The Future of the EU-UK Partnership in Science and Research

PROCEEDINGS BRIEF of Policy Dialogue, 13 December 2017

On 13 December 2017, CEPS organised a Lunchtime Policy Dialogue dealing with "The Future of the EU-UK Partnership in Science and Research". The event represented the first of a series of three Lunchtime Policy Dialogues co-organised by CEPS and the British Council to reflect on the future of a long-term EU-UK partnership in three specific areas: science and research, higher education and student mobility, and external aid. The panel discussion was chaired by Cinzia Alcidi (Senior Research Fellow at CEPS) and featured presentations by Peter Mason, Policy Manager EU Research and Innovation, Universities UK; Beth Thompson, Head of UK and EU Policy, Wellcome Trust; and Thomas Jørgensen, Senior Policy Coordinator, European University Association.

The spirit of this series of policy dialogues is to explore options and address priority areas from a depoliticised, expertise- and research-based angle.

The departure of the UK from the EU may affect the possibility and/or the modalities of UK research institutes and universities to participate in EU-funded schemes, such as Horizon2020 and FP9 and current cooperation paths with the UK in the European Research Area (ERA).

Figure 1 illustrates the leading role of the UK as beneficiary of H2020 proposals. This should be read, of course, as an indicator of EU funds allocated to the country but, given the highly competitive access to H2020 fund, also as an indicator of excellence of UK research bodies.

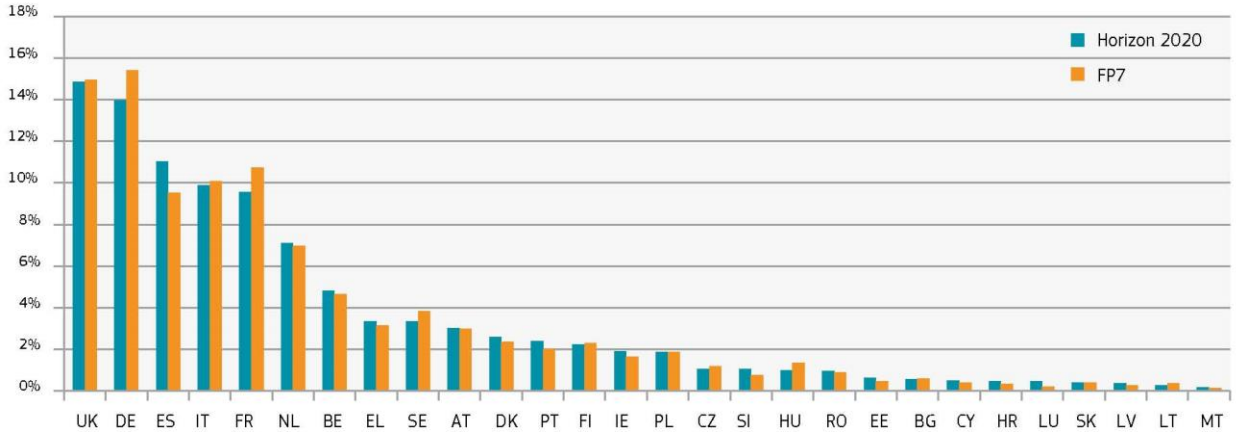
Figures 2 and 3 provide a more detailed overview of EU funds across different organisations, hence pointing to the types of organisations that are likely to bear more of the cost of non-agreement.

The presentations and the discussions at the Lunchtime Policy Dialogue covered three main angles:

- *First*, the possible models and options available for future EU-UK partnership regarding research collaborations;
- *Second*, the obstacles or barriers that could be envisaged; and
- *Third*, the potential risks that could be foreseen in cooperation on these domains.

