

UQ Response to Horizon Europe implementation: discussion paper

Overview

The University of Queensland (UQ) welcomes Australia's association with Horizon Europe and supports the Australian Government's focus on establishing practical structures, supports and coordination arrangements that maximise national participation and benefit. Horizon Europe should be approached not only as a research funding program, but also as a strategic mechanism for connecting Australian research, industry and government into European innovation ecosystems, strengthening international capability and creating enduring partnerships.

UQ's response therefore addresses the consultation themes as an integrated implementation proposition. It focuses on the design of the National Contact Point network, the support required to build competitive participation, the measures by which success should be judged and the longer-term opportunity to position Australia strongly for the next European Framework Programme.

1. A nationally coordinated, distributed National Contact Point network

Recommended structure

UQ supports the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR) providing the central coordination function for Australia's National Contact Point (NCP) network. A Tier 1 office within DISR would promote national consistency, disseminate authoritative information, maintain links with the European Commission and provide clear coordination across Australia's research and innovation system.

Tier 2 NCPs should draw on expertise located within universities, research organisations, industry and other relevant sector bodies. Competitive Horizon Europe participation requires deep disciplinary knowledge, understanding of national research capability and established collaborative networks. These capabilities are unlikely to be concentrated in a government-only model.

UQ recommends a distributed hybrid model in which Tier 2 NCPs are aligned primarily to the six Pillar II clusters and hosted across the research and innovation system. Geographic coverage should be incorporated through the distribution and reach of the network, rather than used as its principal organising logic. This would combine national coordination with cluster-specific expertise, sector reach and local connectivity.

UQ does not consider a separate volunteer-based Tier 3 network essential. Its proposed functions largely overlap with existing university research offices, peak bodies, academies, industry organisations and government networks. Formalising an additional tier may create ambiguity, duplication and uneven service quality. Outreach should instead be embedded in the responsibilities and partnerships of Tier 1 and Tier 2 NCPs.

Specialist and cross-cutting capability

In addition to cluster-aligned Tier 2 NCPs, Australia should establish dedicated cross-cutting specialist NCP functions in areas that apply across the program. These should include:

- legal and financial requirements, including contracting, intellectual property, data protection, financial administration and audit;
- Horizon Europe Missions and European Partnerships;

- European Innovation Council and European Institute of Innovation and Technology opportunities;
- European Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, where relevant to Australia's broader European engagement; and
- European geographic and partnership intelligence as a secondary enabling function.

A stand-alone Legal and Financial NCP would be particularly valuable during Australia's transition into Horizon Europe. It could publish authoritative national guidance, promote consistent interpretation of program requirements and provide a trusted point of referral for participant questions. Its scope should be clearly defined as guidance and information, rather than legal or financial advice.

This capability would be especially valuable for smaller and less experienced organisations. It would also benefit lead organisations by improving partners' understanding of the EU Grant Agreement and reducing avoidable negotiation, contracting and review complexity.

NCPs will require a high degree of expertise, skills and experience in understanding the technical administrative EU language. There is also expertise needed to bring huge teams together across cultural and language boundaries. As such, the following skills and expertise will be critical to effective Tier 2 NCP activities:

- understands the cluster deeply;
- has participated in international consortia development and program management;
- has established connections – or can acquire quickly - European coordinators and NCPs;
- can identify consortium opportunities early; and
- can broker partnerships between research, industry and other agencies where necessary.

2. NCPs as strategic brokers, not only information services

In the establishment phase, NCPs will need to absorb program information, training and updates from DISR and the European Commission rapidly. Over time, however, their highest-value contribution should be proactive opportunity development and partnership brokering.

Priority NCP functions should include:

- identifying relevant calls and strategic opportunities early;
- connecting Australian capability with European coordinators, consortia and NCP networks;
- supporting consortium formation and partner matching;
- drawing on knowledge of Australia's research strengths, policy priorities and sector capabilities;
- linking researchers, industry, government and other organisations;
- providing an accessible front door and directing applicants to appropriate specialist support; and
- supporting trusted international collaboration across institutional, disciplinary, cultural and national boundaries.

NCPs should therefore be selected for both technical expertise and their capacity to mobilise networks. Each Tier 2 NCP should understand their cluster deeply, have experience in

international consortium development or program delivery, be able to identify opportunities early and have established European connections or the ability to develop them quickly.

3. Inclusive participation across the research and innovation system

Horizon Europe creates an important mechanism for connecting universities, research organisations, industry, government and other organisations through Pillar II. The implementation model should actively address the participation barriers associated with Australia's distance from Europe and the limited resources and international networks available to many SMEs, regional organisations and first-time applicants.

Australian SMEs may face information asymmetry, partner-search costs, limited international networks, unfamiliar administrative requirements and a high opportunity cost from committing staff to an application that may be unsuccessful. Government should establish a coherent Horizon Europe SME pathway delivered through trusted industry-facing intermediaries. Regardless of whether an SME first approaches an NCP, university, industry body or government agency, it should be connected to the same national opportunity and partner-matching infrastructure.

