

Submission to request for information: Possible association to Horizon Europe ATN Universities

2 November 2025

Key takeaways:

1. Association with Horizon Europe presents an opportunity to broaden collaboration but only if the design, equity, and funding priorities are carefully managed.
2. Association must support national research and industry objectives rather than reinforce global concentration patterns already evident in large-scale international programs.
3. Our governance, funding, and reciprocity settings must ensure that association is both equitable and strategically aligned.

As Australia's most industry-engaged university grouping, the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Industry, Science and Resources' consultation on Australia's possible association with Horizon Europe.

ATN members, Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia and University of Technology Sydney, specialise in workforce development, applied research, and global education partnerships. We support ongoing dialogue with the European Union about association where participation is strategic, equitable and fiscally disciplined, delivering demonstrable benefits to Australia's research and innovation ecosystem and community.

Association with Horizon Europe presents an opportunity to broaden collaboration but only if the design, equity, and funding priorities are carefully managed

EU contributions to Horizon Europe projects from 2021 to date that Australian researchers participated in totalled EUR €0.68 billion (AUD \$1.20 billion), with EUR €11.75 million going to Australian universities¹. Association would allow Australian institutions to access Horizon Europe Pillar II projects and lead consortia. However, experience from other countries suggests this comes with fiscal and administrative trade-offs.

New Zealand's association (Pillar II) uses an operational contribution and participation fee, with a domestic overheads top-up; in its first 12 months NZ recorded 7/23 successful bids (~30%) and ~€3.3m budgeted for NZ partners, while noting success likely trends toward the ~21% Pillar II average over time. The European Court of Auditors found Horizon 2020 simplification reduced burden overall, but beneficiaries still reported complex guidance/tools and the need for stability of rules. These are useful signals for how Australia might resource support (e.g. NCPs) if it associates.

¹ https://dashboard.tech.ec.europa.eu/qs_digitt_dashboard_mt/public/sense/app/1213b8cd-3e8e-4730-b0f5-fa4e326df2e2/sheet/e1b57f9a-669b-4962-bdb9-0151c523120f/state/analysis

Any Australian contribution must be performance-linked and capped, maintaining fiscal discipline and value-for-money. It is critical that any investment in Horizon Europe be additional, not drawn from or replacing existing Commonwealth research or innovation programs e.g. the National Reconstruction Fund (NRF) initiatives, Universities Accord priorities or the Strategic Examination of R&D outcomes. Diverting funds from these domestic priorities would undermine the purpose of association. We could consider establishing a domestic co-funding or a strategic steering mechanism to direct participation toward projects that advance national priorities such as critical minerals, renewable energy, AI, health innovation, and advanced manufacturing.

Association must support national research and industry objectives rather than reinforce global concentration patterns already evident in large-scale international programs

Peer-reviewed analyses find that participation in EU Framework Programmes exhibits high institutional concentration, with Horizon 2020 showing the greatest concentration among recent cycles, and a persistent core of strongly connected organizations alongside a larger periphery. Empirical studies of competitive grant systems show cumulative advantage e.g. early awardees are more likely to secure later funding, which can reinforce concentration dynamics unless counterbalanced.

This is reflected in Australia's participation in Horizon Europe from 2021 onwards (**Figure 1**). ATN Universities members have attracted around 5 per cent of total EU funding to Australia, whereas Go8 institutions have received roughly 82 per cent of the EU funding awarded.

