

Possible Association to Horizon Europe – Submission to Public Consultation

Research Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Department of Industry, Science and Resources' consultation on Australia's possible association to Horizon Europe, by way of a written submission.

Research Australia has consistently called on the Australian Government to formally sign up to Horizon Europe to unlock new opportunities for Australia's researchers and innovators and secure our nation's position as a global leader in science and innovation. We therefore welcome the commencement of non-binding exploratory talks with the European Union on possible association to Horizon Europe under Pillar II, *Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness*.

The European Union's \$170 billion (€95.5 billion) research program is a highly pertinent opportunity for the Australian health and medical research and innovation sector – supporting international collaboration across several key areas, including health, climate change and digital transformation. Research Australia is of the view that Australia's association to the scheme will provide a further platform for strategic and operational impact alongside other critical reforms currently in their finalisation – particularly the National Health and Medical Research Strategy (National Strategy), Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) and 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap.

The following submission outlines a range of recommendations based on our engagement and consultation with our members across the sector. Research Australia sincerely thanks and acknowledges our members across the health and medical research and innovation ecosystem for their invaluable insights, expertise and contributions, which have helped shape this submission and continue to drive the future of the sector. We would like to give special thanks to:

- Bellberry
- Rare Voices Australia
- Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)
- The Kids Research Institute Australia
- The University of Adelaide

Summary of key recommendations

Area	Recommendation
Australia's opportunities within Horizon Europe	• Leverage Horizon Europe as a strategic platform to deepen existing international research partnerships while cultivating new networks that align with the national priorities outlined in the forthcoming National Strategy and SERD. • Consider implementing models such as New Zealand's <i>Catalyst: Seeding</i> with an EMCR-focus to ensure emerging researchers can thrive within international networks.

	• Utilise Horizon Europe to progress the current objectives and priorities of the health and medical research and innovation sector.
Implementation considerations to maximise the benefits of Horizon Europe	• Align association to Horizon Europe to key reforms currently underway, especially in relation to national priority setting and funding of the sector, while maintaining an approach which prioritises domestic needs, expertise and niches. • Map research domains where scaling international collaboration will create pathways for transformation (such as rare diseases research) as part of forthcoming national priority setting initiatives. • Utilise Horizon Europe as part of a broader drive to ensure long-term sustainability and smarter investment in Australian health and medical research and innovation. • Clarify the membership fee to Horizon Europe and disclose how it would be funded, ensuring it does not deduct from existing funding streams, as a priority. • Develop accessible resources, such as ‘Horizon Europe Condensed: The Legal and Financial Basics’, to support researchers to successfully access European funds. • Engage with existing member organisations of Horizon Europe to assess the need for ongoing co-funding schemes and/or administrative assistance. • Take learning from measures developed in New Zealand to globally connect researchers with international networks, such as the ‘National Contact Points’ network. • Embed equitable access for research with and for priority populations to EU funding and collaborative networks as a core principle.
Developing multiple approaches to international science collaboration	• Promote strategic collaborations that address shared health priorities to strengthen Australia’s leadership globally and in the Indo-Pacific. • Focus on developing international science and diplomacy through bodies like Austrade. • Craft a strong national narrative that positions Australia as a global destination for health and medical research and innovation and promotes our world-class research and clinical trials ecosystem.

Australia’s opportunities within Horizon Europe

Funding

The European Union is a significant contributor to international R&D expenditure. In 2023, the EU bloc spent €389 billion (\$690 billion) on research and development, with R&D expenditure as

a percentage of GDP standing at 2.26% - an increase from 2.22% in the previous year¹. Encouraging increasing levels of research investment has been a key aim of the EU during preceding decades, with the Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029 putting investment in R&D at the centre of the economy². By contrast, Australian R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP has declined over the past 10 years to 1.69%³, despite key reforms underway such as the National Strategy and SERD connecting ‘future job creation, productivity and prosperity’ with R&D investment⁴. As acknowledged in the Australian Academy of Science’s submission to the Horizon Europe consultation, it is vital that association with Horizon Europe does not compromise Australia’s domestic research investment.

