

Russell Group universities and Brexit

Summary

We welcome the reassurances the Government has been able to give on EU students, Horizon 2020 and regional EU funding so far. Our universities are just as open and welcoming to students, staff and ideas as we were before the EU referendum and we will continue to work with partners across Europe and more widely to boost the UK's international competitiveness.

The decision to leave the EU will have a significant impact on our universities and thus on the wider communities, business and other partners they work with. Uncertainty over the UK's future relationship with the EU is in itself a major concern. In Northern Ireland the land border with the Republic of Ireland is a unique and important issue. It is vital that freedom of movement across both jurisdictions continues unimpeded in order to sustain and enhance current north-south collaboration.

Russell Group universities are ready and well placed to support the Government in delivering an ambitious and successful industrial strategy. But to maximise the ability of universities to deliver cutting-edge research and innovation, boost jobs and growth and drive productivity, a good outcome for higher education and research is needed in the Brexit negotiations, as well as an immigration system which actively supports universities in attracting, recruiting and retaining talented staff and students from the EU and across the globe.

Key priorities for the Government in the upcoming negotiations with the EU should be:

- (a) Ensuring UK universities can continue to recruit and retain talented staff and students from across the EU and more widely without bureaucratic visa burdens
- (b) Ensuring the UK can continue to have full access to and influence over Horizon 2020 and future EU research and innovation programmes and infrastructures with a focus on excellence
- (c) Securing a good deal for future UK participation in the Erasmus+ programme.

The Government should also commit to increasing investment for universities to replace any lost funding from the EU as part of efforts to ensure we continue to be a globally competitive scientific nation and to strengthen the pipeline for growth and jobs in the UK.

Students

Excellent EU students are indispensable for world-class universities, contributing to a diverse student body and a thriving society, culture and economy. There are 61,000 students of other EU nationalities at Russell Group universities, making up 8% of undergraduate students and 15% of postgraduate students.

The reassurances Government has provided for current EU students and those starting courses in 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 have been very helpful to provide EU students the certainty they need when considering studying in the UK, as well as giving our universities clarity to plan ahead.

We are seeking the following reassurances:

- Confirmation of the immigration status of existing and prospective EU students and their right to remain in the UK for work or postgraduate study
- Confirmation at the earliest opportunity of the fee rate EU students might move to and when this would come into effect – this applies to postgraduate students as well as undergraduates

Staff

A strong base of talent from Europe and across the world enables research-intensive universities to remain globally competitive and is fundamental to excellent research, innovation and education. EU staff members make a significant contribution to our success, in particular to the excellence of the UK research base and in teaching key subjects vital to the UK economy, such as STEM and modern languages.

Currently, there are around 24,860 members of staff from other EU countries at our universities: 15% of the overall workforce, 23% of academics and 27% of staff on research-only contracts are EU nationals.

We welcome the ambition of both the UK Government and the EU to strike an early agreement on the rights of EU citizens in the UK and vice versa. However, there is understandably a high degree of uncertainty, which impacts on our ability to recruit and retain the highly-skilled staff we need from abroad.

We are seeking the following reassurances:

- Confirmation of the continued working rights for current EU staff (and their dependants) at UK universities and for those who take up positions during the transition period before the UK has left the EU. We would want staff and their dependants to retain the same rights to stay and work without a visa that they have now (with no time limit placed on this)
- In the longer term, we want to ensure our universities can continue to recruit the talented staff they need from all over the world without overly-burdensome visa requirements.

Research funding, collaboration and mobility

Research and innovation are global pursuits and are most effective when ideas and people are mobile across borders. The mobility of talent, the networks, collaborations, critical mass of research activity and funding (focused on excellence) that we gain from EU membership have contributed to the competitiveness of our leading universities and the UK economy as a whole.

EU funding is increasingly valuable for funding ground-breaking, collaborative and interdisciplinary research – in particular for multi-lateral collaborations where we can tap into expertise from a number of countries. Research income from EU sources represented 13% of the collective research grant income to Russell Group universities in 2015/16, up from 8% in 2007/08 – equivalent to £600 million.

We are seeking the following reassurances:

- Ensuring the UK remains the best place for science and innovation is one of the Government's 12 key Brexit principles – we want to ensure this remains a priority for the upcoming negotiations, with a view to ensuring continued UK participation in EU research (including research infrastructures), for the full duration of Horizon 2020 and future Framework Programmes with a focus on excellence
- We welcome the commitment of an additional £4.7 billion investment in R&D over the course of the Parliament. The Government should develop a long-term roadmap to increase public and private sector investment in R&D in the UK to 3% of GDP, particularly to support universities' international collaborations post-Brexit. This will be important to replace any lost EU funds and to ensure the UK remains a globally competitive scientific nation
- A commitment that the Government will look to secure a good deal to allow continued participation in Erasmus+, which contributes to social mobility and has a positive impact on graduate employability.

The Brexit negotiations must seek to maintain our status as a competitive and outward-looking nation, to drive world-class research and innovation at our leading universities for the wider benefit of the UK economy, society and culture.

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