



Post-Brexit: Perceived Challenges for Collaboration between British and European Universities

A survey report by the UnLiON Brexit Working Group
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Key Findings

1. 90% of the respondents say that they are willing to continue the collaborations they have with the UK or instigate new ones, though some express that future collaborations will depend on funding.
2. 85% of the respondents think that Brexit will have a negative impact for their institution.
3. 85% view the UK government's current commitment to underwrite funding as positive, but the security is only temporary and does not guarantee future collaboration. It is clear that the desired scenario is a long-term continuation of this arrangement.
4. The UK is viewed as an important contributor to research and education on a European level, both because of the excellence of the institutions involved and the competition they pose for other European actors.
5. The reduction in competition that could follow Brexit is viewed as negative for the quality of research at the European level.
6. The will to collaborate with UK partners is there, but the uncertainty connected to Brexit has led to structural changes where UK partners are no longer placed in key roles.
7. Many concerns regarding collaborative difficulties are based around limitations on mobility, which might make the UK less desirable for collaboration.
8. An overarching belief is that collaboration will always find its way. Alternative routes could be sought through intensification of bilateral agreements or through strengthening of national funds that allow for international collaboration.
9. Many of the respondents fear that Brexit will cause the EU's next Framework Programme to have a smaller budget. However, because the UK has been one of the top beneficiaries of EU funding for Research and Innovation, some believe that their institution's funding will not suffer due to Brexit.

About the report

As we have entered the second phase of the Brexit negotiations towards the UK's departure from the EU in March 2019, there are still many uncertainties on the UK's future collaboration with the European Union (EU). In the second half of 2017, the UnILiON Brexit Working Group created and distributed to UnILiON members a questionnaire on Brexit with the aim of exploring the grounds for post-Brexit collaboration between European and British universities.

Following the UK's decision to leave the EU in a referendum held on 23 June 2016, there has been a great deal of uncertainty regarding the UK's future participation in European Funding Programmes. The UnILiON Brexit Working Group was interested to gather the reactions and suggestions on the matter from UnILiON's home institutions and to explore how Brexit will change the nature of collaboration between British and European universities. The questionnaire had a clear focus on effects and concerns for mobility, collaboration and funding on a European level post-Brexit (The questions are included on page 9).

This report reflects the views of the 20 respondents (either a representative for the universities in Brussels, or from the administration at the home institution) representing over 20 universities across 8 European countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, United Kingdom). The report will be presented and discussed at an event in Brussels on 22 March 2018. A high level panel of experts from the UK Russell Group of Universities, the European University Association and the European Policy Centre, will offer



Figure 1: Map showing regional spread of the respondents

their insights and suggestions on the changing relationship between European and British universities. The aim of the seminar is to have an open, lively discussion on the findings of the survey and to identify possible next steps that UnILiON and other stakeholders can do to address the challenges identified in this report.

Mobility

One of the main post-Brexit concerns is mobility, both for researchers and students. The majority of the institutions acknowledge UK research as excellent and have a desire to collaborate with UK partners, but the ongoing Brexit negotiations create uncertainties and fears that mobility will suffer in the future. The vast majority of the respondents (85%) believes that Brexit will in some way have a negative impact for their institution. Questions surround the possible difficulties of issuing visas and working permits, increased costs of medical insurance, a prediction of increased administrative work and other extra costs that might make the UK less desirable for collaboration. These concerns involve collaborative difficulties on several levels, from joint masters to doctorates all based around limitations on student mobility.

“Physical’ mobility of greater concern than ‘virtual’ collaboration”

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Funding

There is a difference of opinion on how Brexit will affect funding for the institutions. The UK is a big contributor to Horizon 2020 and to previous Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation. Therefore, some of the respondents fear that Brexit will cause the EU’s next Framework Programme (FP9) to have a smaller budget than anticipated, which will be negative for the EU research funding landscape and affect all EU Member States. However, because the UK also has been one of the top beneficiaries of EU funding¹ some believe that their institution’s funding will not suffer due to Brexit, but rather continue to grow. From a UK perspective, it is hoped that domestic funding will replace EU funding through a new raft of funding routes.

