

MillionPlus

The Association for
Modern Universities



POLICY BRIEFING

Brexit – what’s best for our
universities and students?

Introduction

MillionPlus, the Association for Modern Universities, believes that it is crucial that the needs of the UK's higher education sector are fully considered during the Brexit negotiations.

As set out in our [report](#) published in October 2016, the extent of the trade between the European Union (EU) and the UK's universities is substantial.¹ Since the triggering of Article 50, and the start of formal negotiations, it is increasingly important that the needs of the higher education sector are understood and appreciated by government.

This briefing highlights the key issues and outlines what the best deal for Brexit would look like to ensure that the interests, income, collaborations and reputation of the UK's higher education sector are sustained during the negotiations and beyond.

Tackling these issues will help to support a sector that makes a significant contribution to the UK's economy, exports and soft power. It would also offer continued access to EU students and staff, boost regional economies where universities are key players in promoting growth and workforce skills, and help protect the UK's science base in the years ahead.

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¹ [http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Policy Briefing - Trade in HE services and research - negotiating Brexit.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Policy%20Briefing%20-%20Trade%20in%20HE%20services%20and%20research%20-%20negotiating%20Brexit.pdf)

1. THE TERMS OF UK-EU STUDENT MOBILITY AND TRADE

In 2015/16 127,000 EU students were studying in UK universities.² The spending power alone of EU students generates over £3.7bn per year to the UK economy, and supports some 35,000 jobs.³ EU students add to the academic and cultural diversity of our institutions, and their engagement helps to sustain courses for UK students that would otherwise not be viable, especially in STEM subjects and modern foreign languages. These students are a vital market for UK higher education, and it is in the best interests of the UK that this market remains open, and that UK universities remain attractive to EU students.

It is impossible to foresee the UK retaining its EU market if EU students are re-classified as international students post-Brexit. There is no tradition of students paying tuition fees upfront across the 27 member-states, and research from London Economics has stated that if EU students were treated like international students, EU student mobility to the UK would collapse. This would lead to an overall loss of income to the UK sector of around £40 million - with at least 100 of the UK's universities worse-off.⁴

It is also unwise to assume that such a large number of students can easily or quickly be replaced by a growth in the international market.

Maintaining access to Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes post-Brexit would be a highly positive step. However, only a minority of EU students come through these schemes (30,183 in 2014/15, less than a quarter of the total population), so it is vital that a broader view of the EU student market is taken into account throughout the negotiations.⁵ Failing to do so risks delivering significant market advantage to the UK's global and European competitors and will lead to a significant loss of income for UK universities and their local economies.

The UK needs a broader, bolder deal that supports and enables reciprocity in terms of freedom of study between the UK and EU. EU students must not be priced out of studying at UK universities post-Brexit and UK students should have opportunities to study in the EU27. Such an approach would also deliver benefits to the UK in terms of 'soft power' with what will remain, geographically, our nearest trading partners.

The best Brexit deal would deliver:

- A freedom of study area between the UK and EU, ensuring that UK universities remain open and attractive to EU students.
- A specific reciprocal arrangement between the UK and EU to enable home fees for EU and UK students, and access to funding.

2. ACCESS TO TALENT

The UK must remain open to talented academics and staff from across the EU. Uncertainty about the immigration status and citizenship rights of current and future EU staff, their partners and dependents is making it harder to retain these staff and will undermine the future recruitment of new staff from the EU. Currently, EU academics play a critical role in the UK's universities, especially in modern foreign languages, biology, and engineering. Without the ability to effectively plan, UK universities will lose out on, or be unable to retain, talented people from the EU with knowledge and expertise that will benefit our universities and students.

² <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/detailed-statistics>

³ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/eu-students-vital-to-regional-economies.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Hepi-Report-91-Screen.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/spain-most-popular-erasmus-destination>

The best Brexit deal would:

- Ensure that accessing academic talent from the EU will be as frictionless as possible post-Brexit.
- Guarantee the rights of all EU workers currently working in UK universities, and all those working in UK universities at the point of Brexit.

3. INVESTMENT AND JOBS

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) have helped to transform regions of the UK. Universities have played key roles in drafting and delivering ESIF regeneration programmes based on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. These funds, along with the numbers of EU students that study at our universities, have a significant impact on jobs in the UK.

The best Brexit deal would:

- Maintain access to, or guarantee to match with UK government funding, the level of structural funding received by the UK, and its regions, in order to guarantee continued investment and help address inequalities in regional growth.

4. AT THE FOREFRONT OF RESEARCH

The UK is a global leader in research and our universities have the second highest global citation levels, after the USA.

Modern universities play a key role in delivering research with impact and over half of all research at modern universities has been assessed as world leading or internationally excellent.⁶

In 2015/16 UK universities received £840m in research funding from the EU and programmes such as Horizon 2020. In modern universities, in particular, EU research funding provides a significant proportion and source of research income, as EU funding is less concentrated than UK research funding. Any reduction in this research funding would therefore be a major concern to many universities, and this would impact on the work they can do in their communities, with local businesses, and on the quality of experience for their students.

The best Brexit deal would:

- Maintain access to successful EU research and collaborative programmes like Horizon 2020, or, the UK government should guarantee that current EU research funding levels are matched post Brexit and ensure that the distribution of this funding remains diverse.

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http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Is_science_and_research_funding_in_higher_education_meeting_the_challenges_of_the_21st_century.pdf

5. REGULATIONS AND ARBITRATION

As with other major sectors of the UK economy, trading and collaborative relationships between universities are supported by a common framework of regulations, a mutual recognition of qualifications and quality assurance regimes and an agreed arbitration mechanism via the Court of the European Union, more often referred to as the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Some EU agencies or Research Infrastructures, such as the European Social Survey, are also currently located in the UK. Removing UK universities from these programmes would be harmful to collaboration, and to UK research, and an outcome must be achieved that does not cut the UK adrift from such successful and beneficial initiatives.

The best Brexit deal would:

- Agree common arbitration procedures, with ideally the retention of the ECJ for this purpose.
- Create the necessary mechanisms to ensure that the UK continues to recognise EU regulations and frameworks post-transition to underpin the potential for UK universities to continue to trade and engage in collaborations with the EU and EU partners.
- Or, if that is impossible in the timeframe, agree a transitional deal where all EU regulations continue to be applied, until the appropriate mechanisms are established.

Conclusion

During the UK's membership of the EU the UK's universities have benefitted from access to a market of 500 million people, European research funding and programmes and the application of a common set of EU regulations and standards. With key local and regional stakeholders, universities have also successfully bid for and led projects that have resulted in European Structural Funds being allocated to regions throughout the UK. In total, between 2014 and 2020, this will amount to €10.8bn of investment.⁷

The deal that the government negotiates to leave the European Union will have powerful and long-lasting implications for UK universities and their students and the different regions and countries of the UK. It is critical that, during the negotiations, the government builds on what has been achieved and strikes a deal that will maintain the UK's status as a leader in higher education and supports the capacity of this sector to continue to trade with the EU.

If you would like information about MillionPlus or would like to discuss this briefing further then please contact us at:

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⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307492/bis-14-772-uk-allocations-eu-structural-funds-2014-2020-letter.pdf