

Swiss scientists to regain full access to EU research programmes

Political compromise settles immigration row that could have severed Swiss–EU research agreements.

Alison Abbott

21 December 2016

A row over immigration that threatened to exclude Swiss-based scientists from European Union research programmes has been resolved, although some politicians are pressing to reopen the debate next year.

From 2017, Switzerland's scientists will once again enjoy full access to the EU's €80-billion (US\$83-billion) Horizon 2020 research programme, the European Commission [announced on 20 December](#). Four days earlier, Switzerland's parliament had decided to water down controversial immigration controls that would have had the knock-on effect of severing Swiss–EU research agreements.

"It's not just about the money, it's about being part of the European scientific community," says Matthias Egger, an epidemiologist at the University of Berne who will become president of the Swiss National Science Foundation's research council in January. "Research is not something you do in isolation, and you need to compete with the best."

Switzerland is not an EU member, but it has signed bilateral agreements with the bloc on key policy areas, including research. The country has been participating in EU research programmes since 1988, and in 2004, it became a full associate partner. That allowed Swiss-based scientists to lead EU-funded research consortia, and Swiss institutes to host scientists on prestigious European Research Council (ERC) grants. Switzerland pays into the EU research programme's budget for the privilege.

But in February 2014, the Swiss public voted to limit immigration in a legally binding referendum. As a result, Switzerland's government could not sign an agreement with the European Commission to allow free movement of people from Croatia, at the time a new EU member state. And because the free movement of EU citizens is a non-negotiable tenet of membership of EU programmes, [Switzerland's relationship with Horizon 2020 was thrown into confusion](#).

Seeking compromise

By September 2014, negotiators had cobbled together an interim agreement for a 'partial' association, allowing continued participation in some parts of Horizon 2020, including competitive programmes in basic research such as the ERC and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie international postdoctoral programmes. But the agreement was scheduled to run out at the beginning of February 2017, when the outcome of the referendum vote had to be written into Switzerland's constitution.

During this period, says Egger, "we didn't get so many letters asking us to collaborate on EU research proposals, and saw that foreign scientists were starting to see Switzerland as a less attractive place to work".

This December, with time running out, the Swiss parliament found a compromise. It will not put limits on immigration, but employers in professions or regions where unemployment is above the national average must in future interview Swiss job seekers for any vacancy — although they will not be obliged to select them. The commission says this law is compatible with its principle of free movement, and it agreed that Switzerland could resume its status as associate member on 1 January.

The debate isn't over. Some Swiss populist parties say that their parliament's compromise is a betrayal of the 2014 referendum vote — and may push for a second referendum on the migration issue, Swiss media report. That could plunge science into uncertainty again.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.21225