Universities UK update November 2017

Updated Erasmus+ underwrite

Earlier this month UUK received what it called “welcome confirmation” from Jo Johnson that the UK government will now “underwrite successful bids for Erasmus+ which are submitted while the UK is still a Member State, even if they are not approved until after we leave, and/or payments continue beyond the point of Exit”.

This will allow universities to apply for funding right up to March 2019, and will secure mobility periods due to take place in the academic year 2019/20.

Although uncertainty remains around the UK’s longer-term position within the programme, the Minister also confirmed that, “In the event that we no longer participate in the Erasmus+ Programme after Exit, we will make arrangements to administer the underwrite and support students to undertake their Erasmus+ study periods abroad”, reassuring universities further that the government underwrite will still stand even if the UK were to no longer be an Erasmus+ programme country.

This new guarantee has now been officially updated on the UK National Agency’s website which also states that they are discussing “practical details regarding how this will be implemented”.

UUK are continuing to work with the UK government and the National Agency on these practical details, as well as promoting the many benefits of the Erasmus+ programme to encourage the government to seek access to the programme post-Brexit.

UUK have worked closely with several MPs across different parties on this issue to make sure that the call to remain in Erasmus+ post exit is being made to government by supportive MPs, who are also trying to secure a debate in Parliament on the issue.

Exit negotiations

During the European Council Summit on 19 and 20 October 2017, the European Council concluded that not enough progress had been made to initiate Phase 2 of the negotiations.

Talks with senior officials at the European Commission and UK government ministers indicate that significant progress has been made on citizen’s rights, but that the financial settlement and Northern Irish border issue remain sticking points.

The next opportunity to commence Phase 2 is during the next European Council Summit in December.

If the UK government and the EU can agree on the financial settlement for exit and initiate Phase 2, the UK can participate in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ until the end of these programmes (December 2020).

Joint statement – national rector’s conferences

As a response to the delay in the negotiations, Universities UK International coordinated a joint statement, signed by 22 European National Rector’s Conferences and the European University Association.

In this statement the NRCs asked their respective governments and the European Commission to speed up the negotiations.

The statement received coverage in the UK media by the Guardian and the Times Higher Education as well as European media.
Political engagement

UUK have been working with parliamentarians to raise the profile of concerns and policy asks with a focus on citizens’ rights, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and financial support for EU students starting in 2019/20.

Parliamentarians have raised questions for UUK in a number of forums including Brexit and Education oral questions, Jo Johnson’s evidence to the Science and Technology Committee, and David Davis’ evidence to the Brexit Select Committee.

During the Brexit Secretary’s evidence to the Committee, he indicated that it was “likely” that the UK would remain in Horizon 2020 for the remainder of the programme and that EU students would continue to have “home” student status in 2019/20.

UUK are also working with MPs to secure a debate in parliament on EU students and Erasmus+. UUK have recently met with Hilary Benn MP, Chair of the Brexit Select Committee, to discuss the sector’s short- and long-term priorities while discussing immigration priorities with Minister for Immigration, Brandon Lewis.

UUK also supported Roberta Blackman-Woods and Paul Blomfield MP, chairs of the Universities and International Students all-party parliamentary groups respectively, to write to Jo Johnson calling for clarity on Erasmus+ for students starting this autumn.

UUK presented a paper on student and staff immigration and mobility issues to the joint Jo Johnson / DexEU led advisory forum on universities, research and EU exit. The paper highlighted and evidenced a range of issues that need to be resolved and outlined a range of policy options, which were discussed at length by participants.

VC delegation to Brussels

At the end of October, one of UUK’s regular high-level delegations of Vice-Chancellors visited Brussels.

The delegation met with key stakeholders at the UK Research Office, the UK Permanent Representation to the EU, DG Education and Culture, DG Research and Innovation and DG Economic and Financial Affairs at the European Commission, and the European Universities Association.

A recent meeting also took place with members of Barnier’s Article 50 team.

The stakeholders shared helpful information about the latest EC priorities and developments and were largely receptive to the benefits of UK participation on both the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes until 2020, but highlighted concerns about the financial settlement.

The European Commission were still positively encouraging the UK’s participation in the development of the Erasmus+ successor programme and Framework Programme 9.

The next VC delegation to Brussels will take place in March 2018, when UUK hope to meet with key officials in the European Parliament as well as continuing dialogue with European Commission contacts.

Case studies report - The Brightest Minds

Later this month, UUK will publish case studies and a report ‘The Brightest Minds - why our universities need the vital contribution of EU staff’.

The case studies include personal testimony from EU researchers on what working in the UK means to them, and will illustrate how the UK’s research excellence would suffer without them.

It will highlight the ongoing uncertainties EU researchers have around their residency rights and make the case for the future post-exit immigration system for EU nationals.