



## **Response to the Government's Proposals for the Pioneer Programme**

The Eastern Academic Research Consortium, or Arc, comprises three research-intensive universities on the Eastern seaboard of the UK: the universities of East Anglia, Essex and Kent. Given their location and the collaborative nature of their research, they have strong links with universities in the EU and beyond, and continuing access to the largest research and innovation funding platform in the world, Horizon Europe (HEU), is seen as a crucial route for enabling these links to continue.

As such, and in common with many others in the UK's R&I community, we have been concerned with the apparent impasse between the UK Government and the EU over Britain's association with Horizon Europe, despite the announcement of the Windsor Agreement in March 2023.

Given the lack of progress, we understand the need to consider alternative avenues. We stress that our preferred option is still association; however, we recognise that these proposals for the Pioneer programme should be taken seriously, and warrant an appropriate period to read, consider and consult on them. We have now had the opportunity to do so, and what follows is the formal response from the Consortium.

Our community of academics, researchers and professionals welcome the pillar-based structure, and is pleased to see the Government's recognition of the value of 'talent', already demonstrated through the fellowship-focussed elements of the Framework Programme, such as the European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The ambition of the Innovation pillar is good, although we would want to be reassured that the funding for 'moonshots' is of a level necessary to meet such ambition. And we are heartened to see the Government's engagement with the international research community when its recent actions - such as the reduction of ODA funding and the restriction of visas for students and researchers - has suggested a more insular approach.



However, our community raised three significant concerns.

1. **We believe that the UK will not be better off with Pioneer than with HEU.**

Although it's true, as Michelle Donelan suggests (p4), that 'our receipts from Horizon would be uncertain as they depend on the performance of UK participants in competitive processes', but her implication that, based on the figures for H2020, the UK would probably lose out is odd at best. The results for H2020, suggest the opposite. As Quirin Schiermeier [noted](#) in *Nature*, the UK 'received 12.1% (more than €7 billion) of the Horizon 2020 funding; by comparison, the country's average contribution to the overall EU budget is around 11.4% of the total.' The UK has long been a net beneficiary of the framework programmes: under FP7, the previous framework programme, the UK received €8.8bn of direct EU funding for research, having contributed an estimated €5.4bn.

2. **The total funding is unclear, and such uncertainty is a concern.** The prospectus says that 'the UK [will] invest around £14.6 billion over seven years.' However, the figures for the four pillars only add up to £11bn. If you factor in the money set aside for Third Country Participation (TCP) in HEU (£1.3bn) and the money already spent on the guarantee (another £1.3bn) there still appears to be a significant shortfall. We are sure that this has been accounted for, but this is not reassuring. It would be good to have clarification on this.

3. **The programme appears to challenge the Haldane Principle.** The Haldane Principle is enshrined in the legislation that created UKRI, the body that will be responsible for delivering a large part of Pioneer. It separates research funding decisions from party politics. There is a clear danger of Haldane being breached in Pioneer's fourth pillar (Infrastructure): 'This [funding] will contribute to our commitment, as part of the Levelling Up White Paper, to increasing public R&D investment outside the Greater South East by at least 40% by 2030.' This is a significant concern: is this pillar (or Pioneer more broadly) being used for political ends, however well intentioned?

Overall we welcome the Government's proposals. It is good to have a level of certainty and purpose, and Pioneer offers a positive and exciting opportunity for researchers to collaborate both in the UK and globally.

However, we are concerned that Pioneer may become a political vehicle, used to support and encourage research to particular ends rather than for pan-national good. The EU's framework programmes may have some shortcomings, and are certainly not free of politics, but they have significant proven benefits, offering a common platform for European and global R&I.



As the Wellcome Trust has [stated](#), 'compared to national schemes, multilateral funding schemes where researchers seek funding from a wider pool creates more prestigious awards and ensures that research is internationally competitive. Compared to multiple schemes agreed with individual countries, multilateral schemes are more efficient to administer and reduce the number of applications researchers need to make.'

We wish to collectively endorse the position already adopted by UEA in its individual submission, namely that 'the UK's overriding priority should continue to be full association as soon as possible, in order to limit the damage that the two-year delay – and counting – is having on research cooperation with our peers in Europe.'

Pioneer is a welcome addition to the UK's funding landscape, but it should not be seen as a substitute for Horizon Europe.



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