



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

University APPG meeting- Brexit and Higher Education

18:00-19:30 Wednesday 23 October, Committee room 3A, House of Lords

Chair:

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP, Chair of the APPUG

Speakers:

Paul Blomfield MP, Shadow Exiting the European Union Minister

Vivienne Stern, Director, Universities UK International

Dr Anne Corbett, Senior Associate, LSE Enterprise

Vivienne Stern used her address to take stock of the progress of the current Brexit situation and what it meant for universities. Universities UK (UUK) and its members had put all their energy into thinking about a no-deal exit and the challenges that would bring but now it was time to consider other options as well. The three possible outcomes were a no-deal (at some stage), a version of the prime minister's current deal or an indeterminate delay. Energy should have, and should now, be put into laying the groundwork for future association to EU programmes, she thought.

Vivienne described the activities UUK had undertaken to date to prepare the higher education sector for the possibility of a no deal. This included new guidance, new legal advice on education as a service on a third party basis in EU member states, webinars on financial planning and gathering experts from different areas of university life to explore risks and opportunities in the areas of estates management, finance etc.

A recent survey of UUK members showed how prepared universities were for a no-deal she said and went through some of the findings including the fact that 3% of universities said they were fully prepared for a no-deal, 50% said they were very prepared and 47% said they were slightly prepared. In summary, she thought universities were in a reasonable position when compared to many other sectors.

Preparations in some areas were more advanced than others however. All responding universities had uploaded their research contracts to the UKRI portal, however only a small proportion had assessed the proportion of their own staff that had applied for settled status. One dilemma for institutions was around when to take action to mitigate against a no-deal she said, explaining that one London-based university had worked out they would need to open up a huge number of individual contacts to add a new clause on data and this would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Turning to the possibility of a deal being in place, Vivienne welcomed the fact the sector had a degree of certainty about the mutual desire of the UK and EU to continue academic collaboration as stated in the draft political agreement. The groundwork with the EU

Commission was there and she thought there would be an appetite for the UK to make “fair contributions” in exchange for contributing towards the strength of the EU research system. There was however the potential issue that the balance of power amongst the EU27 had shifted.

Concluding her open remarks, Vivienne lamented that political support for the Erasmus+ programme was weaker than for Horizon 2020 and therefore work needed to be put in to both make the case in the UK, and also ensure the next Erasmus programme remained strong and politically appealing.

Dr Anne Corbett opened by saying there had been a lot of discussion about replacing research funding, but less awareness to date of what Britain had already lost since the Brexit vote. She particularly noted the benefits of the European Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and then highlighted that almost half of the whole European Regional Development Fund budget went on research into vital areas such as agriculture.

Speaking about early ideas for replacement funding, she urged members of the group to be cynical and push for full association. She described how the “well oiled, heavy infrastructure” that existed within the Erasmus+ programme was vitally important, and therefore any replacement system would have to be much more complex than simply dividing the roughly £13billion Erasmus budget by 27. She added that the Erasmus programme had also been important for the vocational sector, a focus of the current and future governments.

In terms of future participation she thought it would be much more likely with a softer Brexit, and noted that the EU27 would be feeling fairly “bitter” about losing a large chunk of the future budget for both the Horizon and Erasmus programmes.

Turning to her recent trip to a conference in Slovenia, she said that university colleagues from all over the Continent made the point to her that Brexit was not just a matter for the UK university system, but also university systems in other EU member states. She suggested that there needs to be a greater understanding in the UK sector of the complex interrelationships that exist between EU member state universities.

Universities in countries such as France and the Netherlands were potentially looking to increase their competitiveness and capitalise on Brexit. But she was told that small countries like Slovenia would need to amend their longer term strategies with no deal or a hard deal. This is because they have counted on getting their postdocs trained up by participating in EU research contracts led by Britain.

Paul Blomfield MP gave the group an update from the Labour frontbench on the ongoing negotiations with the government over the Withdrawal Agreement Bill. He also thought UUK and the university sector had been right to focus on the possibility of a no-deal as it was a very real prospect over the summer.

He went through amendments Labour was planning to table to the Withdrawal Agreement Bill including:

- An amendment to close the ‘no deal trap door’ in Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s proposal that could enable the UK to crash out in December 2020

- An amendment for a Customs Union which he felt could secure cross-party agreement
- An amendment on changes to the settled status scheme given the problems that existed, particularly around people only being granted pre-settled status when they had applied for the full status.
- An amendment for a second referendum.

Expanding on the first amendment, he explained that it was incredibly unlikely the UK could negotiate its entire future relationship with the EU within 14 months especially given that, unlike other trade deals, regulatory divergence rather than alignment would be the aim. It would therefore be wise to do everything possible to ensure a no-deal outcome would not be the default at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020.

Finally, he agreed with Anne that the loss of European Structural Funds was concerning, giving the example of his local region South Yorkshire which would now be eligible for significant amounts of structural funding over the coming 7 year period given the shrinking of the area's GDP.

Questions from attendees covered a wide range of areas including the Adrian Smith Review, European Temporary Leave to Remain, future tuition fees status of EU students and Transnational Education (TNE) contracts.