

Submission to the
Department of
Industry, Science
and Resources

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Horizon Europe implementation: discussion paper

Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the invitation to provide a submission to the Department of Industry, Science and Resources' consultation to ensure implementation arrangements for Australia's association with Horizon Europe are fit for purpose and maximise opportunities for Australian applicants.

Association to Pillar II creates a significant opportunity to deepen research and innovation partnerships with Europe and other likeminded democracies, contribute to shared global challenges and strengthen the impact of Australia's research, innovation, and policy positioning across sectors.

Our feedback focuses on how the implementation arrangements can support broad participation across the research community in Australia, make effective use of existing sector expertise, and build Australia's capability for longer-term engagement with Horizon Europe and the 10th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10).

Effective implementation will require a nationally coordinated and adequately resourced support system that is operational as early as possible.

The proposed Tier 2 National Contact Point (NCP) network should combine cluster-specific expertise with specialist cross-cutting advice, connect closely with established institutional and sector capability, and provide consistent and equitable support to universities, research organisations, industry, SMEs and entities in regional and remote Australia.

Key recommendations include:

- Establish, as soon as practicable, six Tier 2 NCP functions aligned with Horizon Europe Pillar II clusters, complemented by four cross-cutting specialist functions with dedicated expertise in: First Nations engagement; industry and SMEs engagement; legal, financial and post-award management; and research security; and:
 - Provide Tier 2 NCPs with sufficient time, funding and administrative support, under a nationally consistent hybrid hosting model, with clear conflict of interest (COI) arrangements.
 - Ensure the Tier 2 NCPs provide timely, accessible proposal-development support, particularly for Australian-led bids.
- Establish a clear network of Tier 3 support to enable rapid dissemination of information and build capability across outreach and knowledge-sharing.
- Ensure that national priorities, which already align with Pillar II Clusters, broaden, rather than limit, participation across Horizon Europe calls.
- Establish baseline success measure early and conduct ongoing assessments to ensure that implementation arrangements support immediate participation as well as Australia's preparedness for FP10.
- Embed Indigenous leadership in Horizon Europe implementation arrangements from the outset, shaping priorities, partnerships and investment decisions as the network is designed, not consulted after key structures are already settled. This would include:
 - a dedicated NCP (Indigenous) function modelled on New Zealand's NCP (Māori)
 - this NCP having an additional defined role at Tier 1 so Indigenous perspectives inform national coordination and EU-facing engagement, not only cluster-level activity.

The University of Melbourne is committed to fostering strong participation in Horizon Europe across our community of researchers and collaborators, and the broader domestic research and innovation sector.

We are pleased to provide more in-depth responses to requested consultation questions below.

For further information or to discuss this submission Professor Mark Cassidy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) can be contacted on dvc-research@unimelb.edu.au.

National Contact Points

1. What is the best way to structure the NCP network in Australia: by cluster, industry sector, geography, thematic or another approach?

Australia should adopt a nationally coordinated model that is both cluster-based and supported by dedicated expertise in cross-cutting themes. We propose six Tier 2 NCP functions aligned with Horizon Europe Pillar II clusters, complemented by four cross-cutting specialist functions.

A cluster structure provides applicants with a clear point of entry and enables NCPs to develop detailed knowledge of relevant work programs, policy drivers, calls, partnerships and evaluator expectations.

The four cross-cutting specialist functions should cover First Nations research and engagement; industry and SME participation; legal, financial, intellectual property, audit and post-award requirements; and research security.

Ten functions provide a sound starting architecture, but the model should not assume that each function can be delivered by one person. Some clusters span several large domains and may require co-NCPs, deputies or additional staffing. The configuration should be reviewed after the first year. Geographic and sector coverage is better achieved through a strong Tier 3 network than by organising Tier 2 primarily by state or territory.

New Zealand offers a directly relevant precedent for First Nations engagement. An NCP (Māori) is appointed alongside cluster-based NCPs, working across all clusters rather than as one specialist category. Its functions include engaging directly with Māori researchers and stakeholders, connecting them to funding opportunities, supporting partner-finding, bringing a Māori viewpoint into general NCP engagements, and representing that perspective in dealings with the European Commission (EC).

We recommend Australia adopt an equivalent NCP (Indigenous) function for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities. Given the scale of Australia's research sector, this should be resourced to scale beyond a single national role (for example, one Indigenous NCP per Tier 2 cluster group, rather than adopting New Zealand's model directly). This function should also have a defined role within Tier 1, not only Tier 2. Without a Tier 1 role, Indigenous perspectives risk being confined to cluster-level engagement. Advocacy for Indigenous participation must occur at a higher level through direct relationship-building with the EC.

