Universities UK update February 2017

UUK’s Brexit policy priorities

A UUK briefing paper titled *What should be the government’s priorities for exit negotiations and policy development to maximise the contribution of British universities to a successful and global UK* was developed drawing from extensive feedback and advice received from UUK members over the past 6 months.

The paper summarises a clear set of priorities on which UUK will draw to inform its conversations with policy makers and influencers as it seeks to influence the post-exit environment for universities.

It outlines what the UK government should prioritise in three stages: transitional arrangements; exit negotiations; and domestic policy change.

Government White Paper

On 2 February, the government published a White Paper titled *The United Kingdom’s exit from and new partnership with the European Union*.

The section of most interest for the university sector was chapter 10, which focuses on how the government will ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of science and innovation.

While much of the content had already been revealed in the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech on 17 January, the White Paper goes into more detail about the strengths of the university sector and the importance of promoting research and development following Brexit.

The paper again signals the government’s intention following withdrawal from the EU to ‘collaborate with our European partners on major science, research and technology initiatives.’

In an earlier section on immigration, the vital contribution of EU students and staff is also acknowledged, though there are no specific commitments about their future following Brexit.

The government indicated that new immigration arrangements for EU nationals will be subject to a phased process of implementation in the coming years – an approach that aligns well with UUK policy priorities and the preferences that most members have expressed.

Outward student and staff mobility

UUK are keen to ensure that Brexit does not diminish opportunities that currently exist for UK students and staff to access vital global opportunities, predominantly through the Erasmus+ programme and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions.

However, in the longer term, regardless of whether the UK retains access to European mobility programmes, UUK want to encourage the government to use Brexit as an opportunity to expand the number and range of mobility opportunities.

This will involve greater investment in international mobility programmes, and will require steps to bring the UK more in-line with our competitors by adopting a quantitative target for UK students with overseas experience.

Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries on Brexit issues

UUK recently submitted written evidence to the Treasury Committee as part of their inquiry, ‘EU exit and transitional arrangements’.
The inquiry offered an opportunity to state what actions UUK consider the government should take immediately to help to address uncertainty and promote stability throughout a short transitional period as the UK exits the EU.

These actions were: (i) Confirm the right to reside and work in the UK post-exit for EU nationals who are currently working or studying in the university sector, and their dependents; (ii) Extend existing commitments around EU student finance to include those starting a course in 2018/19 or 2019/20, and (iii) Provide a clear signal of intent to negotiate continued UK participation in Horizon 2020 for the remainder of the programme.

Separately, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee is currently holding an inquiry, ‘Brexit and the Labour Market’, and will be considering EU and non-EU migration as part of its line of investigation.

Mutual recognition of qualifications directives

UUK are looking at how leaving the EU could affect the UK’s access to various mutual recognition of qualifications directives.

An exit from the Single Market could, for example, mean that the UK is no longer covered by the Professional Qualifications Directive, which in the long term could risk the value of a UK degree by creating uncertainty around the transferability of the qualification.

This insight will be used to inform conversations with relevant government and European Commission officials.

Delegation to Brussels, February 2017

On 2 and 3 February 2017, UUK attended a series of meetings in Brussels with a small delegation of vice-chancellors led by Steve Smith, as Chair of UUK’s International Policy Network.

Over the two days the delegation met with Commissioner Moedas, senior Commission officials, MEPs, UKREP, UKRO, EUA and Science Europe.

The main issues discussed included the mid-point review of Horizon 2020, the opportunities for future access to EU programmes and the development of the framework 9 research and innovation programme.

Clear reassurances were provided that the Framework 9 research and innovation programme would continue to be strongly focussed on excellence.

The delegation made clear that UK universities were keen to continue close collaboration with European partners and discussed options for how this could be achieved.

The delegation received a steer that universities across Europe and many European policy makers would like to see the UK play a continued role in European research collaboration post-exit.

Although access to EU programmes would likely be on less favourable terms than as a full member, it seemed possible that a future collaborative arrangement would recognise the UK as a significant research power.