

Response to House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Inquiry on Science and Innovation after Brexit

5 February 2018

INTRODUCTION

The Academy of Social Sciences and its Campaign for Social Science have [written a number of briefing papers](#) outlining the benefits to UK science and research of international collaborations, EU research funding, and the ease of movement of staff and students – areas which will be affected by Brexit if appropriate steps are not taken to ensure protection for science and research. International academic and research staff provide an important source of talent to our universities and fill a skills gap difficult to overcome without long-term future investment, funding and recruitment. International students contribute intellectually and financially to the health of UK universities and science, adding almost £11bn to the UK economy.¹ The UK has also gained significantly from participation in EU research programmes, infrastructures and cross-national research collaborations. These issues are vital to the health, rigour and quality of the social sciences in the UK just as much as to STEM science subjects.

The conclusion of Phase I of the Brexit negotiations in December 2017, in conjunction with other statements and agreements over the last few months, has brought welcome clarifications in some areas. These include: commitments to ‘attract the brightest and the best to work or study’ in the UK; the goal of achieving spending of 2.4% of GDP on research and development by 2027, along with the long-term aspiration to match the 3% EU target; confirmation of the eligibility of EU undergraduate and postgraduate students for loans, grants and home fee status for 2018/19; and pledges to underwrite certain research awards made to UK researchers under the EU’s Horizon 2020 programme. The Government has also said it would ‘welcome agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners on major science, research and technology initiatives.’

However, questions remain about continued access to EU research funding and networks, as well as about the ability to attract and retain international staff and students, particularly if current migration policies are not adapted. Failures to address these issues would affect all of the UK sciences and the UK research base, including the social sciences, in light of the importance of EU staff, students and research funding to numerous social science disciplines. Moreover, given the number of social science students and staff in UK universities, and their importance to initiatives with local and regional business and governments, these issues need to be addressed across all disciplines to ensure the health of institutions of higher education, many of which are drivers of local economic growth and crucial partners in delivery of the government’s grand challenge priorities.

INTERNATIONAL STAFF AND STUDENTS

The ability of the UK to continue to attract international talent is of vital importance to science and universities, as well as for local, regional and national economic growth. Fifteen per cent of all academic staff, and 16% of social science staff, are EU nationals; in total 27% of all academic staff, and 28% of social science staff, come from outside the UK.² They make a contribution to the £73 billion created for the UK economy by Higher Education Institutions in 2011/2012,³ along with providing skills and expertise necessary to maintain the UK's position as a world-leader in research excellence that drives innovation and prosperity. Our research shows they are particularly important to [certain disciplines](#) (for instance, economics) and we believe they are disproportionately important too in social science requiring quantitative skills, as, for instance, at ISER at the University of Essex.

The December 8 [Orderly UK withdrawal](#) agreement has provided some clarity for EU citizens currently residing in the UK. The government has also confirmed that EU undergraduate and postgraduate students will be eligible for loans and home fee status on the same terms as UK students for courses starting in 2018/2019.⁴ We welcome the recent announcement of an [additional 1,000 Tier 1 \(Exceptional Talent\) visas](#), including for the social sciences and humanities via the British Academy as an endorsing organisation. But this is only a start, as there will continue to be a need to recruit internationally for academics, including social scientists, at a variety of levels if the strength of UK social science and of universities as a whole is to be protected. We hope too that the Rutherford Fellowship programme will also include social science disciplines.

So while these steps are encouraging, we believe that continued assurances to EU citizens currently working in the UK are still necessary, along with further clarity as to the status and opportunities for those coming to the UK during and following the transition period. We believe that [appropriate visa policies and processes](#) for universities and the wider research community will be needed to enable straightforward and flexible recruitment and retention of international researchers and teachers across all disciplines. This includes ensuring that any salary threshold for Tier 2 visas remains within an accessible range for those currently or intending to work at HE institutions. These measures would enable universities and research institutions to maintain their global standing as hubs of international talent, while fostering the skills necessary for a dynamic and innovative science and social science community capable of delivering on the government's grand challenge priorities.

