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For science, Brexit isn't done yet
James Wilsdon

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If there's one sentiment that papers over the cracks in a once-United Kingdom, it's bone-weariness over Brexit. Wherever one entered the debate back in 2016—on the side of the United Kingdom leaving or remaining in the European Union (EU)—most people simply want an end to the saga, which has spewed uncertainty and paralyzed decision-making for almost 4 years.

A pre-Christmas campaign pledge to “get Brexit done” propelled Prime Minister Boris Johnson back into Downing Street with a Conservative dominance of the political landscape unseen since Margaret Thatcher's heyday. One week after its reelection, the government passed the Brexit withdrawal bill, and at midnight on 31 January, the United Kingdom departed. With the democratic die now cast, universities, scientific organizations, and individual researchers must figure out how to constructively engage with Europe. Is there a soft landing for science on the other side of the leap into the dark that has just been taken?

The United Kingdom now enters an 11-month transition period, in which scientific collaboration—and the precise form of any U.K. involvement in Horizon Europe, the EU's next 7-year, multibillion euro research program—is one of a daunting list of agenda items that need to be resolved as part of any comprehensive EU-UK agreement. Throughout this transition, which runs until 31 December 2020, the United Kingdom's scientific community will continue to make a case for collaboration and for preserving the mobility of researchers.

Buoyed by his election victory, Prime Minister Johnson is so confident that he can achieve an agreement at record-breaking speed that he included in his withdrawal bill a clause outlawing any extension to the transitional arrangements. Senior figures in the European Commission, and most trade experts, warn that negotiations will take far longer. If the experts are right, and if the United Kingdom refuses to be flexible, then the United Kingdom could be back on the precipice of a no-deal Brexit in a matter of months. “Get Brexit done” may have worked as an election slogan, but it leaves unresolved numerous policy trade-offs that have bedeviled Brexit discussions since 2016.

Others hope that it may be possible to fast-track a bespoke deal on research, in the margins of wider trade talks. A fascinating report released late last month by the Wellcome Trust and the think-tank Bruegel, entitled “A post-Brexit agreement for research and innovation,” describes in detail the results of a simulated negotiation between the United Kingdom and EU. Such textured engagement by science funders and policy-makers in the fine print of the negotiations is vital but can't ultimately predict the outcome of a deeply political process, in which science and

innovation will inevitably be traded off by both sides against competing interests and priorities.

Last week, the U.K. government announced a substantially expanded category of “global talent visas,” an effort to signal that it will continue to support the mobility of international researchers into the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Johnson has stated that he wishes to see ongoing UK-EU collaboration in research and has pledged an £18 billion (GBP) doubling of public spending on research by 2025, as part of a renewed commitment to boosting overall research and development investment to 2.4% of gross domestic product. He also plans to rebalance research funding toward poorer regions of the country and to create a new agency for “high-risk, high-payoff research” modeled on the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Even in the depths of a British winter, such largesse would normally provoke a warm response from the research community. But trust and confidence remain in short supply.

Beyond the political grandstanding, U.K. science remains, in essence, stuck at the Brexit crossroads it arrived at some 43 months ago. The United Kingdom has now departed from the EU, but its journey's end is far from clear. In contrast to the Prime Minister's ebullience, Venki Ramakrishnan, president of the Royal Society, is one of many voices reminding us how much remains at stake over the next 12 months. “If we get it wrong, the damage could cripple the UK for at least a generation.”