

Leader column

Brexit: Working together

Nearly nine months have passed since the public voted by a small majority to leave the EU. The result was very disappointing to many of us, but the reality is that the UK is embarking on a path to implement the outcome of the referendum: Article 50 is expected to be triggered imminently. So, nine months on, what more do we understand about the impact of Brexit on the University, the wider higher education sector and the science and research community?

Following debates and votes in both the Houses of Commons and Lords, the bill which enables Article 50 to be triggered was finally passed without amendments. This was hugely disappointing, especially for those of us who wanted to secure - ahead of Brexit negotiations - long term residency status for EU citizens currently living in the UK. Despite the bill ultimately being passed, we can take some heart from the outspoken support for this important issue in the House of Lords and, to an extent in the Commons, during the debates and earlier votes.

I know that this is bitterly disappointing on many levels. It is increasingly unacceptable to have so little certainty about something of such fundamental importance to the lives of a great many colleagues: people who have been selfless in supporting the University and the wider public good in the UK, often for many years.

However, recent developments suggest that we might be beginning to see early signs of a more enlightened approach, at least from the perspective of higher education. While she gave no promises, the Prime Minister's speech on Brexit in January was positive on the subject of science and research and the importance of continuing to welcome people from across the world to work in our universities and cutting edge industries. Her rhetoric needs to be followed up quickly by practical action.

Similarly positive noises could be heard in the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, David Davis' white paper speech to Parliament last month; but his statements also fell short of providing the certainty we are all seeking. By its own admission, the Government is analysing



the impact of Brexit across at least 58 different UK sectors, so we must keep up the pressure to ensure that the voice of higher education is clear and consistent and that it is supported by our political representatives and industry partners.

You will recall that, as well as the fundamental issues of residency and a progressive approach to immigration, we are also focused on access to multilateral research collaborations and funding that recognises academic excellence. This underpins the success of UK universities and will be an important prerequisite for the success of the Government's industrial strategy and the important issues of international development supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). If the Government's mantra is 'Global Britain', it has to realise that all these issues are interdependent and require a joined-up approach to policy development.

The sector is lobbying hard. The Russell Group and Universities UK are focused on: the rights of current EU staff and their families; financial certainty for undergraduate and postgraduate students from the EU who want to study in the UK from 2018 to 19; continued access to the EU research framework Horizon 2020, and a place at the table to inform the development of its successor (FP9); and continued UK participation in Erasmus+, a scheme highly valued by our students.

Above all, we want to avoid a hiatus in research funding for UK universities and to achieve certainty for existing and future students and staff. Lobbying can be a time-consuming, often tiresome process but the welcome amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill announced at the end of February show what can be done when the sector sticks to its principles.

As the Government's longer-term position crystallises, the University will continue to nurture existing research collaborations and student exchanges, play its part in maintaining the important contribution made by students and academics from EU member states, and prepare for a post-Brexit future which maintains a strong international ethos.

Our international strategy – which will be discussed at Senate and Council later this

month – has five priorities: recruiting talented students and staff; enriching student experience and enhancing employability; increasing world-class collaborative research outputs; increasing global partnerships and funding; and raising the University's global profile and reputation. Determined action in each of these areas will ensure that we continue to develop as a truly international institution, with high academic standards and the self-confidence to look outwards.

In the meantime, we continue to attract and welcome talented staff and students from around the world and to drive research and innovation across borders. 39% of the 121 academic appointments made in 2016 were from other countries, international undergraduate student applications have increased by 18% since last year, and our online distance learning offer has a strong international following. We were awarded 18 Marie Skłodowska Curie Individual Fellowships in the latest application, a 33% success rate and the most the University has ever been awarded in a single call. We have also had success with a number of Newton grants, we are optimistic about our GCRF bids and we see evidence of a growing number of strong publications with overseas partners.

There is no doubt that the Brexit vote and the aftermath of political uncertainty has unsettled us all and that there are obvious risks ahead.

That said, I can be equally clear that by working together we will continue to protect and promote the interests of **all** staff and students; argue stridently for continued collaboration in Europe; maintain our commitment to high quality, research-led education and research-based learning; invest further in people and infrastructure to improve the quality and impact of our research and innovation; and strengthen our international ambitions, enriching life on campus and building successful partnerships around the world.

With risk comes opportunity and a requirement to change quickly and intelligently to ensure the long-term academic and financial sustainability of the University.

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