

Ricky's Afterthought:

UK based researchers out of EU's Horizon Programme

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Associate membership

When the Brexit negotiations were reaching the final stages around November 2020 the efforts of David Frost, the UK Brexit chief negotiator, were applauded for securing agreement with the EU, in the form of a UK associate membership, in extending the Horizon funding to researchers based in the UK. This fund amounted to some €95.5 bn and researchers in the UK were promised a good chunk of this money after Brexit was completed.

Horizon Europe is a key funding programme for research and innovation. It tackles climate change, helps to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and boosts the EU's competitiveness and growth. The programme facilitates collaboration and strengthens the impact of research and innovation in developing, supporting and implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges. It supports creating and better dispersing of excellent knowledge and technologies. It creates jobs, fully engages the EU's talent pool, boosts economic growth, promotes industrial competitiveness and optimises investment impact within a strengthened European Research Area. Most importantly it encourages multidisciplinary projects and the exchange of information between scientists and engineers within the countries of the EU and its associated members.

Northern Ireland Protocol

The Northern Ireland Protocol is a protocol to the Brexit withdrawal agreement which covers immigration issues at the border and indeed issues of trade between Northern Ireland, the UK and the rest of the EU. However, following Brexit, a serious problem has arisen with some politicians within the

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland, protesting that what was agreed in the Brexit settlement fell far short of what they would have liked to have seen in the final negotiations and refused to take part in the Northern Ireland Assembly requesting that the Northern Ireland Protocol be renegotiated. Initially the British Prime Minister stated that a solution could be found and he was willing to discuss the matter with EU representatives. A deadline was set for 29 June 2022, by which time the UK promised to discuss the issue of the Irish Protocol with EU representatives and if successful their associate membership would stand. The EU really used the Horizon funding to put pressure on the British Government to abide by what was agreed initially when Brexit negotiations were completed.

Alas the Northern Ireland Protocol proved too difficult to resolve to the satisfaction of the DUP, the British Government and the EU and thus no such agreement could be reached by the deadline. Basically, ratification of the membership has been in limbo because the UK has not implemented the Brexit trading arrangements agreed under the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Horizon Funding agreed subject to relocation

Following the PM action which in essence means tearing up the Northern Ireland Protocol, the European Research Council, which administers the Horizon Funding, informed UK based researchers that unless they were willing to relocate to Europe the funding promised to them would not materialise.

As I write this report some UK based researchers have taken this opportunity to relocate to Europe thus securing the EU Horizon grant allocated to them. One academic originally from Europe who decided to relocate to Europe and keep his £1.5m

grant was very pessimistic about the prospects of research in the UK and being able to collaborate with European colleagues. If many other academics follow suit and relocate to European universities or research institutions that will be very sad and would severely curtail the UK's ability to compete in first class research activity. It is rumoured that some 18 academics so far declared their willingness to relocate to Europe.

Coordinating role passed to Europe

Other academics who are not able to relocate suffer severe curtailment of their projects, for example, Nicholas Walton, a Research Fellow at the Department of Astrophysics at the University of Cambridge was asked to relinquish his coordinating role in the £2.8m Euro Marie Curie project of the European Space Agency in their quest to map the Milky Way. His role was passed to a colleague from the Netherlands, which in essence is a direct action for the UK not being an associate member as far as Horizon is concerned. A European diplomat stated that, "If Britain threatens to suspend important parts of the withdrawal agreement it is hard for us to do business in other areas. Brexit means Brexit and it is a self-inflicted wound."

It is claimed the ERC has stopped funding to the tune of about £100m. Some 115 grants to UK based academics were scrapped thus severely

hampering the efforts of many young academics to continue with their projects.

Alternative UK based scheme

The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has pledged to meet the funding deprived to UK based researchers so long as they sign up to the new UK scheme by Dec 2022. When it was first announced that the EU were threatening to curtail agreed funding to UK based academics, the UK Government promised to allocate some £2 bn per annum for three years to bridge the gap (so called plan B programme), however, my understanding is that this funding is slow to materialise owing to disagreements between the Treasury and the Science Minister. This plan would involve Switzerland, Israel, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The promise from the UK Government to fund projects which were scrapped by the EU or the establishment of a new research fund in the UK with the six partners stated above is very encouraging indeed, however, given the enormous task of the UK Government, and indeed many European Governments, to assist families with doubling or trebling of their annual energy costs, one wonders whether research funding drops way down the priority list of projects from the Treasury. That may be the pessimist's view but it is I am afraid the reality academics and researchers based in the UK are facing.