UK exiting the EU – UUK update May 2017

FAQs and key messages for EU students

UUK have produced an updated FAQs and key messages document for communications with prospective EU students. In response to the question ‘Why study in the UK?’, the document highlights a number of reasons why the UK remains one of the most attractive destinations in the world for international students. The document also provides answers to practical questions about the current and possible future implications of the vote to leave the EU.

Brussels delegation, May 2017

Continuing its regular schedule of meetings with European influencers and policy-makers, a small Universities UK delegation of Vice-Chancellors travelled to Brussels on 4-5 May 2017 for meetings with key EU stakeholders. These included meetings with the European Commission’s Director-General for Education and Culture (responsible for Erasmus+), the new UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, the President of the European Research Council, and the Head of Unit for FP9 planning in DG Research and Innovation. The group also attended a roundtable with a group of EU research and higher education sector bodies, aimed at identifying joint actions to promote a positive and mutually beneficial settlement for our sectors.

There were several learning points from these meetings. Most urgently, it became clear that the current Treasury underwrite on Horizon 2020 funds needs further refinement as the Commission does not know whether the UK Government plans to route this funding through Brussels, or whether it establishes its own mechanisms, which would have ramifications for existing and unsigned grant agreements. On the likelihood of a favourable deal, there continues to be strong support from across the EU research and higher education community for continued UK participation in the EU programmes. However, there is a sense that discussions on HE and research are unlikely to be addressed early in the negotiations. UK involvement in the remainder of the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes (up to the end of 2020) seems inextricably linked with the ‘divorce bill’. Given that these programmes are part of the current multi-annual financial framework, full access to them will depend on agreement over the UK contribution to the rest of the MFF. The delegation also had an opportunity to share UUK’s thinking on the future shape of Framework Programme 9 with a number of key influencers.

Policy development priorities

UUK are continuing to develop policy ideas, options and positions on a range of Brexit-related issues, with input from UUK’s policy networks and board, and sharing their thinking with government officials and policymakers in both the UK and in Brussels, as appropriate.

This includes work on: research collaboration and funding; student finance; immigration; student and academic mobility; structural funds, regulatory issues, and the implications of free trade agreements for HE and research. Most of this work builds from the headline positions set out in UUK’s statement of Brexit policy priorities that it published in February.
One cross-cutting theme which UUK have recently prioritised is preparation for a possible ‘worst-case’ scenario from Brexit, in which exit negotiations collapse either with no deal being reached on the future UK-EU relationship, or insufficient progress being reached on the future relationship within the two-year Article 50 timeline and the UK government having insufficiently planned for what will follow. Following a meeting at the end of April between Theresa May and the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, there have been reports in the media that EU officials believe the UK government has ‘unrealistic expectations’ about the length and process of the negotiations, and on specific issues such as any ‘Brexit bill’ that the UK might be asked to pay to leave the EU. Juncker is reported to have stated that if the UK did not pay such a bill, then there would be no trade deal. UUK have recently been discussing with members – including through the International Policy Network – what suite of actions the new government must be prepared to take if faced with such a scenario, in order to ensure continuity and stability wherever possible. UUK are working quickly to ensure that they are in a position to inform incoming Ministers about what a ‘stability package’ of measures for universities would look like.

- **Phased process of implementation**

The Department for Education is interested to hear sector leaders’ views on our requirements as part of any wider ‘phased process of implementation’ that a new government might wish to put in place post-Brexit.

On 4 April, Prime Minister Theresa May signalled that free movement of EU citizens could continue during a transitional phase after the UK leaves the European Union in spring 2019, adding: “... it will be necessary for there to be a period of time when businesses and governments are adjusting systems and so forth, depending on the nature of the deal, a period of time during which that deal will be implemented”.

It has been difficult to estimate how long such a period would be in place for until the government states what it hopes an implementation / transitional deal should look like. Commentators have said that it could be as short as 18 months or last up to several years. However, a potentially new Conservative government might aim for as short a period as practically possible.

