Universities UK update March 2017

▪ Political developments in Westminster

The government’s recent White Paper on Brexit principles included relatively positive signals in relation to the value of international talent and international collaboration for universities.

However, there are, as yet, no formal policy proposals or negotiating positions confirmed on the key issues for universities.

UUK’s primary objective at this time is to influence government to move from giving positive signals to firm policy positions in line with UUK’s priorities, as set out in its briefing document – which has been shared widely with policy makers.

▪ 2018/19 EU student fees, grants and loans

UUK are continuing to highlight to government the urgent need to provide clarity on EU students’ fee status and eligibility for grants/loans for those starting a course in 2018/19.

UUK understand that a number of government departments are supportive of extending the current guarantee and that this is now actively under consideration by No. 10.

UUK have shared with government officials evidence that shows that four out of five students start their research about studying abroad more than 12 months in advance of actual enrolment, highlighting the importance of action being taken as soon as possible to prevent a further drop in EU applications for 2018/19 entry.

▪ Switzerland delegation

Between 20 and 21 February 2017, a vice-chancellor delegation, supported by UUK and UUKi staff, travelled to Switzerland to meet with Swiss university leaders and government representatives.

In addition to seeking opportunities to strengthen UK-Swiss collaboration, an objective of the visit was to develop understanding of the short- to medium-term actions taken in Switzerland to address the country’s exclusion from both the Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ programmes in 2014, following a refusal to grant Croatians free access to the Swiss labour market.

In addition, the visit gathered insights into the Swiss government’s negotiations with the European Commission which, in particular, resulted in readmittance to Horizon 2020 in December 2016.

Key learning points from the delegation included:

- The uncertainty generated by the process was highly damaging for universities and researchers, as evidenced by a significant downturn in the number of successful Swiss project applications;
- While the Swiss government’s temporary back-up scheme to replace the loss of ERC funding was functional, it was nowhere near as effective as the ERC itself, and accessing the collaborative opportunities afforded by Horizon 2020 as a third country was even more problematic;
- And the Swiss government’s replacement mobility scheme has managed to maintain a more or less constant level of mobility, but at a much higher cost.

▪ New Policy Lab report: Positioning the UK within the global research landscape
In December 2016, UUK worked with the Policy Institute at King’s College London to host a full-day Policy Lab, focused on how the UK can be best positioned to lead and participate internationally in research in the years ahead, across a range of scenarios.

The event brought together vice chancellors, the Research Councils, the Royal Society, Digital Science, the Wellcome Trust, the science and innovation lead at the Swiss embassy, UKRO and UUK staff.

Participants considered how the UK higher education sector and the wider research community could maximise opportunities for global engagement with different levels of access to knowledge, skills, infrastructure and funding post-exit, and considered what policy levers are available to secure the most favourable environment in each case.

In addition to participants being very clear that EU Framework Programmes are a central pillar of research collaboration, it was agreed that, regardless of the level of access or influence the UK secures when it comes to Framework Programmes, an early plan should be developed in the eventuality that collaboration with the EU is made more difficult.

This plan could include the development of a new, competitively awarded ‘excellence fund’ for research, a need to consider large collaborative as well as multiple bilateral arrangements with other countries, and the potential development of unique infrastructure to enhance the attractiveness of the UK as a collaborative partner and to be a magnet for talent.

A report setting out the day’s discussions and conclusions is being used to inform UUK’s ongoing work to identify how government can enhance opportunities for collaboration in the long term, post-Brexit.