

Does re-joining Horizon mean that the UK's attitude towards the EU is softening?

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Great news of course that the UK is joining Horizon Europe. This is a collaborative EU research and innovation funding programme with a budget of some € 95.5 b to 2027ⁱ. This succeeded the € 80 b Horizon 2020 programme which ran through 2014-2020 and which the UK was entitled to take part in and had disproportionately benefited from until we left the EU formally in January 2020.ⁱⁱ

Despite cries of anguish from the scientific community, and the fact that UK participation in the programme was on the cards and possible under the terms of the Trade and Cooperation agreement signed by Boris Johnson, the issues regarding the Northern Ireland protocol had delayed UK's Horizon re-entry. Indeed there seemed to be little progress for a while despite the successful signing of the Windsor Agreement which paved the way for an improvement in EU -UK relationships and for re-entry to happen. The signing this week of the UK's new Horizon association agreement means that British scientists can apply for funds as of now.

Of course, the UK university and scientific community has been warning for a while – in fact since the Brexit vote – of the potential loss to the UK of its strong relative position from being excluded from the Horizon programme. Even before formal exit from the EU the Brexit vote had already meant that many potential cooperation agreements did not go forward given the uncertainty about what the final deal might contain. Since leaving the EU- and the Horizon programme, the UK government had stepped in to make up for the loss of funding in the intervening years. And even after the NI protocol issues were resolved, the government was still pushing for an alternative UK centred Pioneer programme of some £14b to compensate.

But compensation it wouldn't have been as the real loss was the power of collaboration with scientists from other countries that enriched all. It also ignored the fact that the net cost was favourable for the UK as the scientific community- universities, the government itself and the businesses that collaborated too- were getting more back per annum on average in terms of funding than what the UK government was putting into the common pot. During the pre- Brexit debates it was sold as a saving, while in fact it was a net loss to the UK.

Well great news indeed. 'Fantastic' as said by the Oxford vice chancellor on the BBC Today programme the day of the announcement- and 'fantastic' again as said by Michelle Dolan, the secretary of state for science though she still put in terms of a brilliant negotiating success for the UK and proud of the concessions extracted at re-entry: the fact that we won't have to pay as associate members for the years we missed; the fact that we have a claw back mechanism if things don't work out- that doesn't sound very reassuring for long term research but never mind for the moment; and the fact that if we overachieve (as we used to) we won't pay a penaltyⁱⁱⁱ.

But one cannot fail but wonder whether instead of hailing this as a great achievement, what it is actually showing is the folly of leaving a system in the first place that had served us so well. Damage has already been done with a fall in our scientific pre-eminence in the intervening years. And while we are also re-joining Copernicus^{iv}– the EU space programme' earth observatory component, why not Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community^v, effectively a single market for transferring nuclear materials and technology? The decision to leave it was announced early in the Teresa May premiership. Euratom 's research and training programme is seen as a complement to Horizon, and it makes little sense not to re-join that too.

But perhaps we should see this small rapprochement as a positive sign that something is finally moving. The Prime Minister Rishi Sunak who wants one of his legacies to be a return to meaningful growth, must see this as a way to achieving his aim. Yes, universities and our scientific base are one of the areas where the UK has a comparative advantage. But they are not the only ones. One could boost growth from achieving mutual recognition or at least solid regulatory equivalence in financial services; or freedom of movement for professionals and people in the creative sector; or opening up the market for many more occupations where the UK is facing serious shortages since Brexit; easing trade blockages to reduce the comparatively larger supply chain problems faced by UK businesses which fuel higher inflation here than elsewhere; and reducing rules of origin checks that are affecting large part of the economy when they try to export and which have reduced our trading intensity as a nation.

Most of the population now think that Brexit was a mistake^{vi}. The politicians won't admit it. But the excitement and talking up of the Horizon deal just struck suggests that maybe they are beginning to accept that policy must change.

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