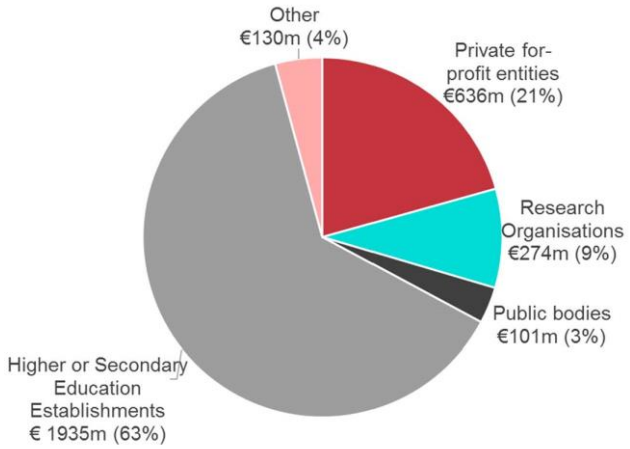
The participants also brought to light the value of the current framework of cross-border research cooperation and specific examples showing value added.

Figure 1. Share of participation in signed grant agreements per EU Member State: Horizon 2020 compared with FP7



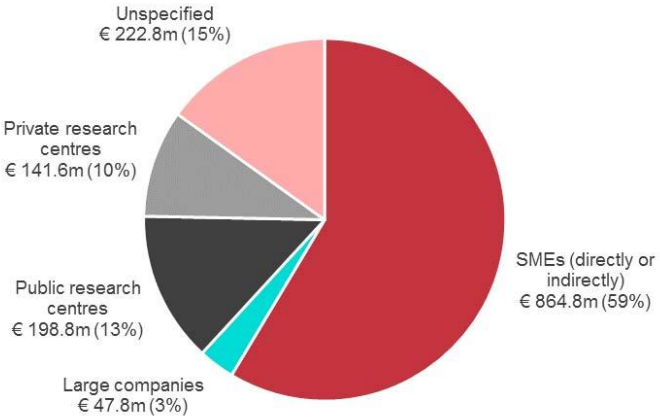
Source: European Commission, "Horizon 2020: First results" (https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/sites/horizon2020/files/horizon_2020_first_results.pdf).

Figure 2. Value of EC contributions in Horizon 2020 to the UK, by type of organisation



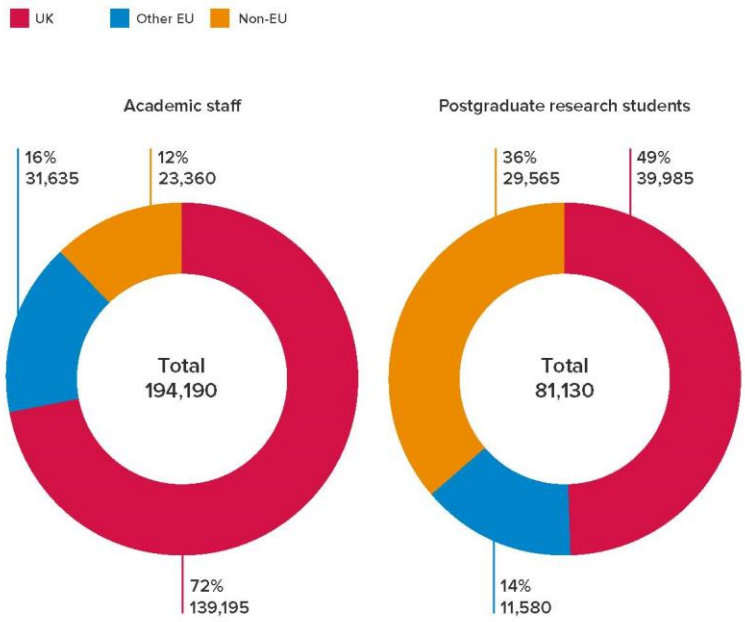
Source: "The role of EU funding in UK research and innovation", May 2017, p. 11 (https://royalsociety.org/~/media/policy/Publications/2017/2017-05-technopolis-role-of-EU-funding-report.PDF).

Figure 3.UK beneficiaries of EU ERDF funding for research and innovation (2014-2020)



Source: "The role of EU funding in UK research and innovation", May 2017, p. 12 (https://royalsociety.org/~/media/policy/Publications/2017/2017-05-technopolis-role-of-EU-funding-report.PDF).

