

TCA06 Universities Wales and Welsh Higher Education Brussels

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Adolygiad o weithrediad y Cytundeb Masnach a Chydweithredu rhwng y DU a'r UE | UK-EU implementation review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement

Ymateb gan: Prifysgolion Cymru ac Addysg Uwch Cymru Brwsel | Evidence from: Universities Wales and Welsh Higher Education Brussels

Senedd UK-EU implementation review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement

Universities Wales and Welsh Higher Education Brussels

Universities Wales represents the interests of all universities in Wales. Our mission is to support a university education system that transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world. Welsh Higher Education Brussels is part of Universities Wales and supports Welsh universities in their European engagement through facilitating and co-ordinating activities, promoting Welsh higher education in Brussels and gathering and disseminating intelligence to the Welsh higher education sector.

Terms of reference

We welcome this wide-ranging Inquiry involving four Senedd Committees enabling a consideration of the current position of the UK-EU relationship in a range of areas ahead of the review of the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Universities are among the most international organisations in Wales and are connected to thousands of organisations and people across Europe and around the world through networks and partnerships built on research and education collaborations.

From the terms of reference set out by the committees the most relevant questions/issues for the higher education sector are:

Areas of TCA not fully implemented, such as UK participation in EU programmes or mutual recognition of professional qualifications;

Changes to the UK-EU relationship you would like to see.

Our universities are a vital part of the Welsh economy. The [total economic impact](#) of Welsh universities research and knowledge exchange activities is £1.98 billion and through their international work universities generated £1.26 billion in exports for the Welsh economy in 2022/23. Access to and participation in European programmes has been an important feature of our system for decades underpinning our education, research and innovation. The end of access to almost all EU programmes has had significant consequences for universities. We are very pleased that the UK has associated to Horizon Europe but the delay in association has been problematic and there are limitations due to being in only one major EU programme.

Areas of TCA not fully implemented, such as UK participation in EU programmes or mutual recognition of professional qualifications

EU programmes - Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is the only major EU funding programme covered by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) between the UK and the EU – the TCA also covered Copernicus and Euratom but in 2023 the UK decided not to associate to Euratom.

Horizon Europe is the EU's current research and innovation funding programme running from 2021-27 with an original budget of €95.5 billion. It has a structure of three main pillars with some cross-cutting areas. Pillar 1 is Excellent Science (European Research Council, Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions, Research Infrastructures) Pillar 2 is Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness (Clusters and Joint Research Centre) and Pillar 3 is Innovative Europe (European Innovation Council, EIT). There are cross-cutting areas in Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area.

The association of the UK to Horizon Europe was delayed for three years due to difficulties around the Northern Ireland Protocol. This delay and the uncertainties during the period when association was in the balance has had a major impact on participation in the programme. UK entities could participate from 2021-23 on a limited basis with funding provided by the UK Government's 'Guarantee' managed by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which enabled some connections to be maintained.

The greatest decrease in participation for the UK and for Wales has been in Pillar 2 – the thematic clusters where collaborative partnerships are built to respond to calls. It is estimated that UK participation in this part of the programme has [halved](#) compared to participation in Horizon 2020. The Guarantee did not enable UK entities to lead projects and some UK researchers were not included in applications or invited to join consortia due to concerns around their funding position.

There has also been an impact on early career researchers who might have been expected to network and participate in European funding calls but who have not engaged due to the uncertainties around UK participants between 2021-2023. Without early career researchers building networks and participating in European and international programmes the longer-term health and sustainability of research in our universities will be limited with the consequences for the wider economy and society.

UK involvement in the Partnerships in Horizon Europe - which account for a significant proportion of the budget for Pillar 2 at €23.9 billion - has been limited in the first half of the programme due to the uncertainties. Another area of the programme where the UK has not engaged is the 'Missions' which outline five key challenges where research and other activity can align to achieve improved ocean health, more climate-neutral cities, improved cancer outcomes, improved soil health and regional climate change adaptation. UK entities are participating in the Missions in a very limited way.