2. Which of the NCP functions will be most important, and what is the best model for delivering?

The high-priority functions are those requiring authoritative, specialist and current knowledge that individual applicant organisations cannot efficiently source on their own. NCP services should complement, rather than duplicate, general awareness and mobility support provided through EURAXESS and institutional research offices.

In addition to specific expertise required by NCPs – either linked to clusters or specialist functions outlined above – we recommend that the following NCP functions should be considered in order of priority:

1. Receiving and disseminating program information, work-program intelligence, updates and training from the EC and Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR).
2. Building active links with other NCP networks to ensure NCP knowledge is consistent internationally, especially with advice provided through other associate member countries that share similar challenges as newer consortia members.

3. Providing clear guidance on research security, foreign interference, export controls, sensitive technologies and relevant due-diligence expectations in the context of Pillar II opportunities.
4. Helping researchers understand cluster topics, expected outcomes and impacts, and assess how their proposal may or may not be applicable to the EU's strategic priorities.
5. Mapping Australia's research strengths, policy interests and sector capabilities, and connecting prospective applicants with relevant research, industry, government and community partners.
6. Acting as conduit with the Tier 3 network to promote opportunities and track national capability.

3. What existing functions undertaken by government or sector organisations could support entities participate in Horizon Europe?

The implementation model should deliberately connect with existing capability rather than recreate it.

Universities and other research organisations already maintain functions to support research and innovation development, international partnerships, major bids, contracts, legal, research finance, research integrity, research security, export control, intellectual property and post-award functions. These teams can identify opportunities, support consortium development, review proposals and contracts, manage due diligence and administer awards.

Peak bodies and established networks can extend national reach and convene communities of practice.

Government agencies, including bodies hosted in Europe and other associate member countries, as well as national facilities, can contribute to policy, industry and infrastructure connections, while EURAXESS can continue to support broad awareness, mobility and networking activities.

National resources should include reusable templates, checklists, model timelines, partner-search guidance, costing tools and training materials.

4. Would it be most effective to locate the Tier 2 NCPs within government, in the research sector, in industry organisations, peak bodies, or a hybrid?

A hybrid model is likely to combine credibility, depth of expertise and sector-wide accessibility.

Cluster-based NCPs should be selected primarily for subject-matter expertise and direct Horizon Europe experience. They may be located in government, universities, publicly funded research organisations, industry bodies or other suitable organisations under formal agreements with DISR to actively manage potential conflicts of interest. Host organisations should be funded for the full cost of delivery.

Cross-cutting specialists, whose advice must be nationally consistent, should be centrally coordinated and preferably located within government.

First Nations engagement should be designed and led with First Nations experts and communities.

5. In addition to the expectations for NCPs outlined above, what expertise should every Tier 2 NCP possess?

All Tier 2 NCPs should have detailed knowledge of Horizon Europe structures, rules, calls and evaluation processes; understanding of the EU policy drivers relevant to their domain; and strong communication, training and stakeholder engagement skills. They should also understand the Australian research and innovation system and be able to work effectively across universities, industry, government, not-for-profit organisations and communities.

All Tier 2 NCPs should hold a baseline understanding of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections and data sovereignty principles, sufficient to recognise issues, and refer to the NCP (Indigenous).

The six Cluster-based NCPs should possess relevant thematic expertise and active or recent connections to research and innovation in their cluster; extensive experience in international collaborative research and consortium development; and direct Horizon Europe experience as an applicant, awardee, coordinator, evaluator or research manager should be strongly preferred.

The four Specialist NCPs should possess demonstrable expertise in their functional domains, including legal, financial, intellectual property, ethics, research security, audit or post-award matters.

All NCPs should receive induction and continuing professional development from DISR and the EC.

6. How should performance of Tier 2 NCPs be measured?

We support the overarching measures proposed in the discussion paper.

Tier 2 performance should also be assessed through a balanced set of service, reach, capability building, outcome, and system learning measures.

Outcome measures (across applications and partnerships) should be interpreted at the cluster level and adjusted for differences in call volume, maturity, competitiveness and the time lag between engagement and outcomes.

We recommend these measures include:

- Service quality: response times and usefulness of advice.
- Reach and equity: number and diversity of entities supported by sector, geography, organisation size and applicant type, including regional and remote entities, SMEs and First Nations researchers.
- Capability building: training delivered, participation, reusable resources produced, Tier 3 capability and evidence of improved applicant readiness.
- Application outcomes: applications submitted, Australian coordinator and partner roles, progression and success rates, evaluator scores where available, and funding secured.
- Partnership outcomes: new European and international connections, long-term collaborations, and sustained partnerships beyond a single call.
- System learning: barriers identified, and issues escalated.

7. How should conflicts of interest be managed where NCPs are hosted by applicant organisations?

Conflicts of interest should be managed through a nationally consistent framework rather than relying on informal arrangements. It should include transparent appointments; public declarations of interests; confidentiality and information-handling protocols; documented triage and recusal procedures; auditable records; and an independent escalation or complaints pathway through Tier 1.

