

From Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe: Why it is not yet “business as usual” for UK universities

*Thanks to the Brexit deal, it is likely that UK researchers will gain access to the Horizon Europe programme and EU research funding. Will this suffice for UK higher education institutions to return to pre-Brexit participation levels, asks **Marco Cavallaro** (University of Lugano)?*

The EU-UK trade and cooperation agreement, commonly known as the “Brexit deal”, has been welcomed by the UK and EU research communities, as it states the political will to continue close scientific cooperation under Horizon Europe, the 9th European research programme. The terms and conditions to join the programme as an associated member still need to be negotiated and agreed. However, the Brexit deal puts an end to a climate of uncertainty for UK-based researchers that started in June 2016 with the Brexit vote in the middle of Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe’s predecessor.

From 2016 to 2020, a series of Brexit-induced uncertainties, including the access to the next research programme and researchers’ immigration status, [affected the participation of UK Higher Education Institutions \(HEIs\) in the last years of Horizon 2020](#). When compared to European HEIs with similar characteristics in size, reputation and experience in European projects, we observed a decline of UK HEIs’ participation in and coordination of collaborative projects. Applying consortia were less keen to get UK HEIs on board and to give them leading roles. There was the perception that not involving UK-based partners maximise chances of getting funded and is more likely to result in stable research collaborations. In some HEIs, UK-based researchers were even [discouraged](#) to take coordinating roles.

We also noticed a drop in the number of grants acquired in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), Horizon 2020’s mobility scheme for post-docs and early-stage researchers. Uncertainties related to the researchers’ immigration status probably lessened the attractiveness of UK HEIs as research destinations and doctoral network partners.

We did not find a negative correlation between the Brexit vote and the number of European Research Council’s (ERC) grants acquired by UK HEIs. This is certainly due to the prestige of the top-ranked UK HEIs, which might be affected by Brexit only in the longer term.



Students outside Old Building in Houghton Street during Orientation Week

With the Brexit deal, it has become likely that UK-based researchers will get full access to Horizon Europe and EU funding like their peers in other non-EU Associated Countries such as Switzerland, Norway and Israel. Will this suffice for UK HEIs to return to pre-Brexit participation levels?

When considering the participation in and coordination of collaborative projects before the Brexit vote (2014-2016), the UK was only second to Germany. Non-EU countries with association agreements like Switzerland, Norway and Israel have acquired and coordinated [more Horizon 2020 grants than most EU Member States](#). This can lead us to think that participation of UK HEIs in Horizon Europe will be jeopardised. However, it is worth mentioning that these non-EU countries have many years of stable relationship with the EU, while the Brexit deal is not an end in itself but [the starting point of years of complex negotiations](#). There are remaining uncertainties and challenges with regards to post-Brexit economic welfare and researchers' mobility.

The Brexit deal ends the UK-EU freedom of movement and visa will now be required by the UK authorities for stays of more than 90 days. The [Global Talent visa](#) for researchers from the rest of the world offer a quicker immigration process, but the UK immigration system remains one of [the most expensive in the world](#). Attracting talent to UK HEIs is therefore likely to be a challenge in the coming years.

Retaining talent seems also to be challenging. A study from the [Oxford-Berlin Research Partnership](#) revealed a 30 per cent increase in the number of UK citizens emigrating to EU countries since the Brexit vote and expressed concerns about a “potential brain drain” from the UK to the EU. This will potentially impact UK HEIs' Horizon Europe participation in research networks and acquisition of individual grants.

If UK HEIs top the ranking of ERC grants recipients, [about half of the grantees are non-UK nationals](#). These are likely to be more mobile than UK nationals. Visa costs may also be a deterrent for the reception of European post-docs and early-stage researchers within the MSCAs' Postdoctoral Fellowships and Doctoral Networks.

The expected decrease of EU students due to raising university fees is likely to affect UK HEIs’ finances. The loss of access to the EU’s structural funds is also a problem for many UK HEIs, especially in Wales. These funds, which usually cover training and infrastructure costs in projects benefitting to local communities, were typically distributed in a less concentrated way than the highly competitive UK and EU research programmes. Participation in EU research networks is known to be concentrated into a “[closed club](#)” of few HEIs and research organisations. We can, therefore, assume that Brexit will further hinder the participation of UK HEIs whose resources will be the most affected by the loss of EU students’ fees and eligibility to the EU structural funds, and that have less developed ties with the EU research community.

Considering the multiple challenges that UK HEIs are and will be facing, going back to pre-Brexit levels of participation in EU projects will be difficult. This will highly depend on the UK’s ability to retain and attract talent, and to address financial losses instigated by Brexit.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.