

Horizon Europe...we're back, baby!

Perspectives from the SULSA Early Career Committee on re-joining Horizon Europe

Announced as a breakthrough settlement in September, the UK and EU formally signed an agreement confirming the UK's re-association to the Horizon Europe funding scheme in December, 2023. As an Early Career Researcher (ECR) in the life sciences, this announcement arrived as an excellent gift, and just in time for the holidays, to boot!

With the potential impact of this renewed association in mind, the SULSA Early Career Committee dedicated the bulk of their quarterly meeting this winter to discussing the potential impact of re-association with Horizon funding on ECRs based at Scottish Universities. Over the course of an engaging ninety minutes, we discussed our current connections to EU partners and knowledge of the Horizon scheme. We also debated expectations for the future, and voiced our general thoughts and queries about the potential of this renewed relationship. Additional expertise on the topic was provided by a guest to the committee meeting, Sinead Holland, a policy manager for Scottish Government. Sinead's help and insight was greatly appreciated on this important topic!



For some context, the SULSA Early Career (EC) Committee is composed of delegates from the thirteen Higher Education Institute members. For the purposes of the committee, 'Early Career' is broadly defined, and includes PhD students, post-doc researchers, and newly independent scientists in their first academic post. I fall into this latter camp, as a Lecturer and now Reader and aspiring research group leader at Glasgow Caledonian University. I am working to create my own research group and have frantically applied for seemingly any and all funding streams available to support this goal. I have also had past experience as a post-doc of receiving funding from the EU during the Horizon 2020 funding period. With this perspective, I was in the minority, as only 2 Committee members (of 12 present) had had past funding through the EU. However, potential appetite for European funding was clearly commonplace, with the majority of the Committee utilising existing EU collaborations as part of their research.

At the meeting, we had contributions from 12 members in total, and sought to record our main thoughts on the topic through the use of internal polls/questions related to Horizon EU funding. Broadly speaking, the Early Career Committee was extremely positive in discussions about renewed

membership in the Horizon programme. Key descriptors of sentiment about Horizon Europe used by the group focused on 'opportunity', 'collaboration' and, crucially, more 'funding' and 'funding opportunities'. I concur, as more opportunities for gaining research funding are always welcome! Even so, this enthusiasm was tempered slightly by, in some cases, a lack of familiarity with relevant funding opportunities available within the various Horizon schemes, or from too much familiarity with navigating the paperwork and bureaucracy associated with submitting grant applications to Horizon funding calls.



Before digging further into the thoughts of the Early Career Committee, it is important to frame what Horizon Europe is, and also what the announced UK-EU partnership means in practical terms for researchers in Scotland. Thanks to the new UK-EU collaboration agreement, researchers across Scotland (and the whole of the UK) will be able to participate in the Horizon Europe funding programme on the same basis as EU member states. This means that, from January 2024, researchers in Scotland can apply as Principal Investigators and/or as the heads of consortia in research bids directed to any of the three core pillars that comprise the Horizon Europe programme. These include developing 'Excellent Science' (Pillar 1), tackling 'Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness' (including research focused on the UN Sustainability Goals and on Climate Change) (Pillar 2), and promoting innovation through the 'Innovative Europe' platform (Pillar 3). The current funding round (2021 – 2027) includes €95.5 billion (!) that will be made available to support research, development, and innovation initiatives in these areas.

As mentioned earlier, the main takeaway from the SULSA Early Career Committee meeting was that this is clearly a very big 'win'. A selection of comments from our discussion makes this clear: "This can only be a good thing...It provides more options to apply for funding and pursue collaborations" and "...more sources of money are always welcome!". As ECRs on the committee are acutely aware, the post-COVID funding landscape has become an extremely intimidating place. UK charity-funded schemes have been reduced, some funding calls have been curtailed, and in some cases, historical funding pathways have been postponed indefinitely (The Carnegie Trust PhD studentship as one example). This situation leaves greater competition for the remaining grants, and this has led to declining grant success rates and a greater burden on ECRs to apply for more and more grants. Hopefully, renewed association with Horizon Europe will help to provide a larger and steadier funding stream from 2024.

Scotland as a whole has benefited greatly from past rounds of the Horizon scheme. Scottish applicants were successfully awarded close to €900 million in funding in the previous iteration, Horizon 2020, for example. This level represented more than 11% of total UK funding from Horizon 2020, and illustrates Scottish competitiveness in delivering research impact and innovation. As with the EC committee, Scottish researchers as a whole extensively collaborate with EU colleagues. This was highlighted in the Scottish Science Advisory Council's "Scotland's Science Landscape Report" (SSAC 2019), which reported that 10 of the top 20 global research partner countries for Scotland are in the EU, and this relationship is associated with significantly enhanced research impact.

Interestingly, there was a thread of thought shared by three members of the committee with respect to European funding being seen as 'more accessible' and 'more open to funding' for researchers at 'modern'/post-1992 Universities compared with perceived competitiveness for grants from large UK funders. For this reason, sentiment across the panel was positive about access to this 'new' large funding avenue. We hope that it in particular may provide much-needed additional opportunities for ECRs, and especially to ECRs in smaller universities. If this holds up, it could bode well for ECRs making their research careers in Scotland. In our panel, at least, the ECR committee weighted 'access to funding' alongside 'support network' as the most important factors in considering where to start a research career. Horizon funds could help ensure this stability in Scotland.



Evident enthusiasm of the Early Career Committee for Horizon membership was (slightly) tempered by some trepidation about the grant administration and application burdens that are perceived to go along with EU funding. The Committee members with past experience of EU funding agreed that the time and record-keeping requirements of the grants were extensive and seemed especially restrictive compared with similar grants from UK-based funders. In addition, the paperwork required for grant applications, including both a preliminary and full proposal at first submission for European Research Council funding calls, for example, were a deterrent for some ECRs. In addition, and perhaps as a consequence of early career stage, knowledge of individual funding calls amongst those without past experience with the EU was not very strong. This is understandable given that many of the committee members had not yet been at a career level for trying to get independent funding until AFTER Brexit when association with Horizon wasn't assured. Information and workshops on funding streams available from Horizon Europe for Scottish researchers could help to bridge this knowledge gap.

Overall, the SULSA Early Career Committee had extremely positive impressions about the UK and Scotland once again becoming eligible for Horizon Europe funding. The flags raised in the meeting about bureaucracy and general knowledge of schemes could be an issue for fellow ECRs. This is an area where information campaigns, workshops, and case-studies could be of great benefit - either at the level of individual Scottish Universities, through SULSA, and/or with support from Scottish Government. Achieving that, it will be left to researchers at Scottish Universities to take full advantage of Horizon membership until 2027. For the time being, we can only hope to avoid any unnecessary distractions or ambiguity about future membership to whatever comes next. This is likely beyond the scope of mostly celebratory pronouncements here, but ECRs on the panel remained engaged about continuity of funding beyond the current scheme (through 2027). As one committee member commented, “We are in [Horizon Europe] as an associated country...is that permanent?...how viable is this... to count on as a long-term thing?”.

Links:

[Horizon Europe Information Portal](#)