

A Global Education System

How the UK should
reorganise its university and
research programmes

Robert Yee



The
Bruges
Group



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On February 1st, Parliament voted in favour of giving the Prime Minister power to trigger Article 50. Published the following day, the government's white paper, 'The United Kingdom's exit from and new partnership with the European Union', outlines the ways in which the UK's departure from the EU must be coordinated in order to preserve 'the right deal for the entire UK and in the national interest', according to MP David Davis.¹ In a similar manner, the Secretary of State continues with 12 principles which should guide the transition which, among others, include:

10. Ensuring the United Kingdom remains the best place for science and innovation; and

12. Delivering a smooth, orderly exit from the EU.²

These two points hint at the greater challenges the UK will face when arranging deals on higher education. For the country to maintain its position as a center for scholarly advancement and intellectual pursuits, it must work out the details of how knowledge can be exchanged and transferred among the many universities and research centers of Europe. In doing so, the UK should focus its efforts on reform and skill-based immigration so that it can retain its position as the epicenter of science, humanities, and innovation.

University Tuition and Applications

Universities are central to the nation's role as the center for innovation and research. Students from the countries of the EU account for some 5.5% of the student body in the UK.³ To maintain its status as an ideal place to study among Europeans, the UK will have to redefine its strategy for attracting students, both from the EU and from around the world. Evidently challenging to this prospect is the country's ability to keep tuition fees at low enough levels. Costs for attending UK universities were previously the same for all members of the EU. It is an ongoing debate that, as tuition fees rise for EU students, the UK will have fewer applications because of the higher associated costs.

However, it is also important to note that the UK does have potential leverage in regard to fees. Even prior to Brexit, tuition fees at universities in the UK were often significantly higher than those in the EU. By that logic, students from the EU were paying a premium to study at the UK. Thus, even if Brexit requires that students be reclassified as international, they chose the more expensive option regardless of Brexit. The question then becomes is how much will fees increase for international students, and what is that level at which just enough students still apply.

From outside the UK could adopt a more liberal visa system in which nationals from other countries can also have access to the UK. Countries that may be interested in such a collaboration include the US, Canada, Australia, China, India, and New Zealand. In fact, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has opened discussions with the May administration of how the country can open its doors to more Indian

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589191/The_United_Kingdoms_exit_from_and_partnership_with_the_EU_Web.pdf

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589191/The_United_Kingdoms_exit_from_and_partnership_with_the_EU_Web.pdf

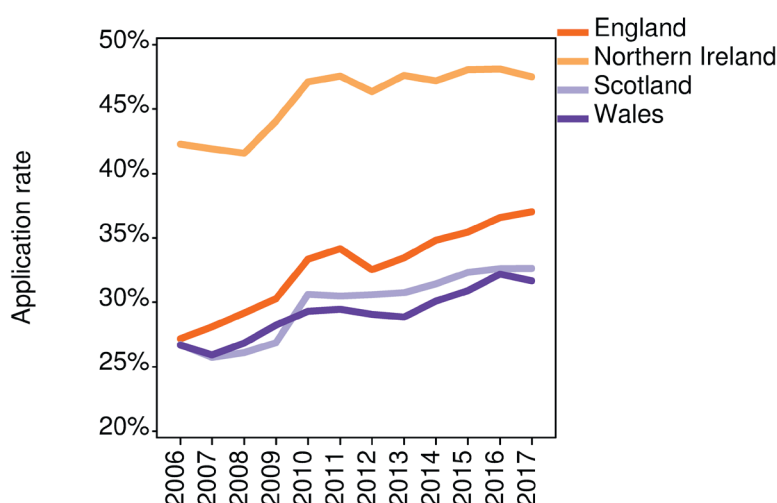
3 <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/parliamentary-briefing-effect-exiting-eu-higher-education-18-november-2016.pdf>

students.⁴ Access perhaps to a simpler visa processes for obtaining visas and more scholarships would incentivise more applications from non-EU countries. However, high tuition is still a challenge for these nations as well.

In addition to tuition, another worrisome area is the country's ability to convince more students to apply to its universities. After the vote for Brexit, applications from EU students fell 7% in general. However, the group of 18 year olds that applied this year from last year fell only 1%.⁵ By country, application rates for England rose by 0.4%, and either declined by less than 1% or stayed the same in other countries.⁶ Given the uncertainty of how Brexit would proceed, students were likely discouraged from applying, and perhaps decided to wait until Article 50 was triggered before making an important life decision. But if the UK can negotiate a stable tuition rate for European students, a surge in applications is likely to occur in the coming years.

