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Will Brexit will drive UK academia over a cliff edge?

Keith Baker, Glasgow Caledonian University, looks at the prospects for British universities as the end of UK membership of the European Union approaches.

Much like the guidance from Universities UK on UK government's proposals for how it intends to withdraw from the EU,¹ this article has been revised several times since it was first drafted. Back in September 2017 it was that all EU-funded activities, including those at proposal stage, would be funded to completion. Then in November researchers on projects funded by the EU's flagship Horizon 2020 programme were warned that, without an agreement being reached, funding could cease as early as March 2019,² with this uncertainty leading Prof Stuart Croft, Vice Chancellor of Warwick University, to warn that the sector could face disaster within weeks³.

At the time of writing the guidance is now more optimistic, stating that all EU funded activities will be supported until the end of the end of the current procurement programme and that UUK is *"urging the government to confirm the UK's access to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are included in the phase one agreement as well as working to secure future association onto the successor programme, Framework Programme 9 and is contributing actively to its design"*.¹

This latest guidance effectively postpones the cut-off year to 2021, but even if these agreements are reached the UK will of course have little or no say in the design and delivery of future funding programmes. It also seems reasonable to assume that, should such agreements be reached, UK universities would then be subject to the same basic conditions of other non-EU partners, such as receiving smaller shares of the full economic costs of activities.

But that's just the impact on research. The UK is currently the second most popular destination in the world for international students, after the USA, and in 2014-15 international students contributed over £25 billion to the economy, which is estimated as supporting over 200,000 jobs in the UK's university towns and cities.^{4,5} But that income is now under serious threat. A 2016 survey by the student recruitment consulting firm Hobsons found that 30% of international students said they were unlikely to come to the UK following the referendum result, with another 6% saying they would definitely not choose to study here.⁶ Assuming those figures are reasonably accurate, that's a loss of at least half of the infamous £350 million a week Boris Johnson and colleagues claimed would be saved for the NHS.

In the second draft of this article I warned that a hard Brexit, meaning leaving the EU without an agreement in March 2019, would drive UK academia over a cliff edge, and since then I've seen no reason to change that conclusion. However, we are now in a situation more akin to early 2017, so it's worth noting an analysis from the European economic think-tank Bruegel⁷ which, building on analysis by the Higher Education Policy Institute.⁸ This found that whilst the funding losses of a more managed Brexit would not necessarily be irrevocable, universities already perceive the impacts on EU staff and students a significant distortion in their human capital and international reach, and that funding benefits that do not come directly from the EU but depend on staff mobility⁹ and opportunities for international collaborations, could cease.

So whilst the latest news softens the blow, even a 'soft' Brexit will still have a negative impact on UK academia, and the long-term uncertainty is not going to go away. Let's not forget that nothing will be set in stone until at least late 2018, by which time pollsters and commentators are predicting we may see another general election or possibly even a withdrawal of Article 50, or that three years is a very short time for academic planning. Furthermore, here in Scotland where the need to attract immigrants to offset an ageing population is likely to remain a red line for the Scottish Government,

there remains the prospect of a second referendum on independence that could attract talent from across the new border. So as things stand, the end of 2018 will see us three months away from 'Brexit Day', and whilst we may have retreated from the brink of disaster, that cliff edge still looks dangerously close.

Dr Keith Baker is a Researcher in the School of Engineering and the Built Environment, Glasgow Caledonian University. He has worked on EU-Funded research projects but is not currently in receipt of or applying for EU funding.

References

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⁴ Onyanga-Omara J (2017). After Brexit, foreign students flee UK universities for U.S., Canada and Australia. USA Today, 15 October. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/15/after-brexit-foreign-students-flee-uk-universities-u-s-canada-and-australia/699333001/> [last accessed 18/10/17]

⁵ Oxford Economics, 2017. Assessing the Economic Implications of Brexit. Available at: <http://www.oxfordeconomics.com/brexit> [last accessed 02/11/17]

⁶ As note 5.

⁷ Demertzis, M., & Nano, E., 2017. The impact of Brexit on UK tertiary education and R&D. Bruegel, 14th February 2017. Available at: <http://bruegel.org/2017/02/the-impact-of-brexit-on-uk-tertiary-education-and-rd/> [last accessed 01/01/18]

⁸ Conlon, G., Ladher, R., & Halterback, M., 2017. The determinants of international demand for UK higher education. Available at: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Hepi-Report-91-Screen.pdf> [last accessed 01/01/18]

⁹ O'Shea R (2017). Brexit: Airline passengers won't be guaranteed compensation for cancelled flights after UK leaves EU. The Independent, 18 October. <http://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/brexit-airlines-passenger-compensation-cancelled-flights-grounded-refund-not-guaranteed-eu-law-uk-a8006471.html> [last accessed 18/10/17]