

Finnish Science Society in the United Kingdom

Brexit, Science, and Finland

Introduction

The United Kingdom's exit from the EU (Brexit) happened on 31 January 2020. Further negotiations regarding the future relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU) have now begun. We have now entered the transition period, lasting until the 31 December 2020, during which the future relationship between the UK and EU needs to be negotiated and implemented.

Finnish scientists living, working and studying in the UK are an asset to Finland as a nation. Finnish scientists that have established themselves in the UK have a network of contacts in the country, and can aid in creating new links between Finnish and UK institutions. Those who leave Finland for their studies or for a research post and then return to Finland bring new knowledge, ideas and connections with them. Finland should aim to encourage the international behaviour of Finnish scientists and stay in touch with its scientists abroad. If contact is maintained, Finland can draw on the knowledge and contacts of its scientists and attract more scientific collaboration with other nations.

Up until now the focus of the Brexit debate has been on what the UK's position is, while the interests of Finland have widely remained undiscussed. This document 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. The contents are based on an open discussion of the Finnish Science Society in the UK on 12 January 2019 and a meeting with the Finnish Ambassador Markku Keinänen on 11 March 2020.

This document covers four main areas:

- the role of science and research in the negotiations
- UK participation in EU research framework programmes
- status of students
- mobility of researchers

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

The EU and the UK have published their own mandates relating to the UK's relationship with the EU after the transition period, and the negotiations have started. There are some fundamental disagreements between the UK and EU positions, both in content and in structure. The EU would like an extensive agreement that covers most aspects of the future relationship, such as trade, migration, students, and justice and home affairs, while the UK only wants a free trade agreement similar to that which the EU has with Canada, together with separate agreement in specific areas.

Because of the coronavirus crisis, the negotiations are currently being carried out remotely. Nevertheless, the UK has stated that it will not be asking for an extension for the transition period, scheduled to end in December 2020. If the EU and UK have not reached and implemented by then, all agreements the UK has through its EU membership expire.

While negotiations are conducted by the EU Commission, Finland can influence them as a member state. The negotiation mandate and objectives are set by the Council, where Finland is represented by the Finnish government. The Finnish parliament can guide and influence Finland's position through the usual parliamentary processes.¹ Depending on the nature of the final agreement, it may also need to be approved and ratified by the Finnish parliament. The European Parliament is not directly involved in the negotiations, but it will need to give its consent to the agreement before it can be formally adopted.

It is likely that politically important questions, such as trade, human rights, and fishing, can overshadow the less politically charged topics, such as science and research, during the negotiations. Difficulties in those negotiation areas may therefore lead to a non-ideal agreement on science and research. This is already reflected in the negotiation mandates which contain very few references to science or students. Therefore it is important for Finland to take a proactive role on these issues.

Recommendations

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

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https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/naineduskuntatoimii/eduskunnan_tehtavat/euasiat/euasiat_eduskunnassa/Sivut/default.aspx

EU Research Programmes

The UK has enjoyed 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 sizable portion. Under the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK can continue to participate in Horizon 2020, the current EU scientific research programme framework, during the transition period. If the Brexit timeline goes as intended, the transition period and Horizon 2020 will end simultaneously.

The details of Horizon Europe, the successor of Horizon 2020, are currently being negotiated within the EU, with many aspects of it remaining unclear at the present time. Currently it seems that Horizon Europe might be more open to external partners than Horizon 2020, which may make it easier for the UK to be involved as an associated country. However, it is not clear if the UK is aiming to achieve that status, as the UK negotiation mandate only states that “the UK will consider a relationship in line with non-EU Member State participation”. 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.

Possible alternative sources of research funding for patching the research collaboration funding gap include the Royal Society², the Academy of Finland³, and the UK and Finnish governments. The Royal Society is already funding some international collaborations, while the Academy of Finland could look into replacing some of the funds that will be lost in Finland-UK collaborations after the UK's exit from the EU. However, it is unlikely that they can replace EU funding.

UK universities are also setting up more official collaborations with EU universities. Many of these 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. Scotland and Wales have especially expressed interest in forming collaborations with Finland. These bilateral links are likely to become more important after Brexit, but like the new funding streams, they cannot replace Europe-wide collaboration.

In the past year, Finland has also created the Team Finland Knowledge network, which aims to attract non-Finnish researchers to Finland and share Finnish knowledge in selected countries.⁴ The UK is not currently covered in this scheme, but it might be beneficial to look into whether the UK could be included to this or another similar scheme after it has left the EU.