Perhaps to mitigate the effects of potentially higher tuition, the UK could strive to provide funding opportunities via scholarships for the to scholars in Europe. Such a programme could be part of a new initiative within Erasmus+, the university exchange programme. Although the UK may lose direct access to services provided by the European Commission, Erasmus+ could develop a special UK-branch going forward. The Erasmus+ programme does notably have five partner countries who are not members of the EU but share many of the benefits.⁷ In a similar fashion, if the UK were to join this list alongside the likes of the Federal Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, and Turkey, it could still have the ability to promote the exchange of students from in and out of the country.

January deadline application rates for 18 year olds by country



Source: Figure 1 from 'UK Application rates by the January Deadline 2017', www.ucas.com
 Not all HE providers in Scotland use UCAS. Therefore the share of total HE provision in Scotland that is recorded through UCAS can change by both cycle and background.

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- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/07/india-urges-theresa-may-to-open-uk-doors-to-university-students>
 - 5 <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/applicants-uk-higher-education-down-5-uk-students-and-7-eu-students>
 - 6 <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports>
 - 7 <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/participating-countries>

Figure 1: UCAS January deadline application rates for 18 year olds by country⁸

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
England	27.2%	28.1%	29.2%	30.3%	33.4%	34.2%	32.5%	33.5%	34.8%	35.4%	36.6%	37.0%
Northern Ireland	42.3%	41.9%	41.6%	44.1%	47.1%	47.6%	46.3%	47.6%	47.2%	48.1%	48.1%	47.5%
Scotland	26.7%	25.7%	26.1%	26.9%	30.6%	30.5%	30.6%	30.7%	31.4%	32.3%	32.6%	32.6%
Wales	26.7%	25.9%	26.8%	28.2%	29.3%	29.5%	29.1%	28.9%	30.1%	30.9%	32.2%	31.7%

The barriers to entry of university tuition and scholarships, however, only represent a small point of conflict. For the UK to begin the process of truly opening its borders in a globalised world, it must turn to other countries for international research projects.

A Brain Drain, or a Brain Gain?

Economists and political theorists have quaked at the thought of a ‘brain drain’ from universities. Higher-education reports show that individual foreign researchers have developed a perception that better opportunities exist in other countries, especially after the Brexit vote. By one study, around 90% of academics working at UK universities indicated that Brexit would have a negative impact on access to higher education funds.⁹ Perhaps this figure is indicative of the nation’s pivot towards a new educational regime, which has potential risks moving forward. Yet the concerns among scholars have grown in recent months. Such fears are not wholly speculative, as some 40% of UK academics have stated that they are ‘more likely to consider leaving Britain’.¹⁰ If the country can successfully negotiate new terms on how to promote the spread of knowledge and collaboration with its European counterparts, it is entirely conceivable that it can remain a ‘global leader in international collaboration’.¹¹

According to *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, universities in the UK occupy 32 out of the top 200 universities, only behind the United States at 63.¹² These figures are also reflective of the country churning out 85 Nobel Laureates, again behind the United States.¹³ And lastly, the UK is 7th on the ‘Global Competitiveness Index 2016-2017’, an annual report by the World Economic Reform.¹⁴ The area for growth is tremendous if the country continues to invest in its global research initiatives.

8 <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports>

9 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/two-fifths-scholars-more-likely-quit-uk-after-brexit-vote>

10 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/01/09/universities-may-face-brain-drain-brexit-new-survey-reveals/>

11 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589191/The_United_Kingdoms_exit_from_and_partnership_with_the_EU_Web.pdf

12 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/world-university-rankings-2016-2017-results-announced>

13 https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/countries.html

14 http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2016-2017/05FullReport/TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2016-2017_FINAL.pdf