Figure 4. Share of UK workforce engaged in university research



Source: The Royal Society, "UK research and the European Union The role of the EU in international research collaboration and researcher mobility", p. 8.

1. What kind of partnership could be envisaged?

A first recurrent issue that arose during the Policy Dialogue was the clear and high value that universities in the UK and the EU put on their linkages and their willingness to preserve the closest framework cooperation in light of BREXIT. The UK enjoys a high reputation as an international destination for research and science. Figure 4 documents this by the composition of the workforce of universities.

At the moment one can only speculate on the actual outcome of the Article 50-negotiations.

This high level of uncertainty creates considerable concern among all the parties involved regarding what will happen in the near future and what can be expected to be the future framework of research, sciences and innovation cooperation, as well as its impact on the daily lives of scientists, researchers and academics.

A key point emphasised was that there is an immense need for clarity and certainty for UK and EU researchers, particularly with the March 2019 deadline looming as a cliff-edge

All the speakers unanimously pointed to the importance of securing the lowest possible barriers to the movement of staff between the UK and the EU, and their strong interest in ensuring the UK's continuing participation in the European Research Area (ERA) as well as the EU's higher education and research and innovation programmes.

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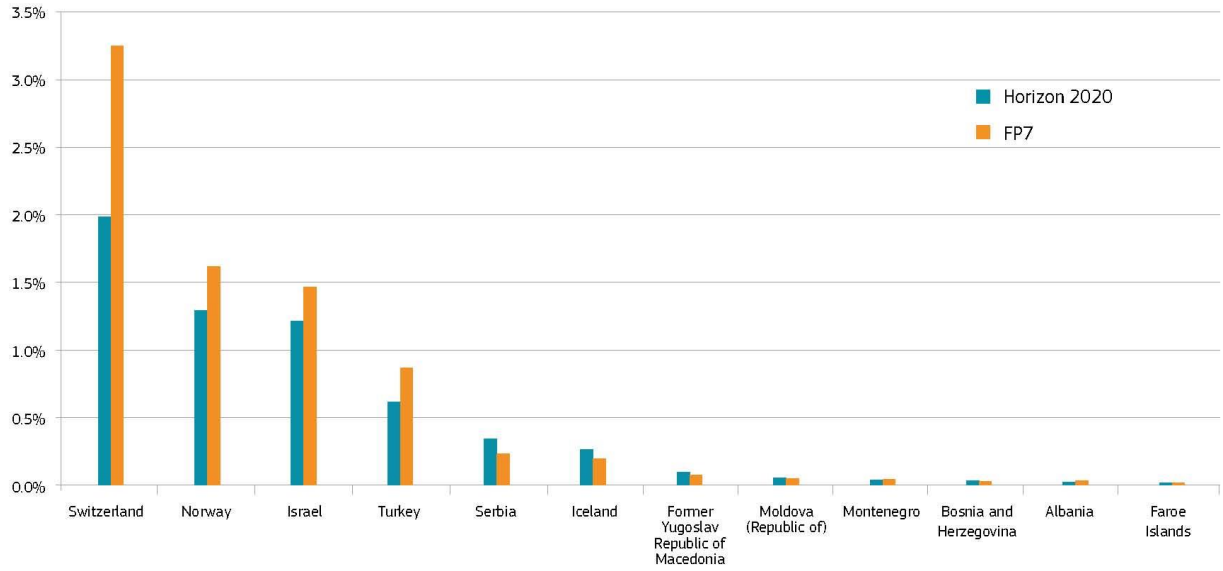
One of the most frequently cited options or models are the association agreements. These tools provide a multilateral framework of cooperation and deep collaboration with non-EU member states. Figure 5 illustrates the share of eligible applications for some of these countries, comparing FP7 to H2020. It is interesting to compare the share of Switzerland to that of the UK (see Figure 1), the latter being about eight times larger than the former.