Recommendations

- 2. Aim to keep the UK as a full participant in EU research programmes.**
- 3. Create new avenues for collaboration and funding for scientific research between the UK and Finland.**

² <https://royalsociety.org>

³ <https://www.aka.fi/en/>

⁴ <https://minedu.fi/en/team-finland-knowledge-network>

Students and Science

The UK is the most popular destination for Finnish degree students abroad. According to KELA statistics,⁵ 2,198 Finnish students were studying for a degree in the UK in the academic year 2018/19, more than in any other country outside Finland. This figure does not include exchange students. The UK is also a very popular destination for Finnish PhD students. There are a multitude of reasons for the UK's popularity:

- The UK is an English-speaking country
- The UK is a world-leading hub of cutting-edge science in many disciplines
- The UK offers degrees in areas of science that are not available in Finland
- Finnish citizens are currently entitled to a student loan from the UK government, covering both tuition fees and some living costs

The statistics show that there are fewer EU students applying to the UK already as a result of Brexit, even though the UK government has assured that tuition fees for EU students starting their studies in the UK in the autumn of 2020 will be the same as those for UK students for the duration of their course and that they will be eligible for student loans.⁶

Finnish students pursuing an undergraduate or taught postgraduate degree in the UK are currently treated in the same way as UK students. One of the major outcomes of this is that Finnish students have paid the same tuition fees as native students (currently £9,250 per year), rather than the overseas fees, which are often at least triple that of the UK fee. For example, at Imperial College London, the standard tuition fee for overseas students is £33,000 per year. Unless something else is agreed, European students starting their degrees in 2021 will be charged these higher fees and excluded from the tuition fee loan scheme. Finnish students wishing to study in the UK would then be paying tens of thousands of pounds per academic year at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level and lose access to the loans that used to be available for covering the tuition fees. This will be financially prohibitive for most students. The question of tuition fees is not mentioned in the EU negotiation mandate, but it is an urgent issue because the first application deadlines for university courses starting in 2021 are on 15 October 2020.

Besides full degree programmes, another popular route for Finnish students to study in the UK is through exchange programmes. Currently, the Erasmus+ exchange programme is the most common framework used by universities when setting up student exchanges with the UK. Overall, there were 558 student exchanges from Finland to the UK under the 2017 Erasmus+ call.⁷ It is possible for non-EU countries to be members of Erasmus+, but so far the UK has not shown interest in it. Another, currently less used, avenue is creating exchange programmes between individual universities. It is crucial to make sure that exchange opportunities in the UK remain available to Finnish students, ideally through UK participation in Erasmus+. If that is not possible, it would be important for Finnish institutions to create new collaborations with UK institutions to allow for student exchanges.

PhD students' tuition fees are also high for non-EU students, typically £20,000-£40,000 per year. Finnish PhD students are currently eligible to receive UK research council-funded PhD scholarships, which cover their fees and living costs, as long as they have resided in the UK for a minimum of 3 years before applying. Non-EU students are not allowed to apply for these programmes. If this funding is unavailable, the PhD opportunities of Finnish students would be severely limited. PhD funding can also be obtained from charities, such as the Wellcome Trust or the Gates Foundation. Charities tend to allow for a wider pool of candidates, but the number of scholarships available is much smaller.

⁵ <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2019110837236>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eu-student-funding-continued-for-202021>

⁷ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ae35558f-41b8-11ea-9099-01aa75ed71a1>

Currently, even in those UK PhD funding schemes that are available for non-EU students, it is rare that the full extent of the non-EU tuition fees is covered by the available grant. This leaves the student to cover the difference out-of-pocket. The aim should therefore be to negotiate the continuation of the current arrangement in which Finnish and other EU PhD students are eligible for home fees and research council PhD scholarships.

It is also important to ensure that professional qualifications obtained in the UK will be valid in the EU, and vice versa, after the transition period is over. Applications for the approval of professional qualifications that have been submitted before the end of the transition period will be processed according to the regulations that were in place while the UK was a member of the EU.

Recommendations

- 4. Aim to retain the Home fee status and student loans for EU students in the UK and vice versa.**
- 5. Ensure that EU students remain eligible for PhD funding from UK research councils.**
- 6. Aim to keep the UK in the Erasmus+ programme.**
- 7. Create new avenues of PhD funding for Finnish students in the UK if existing PhD funding opportunities dwindle.**
- 8. Ensure recognition of professional qualifications between the UK and the EU.**

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 research 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. In short, Finnish scientists spending time abroad is the key to the internationalisation of Finnish science.

Freedom of movement

For the past 25 years, freedom of movement has made it easy for Finnish scientists to live and work in the UK. The bureaucracy and cost of moving have been minimal, and EU laws have guaranteed equal rights in the UK. If freedom of movement between the EU and the UK ends, Finnish researchers will face new obstacles to mobility. The worst hit will be researchers hoping to relocate with their families. Obtaining visas takes time and 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.

