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Research and Higher Education: UK as International Star and Closet European?[i]

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ABSTRACT

The research and higher education sectors have an exemplary place in the referendum debate. They were not part of the David Cameron renegotiation package. But stakeholders in favour of Remain have disrupted the consensus that in these sectors the EU's role is relatively unimportant and that the UK's achievements can be explained in national terms. The article seeks to explain first, the change in political dynamics that have brought the EU connections out of the shadows in these sectors, and second, what these sectors risk losing by a Brexit. It suggests that the campaign has made the case for a causal relationship between the UK's higher education and research achievements and its global reach and it has shown how these sectoral policies are embedded in the EU's foundational principles of freedom of movement and non-discrimination. There also signs that EU membership may come to matter to students, a politically important group, for reasons which range from freedom of movement to conflict prevention.

Introduction

'Europe' is normally well down the list of priorities of government higher education policy though it is better placed in research. But there has been a flurry of activity among higher education and research stakeholders since the referendum became a certainty. The arguments largely revolve round a re-interpretation of two concepts that David Cameron has emphasised in his negotiations for a new settlement between the EU and the UK: competitiveness and sovereignty.[ii] The Remain side brings together very many of those who live higher education and research first hand as an international and comparative experience - among them university leaders, the multinational research teams which are such a feature in science, technology and innovation, and many academics across the disciplines. Those who wish the UK to break with the EU tend to take the sovereignty line 'vote leave, take control.' This could include 'going global'. Among the uncertainties are how and whether students will vote and on what grounds. A Higher Education Policy Institute survey (Nov 2015) showed them as being instinctively in favour of UK membership of the EU but undecided on whether to cast their ballot or for whom.

The puzzle is why the European dimension of higher education and research has been of such low level interest until now. There is little argument between the EU and UK in the political economy terms of competitive advantage. Higher education matters, as always, as a consumption good enjoyed by elites. But higher education (and indeed R&D) is also, and increasingly, an important element in national economic performance (Barr, 2004).[iii]

The two questions this paper addresses are: Why has the referendum promoted such a strong surge in the sector in favour of staying? What would UK research and HE lose if the UK were to leave?

The secret European

It is not as if the EU has no role. The formal European connections of the sector as a whole have recently been reviewed. Two of the Balance of Competences exercises which took place in 2013 and 2014 laid out in detail three strands of EU intervention: in research, development and innovation, and separately in the strands of higher education managed

by the EU and in the nationally coordinated Bologna Process which the European Commission supports.[iv]

These show that R&D is a sector of a shared competence between national governments, accounting for around 17 per cent of the EU budget, and around 15 per cent on top of the national budget. The EU uses these funds to support major multinational research and development. The main vehicle is the Framework Programme (now Horizon 2020) and the excellence-based grant system and - a key instrument - the European Research Council which funds individual researchers on a competitive basis. EU backing for research development and innovation was strengthened by the Amsterdam Treaty, 1997, which recognised knowledge sharing and transfer as the 'fifth freedom' of the EU. The sector has been strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty 2009 and reinforced by larger budget shares in the EU's 2014-2020 programmes.

In higher education the EU has a more limited role and allocates it less than 1 per cent of its budget. Though the sector as whole recognises that EU policy coordination results in the beneficial sharing of education policy and practice, few witnesses at the LSE hearings identified particular EU policy measures. This attitude was summed up by some evidence that EU action in higher education 'was neither visible on the ground nor influential in national policymaking and unlike the OECD it is almost entirely unnoticed by the world of education'.

The Bologna Process is led by 48 national participants, with the Commission and European level stakeholders such as the European University Association in support. Although the Commission is a member, the process is largely intergovernmental. The European Higher Education Area now encompasses over 25 million students and at least 4000 institutions. The aim is to create by voluntary means systems which are compatible. National systems are committed to working within a broadly defined European framework of undergraduate and postgraduate degree structures, quality assurance mechanisms, and recognition of studies for credits and for qualifications. The UK conforms with a British edge. For example England and Wales maintain a minority pattern of one year masters' degrees. Universities use a credit system with some tweaking which differentiates it from the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. The Russell Group tends to stand aside trading on national reputations.

As any study of national policymaking in these sectors shows, the UK government's framing of its strategy and achievements in these sectors is framed in global and national terms, OECD fashion, and not in European terms.