We recognise the complexity of debates around migration targets, but note the financial contribution of international students to their universities and local economies, and the recent work by the [Office of National Statistics](#) showing that the vast majority of international students leave the UK when they finish their courses. A simple distinction between official migration statistics and any migration target the Government intends to set could address this matter, and would appear to have [public backing](#). We understand the Migration Advisory Committee is examining this issue.

Government policy should further bear in mind the extent to which drawing on international talent for all sciences, including in social science PhD occupations, can be a source of skills and knowledge for universities and the wider economy that would otherwise result in significant long-term gaps in skills the UK economy will need after Brexit.

FUNDING AND COLLABORATION

The Academy and Campaign have [previously argued](#) that the best outcome for UK science and research would be to secure the closest possible association with and participation in Horizon 2020 after the UK leaves the EU in 2019, and for the next Framework Programme, FP9. This would help safeguard research funding, opportunities for international collaboration, and recruitment of international talent. Participation in and access to such programmes is of particular importance to the UK social science community.

Issues such as poverty, housing, population growth, ageing, educational outcomes, economic productivity, and health-related behaviour have been identified as [priorities by Sir Mark Walport](#), CEO of UKRI. Through participation in H2020 and future Framework programmes, the social sciences are able to enhance our understanding and help tackle many of these grand challenges. UK social sciences have out-performed other UK disciplines, and the social sciences in other countries, in winning Framework grant funding to address precisely these issues.

The UK received an estimated €3.4 billion more than it paid into the EU in terms of funding for research, development and innovation activities between 2007 and 2013. This paralleled a steady rise in EU funding for social science research, offsetting a corresponding decline in domestic research council and departmental funding.⁵ Failure to achieve the closest possible form of associated status not only has funding implications, but could also mean the loss of important international leadership roles, and access to international cooperation that has helped develop UK expertise, capacity, and quantitative skills in areas such as health policy and health inequality, social mobility, business innovation studies, and so on.

The Government has taken a series of constructive steps towards ensuring continued participation in EU funding programmes, beginning with the autumn 2016 pledge to underwrite research awards made to UK researchers under Horizon 2020. This has been reinforced by the further partnership paper on Collaboration on Science and Innovation, offering a clear indication of the UK's willingness to seek associated status, and, 'explore forging a more ambitious and close partnership with the EU than any yet agreed between the EU and a non-EU country'.⁶

Additionally, [Pascal Lamy's July 2017 LAB-FAB-APP report](#), recommending association based on excellence and financial contributions, opens the possibility that the UK could seek future association with FP9 without changing its current position on free movement. Such an arrangement would allow the UK to remain a key player in the European Research Area, and continue international research collaboration to mutual benefit, unaffected by the eventual post-Brexit model of EU-engagement. At the same time, the Orderly UK

withdrawal agreement, in which the UK ‘will continue to participate in the Union programmes financed by the MFF 2014-2020’⁷ confirmed its participation in H2020 at least until that year. The agreement also states the UK ‘my wish to participate in some Union budgetary programmes of the new MFF post-2020 as a non-Member State’, striking a hopeful tone for FP9. We hope this will include not only STEM subjects, but a full range of disciplines needed to address challenges facing the UK, including the social sciences. We therefore hope that the Government’s commitment to ‘strengthening the UK’s world leading science base’ will extend to all sciences.

