Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation)
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THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA
CREATE CHANGE

UQ Submission: Australia's Association to Horizon Europe

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Introduction

The University of Queensland (UQ) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on Australia's potential association with Horizon Europe. As one of Australia's leading research-intensive institutions, UQ strongly supports full association with Horizon Europe across all pillars. We believe this represents a transformative opportunity to enhance Australia's global research engagement, unlock significant funding and infrastructure benefits, and align our national research priorities with those of the European Union. This submission outlines the strategic, economic, and sectoral advantages of association, drawing on UQ's experience as a Third Country Participant and providing case studies that demonstrate the potential for impactful collaboration.

Responses to submission questions

1. What benefit would association to Horizon Europe bring to your organisation or Australia?

UQ strongly supports Australia's association with Horizon Europe (HE) and encourages the Government to engage proactively with the European Union as exploration and formal negotiations progress in the coming months. UQ advocates for engagement across all pillars of HE, rather than limiting participation to Pillar II, as this would significantly expand opportunities and embed Australia within a global research and innovation network unparalleled in scale and impact.

Scale

The scale and breadth of the funding available through HE dwarfs current Australian research funding opportunities. As the EU's primary funding mechanism from R&I, the scale of the program speaks for itself:

- A €95.5 billion budget from 2021-2027, €53.5 billion of which is allocated to Pillar II
- HE 2028-2034 has a proposed budget of €175 billion (an ~87% uplift), €75.9 billion of which is earmarked for Pillar II.

Researchers from Associated countries are also eligible to apply for European Research Council Synergy grants worth €10 million, plus an additional €4 million for startup, equipment and infrastructure costs. In 2024, this pool of funding distributed an additional €571 million to researchers, over and above the funding pool attached to HE Pillar II. Currently, Australian researchers are limited in how they can access these schemes and are subject to caps on the funding available to them. A membership with HE would remove these constraints, enabling full participation and significantly increasing the potential funding returns to Australia.

Priority Alignment

An additional benefit lies in the synergy of the Global Challenges/Clusters targeted by Pillar 2 with Australia's research priorities. The HE priorities are: Health; Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society; Civil Security for Society; Digital, Industry and Space; Climate, Energy and Mobility; and Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment.

These challenges align closely with Australia's recently implemented National Science and Research Priorities in health, climate, net-zero transition, digital capability food security, and inclusive societies; they also map well onto the priority industries identified by the Future Made in Australia policy initiative and the accompanying National Interest Framework.

Research Sector Uplift

Association with HE's Pillar II would deliver substantial value to the Australian research sector and the national economy. It would provide direct access to Europe's largest collaborative research funding pool, opening opportunities for joint projects with world-leading institutions.

The drastically increased research capability benefits extend also to encompass access to world-class infrastructure, international networks, and collaborative opportunities unavailable only through domestic or bilateral arrangements. Opportunities for HDR student mobility and exchange would also increase markedly, as well as the ability for our national EMCR cohort to forge important foundational connections with their European colleagues. Important international research experience and knowledge transfer would become available to a broader range of our researchers, not just a small proportion, as exists now. Importantly, it will help address the national skills shortage identified by the Australian Academy of Science's report, thereby strengthening Australia's positioning within the OECD and contributing to sustained productivity growth.

HE mobilises researcher networks and exchanges at all career stages. Consequently, access to HE would support addressing Australia's skills shortage, providing a means to address a national challenge and supporting the advanced knowledge economy that is needed to underpin productivity and wellbeing.

Strategically, there would also be a benefit in Australia's geopolitical position as a bridge between European and Asia-Pacific research networks while establishing leadership in areas of national strength. Australia's expertise in consumer-led research, Indigenous health approaches, and digital health innovation aligns with European priorities while offering distinctive perspectives that enhance global research.

With respect to impact, an association with Pillar II would increase Australia's capability to enact co-designed research that leverages European scale and experience, thus creating translational pathways for Australian industries.

