



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of Speaker Meeting: “Universities and Europe: why EU membership and reform matter”

Speakers:

Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow DBE, Vice-Chancellor, University of Kent and President, Universities UK

Neil Carmichael, MP for Stroud, Chair, Conservative Europe Group and Chair, Education Select Committee

Pawel Swidlicki, Policy Analyst, Open Europe

Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow described why she felt that university leaders shouldn't be bystanders in the EU Referendum debate. She set out how as president of the representative organisation for the UK's universities it was her expectation that university campuses should be places for debate and that academics would provide expertise to all sides.

She made it clear that she felt there was need for reform, and how recognising the benefits of EU membership does not exclude wanting to push for reforms to make it work better. However for the UK to have a significant say in EU reform, she believed that the UK must commit to a future in the EU, and should play a leadership role in making the EU more efficient and effective.

Professor Goodfellow described specific examples of how she felt EU membership worked well for UK universities. She named examples in research impact such as EuroCoord, an EU backed network established by several of the biggest HIV research projects in Europe. It improves the lives of individuals infected with HIV. A pan-European network, with 25 partners from across the world, it allows British universities to conduct research on an amazing wealth of international data and to pool expertise and resource with excellent scientists across Europe to achieve medical advances that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

She also described how membership enhances the student experience, noting that 15% of academic staff at UK universities are from other EU countries and over 125,000 EU students are currently studying at UK universities. These students help to foster an international, outward-looking culture on university campuses which in turn provides British students with an international university experience preparing them for an ever more globalised world.

Neil Carmichael MP focused his comments on the many positives for the higher education sector and society more widely in remaining a member of the EU.

Again he agreed that, like every public organisation, some reform is required from time to time. However, he noted that the EU had reformed its policies, in some examples quite dramatically from their initial principles. He cited the Common Agricultural Policy as a big example of reform and improvement that had taken place thanks to UK intervention as an EU member.

Mr Carmichael mentioned the Prime Minister's agenda for reform; including energy into the single market, a greater role for the national parliament, and making a more successful digital economy. He argued that these were positive interventions and noted that the UK had European allies in these negotiations.

He described how he felt that the ultimate reform was transparency within European Council decisions. He described how there is accountability in the elected representatives of European Parliament but noted that unlike the UK parliament where we can call on the Prime Minister to answer for his actions, the European Council decision making remains veiled.

Mr Carmichael explained how the central point of the European Union is free trade and the huge advantages that this brings to the UK and to the higher education sector. When large firms, such as Airbus, chose to establish themselves in the UK, they choose regions where there are excellent universities and therefore where they know they will be getting the right training and education for their current and future employees.

He reiterated, what he described as a misconception, that the UK would save money by no longer paying the fee for EU membership, noting that any trade agreement that the UK entered into as a non-member would incur a financial cost.

Pawel Swidlicki welcomed the acknowledgment from other speakers that reform is needed. He stated that those who are campaigning to remain a member of the EU have a strong credibility with voters when they set out where they would ask for reforms.

He noted that there were interesting test cases of membership, such as Switzerland who have been granted partial association, which the UK could look to apply should Brexit occur. He also discussed the dangers of overstating the higher education case to remain a member as the UK would still be able to take part in funding schemes like Horizon 2020 and exchange programmes such as Erasmus.

He set out the positive of being able to negotiate a fresh deal, that there would be an opportunity to choose which policies to implement. He noted the argument that half of the EU budget goes towards agriculture and recycling and therefore matters such as innovation are being left behind. He felt that people should be supportive of this argument as it was

proved correct on every occasion the EU took a decision ignoring scientific advice for political reasons.

Mr Swidlicki explained that in his opinion the biggest issue for universities and a possible Brexit was about free movement. Although there are valid concerns about how this would be tackled, there is no reason to think that the UK would not be able to repeat other countries achievements.

Q&A and Discussion

A parliamentary member warned about the **RAB cost to the UK from EU students** who did not pay back their student loans. They noted that a negotiation the Prime Minister should request is for a system to be put in place similar to student loan repayments through PAYE for UK students. A university member responded to this by saying that a recent study had shown that UK graduates living overseas were more likely to be non-payers (being lost to the system) than EU students who return home after studying here.

Some members present discussed the Scottish Referendum and how they felt universities came late to the debate. As such the early interest of the sector for the EU Referendum was welcomed. This led to an exchange about the **1975 referendum** and concerns that the set of negotiations that the Prime Minister may achieve will either appease those who were strongly in favour of an exit or could run the risk of inspiring nobody. They noted that the swing in the previous referendum was the success in setting out a bigger picture rather than arguing over complicated details.

A parliamentary member noted that what had been missing in the debate so far, including the debate within higher education, was that the **referendum would be decided on emotional narrative** and not by facts and figures. It was suggested that those people regarded as opinion formers should engage their workforce and disseminate their message to the broadest group of people.

Others noted that universities need to think about their communities, and inspire debate and provide information to their students and staff. Universities should ensure students are registered to vote and make the importance clear to those who may never have voted before. One university member suggested holding a referendum on campus to gauge student and staff opinion, and act as a locus for debate.

Professor Goodfellow noted that UK students were still less likely than others in the EU to go overseas and the sector should not assume that all students would have social capital to do so. **Pawel Swidlicki** referred to his own personal experience of the Erasmus scheme and how information about financial assistance was often difficult to find. Members agreed that more needed to be done to encourage students to study abroad.

There were many calls for **nonpartisan information** to be easily available for the public. Members noted that this was available on website such as Open Europe but that it was

important to recognise that objective data would always be carefully chosen and spun due to the emotiveness of the referendum.