

Description

On 23rd June this year, the UK voted in a historic referendum to leave the EU, throwing the country and the rest of Europe into a crisis. For researchers in the UK and around the world, the uncertainty surrounding what the future looks like is intense as a large proportion of research funding derives from the EU. For many, it is already being regarded as a "catastrophe."

What will the implications of Brexit be for researchers based in or collaborating with the UK?

The major fear among researchers is that EU research funding will dry up. According to the Royal Society, the UK has contributed nearly €5.4 billion to EU research and development but has received €8.8 billion in grants from the EU for research, development, and innovation. Moreover, the UK is the largest beneficiary of the European Research Council, having been awarded €1.7bn in the last funding period. In addition, UK researchers are project leads on 892 research projects in the current funding period. EU funding is currently vital to UK science and research.

With this being the status quo, the future for UK research will certainly be different. While pro-Brexit scientists have maintained that the UK will be able to bid for funding through associate agreements—as Israel and Norway currently do—it seems certain that the amount of research grants coming in will be significantly reduced, at least in the short term while new agreements are being negotiated. While pro-Brexit campaigners have claimed that the UK's contribution to EU funding can now be re-directed to British science and research, there is certainly no guarantee that this will be the case.

Moreover, the future of cross-border collaborations is now at risk. The Large Hadron Collider at CERN and the European Space Agency are the highest profile EU collaborative research programs, and cross-border partnerships have always been encouraged by the EU. Researchers from the UK are now reasonably concerned about their continued access to these collaborative programs and to the sense of strong community and fellowship that the EU funding programs have fostered.

It is this more than anything which has led to the widely negative reaction from UK-based researchers to the Brexit vote, with a palpable sense of shock, disappointment, and fear being reported by scientific journals. However, this is not the only fear that researchers have stated. Major scientists in the UK are EU citizens, who after receiving grants for their research move along with it to the UK. Therefore, many fear for the future of their international collaborations, and for the security of non-UK EU citizens who work in the UK.

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The future for EU citizens living and working in the UK is now deeply uncertain, with no campaigner being able to guarantee the continued free movement of people into the UK. It is likely that EU citizens will have to apply for work visas. A major fear among research institutions is that this will drive good researchers away from UK based research in a “brain drain” and prevent new researchers from applying in the UK. Such a “brain drain” would severely impact all forms of medical and scientific research. Once the impact of Brexit is realized, the entire research community will feel demoralized on being forced to take their research elsewhere.

Brexit will also compromise the ability of researchers to lead effective European clinical trials. For diseases such as rarer forms of cancer, the UK does not have the number of patients for trials, nor the funding to organize and run effective trials on its own.

Moreover, the limited precedent that exists does not bode well for the UK’s position alongside the EU. When Switzerland voted to limit EU migration in 2014, the EU retaliated by downgrading their status to “partial associate,” and limited their access to the funding benefits of the EU. Swiss students were removed from Erasmus programs and funding was immediately withdrawn from Swiss labs. This is not a bright picture for the UK’s future.

Some members of the Leave campaign have, however, attempted to draw attention to the potential benefits of leaving the EU for scientists. They have noted that EU regulations which limit some areas of research will no longer apply, for example, and that research will no longer have to meet the EU’s societal challenges that shape the focus of research. They have also stated that limiting “unskilled” migration and the creation of an Australian points-based immigration system will actually benefit highly skilled experts and scientists.

The future on all these fronts is extremely unclear. There is no precedent from which we can draw conclusions and a very limited number of facts from which conclusions can be derived. Currently, the UK has not activated Article 50, which will begin the formal negotiations for leaving and remains an EU member state. So, as the European Commissioner for science, research and innovation has stated, nothing will change immediately and there is no need to panic.

Once negotiations are under way for the UK to leave and find a new place in the global landscape, the implications of Brexit will become clearer. The current fears are based on speculation about people’s futures. But while the future of research, development, and innovation in the UK will certainly be different, no one yet knows exactly what it will look like and there may be silver linings yet to come.

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