Open letter to the people of Brighton and Hove

VC says Sussex stands together: we will not tolerate prejudice

For the past week I have been reassuring the University’s campus community that, while we are not entirely sure what a future outside the EU will look like for us, we will do all we can to support those worried about how the decision will affect them.

At a recent meeting we held on campus, a question came from a member of staff who asked what we as a university could do to help combat some of the taunts against ‘foreigners’, aimed at our own staff and students, that have already surfaced in the local community.

I was deeply shocked to hear this. How can this be? Brighton had one of the highest votes for ‘remain’ in the country and is regarded as the UK’s most liberal and tolerant city. It’s horrific to think that this referendum has unleashed such offensive and prejudiced behaviour.

When we conducted a poll among our own students and staff, 82 per cent said they would vote to stay in the EU – heartening, I’m sure, for the thousand students and 300 members of staff that we currently host from our European neighbours.

In common with most UK universities, the University of Sussex has long valued its connections with communities overseas. With alumni from more than 190 countries and relationships with dozens of universities globally, internationalism is at our heart.

I believe the same is true of Brighton and Hove. For decades we have lived and worked alongside those not born in the UK. The city was one of the first to create a continental-style ‘café society in the UK – once boasting more restaurants per capita than any other UK holiday resort - and celebrates its diversity.

It is a model of how people from different backgrounds can get along, thrive, and enjoy each other’s culture. This rich mix of people and their histories makes it one of the very special places in the UK.

And it’s an economic success too. Brighton and Hove emerged from the last recession as one of the fastest growing and most sustainable local economies. I’m proud to say the University is part of that success, currently creating more than £600 million of spending a year in the region through facilities and expertise and rising as the University continues to grow.

Our research for example in biomedicine, astrophysics and social sciences – in part reliant on EU funding and expertise – also raises the profile of Brighton and Hove, and attracts more visitors.

For all these reasons I would hope that those who feel it’s acceptable to tell their neighbours, work colleagues and those who are contributing to their community that they are no longer welcome in the UK, will stop and think again.

This referendum may have decided that we are out of the EU, but that does not mean that we need to be a UK in isolation. And it certainly shouldn’t mean that we put up with open prejudice and, in some cases, unlawful abuse.

Look out for your friends and neighbours. Make sure they continue to feel welcome. This is the time to show others that multiculturalism makes us all richer, not poorer.

Professor Michael Farthing, Vice-Chancellor
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