Enabling Australian researchers to access Horizon Europe funds under the same conditions as EU and other associated countries is critical given the extent of unfunded international collaborative research already taking place. According to the European Commission’s CORDIS database, 63 projects under Pillar II have included Australian researchers as partners since 2022⁵, with Australian-based researchers reliant on grants such as the \$4 million NHMRC-Horizon Europe 2025 scheme to supplement absent EU funds.

As an example of an existing engagement with Horizon Europe, Research Australia’s member organisation, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), has a main campus in Victoria (RMIT-AU) and a European hub in Barcelona, Spain (RMIT-EU), which provides a gateway for European research. 5 of the 63 Horizon Europe projects involving Australian researchers have involved research contributions from both RMIT-AU and RMIT-EU as part of international consortia, however only RMIT-EU has accessed EU funding amounting to approximately €1.53 million (\$2.7 million).

Research Australia acknowledges that association to Horizon Europe will incur a membership fee yet to be disclosed, however our nation’s strong international reputation and capacity to undertake high-quality research is already contributing to the success of the Scheme without receipt of financial dividends. We must stop relying on domestic grant schemes to prop up our participation in Horizon Europe and participate on an equal footing. Furthermore, as well as pulling funds, associate status would enable observer status in the Programme Committees which govern Horizon Europe funding calls and programme priorities (including funding determinations for each) – giving Australia a priority-setting role within the bloc which would be otherwise absent.

¹ Eurostat. (2025). ‘R&D expenditure’. See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=551418>

² European Commission. (2024). ‘Europe’s Choice: Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029’. European Union.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025). ‘Research and Experimental Development, Businesses, Australia’ See <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/research-and-experimental-development-businesses-australia/latest-release#gross-expenditure-on-r-d-gerd->

⁴ See <https://www.industry.gov.au/science-technology-and-innovation/strategic-examination-research-and-development>

⁵ European Commission. (2025). ‘CORDIS’. See <https://cordis.europa.eu/search?q=frameworkProgramme%3D%27HORIZON%27%20AND%20programme%2Fcode%3D%27HORIZON.2%27%20AND%20relatedRegion%2Fregion%2FeuCode%3D%3D%27AU%27&p=1&num=10&srt=Relevance:decreasing>

International collaborative networks

As of 2023, there are 2.15 million FTE researchers in the EU bloc alone⁶. Association to Horizon Europe would provide Australian researchers and institutions with direct access to world-leading collaborative networks, fostering deeper engagement with leading European teams and ensuring our national research system remains globally connected. Association to the scheme would be particularly transformative in areas such as rare disease research, where collaboration is essential due to small and dispersed patient populations. Horizon Europe should be leveraged as a strategic platform to deepen existing international research partnerships while cultivating new networks that align with the national priorities outlined in the forthcoming National Strategy and SERD.

The scheme is also a vital opportunity for the health and medical research and innovation workforce – particularly early and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) – to gain experience within world-leading international collaborative networks. Exposure to large-scale, multidisciplinary projects under Horizon Europe would accelerate skills development, enhance research excellence, and expand pathways for career progression, ensuring Australia's emerging research talent remains globally competitive. Following association to Horizon Europe in 2023, New Zealand has developed specific programs such as *Catalyst: Seeding*, which provides funding via travel grants and support for research expenses to facilitate new small and medium pre-research strategic partnerships that cannot be supported through other means, with the view of developing full collaborations through *Catalyst: Strategic* over time. The scheme supports researchers to establish and build networks with international colleagues, providing a pathway to forming multinational research consortia ready to undertake grant applications. Australia should consider similar models upon association with an EMCR-focus to ensure emerging researchers can thrive within international networks.