“I expect that FP9 will give us the same funding opportunities as H2020 independent of Brexit”

Less competition, not necessarily a good thing

There were mixed reactions concerning the departure of the UK from the EU. A percentage of the non-UK respondents could see opportunities with a strong competitor like the UK out of the picture, while others see this as purely negative. In the thought scenario, where the UK does not participate in the EU’s next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, some argue that there might be more room for their institutions to participate. However, it is pointed out that the net effect might not be more money because the totality of the funding programme might shrink.

“If the UK is not part of the next FP we are losing the most important player in research, both in terms of quantity and quality”

Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, some argue that there might be more room for their institutions to participate. However, it is pointed out that the net effect might not be more money because the totality of the funding programme might shrink.

The UK is viewed as an important contributor to research and education on a European level, both because of the excellence of the institutions involved and the competition they pose for other European actors. If

¹ UK participation in Horizon 2020 and Framework Programme 7
www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-participation-in-horizon-2020-and-framework-programme-7

the UK is left outside the EU's next Framework Programme for Research & Innovation a big competitor is removed, which can be detrimental for the quality of research at the European level.

Collaboration

There is a strong feeling among the respondents that research collaboration should not suffer from Brexit and they are confident that common research objectives will drive collaboration further. A large percentage of the respondents (90%) confirm that they wish to maintain their existing collaborations with the UK universities or instigate new ones, though some convey that future collaboration will depend on funding possibilities. At the same time, some respondents report that there is a lack of trust felt by some individual researchers when thinking about involving a UK partner, and their preference is to work with other non-UK partners instead.

“High quality partners are always welcome”

The commitment by the UK government to underwrite the funding for all successful bids made by UK participants and submitted before the UK leaves the EU² is viewed by 85% of the respondents as a positive initiative. However, it is pointed out that this security for collaboration is only temporary. For now, it ensures sustainability of on-going projects, and collaboration continues for the most part as planned. Still, because this commitment is time limited, it is not enough to guarantee future collaboration, and it is clear that the desired scenario is a long-term continuation of this underwriting arrangement.

There is an ongoing, general concern about the impact of Brexit and some Higher Education Institutions have already noticed that many research collaborations with the UK are either stagnating or being reduced due to this uncertainty. For others, collaboration has continued as usual after the referendum, and only one institution said that they have been put off joining a UK-led consortium. Nevertheless, there has been a change in many of the consortia with the co-ordination role being taken by non-UK partners. The will to collaborate with UK partners is there, but the uncertainty connected to Brexit has led to these structural changes so that UK partners are no longer operating in key roles.

Alternatives

The main message taken from the questionnaire is the belief that collaboration will always find its way whether this is through intensification of bilateral agreements or through strengthening of national funds that allow for international collaboration. In the case of a hard Brexit, some feel that collaborations should be facilitated through domestic funding which could include: (1) UK government and major businesses open up their national funding programmes to non-UK institutions; (2) UK government should continue to guarantee funding for UK partners participating in European funding schemes; (3) National country-based research foundations could run calls targeting collaborations with other nominated countries.

“It is not the EU that makes us willing to collaborate with other universities; the EU facilitates this, no doubt, but the will to collaborate is here anyway”

² UK participation in Horizon 2020

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686810/Horizon_2020_Core_lines.pdf

Suggestions on how to facilitate future collaborations also include finding other already existing or developing new European funding schemes, bilateral collaborations, B2B agreements between universities or international funding calls. While several of the respondents see Brexit as purely negative, some argue that their institutions might actually profit from B2B or bilateral agreements as UK universities go looking for new strategic partnerships across Europe.

