



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

University APPG meeting- Brexit and Higher Education

18:00 – 19:30, Wednesday 14 November, Committee Room 4, 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

Professor Richard Catlow, Foreign Secretary and Vice President, Royal Society

Paul Blomfield noted that the Prime Minister was currently holding a Cabinet meeting to gain approval for the Brexit deal she had recently negotiated with the EU. This was a critical period he said, but stressed that the last part of agreeing the final Brexit deal was the most difficult part. Polling showed the public was now 'fed up' of Brexit.

Brexit was paralysing politics he thought, movement had been slow and therefore the government had little bandwidth to deal with the other major issues facing the country; this situation was likely to continue for a few years. He praised former Higher Education Minister Jo Johnson's resignation speech for describing the current situation as a political crisis. Negotiating a free trade agreement of the sort the country had never had before was extremely complex despite the fact the UK started out from the same position as the EU.

Responding to some views that Labour should support Theresa May's Brexit deal as it contains customs arrangements between the UK and EU, Paul stressed that Labour wanted guaranteed customs arrangements rather than a time-limited or backstop plan. He later ran through Labour's six tests, stressing that any withdrawal agreement would be judged against these tests.

He thought the situation would have been significantly different had the prime minister not followed the narrative of the 'extreme Brexiteer' wing of the party; the referendum vote did not give a mandate to rupture relations with the EU.

Parliament could usually be seen to contain a lot of cross-party working on legislation yet there had been no attempt from the government reach out to the opposition; this was bad for demography. There was also an issue around what a 'meaningful vote' would look like and whether amendments could be made to the motion in a situation where parliament voted it down. He thought there was a majority in parliament against no-deal and therefore the threat that if MPs did not vote for the prime minister's deal there would be a no-deal situation was a false premise.

Vivienne Stern opened her remarks by explaining that Universities UK (UUK) was in an awkward position of planning very seriously for three entirely possible and near-term eventualities. She stressed that universities were amongst the more resilient institutions in the country that would be affected by Brexit; even in the worst case scenario there were

structures in place that made collaboration with Europe, and the rest of the world, possible. One of the big threats to universities was the fact the system depended on the success of the wider UK economy. She thought another threat came in the form of wider political movements across Europe, as discovered through UUK's ongoing delegations to European member states. It was unfortunate that the government did not have the bandwidth to focus on wider issues.

Despite Paul's view that a no deal scenario was unlikely, Vivienne told attendees that UUK's main priority was to map out what this scenario would mean for universities, giving specific examples of the contracts that were in place with other institutions and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. This situation was mirrored in many other sectors, she thought.

In terms of what the government needed to do to protect against the consequences of a no deal, she welcomed the statements that been made so far in terms of assurances on Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ but thought these needed to be backed up with more detail and granular planning. Additional capacity in the civil service would be needed to work through issues of great importance for the sector such as involvement in the future Erasmus programme.

Turning to a situation where the parliament votes the deal through, Vivienne stressed that there needed to be a concerted effort to make sure European partners understood what this route to Brexit meant for them. Communication needed to be clearer to those in EU member states that the UK would still be able to participate in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+. In any case, a lot of lobbying would be needed to ensure the UK could continue participation as an associated country after the transition period. Giving an example of an important area the UK needed to have continued influence in, she explained the ongoing debate between distribution of research funding between widening participation and excellence.

In the third scenario in which there was no future association with European programmes post-transition period there would be a genuine cost on the research side to losing access to European framework programmes she thought. In this situation national alternatives would have to be designed to replace, for example, funding from the European Research Council.

Ending on a positive note, Vivienne told attendees that various sector institutions were working well together to plan for the different scenarios she had outlined and ensure the new reality would be successful. It was particularly positive that the benefits of scientific and educational collaboration were well known by EU member state government and should stand the sector in good stead.

Professor Richard Catlow told attendees he would speak partly in his capacity as Foreign Secretary of the Royal Society and partly as an active researcher working at both University College London and Cardiff University. He started by stating the UK was a "research powerhouse" that was recognised all over the world. The scientific community in the UK was very international, with nearly 30% of academic staff from overseas, and 17% specifically from the EU. To add to this, the UK's top five countries for collaboration included four EU member states: Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands. The UK was a real magnet for international talent he stressed, adding that home-grown talent was also vital.

On mobility, he stated the current visa system was deleterious for science and very expensive. He then gave an example of a solar energy researcher that had been greeted with

an unwelcoming attitude and huge costs. He stressed that the science community was comprised of those on modest salaries as well as senior professors. Researchers at different stages of their career would be needed for the government to meet its ambitious and welcome target of increasing R&D spending to 2.4% of GDP.

He agreed with both UUK and the Russell Group that the most desirable situation was a deal that enabled the UK's association with Horizon Europe in as full a way as possible. This needed to be the focus of lobbying pressure, although thinking of alternatives would also be important.

Giving his final thoughts, Richard said the UK was firmly integrated with international science as well as European science and was respected around the world; the Royal Society worked closely with international academy groups including as part of the commonwealth. It was important to maintain strong international links for a variety of reasons including soft power.