

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0NE

24 February 2023

Dear Ms Donelan,

Surrender of funds allocated for association to Horizon Europe

I am writing to you as the President of the Royal Astronomical Society, which represents around 4,000 astronomers and geophysicists in the UK and in 60 other countries around the world.

The recent decision to create a dedicated Department for Science, Innovation and Technology with you at its head was welcome, and we saw this as part of a genuine commitment by the UK government to pursue its ambitions to become a 'science superpower'.

We are therefore very concerned at the decision to return £1.6 billion of funding to the Treasury, which had been previously allocated to support UK association to Horizon Europe or to support a domestic alternative.

As you know, astronomy and geophysics research is a UK success story, and output here ranks between second and fourth in the world in international citation indices¹. That strength is reflected in the remarkable ability of our members based here to win grants from successive EU Framework Programmes, supported by researchers across the continent who were keen to join in UK-led collaborations.

The Science and Technology Facilities Council estimated that at least 30% of resource funding for astronomy came from EU sources (we estimate that in 2019 UK astronomy and geophysics obtained €18 million from the European Research Council alone) and there was previously a healthy flow of talented people from other European countries into the UK, with research groups here seen as attractive settings for world-class science².

¹ See e.g. <https://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?category=3103&year=2021> and <https://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?area=1900&year=2021&category=1912>

² "Our Scientific Community in 2016", Massey R., A&G, December 2017.
<https://ras.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/AandGDemSurvey2017.pdf>

As a result the Society has been consistent, and patient, in our support for association to Horizon Europe and its concomitant benefits for UK astronomy and geophysics.

The apparent removal of the funding for association sends exactly the wrong signal to the scientific community, represents a significant cut in the UK R&D budget, and puts our reputation as a science powerhouse at grave risk.

On behalf of the RAS, can I ask for assurances on what it means for our future relationship with the EU Horizon programme, and for government support for science more generally?

As you would expect, for full transparency, I will be sharing this correspondence with our Fellows and other stakeholders via our website.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. G. Edmonds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Professor Mike Edmonds
President, Royal Astronomical Society