Universities UK update July 2016

Universities UK delegation to Brussels

A Universities UK (UUK) delegation visited Brussels on 5-6 July to take the temperature of key stakeholders and to highlight the key issues facing the UK university sector.

The European Commission (EC), the European University Association and Science Europe, highlighted their commitment to continuing European cooperation in research and innovation and underlined that failing to secure mechanisms for continued close collaboration between the UK and European research partners would be to the detriment of both the UK, and the European Union.

The EC also undertook to promote the Commissioner’s messages of reassurance regarding the UK’s continued participation in Horizon 2020 to other European higher education sectors in order to discourage researchers from dropping UK partners from collaborative bids.

UUK also received valuable advice about the mechanics of the EU-UK negotiations and how to contribute to these effectively, as well as the anticipated priorities of an incoming Prime Minister.

UUK will be modelling scenarios for future research collaboration in detail over the summer in order to influence the Government’s thinking on this at the earliest opportunity, as well as framing wider arguments about the fundamental importance of UK universities and an internationally connected research sector for economic growth and British influence in the world.

UUK is in very regular contact with BIS, in contact with the Treasury and Home Office, and have also met with advisers from No. 10 to highlight the sector most pressing challenges, share evidence of impact and seek advice on how to resolve both these immediate issues and influence longer term policy development.

Support for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) following the referendum

UUK has written to James Wharton MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, Minister for Local Growth and the Northern Powerhouse, seeking immediate clarification on the future of ESIF funding in England, following reports from universities that approved projects that have not yet been countersigned have been put on hold. A

Although no formal statement has yet been issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government on the future of ESIF, UUK understands that future ESIF proposals have also been frozen.

UUK is urgently seeking clarification on the reasons behind this suspension, and a commitment from government to support ESIF funding without unnecessary delay. It is continuing to highlight to Ministers, including Jo Johnson, that any such suspensions could undermine the success of projects ready to be delivered, but also of the importance of the ESIF programme more widely in creating jobs and driving innovation in local areas.

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee

Chair of the UUK Research Policy Network, Professor Sir Ian Diamond, gave oral evidence to the Science and Technology Committee’s urgent inquiry into ‘Leaving the EU: implications and opportunities for science and research’.
Professor Diamond stressed the university and research community need immediate assurances on the status of EU students and staff and that any alternative model of UK membership of Horizon 2020 had to ensure that the UK retains its influence as well as access to the current structures and funding.

Professor Diamond also stressed that given its impact and leadership, the UK university and research sector must have a seat at the negotiating table going forward.

Further, he noted that for the sector to maintain its global leadership and reputation, we must be open to attracting the brightest and the best students, and the most highly skilled and sought after staff without restriction.

More information on the inquiry and witnesses can be found on the Committee website.

UUK will also be submitting written evidence and the University of Sussex is looking to contribute to the committee’s call for evidence.

**UUK activities and priorities**

UUK is currently prioritising the following activities in seeking to address the implications of Brexit on universities:

i)  Seeking clarity and reassurance from the UK Government, Governments in the devolved nations, and the Commission on a range of key issues and questions. Amongst a lengthy and growing list, priorities include: the immigration status of current and prospective EU staff; the status of current and future Horizon 2020 projects and EDRF funding; and the fees and the loans status for EU students, particularly those starting in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

ii)  Sharing the latest information with universities, staff and students.

iii) Gathering evidence on the impact of Brexit on institutions (pooling with others across the sector) and sharing this will policy and decision makers.

iv)  Modelling on potential future relationship with EU with pros/cons leading to development of clear set of sector priorities for exit negotiations.

v)  Developing a short, high level manifesto for the new PM to promote a vision of how universities can play a full economic, social and civil role and strengthen UK’s place in the world in a post-Brexit Britain. This will set out what’s needed to deliver that vision – both steps by Government domestically and priorities for the exit negotiations.

vi)  Developing and strengthening contacts with those who could influence future policy development and exit negotiation in the UK and Europe, including building coalition of support amongst university leaders in other EU member states.

vii) Promoting positive messages to current EU staff and students, prospective EU students and research partners (and more widely internationally) that the UK university sector is a welcoming destination, a high quality partner of choice and remains very much open for business and internationally engaged.