Potential Funding Outcomes

We draw reference to the recent example of New Zealand's association to HE. As the first non-EU country to formally associate to Pillar II of HE, New Zealand has evidenced remarkable results with respect to its application success rates and subsequent funding. The first year of participation saw New Zealand secure ~ €3.3 million for its domestic research partners; with a success rate of ~30%. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (NZ) forecasts this success rate to trend towards an average of 21% for Pillar II over the coming years.[1]

Australia's significantly larger R&I endeavour (approximately 8x larger than New Zealand's [2,3]) could potentially target an initial funding receipt of ~ €15-25 million in the earliest years of our participation, with the potential for this to scale to ~ €50-100 million annually as research relationships, networks, and practices develop.

UQ is Australia's leading university in participating in HE schemes available to non-EU member organisations. According to data presented by Euraxess on 14 October 2025, UQ has secured more than 23 projects and attracted nearly $4 million in funding. The comparatively low funding rate reflects the caps and restrictions imposed on non-associated high-income countries. This demonstrates that while UQ maintains strong and active collaborations with European partners, these partnerships are constrained by limited access to funding mechanisms. Full association would enable Australian researchers to access the "Proof of Concept" funding pool available to ERC grant holders, thereby accelerating technology transfer and the development of market-ready innovations.

Australian research agencies could also leverage HE by creating funding schemes or initiatives that channel resources to neighbouring low- and middle-income countries. This approach would allow Australian researchers to use the funds locally while sharing expertise and fostering partnerships that deliver regional benefits.

[1] https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Trade-General/Trade-Market-reports/New-Zealands-Association-to-Horizon-Europe-Twelve-Months-On-March-2024.pdf
[2] https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/research-and-development-survey-2024/
[3] https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Research_Papers/2024-25/RandD_and_innovation_in_Australia_2024_update

It is important to emphasise that the immediate opportunity extends beyond increased research funding to include the development of deep partnerships, international networks, enhanced research impact, infrastructure, and workforce capabilities.

Sectoral Examples

Humanities and Social Sciences

The HASS disciplines represent, domestically and globally, a cohort that attract substantially less funding than the STEM-related fields. Through the benefits of scale, outlined above, an association with Pillar II would drastically increase national competitive positioning for HASS researchers on the global scale. With respect to the Australian National Competitive Grants Program, from 2002-2024, the HASS disciplines attracted only ~24% of the funding amounts that were provided to STEM-centred fields of research.[4]

The strengths of UQ's HASS expertise in creative arts, cultural studies, and Indigenous research align very well with Cluster 2 (Culture, Creativity, and Inclusive Society); and UQ's HASS research on social cohesion, confliction resolution and policy analysis reflects the central focus of Cluster 3 (Civil Security for Society). Obvious cross-cluster opportunities exist also for HASS researchers in digital humanities, environmental humanities, and health humanities. UQ anticipates that our HASS research cohort may be positioned to receive an additional 10-15 major grants annually through association with HE. These successes would likely be replicated in turn across by organisations across the sector with a strong HASS research cohort.

Health and Medical[5]

Cluster 1 represents an immediate and obvious opportunity as part of an association with HE. The Cluster's €8.2 billion budget presents a crucial opportunity to supporting research that directly addresses Australia's health challenges.

Chronic pain exemplifies this potential; current research fragmentation across 50+ fields limits translation effectiveness, while European collaboration would enable coordinated approaches matching the challenge's complexity. Association would facilitate access to European clinical trial networks, regulatory pathways, and commercial partnerships that could accelerate Australian health innovations to global markets. This includes the opportunity to lead in the design and implementation of adaptive platform clinical trials, a more efficient and ethical approach to testing new therapies.

AI Digital

Digital Technology and Artificial Intelligence through Cluster 4 (representing €15.3 billion in funding) would enhance Australia's digital transformation agenda. Domestic research strengths in digital health, mining technology, and agricultural innovation align with European priorities in AI, advanced manufacturing, and space technology. Association would provide access to European digital markets, technology partnerships, and regulatory frameworks while enabling Australian companies to participate in developing global technology standards.

2. If you don't support association to Horizon Europe, why not?

UQ supports association to Horizon Europe.