The UK has recently introduced a Global Talent⁸ visa scheme for specific sectors including scientific research. It offers better conditions than normal visas but has strict eligibility requirements which most researchers are unlikely to satisfy. In many cases the application process also includes a lengthy peer review. Even with a Global Talent visa, the cost of moving to the UK as a researcher would be very high. The Royal Society has estimated that a Global Talent visa would cost a family of four £12,880 over the course of 5 years.⁹ Such a high cost for a visa can make it difficult for Finnish scientists, especially those with families, to move to the UK. Finnish researchers would also no longer be eligible to receive public benefits such as Child Benefit or Child Tax Credit, which can amount to thousands of pounds per year. When the cost of living in some UK cities, such as London, Cambridge, or Oxford, is factored in, living in the UK on a researcher grant while paying the additional costs of visas and healthcare may become unsustainable.

The work of an academic also often involves a fair amount of travelling and fieldwork in other countries. 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 permanent residence status. The immigration rules should take this into account in both Finland and the UK.

Healthcare and Social Security

Finnish scientists who are already in the UK are eligible to the settled or pre-settled status, which gives them continued access to healthcare and social security in the UK on the current terms under the Withdrawal Agreement. However, the situation of new arrivals after the transition period is still open and needs to be agreed urgently.

Most Finnish scientists who work in the UK are employed in the UK. This includes those working in the private sector, those employed on a grant held by a more senior Principal Investigator at their host university, and in many cases also those holding personal fellowships at UK universities. For those researchers the effects of Brexit are the same as for other EU workers described above. For example, they will be covered by the UK healthcare and social security systems, subject to the general

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/global-talent>

⁹ <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2019/international-visa-systems-explainer-july-2019.pdf>

restrictions. In particular, they will have to pay the immigration health surcharge of £400 per person per year (£300 for students) and they will not be eligible to receive public benefits such as child benefit and child tax credit.

The situation of postdoctoral researchers funded by Finnish foundations and some other sources is more complicated, because they are usually not employed by their host institution. Instead, they receive their funding directly from the funder as a tax-free stipend and are covered by the Finnish social security and health care systems. Currently EU laws guarantee these researchers access to healthcare in the UK, but if there is no new agreement this will no longer be the case after the end of the transition period. It is very important to ensure that appropriate agreements on taxation, healthcare and social security are in place for them when the transition period ends.

Funding

Most postdoctoral opportunities available for Finnish scientists in the UK will not be directly affected by Brexit, but depending on the level of the UK's participation in Horizon Europe, EU funding can become very limited. In particular, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships are largely limited for EU or associated countries and could therefore not be used for working in the UK. UK partners will no longer be able to fully participate in European collaboration and mobility schemes such as Innovative Training Network and Research and Innovation Staff Exchanges, and if UK Principal Investigators lose access to EU funding, there may be a decrease in the overall number of postdoctoral positions available in the UK.

One way to mitigate the effects of this on scientific mobility with Finland and the UK would be to increase the funding either through expansion of existing schemes or by introduction of new schemes, both for mobility and for postdoctoral fellowships in the UK. The value of the fellowships will have to be sufficient to cover the additional visa and healthcare costs. There may be opportunities for co-funding such schemes with a UK counterpart. For example, the Royal Society International Exchanges¹⁰ scheme already has co-funding agreements with several countries, including Italy and Ireland in the EU.

Recommendations

- 9. Aim to retain full freedom of movement between the EU and the UK.**
- 10. Minimise barriers to mobility, both for researchers and for their partners and dependants.**
- 11. Ensure appropriate agreements on taxation, social security and healthcare are in place.**
- 12. Review funding schemes for postdoctoral fellowships and mobility between Finland and the UK.**

¹⁰ <https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/international-exchanges/>

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, questions affecting science must be high on the agenda. Finland should use its influence as a member state to ensure that the EU has clear and strong positive negotiation objectives in these areas and pursues them actively, rather than seeking the lowest common denominator between the EU and the UK aims. Specifically, we make the following recommendations for the negotiations on the future relationship:

- 1. Give sufficient attention to science and research in the negotiations.**
- 2. Aim to keep the UK as a full participant in EU research programmes.**
- 3. Create new avenues for collaboration and funding for scientific research between the UK and Finland.**
- 4. Aim to retain the Home fee status and student loans for EU students in the UK and vice versa.**
- 5. Ensure that EU students remain eligible for PhD funding from UK research councils.**
- 6. Aim to keep the UK in the Erasmus+ programme.**
- 7. Create new avenues of PhD funding for Finnish students in the UK if existing PhD funding opportunities dwindle.**
- 8. Ensure recognition of professional qualifications between the UK and the EU.**
- 9. Aim to retain full freedom of movement between the EU and the UK.**
- 10. Minimise barriers to mobility, both for researchers and for their partners and dependants.**
- 11. Ensure appropriate agreements on taxation, social security and healthcare are in place.**
- 12. Review funding schemes for postdoctoral fellowships and mobility between Finland and the UK.**

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<https://www.finnishscience.org.uk/>

Friday 17 April 2020

For comments or suggestions for further inclusions and edits to this document, please contact finnish.science.uk@gmail.com