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## Asian universities may struggle to be successful in Horizon Europe

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# Civic universities should offer places to all locals who make the grade

Ease of entry improves access, and most universities could assure entry without requiring personal statements, says Tim Leunig

Civic universities do many things for their local communities. But they could do a lot more.

My challenge to them is to identify the facilities they have that their community needs and throw them open. Those could be libraries and wi-fi. They could be classrooms for the local University of the Third Age to use in evenings or vacations. Vacations are the time to offer sports, arts and drama facilities, or halls of residence for those in need.

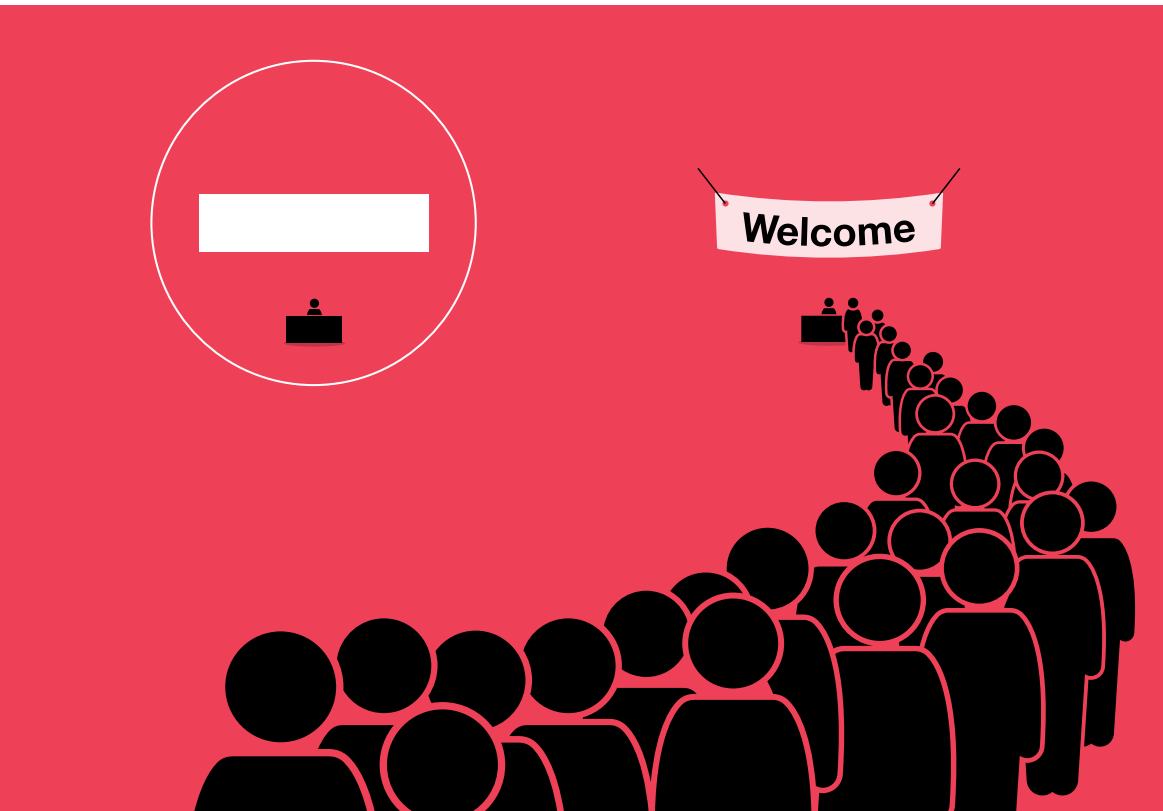
No door should be left closed without the strongest possible reason. And wherever possible, access should be free – most of these facilities cost nothing at the margin. Where possible, sponsorship from local employers and charities can be sought. When you do the right thing, money can often be found.

But universities can and should go further still, taking open access right to the heart of their core purpose: education. And I don't mean

lectures for local interest, important though these are. I mean access to degree courses.

Most newer universities have a strong local presence. Almost half the students at Sheffield Hallam University, for instance, live in greater Sheffield. Most commute from home. That is not for everyone but it is an important option for many, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. But all civic universities, new and old, should make a blanket offer of a place to any local child who gets the relevant grades for the relevant course, without the need to write a personal statement and the other stuff that is currently required.

Of course, we have to be a little careful here. This proposal could not cover medicine, because the government limits the number of places. Similarly, if Oxford said that anyone who lived in the city and got AAA was guaranteed a place, a lot of well-off people with academically able children would surely



move to Oxford, making access largely determined by parental wealth.

That said, neither Oxford nor Cambridge has ever claimed to be a civic university, so let's put them to one side. We also need to be careful in London – no university could offer unconditional places to the city's 40,000 annual school-leavers – but London universities could cooperate to ensure good local access.

This idea would work well elsewhere. Liverpool, for example, has about 2,500 sixth-formers a year, while Sheffield has 2,000. The universities take roughly 6,000 and 5,000 UK undergraduates a year respectively. Since not all local sixth-formers will want to go to their local university or will get the grades, such universities could have an open access local offer without any difficulties in providing the relevant number of places. We also all know

that most selective universities currently reduce grades to fill their final places – so winning over more local students who actually have the grades would strengthen their intakes.

Imagine being a teacher talking to a capable student from a non-traditional background in Newcastle who doesn't know any graduates and is unsure whether university is for them. Imagine being able to say: "I can guarantee that if you get the grades, Newcastle University will take you." The academic literature tells us unambiguously that ease of entry

*Selective universities reduce grades to fill places, so more local students who have the grades would strengthen their intakes*

encourages access. Sometimes that conversation between teacher and pupil will be enough.