Co-NCP or deputy arrangements across different organisations could provide continuity and enable matters to be redirected when a conflict arises. A secondary-cluster allocation may improve coverage, but it should not replace an explicit conflict-management framework. NCPs should provide enabling and advisory support and should not assess or rank proposals in which their host organisation has an interest.

8. What organisations or industry sectors could most effectively deliver the NCP network and how could they be engaged to do so?

The network should be government-led and nationally coordinated, with Tier 2 appointments drawn competitively from government, universities, publicly funded research organisations, industry organisations, peak bodies and other organisations that meet the expertise and independence requirements.

Engagement should occur through an open EOI process, clear role descriptions and funded service agreements.

9. What are the trade-offs and risks the government should be aware of with the NCP structures and establishment of the network?

We identify the following trade-offs and risks for the government to consider:

- Insufficient resourcing or fractional appointments that do not provide enough protected time to deliver a credible national service.
- Siloing between clusters or between specialist and thematic functions. This should be mitigated through shared systems, regular cross-network meetings, joint training and cross-referral protocols.
- Perceived or actual preferential access where NCPs are hosted by applicant organisations.
- Over-reliance on volunteers, which may create inconsistent coverage, variable advice and inequitable access.
- Duplication or confusion between Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3, EURAXESS and institutional support. A published service map and clear escalation pathways are essential.
- Loss of expertise through short-term appointments. Multi-year funding, deputies, succession planning and a shared knowledge base are needed.
- A narrow focus on application numbers at the expense of proposal quality, consortium leadership, strategic partnerships and long-term capability.
- Delayed implementation. Calls are already opening and developing competitive consortia takes months; interim arrangements and early appointments are therefore necessary.

10. What level of activity could reasonably be delivered through a volunteer-based Tier 3 network?

A volunteer-based Tier 3 network could circulate information, promote events and calls, convene local communities of practice, identify prospective applicants, provide high-level navigation and referral, and feed information back to Tier 2 and Tier 1.

Such a network could include institutional research office contacts, research leaders, experienced applicants and evaluators, industry and regional representatives, peak body networks such as the Go8, and relevant professional communities such as the ARMS International Research Collaboration Special Interest Group.

Indigenous organisations should not be expected to contribute to the voluntary Tier 3 network on the same unpaid basis as well-resourced universities and industry. Their engagement should be funded.

Tier 3 participation should be established through expressions of interest or a national register, supported by induction, concise role descriptions, standard materials and regular briefings.

Expectations of deliverables and time commitment must remain proportionate to a volunteer role, and expectations calibrated.

11. What activities are appropriate for volunteers versus specialist NCPs?

Volunteers should enhance knowledge dissemination within their regions and sectors by sharing information received from the Tier 2 NCP network, which maintains direct engagement with the European Commission.

12. Are there specialty skills/areas of focus that the NCP network could include, such as engaging First Nations communities, regional/rural access issues, administration and financial guidance, audit and compliance or others?

Yes, and we propose these are grouped in four cross-cutting specialist functions as described in our response to Question 1.

First Nations engagement, legal, financial, intellectual property, data, ethics, audit, compliance and post-award guidance should have dedicated specialist capacity so that cluster NCPs can focus on thematic fit, consortium development and proposal strategy.

Specifically on our proposal of how to shape the NCP with dedicated expertise in First Nations engagement (augmenting points made in our responses to questions 1, 4, and 6):

- First Nations research and community engagement requires distinct expertise and should have a dedicated, appropriately resourced function designed and delivered at scale with First Nations leadership.
- The NCP (Indigenous) should engage directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities; connect them to relevant funding calls; support partner-finding in Europe and Australia; bring an Indigenous viewpoint into general NCP engagements; represent an Indigenous perspective in dealings with the EU; and drive greater Indigenous participation in the Horizon Europe programme overall.

Driving alignment with national priorities

13. Can financial incentives drive success and alignment with national priorities? If so, what approach would be most effective?

Yes, financial support can improve participation, proposal quality and strategic alignment, particularly because consortium development is costly and many prospective applicants lack dedicated Horizon Europe capability.

However, we consider Horizon Europe Pillar II calls already highly aligned with Australia's national priorities and recommend against further specialisation or incentivisation of particular destinations or calls. This would ensure that Australia's world-leading research can access as many opportunities as possible for high-quality collaborations with Horizon Europe consortia.

A proposal-development scheme across all Pillar II calls could support credible applications in areas of existing research strengths. Small planning grants could be made available early enough to support partner engagement, travel, workshops, specialist advice and consortium meetings. Eligibility should first be based on fit with the relevant Horizon Europe topic and the competitiveness of the proposed application.