In exclusively national terms the UK can boast that with 0.9 per cent of the global population, the UK counts for 3.2 per cent of R&D expenditure, 4.1 per cent of researchers, it produces 15.9 per cent of the world's most highly cited articles. The UK is a strong player too in a world in which over 40 per cent of 25-34 year olds in OECD countries have a university-level education and students are ever more mobile, particularly at the postgraduate level where their work contributes to national research performance. In higher education the top UK universities are better placed than those of any of the continental countries in global rankings.

Eight British universities feature in the top 40 by the QS rankings 2015/16 and four are part of the world's top ten. The UK is one of a select group of five anglophone countries plus France and Germany to take in 50 per cent of this global flow of students. The UK itself is the second OECD country of destination for international students, just behind the US. It is also the biggest recruiter in the EU with students from other EU countries making up 5.5 per cent of the student total, largely in postgraduate study. These advantages cannot be taken for granted: as the *Economist* pointed out recently, the 'brain trade'

competition is intense, with Australia leading the pack ahead of Britain and Canada, and with the US failing to grow (January 13, 2016).

The university sector has traditionally based its political appeal on the same economic grounds as the government. The 'Facts and Figures' promoted by Universities UK, the voice of the sector, stress the benefit of Britain's universities to the economy and the export earnings they contribute**.** In 2014, the UK's 133 universities contributed £73 bn to the UK economy in 2011–12 (2.8 per cent of GDP); higher education generated £10.7 bn of export earnings (2011–12), and universities are major local employers. For every 100 jobs at universities an additional 117 are created in the wider economy, a total of 380,000. By the traditional aims of higher education universities are also doing well. Student satisfaction has continued to increase according to the National Student Survey, reaching an all-time high of 86 per cent of students surveyed in 2014 and 2015.

Reassessing the national interest

It was the General Election results in May 2015 that changed the dynamics dramatically. In making the referendum on EU membership a certainty, it became obvious to many in the sector that national interests really were at stake and that the Europe connection had to be made known**.** A small group of scientists calling themselves Scientists for EU threw themselves, as they describe it, 'into the trenches'. Their initial social media claim was that they could give a voice to those 'who were sick of the red tops' bullying' and that they could act as 'an agile swarm of passionate activist communities'. They now have thousands of supporters including scientists of national and international renown and have fired up local groups in other disciplines. Many of these are outgrowths of the European Movement which was set up after World War II and which has been finding new dynamism with the referendum.[v]

The key message of these scientists was one not widely known to the public.The EU is the world's biggest hub of scientific activity, based on scientific citations. It is bigger than the US. The UK's central position in that hub is a part of the explanation of the UK's recent rise to first place globally in scientific productivity. But Scientists for EU also underlined that modern science is cooperative and multinational. Research is co-authored across national boundaries.[vi]

Within a couple of months, Universities UK, had got the leadership of every institution in its diverse membership to join in its 'Universities for Europe' campaign. It makes similar claims to Scientists for EU, but also broader claims about universities as a public good. The campaign stresses for example how EU multinational research supports the discoveries which improve people's lives, from disaster prevention to improvements in understanding and treating cancer.

The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee then moved in on the action. It set up an enquiry on the relationship between EU membership and the effectiveness of science, research and innovation in the UK. That immediately provided an arena which has obliged those on the Leave sideto clarify their position.[vii] Additional signs that higher education and research are now of public interest are reflected on such blog pages as *British Influence*, *The Conversation, Wonkhe* and the LSE's *BREXITVOTE*, in front page stories in the *Guardian* and the *Independent* and coverage in *Times Higher Education*.

So how do the respective arguments stack up? The issues of EU funding and resources and the potential costs of a Brexit have dominated much of the argument as we shall see below. But the more the debate has been amplified the greater the emphasis has been on

how knowledge is produced, and the delicate balance between institutions, individuals and national interests.

The case for the big picture is made by 'Universities for Europe', in relation to how the EU enhances what the British universities can achieve. As a member of the EU, the UK is part of the world's largest knowledge economy with access to international networks, adding to its global significance, its leadership capacities, and the impact it can have on the regulatory environment. Specifically the EU supports British universities in pursuing cutting edge research leading to discoveries which benefit society. The EU supports British universities to grow businesses and create jobs. It makes it easier through freedom of movement for UK universities to attract talented students and staff, who contribute significantly to university teaching and research and benefit the UK economy. It helps universities to provide more life changing opportunities for British students and staff. It also provides vital funding to the UK's most talented researchers.