Number of Nobel Laureates by country – Source: Nobel Prize

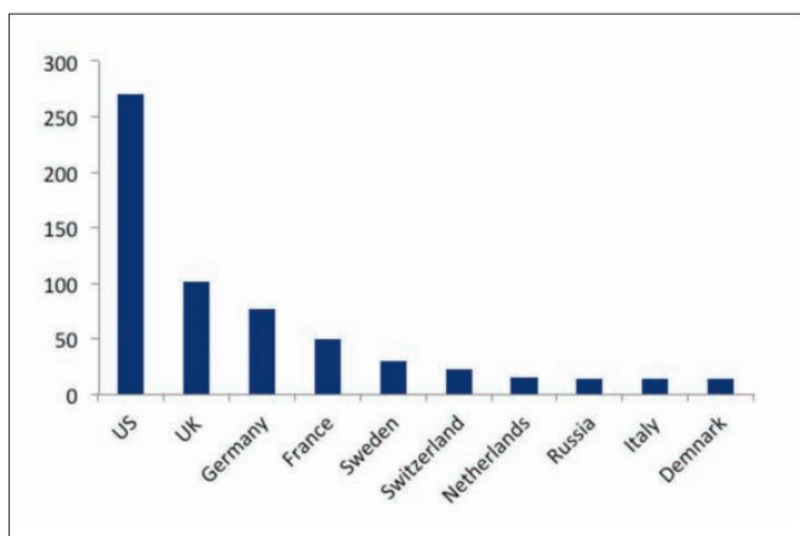


Figure 2: Nobel Laureates by country of origin¹⁵

In 2015, Research Councils UK (RCUK) began to focus their efforts on China and India, two countries with vast populations and even greater access to knowledge. In India, RCUK India established a UK-India Task Force to identify specific areas where the local scientists had particular strengths. By looking to improving living conditions in India, a specific problem that the government has highlighted for its 1.25 billion people, the three areas of growth that the Task Force emphasised were: Sustainable Cities and Urbanisation, Public Health and Well-Being, and Energy-Water-Food Nexus.¹⁶ Co-funded initiatives between RCUK and their Indian branch have led to over £150 million in funding since its initiation in 2008.

Similar collaborative research projects have been underway with the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology. Institutional partnerships are key for Chinese relations because they give researchers access to a plethora of resources. Between 2007 and 2014, more than 60 universities and 50 companies were involved in 78 UK-China projects in a multitude of disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities and more.¹⁷ From one white paper report by the RCUK, it is clear that the support systems are existent for an ever-growing field of academic research. Through mutual beneficence, the initiative perpetuates a network of joint projects that, to date, over £195 million has been used to fund projects between the UK and China.¹⁸

There have been several scare tactics employed among those who portend of a dismal future for the UK in regards to the sciences: ‘Our funds competitively won from the EU are irreplaceable by national funds as they concern shared infrastructure, talent exchanges and complex high-value international collaborations’.¹⁹ However, if the UK can negotiate a plan whereby it can be part of the same funding scheme without being directly part of the EU, then funding for such programmes may continue to be plenty. A proposal could take the form of allowing the UK to continue participating in research

¹⁵ <https://www.brugesgroup.com/images/pdfs/BritainsGlobalLeadership.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/india/inspiringchangeimpacthighlightsuk-india-pdf/>

¹⁷ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/international/rcukchinaimpactbrochure-pdf/>

¹⁸ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/international/Offices/china/>

¹⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/convinced-by-arguments-to-leave-the-eu-consider-the-damage-a-brexite-would-do-to-british-science-a6784686.html>

programmes.²⁰ To obtain grants for research with EU members, the UK should assert its status as a newly recognized ‘Associated Country’ alongside Norway, Switzerland and Israel.²¹ In other words, it is not necessary to hold membership in the EU to have access to EU funding.

Furthermore, an additional take-away from the often prescribed ‘Norwegian model’, membership of the European Free Trade Association and a part of the European Economic Area, may be that the country is more integrated in European affairs. Indeed, the Scandinavian country consistently funds for programs that assist with career services, intellectual property, and policy coordination.²² Since many of these programmes directly benefit the Norwegian economy because of its naturally more integrated private sectors, the government can justify paying about £623 million in expenditures, or a net £23 per capita when estimating benefits.²³ Meanwhile, the UK spends the same £96 per capita without being subject to the regulations of the EU.

In attempting to engage the global community, the Russell Group could continue to accept and encourage applications from international students and research groups. The RCUK and its affiliates in India and in China should begin the process of engaging potential scientists and engineers at younger ages, perhaps at the undergraduate university level. Ensuring the RCUK remains fully funded is imperative to the nation’s research agenda because, in the 2013-2014 year, the RCUK contributed around £2.8 billion to science projects while the EU offered around £260 million. Although the UK should not ignore co-sponsored projects with the EU, it should recognize the opportunities that exist beyond the borders of Europe.

International Collaboration in Science and Technology

In the disciplines of science and technology, collaboration is key for advancing the current body of knowledge. The UK’s area of growth may be in these innovative fields. According to the government’s white paper, 47.6% of all UK articles were co-authored internationally. Furthermore, the country boasts a well-respected community of scientists, engineers, and scholars. In a recent Parliamentary briefing from November 2016, the government emphasised its strategy of establishing ‘a cross-Government approach to supporting international research’ and promote ‘research collaboration opportunities... to overseas governments and businesses’.²⁴ To foster continual innovative projects, the country will have to prove to the world that it still holds the position as a prominent member of the international community of scholars.

Together with opening universities is opening access to new programmes. In December, the May administration began the process of creating a ‘Forum on EU Exit, Universities, Research and Innovation’. Such a programme is intended to act as a group that ensures the UK maintains its strong position at the forefront of global research in the sciences. Although the working group is still in its nascence, having only met for the first time on 14th December, the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson

20 <http://scientistsforbritain.uk/wordpress/?p=47>

21 <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/uk-research-and-european-union/role-of-EU-in-funding-UK-research/which-countries-can-access-eu-research-funding/>

22 <http://www.eureferendum.com/blogview.aspx?blogno=83561>

23 <https://infacts.org/norwegians-pay-same-brits-eu-access/>; <http://www.eu-norway.org/eu/Cooperation-in-programmes-and-agencies/#.WJdLyrYrIY0>

24 <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/parliamentary-briefing-effect-exiting-eu-higher-education-18-november-2016.pdf>

MP, has revealed that it will include ‘representatives from Higher Education, Research and Innovation funders, National Academies, Learned Societies and Business’.²⁵

Furthermore, the Parliamentary white paper also makes note of a new Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF), an initiative that funds projects, such as in robotics and biotechnology, will propel the UK forward in the field of scientific research. The money from the ISCF ‘will address the future needs of industry and consider potential new markets which will deliver economic impact, jobs and growth across the country’.²⁶ The fund is also under the jurisdiction of the Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN). Among many other projects, including the Catapult program launched in January 2016, KTN seeks to promote funding competitions and grants for innovative research.²⁷ All of these initiatives fit into the wider goal of the ‘Industrial Strategy’ action plan that seeks to support research in the following: Advanced Materials, Energy Storage, Big Data, Satellites, Robotics & Autonomous Systems, Synthetic Biology, Regenerative Medicine, and Agri-Science.²⁸ In doing so, the UK will play to its strengths in the sciences and provide funding for those who pursue original research.

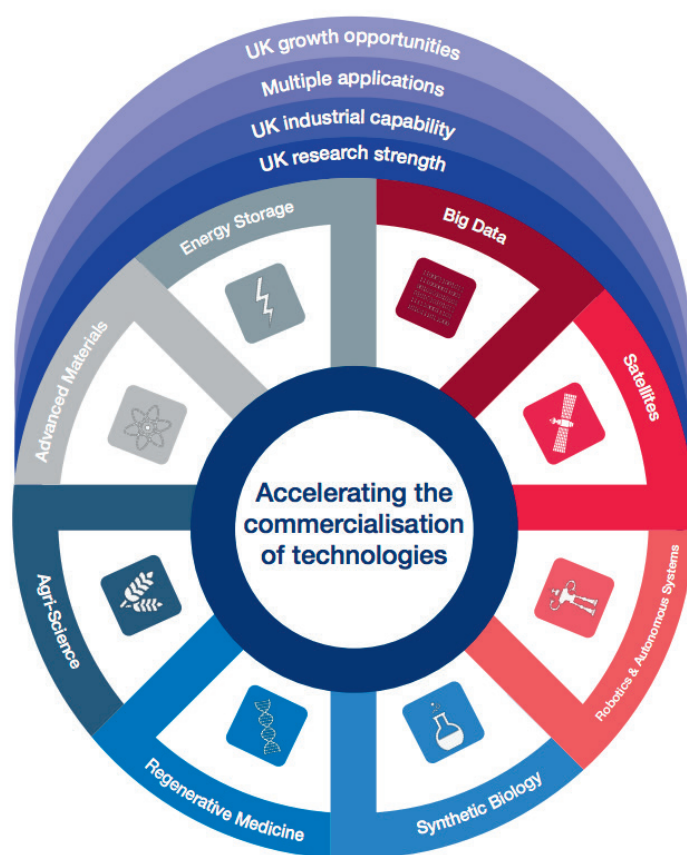


Figure 3: Eight Great Technologies²⁹

25 <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2017-01-11.59635.h>

26 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-industrial-strategy-challenge-fund-engagement-begins>

27 <https://www.ktn-uk.co.uk/funding>; https://admin.ktn-uk.co.uk/app/uploads/2016/09/KTN-Annual-Report-2015_2016.pdf

28 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249255/eight_great_technologies_overall_infographic.pdf

29 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249255/eight_great_technologies_overall_infographic.pdf

According to LSE scholars Anne Corbett and Claire Gordon, ‘Academic collaboration is not an abstract thing. It is a relationship between researchers and different kinds of ideas and research projects’. Such cross-border collaboration is essential for the continual academic success of the UK’s universities. To further this endeavour of collaboration, the HM Treasury itself has indicated that it will work closely with the European Commission to continue the integration of funding and scholarships opportunities for its citizens.³⁰ The actual viability of such an arrangement may be the most difficult area of negotiation going forward. Maybe the UK could negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement for scholarships with Europe, in which each country consents to a certain amount of funding secured for international students. Whether such talks come into fruition remains to be seen, but at the very least, the HM Treasury has promised to safeguard and any funding from the EU’s Horizon 2020 Programme before the actual departure from the EU takes place.³¹

Moreover, another potential opportunity for expanding innovation is to turn to the private sector for additional support. As firms cut employees from the UK offices, the government must be willing to convince businesses that the country is supportive and ideal for new thinkers and creators. In November, Theresa May promised businesses that the country will maintain the ‘lowest corporate tax rate in the G20’.³² The Prime Minister claims that the government will intend to bring corporate taxes to as low as 17% by 2020.³³ This noble goal acts as a clear incentive to encourage foreign direct investment. Some organisations, including the OECD, have taken note that the UK may be opening to the world as a tax-haven economy, the unintended ramifications for domestic stability and potentially ‘it risks antagonising the Governments of our European and G7 trading partners.’³⁴ Also, this new identity, as a country with generous taxes, would indeed be rather unusual, since it is more common in smaller countries, and may put a serious strain on the Treasury.³⁵

Addressing the compatibility between EU membership and UK research funding was the main topic of a recent white paper by the Commons Science and Technology Committee. In April 2016, the body noted that they ‘see value in the harmonisation of regulatory frameworks across Member States’ but did not that the EU has pushed forth an agenda that results in ‘the loss of the flexibility’ in regard to its regulations on research.³⁶ While the board felt that there was much to be gained from mutual cooperation, such as the creation of organisations including the Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM), it did note that the EU’s imposition on the UK’s regulatory environment, such as restrictions on clinical trials, limitations on certain chemicals to be used in laboratories, and data protection on aggregated health records.³⁷ These limitations notably lengthen the time it takes to complete research and provides additional challenges to the advancement of the profession. Such sentiments were echoed by the Scientists for Britain group,

30 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589191/The_United_Kingdoms_exit_from_and_partnership_with_the_EU_Web.pdf

31 The Horizon 2020 initiative plans to allocate €80 billion between 2014 and 2020 for research within the European Research Area (ERA); <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/safeguarding-funding-for-research-and-innovation>

32 <https://www.ft.com/content/245bde5a-affa-11e6-9c37-5787335499a0>

33 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/corporation-tax-to-17-in-2020>

34 <https://www.hwfisher.co.uk/brexit-turn-britain-corporate-tax-haven/>

35 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-europe-tax-idUSKCN0ZJ0MG>

36 <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldsctech/127/127.pdf>

37 <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldsctech/127/127.pdf>

the members in which felt that SAM benefits and EU collaboration could be achieved without direct membership in the EU.³⁸

In June 2016, the Science and Technology Committee published a series of whitepapers and inquiries on the implications for science in the post-EU country. Under Chair Nicola Blackwood, the Committee has sought to address specific aspects of the negotiations that will affect the UK most significantly.³⁹ The areas of 'Funding', 'People', 'Collaboration', 'Regulation' and 'Innovation' and facilities and infrastructure' were the key areas for improvement that the committee plans to address. For the first two areas, the greatest concern among academics is making sure that the free movement of scholars for research purposes does not change after the exit from the EU. The UK currently has in place several control systems to deter such potential risks. Through a visa 'tier' system, those with 'exceptional talents' and certain skills will be placed at a higher position on the list for admitted individuals. The highest two tiers each currently have a 1,000 per year cap (under the 'Exceptional Talent' group) for available visas, with additional visas for those affiliated with the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the British Academy.⁴⁰

The final three categories, 'Collaboration', 'Regulation' and 'Innovation', ensure the promotion of the 'Industrial Strategy' set forth under the Campaign for Science and Engineering. In establishing a new skill-based framework and supporting programmes, the UK hopes to support collaboration on specific high-priority research initiatives. The Campaign also highlights the importance of 'knowledge exchange' to 'build on the UK's competitive strength of its science and innovation base'.⁴¹

As the globe turns to more collaborative research projects, often across countries and continents, the UK needs to maintain a strong presence in science and technology. Indeed, the supporting programmes for a new system of research are slowly, yet significantly beginning to form. It is up to the government to continue on this path of initiating research ties with the rest of the world. As a prominent country in the fields of renewable energy, nuclear fusion, space exploration, and more, the UK would truly benefit if it can make a potential deal with both the EU and the rest of the world over how international collaboration can occur.

Supporting Higher Education and Research

The picture of the UK as a hopeless, dismal situation is indeed exaggerated.⁴² True, if the UK were to fail in its negotiations, then the state of scientific and technological research may be degraded. But the country has the ability to leverage current networks, continue to fund its current programmes, and expand funding for scientific innovations. In doing so, the post-Brexit situation seems to be not wholly optimal, but will require attention to detail and success in EU-UK negotiations. Going forward, the country will have to restructure its funding and knowledge-transfer programmes with its EU allies, and maintain an open environment with visas for people working on high-impact research projects. Furthermore, and almost simultaneously, the UK will need to look to partners in the US and the rest of the world for new programmes as well. Thus, a three-pronged approach is necessary for the UK for the future:

38 <http://scientistsforbritain.uk/wordpress/?p=201>

39 www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7213/CBP-7213.pdf

40 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2015/work>; <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmsctech/502/502.pdf>

41 <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmsctech/502/502.pdf>

42 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/08/18/dismal-scientists-need-some-humility/>

1. Encourage study at UK universities for both EU and non-EU countries

Given the substantial number of EU members who attend its universities, the UK will have to have access to this pool of knowledge as it moves forward. This process may require opening the education system to students from the US, China, India, and other regions that may prove to also be important trading partners. By retaining this pool of international students, and not just domestic ones, the UK can continue to maintain its status within the realm of higher education.

2. Promote international collaboration and innovative research ideas

While the RCUK and Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund programs are a good start, more emphasis should be placed on initiatives that specifically fund projects with partners not in the UK. In 2013, the UK accounted for 15.9% of the world's most highly cited articles.⁴³ As the country continually seeks to prove its importance as a collaborator on cross-border research programmes, it must also recognize that more is needed for the country.

3. Provide funding and financial aid to programs covered in #1 and #2

Investment is key for many of these initiatives to thrive. As seen by the RCUK's work and its international partners, as well as other government, university, and private-sector ventures, the UK occupies a spot of high potential, yet also high risk. In the short-run, the government should funnel money into specific universities and research projects that prove that the country is willing and able to become a key powerhouse of academic prowess for the twenty-first century.

Together, these steps will provide the necessary foundation for the UK to develop a research that revolves around global education. Troubles may arise if research collaboration is cut off, but the scenario is unlikely given the already existing networks of information sharing. Opening the nation's academic doors to those from around the world across the disciplines, from arts and humanities to science and technology, must be at the forefront of the May administration's agenda. The support system exists, and the research-oriented councils and initiatives are in place. Going forward, the UK will have to prove how that it can function without being a member of the EU in an increasingly globalised society.

43 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589191/The_United_Kingdoms_exit_from_and_partnership_with_the_EU_Web.pdf

THE BRUGES GROUP

The Bruges Group is an independent all-party think tank. Set up in February 1989, its aim was to promote the idea of a less centralised European structure than that emerging in Brussels. Its inspiration was Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech in September 1988, in which she remarked that "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level...". The Bruges Group has had a major effect on public opinion and forged links with Members of Parliament as well as with similarly minded groups in other countries. The Bruges Group spearheads the intellectual battle against the notion of "ever-closer Union" in Europe. Through its ground-breaking publications and wide-ranging discussions it will continue its fight against further integration and, above all, against British involvement in a single European state.

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