[4] https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/funding-outcome/grants-dataset/trend-visualisation/ncgp-trends-areas-research
[5] 'Health and Medical' and 'AI Digital' case studies presented here are adapted, with permission, from the submission: 'Possible Association to Horizon Europe, submitted by Professor Paul Hodges, on behalf of the DISCERN NHMRC Synergy Grant Team and the Centre for Innovation in Pain and Health Research (CIPHeR), The University of Queensland.'

3. If you already participate in Horizon Europe as a Third Country Participant, what return on investment have you received? Explain what difference association would provide you.

The difference between third country and associated country status in Horizon Europe is hugely significant in terms of funding eligibility, project leadership, and strategic influence. An Associated Country status would facilitate eligibility for direct EU funding on equal terms with EU Member States, unless explicitly excluded in specific calls.

Furthermore, an Associated Country can coordinate projects, lead research groups, and/or participate in the HE program (dependant on the agreement), and can positively contribute to research agendas, EU missions, and partnerships.

For Australian higher education institutions, including UQ, association to Horizon Europe would be revolutionary, as it would:

- unlock full funding eligibility
- enable leadership roles in consortia and access to all program elements
- allow participation in strategic planning and priority setting for projects
- provide strategic access to EU research priorities
- facilitate full access to key program infrastructure and networks; and
- significantly increase our participation and impact.

Further, associated countries typically see a ~ 300-500% increase in the number of projects they are involved in, due to their ability to take a leadership role in the project.[6]

4. Case studies

See below for case studies that represent possible ways in which UQ would engage with HE. The first Case Study indicates the institutional-level response to Australia's association with HE, while case studies two through seven detail specific research programs that are well positioned for HE application.

Case Study 1: UQ's engagement with Horizon Europe

This case study highlights how the University might engage with HE if Australia's proposed association comes to fruition.

The proposed engagement strategy focuses on aligning UQ's research strengths with Horizon Europe's priorities, fostering institutional and industry partnerships, enabling researchers, engaging with government policy, and promoting impact through communication.

Strategic Positioning

- Align UQ's research strengths with Horizon Europe Pillar II clusters such as Health, Climate, Food/Agriculture/Bioeconomy, Digital, and Industry.
- Prioritise Health and Climate/Energy clusters, for flagship Horizon Europe proposals. This is reflective of UQ's expertise and research capability in biomedical and health sciences, sustainable energy and climate.
- Leverage existing EU collaborations in agriculture, environmental science, critical minerals/mining, to expand into the Food/Bioeconomy cluster.

[6] https://dashboard.tech.ec.europa.eu/qs_digit_dashboard_mt/public/sense/app/1213b8cd-3ebe-4730-b0f5-fa4e326df2e2/sheet/d23bba31-e385-4cc0-975e-a67059972142/state/analysis

- Build capacity in Digital and Civil Security clusters through interdisciplinary initiatives involving engineering, law, and social sciences.
- Develop a Horizon Europe-aligned research strategy to promote internally and externally, in collaboration with the Research Office and Global Partnerships, aligned with the University strategic plan and global engagement framework.

Institutional Partnerships

- Identify top Horizon Europe coordinators in Europe for joint proposals.
- Leverage existing collaborations like the m4mining project (in which UQ and the Sustainable Minerals Institute are consortia members) and strategic partnerships.
- Host joint workshops and symposia with European institutions.

Researcher Enablement

- Establish a Horizon Europe Support Hub within UQ's Research Office.
- Provide training on EU proposal writing, consortium building, and compliance to the UQ community.
- Support seed funding and travel grants for EU engagement.

Government & Policy Engagement

- Collaborate with the Australian Government to stay informed on EU-Australia agreements.
- Participate in national Horizon Europe briefings and advocate for bilateral funding mechanisms.

Communication & Impact

- Develop a communications campaign showcasing UQ's Horizon Europe projects and impact.
- Create case studies and media releases.
- Promote UQ's role through international conferences, with Government and EU platforms.