Figure 5. Share of eligible applications per Associated Country: Horizon 2020 compared with FP7



Source: European Commission, "Horizon 2020: First results" (https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/sites/horizon2020/files/horizon_2020_first_results.pdf).

One speaker highlighted that it would be weird not to include the UK when the EU does cooperate with third countries, such as Australia, Canada, Tunisia and Armenia. This would entail an associated status in H2020 and FP9, and a country status in Erasmus+. For both options, there is already a precedent with non-EU countries. Incentive solutions are needed for the future UK-EU cooperation in science and research, but any form of "return" should be resisted.

It was emphasised that efforts should be tailored to ensure a "business as usual" stance, in which the UK would still be eligible for H2020 and future research programmes. This is not technically complicated, as current EU research programmes are also open to third-country participation. One speaker pointed out that there is no reason to believe that the next round of programmes will be more closed than the present one. However, it may too optimistic to assume that a cooperation agreement on research and Innovation will be achieved in complete isolation from other areas of negotiation. Some innovation areas, by their nature, will be affected by regulations that will depend on the trade agreement.

Another speaker outlined three main principles to guide the future partnership:

First, the "joined-up way" (H2020 and Erasmus+). It was said that "higher education" and "research and innovation" must be addressed in a joined-up way. It was mentioned that these programmes are "mutually reinforcing" and both sides would be poorer if the UK would no longer take part.

Second, politicians must recognise the strong mutual benefits of collaborative higher education, research and innovation. The discussions on H2020 and Erasmus+ must be isolated from other themes. This includes for instance trade policy. One participant stated that research should not become a policy issue that either side seeks to exploit for a "competitive advantage".

Third, H2020 and the next framework research programme (FP) should aim to protect the "common pot approach" to research funding, whereby academic excellence remains the single guiding principle in the allocation of funding. Reference was made here to the report of the independent High-Level Group on maximising the impact of EU Research & Innovation Programmes, chaired by Pascal Lamy,[1] which called for broadening its geographical reach to maximise the gains from collaboration.[2]

That notwithstanding, there was consensus among those present that the UK could not expect a special treatment regarding its involvement in legislative procedures delineating future programmes. One speaker proposed the formation of a Schengen-style "mixed committee" for higher education and research and innovation, which would not include voting rights for the UK. This could also be done in consultation with all the other Associated Countries as part of broader reform of the FPs.

Speakers and participants underlined the mutual benefits of collaboration. The EU and the UK have a lot in common in terms of legislation and infrastructure. There is fantastic cooperation and flow of data, and it was emphasised that it is important to keep this cooperation working. It was pointed out that better research is obtained when we collaborate. With the numerous different nationalities across the EU, the sharing of expertise and ideas will only lead to better research and innovation outcomes.

2. What are the main *obstacles* to a future EU-UK research partnership?

All the speakers expressed the need to leave aside the political dimension of this debate. It would be important for the discussions to transform into and remain a technical affair that resists efforts at politicisation. As one of the speakers put it, "one of the biggest barriers to achieving a positive future partnership on research is likely to be politics. Since we should be able to achieve a strong partnership on a wide range of BREXIT scenarios, including where there is regulatory divergence, we must therefore try to keep research above the politics."

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It is clear that there is a need for more clarity regarding the mutual benefit to feed into the negotiations. The speakers and several participants highlighted the enormous value for science to work in teams from different countries and origins. Scientists who work in teams produce better results, and it is through collaborative cross-border research that greater value has been achieved.

Examples mentioned include:

- The report on the impact of collaboration for medical research and what this entails for research and the health of patients.[3]

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/other_reports_studies_and_documents/hlg_2017_report.pdf.

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/other_reports_studies_and_documents/hlg_2017_report.pdf.

[3] Refer to http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/we-develop-policy/we-work-with-government/exiting-the-eu/uk-and-eu-research.