Accessing pooled knowledge and data to enable breakthroughs and productivity

Association to Horizon Europe would unlock access to vast pools of shared data, expertise, and infrastructure through multinational research consortia, ultimately accelerating health and medical research discoveries and unlocking productivity gains through better health and the creation of new industries. Horizon Europe's *Cluster 1: Health* within Pillar II broadly aims to advance disease prevention and treatment, develop health technologies and strengthen health systems⁷. Taking preventable disease as an example, the 2024 Australian Burden of Disease Study showed that over one-third of Australia's total disease burden is preventable by modifying key risk factors linked to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)⁸. With \$24 billion in healthcare expenditure attributable to modifiable risk factors and further significant productivity loss related to illness-related absenteeism, presenteeism, and early workforce exit⁹ - it is an economic imperative that Australia is at the forefront of world-leading research which ultimately

⁶ Eurostat. (2024). 'R&D personnel'. See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=485469>

⁷ See https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/cluster-1-health_en

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). 'Australian burden of disease study 2024'. Australian institute of health and welfare. Australian Government.

⁹ Jaithri Ananthapavan, Veronica Le Nevez, Suzanne Robinson, Todd Harper, Vicki Brown. (2025). 'Prevention pays: Investing in Australia's health and economic future'. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.

reduces the burden of disease. This is just one of many examples illustrating the transformative impact of a strong and well-connected health and medical research and innovation sector. By engaging in Horizon Europe’s collective knowledge network, Australia will tap into and lead discoveries and innovation which will be transformative to the health and productivity of our nation.

Alignment with existing priorities and strategies across the ecosystem

Joining Horizon Europe also presents an opportunity to advance the current priorities and objectives of the health and medical research and innovation sector. As the largest funding bodies for health and medical research, the [MRFF’s 2024-2026 Priorities](#) and [NHMRC’s Corporate Plan 2025-26](#) both have a focus on improving international collaboration. Furthermore, the NHMRC’s [International Engagement Strategy 2023-2026](#) outlines 4 priorities for international engagement, with Priority 4 aiming to ensure ‘Australian researchers have access to and benefit from international expertise, resources and best practice in the conduct of research’. Most recently, the 2025 draft National Health and Medical Research Strategy sets out an ambition to support bilateral and multilateral relationships and agreements within the *Global partnerships* sub-section of Focus area 5: *Position to be ready for future needs and challenges*.

This alignment extends to individual organisations within the ecosystem, for example, the initiative aligns closely with the “Research Reimagined” vision at institutions like the Kids Research Institute Australia, which emphasises global engagement, innovation, and impact. Research Australia is of the clear view that the foundational nature of the Horizon Europe scheme aligns with the current objectives and priorities of the health and medical research and innovation sector and therefore represents a natural next step in pursuing these aims.

Geopolitical partnerships

Ongoing geopolitical instability and changes to global research funding emerging from the change in US administration presents a timely opportunity for Australia to foster closer ties with reliable international partners that share a strong commitment to stable and sustained investment in research and development. Australia already has a well-established reputation for supporting global health and medical research and international collaborations. Between 2017 and 2023, NHMRC invested approximately \$1.2 billion to support global health research¹⁰. Furthermore, Australia’s participation in programs such as the Tripartite Agreement on International Indigenous Health Research and European Rare Diseases Research Alliance (ERDERA), as well as supporting grant programs such as Australia-UK Platform Studies in Areas of Unmet Clinical Need and MRFF International Clinical Trial Collaborations demonstrates capacity to form international networks around mutual priorities, underpinned by existing diplomatic ties. In addition, there are areas of broad alignment between Australian and EU research standards, including the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2025 – thereby providing a strong foundation for further collaboration. Research Australia is of the view that association to Horizon Europe would provide a trusted framework for long-term

¹⁰ See <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/news-centre/ceo-statement-global-health-research-and-international-collaboration>

collaboration, ensuring that Australian researchers can engage in projects with consistent funding, clear governance and shared priorities.

