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IMPLICATIONS OF A NO-DEAL BREXIT FOR EUROPEAN RESEARCH

[7 MARCH, 2019](#) [BRIAN CAHILL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Since the vote of the UK public to leave the EU in June 2016, there has been extensive discussion about the negotiations surrounding Brexit. This article assesses the impact of Brexit on European research. The UK is home to many excellent research institutions and a vibrant academic and scientific community that has very strong links to the rest of Europe through mobility of researchers, through research cooperation and through research funding.

Looked at through the prism of EU research funding, UK institutions have so far been awarded €5.2 billion (14.2% of the total budget) of Horizon 2020 funding. That is a close second to Germany in the list of countries that have been awarded the most funding in Horizon 2020. [Four of the top five](#) most successful universities in Horizon 2020 are based in the UK (Oxford, Cambridge, University College London and Imperial College). Luc van Dyck of EuroScience compiled a [study](#) of how the UK benefited from EU research funding in FP7 and Horizon 2020. It showed that the UK is a net beneficiary of Horizon 2020 funding but that this is solely due to the EU budget rebate that the UK benefits from. If the UK can negotiate a deal to take part in Horizon Europe, it would

most likely do so without a rebate and would probably become a net contributor to EU-funded research.

How a No-Deal Brexit would affect researchers and research institutions is quite uncertain but this article aims to outline the scenario. Since the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016 and Theresa May triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty in March 2017, the negotiations surrounding Britain's decision to leave the European Union have been quite protracted.

The [continuing participation of the UK in Horizon 2020](#) was agreed as part of the Joint Report on EU-UK negotiations published in December 2017. The UK agreed to pay into the EU budget until the end of the current budgetary period, that is, 31st December 2020. In doing so, the UK would be eligible to take part in Horizon 2020 until the end of that Framework Programme. In order to ratify that agreement, the Withdrawal Agreement must be passed by the House of Commons: that has not yet happened.

In the case of a No Deal Brexit, the British Government has [guaranteed all Horizon 2020 funding held by UK beneficiaries](#). Nevertheless, the details of how this will be implemented are not yet clear. For instance, who will be responsible for administering this funding? It might be least disruptive for Horizon 2020 beneficiaries to continue to observe the current reporting and auditing procedures administered by the European Commission. The British government however might be compelled to implement its own as yet unspecified procedures to administer funding in the case of a No Deal. [UKRI](#) is [surveying](#) UK beneficiaries of EU research funding. Currently beneficiaries of H2020 funding across the UK are unaware of exactly how to prepare for No Deal.

The UK has long been a very attractive destination for many international researchers. For example, since the beginning of the [Marie \(Skłodowska-\)Curie Actions](#), the UK has always been the most popular host country for Individual Fellows. Many EU citizens in the UK instinctively felt that the Brexit vote was a rejection of their presence in their adopted country but it also had practical implications for their legal status in the UK. The uncertainty about residence status was dealt with far too slowly during negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement. As part of the negotiations, the UK has prepared a process for awarding "[settled status](#)" to EU nationals working in the UK and a [pilot scheme](#) has already been implemented for staff at certain universities and hospitals. It is understood that the same process will be carried out even in the case of a No-Deal Brexit. After a No-Deal Brexit, all EU citizens (apart from Irish citizens) entering the UK may be subject to much stricter immigration rules and requirements and this may reduce the attractiveness of the UK to EU researchers in future.

Many EU projects consist of a consortium of multinational partners and UK institutions have traditionally led many of these consortium projects as coordinators. Although full participation in Horizon 2020 funding has continued to be open to UK partners, there have been [reports](#) that some consortia have been reluctant to choose UK institutions as coordinator since the Brexit referendum. If the UK were to crash out of the EU without a deal, it might affect the legal status of some current projects. Horizon 2020 requires at

least three partners in a consortium to be from an EU state or associated country. The [Austrian National Contact Point for MSCA is advising](#) that should a UK organisation be required to leave a consortium, the consortium would have to either attempt to find a new organisation to again meet the minimum requirements (before this actually occurs), or the project would be terminated by the EC. The UK Government guarantee provides financial security but the continuation of some projects will require the EU to exercise a degree of flexibility that may or may not be forthcoming.