- The Brightest Minds campaign,[4] profiling six EU academics at UK universities who have made life-changing contributions to fields such as public health financing, fingerprint technology, renewable energy, sleep science, manufacturing technology and health economics.
- Another example mentioned was the Future Partnership Project, launched by Wellcome and the Royal Society, which brings together UK and EU partners to explore what a close and ambitious partnership could look like.[5]

Another important issue mentioned was the impact of barriers on people working in the scientific community. There is a very large number of non-UK nationals working in the academic communities in the UK. All countries need foreign talent. Barriers for researchers and others to work in the UK could lead to the temptation to keep the talent in the EU. This would be counterproductive, as it would diminish the prestige of the programme and exclude the most experienced researchers from the UK's top research environments.

Another obstacle relates to competitiveness of funding schemes: Why should the UK continue funding or subsidising competitiveness of other countries? Why should the EU finance UK companies? Where does this leave the pilot European Innovation Council (EIC)? Presentations and discussions covered two clear areas that will require consensus and compromise in the discussions to come, namely cost and influence.

Regarding costs, one speaker raised the question of whether the UK will continue to be a net receiver, and the extent to which this would be politically feasible. Another speaker pointed out that this should remain the case, as the margins are really pocket money: "In the past, the UK has been a net beneficiary of previous FPs, and other MS are understandably wary about subsidising UK researchers if the UK contributes through a similar GDP-based calculation."

3. What kind of risks can be foreseen?

The presentations and discussion that followed emphasised that research, science and innovation may be one of the least difficult political issues under the BREXIT negotiations. There are, however, important risks of getting onto a "wrong track". There is also the risk that research will become a victim of or be dragged down by other policy issues.

Moreover, during the discussion, the issue was raised that not enough attention is currently being paid to the obstacles that research regulation will pose to the future partnership, and the ways in which trust can be kept in the future. The issue of data protection and privacy was also cited as an example.

One area with a very high degree of regulation is health research. The UK has benefited from this regulation and from being part of the internal market. The more barriers that arise, the more regulatory obstacles will be faced.

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The adoption of and the UK's participation in the General Data Protection Regulation

[4] http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/brexit/Pages/brightest-minds.aspx.

[5] See https://wellcome.ac.uk/fpp.

(GDPR) is a positive and welcome step forward. It was highlighted that the Regulation would be central to ensuring that data will continue to flow in light of these EU data protection standards.

One speaker called for reaching a "cultural compromise". The UK should move away from the notion of being a special country, and the EU should recognise that it is. Another speaker referred to the existence of a "cultural gap" between the UK and the European Commission in the negotiations, with the UK being more "pragmatic" and the EU being more "legalistic". The same speaker called for the need to achieve a "cultural compromise" and to move beyond the currently lack of flexibility.

All speakers emphasised the need for innovative thinking and solutions. To this end, the scientific and research community should be more actively involved in securing future research cooperation. Researchers are not part of "policy discussions" and UK colleagues need to be more vocal. Individual researchers and institutions collaborating will be subject to more barriers, so they have a strong interest in a future partnership that will work effectively.

In the words of one of the speakers: "Collaboration in higher education and research and innovation is a positive sum game. It leads to better scientific outcomes which have a positive impact in resolving societal challenges and stimulating jobs and growth for all involved. It is also primarily driven by researchers' choice, so if the future UK-EU framework is not as close as we would like, collaboration at an institution-institution and researcher-researcher level will simply stop. However, there will be fewer funding opportunities, and more barriers, especially through the loss of a common set of rules for collaboration that Horizon 2020 offers. In short, a substantial opportunity cost."

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The event concluded with a call for inventive proposals and solutions that bring certainty and clarity, for relevant communities and research actors to be more vocal on current policy discussions, and for awareness-raising of the mutual benefit of EU-UK collaboration, so that this becomes a priority in the Phase 2 BREXIT negotiations.

The Panel concluded that it would be essential to keep research above politics in order to secure a stable and robust EU-UK partnership on research, science and innovation. There needs to be alignment regarding the flow of people and research funding. The continued sharing of expertise and ideas across borders will lead to better outcomes.