Recommendations

- Leverage Horizon Europe as a strategic platform to deepen existing international research partnerships while cultivating new networks that align with the national priorities outlined in the forthcoming National Strategy and SERD.
- Consider implementing models such as New Zealand’s *Catalyst: Seeding* with an EMCR-focus to ensure emerging researchers can thrive within international networks.
- Utilise Horizon Europe to progress elements of government’s current objectives and priorities for the health and medical research and innovation sector.

Implementation considerations to maximise the benefits of Horizon Europe

Research Australia is of the clear view that association to Horizon Europe provides a unique opportunity to strengthen the health and medical research and innovation sector in Australia. However, we implore the Department of Industry, Science and Resources to prioritise the following considerations to ensure the benefits of association are dispersed across the sector:

Alignment with current reforms

The strategic direction of the Australian health and medical research and innovation sector will be significantly shaped by key reforms currently underway such as, but not limited to, the National Strategy, SERD and 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap. It is imperative that association to Horizon Europe is aligned to these reforms, especially in relation to national priority setting and funding of the sector, while maintaining an approach which prioritises domestic needs, expertise and niches. Research Australia suggests the mapping of research domains where scaling international collaboration will create pathways for transformation (such as rare diseases research) as part of forthcoming national priority setting initiatives.

Scaling – not substituting – smarter investment

Association to Horizon Europe must not substitute ongoing efforts to ensure long-term sustainability and smarter investment across the sector to strengthen Australian health and medical research and innovation. This extends to the membership fee for Horizon Europe. Government must clarify as a priority, the membership fee to the Scheme and disclose how it would be funded, ensuring it does not deduct from existing funding streams.

Connecting the research workforce to opportunities within Horizon Europe

Research Australia notes the strong competition for grant funding within Pillar II of Horizon Europe, with average grant success rates of 21%¹¹. To ensure Australia receives a positive return on investment in the scheme, consideration should be given as to how best to support researchers to successfully access European funds. Accessible resources should be developed and widely distributed, drawing example from guidelines such as ‘Horizon Europe Condensed:

¹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024). ‘New Zealand’s Association to Horizon Europe: Twelve Months On’. Government of New Zealand.

The Legal and Financial Basics’, developed by UK Research and Innovation¹². In addition, through engagement with existing member organisations of Horizon Europe, government should assess the need for ongoing co-funding schemes and/or administrative assistance to enable effective participation and remuneration for Australian researchers.

Furthermore, success in the scheme will rely on effective engagement with research networks, associations and consortia to undertake joint applications which, given the geographical distance between Australia and the majority of Horizon Europe’s members, presents a potential barrier for Australian researchers. New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has established a network of ‘National Contact Points’ to provide detailed information to research organisations, businesses and institutions on putting together bids¹³. As Australia’s prospective closest geographical partner in the scheme, Australia should take learning from measures developed in New Zealand to connect researchers with international networks.

Ensuring equitable access for research with and for priority populations

To realise the full potential of association to Horizon Europe across the ecosystem, it is essential that equitable access for research with and for priority populations to EU funding and collaborative networks is embedded as a core principle. Participation mechanisms for researchers must be developed to actively support inclusion of underrepresented and priority populations – including First Nations, people with disability, gender and gender diverse people and regional, rural, remote and very remote (RRRvR) communities. Association to Horizon Europe must not amplify existing disparities across priority populations. Government must prioritise robust data collection of priority population participation in domestic and international funding schemes and utilise these datasets to develop targeted participation mechanisms to ensure equitable access across the ecosystem.