The allocation of financial incentives – whose nature we expand upon in our response to Question 16 – should be quick and align with Horizon Europe call timetables rather than conventional domestic grant cycles. These could be administered by the Tier 2 Cluster-based NCP network.

14. What unintended consequences should government be aware of when thinking about incentivising alignment with national priorities?

There could be many unintended consequences associated with incentivising further alignment with national priorities. These may limit the opportunity for Australian research to tap into available Pillar II consortia. These include:

- Overlooking emerging or enabling research whose strategic value is not yet reflected in current national priorities.
- Narrowing the pipeline and reducing Australia's ability to respond to high-quality European-led opportunities.
- Concentrating support in large, established organisations that already have proposal-development infrastructure.
- Creating incentives to frame proposals superficially around national priorities rather than pursuing genuine strategic fit.
- Adding slow or duplicative assessment processes that cause applicants to miss consortium or call deadlines.
- Discouraging multidisciplinary proposals that span clusters or priorities.

15. What barriers do Australian SMEs and industry face in participating in Horizon Europe and how can they be overcome?

Australian SMEs and industry may face several barriers to participating in Horizon Europe, including:

- Limited experience in proposal development and grant submissions while navigating complex eligibility, costing, contractual, intellectual property, reporting and audit requirements.
- Limited awareness of the program.
- Difficulty identifying suitable calls and trusted consortium partners.
- Limited awareness and ability to consider relevant research security and data protection requirements.
- Long lead times.
- Limited capacity to absorb proposal-development costs and the risk of an unsuccessful application.

SMEs and industry may initially find it more accessible to join consortia led by organisations with established Horizon Europe experience, including universities and research organisations. This would provide access to existing support and expertise while enabling businesses to build their own knowledge, networks and experience.

The NCP network could support this through mentoring and practical guidance on roles and obligations. Over time, SMEs and industry should also be supported to lead consortia where this aligns with the call and they have the necessary capability and partnerships.

16. At what stage in the application process would support be most helpful?

Support through expert advice via the NCP Tier 2 network would be most valuable early in the application process, when applicants are assessing fit, shaping the concept, identifying partners and negotiating their role in a consortium. Assistance should continue through proposal development, costing, due diligence, contracting and award establishment, but early intervention has the greatest potential to avoid wasted effort and improve competitiveness.

Financial incentives such as those explored in our response to Question 13 should be available at different stages of proposal development. Small, rapid and low-burden grants should be available early to help credible applicants assess opportunities, identify partners and form consortia. Enhanced support could then be provided to proposals that demonstrate readiness and strategic fit. This funding could support pre-submission meetings, workshops, travel and specialist proposal-development advice. Funding decisions should be made quickly and align with Horizon Europe call timetables rather than conventional domestic grant cycles.

Other implementation considerations

17. How could we support participation from entities in regional and remote areas?

Regional and remote participation should be integrated into the network's design from the outset. A strong Tier 3 presence in regional Australia should be complemented by explicit Tier 2 service expectations, virtual access, accessible training times, targeted outreach, travel budgets and practical support for partner development. A proportion of proposal-development funding could be reserved or weighted for regional and remote entities.

The model should also support participation in national consortia and shared institutional services, recognising that smaller organisations may need access to legal, financial, contracting and post-award expertise that cannot be maintained locally.

18. Where are the gaps in the current implementation approach and how could they be addressed?

The most immediate gap is timing. Australia's implementation arrangements must be fast-tracked to provide applicants with the support needed to prepare competitively for the 2027 calls. Many calls are already open or will open shortly, and developing credible international consortia and high-quality proposals can take several months. The NCP network therefore needs to be established and operational as a matter of urgency. Where permanent appointments cannot be completed immediately, DISR should introduce interim NCP arrangements, appoint experienced temporary contacts and release essential guidance without delay. A staged implementation approach should not postpone the practical support that applicants need now.

19. In addition to the measures of success already identified, what additional measures should be used (see page 6)?

We recommend that the proposed measures of success should be complemented by indicators capturing Australia's participation in other Horizon Europe schemes (such as Pillar I) and European research funding opportunities, as a measure of flow-on indirect benefit of association; the breadth, diversity and equity of participation across Pillar II; the development of enduring international research partnerships; and wider research, economic, policy, social, cultural and environmental benefits.

For First Nations participation, we recommend tracking Indigenous participant leadership and roles, not participation headcount alone.

Measures of Australian participation in Pillar II should capture the role of Australian participants, such as consortium coordinator, work-package or task leader, contributor or partner, while also assessing growth in Australia's institutional capability, international influence and access to research infrastructure, networks and markets.

We recognise that many of these outcomes will take several years to mature and urge the government to consider how measures for these outcomes may be baselined in the early years of Australia's association.

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