

Brexit or Bremain?

The UK higher education sector has lined up to warn against a possible vote for leave in June's EU Referendum. Have universities got it right, asks **Julian Hall**

In April, 'Brexiteer' and former education secretary Michael Gove, and his Eurosceptic colleague, the outgoing London Mayor, Boris Johnson, called for money potentially saved on European Union (EU) membership to be spent on the ailing National Health Service (NHS). This populist move begged the question whether other state-funded bodies could also benefit from a British exit from the European Union following this June's referendum – among them cash-strapped universities.

As Brexit fans have argued, outside the Union universities would be able to charge Continental students higher fees, bringing to an end UK taxpayers' 'subsidies' for them. However, trade bodies such as Universities UK vehemently disagree: they argue that universities would lose reams of European students and vital research grants; that's not to mention the related damage it would cause to the wider economy.

The EU referendum debate inspires passionate feelings in most people, but when it comes to education do the Brexiteers or the Bremainers have a stronger case to make?

Setting out its position last year, Universities UK said: "There are 125,000 EU students at British universities, generating

more than £2.2 billion for the economy and creating 19,000 jobs, while 14% of academic staff come from other EU nations". In terms of research funding, British universities got £1.40 back for every £1 put into the EU's centralised budget, it added.

A recent blog post from PwC illustrated just how big the research funding rewards can be. It said that UK universities were predicted to receive £2 billion from the first two years of the EU's research and innovation programme Horizon 2020.

Based on these statistics alone, remaining might seem like the obvious choice for the higher education (HE) community, but there are countervailing arguments. For one thing, say Brexiteers, the savings the UK could achieve on EU membership could be re-allocated – albeit following some tortuous administrative gymnastics. Indeed the authors of the PwC report acknowledge that policy choices could be made by government to re-create EU research funds but in a Brexit form. However, it adds: "If this does not happen in higher education, where will the shortfall be made up?"

Corporate communications agency Bellenden go a little further to say that an increase in the UK's science and research budget could be possible following Brexit, although they argue that it would be "marginal" and that "any uplift is unlikely

to be as high as the return that we currently get on our investment".

Fearing the worst for research, plenty of big-hitting academics have lined up against Brexit. Cambridge University's vice chancellor, Leszek Borysiewicz, says the university would have to open science parks on the Continent to keep the jobs and opportunities created by EU-funded research. Meanwhile, Stephen Hawking and other fellows of the Royal Society have highlighted how Switzerland's research collaboration with other EU countries is restricted because it does not allow EU-style freedom of movement.

The restriction of freedom of movement is crucial. "It's not just about losing French and Germans," says one insider, "it's about the UK becoming less attractive to the Chinese and the Americans too – the best global researchers go to where the best global researchers are. It's a network effect."

When Tier 4 of the points-based immigration system was introduced in 2009, English universities witnessed their first drop in international students in almost thirty years – albeit a decrease of just 1.5%. If EU students were subject to these regulations then another fall would be likely, compounding recent falls in numbers from countries such as India.

Among the academics lining up to

back the status quo is University College London's president and provost, Michael Arthur. He cites findings by technology company Digital Science that show research carried out with international partners is 50% more effective than work carried out by a single country. A good example would be recent research into the atmosphere of the planet 55 Cancri e, a project that "will impact on our lives for years and centuries to come", says Arthur.

University of Aberdeen vice-chancellor Ian Diamond offers another example, pointing to work on the next generation of MRI scanners that "involves collaboration with six EU member states, with several of our own researchers on the team originating from different European countries".

However, one of the few dissenting voices is Dr Christopher Leigh, spokesman for Scientists for Britain, a pro-Brexit group of academics. Leigh recently told *The Australian* that "mind-numbing bureaucracy" made him spurn EU networks and that scientific collaboration "is perfectly achievable without EU oversight".

As far as undergraduate student numbers are concerned, as well as the Tier 4 immigration controls, the curtailment of free moving undergraduates will also manifest itself in the end of exchange programmes like Erasmus, a scheme that has seen over 200,000 British students and

20,000 staff studying or working abroad. "Those that take part are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment," says Dame Julia Goodfellow, president of Universities UK and vice chancellor of the University of Kent.

More bad news could come in the form of increased tuition fees. Brexit sceptics generally agree that the UK is unlikely to take itself out of the European Economic Area (EEA) that currently comprises of EU and EFTA countries and enables a parity of fee loan rate. However, if it did, and students had to pay out the £11,000-£14,000 international student rates up front, undergraduate numbers could fall. It's a fair assessment given that Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) figures showed a decrease of almost 25% in full-time EU undergraduates following 2012's tuition fee rise to £9,000.

A student number 'meltdown' scenario has already been felt by private language colleges, with a 46% decrease in sponsored visa applications following tougher government rules. The sector is currently diversifying to survive, for reasons that include easy access to language teaching facilities online and increasing ELT college options abroad. The application of Tier 4 rules would be a massive setback at this crucial stage of reinvention. Similarly, independent schools, which have

become more reliant on foreign students, particularly from Germany and Spain, could see a drastic decline in that resource.

The flow of academic staff could also be affected by Brexit. "A Brexit may make attracting the right EU academics to UK universities difficult, which in turn could have a negative impact on the future research base for UK plc," notes the PwC blog.

Unless an accommodation is somehow reached on student and staff mobility, it's hard to see a clear Brexit good-news story for HE. It's true that there is conjecture on both sides and that re-allocation of funds might, just might, be enough to see some consistency for government departments including education post-Brexit. But the prospect of a Brexit brain drain is surely too much for the sector to countenance.

Supporters of Brexit often look to the US and Australia to assuage concerns about lost markets or partners. So it's perhaps ironic that the last word should go to executive director of the International Education Association of Australia, Phil Honeywood. Honeywood told *The Australian* in April that Brexit would mean the UK "surrendering some valuable advantages that they now enjoy over competing countries like us. It's hard to fathom why they would do it but if that is their choice then it is good luck for us." ■