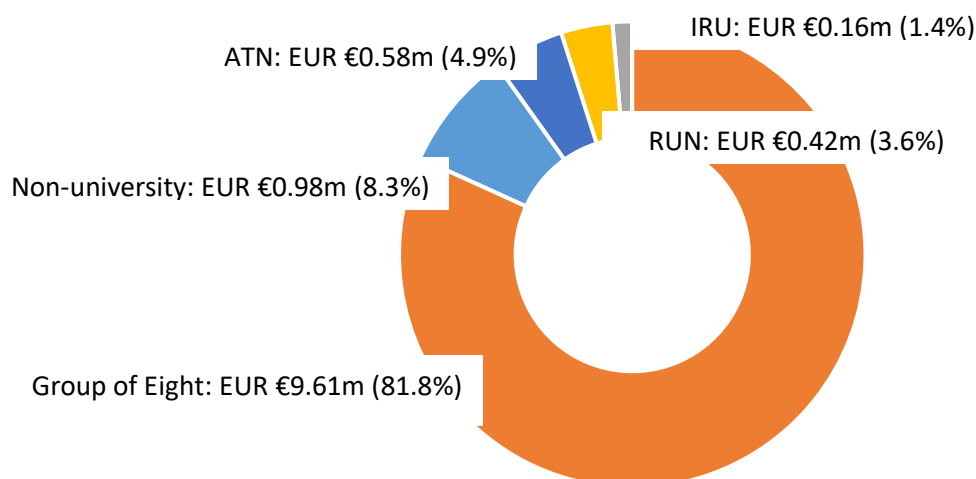


Figure 1: Horizon Europe EU contributions going to Australian universities, by group, 2021- 2025. Source: CORDIS - EU research projects under Horizon Europe (2021-2027)

This is despite comparable rates of international collaboration between the two groups (**Figure 2**).

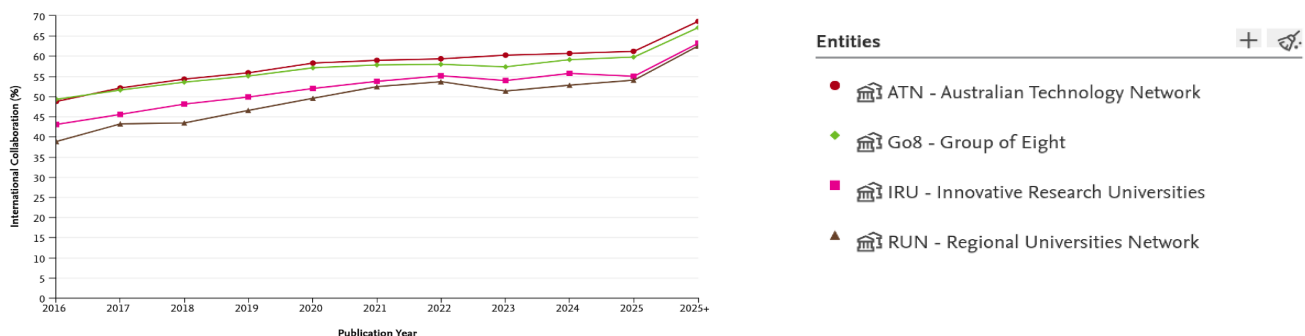


Figure 2: Percentage of international collaborations, by group, 2016 - 2025. Source: SciVal (2016-2025)

Without safeguards, there is a risk that association may disproportionately benefit a small, select group of universities, potentially crowding out mid-sized and emerging research institutions. Equity mechanisms should be built in to ensure participation across a broader range of institutions, regions, and disciplines. A domestic allocation or co-funding mechanism could prevent concentration of benefits while incentivising collaboration. Our members highlight the importance of periodic review and clear performance indicators, ensuring transparent reporting of participation and outcomes.

Our governance, funding, and reciprocity settings must ensure that association is both equitable and strategically aligned.

Association offers potential to strengthen two-way mobility, joint doctorates, and industry-linked consortia. Its value depends on reciprocity and complementarity with Australia's innovation system. Reciprocity should be structured to avoid open-ended commitments while enabling European partners to engage with Australian programs. Where could association create dual benefit e.g. shared regulatory or standards work, cotutelle programs, SME innovation networks? How might success be measured beyond financial return e.g. skills development, innovation translation, policy alignment?

Canada is associated to Pillar II, enabling Canadian entities to lead and be funded directly, with a joint committee monitoring implementation. Australia could adopt a similar joint oversight mechanism and define reciprocity as structured collaboration opportunities e.g. EU partners participating in Trailblazer/NRF-aligned initiatives via domestic settings.

ATN Universities encourages the Government to explore association to Horizon Europe as an opportunity for deeper collaboration, provided the model ensures additionality, equity, and alignment with national priorities. We stand ready to collaborate on the design of the association's governance and funding settings that safeguard sector equity, and on frameworks to measure benefit across research, education, and innovation outcomes.

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