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UK could lose access to EU innovation funding

Document suggests UK could be barred from two FP9 pillars

UK PARTICIPATION in the EU's next R&D Framework programme could be limited to just one or two of the programme's three main funding pillars, a document that appears to be a draft European Commission text suggests.

Countries that are not members of the EU or the European Free Trade Association, candidates for joining the EU or associated to Horizon 2020 will be able to associate to the next Framework programme if they have strong R&D capacities and open economies, the document, seen by Research Europe, says. But it says these countries "may be associated to the Global Challenges pillar only or to the Global Challenges and Open Science pillars".

The document and others that appear to be draft Commission texts indicate what the pillars of the next programme—known so far as Framework 9 but now being dubbed Horizon Europe—will include. Open Science looks set to include the European Research Council, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and support for research infrastructures. Global Challenges would combine parts of the Horizon 2020 Societal Challenges pillar with parts of its Industrial Leadership pillar.

A third pillar, Open Innovation, would help small companies grow, support innovation systems and provide access to loans. It is this pillar, as well as potentially the Open Science pillar, that the UK would lose access to if the document's proposals were to be adopted.

Mike Galsworthy, who heads the UK-based pro-EU campaign group Scientists for EU, said the arrangements set out in the document were a "bit harsh". But he added that the proposals were roughly what he was expecting based on how the negotiations on the UK's departure from the EU are developing.

"If the UK isn't going to be generous in its investment and opening up to free movement then it will get a partial deal like Switzerland did," he said. Switzerland's associate membership of Horizon 2020 was downgraded in 2014 after a referendum vote to restrict the free movement of people.

Galsworthy said he was not surprised that the UK

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could be excluded from the innovation pillar, as there would be no advantage for the EU "to be ponying up money, and for the vast UK structures to be sucking that up and getting ahead".

Sarah Main, executive director of the British science advocacy organisation Campaign for Science and Engineering, said the document was a blow to the hopes of UK-based researchers. But she said she wasn't giving up on full participation in Framework 9 yet.

"If the UK didn't have access to all three pillars, that would be a disappointment for the research community," she said. "But I don't think this document necessarily says that and I do think the [UK] government is aiming for much fuller access to Framework 9 than that."

The Commission, whose proposal on the next Framework programme is expected to be published at the end of May or start of June, declined to comment on the document.

UK prime minister Theresa May said in a major speech on Brexit, in March, that her government was "committed to establishing a far-reaching science and innovation pact with the EU" that "would enable the UK to participate in key programmes alongside our EU partners".

EU research commissioner Carlos Moedas has said several times that "something different" to a standard association agreement would be needed for the UK because of its large size.

Asked whether being kept out of the innovation pillar would be harmful for British companies and research organisations, Main said she thought the significance of EU innovation funding had been "underplayed" in the debates about the importance of the Framework programme for the UK.

"Small and medium-sized enterprises do clearly value it," she said. "Although their voices might be a bit smaller, I think they would be disappointed."

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