Monitoring & Evaluation

- Establishment of KPIs such as number of proposals submitted, funded projects, and EU partners engaged.
- Conduct annual reviews and adjust strategy based on funding trends and research priorities.

Case Study 2: Adolescent Mental Health and Digital Wellbeing

This project would investigate digital media, anxiety, and executive function, and trial scalable school-based interventions.

- **Consortium Structure**
    - The project would collaborate under Cluster 1 (Health) on "Mental Health Promotion and Digital Innovation for Youth." Partnering with Ghent University (Department of Experimental Clinical and Health Psychology) to test digital interventions in cross-cultural settings. UQ researchers would contribute expertise in stepped-wedge trial design, psychometrics, and implementation science.
- **Impact/Benefits**
    - Jointly develop evidence-based digital tools that address shared public health challenges
    - Deliver scalable solutions to improve adolescent wellbeing and reduce system costs

- Position Australia as a key global contributor to youth mental health innovation
- Participation in collaborative grant proposals.

Case Study 3: Digital Observatory

- **Consortium Structure**
  - The Centre for Digital Cultures and Society at UQ exemplifies Horizon Europe's potential for Australian research. Currently developing the Australian Internet Observatory alongside European counterparts at institutions in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Zurich, the Weizenbaum Institute, and the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, the Centre maintains productive collaborations through shared methodologies and networks. However, existing funding structures lack mechanisms for substantial collaborative projects.
- **Impact/Benefits**
  - Horizon Europe association would enable large-scale, cross-national research programs that jointly leverage digital observatory infrastructure, moving beyond knowledge exchange to ambitious, funded research programs. This would deeply embed Australian digital humanities expertise within European cutting-edge research ecosystems, achieving greater impact through coordinated international programs than current piecemeal approaches.

Case Study 4: Down Syndrome Longitudinal Research

Professor Rhonda Farager's Down Syndrome Research Program at UQ, running since 1978, follows fewer than 50 participants from the original cohort—now entering unprecedented territory as the first generation ageing with Down syndrome outside institutional care. Australian participant populations are too small for robust epidemiological studies in disability research. The program's globally unique longitudinal data on ageing and dementia could be transformative when combined with international cohorts, but as Third Country Participants, Australian researchers cannot lead such multi-site studies.

- **Impact/Benefits**
  - Horizon Europe association would enable the critical mass needed for research directly impacting individuals with Down syndrome, their families, and policy development across participating nations.

Case Study 5: Regulating Digital Platform Markets

Digital platforms such as app stores, online marketplaces and search engines increasingly act as gatekeepers, raising concerns about competition, data access, and consumer outcomes. Both the EU (Digital Markets Act) and Australia (ACCC inquiries) are exploring policy responses. UQ research into competition law in the digital economy examines the tension between innovation incentives and risks of entrenched market power. This work directly informs debates on interoperability, AI, and vertical restraints in digital markets.

- **Consortium Structure**
  - Horizon Europe Cluster 4 (Digital, Industry and Space) calls regularly fund projects on fair digital markets, platform regulation, and AI governance.
  - UQ could coordinate a consortium with EU partners (e.g., universities, regulators, technology-focused SMEs) to compare digital market regulations, test interoperability policies, and design policy toolkits.
- **Impact/Benefits**
  - Evidence-based regulation that supports competitive digital markets, reduces barriers for SMEs, and ensures consumers benefit from lower prices and greater choice—advancing Australia's productivity agenda in the digital economy.

Case Study 6: Fairness in Grocery Supply Chains

Concentration in the grocery retail sector raises issues of buyer power, unfair contract terms, and pressures on small suppliers, issues highlighted in both EU and Australian contexts. UQ has an extensive history of research and publishing into vertical restraints and supermarket-supplier relations, providing deep insights into the legal and economic dynamics of grocery markets.

- **Consortium Structure**
    - Horizon Europe Cluster 6 ("Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment") calls include projects on sustainable and resilient food systems.
    - UQ could partner with EU agricultural economics and law institutes to design pilot codes of conduct, dispute resolution mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks for grocery supply chains.
- Impact/Benefits
    - Stronger supply chain resilience, fairer outcomes for farmers and SMEs, and improved consumer prices. Such outcomes align with Australia's goals of strengthening agricultural productivity and rural economies.

