurance for researchers left bereft.

"In the event of non-association, our most pressing priority will be to provide immediate stability for the UK's science, research and innovation sector and to implement the practicalities of switching from an established system to a new one. We are setting up the systems for those now, so they will be ready if needed. The issue of how to deal with applications that are 'in-flight' at the time of switching to UK alternatives is operationally and legally complex. We are working hard to iron out the details and will update very shortly." The government, he says is also 'developing a comprehensive plan of alternatives to Euratom R&T, Fusion for Energy, and Copernicus programmes, including interim measures'.

Unfortunately, developing comprehensive plans has not been a noted strength of the government and it is GAMBICA's view that these sticking plasters fail to address the very real threat to the UK's capability to benefit from and lead collaborative research projects here in the UK. Even in the very short term, the market for lab equipment, lab space and lab expertise in the UK will decline as a result of the failure to find a way forward on the Northern Ireland protocol. But worse, over the long term the ebbing of innovation from the UK would be a body blow to our ability to compete internationally and to maintain our high tech, high wage economy. It is essential that we act now to do what's right for business, for science and for our ability to lead the scientific innovation which is essential for our health and that of our planet.

The CBI has been calling for the government to let business into the room to help with negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol and GAMBICA supports allowing those with skin in the game to lend some de-politicised good sense to the talks.

If academic research is an important concern for you, we would love to have your support for GAMBICA's campaign on this hugely important, but woefully under-recognised issue. You can let me have your views by emailing me at jacqueline.balian@gambica.org.uk

To view the GAMBICA position paper, go to <https://www.gambica.org.uk/resourceLibrary/gambica-industry-position-on-horizon-europe-pdf.html>



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