

Brexit is Done: What Next for UK Higher Education?

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Legally, the Brexit deal is done. It comes in three parts, all of which deeply affect the sphere of UK higher education and research. Two are international treaties between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The third is a national affair: the choice of the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, and his government.

The Deal with the European Union

The [EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement](#) frames the terms of the divorce, taking away the four freedoms around which the European Union has been constructed: freedom of movement for capital, goods, services, and people. Gone are the automatic rights that for nearly 50 years came with EU membership to study, work, and live in any nation of the European Union. Gone too are associated freedoms, such as the recognition of professional qualifications, linked to the freedom of establishment.

The [Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#) (TCA) defines the political deal as cut by the United Kingdom with the European Union. It lays out the grounds for trade and political cooperation with the European Union. The higher education sector interest here is that it covers education and research.

The United Kingdom is to remain in the European Union's Horizon program, a much appreciated program designed to support excellence in science and innovation, and in highly specialized research organizations, including Euratom, ITER, and Copernicus. The Horizon decision (Horizon Europe in its new version) is especially sweet since, due to the European Union's recent internationalizing reform, the United Kingdom will participate on almost the same terms as before, once the United Kingdom's financial contribution is settled. That includes guaranteed access to European Research Council grants and the research fellowships of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The Horizon decision is also welcome for the humanities and social sciences which, in national terms, lose out to STEM subjects. Horizon funds go to minority subjects like archaeology and classics, and specialized institutions such as those in the arts and music.

The Erasmus program is not part of the deal, despite a prime ministerial government promise. The government has instead launched a more modest made-in-Britain scheme (see [article by Guibert and Rayón in this issue](#)). In Northern Ireland (NI), the Republic of Ireland has come to the rescue in treating NI students as their own. Scotland and Wales were reflecting on how they too could stay in—but their ambitions were dashed.

Immigration Policy

The UK sector was highly globally connected before Brexit. But while Brexit changes the rules, how much it will change the numbers of incoming students and academics is an open question.

Universities UK statistics from 2017 (before COVID-19) show the United Kingdom as leader in the field. Non-United Kingdom students and academics were almost 21 percent of the United Kingdom's 2.4 million total. Over 91,000 of these are from China, roughly the same as from the 27 members of the European Union combined, and just 16,700 are from the United States. Almost 30 percent of academics are non-British.

Outside short visitor stays, visas will now be the norm. All non-British academics or students hoping to work or study in UK universities will be subject to newly revised immigration rules. For academia, there are three types of visa: student visas; skilled worker visas; and global talent visas. A new graduate visa is in preparation. EU citizens in Britain before December 31, 2020, will now need to be approved for settled status.

Abstract

This article reviews the implications of the Brexit deal for UK higher education and research. It argues that future scenarios will be based not only on the treaties signed with the European Union, but also on policy preferences as laid out in 2017 legislation on higher education and research, and two later policy decisions: to remain in the EU science and innovation program, and to enhance trading relationships, including higher education, with the Pacific region.

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While new EU students will now be subject to the high fees already charged to international students, EU citizens and their children already in Britain will be eligible for home fees. There are, however, details still to be settled. [Universities UK](#) is the best source for up-to-date information. For British citizens wanting to study or research in EU member states, there already exists an EU Directive of 2018 covering researchers, students, and interns from third countries. It is part of the drive to make the European Union an attractive destination for talent.

The Trade Dimension

Internationalization has been a crucial source of UK higher education funding. The fees of international students subsidize UK teaching and research. There are over 400,000 international students in Britain and 666,000 international students working for British degrees delivered outside Britain (49 percent in Asia). The phenomenon of transnational education (TNE) takes in branch campuses, UK-local university partnerships, as well as other forms of study. Higher education earns GBP 10.8 billion in export earnings, a figure that has almost doubled since 2013. Its internationalization activities have created over 200,000 jobs.

Brexit is inspiring the UK government to take internationalization further. Higher education will be integral to the new and revised trade deals intended to orient trade away from Europe to the Pacific, once the United Kingdom is accepted into the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). While the CPTPP is projected to grow fast, the present trade gap between it and the European Union is enormous. Just 8 percent of UK trade in goods and 9 percent of trade in services goes to the CPTPP. Forty-three percent of trade goes to the European Union.

Where Does Brexit Leave UK Higher Education?

In the post-Brexit world, the default setting for UK policy is the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. This Act strengthens government control over the sector with the aim of making UK higher education institutions more competitive at home and abroad.

It allows the government to play a more strategic role in the funding of research. To this end, the Act brought the long-existing discipline-dominated research councils under a single body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The Act is an encouragement to new higher education providers, or, as some would put it, puts a brake on a university monopoly. It has removed the distinctions between public and for-profit higher education providers. The Act also sets the scene for a category of teaching-only (undergraduate degree) universities. In doing so, it has broken the organic link between the university's traditional educational and research functions, most dramatically at the doctoral level. Not all universities will now be able to award the Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD), one of their distinguishing characteristics.

The Act makes the government the degree-awarding authority (though not expected to interfere with the historic pattern designed to underscore university autonomy). Students explicitly become customers under a new Office for Students. Universities are rated under a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Developments during the almost five years since the Brexit referendum suggest research will be subject to gentler treatment than teaching and learning. In acceding to the seven-year Horizon program, the UK government has followed the advice of a high-level report, *Changes and Choices*, that Brexit policy should focus on damage limitation before changing direction. The keywords were stabilization—transition—vision. But there is no parallel strategy report for the other missions of the university to ease the post-Brexit transition.

We can expect that Brexit will speed up changes in the university sector already implicit in the 2017 Act, that is, a growing gap between the global research universities and the rest. But how universities see new opportunities for trade in services will also mark their future. UK universities, historically united epistemically in their commitment to the creation and transmission of knowledge, will be coming to terms with Brexit ramifications for some time. Brexit is not just a matter of the law. It is an ongoing process. ▲

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Earlier versions of this article appeared on the [LSE Brexit blog](#) and in [University World News](#).