Recommendations

- Align association to Horizon Europe to key reforms currently underway, especially in relation to national priority setting and funding of the sector.
- Map research domains where scaling international collaboration will create pathways for transformation (such as rare diseases research) as part of forthcoming national priority setting initiatives.
- Utilise Horizon Europe as part of a broader drive to ensure long-term sustainability and smarter investment in Australian health and medical research and innovation.
- Clarify the membership fee to Horizon Europe and disclose how it would be funded, ensuring it does not deduct from existing funding streams.
- Develop accessible resources, such as ‘Horizon Europe Condensed: The Legal and Financial Basics’, to support researchers to successfully access European funds.
- Engage with existing member organisations of Horizon Europe to assess the need for ongoing co-funding schemes and/or administrative assistance.

¹² See https://www.ukro.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/factsheet_heu_legal_fin_basics_2025.pdf

¹³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024). ‘New Zealand’s Association to Horizon Europe: Twelve Months On’. Government of New Zealand.

- Take learning from measures developed in New Zealand to globally connect researchers with international networks, such as the ‘National Contact Points’ network.
- Embed equitable access for research with and for priority populations to EU funding and collaborative networks as a core principle.

Developing multiple approaches to international science collaboration

Research Australia is of the clear view that Australia should utilise this critical opportunity to join Horizon Europe as an associate member. This, however, must not be our only approach to international science collaboration. The following recommendations should be progressed in tandem with joining Horizon Europe, not seen as an either or, to strengthen and future-proof Australia’s globalised health and medical research and innovation sector.

Research Australia endorses the promotion of strategic collaborations that address shared health priorities to strengthen Australia’s leadership globally and in the Indo-Pacific, as outlined in the draft National Health and Medical Research Strategy¹⁴. To initiate this, Australia needs to focus on developing international science and diplomacy. Drawing on the example of New Zealand following their association to the EU scheme, the Science System Advisory Group Report stated “the entry into Horizon Europe is welcome but cannot address issues within the future technology space”¹⁵ and goes on to highlight how international science diplomacy offers areas of great opportunity for the country. Within the Australian context, this should be harnessed through bodies like Austrade to progress Australia’s health and medical research and innovation interests globally. This must be underpinned by crafting a strong national narrative that positions Australia as a global destination for health and medical research and innovation and promotes our world-class research and clinical trials ecosystem.

Recommendations

- Promote strategic collaborations that address shared health priorities to strengthen Australia’s leadership globally and in the Indo-Pacific.
- Focus on developing international science and diplomacy through bodies like Austrade.
- Craft a strong national narrative that positions Australia as a global destination for health and medical research and innovation and promotes our world-class research and clinical trials ecosystem.

Conclusion

Research Australia strongly supports Australia’s formal association to Horizon Europe, recognising it as a strategic investment in the nation’s health and medical research and innovation-driven future. Association will deepen international collaboration, accelerate discovery, and ensure that Australian researchers are active contributors to addressing shared global challenges. We look forward to working with government as exploratory talks progress to ensure we maximise the benefits of the scheme through the recommendations outlined in this policy submission. By working in partnership, we can collectively help secure a more dynamic,

¹⁴ Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. (2025). ‘Draft National Health and Medical Research Strategy’. Australian Government.

¹⁵ Science System Advisory Group. (2024). ‘Science System Advisory Group Report: An architecture for the future.’

resilient, and globally connected research landscape that delivers lasting benefits to the health and wealth of all Australians.

About Research Australia

Setup by government following a landmark review in 2000, Research Australia is the national peak body for the health and medical research and innovation sector. Our membership is drawn from the whole pipeline of health and medical research and innovation, from universities and medical research institutes to charities and patient groups, and health care providers and companies commercialising new health technologies.

Our priorities include a whole of systems approach to health and medical research and innovation, smarter investment, workforce and advancing prevention. Underpinning these priorities are equitable health outcomes; collaboration; AI and digital health, data and data linkage.

For further information regarding this submission please contact Dr Talia Avrahamzon, Head of Policy, Projects and Advocacy at talia.avrahamzon@researchaustralia.org, or policy@researchaustralia.org

Warm regards,



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