Even if it isn't, if the sixth-former achieves the relevant grades, on results day the teacher can say, "We, your school, will certify that you got the grades and live in the city. All you need to do is click 'send' and you have a place for this year." Some students will be willing to take that step – a step that has no possibility of rejection. It would change lives.

There will be questions, of course, about where town and city boundaries should be. But let us not make the best the enemy of the good. Let the sector find a selective civic university willing to stand up and be counted, willing to pilot this. Their education and statistics department can calculate how many people in an area typically get these grades. If it seems too risky, start small and do this only for students who have been eligible for free school meals. Or restrict it initially to students from a tightly defined area.

Then civic universities should go further and interrogate national databases to find how many students in their local communities had the grades but attended either no university or attended a much less selective university, typically leading to lower-paid jobs and fewer career options. They should then convene such students and ask them what would have persuaded them to take up the offer of a place. More information? More part-time courses? Bursaries? Different courses? Degree apprenticeships? Good qualitative survey work – sometimes termed immersive research – will be key to understanding what works.

Every student at every local school – and their parents – should be able to see a route to university in their community. A route that is easy to explain and can be plastered all over local bus stops: "Get the grades, get a place."

This is what it means to be a civic university: in your community, of your community, for your community.

Tim Leunig is visiting professor in practice in the School of Public Policy at the London School of Economics. This is an edited version of his contribution to *The Kerslake Collection: The future of universities and their places, five years on from the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission*, edited by Sir Chris Husbans and Richard Brabner and published on 10 July.

# Asian universities may struggle to be successful in Horizon Europe

Ministry support will be vital, but a lack of political imperative could limit motivation, say Hyejin Kim, Erik Mobrand and Sylvia Schwaag Serger

South Korea may have recently become the first Asian country to join Horizon Europe, but it is unlikely to be the last. Japan and Singapore are also having ongoing conversations with the European Commission over the possibility of deepening their relationships with the world's largest research support scheme.

As an associate member, South Korea will be permitted to apply for certain Horizon Europe initiatives on an equal footing with full members. Seoul is hoping that this will unlock more opportunities to participate in and lead top science. And Europe's interest is understandable considering the advanced level of science in these countries. But questions remain

over whether universities and education ministries in Asia have the organisational traits to succeed in the European research framework.

One reason is that this framework has never solely been a scientific endeavour. It is embedded in a project of bringing Europeans closer together and "advancing the EU's general and specific objectives and policies". That impetus, combined with scientific and funding incentives, has put European government agencies for research and education on the same page as university research offices about priorities and has given them an extra impetus to make collaborative work.

Hence, European science agen-

cies and universities, by now, have decades of experience of building deep networks of cooperation. Universities have learned how to build and staff effective research support offices, while science ministries and allied agencies have developed strong communication channels.

Of course, the Horizon framework has long invited researchers outside the European Union to participate, and some of them have done so with considerable success. Nor is South Korea the furthest flung nation to associate since the scheme was opened up to advanced scientific nations elsewhere in the world, with New Zealand joining in 2023 (although Australia has just pulled out of talks).

But unlike New Zealand and fellow potential anglophone member Canada, South Korea and other Asian nations also lie well outside Europe's political and social scope, and their funding systems and political priorities are very different. The potential effects of this should not be underestimated.

Scientists in Asia are undoubtedly enmeshed already in the global research networks that drive scientific progress today. However, international collaboration has been underpinned in Asia by national projects and is supported by governments less as a goal in itself than as a means of gaining recognition for national institutions in global higher education indices. That is why, for better or worse, organisational forms, both in ministries and in universities, have remained oriented to the national project.

Funding structures are relevant here, too. In public European and anglophone universities, external research funding is crucial to the financing of science – and, therefore, to institutional success. But in Asia's top public universities, the incentives and structures tend to be different. University budgets depend less on external competitive research funding. These universities design research programmes and allocate project grants directly to researchers, sometimes on a scale that is generous by any international standard. Some of this funding is channelled directly from state sources, as well as from universities' own revenue sources.

Hence, for individual scholars in these universities, rewards are higher for publishing in prestigious journals or registering patents than for winning grants. Moreover, universities and agencies in

the region tend to have simpler research support offices than European universities do, with few ties to counterparts elsewhere. Administrative offices lend secretarial support but rarely serve higher-level functions, such as writing grant applications.

These differences suggest that building the organisations that successful Horizon Europe applications require will prove a challenge for new associate members in Asia, even if European counterparts are willing to lend a hand in capacity-building. Doing good science could be insufficient preparation. Without support or

guidance from education ministries, some universities will struggle to see what organisational changes they might need. Even writing big grant applications will be a great challenge to them. But, in South Korea, there are no signs that the ministry is ready or willing to offer that support.

An additional twist lies in the geopolitical context to Horizon Europe's expansion. The growth of dual-use technologies, Russia's war in Ukraine and the rise of US-China rivalry have launched a challenge to open science. But in the background to Seoul's Horizon accession is a sense that building



ties with a third global power base, Europe, could help manage the risks associated with China-US rivalry. This consciousness might boost Asia's engagement with Horizon Europe, as consciousness of European integration objectives has driven participation within Europe.

On the other hand, politicising science in this way could be seen as exacerbating the challenge to open science and increase inertia around Horizon Europe participation in Asia.

In short, while the science underlying greater European-Asian research integration is sound, the politics of that integration needs careful management.

Hyejin Kim is a senior lecturer in political science at the National University of Singapore. Erik Mobrand is professor in international studies at Seoul National University. Sylvia Schwaag Serger is professor of research policy at Lund University.