

Don't leave us this way: A love letter to Britain from a member of the European research community

*In this love letter, **Joeri Tijdink** voices the perspective of a continental academic who will miss the UK when it leaves the European research community after Brexit. He reflects on the contribution that the UK made, from good journals to bad jokes- and the emotional disturbance that this rift will cause. There is also rock-solid evidence that British academics will be missed in future collaborations. For the author, and many continental researchers, togetherness in research endeavours is favoured and Britain will be missed.*

Dear UK,

We, continental researchers are afraid, even mortified. We see the Brexit date coming closer and we are reluctant to say farewell. This is not a Didoesque lament, but we feel impelled to reflect on our feelings of despair, sorrow and a sense of confusion.

It is an emotion that makes us ask why we, the continental researchers, have been so quiet about Brexit since that rainy day in 2016 when statistics were not on our side? This unheimlich (ok, one continental word) feeling is a portent of a depressing future. Why have we been so apathetic when confronted by a potential future without collaborations with those gentle, friendly, somewhat stiff researchers from the other side of the North Sea with their pale skins and their balanced sense of humour and self-depreciation. And, while their physical appearance does not necessarily come close to elegance, their wording and manners are a joy for everyone's eyes and ears. Why are we not making more noise about this impending disaster?



You might ask, what has all this emotional turmoil to do with research? Rather a lot actually. Consider this emotional expression as an introduction to what will come. The UK has been part of 'us' for decades. The UK was part of our research community. They participated in big EU projects, were actively involved in multicentre studies and set the tone at guideline committees, conferences (dinners specifically) and many aspects of research. This emotional disturbance is what we call rationalization in psychology, a coping strategy against the upcoming feeling of abandonment. We always felt that with the Brits, we were stronger and would reach further. Collectively we made research a better place. We enjoy your beautiful journals with high impact factors, but also to appreciate your exquisite sense of British humour. To enjoy the rhythm of spoken and written British language, to enjoy the history of your beautiful University grounds. We even appreciated the harmonious and respectful corrections on our European hokey pokey English-grammar.

All these arguments are worthless if they are only rooted in our emotions. So let's have some evidence why we think that leaving us is not a good idea. Consider the case of clinical trials, the outcome of which affect the well-being of virtually all Europeans. It is clearly essential that such trials should as accurate and valid as possible with the least bias possible. In our ReFRESH project we have analysed over 50.000 clinical trials produced by hundreds of European Universities from the 28 EU-countries. In this analysis we have looked at the 4 'risk of bias' scores from these trials. The Risk-of-Bias Score (RoB) is one of the most important scores to check whether research results should be considered valid and reliable.

We were able to include 53.271 clinical trials from the past 5 decades. There were 10634 trials with only authors from UK soil, 39612 clinical trials from authors with continental affiliations and we included 3035 trials that had authors from both sides of the North Sea.

In a first preliminary analysis, we found that these 3035 trials from EU+UK collaborations had lower risk of bias scores compared to EU-only or UK-only clinical trials. Specifically, the RoB-score on 'blinding' showed potentially relevant differences (4.5% lower probability (52,3% vs 56,8%)). For these number of trials included, these differences are large compared to the large number of included trials. In the other risk of bias scores we found similar differences.

Why should we take this into account? The analysis of these data helps us to reconfirm what we already felt intuitively. We want to be with you. Be with the British research community. We want to be together in our research endeavours. And I think this is important that you know as British researchers, what our continental position is in your Brexit debate. In short, don't leave us (this way). To quote one of the most famous British writers in human history 'speak what we feel, not what we ought to say'. While this letter may not sway the opinion of your Prime Minister and the Brexiteers in your Parliament, it represents the sentiments of many continental researchers. We favour togetherness in our research endeavours. As the great Winston Churchill said: 'if we are together nothing is impossible, if we are divided all will fail'.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the continental sentiment,

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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