UUK update January 2018

EU exit negotiations and next steps for UUK

UUK welcomed the progress reached through December’s agreement on the UK’s exit from the EU, which provides much needed certainty for EU staff, as well as students and researchers across the UK and Europe.

Although an important step forward in addressing some of the sector’s key immediate concerns around citizens’ rights and participation in valuable EU programmes until the end of 2020, UUK are keen to see government act now to provide even greater certainty and stability for universities, by:

- Supporting the higher education sector in increasing awareness across Europe of the UK’s continued eligibility to participate in certain EU programmes until the end of 2020. This is most urgent for Horizon 2020, as official statistics show a drop in UK participations and collaborations following 18 months of uncertainty
- Confirming that the fee status and loan eligibility of EU students starting a university course in 2019/20, or throughout any post-exit transition period, will not change
- Clarifying that EU students and university staff entering the UK during any post-exit transition period will be able to do so without facing additional barriers, (recognising that government is already considering a system of registration for new arrivals)

As the government prepares its own positions ahead of the second phase of exit negotiations – focusing on transition and the future UK-EU relationship – UUK are preparing an updated Brexit priorities statement to support their external engagement, which will incorporate the above set of more immediate asks, as well as a refocusing on how government can secure an effective post-exit settlement for universities through a combination of negotiation and domestic policy reform for the longer-term.

UUK understand that the Prime Minister will be making a speech during the parliamentary recess in February setting out the government’s Brexit positions, which UUK want this refreshed set of priorities to inform.

Political engagement and developments

The recent reshuffle saw a new Education Secretary and ministers in higher education, immigration, Brexit and trade.

Suella Fernandes MP joined rather than replaced a member of the ministerial team at DExEU while Robin Walker MP remains the minister who will lead on higher education issues.

UUK has stressed the valuable engagement the sector has experienced through the High-Level Stakeholder Forum on EU exit, universities and research, urging the Minister to maintain this forum under his leadership.

Greg Clark remains as Secretary of State at BEIS with Cabinet-level responsibility for research and innovation and a seat on the Brexit sub-committee.

Also, with potential impact on Brexit issues, Caroline Nokes MP was appointed Immigration Minister while Graham Stuart MP takes over from Mark Garnier as Trade Minister with responsibility for higher education exports.

UUK has written to the new ministers highlighting UUK priorities regarding Brexit and to arrange meetings with them as soon as possible to discuss these issues further.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

On Wednesday 17 January, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill completed its progress through the House of Commons and will now move on to be scrutinised by the House of Lords.

In addition to removing the ability of EU institutions to legislate for the UK through the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, this bill establishes mechanisms to retain all current EU law to provide immediate legal certainty as the UK withdraws from the EU. At a later date, parliament can choose to legislate for changes to this retained EU law as it considers appropriate.

Since its introduction to the Commons, MPs have expressed concerns about different aspects of the bill. Criticisms have been particularly focused on the wide-ranging powers given in the bill for the government to alter primary
legislation via statutory instrument – intended to allow easy transposition of EU law and implementation of some parts of the withdrawal agreement – which some say will not receive adequate parliamentary scrutiny.

While numerous amendments were voted on during the bill’s passage through the Commons, only one passed: an amendment to Clause 9 intended to secure a ‘meaningful’ vote on the withdrawal agreement.

Framework Programme 9 consultation and development of UUK position

The European Commission published a consultation on EU funds in the area of investment, research & innovation, SMEs and single market on 10 January.

UUK will be submitting a position paper on the next Framework Programme (FP9) to this consultation, the key messages of which will be discussed by the UUK Board on 2 February. The position will be based on input received through the UUK members survey on FP9 last summer, discussions with the International and Research Policy Networks in September 2017, and a joint UUK-UKRO research managers workshop in October 2017.

UUK is also feeding evidence and ideas in to the developing BEIS submission to the FP9 consultation.

The Commission is also expected to publish an informal call for ideas on mission-driven planning in FP9 by the end of January to which UUK will also be responding.

Erasmus+ budget uplift and influencing the successor programme

Ahead of the February deadline for Erasmus+ Key Action 1, (mobility), funding, Universities UK International (UUKi) have produced an information note regarding the budget uplift available.

It has been announced that for the 2018 call for applications, the UK’s overall budget has increased significantly to almost €170 million. The budget specifically for Higher Education student mobility in other Erasmus+ programme countries has increased by 20%. This budget increase is built into the programme lifecycle and 2017 was the most popular year for Erasmus+ in the UK so far.

