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The Brexit White Paper: what does it mean for higher education and research?

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While Theresa May pledged that “the days of sending vast sums of money to the EU” are over, the UK is still very much under the illusion that the days of receiving large amounts of EU money in specific sectors are not. Hopes of an early deal allowing UK universities to remain among the highest beneficiaries of EU research funding programmes are vanishing quickly. The UK is holding on to its red lines – such as ending free movement and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) – and British officials are still publicly debating the possibility of the UK backtracking on the ‘divorce bill’ without securing a trade deal. With less than three months to go before both sides hope to achieve an agreement in October 2018, the government’s recent White Paper offered a twofold opportunity: first, to set out its post-Brexit position for higher education and research; and, second, to present the outcome of two years of negotiations. While the White Paper embraced future collaboration with EU partners, it fell short of the second objective, lacking detail and remaining non-committal in terms of the partnership status the government seeks to obtain.

▪ Establishing new cooperative accords

The White Paper has the merit of underlining the value of continued research collaboration with EU partners. Fortunately, government officials understand the greater impact gained through international co-authored publications, which are on average more highly cited than UK domestic publications. They also acknowledge that cross-border collaboration can increase the impact of scientific activity, as illustrated by major breakthroughs such as the development of an Ebola vaccine and the discovery of graphene. 13 out of the 21 countries that have co-authored at least one per cent or more of UK research outputs during 2007-2016 are EU countries (rising to 15 if Horizon 2020 associated countries Norway and Switzerland are included). While the UK is a partner of choice for each of its European collaborators, on the flip side the quality and impact of UK research, science and innovation depends on

interaction with all 15 of these European countries simultaneously.

Furthermore, EU funding has been vital for UK research. For example, the National Graphene Institute at the University of Manchester was created from an initial £23 million investment from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), out of a total £61 million investment. Domestically, there has been no substantial progress on establishing how that funding would be replaced, since the so-called “shared prosperity fund” outlined in the Conservative manifesto (May 2017) aimed at reducing the staggering inequalities across the four UK nations.

For this mutually beneficial partnership to continue, the UK government proposes to collaborate with the EU through new broad cooperative accords “that provide for a more strategic approach than simply agreeing the UK’s participation in individual EU programmes on a case-by-case basis”. In return, the UK would offer a financial contribution. There are many research funding programmes in which the UK would want to remain included, such as the forthcoming Horizon Europe programme, the Euratom Research and Training Programme, the Joint European Torus (JET) project and the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER). It is difficult to understand precisely what is meant by “cooperative accords”; eg, whose jurisdiction such accords will fall under, how they will decrease bureaucracy, their legality in courts and their capacity to bind partners.

An important structuring principle is that these future EU-UK cooperative accords are expected to cover, among other sectors, both “science and innovation” and “culture and education” separately. The White Paper indicates that the new EU regulations for the forthcoming funding programmes will be adopted next year, and will provide a basis for third country participation. This could further delay progress in reaching an agreement in science and

innovation, and it is unclear what role, if any, the UK will play in the development of the new EU rules. The UK's role in EU decision-making is increasingly marginal, illustrated by the fact that the UK had to give up the EU council presidency in the second half of 2017, and British prime ministers are no longer invited as full members to European Council summits between heads of states. It is in the context of the declining role of the UK in EU decision-making that the new EU regulations governing third country participation in EU funding programmes will be adopted next year. It is problematic that it is the forthcoming EU regulations that will inform the development of the new cooperative accords, as they may be agreed without significant British input. The White Paper remains ambivalent about committing to the associate status advocated by the higher education sector.

▪ **A new cooperative accord for science and innovation**

The three guiding principles of “excellence, openness to the world, and European added value” have been prioritised as the UK's collaboration strategy since its bland national statement on participation in the Ninth EU Framework Programme (FP9). Encouragingly, the White Paper calls for an accord that will provide for UK participation in EU research funding programme; enable continued cooperation through joint participation in networks, infrastructure, policies and agencies; and establish channels for regular dialogue between regulators, researchers, and experts. However, beyond this statement of intent and the reference to a new cooperative accord there is no detail on how this will be achieved. With regard to EU research and innovation programmes, the UK simply wishes to explore association, based on a range of precedents, with the 16 countries currently associated with Horizon 2020. The government's language is non-committal, at a time when UK universities and their EU partners are looking for certainty.

▪ **A new cooperative accord for culture and education**

Education cooperation, notably that centred around Erasmus+, would be part of a EU-UK “culture and education” cooperative accord that would allow for UK HEIs' participation in EU mobility programmes. The White Paper devotes a single bullet point to the topic, noting that the end of the current Erasmus+ scheme will coincide with the end of the UK's transition period. Again, the UK remains non-committal but “open to exploring participation in the successor scheme”. However, should the UK secure a close economic partnership with the EU, it would seek to provide reciprocal arrangements with regard to mobility. These would nonetheless be “consistent with the ending of free movement”, and would “facilitate mobility for students and young people, enabling them to continue to benefit from world leading universities and the cultural experiences the UK and the EU have to offer”.

This position will gain from further discussion with EU negotiators, but appears to be linked to the EU and the UK

securing a close trading partnership, and does not seem to anticipate a ‘no deal’ scenario.

▪ **Conclusion**

It is encouraging that the UK government is committed to making an appropriate financial contribution in each of these cooperative accords, and to ensure governance arrangements enabling both the EU and the UK to shape the activity covered. However, the UK explicitly states that it will want to target its investment. Associated countries are not granted, at least officially, such rights. These statements are important, but would gain from further detail and will need to be negotiated with the EU, as they breach current rules.

New cooperative accords are an ambitious type of arrangement and would gain from being further fleshed out. With increasingly hardline rhetoric from both sides, it is unlikely that either side will be keen to grant concessions, unless a significant gesture on the UK side is made regarding its proposed financial contribution to the EU's research and innovation budget. The only minor concession granted so far by England has been to belatedly guarantee EU students' fees and loan rates for September 2019 entry (six months after the Scottish government indicated it would do so). It would seem any form of accession to the EU's multi-billion funding programmes, requiring ratification of an international agreement, may take longer than anyone bargained for.

Even with a generous financial contribution, ending free movement from the EU is of itself ample grounds for the UK to be expelled from Erasmus+ and large sections of Horizon Europe. This is what happened to Switzerland and its HEIs from 2014 until the end of 2016. Both sides' red lines are still in direct tension with each other. UK universities, along with other sectors, must be prepared for a ‘no deal’ scenario. Meanwhile, the UK must move beyond merely being “open to exploring participation in the successor scheme” [of Erasmus+] and wishing to “explore” association in research and innovation programmes. The time for exploration has long past. Guaranteeing continuity of research funding mechanisms and networks, securing goodwill from EU partners, and delivering certainty should now be the government's top priorities.

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