

The university challenge: what would an Intelligent Brexit look like?

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*The EU brought invaluable networks for research and collaboration to the UK. More than that, it fostered a shared democratic culture of openness and tolerance. But these links will have to change as Britain pursues a hard Brexit. Time is short, write **Anne Corbett** and **Claire Gordon**, and universities need to make the case for an 'Intelligent Brexit' that will preserve the links fostered during 40 years of peaceful collaboration.*



Brexit is an opportunity to do some fresh thinking about why universities matter. Yet a great deal of uncertainty remains about what it means for higher education. The recent [disclosure](#) that the Department for Exiting the European Union has no structure for dealing with research, education or universities and in the Department for Education there is no one dealing with leaving the EU has added to universities' concerns.



Despite her '[hard Brexit](#)' [speech](#) and her vision of a Global Britain outside the single market, Theresa May did give one hint that was welcomed by Universities UK. She would like the EU27 to give the UK some post-Brexit buy-in to EU research programmes. But it seems her interest in universities is limited to university science and innovation – in other words, the aspects of higher education relevant to the government's new industrial strategy.



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The Supreme Court ruling on Parliamentary sovereignty and the limits of the royal prerogative may be more helpful. Parliament now has the uncontested responsibility to legislate for the removal of rights accorded to the British as EU

citizens. For universities, this means the right to study, work and live in member countries for academics and students.

Now we have heard from May and the Supreme Court, Parliament will have a chance to shape a strategy that can limit the damage caused by leaving the EU and is open to other ways of enhancing the quality of UK higher education and public understanding.

Things have to change – despite the success of HE

Meanwhile, the [Education Select Committee \(ESC\)](#) of the House of Commons is looking into the impact of Brexit on higher education. The conundrum it faces is that UK universities currently have an enviable record in terms of research achievement. They attract academics, researchers and students from many parts of the world, and they keep dropouts to a minimum – but underpinning the status quo cannot be a political option for the committee after a political earthquake like Brexit.

So what is the most productive way forward? We believe higher education doesn't need a hard or soft Brexit: it needs an Intelligent Brexit.

The ESC has been hearing two arguments repeatedly. The first is that a hard Brexit could be a disaster for higher education, making British universities uncompetitive, cutting off the flow of bright people coming into the system and downgrading our reputation for excellent research. Universities are already [having more difficulty recruiting](#) EU students and staff. They cite public hostility towards immigrants and uncertainty about the future of collaborative research. The 7% fall in applications by EU students to British universities supports their pessimism.

The second argument is that replicating the infrastructure, funding and the cooperative networks which come with EU membership – whether by national or international initiative – is impossible in the short term, however great the incentives to boost existing international links.

One suggestion is that academics should lobby for a bespoke deal for higher education. The aim would be to guarantee free movement of researchers, academics and related staff within the European Economic Area. Another is to focus on getting associate country status, which would allow the UK to participate in the research and innovation programme that will follow on from Horizon 2020, meaning participation on the basis of financial contributions. These options would probably need to be supported by more generous visa regimes for international staff and international students – a possibility which is on hold at present, because the government treats them as migrants, and therefore subject to its targets for reducing immigration.

First principles

Ultimately, universities and their scholars must be true to their democratic values and their respect for evidence and reason. So this is the moment when we need to broaden public and political understanding of what it is about the European connection that helps UK universities to perform as well as they do – and by extension, why a hard Brexit would be so destructive. As a natural home for those who identify with Europe and an Enlightenment inheritance, universities have been prime targets of the Brexiteer triumphalism currently marking British life. We need a better narrative of university values and functions which can be weighed up against immediate transactional values and – understandable in the circumstances – financial sustainability.

Take the example of why academics are so keen to engage in cross-border collaboration. Academic collaboration is not an abstract thing. It is a relationship between researchers and different kinds of ideas and research projects. Such relationships build up gradually. At their best they produce originality, innovation and learning among people who have been formed in different intellectual contexts. It is an ecology which could easily be damaged.

The universities of Europe share a democratic mission to project the values of openness, tolerance, inquiry and a respect for diversity. Our core task to enable the young to engage critically with the latest knowledge that comes from scholarship, and develop the transferable and interdisciplinary skills they will need in the labour markets of the future. They come together in tackling the big social challenges of health and environment through transnational collaboration and data sharing.

Europe – with its multiple languages – has largely transcended its conflict-ridden histories over the past 40 years. Universities here are underpinned (in a way which does not happen in other regional HE groupings, such as those of Asia and Latin America) by shared expertise and incentive funding, which have developed to support mobility and the circulation and development of knowledge. European universities are also distinctive in their openness to other countries and regions.

It is hardly surprising that much of the UK HE sector wants to continue to work on a European scale in a post-Brexit world. That collaboration can help it fulfil its public, educational and research roles.

What do universities want?

Many universities will be calling on the government to ensure that higher education forms an integral part of the Article 50 Brexit negotiations. They want to reclassify international students and take them out of the migration statistics, to give EU citizens certainty over their status, and to fight for the nearest thing to associate country status for the UK so that our researchers can continue to participate fully in the EU's research and educational programmes.

The Intelligent Brexit we are arguing for takes on the challenges of the 'post-truth' society and May's assumptions about 'citizens of nowhere'. It is driven by the characteristic interconnectedness of research, education and democratic values. We have very little time to make our case. Will we seize it?

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