

Brexit & UK (Social) Science: Developments to date

20 February 2017

The Academy of Social Sciences and its Campaign for Social Science have [previously outlined](#) the benefits to UK science and research of international collaborations, EU research funding, and the ease of movement of staff and students – all of which will be affected by Brexit. We have also noted the [economic benefits of UK universities](#) at the local, regional and national levels (including an estimated [£73bn](#) generated by HEIs for the UK economy), providing an important source of growth for their host communities, buoyed by international academic talent and students.

The Government has already taken many welcome steps to address some of the uncertainty for UK science and research following the referendum. Concerns remain over what Brexit could mean in terms of the potential loss of income from international students, recruitment and skills gaps from loss of international staff, higher barriers to international research collaborations, and lower levels of research funding in the longer-term.

This note outlines Government statements related to recommendations the AcSS/ CfSS have made since the EU referendum. It provides a summary of where government has been publicly responsive to the concerns of the science and research community, and notes points on which more clarity is still needed.

I. Universities and International Staff

I.1. Prior Recommendation: *Recognising the sector's importance as a driver of UK prosperity, the Government should confirm that it will be mindful of the importance of EU and other international staff to UK universities and the research community, developing appropriate visa policies for international academic and research staff if necessary.*

Government Response: [The Government's white paper on exiting the EU](#) has made clear that the UK will pursue a 'new and equal partnership' with the EU. This seems to rule out a European Economic Area-type deal, or other existing models that might include freedom of movement. While committing the Government to control immigration more tightly, the Prime Minister has also, however, promised to prioritise high-skilled immigration, in order to '[attract the brightest and the best to work or study](#)' in the UK in the future. [The Government's Industrial Strategy Green Paper](#) suggests 'exploring' programmes similar to those in other countries to 'attract leading academics' to pull in other 'stars'.

The PM has also made clear that guarantees for EU citizens' rights currently living in the UK will depend on corresponding rights being granted for British nationals in other EU states, and that reaching such a deal is a priority. Others have since also called for [appropriate visa policies](#) for UK universities and research, but clear commitments have yet to be proposed.

Context: In the UK, 15% of academic staff are EU nationals, with a total of 27% of academic staff coming from outside the UK. This reflects the importance of international talent to our universities, and highlights a skills gap that will be difficult to overcome without significant

investment, funding and recruitment. In a recent poll, [76% of non-UK EU academics](#) said they were now more likely to consider leaving the UK higher education sector. Post-Brexit immigration policy will therefore need to consider safeguards to permit hiring of the strongest possible talent for UK positions, including ensuring that any salary thresholds for Tier 2 visas remain within an 'appropriate range' for those working at HE institutions.

The AcSS / CfSS believe that a comprehensive approach is needed to ensure that policies and processes for recruiting EU and international staff are made straightforward and flexible for universities, and not restricted to some high visibility sectors like finance or computing.

2. International Students

2.1. Prior Recommendation: *Government should further pledge to safeguard the fee status and loan eligibility of UK students applying for courses in the 2018/19 academic year.*

Government Response: The Government has confirmed the eligibility of EU students starting courses in 2016/2017 and 2017/18 for student loans, grants and home fee status for the duration of their course. It also confirmed that research councils will continue to fund EU postgraduate students whose courses start in 2017-2018. The Government's white paper does not however address uncertainty related to the 2018/2019 academic year, although maintaining current arrangements for EEA students during a [transitional period](#) remains a possibility.

Context: More medium-term certainty is needed to ensure retention of applicants. EU student applications have already [dropped by more than 7%](#) for the first time in a decade. Post-graduation employment concerns of international students could be addressed separately, without jeopardising the financial and intellectual contribution made by non-UK students to UK universities and science. Foreign students contribute nearly [£11bn](#) to the UK economy, of which [£3.2bn](#) alone is attributable to non-EU international student fees. Reductions in the number of international students, as well as a more restrictive student visa regime, could threaten the economic well-being of UK universities, and the growth prospects of the economy at the local, regional and national level.

Government policy on international students should bear in mind not only their financial contributions to UK universities but also the extent to which they can, with appropriate development of post-study visas, be a source of skills and knowledge both for universities and also the wider economy.

3. Funding and Collaboration

3.1. Prior Recommendation: *Government should announce that it will do all it can to protect and replace EU funds for research after Horizon 2020.*

Government Response: In the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor announced increased expenditure on research and development by [£4.75bn over the next four years](#). This is complemented by an earlier pledge to underwrite certain research awards made under the EU's Horizon 2020 programme. The Government asserts this will give '[UK participants and their EU partners the certainty needed to plan ahead for projects that can run over many years.](#)'

As mentioned above, [the Government's white paper on exiting the EU](#) appears to rule out a European Economic Area-type deal, necessitating a bespoke agreement for UK participation as an associated country in any future EU Framework Programmes. The Government has, however, specified that it would '[welcome agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners on major science, research and technology initiatives.](#)' The UK's role in future international collaborations with EU-based colleagues will clearly depend on this, and the broader context of the UK's future engagement with the EU.

