

THE CONVERSATION

'Insularity is not the way forward': three university vice-chancellors on Brexit

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UCL in central London: worried about the impact of a Brexit. Harry Wood/flickr.com, CC BY-SA

Universities and their leaders are contemplating the spectre of a British exit from the European Union with considerable alarm. Over the last few decades, the institutional architecture of Britain's universities has become ever more European. The threat of Brexit

jeopardises a range of collaborations and research projects including the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme and the ERASMUS student exchange scheme. Universities, unsurprisingly, are worried.

In an effort to understand the main issues worrying universities as the June 23 vote approaches, I spoke to the leaders of three universities of different sizes from across the country: Michael Arthur, president and provost at University College London; Gerry McCormac, principal at the University of Stirling, and Chris Husbands, vice-chancellor at Sheffield Hallam University. They focused on three core issues: student mobility, the UK's attractiveness, and research funding.

Student mobility

Gerry McCormac, Stirling: "I have no doubt that a Brexit would have a negative impact on student mobility, cultural diversity and understanding – it would greatly reduce student and staff exchange."

Chris Husbands, Sheffield Hallam: "The likelihood is that Brexit would make life more difficult." Speaking in a personal capacity because his institution has not taken a position on the EU referendum, Husbands said Brexit would materially impact on students and the opportunities British universities can offer them.

"The ERASMUS programme is a good example of a programme which has made the logistics of arranging student mobility easier ... Given the ways in which Brexit has adopted a strong rhetoric around closing, or raising border restrictions, I don't think the best interests of UK students would be served by withdrawal," said Husbands, the former director of UCL's Institute of Education.

Michael Arthur, UCL: "More than 200,000 young Britons have studied and worked in Europe through the Erasmus programme. Post-Brexit there would likely be no Erasmus mobility programme to and from the UK and the cultural loss to our universities would be significant."

Attractiveness of UK universities

Recruitment of EU undergraduates is a serious business for Britain's leading universities. **Michael Arthur** says that, unlike non-EU international students, EU students are eligible to get a loan to cover their £9,000 tuition fees – which would be unlikely to continue after a Brexit. Arthur also claims that leaving the EU would make Britain far less competitive in attracting such students.

There's a huge difference between staying in the Netherlands and paying nothing, to coming to the UK and paying full international fees. It's my view that we will lose a significant proportion of the undergraduates, and that could be quite negative.

EU students are equally, if not more, important north of the border. **Gerry McCormac** highlighted the fact that of Scotland's "over 50,000 international students", 21,000 hail from the EU – "the highest proportion in the UK". Their disappearance would amount to "a major economic impact" on Scotland.

The off-campus expenditure of all EU students is estimated to be worth over £400m per annum, creating and supporting close to 4,000 jobs. In a small city like Stirling, this income makes a valuable contribution to the buoyant local economy.

The contribution EU students make to the cultural life of Britain's universities is also significant, and Brexit would throw this into question. **McCormac** added:

The richness of experience and mutual understanding of cultural differences provided by young people from across Europe, who live and learn together is immeasurable. Given Europe's history of war and conflict, it's uplifting to see young people exploring different cultures and learning together.

The fear of exit is real, then, not just for vice-chancellors, but for students themselves, as **McCormac** elaborated.

According to a recent report, nearly half of international students, and more than 80% of EU students, would not view the UK as an attractive place to study in the event of a Brexit. This shows a worrying lack of confidence in UK universities outside of the EU with serious implications for student recruitment and quality of experience.

Impact on research

Research collaboration is the keynote of the vice-chancellors' concerns. The complexity of negotiating numerous bilateral agreements with partner institutions in a post-EU world is a point of real contention for them.



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Chris Husbands: "The EU, imperfect though it is, has been a spur to collaboration." For him, it is hard to believe "that European scientists, still operating in a common space, would look to Britain to collaborate."

He added: "It is difficult to believe that the UK science budget would be increased post-Brexit to compensate for lost EU funding."

Michael Arthur argued that the EU "plays a vital role in bringing the best scientists and researchers together".

"Research carried out in collaboration with international partners has 50% more impact than that carried out by a single country ... There would be no development (for the UK at least) of the European Research Area, making the cross-border movement of postdoctoral researchers and academic staff much more difficult."

Though collaboration is king, cash also matters. **Arthur** pointed out that UCL currently receives the most amount of funding in the EU from the Horizon 2020 programme and ranks

in the top three of those receiving the most funding from the European Research Council, and this funding supports roughly one in eight of UCL's research staff.

Gerry McCormac said that the UK is a net beneficiary of research funding from the EU, which is worth over £1 billion a year to the UK.

Cutting ourselves off from the research income and, inevitably, from much of the cutting edge research that it funds, would set research back in this country and risk the loss of our dominance in the world. Insularity is not the way forward, increased collaboration, sharing resources and ensuring mobility of expertise for the common good is the path we're on and the one we need to continue to follow.

Consensus for a reason

Among British vice-chancellors, there is something close to a **consensus**: membership of the European Union boosts both research and the student experience, and enables universities to fulfil their mission as centres for cultural exchange.

Michael Arthur: "When there is near unanimity among Britain's vice-chancellors that Brexit would be bad for the future of our sector, it is worth considering why."

Britain's universities are a success story of globalisation. Brexit represents an attempt to turn back the clock on that process. It may not dominate the referendum debates as immigration and the economy do, but for Britain's vice-chancellors one thing is certain: the fate of Britain's universities hangs in the balance.



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