

Brexit was a huge shock for universities. Now we must regroup and deepen our European links

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Universities were shocked and profoundly concerned by the Leave vote. So much collaboration between European universities has arisen from membership of the EU. But, writes [Anne Corbett](#), now is the time to forge and deepen our European links through associations like Coimbra and the European University Association.



Shock and alarm

Few policy sectors are more shocked than higher education at the referendum result. It was unusually united in support of EU membership. All the demographic information pointed its way: the young and the highly educated were identified as overwhelmingly likely to support Remain. Vice chancellors, scientists in huge numbers, student bodies, all put their pro-EU views out in public. So did the minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson (brother of..) and 14 of his predecessors, alarmed at what a blow Brexit would be for UK science.



LSE academics and guests on referendum night. Photo: LSE

Universities have immediate concerns about their actual EU involvement. One is the conditions in which EU students and academics will continue to be welcomed to British universities. They make up around 5.5 % of the student body and around 15% of academic staff. The other main concern is whether they will lose the forms of research collaboration across Europe and a wider world, currently managed and financed by the EU. This is competitively funded collaborative research, mostly directed at research and innovation ends but also for regional cohesion. During the campaign, universities were surprised to face an opposition distinguished by its scorn of intellect, expertise and evidence, and free in its use of Hitler as a reference point for belittling the EU. The resulting Brexit vote has in its first days brought political chaos, economic meltdown, and racist attacks – not to mention remorse by a large number of Leavers who could in no way be categorised as hooligans. But it stands as a

democratic decision.

EU-backed research is now on a scale and of a quality which has made Europe a world-leading science hub. The UK has scored so consistently well that the EU is a structural part of university institutions, producing [somewhere between 14% and 19% of university income](#). In purely financial terms, this is the amount the UK's indebted universities will be forced to find some way of replacing. The Leave campaign's already broken promises on what to do with the so-called £350m a week are a non-starter – and in any event they could not work to comparable ends.

Universities do not have to turn their backs on European cooperation and collaboration. But they need to be more inventive than they were during the campaign when they address the urgent political questions. What is the agenda that they will want to feed into the eventual negotiations for the UK's departure from the EU? How effectively they will be able to lobby a future government on a strategy for European relations?

Second best: Norway's model

UK political circles will disagree about whether the aim of a new government could, and should be an EU-associated status on the model of Norway (pay for the privilege and implement the policies). For universities, this would be the best solution in the circumstances. It opens the way for continued participation in the core EU higher education and research programmes: Erasmus+ for mobility and cooperation, Horizon 2020 for research, development and innovation, and possibly the regional and social cohesion funds which involve universities in the poorer areas of the EU in capacity building.

But as things stand, the Norway model is difficult to square with the referendum vote. The Norway European Economic Area model commits a country to accept the rules of the EU and respect for the European Court of Justice, the most relevant being freedom of movement. It is barely conceivable that the 27 remaining member states will now want to offer the UK such association with tweaked rules. It may be more likely that the UK's future government does a u-turn, so that the imperative not to ruin the economy trumps the demand for migration control expressed by the referendum.

Even so if that is the sector's only agenda, it still looks technical. It may even leave it open to some of the 'gravy train' slurs which were such an unpleasant feature of the campaign. What university and student organisations and associations should be doing is to seek solace, support and ideas from elsewhere in Europe. This would change the framing of their case and might enable them to enter the coming battle in a much more dynamic way.

Pursuing other ways of collaborating

There is a European higher education arena out there that is full of associations, institutions and organisations in which the British have not necessarily invested heart and soul. These institutions share an ambition to help universities to be strong, and for students to have a place in an arena bigger than a national state.

These include groups of like-minded universities such as the [Coimbra Group](#) and the [League of Research Universities](#). Many groupings have survived the highs and lows of the continent's history. Some have a recognised places in the structures of the European Higher Education Area which is underpinned by the intergovernmental [Bologna Process](#), which was launched in 1999.

The Bologna Process has attracted, in successive waves, the EU membership of the 1990s, the countries which have come in through the EU enlargements since 2004, Turkey, Russia and associated states on the frontiers of Asia including Kazakhstan, Europe's microstates including the Vatican, and most recently (and conditionally) the still undemocratic Belarus. This gives Bologna and the key membership organisations which are its stakeholders a huge cultural, historical and comparative reach for those who want to make use of it.

The European University Association, which groups 47 national rectors' conferences and many of the continent's

historically great universities, grew out of a confederation established after World War II. Universities were emerging from the grip of authoritarian states and battered nations. The confederation kept tunnels open through Cold War barriers. It was also a support for the universities of Greece, Spain and Portugal which had lived through dictatorships, and later those of the failed republic of Yugoslavia. It did much to help reduce barriers to mobility between systems which until the last two decades were distinctively different.

Today's EUA is much more managerial, obliged to pitch in such globally relevant policy issues as recognition and quality assurance, and to monitor developments in the always diverse European area – where countries faced with common problems like austerity respond in different ways. But the EUA still retains something of the spirit inherited from an earlier age, when determined people risked professional demotion and even prison to keep lines open to knowledge and ideas.

The [European Students Union](#), too, has a history of resisting authoritarianism. It was formed when Western student unions broke with the communist-dominated international student union in 1982 to create an information bureau on student matters across Europe. It came to maturity as a membership union for national student bodies in the wake of the Bologna Process. It currently incorporates 44 National Unions of Students from 38 countries. The condition for a national union to be accepted is that it should be open to all students regardless of political persuasion, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation or social standing. ESU is currently backing the efforts of the newly re-established students association of Belarus to get official status .

ESU has taken Brexit seriously, writing to David Cameron to express its concern that such a large student voice in favour of Remain should not go unheard. 'The students of Europe have a responsibility to make Europe a fairer place and to unite in the face of hate and division', says the newly elected British member of the ESU Executive Committee and current NUS-Wales President. This points to the fact that here, at least, [students are mobilised](#).

Take a deep breath, and return to the fray

This agenda-setting theory suggests the UK higher education sector could achieve a lot, were it now to take the long view and develop a non-EU European strategy enriched by sector experience in other countries. In a political crisis when governments are flailing around for a solution, those with cool heads and a solution at the ready have a good chance of winning through. (See that political science classic, John Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*^[1].)

However, there is a point which those sensitive about UK-EU relations should not ignore.

If the Bologna Process and many other forms of European higher education and research collaboration survive and flourish, it is because there has been EU funding for cooperation.

Many with first-hand experience of the European higher education world will know the Commission – under the Treaty and with strategy approved by the European Council and the European Parliament – is a facilitator, a source of expertise and incentive funding for cooperation and collaboration. Brexiteers will no doubt see this as propaganda, and regardless of the facts view it as a form of undemocratic control which needs to be reclaimed by Britain.

Yet ideas need resources and institutions to back them if they are to survive. So for anyone with an interest in the survival of a European dimension to higher education and research, resources which come from institutions in which accountability can be traced – including the Commission – enjoy crucial advantages over the causes funded by unaccountable billionaires.

It is not going to be an easy time for higher education. Nothing can be the same. But as the UK higher education world reflects on how it is to continue on the post-Brexit path, it is surely time to take a deep breath and return to fight with renewed energy for the values of European cooperation, as well as the money which has come into the

sector from the EU.

This piece originally appeared on [LSE BrexitVote](#).

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About the Author

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[1] Kingdon, J. (2011). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Update Edition, with an Epilogue on Health Care, 2nd Edition: Pearson Longmans Classics.

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