The information note on the UUKi website provides more details on this budget uplift and the opportunities this presents to UK institutions.

In addition to this significant budget uplift, UUK have submitted a paper directly to the European Commission on priority innovations for the Erasmus+ successor programme due to start in 2021. The two priority innovations set out were to make short-term mobility an important component of the successor programme and to improve support for disadvantaged and underrepresented learners.

The paper was based upon the answers provided by the sector to UUKi’s Midterm Evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme as undertaken early last year.

Whilst the European Commission is not conducting a specific consultation for Erasmus+ as it is for Framework Programme 9, it has just launched a series of public consultations on the priorities that should be reflected in the next Multiannual Financial Framework including one on “EU Funds in the Area of Values and Mobility”. This includes questions on the current performance and future challenges of the Erasmus+ programme. The consultation opened on 10 January and will remain open until 8 March 2018.

Settled status for EU nationals

UUK continue to engage with senior officials on the settled status process for EU nationals already in the UK.

Before Christmas, there were some positive developments on this front, with confirmation that the cut-off date for eligibility for settled status would be the date of EU withdrawal and that individuals with permanent residence would be able to switch to settled status for free.

UUK is now involved in discussions with officials to shape the operational structure of the settled status process with the aim of ensuring it is as light-touch as possible, places the minimum burden possible on individual applicants, and does not disadvantage EU staff or students at UK universities.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The industrial strategy white paper, published late November 2017, reiterates that the government will ensure that local areas continue to receive flexible funding for their local needs.
Following the UK’s departure from the European Union, government will launch the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), and intends to consult this year on the precise design and priorities for the fund. UUK are continuing to work with officials at the Cities and Local Growth Unit (a cross-departmental team across BEIS and DCLG) to help shape the fund. UUK are also active on the ESIF Growth Programme Board, the official programme monitoring committee for the structural funds programme in England, which the UKSPF will follow.

Universities UK have participated in two DCLG ‘scrutiny sessions’ in May and June 2017 – the first with other sector groups, and the second convening ESIF practitioners from a range of UK universities. UUK have also fed into discussions as part of the Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation’s High-Level Stakeholder Forum on EU Exit.

At the December 2017 ESIF National Growth Board, members were informed that the phase one agreement covered participation in the ESIF programme until 2020. UUK is currently seeking written confirmation of this.

**European engagement and delegations**

The European Commission and the UK Government have until the European Council summit in March 2018 to negotiate a deal on the transition period.

The proposal of the Commission as it stands includes a transition period that would last until December 2020, during which the UK would adhere to all EU rules and regulations as it does now and accept the continuing rule of the European Court of Justice, while losing its formal influence: the voting rights.

Trade negotiations are planned to commence in March. The future relationship between the EU and UK in higher education and research, including FP9 and the Erasmus+ successor programme, will be a part of these negotiations. UUK will continue to emphasise the importance of the European programmes to both UK government officials, as well as to its contacts in the EU.

As a response to the joint report on the Phase 1 agreement, Universities UK International have drafted a briefing on what the agreement means for higher education and research and will distribute this to its European contacts. The briefing is aimed at decreasing the uncertainty the sector faced the last 18 months and urges European universities and researchers to continue to work with us, as there is no change to UK’s status in Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020.

In 2018, UUKi will continue their outreach to other EU Member States and continue to build their presence in Brussels. Three Brussels delegations are planned for 2018 in March, June and October. In addition, three other outbound delegations are planned: a Nordic campaign in March, a delegation to Spain in June and a delegation to Austria and Slovenia in the autumn.

**Trade policy and higher education**

Universities UK International have recently commissioned the UK Trade Policy Observatory (UKTPO) at the University of Sussex to provide further expert recommendations and consultancy regarding how future UK trade agreements and wider trade policy could influence the operating environment for UK universities.

UKTPO-authored UUK’s previous report on this topic, entitled ‘Can free trade agreements enhance opportunities for UK higher education?’, was released last year and remains available on the UUK website.

This new phase of consultancy will draw on the views of the UUK membership to inform thinking on trade agreements and higher education, resulting in policy recommendations to be put before the UUK board for review ahead of communication to UK officials later in 2018.

**Universities UK survey: International student enrolments, applications and pathways**

Later this month, UUK will be issuing a survey to institutions to gather up-to-date evidence on EU and non-EU student enrolments and applications across the sector. The information gathered will be invaluable in informing UUK’s evidence base and subsequent policy development and political engagement linked to the impact of EU exit on universities. Questions in the survey will relate to student enrolments, new entrants, applications, and common pathways into UK higher education.