

University of Leeds Response to British Council APPG Inquiry: The UK's future in Europe: what role can Higher Education and Research play?

1. Is collaboration in HE and Research effective in improving the UK's relationship with European countries? If so, why?

Erasmus+ is a highly valued and well understood element of student education. Students from all disciplines take up the opportunity to study at one of our 300+ Erasmus links annually. The funding to support both work and study is a significant incentive for many and removes a barrier for those who can least afford overseas study. Erasmus+ works on a spirit of collaboration and a holistic view of student mobility rather than the more tightly defined parameter of bilateral relationships which functions outside of Europe. We view mobility within Erasmus+ as an overall number and accept that we may accept more incoming students from certain partners and we will send more students to others. The collective balance allows more partnerships to work. Under bi-lateral arrangements there would be increased pressure to only maintain relationships where the flow of students is equitable across that agreement rather than across the overall programme. Erasmus+ tends to work on subject level collaborations whilst most of our world-wide relationships span multiple disciplines. However, broader institutional collaborations make reciprocity easier to manage and to operate at scale. Erasmus+ staff mobility also contributes significantly to pan-European collaboration for both student education and research collaboration.

Horizon 2020 has been hugely effective in establishing relationships with European countries. Networks often last well beyond the individual project and frequently result in future projects together. Marie Curie Fellowships work very well for more Early Career researchers to act as a supervisor as well as to forge a longer-term international link via joint publications and future collaborations. It is also a great first-step into EU funding. ITNs allow cooperation in Ph.D. training and development and genuinely provide a strong link with partners in other EU countries where expertise and training infrastructure is shared across a cohort, resulting in a Ph.D. environment greater than at an individual institution, without requiring joint or dual degrees (although there is a sub-scheme to do this too). Although the number of first-time applicants has increased in H2020, there are still misplaced assumptions that most projects go to consortia who contributed to the call text and that there is a certain 'club' element where researchers cannot participate unless well-networked or in liaison with a senior colleague. Bi-lateral programmes would be a huge administrative burden and most probably less effective as they cannot compete with the H2020 / Horizon Europe budget. The nature of partnerships across the EU is that they are not made at the institutional level but at the level of the individual researcher, so without a driver to change this approach (e.g. accessing national funders in other EU countries) it would probably not work. Multi-lateral programmes could be beneficial if made administratively viable, as these area-specific networks can lead to joint funding bids and policy inputs via indirect or "soft" influence through a European consortium – similar to the principles of COST.

2. What are the potential barriers to collaboration for HE and Research in Europe?

In terms of student mobility we anticipate a reduction in the number of incoming and outgoing students. The ongoing uncertainty and no clarity on future funding to will have an impact on the number of students choosing to study or work abroad. Universities have been forced into no-deal preparations including consideration of using institutional funding to cover the potential loss of Erasmus+ funding. The longer term impact is not yet known but one might anticipate lower numbers of students choosing to study modern languages given the potential loss of funding and opportunity to study and work in Europe. Students undertaking work placements in Europe are significant due to the simplicity of systems such as visas and EHIC. Securing work placements outside of the EU is considerably more bureaucratic and challenging.

The loss of, or severe reduction in access to funding via H2020 / Horizon Europe will remove the primary route to trans-European research collaboration. Although the UK is renowned for excellence in research and innovation, there will be more funding available to the remaining member states so the loss of the UK as a funded partner would not be seen as completely detrimental at a national level in Europe, even if the dilution of excellence might be a concern for the European Commission (and especially the ERC as the global brand reputation could suffer with no UK inclusion). R+I is by nature a mobile profession both for researcher development and as part of collaborations, so VISAs will be restrictive even with allowances made for short-term visits. Replacing Marie-Sklodowska Curie will be difficult with VISA quotas/restrictions as will employing EU post-doctoral researchers onto UK-based grants.

3. In the future, what role (if any) should HE and Research play in the UK's future relationships with European countries?

Student mobility supporting study and work has a rich legacy. It broadens horizons and engenders collaboration. Students are far more likely to work in Europe if they have studied overseas. Students undertaking work placements or optional study abroad programmes are statistically likely to achieve higher marks and are more likely to be in graduate roles within 6 months of graduation. In an unlimited funding environment student mobility within Europe would continue to provide grants to ensure all those who could benefit are able to do so. If additional funding was available it would be beneficial to explore closer collaboration in flying faculty, global classrooms (bringing European and UK students together to study), undergraduate research collaborations could flourish, summer schools could be subsidised and internships could be easier to secure across Europe.

Assuming a continued basis on excellence, alignment with H2020 / HE should be the priority unless eligibility is simply not possible. Competing schemes will take a while to become established and to compete with the wider range of partners and greater financial resources on offer from EU funding. UK funding has traditionally focused on areas not funded at the EU-level so a fund to pump-prime collaborations with EU partners under H2020 or equivalents, or a scheme to cover UK partner costs in projects (similar to the underwrite) would boost UK involvement. In the latter case, the UK becomes attractive as a "free partner" as its contribution is funded but is part of the budget range attributed to the topic. Engagement and collaboration with Europe will be a great case study for how the UK works with and benefits from such cooperation and why it is important to continue to do so.

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