Guidance given or received

25% of the respondents say that they have not been given any guidance on how to deal with UK organisations, while 35% say that they have received guidance. This varies from those that have been informed of the commitment of the UK government to underwrite funding to others who have been told to be cautious. The expectation is that the UK will come up with a good solution. Those who have received guidance say that National Research Councils and UK Research Office (UKRO) have been good sources for information.

Only two of the respondents say that they have implemented a specific plan or action because of Brexit and the current situation in the UK. These actions include keeping researchers informed about Brexit developments regarding European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020/FP9 with the message that you can still take a UK based partner on board. While most respondents have not experienced any reluctance towards continuing their current collaborations with UK partners, there are some concerns about what it will mean for those researchers involved once Brexit actually happens and for future collaborations. The majority of the respondents say that they have no contingency plans, and none of the universities say that they have done any scenario planning for the continuation of Erasmus+ with the UK. Some think that *not having a plan* will 'force' the desirable situation of continuing the present status while others say that the uncertainty of the outcome has prevented them from undertaking any detailed planning.

“We keep repeating the message that it is OK to take a UK based partner on board”

Conclusion

It is clear that Brexit poses a big question mark over future Research & Innovation opportunities for collaboration between UK and European universities. The majority of the respondents, however, are confident that collaboration will continue through new bilateral, B2B, European or international agreements. Others believe that the UK will have an associated country status to the EU and are positive that the UK will take part in the next Framework Programme. Whether the EU facilitates collaboration or not, there is a clear desire to continue collaboration in the future. Though many hope for a continuation of today's model, even if it is not achieved, the overall belief is that collaboration will find its way. Whatever happens, all hope that the Brexit negotiations will finish quickly so the UK's position is clarified as soon as possible.

UnLiON

UnLiON (Universities Informal Liaison Offices Network) is a newly established informal network consisting of 39 university liaison offices collaborating in Brussels and representing more than 110 universities. The network was set up in 2017 and acts as an effective information multiplier, with the aim of being the single entry point to a world of excellent universities and a gateway to European Institutions and partners. There are currently four UnLiON working groups: (1) Horizon 2020 & FP9; (2) European Research Council; (3) Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and (4) Brexit.

Figure 2: Members of the UnLiON Brexit Working Group



Survey Questions

- Q1. Optional questions: Name; Institution; UK or Non-UK; Member State, Associated Country or Third Country?
- Q2. Do you think Brexit will have a negative, neutral or positive impact on your institution? Can you also explain why you think that way?
- Q3. What are the concerns of a post-Brexit EU for your institution for funding / mobility / collaborations?
- Q4. What opportunities does your institution see in a post-Brexit EU for your institution for funding / mobility / collaborations?
- Q5. What is your perception of Brexit and how it might affect the current EU policy and funding landscape?
- Q6. Are there any alternatives for UK universities continuing to collaborate and partner with European universities, and vice-versa? Could you describe them?
- Q7. Despite Brexit, do you think your university is willing to continue any collaborations you might have with UK universities or instigate new ones? Could you explain why?
- Q8. What is the impact on your university of the UK government's current commitment to underwrite the funding for all successful bids for competitive EU funding made by UK participants that are submitted before the UK leaves the EU?
- Q9. Differences in attitudes towards working with UK universities in your home Institution:
- i. Has your home institution been put off joining a consortium that was led by a UK University? Please explain.
 - ii. Have your national NCPs issued any guidance about how to deal with UK organisations? If yes, could you tell us what that guidance was?
 - iii. At your home institution, has there been any reluctance by academics to work with universities? Please explain.
 - iv. Has your home institution implemented or is it planning to implement any specific plan or action because of the Brexit and the current situation in the UK? If yes, could you tell us the plan? If no, could you explain why?
 - v. Has your home institution done any scenario planning for Erasmus+ and the UK, and if so, how public is it?
- Q10. Do you have any other comments that you would like to add?