Regional universities, research organisations and businesses would similarly benefit from targeted partner identification, proposal-development assistance and access to specialised guidance. The objective should be equitable access to national capability, not the creation of parallel or lower-capability support arrangements.

Implementation should also draw on existing functions and relationships, including state and Commonwealth trade offices and commissioners, industry and sector development organisations, peak bodies, universities, research organisations, existing national research management infrastructure and systems, the Australian Embassy in Belgium and established liaison with the European Commission. The Group of Eight and Universities Australia will also be important advocates, intelligence providers and connectors.

4. Sustainable resourcing, governance and risk management

The NCP network will require sufficient and sustainable resourcing. Where Tier 2 NCPs are hosted within universities and research organisations, the cost of delivering a national function should not be absorbed by the university or organisation. Further, government funding should be additional to, rather than reallocated from, existing research-system funding.

The model should be agile and closely connected to the European NCP ecosystem while managing three key risks:

- insufficient specialist expertise in a government-only model;
- fragmentation, inconsistency and under-resourcing if responsibilities are spread too widely; and
- duplication of services already delivered by research offices and other sector organisations.

These risks would be best managed through a small national coordination unit in DISR, supported by a focused network of specialised Tier 2 NCPs operating under common governance, service expectations, performance measures and robust conflict-of-interest arrangements. Host organisations should be selected transparently, with geographic diversity, clear role descriptions, disclosure requirements, information-handling protocols and arrangements for referring matters where an actual or perceived conflict arises.

5. Targeted support to mobilise competitive participation

If the Australian Government provides additional financial support, it should adopt interventions that have been effective in European Member States and Associated Countries. A balanced support package could include:

- mobilisation funding for Australian researchers and partners to develop relationships in Europe, and for European partners to engage in Australia;
- bid-development funding to support the preparation of competitive proposals; and
- accelerator funding for proof of concept, feasibility, pathways to market, industry engagement and translation.

Support should be flexible, proportionate and readily accessible within the intent of each initiative. Horizon Europe consortia and calls develop quickly, and overly prescriptive or slow mechanisms would diminish the value of government support.

Government could apply a portfolio approach: early mobilisation and bid-development support can broaden participation and build capability, while targeted post-award or accelerator support can strengthen translation, industry engagement and longer-term impact. Any targeting of priority areas should preserve scope for high-quality opportunities outside a narrow list of national priorities.

6. A broader framework for measuring success

Success should be measured carefully and over a sufficiently long period to reflect the development of Australia's participation. Application numbers, success rates and funding secured are important, but they do not capture whether Horizon Europe is building durable international partnerships, industry collaboration and research and innovation capability.

UQ proposes a three-level performance framework:

Immediate outputs

- applications submitted and success rates;
- funding attracted and the number of successful Australian participants;
- the number, type and geographic distribution of participating organisations; and
- evidence of support provided and opportunities or consortia developed through the NCP network.

Capability and network outcomes

- first-time applicants and international collaborators;
- Australian organisations joining European networks;
- Australian work-package leaders and coordinators;
- SME and regional participation;
- repeat participation;
- consortium relationships established beyond bid preparation and funding cycles; and
- capability developed in proposal preparation and international collaboration.

Longer-term innovation and impact outcomes

- international partnerships continuing beyond individual projects;
- subsequent joint projects and investment attracted;
- patents, intellectual property, products, services and processes;
- start-ups, spinouts and commercialisation;
- policy and practice impacts;
- researcher and industry mobility
- delivery towards Australian government priorities (e.g. Future Made in Australia and Australia's National Science and Research Priorities); and
- integration of Australian SMEs into international value chains.

A balanced performance framework would encourage NCPs to act as consortium builders and strategic brokers, rather than optimising only for application volume. Attribution should be approached proportionately, recognising that NCPs contribute to outcomes alongside institutions, researchers, industry partners and European collaborators.

7. Building enduring national capability and positioning for FP10

Australia should treat Horizon Europe association as an opportunity to build an internationally connected research and innovation ecosystem between Australia and the European Commission, not primarily as access to a research funding program. Implementation should seek simultaneously to connect Australian actors into European innovation ecosystems, strengthen organisations' ability to collaborate across institutional, disciplinary and national boundaries, and translate those connections into longer-term research, innovation, commercialisation and impact capability.

UQ recommends that the implementation framework include an additional objective: to build enduring Australian capability and international innovation networks that persist beyond individual Horizon Europe applications and projects.

Australia's participation in the 2027 Pillar II calls is an important early phase of engagement with the European Commission and European partners. It should be used to build Australia's credibility, capability and relationships, strengthen alignment between Australian and European priorities and inform the development of funding calls, clusters, missions and partnerships. This early investment will also position Australia to engage strategically with the successor to Horizon Europe, Framework Programme 10.

Conclusion

Australia's Horizon Europe implementation model should combine strong national coordination with distributed specialist expertise, proactive consortium development, inclusive participation and sustained capability building. A focused, well-resourced and cluster-aligned NCP network, supported by cross-cutting legal, financial and partnership expertise, would provide the strongest platform for competitive participation in 2027 and enduring national benefit beyond individual funding outcomes.