Context: Any post-Brexit model for EU engagement will have implications for the UK's participation in the European Research Area (ERA). This includes not only eligibility for funding from Horizon 2020 and future EU Framework programmes, but also the ability to lead and host collaborative research projects. Of course part of the issue is financial, with the UK a net beneficiary of EU funds, receiving €3.4bn more than it paid in to the EU in terms of funding for research, development and innovation activities from 2007 to 2013, and this will remain a long-term concern. The intellectual stimulation and importance of cross-national collaborations to research, are, however, as important as financial considerations.

The Government should ensure that promoting and encouraging cross-national collaborations are a priority as the details of Brexit are negotiated; ideally the Government would negotiate full UK participation in the upcoming 9th Framework Programme as an associated country.

3.2. Prior Recommendations: *We recommended that DfE / BEIS collate evidence of university cases where applications to EU programmes and collaborations have been threatened by misunderstandings of the legal situation, and actively raise them with the EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science.*

Government Response: In response to a parliamentary question, the Government affirmed its commitment to UK science and research during the Brexit negotiations. It pointed to the research@beis.gov.uk hotline for academics and researchers to register issues in engaging with European activities. There are no plans to provide running updates on evidence shared.

[In October](#), however, Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson did note that two thirds of submissions to the hotline relate to funding issues, with the remaining third about status in the UK. He also said that there had not yet been 'hard' examples of actual discrimination at that point.

Context: Scientists for EU recorded more than 400 responses documenting direct impacts to UK academics in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. Anecdotal evidence also exists around UK academics reporting discrimination in particular EU projects. This is most likely to occur when UK researchers are no longer being considered as project leaders, or are no longer asked to join projects in the first place, as relationships change and uncertainty regarding participation in future Framework Programmes looms. Concerns remain that the current environment has and will continue to lead to cases of discrimination and threats to collaboration opportunities going under- or un-reported, and – though very real – difficult to prove in a concrete manner.

The AcSS / CfSS would like to see a proactive approach to monitoring of trends over time while the UK remains a member of the EU. For example, the Minister for

Universities, Science, Research and Innovation could ensure the compilation and publication of real-time statistics about applications for EU funding from UK applicants so that any decline before our final exit from the EU can be acted upon in a timely manner. Where discrimination has been reported, the Minister should be willing to have informal discussions with the relevant EU Commissioner to ensure that they are addressed early.

3.3. Prior Recommendation: *The Government should ensure participation in the Brexit negotiations of a representative of the UK higher education and science community.*

Government Response: The Government has not yet taken formal action to ensure the representation of the research and science community *within* the negotiation process itself. However, the Government has recently announced the creation of a [high level stakeholder working group on EU exit, universities, research and innovation](#), which will meet four times a year. DExEU has also engaged with [various higher education institutions and groups](#), providing another potential informal avenue for their interests to inform the negotiations. Assurances were also given in response to a Parliamentary Question that the Government Chief Scientific Advisor, as well as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, will continue to provide impartial science advice on the UK's departure from the EU. In addition, a recent letter from the Chair of the Commons Science and Technology Committee indicated that DExEU and the Department for International Trade are considering appointing their own Chief Science Advisors.

Context: There is a danger that issues vital to the future of UK science and research will be unnecessarily jeopardised during the negotiations if those directly involved are not fully aware of all the issues that may affect its vitality over the long term. Moreover, the current membership of the high-level stakeholder working group lacks representation from the social sciences, humanities, and creative arts, which comprise [almost half](#) of academic staff and students in the UK.

The AcSS / CfSS continue to believe it is essential that a member of the UK negotiating team is knowledgeable about research, and higher education. This could include a Deputy Director (or Directors) for Research, Innovation, and Higher Education within DExEU, just as there are for other economic sectors such as [Infrastructure & Environment or Revenue, Welfare & Culture](#). We also recommend that the high-level stakeholder working group on EU exit, universities, research and innovation should be representative of the UK higher education and research community as a whole, and include members who represent the contributions of social science and the humanities in addition to members from the STEM subjects. We further recommend that CSAs should have a balanced understanding of the needs of all areas of science and research, including social science, in a post-Brexit Britain.

To read our Brexit analysis, see [‘The EU Referendum – Leave: What next for UK Social Science?’](#), our briefing [‘Making the best of Brexit: Supporting UK Science, Higher Education and Research for the Future’](#), and [‘Navigating Brexit: Supporting and Safeguarding UK Higher Education’](#).