

scientific infrastructures, get involved. Researchers in such countries have an important part to play by collaborating with researchers in Africa.

Such partnerships would benefit scientists not just in Africa, but throughout the world. African researchers include leaders in their fields; scientists on the continent can also bring fresh perspectives, informed by their knowledge and experiences, to research projects. International collaboration needs to be more common. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, such exchanges can happen seamlessly on virtual platforms. Africa's female scientists are on the rise – and partnering with them could give sky-high returns.

Keep science out of Europe's post-Brexit arguments

Scientific collaboration has become a casualty of Switzerland's and the United Kingdom's tussles with the European Union.

A year ago, researchers from across Europe breathed sighs of relief when the United Kingdom and the European Union agreed the terms of their relationship after Brexit.

Although a majority of UK researchers did not support their country's exit from the EU, there was relief that they would still be permitted to participate in the EU's €95.5-billion (US\$107-billion) collaborative research programme, Horizon Europe, through a category of membership called association.

The UK government would pay the EU a total of around £15 billion (US\$20.4 billion) over 7 years. In exchange, UK researchers would be able to apply for prestigious grants from the European Research Council (ERC), and participate in Horizon Europe collaborations, including taking leadership roles. The United Kingdom would no longer have the right to contribute to governance decisions, but UK representatives could sit on committees as observers.

That was then. A year later, it all seems very different. Some 46 researchers in the United Kingdom who have been selected for ERC grants are being prevented from accessing their funding because of an ongoing Brexit-linked dispute over trade and borders with Northern Ireland. Furthermore, Switzerland – which is not an EU member but has associated to EU science programmes in the past – has not had its association renewed. This is because of unresolved negotiations over the country's wider relations with the EU.

The EU says that these outstanding disagreements need to be fixed before UK and Swiss participation can resume. For now, a swift resolution is not looking likely.

This is a concern for researchers on all sides, not least

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because EU schemes are time-limited. Horizon Europe, which began last year, is due to end in 2027. Unless the wider disagreements can be resolved quickly, grant winners will remain in limbo. Already, there are reports that some UK grant recipients might choose to relocate to an EU country to take up their funding, instead of risking losing it. Looking further ahead, there might be fewer opportunities for EU researchers to collaborate with UK and Swiss colleagues.

These delays are worrying in another sense: it seems to be a farewell to the principle that nations should not let political or policy disagreements prevent their scientists working together. Linking science funding to the outcomes of international disputes makes little sense when the funding schemes have nothing to do with the disagreements, and when the countries have paid, or agreed to pay, into a joint fund.

Researchers are being used as “a bargaining chip on both sides” of the English Channel, explained Kurt Deketelaere, head of the secretariat of the League of European Research Universities in Leuven, Belgium, to a UK parliamentary committee during hearings earlier this month. And the damage to science could be considerable.

Frustrated researchers from across the continent have launched the Stick to Science campaign, with the subtitle: ‘Put science collaboration before politics’. So far, it has gathered around 4,000 signatures. “Every month's delay weakens European science,” says Jan Palmowski, secretary-general of the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities in Brussels.

UK science minister George Freeman is trying to reassure researchers that extra funds will be available for international collaborations if association to Horizon Europe doesn't work out. But collaborative projects are about much more than money. Materials physicist Robin Grimes, a former science adviser to the UK foreign-affairs department, told this month's parliamentary committee that Europe's researchers have been able to make advances in their fields because of long-standing relationships, which often transcend a single funding cycle.

It is true that, for decades, research has been one of the ways in which Europe's people have been able to work together. Relations between previous UK governments and the EU hit rocky periods long before Brexit, but governments on all sides agreed that, regardless of the state of wider relations, science links needed to remain an important priority. Joint European funding schemes (previously known as the Framework programmes) have been part of the EU and its predecessor bodies since at least the 1980s.

More than a year ago, *Nature* warned about a creeping anti-research narrative across all of Europe (see *Nature* 588, 370; 2020); now, divisions between nations are spilling over into science. EU officials, together with their counterparts from Switzerland and the United Kingdom, should reflect on the implications of what they are doing. Both Switzerland and the United Kingdom should be allowed to associate to EU funding schemes, regardless of ongoing political disagreements. Dragging research and scholarship into international disputes helps no one.