EU Exit update, 15 July 2016

New Prime Minister and Cabinet Brexit appointments

The new Prime Minister Theresa May has lived up to her statement, “Brexit means Brexit” by appointing three Cabinet Secretaries who will work with her to lead the UK's negotiations on Brexit: Secretary of State for exiting the EU (David Davies MP), Foreign Secretary (Boris Johnson MP) and International Trade Secretary (Dr Liam Fox MP). All three Secretaries of State campaigned for the UK to leave the EU.

Oliver Letwin no longer has a cabinet or ministerial post, rendering the Cabinet Office's recently announced EU Unit redundant. The Unit was set up in the context of a Conservative leadership challenge not concluding until September, but now that we already have a new Prime Minister and a new department dedicated to leaving the EU, the Unit is no longer relevant. However, it is likely that Oliver Robbins who was leading the Unit will move to the Brexit department, probably as Davis’ Permanent Secretary, though this has yet to be confirmed.

David Davis will be charged with leading a new department who will look into the detail of how the UK should negotiate leaving the EU and establishing the red lines. It is encouraging for us that in his Conservative Home article Davis stressed that “…common sense implies that we should consult with stakeholders like the City, CBI, TUC, small business bodies, the NFU, universities and research foundations and the like”.

Fellow Brexiteers Johnson and Fox will be working with Davis via their new jobs. It is not yet clear what Johnson would lead on as Foreign Secretary, but Liam Fox’s immediate priority is to begin UK trade talks with non-EU nations, most likely prioritising USA, India and China.

It is also unclear whether there is a consensus amongst the Secretaries of State and Theresa May on when Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty should be triggered. Mrs May has previously said that she will not trigger Article 50 before the end of 2016 and is thought to want informal talks with EU leaders first with it being potentially closer to two years before the UK formally leaves. However, Davis has indicated, albeit before he was appointed, that while we need some time to negotiate, Article 50 should be triggered by the end of the year.

The next EU Council meeting is not scheduled to take place until 20 October 2016 which may buy the team some time to fully set up a negotiating team and establish their “red lines” on issues such as freedom of movement and access to the single market before official talks begin.

UUK will be making approaches to the Prime Minister and her advisers, relevant Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers when they are announced, to begin and continue our relationships and ensure that universities, science and research are on their agenda when it comes to Brexit.

We will also ensure that our work with other secretaries of state and ministers encourages them to coordinate with the new Brexit Department and David Davis –
including new Secretary of State for Education (which will now include higher education and skills) Justine Greening, and Greg Clark who will lead the new department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy which will probably host science and research. We also await the announcement of junior ministerial posts and what responsibilities they may have regarding Brexit. This includes whether David Davis will have junior ministers with him in his department supporting him on particular elements of the negotiations.

**Government statement on current EU nationals’ status**

The Cabinet Office, Home Office and the FCO issued a statement reiterating that there has so far been no change to the rights and status of EU nationals in the UK. While the statement shows that government expects the legal status of EU nationals already living in the UK to be ‘properly protected’ once the UK leaves the EU, it still does not provide the level of reassurance needed by existing and prospective students and staff affected by Brexit.

One of UUK’s immediate priorities is to ensure that government makes an unequivocal statement that other EU nationals currently living in the UK are welcome here, and provides clarity over their long-term residency status. We are already aware of a handful of instances whereby universities have offered positions to other EU nationals only for them to be turned down.

**Horizon 2020 and other EU funding**

We are continuing to receive detailed examples of UK researchers experiencing issues with collaborative bids to Horizon 2020, as well as ESIF projects being placed on hold. UUK is collating this evidence centrally.

Jo Johnson is aware of the issues related to Horizon 2020, and BIS has recently created a dedicated inbox to gather evidence of post-Brexit impact on science and research: research@bis.gsi.gov.uk

We would be grateful if you could share anything submitted with UUK, too.

**UUK statement on tolerance**

Following the EU referendum outcome, we will shortly release a further statement on the invaluable contribution non-UK students and staff make to our universities. In light of recent events, the aim is to highlight that universities continue to be international in their outlook, diverse, welcoming of people from all corners of the globe, and that universities are places where discrimination is never tolerated.