The response of the Vote Leave campaign, as laid out in its House of Lords evidence, aspects of which were amplified in a subsequent interview in the *Economist* with its director Dominic Cummings, is that that the global reputation of Britain's universities would allow them to go it alone. Not only could the UK could hope for favourable terms with its ex-partners in the EU, but there would be new opportunities, especially internationally through the so-called Anglosphere. Australia now has a highly dynamic higher education system. There are the historically rooted ties with the US and its world leading league of research universities.

The Leave side also claim that bilateral and international collaboration would boost the UK's place in the global innovation league where at present it performs relatively badly. At present it lags behind the US, Japan and South Korea. In evidence to the House of Lords, Vote Leave also suggested the UK could do better by developing a funding and researcher development model based on the American 'DARPA' (Defense and Advanced Research Projects Agency) instead of the European Research Council. It claims that a DARPA-like body would be a more creative way of funding international collaboration with many examples of how defence funding has led to spin-off benefits for civilian life.

Remain in contrast emphasise that research and development occupy a highly strategic position within EU policy. In a major advance on the EU research framework programmes established in the 1980s, the EU now has structures which are welded together by the objective conferred on the EU by the Lisbon Treaty, 'of strengthening its scientific and technological bases by achieving a research area in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely, and encouraging it to become more competitive including in its industry' (Article 163). Among the tested instruments and institutions are the European Research Council created in 2006 which has a world-wide reputation for the way it supports merit grants for starter, consolidator and advanced career researchers; the European Institute of Technology, established in 2008, that promotes knowledge and innovation partnerships (KICS) between higher education, research organisations and industry (it was inspired by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology); and European Research Infrastructure Consortia (ERICS) created in 2009 to facilitate the creation of large scale multinational joint research infrastructures.

The EU's funding programme, the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2014-2020, illustrates how deeply science and research are now embedded in the EU as collaborative ventures beyond the scope of a single state. The main science programme, Horizon 2020, has both 'pure' and 'applied' research elements supported by 13 per cent of the budget. In addition, research is now an integral part of the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion (34 per cent of the EU budget). These programmes are designed to drive economic growth primarily through capacity building in research and innovation with an

emphasis on the EU as a whole. There is special provision for 'less developed regions', 'more developed regions' and the cohesion fund itself. That means a lot of support for universities and individual researchers beyond richer Western Europe. The 2 per cent accorded to security and citizenship also builds in research.

The Remain case, put in characteristically upbeat style by Scientists for EU. is that it would be folly to dismantle all of this, or to remove the UK from policymaking. There is a causal connection between EU structures and UK success. Among the costs for the UK is that it would lose the major role it has held in shaping policy, and its success as a leader in collaborative projects. Scientists for EU also talk down the alternative model that Vote Leave proposes should the British people vote for Brexit. That is the Swiss case. It is not an encouraging example for the Leave case.

Until the Swiss people voted by referendum on 9 February 2014 against freedom of movement the Swiss lived with a situation ratified in 1992 in which they got significant access to the EU internal market and collaborative funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 through a series of sectoral agreements. These covered the free movement of people, public procurement, and removal of technical trade barriers: all hugely important for the Swiss chemicals, biotech and pharmaceutical sectors. As a result of the Swiss popular vote and subsequent negotiations, the country has suffered a significant loss of funding under Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+. The terms it has negotiated are a deal for two year access (ending in 2016) to Horizon 2020, which is expensive and excludes it from leadership roles. This applies to the competitive ERC and Marie Sklowdoska funding for young researchers, and to the industrial leadership and societal challenges elements of Horizon 2002. On Erasmus Switzerland now has to pay for both incoming and outgoing students.[viii]

The Remain arguments taking place over funding statistics highlight that the UK does extremely well under the EU programmes. Under the seven year programme in place till 2014 (the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development or FP7 which preceded Horizon 2020) the UK has received almost £7bn, or 15.5 per cent of the funding allocated over the seven year period, and the universities secured 60 per cent of that national sum. The EU's Erasmus programme (now Erasmus+) is the biggest source of funding for UK students and staff giving them international experience with proven worth in the job market.

