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The UK's participation in Horizon Europe: caught in a game of high politics?

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On 6 March 2018 the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) released its proposed vision for the EU's Ninth Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027). Recently christened *Horizon Europe*, this is the world's largest and most competitive research funding programme, established at a time of growing uncertainty as to whether the UK wants, can afford, or will be allowed to fully participate. This is the first time the EU framework programme will include 'Europe' in its name, flagging a commitment to the wellbeing of its members and the European project – one the UK has chosen to leave. The UK's participation in Horizon Europe is likely to be dependent on the continuing Brexit negotiations and the respective moods in Brussels and London.

Association: still the question mark

Perhaps the British academic community thought itself immune from a 'bad' deal, because of its pro-Remain stance during the referendum campaign and British excellence in research. However, the European Parliament's Brexit steering committee concluded on 7 March 2018 that, while UK participation as a third country in the future Horizon Europe was possible, such participation would not result in "net transfer from the EU budget to the UK, nor any decision-making role for the UK" (Times Higher Education, 15 March 2018). In the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) cycle, the UK contribution to the EU's research and development budget was in the region of €5.4 billion, out of a total FP7 budget of €50 billion. In return, British universities and other UK-based research organisations managed to secure €8.8 billion in grants. UK universities attracted 71% of the total funds awarded to the UK during FP7; UK businesses' share was in the region of 18%. So, there is a potential net loss of over €3.4 billion, based on FP7 figures alone, and further exacerbated by the fact that Horizon Europe is anticipated to have a budget nearly twice as big, of at least €97.9 billion. The social sciences and the arts and humanities are particularly at risk, with EU research income dependency ratios in the UK reaching 38% in Archaeology, 33% in Classics, 27% in Media Studies, 26% in Law and 25% in Philosophy.

The language in Westminster is not encouraging. Sam Gyimah, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, has argued that the UK will not participate in Horizon Europe "at any price" (Times Higher Education, 1 March 2018). According to the Minister, the government's FP9 position paper simply outlines the government's views about how any future programme could be improved: *"This is not, however, a commitment to associate to FP9 but it sets out a broad, wide-ranging positive vision for what would make the UK excited about FP9"* (Times Higher Education, 6 March 2018). The Minister also conceded that FP9 participation is entangled in wider EU-UK negotiations. This indicates the vulnerability of the sector to the final Brexit deal, which will almost certainly be revealed at the last possible stage.

UK priorities for Horizon Europe

While the UK's FP9 position paper discusses several priorities, the top two are: 1) a continued focus on excellence as the only basis for funding research and 2) the conditions for future participation in the framework programmes. These are red lines on which the UK's desire to participate depends.

The mantra of excellence is crucial to the UK, because its universities are already competitive and well positioned to secure EU research grants. During FP7 (2007-2013), the UK received €1.7 billion in European Research Council grants (19% of its share of FP7 funding) and €1.1 billion for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (12% of its share of FP7 funding). European Research Council grants are the hallmark of research excellence funding whereas Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions constitute the talent pipeline for young researchers. Should there be a decision from the EU27 to redirect future research awards to promote a fairer geographical distribution and capacity building, such a move would not be in the direct interest of the UK.

The second priority is the nature of future UK involvement with Horizon Europe, highlighting the importance of overarching intergovernmental arrangements, and the urge to improve the terms of association and third country participation – the two options relevant to post-Brexit Britain.

It is apparent that these two dimensions will define the UK's association or partnership with Horizon Europe. This was recently expressed by Theresa May, who took it for granted that future framework programmes will be excellence-based, oblivious to the fact that the UK will no longer have any voting rights or say in the direction of Horizon Europe under current association rules. She declared that the UK would "like the option to fully associate ourselves with the excellence-based European science and innovation programmes" (21 May 2018, Jodrell Bank Observatory speech). Although May seems willing to allow the UK to contribute financially in return for association, she ambitiously assumes the price for this will be having a say in the future direction of the framework programmes. In other words, by prescribing what the future framework programmes' direction should be, before even being associated, and assuming the UK's influence in shaping the future EU framework programmes will be commensurate with its financial contribution, she is clearly rejecting the current rules of the game and making her own. It is putting the cart before the horse.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Conclusion

Future participation in Horizon Europe is not a given. It is urgent that those working in the higher education sector articulate clearly to the government how important participation is to preserve British research excellence, and to maintain the high standing of some of Britain's leading universities in world league tables. It is also essential that the UK government engages with its higher education sector, and that this translates into visible policy sharing and communication of what constitutes best practice in research collaboration.

The UK can still leverage a good deal for Horizon Europe by making a financial contribution attractive to the EU27. However, can the UK offer to participate in the €97.9 billion Horizon Europe, with all the competing post-Brexit spending priorities, and without necessarily making the substantial return upon its investment it has made before, and with perhaps no voting rights? The European Parliament's Brexit steering committee believes the UK cannot be a net beneficiary from EU research funds post-Brexit, and is even unwilling to permit the UK to have a decision-making role. Coming from what is arguably the most democratically representative institution of the EU, this is bad but not irreversible news for UK science.

Theresa May states the UK is prepared to discuss the details with the Commission as soon as possible. It is surprising this isn't already in the final stages of agreement. This is late – too late – but if the UK still wants to catch the 'Horizon Europe' train it needs to do so very fast. The longer association is deferred, the higher the stakes for UK universities, and the more desperate the UK will be. This is not a good place to be in a negotiation, in particular with the EU juggernaut. Horizon Europe is on its way, with or without the UK, and with the biggest budget any research funding body has ever seen.

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