Universities UK update October 2017

Prime Minister’s Florence speech

On 22 September, the Prime Minister gave a speech in Florence setting out plans for a “new era of cooperation and partnership between the UK and the EU”.

One of the most substantial proposals put forward was a call for a post-Brexit ‘implementation period’ of around two years after March 2019, during which time freedom of movement will still be in place (although there will be a requirement for EU nationals arriving during this period to register, a measure previously outlined by Home Secretary Amber Rudd in a letter to the Migration Advisory Committee).

The proposal for an implementation period, including of this length, aligns closely with UUK’s asks as outlined in their paper on Brexit stability measures, which they have been discussing with key parliamentarians and officials across government in recent months.

Theresa May also announced that, during a transition period, the UK will honour commitments made during the period of EU membership. Although subject to negotiation, such a scenario could include continued access to, and participation in, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ until the end of the programmes, and UUK are seeking further clarification from government officials on the implications of this position for the sector.

However, in response to the Prime Minister’s call for a transition period, the EU’s chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, made clear that sufficient progress has still not been made on priority matters in order for discussions about trade, transition and the future UK-EU relationship to begin. UUK are therefore continuing to highlight with government the growing urgency to shore up stability and certainty in the short- to medium-term. UUK also have a meeting with senior representatives from Barnier’s negotiating team later this month.

EU citizens’ rights

Although progress has been made towards an agreement on citizens’ rights, a final guarantee has still not been secured, with the role of the European Court of Justice post-Brexit remaining a key stumbling block.

UUK are aware of the utmost importance of being able to provide the 46,000 EU nationals working in the university sector with the security they need around their future, and are continuing to highlight in their communications with government that this matter must continue to be prioritised and an agreement reached as soon as possible that guarantees: full access to public services; an assurance that UK-based EU researchers seeking to obtain ‘settled status’ won’t be penalised for spending periods out of the country; not to introduce a retrospective cut-off date for eligibility.

UUK will again raise these concerns at upcoming meeting with both the Minister of State for Immigration and Home Office’s Director-General for Immigration.
Erasmus+

There remains an urgent need for the government to strengthen its existing guarantee that underwrites Erasmus+ student mobility grants to include university students who started their degrees this autumn 2017.

UUK have spoken with Jo Johnson MP about this issue and have written to David Davis MP to highlight the issues and suggest action that he could take to address this immediate issue.

UUK have also briefed a number of parliamentarians, asking them to raise questions in the House.

Shaping Framework Programme 9

The UUK survey on the next Framework Programme will feed into its developing vision for the next programme, which it will share with the Commission ahead of the public consultation, which is expected to open in January 2018.

This vision will also take account of the European Commission’s response to the Lamy report, which is expected at some point in October.

The key priorities from this vision will also be discussed with European Commission officials in meetings during the next UUK Brussels delegation on 30-31 October 2017.

European Investment Bank (EIB)

With future access to the EIB uncertain, UUK have undertaken an assessment of the Bank’s added value for universities, in order to inform its conversations with government as future membership is negotiated with the EU. As part of this, UUK have interviewed several universities who either have EIB loans or have chosen to finance recent, large-scale investments via alternative sources.

Based on these discussions, it is evident that some of the most prominent benefits of an EIB loan are: the low interest rates, the flexible terms, the length of loans available, and the EIB’s focus on community and economic benefits.

Whether the UK has access to the EIB post-Brexit or not, UUK are encouraging the government to work with the university sector to ensure that the added value can be retained as part of the wider financial landscape.

Separately, UUK are aware that some universities are concerned about whether they are eligible to continue to borrow from the EIB following last year’s EU referendum. These concerns were exacerbated by an article in The Times, which suggested that the EIB “has effectively imposed a moratorium on new long-term loans to the UK”. UUK have since spoken with the EIB directly, who advised that the Bank has in fact signed a number of contracts across sectors in the UK since the referendum. However, there has been a delay in the approval process for some projects because of a combination of high demand and the implementation of more stringent due diligence processes. The EIB is keen to raise awareness of its willingness to lend to UK universities, and to encourage universities to look at the EIB as a viable funding option, insisting that applicants should not be deterred.
UUK Trade Policy Lab

On 15 September, UUK co-convened a Trade Policy Lab with the Centre for Commercial Law Studies at Queen Mary University of London to further the sector’s thinking on the opportunities and risks for universities linked to the government’s free trade agreement agenda, particularly in relation to transnational education, international research collaboration, and qualifications recognition.

Building on a UUK-commissioned report authored by the University of Sussex’s UK Trade Policy Observatory (UKTPO) earlier this year, the event brought together trade academics, international staff from UK universities, representatives from BEIS, DfE and DIT, and a representative of the World Trade Organization, among others.

A key learning from the day’s discussions was that, because each bilateral trade agreement will be different in nature, UUK will need to consult closely with its member universities in order to: determine the most pertinent issues (if any) on which to focus, and prioritise certain agreements over others based on the level of risk/opportunity.

To inform its approach, UUK will also need to look more closely at the real-world outcomes of international trade agreements featuring higher education and research commitments to which other nations have agreed.

Media activity

The possible impact of Brexit on universities has continued to feature in the news.

Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive of UUK, spoke with The Sunday Times about the possible impact of Brexit on the Erasmus+ exchange programme. The story (3 September) focused on the need for government to take urgent action to address the current uncertainty faced by students starting this autumn on a course with a mandatory period abroad through the scheme in 2019-20.

Alistair Jarvis’ comment article for Times Higher Education stressed that UK universities urgently need several assurances over Brexit, drawing largely on the set of stability measures that were approved by the UUK Board.

The UK’s position paper on a post-Brexit science partnership also generated coverage. UUK responded, urging the UK government to “negotiate access to, and influence over, the next EU research and innovation programme”.

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