

The impact of Brexit on UK Universities and Higher Education

Much has been written about the impact of Brexit, and in particular the impact on future funding of research, on UK Universities and Higher Education Institutions.

In order to further examine the views of Vice-Chancellors about the nature of this problem. Liberal Democrat Education spokesperson John Pugh MP and Business spokesperson Baroness Lorely Burt wrote to the Vice-Chancellors of all UK higher education institutions which receive funding from the European Union or which have over a hundred EU students, asking for their opinions on the Brexit vote and how higher education in the UK would be affected.

The Vice-Chancellors were invited to fill out a five-question survey detailing specific issues related to the UK's relationship with the EU and how they are relevant to their own institutions. They were also provided with space to expand on their answer. Some of the most relevant quotes are used below.

The letters were sent in July 2016 to a total of 148 institutions, of which 48 have responded at the time of writing. A response rate of 32%.

The below analyses these results.

Question 1 Do you fear that the global reputation of UK universities could be at risk following the vote to leave the EU?

	Number	Percentage	Percentage with No Response Excluded
Yes	36	75.0	94.7
No	2	4.2	4.2
No Response	10	20.8	
Total	48	100.0	

This question goes to the heart of University's views on how Brexit will affect their global standing. Universities, by their nature, rely on their global reputation to attract students and academics. The UK Higher Education Sector is currently highly respected around the world, in part due to the high number of world class institutions within the UK.

Vice-Chancellors who responded 'yes' to this question signalled fears that the Brexit vote paints the UK as an "isolationist" country (Aberystwyth University; University of Southampton) whose international partners see it as "closing up against the world" (University of Lincoln) and can be interpreted as "we are not open for business" (Oxford Brookes University).

An institution's global reputation "depends critically on" international collaboration (Liverpool John Moores University). This includes EU research projects, EU student mobility and the free movement of EU academics, all of which a number of Vice-Chancellors have already noted issues.

Professor Cliff Allan, Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham City University, acknowledged that all of the above problems caused by Brexit "will limit both the scale, nature and qualities of [the] UK's high international standing".

The highly intertwined nature of the relationship between UK and EU higher education institutions has been confirmed to us by a significant number of Vice-Chancellors across the country. Cooperation with EU universities is integral to the success of the UK higher education sector, whose global reputation is now damaged as a result of the vote to leave the EU.

Question 2 Are you worried that the uncertainty regarding research grants and the future of EU academics could have a negative impact on standards at UK universities?

	Number	Percentage	Percentage with No Response Excluded
Yes	27	56.3	73.0
No	10	20.8	27.0
No Response	11	22.9	
Total	48	100.0	

Despite assurances given by the Chancellor about funding for Horizon 2020 funding for UK institutions, there remains uncertainty about the impact of Brexit on universities. This reflects uncertainty found within other sectors, including in businesses, as a result of the lack of clear direction set out by the Conservative government.

Responses to this question were linked closely to those of Question 1 as the UK higher education sector's global reputation relies on high quality collaborative research and the high standards which follow from this.

A large number of respondents referenced Brexit as deterring high quality academics from jobs due to the uncertainty regarding research grants, which will therefore result in lower standards at UK universities. Cross-national research such as Horizon 2020 projects "has time after time been demonstrated to have greater impact than single nation research" (Anglia Ruskin University). The fear of a "brain drain" (Aberystwyth University) was widespread among respondents.

Professor Stuart Croft, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick, noted that the negative impact on standards goes even further than the higher education sector, as the "inability to access [EU] funds will impact the collaborations of the finest minds to solve some of our most pressing problems."

A number of Vice-Chancellors did not answer either 'yes' or 'no' to Question 2, but instead used it as an opportunity to outline what other negative effects they would have, including UK universities potentially being "without a voice in how priorities are set" in future research collaboration arrangements (University of the West of England).

Question 3 Do you agree that it is necessary to maintain freedom of movement between the UK and the EU to protect research funding, the right to reside and work of EU academic staff and the right of all UK and EU students to study anywhere in the EU?

	Number	Percentage	Percentage with No Response Excluded
Yes	40	83.3	100.0
No	0	0.0	0.0
No Response	8	16.7	
Total	48	100.0	

Not a single Vice-Chancellor responded to say that research funding, the right to work and reside of EU academics and the right of all UK and EU students to study across the EU could be maintained without retaining freedom of movement between the UK and the EU. This has been described by Vice-Chancellors as "crucial" (Birmingham City University), "vital" (Writtle College), "fundamental" (Coventry University) and "absolutely necessary" (University of the West of Scotland).

Whilst Government has made short-term promises, its lack of long-term immigration commitments is damaging to the higher education sector, with Professor Julia Buckingham, Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University, saying that "there is an urgent need for clarity" on the long-term residency status of EU staff and the funding status of EU students from 2017 onwards.