Case Study 7: Competition Policy and Clean Energy Innovation

Transitioning to low-emissions energy requires investment in new technologies and markets. Anti-competitive practices (e.g., cartelisation, restrictive licensing) can stifle innovation and slow adoption. UQ combines strong law expertise (competition law and procurement regulation) with world-class energy and minerals research (e.g., Sustainable Minerals Institute).

- **Consortium Structure**
    - Horizon Europe Cluster 5 ("Climate, Energy and Mobility") calls support projects that integrate market design, regulation, and technology adoption for the green transition.
    - A UQ-led consortium could examine competition policy tools to promote open energy markets, fair procurement of clean technologies, and mechanisms to incentivise innovation without anti-competitive lock-in.
- **Impact/Benefits**
    - Regulatory and policy innovations that accelerate Australia's clean energy transition, reduce costs, and enhance competitiveness in global energy markets.

5. If Australia associates to Horizon Europe, what implementation models do you suggest for maximising the benefit from the Horizon Europe funding and alignment with Australian science priorities?

Capacity Building

Develop resources to upskill the research community, including both research and professional staff. This could involve promoting consular contacts and establishing a dedicated office to facilitate liaison, coordination, and professional development.

Infrastructure and Governance

Ensure institutions have the necessary infrastructure and governance arrangements to manage HE agreements and projects effectively, enabling full compliance with HE's terms and conditions. Appropriate management resources should be in place to support compliance, reporting, and governance.

Seeding and Networking Programs

Implement seeding programs to foster collaboration and networking at all researcher levels, increasing visibility, exposure, and opportunities to form partnerships with European institutions. Mobility schemes can be integrated to seed programmatic research collaborations, strengthening the pipeline of researchers accessing HE funding.

Alignment with National Priorities and Regional Impact

Align funding opportunities with shared national priorities through national research council competitive programs and targeted bilateral calls. This approach would allow Australian researchers to access funding while channelling HE resources to neighbouring low- and middle-income countries, amplifying regional impact and benefits for Australia.

Full Participation Across Pillars

Ensure Australia gains access to all Horizon Europe pillars, enabling UQ and other institutions to fully participate in ERC funding, access Proof of Concept funding, and develop a globally connected research workforce. This will maximise both the financial and strategic benefits of association.

6. A number of countries from outside Europe have associated to Horizon Europe (such as Canada, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea), what are the pros and cons of their implementation models for Australia to consider?

Learnings can be gained from discussions with these countries which have already established association agreements with HE. For example, Australia could adopt elements of New Zealand's implementation model, which actively brokers opportunities and supports applications through a coordinated network of National Contact Points (NCPs). These NCPs provide tailored guidance to research organisations, businesses, and institutions on developing competitive project proposals.

As an Associated Country, Australia would also hold observer status on the Programme Committees that govern HE calls, determine funding allocations, and set program priorities thus ensuring Australia's representation and input into strategic decision-making.

In addition, seeding schemes supporting researcher mobility could be implemented at the local, state, or national level to facilitate collaboration and strengthen Australia's capacity to participate in Horizon Europe applications.

The key advantages of these models include access to extensive funding and collaboration networks, alignment with international research priorities, enhanced researcher mobility, and strengthened global partnerships. They also provide opportunities for Australia to contribute to and influence program priorities through observer representation. However, these approaches can present challenges, including the need for substantial coordination and governance infrastructure, potential co-investment requirements to maintain parity with European partners, and administrative complexity in aligning national programs with HE frameworks.

7. If Australia does not associate to Horizon Europe, what alternative models do you suggest for international science collaboration that might deliver similar outcomes to Horizon Europe?

No other international scheme mirrors the scale or intent of HE. The current geopolitical context makes the establishment of consortia of similar scope challenging.

Given the alignment of priorities, global connectivity, and collaborative opportunities HE provides, association would position Australia to realise significant research and innovation benefits.

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