

Brexit and education policy

Public Hearing on the Implications of Brexit for Culture and Education

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The European university sector stands united to keep the deep connections between UK and other European universities despite Brexit. Universities are dependent on working across borders, and they are very sensitive to situations where societies turn inwards to a limited, national horizon. For this reason, Brexit is a major threat to the sector.

The UK is a leader in cooperation on research and student mobility. It is by far the most productive EU country in research, and it is undisputedly the most popular destination for mobile students in Europe. British universities offer learning environment often in highly research-intensive institutions, which makes it a very attractive option for studying abroad. More than 200,000 European students are at UK universities either for credit mobility or for their whole degree, about 30 % of all mobile students in Europe. This attractiveness is partly due to the language, but given the rapid expansion of English-language provision in the rest of Europe, it is also due to the quality and capacity of UK universities.

For this reason, EUA has argued strongly for future association of the UK to the Erasmus programme as well as for the Framework Programme for Research. We point to the fact that both programmes are open to third country participation, and that the UK plays such an important role that it would have consequences for the whole of Europe if it were to leave these programmes. It would be preferable if, as a part of the Financial Settlement, the UK would continue to pay and be eligible for funding from these programmes until they end, and then be associated to the new programmes immediately afterwards.

Concerning student mobility, it will be difficult to make up for the lost capacity, should Brexit mean financial or administrative obstacles to those students wishing to go to the UK. In the short to medium term, a considerable amount to students would probably not be able to be mobile; just the logistical aspect of finding alternatives for up to nearly a third of Europe's mobile students would be daunting. For British universities, this would mean a much diminished capacity to give an international experience to students within the UK ('internationalisation at home'). Again, both sides would suffer.

Citizen's rights and free movement will also be a major issue for universities. As a sector, universities are to a large degree dependent on being able to recruit from beyond national borders. If a solution is not found during the negotiations, we risk a highly uneven situation, where UK researchers and students, and their families, will have privileged access to the EU via the special Directive regarding entry for these groups (Directive 2016/801). Generally speaking, this directive guarantee third country students or researchers that have an EU host institution a number of rights once they have obtained their visa, among these the right to bring family members to the EU, free travel within the EU, and the right to stay and find work after the study period is finished. EU students and researchers, however, would be subject to potentially difficult immigration procedures in order to go to the UK. They would not necessarily have any rights comparable to the ones given to UK researchers and students in the EU. For a sector that is dependent on free flows of ideas and persons, this would not be an attractive scenario. While it could result in access to a larger pool of potential students for EU universities, it would not be good for Europe as such to lose the excellent learning and research environments that are presently in the UK.

There are complicated issues linked to citizens' rights and education, because of the intricate relation between the EU and the EHEA. Particularly the area of recognition raises questions, as recognition of regulated professions is governed by EU law, while recognition of other qualifications is under the EHEA structures, which are formally not linked to Brexit. Also here, universities would like to see the greatest possible flexibility that allows the free flow of people and ideas in the future.