Exit negotiations start

On 19 June the UK Government and the European Commission started formal negotiations on the UK’s exit from the EU. Lead negotiators David Davis and Michel Barnier are likely to focus firstly on the process and timetable for discussions, before moving to the ‘phase one’ issues – the reciprocal right of EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens in other EU countries, the UK’s ‘divorce bill’ and the Northern Ireland border. It is unlikely that any detailed discussion on the nature of a future UK-UK partnership or potential access to programmes will happen until later in the process.

UUK will keep members updated on key developments of relevance to universities.

Universities UK has published a set of five priorities for exit negotiations, drawing from its longer briefing published in February 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?

Impact of the general election results on Brexit

The impact of the results of the 8 June 2017 general election on the UK Government’s exit negotiation positions or wider Brexit policy priorities was [at time of writing] unknown. There does appear to be some moves to consult more widely on Brexit priorities and listen to a wider range of opinions. This provides a fresh opportunity for the university sector to rearticulate priorities for exit negotiations, promote ideas for domestic policy change to address the implications of Brexit and highlight the transitional measures needed to promote stability.

There is much speculation that a Conservative minority government may take a ‘softer’ approach to Brexit, with a primary focus on securing an exit deal that is most favourable to the UK economy placed ahead of a focus on reducing immigration. However, this is by no means certain, nor are there yet details of what such a model would in practice entail.

There are also some commentators suggesting that it is now more likely that a minority government will attempt to negotiate access to some European programmes, yet, this is again still just speculation. Although it could be argued that – given the influence of the DUP and Scottish Conservatives - the ‘hardest’ of Brexit’s is now less likely there is also an increased likelihood that a minority government may not be able to secure majority support for its negotiating position thus making a ‘no deal’ scenario perhaps also more likely. Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers have made clear to the Prime Minister that they will not accept a ‘watering down’ of her positions on the ECJ, single market, customs union or commitment to significantly reduce EU migration.

There also remains a fear that exit negotiations could break down at some point, for instance, because of a disagreement over the UK’s ‘divorce’ bill (where there is a significant gap between the UK’s and EC’s position), leading to no deal being reached by March 2019 on the future relationship between the UK and the EU.
UUK continues to engage with relevant Cabinet members and ministers to highlight the sector’s priorities. The Prime Minister made only few changes to her cabinet and ministerial teams and the key ministers with whom UUK has been liaising in the DfE, BEIS and DeExEU remain unchanged.

Further, UUK are encouraged to see the immediate continuation of the High-Level Forum for higher education, research and Brexit following the election, chaired by Jo Johnson, with DeExEU Minister Robin Walker in attendance. The next meeting taking place on Wednesday 20 June 2017.

UUK are also arranging briefing meetings on universities’ Brexit priorities for Conservative and Labour MPs in July 2017.

A focus on stability measures is likely to be a priority as UUK engage with Ministers and other influencers this summer. These stability measures aim to serve a dual purpose, to provide greater short to medium-term certainty (whilst the longer-term arrangement remain unclear) and to minimise the risk of a ‘worst-case’ Brexit scenario transpiring.

- **Briefing paper - Brexit, Erasmus+ and expanding opportunities for student and staff mobility**

  The attached briefing paper provides evidence and arguments that underpin UUK’s policy ‘asks’ that the UK government should both secure continued access to the programme through the exit negotiations (given its added value), and support universities to remove barriers to expanding mobility opportunities to non-European destinations.

  The paper is informed both by the evidence on the impact that mobility has on graduate outcomes, and feedback from Vice-Chancellors, members of UUKi’s Mobility and Europe networks, and the British Council.

  In line with UUK’s wider work around ‘worst-case’ scenario planning, the paper also sets out what action the government should take to prepare for the possible outcome that the UK fails to secure access to Erasmus+ after March 2019.

  UUK are using this briefing to inform officials in the DfE and DeExEU as they prepare evidence and options for ministers.

- **Developing the 9th Framework Programme**

  The legislative process for the 9th Framework Programme (the successor scheme to Horizon 2020, due to start in 2021), has been delayed. The European Commission now intends to publish a public consultation either late 2017 or early 2018, with a formal proposal to follow in summer 2018.

  UUK intends to play a full and active role in this process and is developing a comprehensive vision for FP9 to submit to this consultation, which will also be shared with key Brussels stakeholders through VC delegations.

  This will build on UUK’s submission to the mid-term evaluation of Horizon 2020, the discussion paper on FP9 prepared by UUK for the Government’s *High-Level Stakeholder Forum on EU Exit (Universities, Higher Education and Research)*, chaired by Jo Johnson MP, and discussions that have already taken place with Vice-Chancellors at the UUK’s International Policy Network and Research Policy Networks.
As part of this process, UUK will survey the membership on their views on FP9 over summer 2017.

- **Joint statement with CPU**
  
  On 19 June a board-level Universities UK delegation was in Paris to sign a joint statement with the French Rectors’ Conference, the CPU.

  In the statement, the signatories reaffirmed the importance of strengthening partnerships in the fields of mobility, training and research and innovation between their members, at both institutional and system levels. In particular, UUK and the CPU hope that despite the UK’s decision to leave the EU, the political settlement of the UK’s departure will allow these links to continue to flourish.

  In addition to meeting with the CPU and signing the joint statement, the delegation also met with representatives of the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research, the British Council and the French National Centre for Scientific Research. The two-day visit concluded with a meeting with the British Ambassador to France, Lord Edward Llewellyn of Steep.