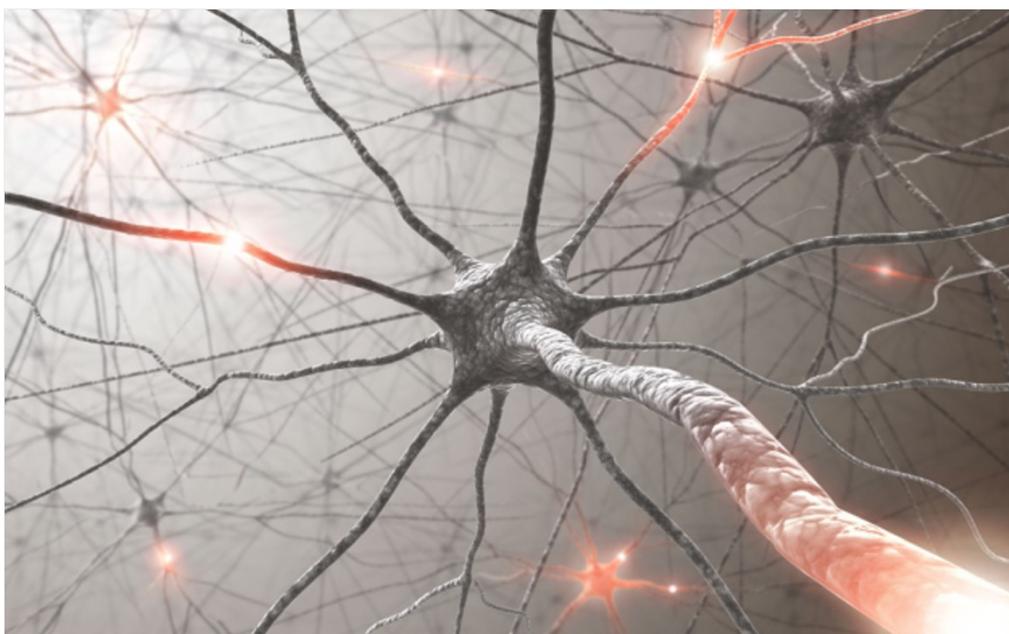


# Troubled billion-euro Brain Project unlocks more funding

European Commission hopes agreement will restore lost confidence.

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*Kiyoshi Takahase Segundo / Alamy*

The Human Brain Project is intended to be a €1 billion, decadal research effort that combines neuroscience and computing.

Europe's troubled Human Brain Project (HBP) has unlocked European Commission financing until at least 2018 — but some scientists are still not sure that they want to take part in the mega-project, which has been fraught with controversy since its launch two years ago.

On 30 October, the commission signed an agreement formally allowing its giant Horizon2020 research funding programme to finance HBP past April 2016, when its preliminary 30-month 'ramp-up' phase ends. The deal also starts a process to change the project's legal status so as to spread responsibility across many participating institutions.

The commission hopes that this agreement will restore lost confidence in the HBP, which aims to [better understand the brain using information and computing technologies](#), primarily through simulation. Last year, hundreds of scientists signed a petition claiming that the project was being mismanaged and was running off its scientific course; they [pledged to boycott it](#) if their concerns were ignored.

Since then, the HBP has been [substantially reformed](#) along lines recommended by a mediation committee. It has dissolved its three-person executive board, which had assumed most of the management power. And it has committed to including studies on cognitive neuroscience (which the triumvirate had wanted to eliminate). It also opened up for general competition some €8.9 million (\$US10 million) of cash previously allocated only to project insiders, and in September selected four major projects in systems and cognitive neuroscience proposed by different groups around Europe.

### Building trust

For those bruised in the battles of the last two years, however, the HBP still needs to show that it can merit their trust. Some of the key neuroscientists involved in the ramp-up phase have decided not to participate in the next phase, but to wait and see how it evolves. “The mediation report was a very important step, but it is much too early to evaluate its impact,” says Yves Frégnac, director of the CNRS Unit of Neuroscience, Information and Complexity in Gif-sur-Yvette, France. “We are still sceptical.”

But neuroanatomist Katrin Amunts, at the Jülich Research Centre in Germany, is enthusiastically committed to the next phase. Amunts, who is co-director of the HBP subproject Strategic Human Brain Data, says that the HBP programme is now much more tightly focused and is more likely to be successful. In particular, she says, it has taken on board the mediation committee’s recommendation to focus on just a few brain functions to begin with: it has selected memory, the sleep–wake cycle, visual processing and consciousness.

The HBP’s management had been concentrated at its coordinating institution, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, Switzerland, which had been criticized for not operating transparently. But the management will now be spread more widely, although details of the new organization’s structure, including its headquarters, are still being discussed, officials said. That change could ultimately put the project on course to survive beyond its originally envisaged decadal timescale, by transforming it into an international organization with a permanent shared infrastructure, perhaps along the lines of the European Spallation Source, a neutron-science facility in Sweden.

“The challenge for the HBP will now be to regain scientific and public confidence with undiminished effort,” noted Wolfgang Marquardt, director of the Jülich Research Centre and chair of the project’s mediation committee.

October’s agreement means that — pending a routine process of expert approval for the research proposed — the HBP will receive €89 million from the commission for the next two years (after €54 million of commission funding in its preliminary phase). Further funding depends on later evaluations of the HBP’s work. Some fear that the project, which is to be financed equally by the commission and other partners, will fail to attract the billion euros over ten years that was foreseen at its launch. Commission officials declined to comment on that, but said confidence remained high.

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### — Corrections

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**Corrected:** This article and its headline originally incorrectly stated that the Human Brain Project had secured commission funding until at least 2019.