

Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
(via email: cab-von-der-leyen-contact@ec.europa.eu;
ec.president.vdl@ec.europa.eu)
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The Russell Group of Universities
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Dear Mrs President,

As you will know, the UK's association to the Horizon Europe programme is awaiting confirmation and risks falling victim to the wider political discussion around the future relationship between Britain and the European Union.

This is a huge source of regret to the Russell Group, which represents 24 of the UK's most research-intensive universities, as well as scientists and researchers from across the continent. It has been widely reported that the UK's association will not be confirmed until the discussions around the Northern Ireland Protocol have been resolved. We believe this is a mistake.

Scientists cannot control the outcome of debates over the protocol. Yet science and the solutions it can provide to challenges like net zero and public health will be the ones that suffer. Russell Group universities have been major players in the European research programmes, particularly in the 'Excellent Science' schemes. Without the UK's full association, the programme will become less competitive, with knock-on impacts for the excellence and prestige of EU grants. Association is therefore too important to be used as part of a negotiation and the current impasse shows this is having no leverage over the Northern Ireland protocol. Of course, there are serious political issues at play that must be resolved in a mutually beneficial way; however, you have the ability to ensure negotiations continue to take place while the UK participates in Horizon Europe.

This week, the British Government will set out plans for its alternative to collaborating internationally and attracting top talent to the UK if association is not secured. It has indicated the plans will be backed by the funding allocated to Horizon, which was set aside in the 2021 Comprehensive Spending Review.

It has also made clear that full association remains its top priority, however the publication of these plans mean walking away from Horizon has become a step closer, and the time left to resolve this is growing short.

The benefits to all parties of UK association is one of the key areas where both EU and UK governments agree. I am urging you, on behalf of the Russell Group and our partners across Europe, to set aside the politics and move forward on a decision that is so clearly a mutually beneficial one – not just for science and innovation but also for future discussions about how our governments should collaborate. Reminding all parties what the EU and UK can achieve when they work together – especially in the face of wider geopolitical, economic, health and environmental challenges – will set a positive and constructive tone for those important conversations.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, Russell Group

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