

# Will the UK find its way back to Horizon?

*New Zealand, on the other side of the globe, has just completed a deal for association with the EU research and innovation programme, Horizon. Why is Rishi Sunak still not committing the UK to a similar form of membership? **Anne Corbett** suggests the question is tied to wider issues about the government's stand on Europeanisation.*

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Since Brexit, UK research has been having a rocky ride. Deeply embedded in Europe over decades, UK academia was optimistic about gaining an association status in the EU's science and research programme, Horizon. The EU had helpfully widened its terms and conditions for non-EU countries to participate for the current programme, Horizon Europe (2021-2027). New Zealand is the latest non-EU country [to have joined](#). The UK [had been doing well](#). In Horizon 2020 (the 2013-2020 programme), British-based researchers were close to Germany in terms of grants and leadership positions. They almost certainly had many EU and international colleagues in their teams.

[Horizon](#) is now the world's largest programme of multilateral research collaboration in critical areas like climate change and disease control, and it is highly supportive of researcher excellence. Although the programme funding amounts to a mere 3 per cent of total public and private funding for UK research, Horizon holds a special status for the Russell Group representing the UK's most research-intensive universities. This is because the programme [provides participants with](#) "unparalleled routes to international partnerships within and beyond the EU".

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The programme is also capable of development. The 2021-2027 record budget for Horizon Europe addresses a festering issue with the UK, by committing more resources for innovation. Perhaps less liked by British governments, but understood by researchers, is the new "widening" element of programme. It explicitly tackles the capacity building question of the East-West brain drain within the EU.

Under the Trade and Cooperation Act, 2020, signed off by the EU and UK, the sector had taken for granted that the UK would want to preserve its links. The Act gives the UK provisional associate status until both sides agree a ratification of a protocol. The UK has used the provision to encourage UK-based researchers to go on applying for Horizon grants, currently lasting until September 2023.

Former prime minister Boris Johnson jinxed the process while in office. The EU seized on Horizon as collateral for Johnson breaking the international law formalising the UK-EU Withdrawal Act. As a result of his unilateral action related to the Northern Ireland protocol, the EU refused to negotiate the UK Horizon relationship between June 2022 and February 2023.

The turning point was the Windsor Framework settling the Northern Ireland protocol issue. When Rishi Sunak and the EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, signed off on the deal, she proclaimed that it had been “a good day for science” and that the Horizon channel could be reopened.

## **The government’s alternative: the Pioneer programme**

Uncertainty persists as to whether Sunak will sign up. Two and half years on from the Withdrawal Act coming into force, government thinking has advanced on a Horizon alternative, It has consistently said it wants to associate. But there are conditions. Its Pioneer programme, unveiled in April 2023, aims at “global science for global good” should the UK [not be able to do a Horizon deal](#) on “fair and appropriate grounds for researchers, businesses and taxpayers.” It promised that Pioneer would receive all the resources previously committed to Horizon.

The Pioneer proposal contains four interconnected actions which largely build on the Horizon model: a talent stream to enhance UK investment in discovery research; a global stream to complement and enhance existing international partnerships; an innovation stream for business-led innovations across sectors and regions; and an infrastructure stream to provide additional funding for such programmes such as World Class lab.

This project was initially met with scorn. Nobel laureate Sir Paul Nurse, director of the Francis Crick Institute, and a major player in this area, [told MPs](#) on the Commons

science and technology committee that Pioneer was “posturing... a weak bargaining chip... a paper tiger.” This month, the chief executive of Universities UK, [Vivienne Stern](#), said, “Scientists are calling Pioneer Plan B because [Plan A is better](#).”

The most recent government message dating from July 6, is that the prime minister remains keen to seek “[value for money for taxpayers](#)” if the UK is to rejoin the programme, and that he is [enthusiastic about](#) a UK-led, international collaborative research programme, drawn up by the Science Minister, George Freeman.

## **De-Europeanising higher education and research**

Significant measures of de-Europeanisation are already in operation across the higher education and research sector. Under the UK’s hard Brexit, freedom of movement and non-discrimination between British and other EU citizens melted away on 1 February 2020, the day the Withdrawal Agreement came into force. EU students and academics have taken note. There have been multiple reports citing official statistics: including a more than 50-per-cent [fall in the number of EU students](#), preferring high-quality continental options to the UK’s high costs.

There have long been worries for the social sciences and humanities in particular that the UK’s participation in Horizon Europe would be caught in a game of high politics.

The precious pipeline of incoming postgraduate research students has halved from 4,650 in 2017 to 2,260 in 2021. EU academics, who may make up to 30 or 40 per cent of staff in some universities, have either left or refused offers to come. A few senior researchers have taken their Horizon grants and their teams to universities within the EU. Others face uncertainties for themselves or their families under the UK settled status regime. There have long been [worries for the social sciences and humanities](#) in particular that the UK’s participation in Horizon Europe would be caught in a game of high politics.

As an economic upside to ending its obligation under EU law, the government has developed a [visa scheme for global talent](#) and for commercial alternatives for the higher education sector from outside the EU. Its [internationalisation strategy](#) encourages university recruitment from countries with large middle classes, such as India and

Nigeria, which are also being cultivated as important trading partners. Targets have already been exceeded. This provides succour for university finances to the tune of 20 per cent. But it also runs straight into conflict with the Home Office now targeting international students as an immigration group ripe for cutting back.

The second aim of the strategy is to increase the value of education exports. These come in large measure from the provision of transnational education services, which consists largely of UK universities' provision of courses to foreign based students. Some of these are within Europe.

## **Overt de-Europeanisation**

Much of the de-Europeanisation of the sector is more overt. It started with the Erasmus programme. In December 2019, as the Johnson government was finalising the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK rejected participation in the EUs celebrated Erasmus+ exchange programme which supports learning stimulated by mobility experience across the continent in education, training, youth and sport. In the UK it has been managed by the British Council. In its place, the government has created the [Turing programme](#), but it is limited to outward mobility. The management of Turing has been handed over to Capita, a private provider.

The UK has [jettisoned its membership](#) of the European University Institute in Florence, though under no obligation to do so. EUI is a world-wide centre for Europe-related advanced education and research in the social sciences and humanities. British academics, and EU colleagues with UK experience, are still making notable contributions.

The UK has signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) on science and innovation cooperation with non-EU member Switzerland. A Swiss-UK joint initiative, building on two research-strong systems, is expected [later this year](#). The government has also created the [Advanced Research and Invention Agency](#) (ARIA) for high-risk, high-reward research in such areas as AI, quantum computing and synthetic biology. ARIA has been given a £800 million grant independent of the national umbrella agency, United Kingdom Research Institute (UKRI). But these could be complementary to a Horizon settlement.

## **The value of collaborative research**

Hardcore governmental thinking on the “value for taxpayers” is short on understanding the fundamental values associated with publicly funded research. Most obviously, the results of such research should produce benefits for wider society whether in the short or long term. Maybe less obvious to outsiders are the benefits of the research process itself, which when trusted partners work together, spurs participants to be more resilient and more creative in their critical thought. The EU has played its part in such developments with its programmes developed within the strategically oriented European Areas for Research and for Higher Education. But the tradition started back in the 1950s with CERN, now famous for the Large Hadron Collider.

It is a tense time for British researchers, and their longstanding EU and international collaborators wherever they are based, for they have all contributed to Britain’s research standing. Is Horizon, the sector’s last rampart against de-Europeanisation, destined to fall?

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For further analysis of developments in UK higher education policy since Brexit, see the author’s [recent article](#) published in the Journal of European Public Policy.

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