The response from the University of Bristol also outlined how some degree courses are now "vulnerable", notably Modern Languages, for which "mobility is an essential part" through the EU-run Erasmus scheme.

Given Government's tautological insistence that "Brexit means Brexit", Professor Maria Hinfelaar, Vice-Chancellor of Glyndŵr University, rightly states that "the only way to [maintain freedom of movement] would be through full EEA-zone status".

Vice-Chancellors in the UK are overwhelmingly in agreement about the importance of maintain this link with the EU.

Question 4 How far do you think that research funding will be adversely affected when the UK leaves the EU?

	Number	Percentage	Percentage with No Response Excluded
Considerably	25	52.1	86.2
Slightly	4	8.3	13.8
Not at all	0	0.0	0.0
No Response	19	39.6	
Total	48	100.0	

The response to this question suggests that the short-term commitments by the Chancellor, in particular to underwrite Horizon 2020 funds does not go far enough.

Most of those who responded 'considerably' noted that they have already seen examples of funding being adversely affected since the referendum result, with academics being forced out of Horizon 2020 funding collaborations.

Many of the 40% of respondents who are not accounted for in the above statistics stated that it is too soon to give a definitive answer, but it was acknowledged that the "[negative] potential is huge" (St George's Hospital Medical School) and "could reduce research productivity overall" (Institute of Cancer Research).

A number of Vice-Chancellors noted that their institutions receive over half of their research funding from EU sources (75% at Anglia Ruskin University; 68% at Southampton Solent University), which enables "a much wider range of projects [to be] funded than are funded solely by UK sources" (Southampton Solent University). Losing out on EU research funding would therefore be damaging to the amount, quality and variety of UK research.

Both the University of Warwick and Royal Holloway specifically pinpointed that they would lose Marie Curie Research Fellowship Programme funding, with Warwick stating that American and Australian colleagues "no longer want to collaborate with the UK and are approaching France, Germany and Holland".

Although the Treasury has committed to underwrite Horizon 2020 funding for projects agreed while the UK is still a member of the EU, it remains unclear what the plan will be post-Brexit. The UK is a net beneficiary of EU funding, attracting almost twice as much as it puts in, and Professor Peter Strike, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cumbria, admitted to us that it is "difficult to see the UK government being able to provide a 100% uplift".

Question 5 Do you believe that the Higher Education and Research Bill should be withdrawn given the negative repercussions and uncertainties caused by the vote to leave the EU?

	Number	Percentage	Percentage with No Response Excluded
Yes	16	33.3	45.7
No	19	39.6	54.3
No Response	13	27.1	
Total	48	100.0	

This question drew the highest split of responses, with no absolute majority to support proceeding with or withdrawing the Bill.

Most Vice-Chancellors who answered 'yes' believe that the vote to leave the European Union has introduced new uncertainties and thus changed the landscape of the UK higher education sector. Rather than pushing ahead with the Bill, the country needs "stability" (Sheffield Hallam University; Institute of Cancer Research; Birmingham City University) which the Higher Education and Research Bill will not bring.

Very few of the 'no' responses to this question gave reasoning for their opinions. Among those that did, "positive implications for the sector and for student choice" (Coventry University) and "legislation is overdue" (Oxford Brookes University) were given as reasons, whilst Professor Graham Baldwin, Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent University, argued that pushing forward with the Bill would provide stability.

Whilst the University of Sheffield acknowledged that "there is some need for legislation", it stated that it would be "premature" to introduce such drastic changes without understanding the impact leaving the EU would have on the higher education sector.

Professor Peter Strike, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cumbria, said the proposals in the Bill "are not very sensible", but answered 'no' to the question, saying "if you want to introduce TEF the Bill will have to go through". However, this response came before Minister of State for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson's written statement on the final day before summer recess outlining that the Teaching Excellence Framework will be implemented outside of the Bill.

There is no clear consensus from university Vice-Chancellors as to whether the Bill should proceed, and it is unclear whether those who responded 'no' are completely happy with the Bill or whether they consider it a necessary evil. What is clear is that enough Vice-Chancellors believe it should be at least delayed, and very likely amended before it can be implemented.

Appendix: Full data tables.

Question 1.

Do you fear that the global reputation of UK universities could be at risk following the vote to leave the EU?

Yes	No	No response
<p>Aberystwyth University Anglia Ruskin University Aston University Bath Spa University Birkbeck College Birmingham City University Bournemouth University Brunel University London Canterbury Christ Church University Coventry University Glyndŵr University Goldsmiths College Liverpool John Moores University Oxford Brookes University Royal College of Art Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Sheffield Hallam University Southampton Solent University St George's Hospital Medical School The City University The University of Bradford The University of Bristol The University of Central Lancashire The University of Lincoln The University of Sheffield The University of Southampton The University of Sussex The University of the West of Scotland The University of Warwick The University of Westminster The University of York University of Chester University of Cumbria University of the Arts, London University of the West of England, Bristol Writtle College</p>	<p>Stranmillis University College The University of Aberdeen</p>	<p>Bangor University Cardiff Metropolitan University Loughborough University Nottingham Trent University The Open University The University of Cambridge The University of Huddersfield The University of Kent The University of Lancaster The University of Manchester</p>

Question 2.