But those who are sceptical of the stand taken by UUK and Scientists for EU argue that, on the contrary, EU membership is no way crucial to funding. Among the debating points raised by the Social Market Foundation and Open Europe are that the EU contribution of around £1 bn p.a. is one tenth of the UK research budget (or 15 per cent on top of the national budget). The Vote Leave campaign has amplified the point. In the event that citizens vote for Brexit, the UK could use its savings from its current net contribution to the EU (which amounted to £10.2bn in 2014) to maintain, or even increase, funding for universities. It is already advertising how much more could be put into British funds to fight cancer. Most of the scientific community is sceptical that such sums would ever feed back into research if incorporated into the national budget. Even Roger Bootle, the eurosceptic economist and author of a 'what's wrong with Europe' book says these 'are not the sort of sums on which the fate of great nations depend – nor on which the momentous decisions about EU membership should be made'.[ix]

Vote Leave may indeed have already lost its argument on research and science. At any rate it has suffered a serious setback. In January, the universities minister, Jo Johnson, declared to a scientific audience that campaigners wanting to leave the EU 'had serious questions to answer' as to how UK science would flourish outside the EU (THE January 28 2016). As he put it: 'A vote to leave would be a leap into the dark that would put our status as a science

superpower at risk'. It is another sign. that the Leave campaign has not ruffled the status quo.

However, should the British people vote for a Brexit, the science and research debate is an indication of the complexities to follow in dismantling or trying to re-appropriate strongly embedded mechanisms. On the evidence presented these European linkages, have been of great value to the UK, and have given the UK important opportunities to lead in international arenas.

The bridges to students and the wider public

An area where the Leave campaigns have appeared strong is in communicating a simple message: 'Vote Leave, Take Control'; 'Vote Leave Go Global'. As applied in higher education and research, their arguments are underpinned by the need to be free of the bureaucratic burden, the 'nightmare', of EU rules. As for the supposed costs of a Brexit, the arguments have been put, and backed by policy experts, that nothing would change overnight (this is despite the Swiss evidence). Even should a Brexit occur, the present near 6 per cent of students from other parts of the EU within the UK system, and the 15 per cent of academic staff, would not drop to zero. A Brexit would not imply that British students would become insular. Though British students have always been relatively reticent about taking up the EU funded mobility opportunities of the Erasmus programme, they get international experience through their studies on Britain's widely diverse campuses.

The Leave side's advocacy has, however, pushed the sector, and an emerging body of students, into making the positive case for EU membership. The task may be difficult. The British public knows less about European institutions than their peers in other member states, and as Simon Hix puts it, 'they don't necessarily like it'.[x] Those who have been through the British school system will have had fewer opportunities to learn a language or take history in secondary schools than pupils in other countries. They are bottom of the language league tables.[xi]

Although at the time of the LSE hearing, the National Union of Students had not made its planned entry onto the scene, an NUS participant presented a case which may now be heard more. What students take from possibility of a Brexit is the impact on their lives as *citizens*, as much, if not more than as students. As she put it, they may not know exactly what the European Commission does on education, or the scope of the European Higher Education Area underpinned by the Bologna Process. Or that there important higher education stakeholders who work across the EU, such as the European University Association, the European Students Union and Eurashe, the association for professional higher education, to provide the links and take up the issues of national stakeholders. Students may even have little idea of how this area of 25 million students is being brought together more and more.

But whatever the Leave side says, students appear to have a sense that a Brexit might directly or indirectly serve to isolate them from other young people around the world. There is evidence that Bologna-instigated reforms of fair recognition of degrees, credit systems and quality assurance procedures in which students are represented, are all having an effect. It is relevant that Professor Simon Marginson, director of the Centre for Global Higher Education at University College, London, a leading expert on the globalisation of higher education and not part of the EU research community, backs the importance of mobility. He sees visible regionalisation within the Europe of higher education and research as marked by the continuous expansion in student mobility at every level from first degree to doctorate, facilitated by its regulatory mechanisms.[xii]

However what might more easily get across to a wider public is the evidence of personal experience. That student witness at the LSE hearing was involved as a student representative in the European political community of students, the European Students Union. She says that it was a transformative experience to be working alongside so many students of her own generation from countries recently in conflict. That is to say, it is not only the post WWII generation that argues for a united Europe on the grounds of peace. Her colleagues from the Balkans, the Baltic and fragile states to the south and east are 'desperate' for a united Europe she said: one that can respect as well as transcend the historical and geographical divisions. It is a live issue. Ukraine for them is a horror story, the more so in that this group know students directly involved.

Some of the most eminent people in the UK university world have made the same sort of personal connections to the political. The vice chancellor of Cambridge, Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, makes part of his advocacy for the EU a reference to his own family situation. He was born in Wales, largely because his parents' life in Poland was critically disrupted. They were victims of the World War II conflict as it hit Eastern Poland, and were then incarcerated in Siberia before they were eventually able to make their way through Western Europe.

