

The UK's Bleak Post-Brexit Horizon

By Scott Lucas

It was a flicker of good news in the unrelenting gloom of Brexit Britain.

On September 7, after years of uncertainty and often ill-tempered negotiations, the UK Government announced an “agreement in principle” to rejoin Horizon Europe, the European Union’s €95 billion research funding program. British scientists could finally seek support for their work after the Brexit withdrawal on January 31, 2020.

The UK would join the Copernicus, the EU’s Earth observation programme, although it would not return to the fusion program Euratom and would instead pursue a £650 million “domestic alternative”.

“It couldn’t be better news,” said [Daniel Rathbone](#), the deputy executive director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering.

Still, noted Kevin Flanagan, a science policy researcher at the University of Manchester, delays in renewing the link “caused a lot of damage and created a lot of distrust. It will take a few years to recover from that.”

And a chorus of voices from scientific, academic, and general communities sang: If there was so much benefit in rejoining Horizon...

...Why had the UK departed in the first place?

The Delusion of The Illusion of “Independence”

The unspoken answer is a microcosm of Brexit’s inexorable, possibly irreparable damage. Almost no one disputes that Horizon has brought widespread benefits across Britain’s science labs, universities, and research institutes. But for Brexiteers, those benefits had to be jettisoned in the name of an illusory “independence” from anything with Europe in the title.

Even the belated return to Horizon had to be framed by the Sunak Government not as a recognition of the merits of partnership, but as the UK clawing back an economic “victory” from the grasp of the Europeans. The Government had held out for months — further eroding Britain’s scientific and technological position — because it wanted to pay a bit less for access to the program.

It crowed that the UK would not pay one pence into Horizon for 2020-2023. And if British scientists receive “significantly less money” than London’s annual contribution, British bureaucrats can claim a rebate.

Both British/European scientists and academics hailed a British realization that Horizon, whose successor program will be announced in 2028, is now “the place where it’s happening when it comes to international collaboration”.

[Maria Leptin](#), President of the European Research Council, said

I am so happy we’ve got them back in. I’m so happy we’re a unified community again when it comes to funding the best ideas for the best researchers. Welcome back.”

Thomas Jørgensen, director of policy coordination and foresight at the European University Association, foresees that UK-EU projects will “snap back” quickly: “It’s about calling your British

colleagues, whom you were afraid to call before because you didn't know of the status of Horizon, to say, 'OK, now we know. Let's get working.'"

But the albatross of Brexit is that the current Government cannot set the standard as collaboration for mutual benefit. Instead, there has to be an illusion of British primacy to gloss over the self-inflicted harm since 2020.

That primacy is out of sync not just with Europe but the world beyond. With the emphasis on mutual gain, New Zealand and Israel are now part of Horizon, and Canada and South Korea are seeking to join.

The paradox remains that the Governments of Brexit, in the name of primacy, also made it a hostage of "independence".

Professor Bart De Strooper, a group leader of the UK Dementia Research Institute at University College London, explains:

There is little reason for celebration for something that should have happened years ago....

Britain used to dominate the Horizon programme, and it will take a long time to get back to such a position.

Professor John Hardy, [a neurogeneticist at the Institute](#), draws an even starker picture.

Our absence from Horizon for the past three years has had a number of detrimental effects that have made the UK less attractive as a place to do science.

We have not been part of the great science that Horizon funds and we have lost the trust of European colleagues. Will we leave Horizon again in future, they might ask. Many scientists have simply left the UK and, post Brexit, moving between the UK and labs in the EU has become a slow, costly, bureaucratic nightmare.

He asks, "All other things being equal, why would people want to do that?"