



# The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

## **Note of speaker meeting: “Brexit and next steps for the university sector”**

Speakers:

**Professor Paul O’Prey**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Roehampton

**Professor Philippe Moreillon**, Université de Lausanne

**Paul O’Prey** began his comments by setting out his thoughts on the reasons people voted in the referendum. He noted that he was not convinced by the single explanations of why people voted one way or another, arguing that on both sides it’s likely that people made their decision because of a variety of reasons, and perhaps put together these are not that coherent. From a relevant sector perspective, over 80% of people studying full time voted to remain, and taking from this those studying in universities this rose to 87%.

Professor O’Prey commented that the success of the UK sector has been based on its ability to attract the best students and the best staff, he felt that the possible lack of access to talent is the biggest threat that Brexit holds for the sector in the long-term. Nonetheless there have been encouraging words from the government and he was hopeful that Erasmus would continue following the UK’s exit from the EU. However, he went on to argue that Erasmus could not be the only form that movement of students that continues. He suggested that the simplest and most effective thing to do, which would ensure Britain’s universities remained outward looking and continue to add value to Britain’s soft power, would be to remove international students from the net migration target. Professor O’Prey cited a recent ComRes and Universities UK poll which found that 76% of people surveyed were in favour of taking in international students. He described how international students have enriched universities and the learning of all university students, as well as their huge contribution to our economy as one of the major exports of the UK. Uniquely he argued, this is an export where the benefits are distributed across the UK not solely focused in one region. He concluded his comments by noting that the country was about to embark on a major international exercise and in doing so the sector must encourage those taking part in the negotiations to focus on our strengths and acknowledge the major contribution that universities can and do make.

**Philippe Moreillon** opened by describing Switzerland’s history with the European Union, mentioning particular issues such as its acceptance as an associate country in higher education, followed by the recent vote against ‘massive immigration’ and countries exclusion from Erasmus. Professor Moreillon also noted the differences between

Switzerland and the UK, including how the Swiss government spends 3% of GDP on research and there are no tuition fees for higher education.

He went on to describe the risks from his point of view for the UK which he felt the sector and the government should work to mitigate. These included a loss of funding and competitiveness for basic science, and a risk to the loss of research and development innovation. He argued that with universities not able financially to take on basic research, which is the breeding ground of innovation, universities might produce less ground-breaking discoveries and lose the knowledge and expertise that tie private companies to the country. As a result, companies might choose to develop innovation elsewhere. In this vein he also warned that the UK should try and ensure the same R&D and patents standards as the EU, cautioning that without this large companies might have another excuse to relocate. Professor Moreillon's final piece of advice was that the UK should negotiate strongly to remain part of the Horizon 2020 programme.

### **Q&A and discussion**

The discussion section of the meeting began with attendees commenting on the **strength of feeling** around the vote including EU nationals living in the UK and potential students, warning of the dangers of unwelcoming statements and how these play out across the world. It was felt that the UK cannot have a world class university sector, that is relevant to the world that we are living in without the same social capital that others have.

Attendees then moved on to the **challenges posed** by being outside of the EU. These included paying a fee to collaborate but not being at the table for the discussion on collaboration rules. It was suggested that the sector would have to look for other ways to influence which would be more complex and less effective. The routes to collaboration are likely to be more bureaucratic than the sector currently experiences.

Vice-chancellor attendees noted their **short and long term worries** about the Brexit decision, which comprised of concerns around using students as a negotiation point, protection of an image developed over hundreds of years that the UK is an open society, and what the possible subtraction of international students might mean for the universities, local businesses and regions.

Attendees finished the discussion by **suggesting options** for how to get the best out of potentially difficult situations and ensure that those taking part in the **negotiations** have the best information. It was argued that the quality of research and teaching is directly related to the quality and standard of staff and students recruited, therefore this should be a top priority for the sector. They should also argue for **free movement of all students**, not just those that partake in the Erasmus scheme, reminding government that cutting international student numbers won't end concerns about immigration, there is nothing to gain and no

public satisfaction in the outcome. Some attendees argued that students should be removed from the net migration target and that a special status should be developed for PHD and post-doc staff. The group agreed that there might be more that the sector could do to address a problem of the referendum, that the **truth does not count for enough**. If this couldn't work in the short term, then it should be researched as a long term social phenomenon that needs to be addressed. A parliamentary attendee suggested that universities should do a **comprehensive risk assessment** which covered all possible job losses, not just academic but at every level of communities and feed this into their members of parliament over the next few crucial months. Lastly, all attendees agreed the importance of the sectors contribution to the government's **industrial strategy** which is currently being developed.

In conclusion, the **group agreed to take this discussion further**. Vice-chancellor attendees would contact the secretariat to let them know where their local MP or other contacts stand on various Brexit challenges, as well as setting out their top concerns and questions for members of the government that will be taking part in the EU negotiations. The group would then work to provide an issue paper on the topic of Brexit, looking specifically at three areas: research, staff recruitment, and students. The paper would be written by a number of parliamentarians across several parties and include the top asks of the sector. This would then be presented by the group's officer to ministers.