There are number of activities underway across the EU, in the UK and in Wales to encourage and maximise participation in Horizon Europe by UK based researchers over the final years of the programme including pump-priming funds, networking visits, roadshows and awareness-raising events. However, it must be noted that the programme is entering its second half so there is an element of 'catch-up' in accessing and benefiting from the programme.

Welsh participation in Horizon Europe

Participation in the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme which runs from 2021-27 has been limited due to the delayed association to the programme by the UK but [Welsh universities](#) remain the most successful Welsh participants receiving three quarters of the funding awarded through the programme so far. In Horizon Europe Wales has been involved in collaborations with 53 different countries involving over 1,000 collaborative links from 106 projects worth £42.8m.

In Pillar 1 Welsh researchers have had seven successful applications to the European Research Council receiving £11.2m and 32 successful applications to the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions receiving £7.7m – this funding has been provided by the UK Guarantee that was in operation from 2021-23 and will continue to support projects initially funded during this period. In Pillar 2 Welsh organisations have been part of 67 successful applications with Guarantee funding of £23.9m.

The UKRI Guarantee was helpful but there were issues around its implementation. The specific call guarantees were launched too late with many calls only included 3 months before their deadline. This was difficult for the research community as many of these calls involve complex applications and work to prepare applications normally starts 6-9 months out from the deadline. The UK approach in this area was in contrast to the approach taken by Switzerland, also a country outside Horizon Europe, which provided an unlimited guarantee for researchers based in Switzerland applying to the programme.

The post award Guarantee process was slow to be opened for successful grants. This caused problems with recruitment so funded positions had to be underwritten by universities. UKRI did not have experience of EU programmes so there were delays in responding to queries and project change requests. There have been particular issues around the management of the Guarantee for Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions within Horizon Europe, the part of the programme that supports doctoral education and postdoctoral training, with changes to reporting requirements post award.

Association has stimulated interest in participation in Horizon Europe by researchers based in Wales as well as more contact with collaborators based elsewhere seeking project partners. There has been a particular increase in applications to calls in the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions. In addition, there has been increased interest in the COST Programme which supports researcher networking across Europe as well as use of Welsh Government funding such as SCoRE Cymru and Agile Cymru to support and maintain relationships and enable preparatory work for funding calls.

Other programmes

Although the UK is only in one major programme there are a number of EU programmes that the UK participated in until the end of 2020 and following the UK-EU 'reset' at a political level there is considerable interest in exploring whether the UK could associate to other programmes although the UK Government remains cautious.

It is very helpful for the UK to have associated to Horizon Europe but a key focus EU policy is to encourage synergies between different funding programmes, e.g. connections between Erasmus funded activities such as University Alliances and Horizon Europe funding. Although it does not appear to have been extensively used yet the current EU programme period has

also introduced the possibility of some Structural Funds being used to support Horizon Europe engagement.

Despite the benefits of Horizon Europe association and also our wish to associate to the next EU research and innovation programme it is important to understand the limitations that participation in only one programme among a range of EU programmes will place on UK entities and our inability to benefit from the synergies that the EU is encouraging across its activities.

Mobility

There has been increased discussion around potential UK association to Erasmus in the next programme period from 2028 onwards. While it is likely that many EU Member States would welcome association to Erasmus by the UK there are a number of issues to be considered. Further discussion is needed around the wider issue of mobility to understand the latest trends in mobility to and from the UK, the impact of the Taith programme, the impact of the Turing programme, the financial position of the sector and also to understand the likely direction of the new Erasmus programme. It should also be noted that universities participated in the other parts of the Erasmus programme – Key Action 2 – cooperation among organisations and institutions and Key Action 3 – support to policy development and cooperation. Participation in these parts of the programme were important for our universities in building connections, supporting partnerships and enabling capacity-building.

The creation of the Taith programme has been very helpful for our universities in enabling some of the connections that were previously supported through the Erasmus programme to be maintained to some extent. The inclusion of an element of exchange as well as staff and researcher mobility has been well-received by partners across Europe.

