

Brexit and UK HEIs

Written by Alex de Ruyter and Vangelis Tsiligiris

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ALEX DE RUYTER AND VANGELIS TSILIGIRIS, AUG 22 2018

The UK's decision to withdraw from the EU is throwing up many issues for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK (and indeed their European counterparts). In this context, the UK Government recently released a "White Paper" detailing what it regarded as its preferred approach to the future relationship with the EU. Key aspects of this are exclusion from the Single Market, Customs Union and jurisdiction of the CJEU.

In contrast, the UK government's current desire is for a customs "partnership" with the EU, access to the Single Market for goods and agriculture only, and a bespoke arrangement on financial services. That the EU appear likely to reject these demands only adds to the continued uncertainty as the time left to negotiate the UK's departure ticks away in advance of March next year. There is now the real prospect of "no deal" given the UK Government's seeming continued inability to understand fundamental EU negotiating principles (and its own internal divisions). Against this, some commentators have also questioned the "rigid" stance adopted by EU negotiators towards Brexit negotiations.

The above notwithstanding, for HEIs in the UK, this continued uncertainty raises key concerns, given the thrust of proposals in the White Paper. This raises particular issues around: 1) immigration rules for EU staff and students; 2) the fee status of EU students; 3) whether EU students will continue to have access to the current UK set-up of student loans, and; 4) UK participation in Horizon 2020 and student mobility schemes (Erasmus).

However, to put Brexit in context, higher education is more internationalised than ever before. More than 4.6 million higher education students study abroad and almost every single higher education programme includes an international component. Research has always been international and today almost 1 in 5 academic papers is an outcome of international collaboration. According to Universities UK, "more than half of UK research is produced through international collaborations".

At the same time there is criticism that in the past 20 years, UK HEIs have engaged with internationalisation activities focused on international student recruitment and income-generating activities. In contrast, progress with the wider internationalisation agenda in the UK by UK HEIs has been slow. Hence, in this context, concerns expressed around the impact of Brexit on UK HE have some substance.

In the recent past, internationalisation of UK HEIs has been associated solely with international student recruitment. In this regard, to reiterate, the major threat for UK HEIs relates to uncertainty around the post-Brexit student visa and fee arrangements for EU students.

Even so, when it comes to international student mobility there are other major developments already affecting UK HEIs. For example, major supply-side developments in key sending countries of international students like China and India, alter mobility dynamics and make it more difficult for UK HEIs to attract international students. As such, Brexit is likely to affect international student mobility, not as standalone factor, but as part of structural developments at the international level.

At the same time, another factor that requires consideration is the significant developments that have occurred at the European level; notably the emergence of Europe-wide organisations representing different aspects of the higher

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education sector. For example, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) represents a group of 47 countries (which extend beyond EU countries) implementing common policy objectives, primarily under the Bologna Process.

Another example is the European Universities Association (EUA), which has grown to become a significant organisation at the global level, able to pursue its own policy agenda. The EUA has been very active in the pre-Brexit period making specific policy recommendations. These developments represent an irreversible internationalisation, or pan-Europeanisation of HEIs – which will continue to include UK HEIs. These developments could be crucial in shaping a bespoke post-Brexit framework for higher education.

Finally, we believe that, despite the obvious and well-discussed problems, Brexit could create opportunities for UK HEIs. Whatever the motive behind the drive to internationalise, universities have internationalisation hardcoded in their organisational DNA. There has been debate recently as to whether internationalisation of higher education will be affected by political developments like Brexit in the UK. At the heart of internationalisation is that it “...recognises and honours the importance of local context – the nation”. It is the celebration of national characteristics and cultural values that acts as the driving force behind internationalisation of HEIs. As such, it is highly unlikely that an event like Brexit will affect the drive of UK HEIs to internationalise. One could even argue that Brexit might even increase UK HEIs’ focus on internationalisation. This is because in the post-Brexit era, UK HEIs realise that they would need to try harder to maintain their international presence.

To elaborate then; first, UK HEIs have focused their strategic initiatives in fast-growing offshore markets, primarily South East Asia. With Brexit, there are concerns around EU student mobility, access to research income and availability of EU staff, which have shifted strategic discussions back to a more balanced state where the EU is again an area of attention. Now UK HEIs are trying harder to engage with their EU peers and seek innovative ways to maintain membership of the wider EU higher education community. For example, several UK HEIs have announced plans to set up EU bases, either alone (i.e. Coventry University campus in Poland), or as a joint venture with an EU HEI (i.e. Oxford University partnership with four German Universities).

Second, UK HEIs have been less strategic in their efforts to internationalise. Instead, several UK HEIs engaged in international projects without careful consideration of the resource implications and the projected benefits. With Brexit approaching, UK HEIs are becoming more strategic and seek to gather evidence that will aid the development of a post-Brexit internationalisation strategy. By actually using an evidence-based approach to craft their internationalisation strategy, UK HEIs can achieve better utilisation of their resources and pursue international activities which are more balanced across the three core areas of internationalisation (e.g. student mobility, research collaboration, and programme mobility).

In conclusion, Brexit does pose issues for UK HE, but these need to be contextualised amidst wider changes facing the sector in mature industrialised economies such as the UK.

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Alex is a Professor at Birmingham City University and Director of its Centre for Brexit Studies, where he researches, gives public lectures and supervises doctoral students. He brings a wealth of research experience and academic engagement on Brexit and the related areas of regional economic development, skills and labour market issues. He has published over 60 academic outputs in leading national and international journals such as *Work, Employment and Society*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations* and *Urban Studies*, and been a recipient of external research funding. Originally Australian, Professor de Ruyter has been in the UK for 18 years.

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