Are you worried that the uncertainty regarding research grants and the future of EU academics could have a negative impact on standards at UK universities?

Yes	No	No response
Aberystwyth University Anglia Ruskin University Aston University Bath Spa University Birkbeck College Brunel University London Canterbury Christ Church University Glyndwr University Goldsmiths College Liverpool John Moores University Royal College of Art Royal Holloway and Bedford New College St George's Hospital Medical School Stranmillis University College The University of Bradford The University of Bristol The University of Central Lancashire The University of Lincoln The University of Sheffield The University of Southampton The University of Sussex The University of Warwick The University of York University of Chester University of Cumbria University of the Arts, London Writtle College	Birmingham City University Bournemouth University Coventry University Oxford Brookes University Sheffield Hallam University The City University The University of Aberdeen The University of Lancaster The University of Westminster University of the West of England, Bristol	Bangor University Cardiff Metropolitan University Loughborough University Nottingham Trent University Southampton Solent University The Open University The University of Cambridge The University of Huddersfield The University of Kent The University of Manchester The University of the West of Scotland

Question 3.

Do you agree that it is necessary to maintain freedom of movement between the UK and the EU to protect research funding, the right to reside and work of EU academic staff and the right of all UK and EU students to study anywhere in the EU?

Yes	No	No response
<p>Aberystwyth University Anglia Ruskin University Aston University Bath Spa University Birkbeck College Birmingham City University Bournemouth University Brunel University London Canterbury Christ Church University Coventry University Glyndŵr University Goldsmiths College Liverpool John Moores University Oxford Brookes University Royal College of Art Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Sheffield Hallam University Southampton Solent University St George's Hospital Medical School Stranmillis University College The University of Aberdeen The University of Bradford The University of Bristol The University of Cambridge The University of Central Lancashire The University of Huddersfield The University of Lancaster The University of Lincoln The University of Sheffield The University of Southampton The University of Sussex The University of the West of Scotland The University of Warwick The University of Westminster The University of York University of Chester University of Cumbria University of the Arts, London University of the West of England, Bristol Writtle College</p>		<p>Bangor University Cardiff Metropolitan University Loughborough University Nottingham Trent University The City University The Open University The University of Kent The University of Manchester</p>

Question 4.

How far do you think that research funding will be adversely affected when the UK leaves the EU?

Considerably	Slightly	Not at all	No response
Aberystwyth University Anglia Ruskin University Aston University Bath Spa University Birkbeck College Birmingham City University Bournemouth University Brunel University London Glyndŵr University Goldsmiths College Liverpool John Moores University Oxford Brookes University Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Sheffield Hallam University Southampton Solent University The University of Bradford The University of Bristol The University of Sheffield The University of Sussex The University of Warwick The University of Westminster University of Chester University of Cumbria University of the Arts, London Writtle College	Coventry University Stranmillis University College The City University The University of Lincoln		Bangor University Canterbury Christ Church University Cardiff Metropolitan University Loughborough University Nottingham Trent University Royal College of Art St George's Hospital Medical School The Open University The University of Aberdeen The University of Cambridge The University of Central Lancashire The University of Huddersfield The University of Kent The University of Lancaster The University of Manchester The University of Southampton The University of the West of Scotland The University of York University of the West of England, Bristol

Question 5.

Do you believe that the Higher Education and Research Bill should be withdrawn given the negative repercussions and uncertainties caused by the vote to leave the EU?

Yes	No	No response
Aberystwyth University Bath Spa University Birmingham City University Glyndŵr University Goldsmiths College Royal College of Art Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Sheffield Hallam University Stranmillis University College The University of Bradford The University of Central Lancashire The University of Sheffield The University of Warwick The University of Westminster The University of York Writtle College	Anglia Ruskin University Aston University Bournemouth University Brunel University London Coventry University Liverpool John Moores University Nottingham Trent University Oxford Brookes University Southampton Solent University The City University The University of Aberdeen The University of Lancaster The University of Lincoln The University of Southampton The University of Sussex University of Chester University of Cumbria University of the Arts, London University of the West of England, Bristol	Bangor University Birkbeck College Canterbury Christ Church University Cardiff Metropolitan University Loughborough University St George's Hospital Medical School The Open University The University of Bristol The University of Cambridge The University of Huddersfield The University of Kent The University of Manchester The University of the West of Scotland