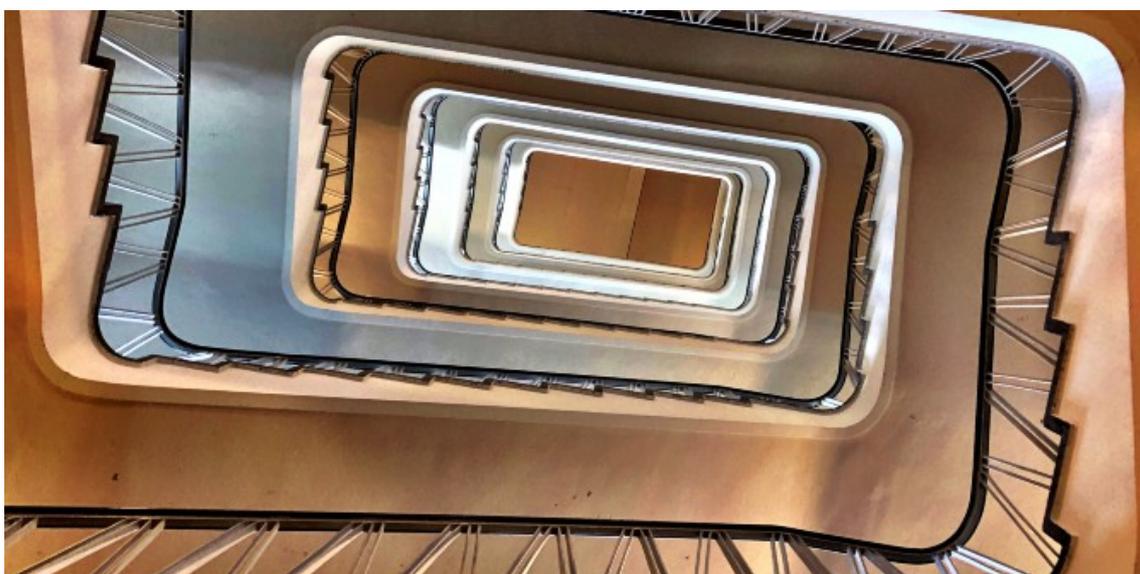


'We don't let them separate us': what German and Portuguese university staff and leaders think of Brexit

Before the UK left the EU, Jens Jungblut (University of Oslo) was one of a team of researchers who asked university staff in Portugal and Germany how they thought Brexit would affect their work. They were confident about the ability to maintain academic partnerships, but concerned about the effect on student mobility – while identifying some opportunities for their own institutions.

University student and staff mobility will obviously be affected by Brexit, as will the availability of European research funding for UK institutions. But less attention has been paid to the question of [how decision-makers in higher education in EU countries see Brexit](#) and its effect on the future of higher education. In a [joint study](#) with colleagues from Germany and Portugal, we addressed this gap.



An old staircase at the Free University, Berlin. Photo: [AN Berlin \[Ondre\]](#) via a [CC BY NC SA 2.0 licence](#)

In our 28 interviews with academics, university leaders, and administrators in Portugal and Germany, interviewees highlighted key concerns, beliefs and hopes regarding Brexit. Most interviews emphasised the persistence of existing ties and the importance of collaboration as key factors that would help to maintain professional networks even after Brexit. Academics expressed their opposition to divisive UK-EU politics and government decisions that might endanger future academic cooperation. Moreover, they highlighted their hope that national governments or European institutions would take the initiative and ensure a framework for continued collaboration with their UK partners.

At the same time, interviewees also pointed to potential gains for European universities from Brexit, especially as they expect that UK institutions will suffer. Given the German and Portuguese higher education systems are very different, our analysis produced surprisingly similar results. Continued cooperation is seen as desirable and Brexit is seen as a threat, especially for educational collaboration. Research collaboration is regarded as more stable, but most interviewees still called for governments to create frameworks for continued academic cooperation.

The main concern, raised in both countries, is that Brexit will reduce student mobility. This is seen as especially problematic because students are generally keen to learn English – especially as existing mobility is unbalanced, with far more students going to study in Britain than vice versa. An additional concern is that other Anglophone countries – or those that offer study programmes in English, such as the Netherlands or Norway – might not be able to fully compensate for the loss in mobility options, or might not be as attractive if exchanges with UK universities become more difficult.

Concern that UK institutions might charge higher tuition fees to EU students following Brexit is also a key factor – and indeed [this has happened](#). Some describe it as a threat to the competitiveness of European universities and the European Higher Education Area as a whole. North America could benefit at Europe's expense.

The academics were less worried about research cooperation with the UK, as they were confident these ties would continue. They believed it would be possible to maintain cooperation and networking based on transnational networks, consolidated friendships, and a deliberate “move towards one another” in academia as a response to the unwanted political climate. There is a perception that links between UK and European scholars do not depend on policymakers, and while from an organisational point of view some collaborations might become more difficult, personal ties will persist and do not depend on politics. As one interviewee put it: “We don't let them separate us”.

Some respondents hoped politicians and institutional leaderships would create new frameworks and funding structures for future collaboration. Both German and Portuguese interviewees expressed the hope that political alternatives and policy instruments will be developed to maintain cooperation, either through association treaties, or by national and/or institutional efforts. In this context, Brexit is ultimately a political issue, rather than an academic concern. Since academics do not expect major changes in their core activities with or without Brexit, they stress their expectations that politicians will negotiate alternative structures and instruments. Comparisons with other associated countries like Switzerland or Norway are used to underline this hope.

While all interviewees stressed that they hoped the UK would remain in the EU, some argued that if Brexit could not be avoided, they expected some competitive advantages for their universities or national higher education systems. For example, German university leaders referred to the high success rate of UK universities in gaining European research funding, and expected some advantages for German project proposals if UK institutions are no longer eligible to apply for funding. Similarly, some anticipate that Brexit could drive top researchers from the UK to other European countries with strong research environments. Brexit is therefore sometimes framed as an opportunity for European universities, and as a chance to seek other partners and diversify consortia and networks. Interviewees added that the UK could only make itself more attractive if it increased its own budget for science and research very significantly. As the EU has already indicated that they [will increase funding](#) for research and collaboration, the interviewees were convinced that it will remain attractive for students, graduates, and researchers from around the world, as it offers well-funded programmes and has many high-quality alternatives to UK institutions.

Overall, German and Portuguese university leaders made it clear that they would prefer it if Brexit did not happen. There is a strong desire for continued collaboration with the UK both in education and research, but also a perception that UK universities will face more challenges than their European counterparts. The experts expect there to be problems in future collaboration in areas where institutional or administrative frameworks are needed. However, where collaboration rests mainly on bi- or multilateral interactions among colleagues, they are optimistic that academic partnerships will continue.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE.