

Finnish Science Society in the United Kingdom

“Brexit, Science and Finland” discussion group

Finnish Church in London
Saturday 12 January 2019

Introduction

At this point in time, the United Kingdom's exit from the EU (Brexit) is scheduled for March 29th 2019. If the United Kingdom (UK) internally agrees upon an exit deal that is approved by the European Union (EU) by this date, further negotiations regarding the future relationship between the two will begin. This would mark the beginning of a transition phase ending on the 31st of December 2020, during which the minutiae of the deal need to be negotiated between the UK and EU. From there on, the UK will officially have completely left the EU.

Up until now the focus of the Brexit discussion has been on what the UK's position is, while the interests of Finland have widely remained undiscussed. This document, which is based on an open discussion meeting of the Finnish Science Society in the UK on 12 January 2019, aims to identify and outline what Finnish scientists consider necessary for the future relationship between Finland and the UK to allow for fruitful scientific collaboration.

This discussion covered four main areas: the role of science and research in the negotiations; UK participation in EU research framework programmes; status of students; and mobility of researchers. Open questions and concerns regarding this transition were also considered. These views may be of interest to parties such as the Finnish government and the EU commission when the details of the future of scientific collaboration between the UK and EU are discussed.

The negotiations

While representatives from both Finland and the UK say that they want to remain as close as possible post-Brexit, it should be noted that the negotiations will be conducted between the EU and the UK, not between individual EU member states and the UK.

It currently seems that most agreements will be negotiated in one package. This may mean that politically more important questions, such as trade agreements, will dominate over the less politically charged topics, such as science and research, during the negotiations. Difficulties in other negotiation areas may therefore lead to a non-ideal agreement on science and research.

Two main questions on this topic were raised:

- **Will there be one unit dedicated for carrying out all the negotiations?**
- **Will all the negotiations be conducted by the same people?**

Recommendations:

1. **Give sufficient attention to science and research in the negotiations.**

EU Research Programmes

The UK currently enjoys a prominent leadership role in scientific research within the EU. This can be seen through the allocation of EU funding for scientific research, of which the UK receives a sizeable portion.

Horizon Europe will be the successor of Horizon 2020, the current scientific research programme framework of the EU. If the Brexit timeline goes as intended, the transition period and Horizon 2020 will end simultaneously. Under the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK will be able to participate in Horizon 2020 during the transition period.

The details of Horizon Europe are currently being negotiated within the EU, with many aspects of it remaining unclear at present time. Currently it seems that Horizon Europe will be more open to external partners, which may make it easier for the UK to be involved with European research in the future, though the UK would have to follow the rules for non-member states. This would involve the UK having to pay their own share of research and not taking part in decision-making.

Altogether, the UK's participation in Horizon Europe should be a straightforward matter as long as the wishes of the UK and EU are aligned, but there may be disagreements on details. Our view is that disruption to scientific collaboration would be minimised if both the EU and the UK would exercise flexibility rather than sticking firmly to their "red lines". This way brilliant scientists would still come to the UK and EU member states would still benefit from collaborating with some of the best institutions in the world.

As Brexit moves closer, UK universities are also starting to set up more official collaborations with universities within the remaining EU member states. Many of these constructions are based on existing points of collaboration, and the aim of these is to allow for collaborations between universities to continue regardless of the outcome of the negotiations. These bilateral links are likely to become more important after Brexit, but they cannot replace Europe-wide collaboration.

- **How would the EU want to restrict UK participation in EU research projects?**
- **Does the future of scientific research collaboration between Finland and the UK lie in between-university collaborations?**

Recommendations:

2. **Keep the UK as a full participant in EU research programmes.**

Students and Science

Finnish students in the UK

The UK is an attractive destination to Finnish students for a multitude of reasons:

- The UK is an English-speaking country with relatively low tuition fees
- The UK is a hub of cutting-edge science in many disciplines
- Finnish citizens can receive a tuition fee loan to cover the costs of their tuition
- ERASMUS programmes in the UK are a great way of improving one's English

Finnish science students pursuing an undergraduate or taught postgraduate degree in the UK are treated in the same way as natives. One of the major outcomes of this is that Finnish students pay the same tuition fees as native students, rather than the overseas fees, which are often very high. In the light of Brexit, there is a risk that the UK will raise tuition fees for European students and exclude them from the tuition fee loan scheme. If this was the case, Finnish students would be paying tens of thousands of pounds per academic year at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level.

Finnish PhD students are currently eligible to receive UK research council-funded scholarships, which cover their fees and livings costs, as long as they have resided in the UK for a minimum of 3 years before applying. Non-EU are not allowed to apply for these programmes. If this funding was not available, the PhD opportunities of Finnish students would be severely limited.

This raises a multitude of questions:

- **Will Finnish students be subject to the same tuition fees as overseas students?**
- **Will the tuition fees be consistent throughout the UK (ie. England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland)?**
- **How can Finnish students pay for their tuition fees in the UK? Will Finland or the UK offer scholarships or new tuition fee loan schemes?**
- **What avenues of funding will be available to Finnish doctoral students in the UK?**

UK students in Finland

Finland has much to offer to students coming from the UK:

- Finland excels in some areas of science, such as neuroscience
- There are no tuition fees for EU citizens and some courses are provided in English, especially at postgraduate level (Master's programmes)
- EU citizens studying in Finland are eligible for the same financial aid ("opintotuki") as Finnish citizens

There are UK students, especially at the doctoral level, who would like to come to Finland for their PhD.

- **What avenues of funding will be available to UK doctoral students in Finland?**

Recommendations:

3. **Retain the Home fee status and student loans for EU students in the UK and vice versa.**
4. **Ensure that EU students remain eligible for PhD funding from UK research councils.**

Researcher Mobility

The UK is a popular destination for Finnish postgraduate researchers, as working in the UK enables them to develop and enhance their academic skill sets amongst the world's best researcher groups. This avenue of career progression should remain open to Finnish researchers, as Finnish science benefits from the networks that these researchers develop during their time in the UK, in addition to improving the quality of Finnish research.

Post-doctoral fellowship positions in the UK are currently not limited by nationality, though standard immigration rules still apply to them. Fellowship funding for Finnish post-doctoral scientists can be roughly separated into 3 categories: Finnish, UK, and international. The Finnish and UK funding tend to come from the governmental organisations (Academy of Finland, UKRI). International funding tends to come from charities, EU research programmes (Marie Curie) as well as inter-governmental funded but non-EU-funded organizations (like EMBO, FEBS). It is worth noticing, that sometimes fellowship funding can be lower than £30,000 per annum, which is the current income limit for non-EU citizens to be allowed to immigrate to the UK.

There may be some complications with the taxation of the international fellowship funding, as post-doctoral researchers with international funding are currently categorised as self-employed. In addition, these self-employed academics' access to healthcare requires some thought as they will not be able to access NHS services in the future without paying the NHS surcharge.

If freedom of movement between the EU and the UK ends, Finnish researchers will face new obstacles to mobility. The work of an academic often involves a fair amount of travelling for research. Some academics spend extended periods of time abroad, which in the future may make it difficult to satisfy conditions such as the residency requirements for immigration status. The worst hit will be researchers hoping to relocate with their families. Obtaining visas costs money; there is a higher income limit for when a working individual is allowed to bring their spouse/partner into the UK; unmarried couples are required to have lived together for at least two years; and the NHS surcharge rapidly becomes very expensive if it has to be provided for the whole family.

- **Which funding types will be available to Finnish citizens for fellowships in the UK?**
- **What healthcare will Finnish post-doctoral scientists be eligible for for each of the fellowship funding types? Will they require private health insurance?**
- **Will Finnish academics be subject to all immigration laws, or will some concessions be made due to the nature of the job?**
- **Who will pay for the visas of Finnish researchers with families? What about healthcare?**

Recommendations:

- 5. Retain full freedom of movement between the EU and the UK.**
- 6. Minimise barriers to mobility, both for researchers and for their partners and dependants.**

Summary

The UK's departure from the European Union is a major threat to scientific collaboration between Finland and the UK. To minimise the damage, we make the following recommendations for the negotiations on the future relationship:

- 1. Give sufficient attention to science and research in the negotiations.**
- 2. Keep the UK as a full participant in EU research programmes.**
- 3. Retain the Home fee status and student loans for EU students in the UK and vice versa.**
- 4. Ensure that EU students remain eligible for PhD funding from UK research councils.**
- 5. Retain full freedom of movement between the EU and the UK.**
- 6. Minimise barriers to mobility, both for researchers and for their partners and dependants.**