More widely Taith has reached other parts of the education sector as well as the youth and adult sectors that had not previously engaged with mobility and enabled a wider range of people to be involved in mobility activities. It will be important to draw on this wider approach and the commitment to the involvement of underrepresented groups in identifying an appropriate mobility route for Wales and the UK.

The EU's proposed youth mobility agreement with the UK which was initially published in April 2024, and which received a very negative response from the then UK Government and a similar view was taken by the then Opposition, has potentially caused confusion and a connection between mobility, Erasmus and immigration which is unfortunate. It would be helpful to consider wider mobility separately from discussions around the next Erasmus programme and to engage constructively with appropriate opportunities to provide input to the development of the next Erasmus programme recognising its remit is broader than mobility.

The UK higher education sector as represented by Universities UK has indicated that it wishes to ['consider the case for association to the next Erasmus scheme'](#) and the Welsh Government has also stated that: ['We continue to raise more strategic issues such as improved energy co-operation and options to re-join EU programmes such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus and Creative Europe'](#).

Interreg

Wales was involved in a range of Interreg programmes - Ireland Wales, Atlantic Area, North West Europe - which enabled co-operation with different countries and regions depending on the programme. Universities were active in all these programmes which brought together universities, public authorities, businesses and other organisations to collaborate on a range of themes. Interreg was important for a number of our universities in supporting impact, innovation and knowledge exchange activities.

Both Switzerland and Norway participate in Interreg enabling co-operation and collaboration with their EU neighbours. It may be appropriate to consider whether the UK could explore participation in Interreg with particular interest for Wales in participating in programmes with Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal.

Creative Europe

The consultation evidence received by the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee on 'Culture and the new relationship with the European Union' noted the previous participation in the Creative Europe programme by a number of Welsh organisations including universities and the issues caused by the loss of access to Creative Europe. Universities would be keen to explore opportunities to engage with the Creative Europe programme drawing on experience of leading projects in this programme. Norway participates in the Creative Europe programme.

Changes to the UK-EU relationship you would like to see.

For the higher education sector one of the most important aspects of the UK-EU relationship for the next period is the need for continuity and stability. EU programmes have provided long-term, stable funding for many years in research and education. The departure of the UK from the EU disrupted many relationships as well as reducing funding opportunities. To enable our universities to undertake excellent research we need to be part of EU research and innovation activities and to be able to base our strategies on being part of these activities. If there is a delay in associating to the next EU research and innovation funding programme the work undertaken across the EU, in the UK and in Wales to encourage participation and collaboration in Horizon Europe by UK based researchers this momentum and enthusiasm will be lost.

This position is reflected in the [Universities UK position paper on FP10](#) and also the position paper on [FP10 published by the UK Government](#). Both these position papers outline the value of EU research and innovation programmes, support for excellence, the value of working with like-minded countries outside the EU and a keen interest in associating to the next EU research and innovation programme.

More widely it is important that the UK, and Wales in relevant areas of competence, considers its relationship with European higher education and research policy to maintain its compliance and alignment with key developments in relation to the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area. If there are areas of divergence these should be by design and not by accident or through the unintended consequences of domestic policy changes.

Since 2020 and the TCA there has been no consideration of UK association to other EU programmes, this might change with new Government. Potential association to the next Erasmus programme has been a focus for some discussions in the UK. It would be helpful to consider wider mobility separately from discussions around the next Erasmus programme and to engage constructively with appropriate opportunities to provide input to the development of the next Erasmus programme.

There have been suggestions that the European Commission may seek to move the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions from the research and innovation area to education and the next Erasmus programme. If this possible change was implemented and the UK remains outside Erasmus it would cause significant problems for Welsh universities and the attractiveness of our sector for doctoral and postdoctoral students.

In addition, EU programmes did vary in their value to different parts of the UK with Structural Funds of particular significance for Wales and for our universities. Interreg also provided an important route for collaboration for our universities with a range of European partners in life sciences, bioeconomy, marine energy and other areas.

It may be helpful to consider which other EU programmes, accessible to third countries, would be useful for the higher education and other sectors in Wales. Involvement in other programmes would have the potential to unlock more opportunities and benefit from the synergies being encouraged by the EU.