It is a reminder that at crucial moments in the past, there have always been powerful advocates for a united Europe of higher education and research who have based their case in part on the fact that they have lived war, dictatorship and civil conflict and a united Europe has secured for them, or their families, an unimaginably better future.. In the earliest days of the Community in the late 1950s, those who had been enemies overcame the hatred that war induced to launch a European University for a European elite (now the European University Institute in Florence), and to promote mobility between research institutes and universities of which present EU programmes are the direct descendants. In the 1980s it is a student rebel from the Spain of dictatorship times, who went on to become European Commissioner for Education, Training and Youth, goes down in history. He ensured a successful outcome for the original EU Erasmus programme with the line that Europe he and his circle had dreamed of would be dishonoured if it could not spend as much on a student as it spent on a cow (Corbett, 2005).[xiii]

Conclusions: into the public arena

The main conclusion here is that the referendum campaign has been doing its job. Campaigners on both sides of the research and higher education debate have forced the issue onto the public agenda. Knowledge about higher education and research which was the prerogative of specialists is out in the public domain. Windows of opportunity have been used. Institutional arenas have emerged, from the House of Lords to universities to serious blog editors and parts of the media. Issues have been reframed in ways more likely to attract public attention.

One now obvious fact is that the EU and the UK share many of the same objectives for successful higher education and research teams. The only surprise is that this could ever have been a surprise. Policymakers in both sets of institutions will naturally be looking at the same indicators, such as investment in R&D and prospects for labour mobility. The employment statistics show very good prospects for those with high level problem solving skills, devastating ones for those on the average, as the middle range skills are superseded by technology.[xiv]

A second point to be clarified is that the EU is not engaged in a takeover. Nor is it being a fortress Europe or curbing national global ambitions. It is being a facilitator in research and other programmes which are best managed trans-nationally. It offers incentives and competitive access to opportunities. It offers capacity building support which is politically

and technically better managed at European level. In the process all sorts of collaborations emerge. The informal underpins the institutional. The evidence assembled by researchers, by university case studies and by the wealth of comment in policy blogs is that the costs of Brexit would be devastating in personal terms, expensive because disruptive in terms of GDP, and destructive of such achievements as the EU helping to generate the conditions for becoming the world's biggest scientific hub.

Thirdly, it has emerged that these sectoral aspects of EU policy are indissolubly linked to its foundational principles. One is the freedom of movement of people, capital, services and goods, as strengthened by the Amsterdam Treaty commitment to knowledge as the fifth freedom. A second fundamental principle is that there should not be discrimination between EU citizens.

Issues about higher education and research that many citizens will not have been aware of have been revealed in this campaign. It has tested polarised views on sovereignty and competitiveness. It has come up with the evidence that much of what are considered purely national achievements have in fact become productively embedded over 40 years in a European way of doing things. Should that now be disrupted if not severely damaged? Big choices are at stake.

Ends (4800wds)

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[i] The author wishes to thank all participants at the Hearing of the LSE Commission on the Future of Britain in Europe of the topic of Research and Higher Education, which took place on December 8, 2015, and also her colleague, Tanguy Séné.

[ii] This article does not go into the differences between the components systems of the UK

[iii] Barr, N. (2004). Higher Education Funding. Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 20(2), 264

[iv] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/education-vocational-training-and-youth-review-of-the-balance-of-competences
https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-uk-and-eu-balance-of-competences-call-for-evidence-on-research-and-development

[v] www.euromove.org.uk.

[vi] Scientists for EU. Written evidence to House of Lords committee. EUM0058.

[vii] See http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/eu-relationship-and-science/eu-membership-and-the-effectiveness-of-science-research-and-innovation-in-the-uk-publications/

[viii] See Gadient, I and Milani, P.(2015) 'Letter from Switzerland' (Political Quarterly 86(4):468 for the democratic implications of the Swiss vote

[ix] Bootle, R(2015)The Trouble with Europe. Updated edition. Nicholas Brealey. See p 153.

[x] http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexitvote/2015/11/30/most-brits-know-little-about-the-eu-and-those-that-do-dont-necessarily-like-it/

[xi] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_education

[xii] http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20140326123556985

[xiii] Corbett, A. (2005). Universities and the Europe of Knowledge: Ideas, Institutions and Policy Entrepreneurship in European Union Higher Education, 1955-2005. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[xiv] http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexitvote/2016/01/01/eu-membership-is-not-the-only-way-to-foster-labour-mobility-but-it-is-the-best/