Many in the UK research community, particularly the [Royal Society](#), support the continuation of cooperation with European partners by being part of the forthcoming Framework Programme Horizon Europe as an Associated Country. Nevertheless, the UK may well become a [third country](#) in [Horizon Europe](#). Partners from third countries can take part in certain consortium projects under certain conditions but are ineligible for mono-beneficiary programmes, such as, ERC grants and MSCA Individual Fellowships. The UK has historically been very successful in both of these programmes. From the point of view of UK researchers applying for EU funding, UK citizens would continue to be able to become MSCA fellows or ERC grantees but at host institutions in eligible countries and UK institutions would not be eligible to be beneficiaries of such funding.

Should the UK no longer be able to take part in Horizon Europe, UK institutions are no doubt already lobbying the UK government to match the current funding they acquire from the EU. The UK should prioritise funding programmes that offer similar support for the careers of early-career researchers. For example, boosting the budget of the [Newton International Fellowship Programme](#) run by the Royal Society to facilitate early-career researchers to engage in research exchange at UK institutions would address the same audience of researchers as the Individual Fellowship programme of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The UK also has existing grants that are somewhat similar to the ERC Starting Grant, such as the [Future Leaders Fellowships](#) of the UKRI, to support excellent young researchers to start research groups.

Although the UK is a leading country in terms of purely academic research, the UK often [struggles to translate academic research breakthroughs into commercial success](#). EU research funding is very inclusive of industry partners: it truly is a research and innovation programme. The UK is not without some programmes that support industry-academia partnerships but these are not as extensive as the EU funded programmes. Innovation is a theme that is integral to the design of Horizon 2020. EU programmes focus on the generation of societal impact through fostering employment and on equipping young researchers with transferable skills that will assist their future intersectoral mobility. The UK may not be able to take part in the forthcoming [European Innovation Council](#) that aims to facilitate European innovators, entrepreneurs, small companies and researchers to develop research ideas into enterprises that can succeed internationally. The EIC aims to do for innovation what the ERC did for academic research.

EU-funded research has been the catalyst for a considerable number of research collaborations between [Ireland and the UK](#). On the one hand, the peace process in

Northern Ireland was accompanied by a blossoming of cooperative research between scientists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland often within the framework of EU-funded research. This cooperation is likely to be reduced after the UK leaves the EU. On the other hand, [Science Foundation Ireland](#) is aiming to [attract world-class academics](#) from the US and UK to work at Irish universities, where they are eligible to apply for EU funding without restrictions.

The UK authorities are encouraging UK institutions to apply for funding under [Erasmus+](#) in 2019 and has given a guarantee underwriting funding for the lifetime of such projects. Even if a Withdrawal Agreement is concluded, the UK will need to carry out negotiations with the EU to continue as an Erasmus Partner Country. If discussions are unsuccessful, the UK guarantee for Erasmus will only cover funding committed to UK institutions and [partner organisations in other countries](#) will have to find funding elsewhere (presumably the EU will provide funding).

The UK has long been a bastion of academic freedom and research excellence and has played a very strong role in strengthening those shared values within the European research community. British institutions and researchers have been enthusiastic participants in international research exchange within Europe and beyond. European research is a much broader arena than EU research funding and the UK will remain a participant in the development of European research. The UK is preparing to leave the EU but it and its institutions will remain a member of the [Council of Europe](#), [CERN](#), [COST](#) Actions, [EMBL](#), [EUA](#), [LERU](#), [Science Europe](#) and many other pan-European organisations.

EuroScience itself has three [Governing Board members](#) based in the UK and two of those are [Vice-Presidents](#). The UK is a leading contributor on many of the topics that matter most to the members of [EuroScience](#), readers of [EuroScientist](#) and attendees at the [EuroScience Open Forum](#): Researcher Career Development, Science Communication, Open Science, Evidence-Based Policy Making, Research Ethics and Integrity, and many more. For instance, the [Wellcome Trust](#) is one of the leading partners in [cOAlition S](#) and in 2003 was the first funding agency to see the need for [changes in academic publishing](#). The [European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#) was published in 2005 and was broadly based on the earlier [UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers](#) published in 1996. On many similar issues, the UK has laid the framework for structures that were later adopted across Europe.

These are difficult times for the relationship between the UK and the EU but it is of the utmost importance to find ways to maintain old and build new relationships between individuals and institutions. UK researchers and institutions will continue to be a part of the European scientific community and contribute to the debate on the development of European research in years to come.

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