GRAND CHALLENGES

As mentioned above, access to EU funding programmes enables the social sciences to address many of the most pressing social and economic challenges identified as priorities by UKRI and in the government’s Industrial Strategy White Paper. The Academy and Campaign [have previously outlined the vital role of the social sciences](#), along with our universities and research sectors, in achieving many of the strategy’s aims. Indeed, social science evidence and expertise will be needed to understand and address each of its four current Grand Challenges – artificial intelligence (AI) and the data economy, clean growth, the future of mobility, and meeting the needs of an ageing society. Working with STEM colleagues, the social sciences will play a pivotal role in creating an evidence-base and helping devise solutions on these issues, as well as those related to industrial strategy, such as navigating ethical and regulatory concerns related to AI, and developing appropriate policy interventions to tackle the UK’s productivity puzzle and regional disparities in growth and education. On these issues, the social sciences draw on European networks to develop appropriate expertise to respond to the challenges affecting the UK.

Fifteen disciplines receiving the largest percentage of their total funding from EU government bodies in 2014/15 were social sciences.⁸ Of the fifteen disciplines that received the largest amount of EU funding in absolute terms, two were also social sciences: Business & Management Studies received £14.8 million, and Geography & Environmental Studies received £10.9 million from EU government bodies in 2014/15.

UK social science has also been particularly successful in securing European Research Council funding, coming first among EU member states for total ERC starting grants between 2007 and 2015, and first in total advanced awards between 2008 and 2014.⁹ Early career researchers have enjoyed similar success, with over one-quarter of all social sciences and humanities ERC grants in this category awarded to UK-based researchers in 2017.¹⁰ Additionally, the UK’s collaboration with EU science and research facilitates the transfer and development of key skills, including data and number skills. This demonstrates not only the strength of UK social science in an increasingly competitive international research environment, but also the importance of continuing to develop social science expertise to propel national productivity, as well as in addressing complex questions of broader societal well-being.

We stress the need for continued participation in EU research programmes that are of vital importance to the social sciences, including FP9, the ERC, Erasmus+, and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. Further clarity and measures are also required to ensure the UK is able to continue to attract and retain international researchers and teachers across all areas needed for the Industrial Strategy, including social scientists in specific areas and those with quantitative skills. We encourage the UK government to develop a flexible immigration system for the higher education and research sector, ensuring that the UK retains the necessary skills and proficiencies for a healthy and vibrant science and social science community at the forefront of research and innovation.

We also continue to support the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's call for a science advisor within the Department for Exiting the European Union, amplifying the voice of the science and research community throughout the Brexit negotiations.

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’](#), our analysis [‘Navigating Brexit: Supporting and Safeguarding UK Higher Education’](#), and [‘Brexit & UK \(Social\) Science: Developments to date’](#).

¹ See: Universities UK, *International Higher Education in Facts and Figures*, June 2016. Available at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/international-facts-and-figures-2016.pdf>

² See: Dr Ashley Thomas Lenihan and Sharon F Witherspoon MBE FAcSS. *The EU Referendum – Leave: What next for UK social science? Professional Briefing #9* (London: Academy of Social Sciences, June 2016). <http://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/EU-Referendum-%E2%80%93-Leave-%E2%80%93-What-next-for-UK-social-science-24-June-2016.pdf>

³ See: Universities UK, *The Impact of Universities on the UK Economy*, available at <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2014/the-impact-of-universities-on-the-uk-economy.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-funding-for-eu-students-for-2018-to-2019>

⁵ See: Academy of Social Sciences, *Navigating Brexit: Supporting & Safeguarding UK Higher Education* (2016). Available at: <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Navigating-Brexit-Supporting-and-Safeguarding-UK-Higher-Education-November-2016.pdf>

⁶ *Collaboration on science and innovation – a future partnership paper*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/collaboration-on-science-and-innovation-a-future-partnership-paper>

⁷ *Joint report from the negotiators of the European Union and the United Kingdom Government*, 8 December 2017. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/joint_report.pdf

⁸ See: Royal Society, *The role of the EU in funding UK research*. Available at: <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/uk-research-and-european-union/role-of-EU-in-funding-UK-research/>

⁹ See: *The role of the EU in funding UK research*

¹⁰ A list of 2017 European Research Council starting grants for the social sciences and humanities is available at: https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2017_stg_results_sh.pdf