Officials in government are keen to understand exactly what a suitable period of time would look like for universities to be able to adapt to any future changes resulting from Brexit, predominantly in relation to:

- A possible change in fee status and loan eligibility for students from the EU
- A possible change in immigration requirements for incoming EU students
- A possible change in immigration requirements for incoming EU staff

Providing clear answers to these questions is of course challenging whilst details of the longer-term settlements we will be transitioning too remains uncertain and therefore the resulting level of change and adaptation required.

- **Strengthening bilateral relationships with European rector**s

UUK are making good progress in building stronger bilateral ties with European rector. An information note on a meeting with the Norway rectors in April has been published on the UUK website. In May, UUK coordinated an inbound delegation of Polish vice-rectors, hosted by Coventry
University. The Polish delegation expressed their desire to continue to foster close working relationships, regardless of the Brexit. In July, a delegation from the German rectors’ conference will meet UUK Board members. In addition to regular officer-level contact, outbound Vice-Chancellor delegations are planned to meet with French university leaders in Paris (19-20 June), Dutch university leaders in Amsterdam (22 September) and Italian rectors in Rome (autumn 2017). UUK also continue to work closely with the European Universities Association on Brexit-related policy issues.

- **General Election manifestos and Brexit**

Most political parties have now published their manifestos ahead of the General Election on 8 June 2017. The manifestos include many commitments on Brexit. Set out below is a brief summary of the university-related pledges on Brexit from the main political parties. UUK are awaiting the publication of the SNP’s manifesto, expected on 30 May.

**Conservatives** – The manifesto makes explicit that the UK would leave the single market and there will be a focus on comprehensive free trade agreements. The document is unsurprisingly light on clear commitments regarding Brexit negotiations, even with little mention of securing rights for EU citizens currently in the UK. It does however repeat two areas which the Prime Minister highlighted in her keynote Brexit speech earlier this year that the UK will continue to collaborate on science and innovation. While there is no mention of specific programmes, she said that “there may be specific European programmes in which we might want to participate and if so, it will be reasonable that we contribute.” There is also a clear commitment to reduce and control the number of EU citizens coming to the UK following Brexit. On structural funds, it states that a Conservative government would “use the structural fund money that comes back to the UK following Brexit to create a United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund, specifically designed to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations. The money that is spent will help deliver sustainable, inclusive growth based on our modern industrial strategy.”

**Labour** – Labour’s manifesto notes that they would “ensure that the UK maintains our leading research role by seeking to stay part of Horizon 2020 and its successor programmes and by welcoming research staff to the UK.” There would be no drop in EU Structural Funding because of Brexit until the end of the funding round in 2019/20, and would ensure that no region is affected by the withdrawal of EU funding in the next parliament. Britain should remain part of the Erasmus scheme. Labour would scrap the Brexit White Paper and immediately guarantee the rights of EU citizens already in the UK, and seek reciprocal arrangements for UK citizens in other EU countries. The manifesto acknowledges that freedom of movement will end following Brexit and our immigration will change, but says they would prioritise the economy over immigration reduction.

**Liberal Democrats** – The Liberal Democrats would hold a referendum on the terms of the UK’s future relationship with the EU once these have been negotiated, with the alternative option of remaining in the EU on the ballot paper. They would call for a unilateral guarantee of the rights of EU nationals in the UK, and call for similar commitments for UK citizens abroad. The Liberal Democrats would also call for the overhaul and simplification of process for EU nationals to obtain permanent residency and UK citizenship. They support continued access to Erasmus+ and “other EU-funded
schemes which increase opportunities for young people.” They state they would retain access to Horizon 2020 and Marie Skłodowska-Curie funding and say they “will campaign against any reduction in investment in UK universities and for their right to apply for EU funds on equal terms.” They would underwrite funding for British partners in EU-funded projects who would suffer cancellation of income due to Brexit and “Reverse the damage to universities and academics by changing the country’s course away from a hard Brexit.”

Plaid Cymru – The Plaid Cymru manifesto has a strong focus on Brexit. This includes a commitment to ensure that Wales can continue to buy and sell to Europe without any costly barriers; to secure the money promised to Wales by the Leave campaign, and not accept a penny less; to insist that all future trade deals are endorsed by the National Assembly for Wales and to guarantee the rights of all Europeans currently living and working in Wales.