

UK scientists dropped from EU projects because of post-Brexit funding fears

Doubts over the UK's ability to win future project grants mean some EU partners are avoiding working with British researchers



The chemistry research building at Oxford University, whose chancellor, Lord Patten, raised concerns about effect of Brexit on research income. Photograph: View Pictures/UIG/Getty Images

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Britain's vote to leave the EU has unleashed a wave of discrimination against UK researchers, with elite universities in the country coming under pressure to abandon collaborations with European partners.

In a confidential survey of the UK's Russell Group universities, the Guardian found cases of British academics being asked to leave EU-funded projects or to step down from leadership roles because they are considered a financial liability.

In one case, an EU project officer recommended that a lead investigator drop all UK partners from a consortium because Britain's share of funding could not be guaranteed. The note implied that if UK organisations remained on the project, which is due to start in January 2017, the contract signing would be delayed until Britain had agreed a fresh

deal with Europe.

The backlash against UK researchers began immediately after the June referendum when the failure to plan for a post-Brexit Britain cast serious doubts over the chances of British organisations winning future EU funding. British researchers receive about £1bn a year from EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020, but access to the money must be completely renegotiated under Brexit.

The 24 universities in the Russell Group are regarded as Britain's elite institutions. With Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, University College London and Imperial College among their number, they are renowned for world-class research and academic excellence.

One leading university said anecdotal evidence that UK applicants were being dropped from EU bids came almost straight after the vote. Since then they had witnessed "a substantial increase in definitive evidence that EU projects are reluctant to be in collaboration with UK partners, and that potentially all new funding opportunities from Horizon 2020 are closing".

Incidents reported by the universities suggest that researchers across the natural sciences, the engineering disciplines and social sciences are all affected. At least two social science collaborations with Dutch universities have been told UK partners are unwelcome, one Russell Group university said in the survey.

Speaking at Oxford's Wolfson College last Friday, the university's chancellor, Chris Patten, said Oxford received perhaps more research income than any European university, with about 40% coming from government. "Our research income will of course fall significantly after we have left the EU unless a Brexit government guarantees to cover the shortfall," Lord Patten said.

The uncertainty over future funding for projects stands to harm research in other ways, the survey suggests. A number of institutions that responded said some researchers were reluctant to carry on with bids for EU funds because of the financial unknowns, while others did not want to be the weak link in a consortium. One university said it had serious concerns about its ability to recruit research fellows for current projects.



Researchers in natural sciences, the engineering disciplines and social sciences are all affected. Photograph: Alamy

Some Russell Group universities declined to comment for the survey, and not all of those which did knew of any discrimination against their researchers. Though one university said concerns over the impact of the referendum had become a part of almost

every conversation about research, their academics were continuing with funding applications as usual.

A week after the referendum, science minister Jo Johnson told academics and industry figures he had raised concerns over potential discrimination against UK researchers with the EU science commissioner, Carlos Moedas. Johnson has asked a team at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to gather evidence for discrimination and urged organisations to report any incidents. Until the UK left the EU, he said the situation was “business as usual”.

Others see it differently. Joe Gorman, a senior scientist at Sintef, Norway’s leading research institute, said he believed UK industry and universities would see “a fairly drastic and immediate reduction in the number of invitations to join consortiums”.

Only 12% of bids for Horizon 2020 funds are successful, a rate that falls by more than half in highly competitive areas. Given the low probability of winning funds at the best of times, Gorman said it was natural risk aversion to be cautious of UK partners. In many cases, British organisations will not have a clue they have lost out. “If you don’t get invited to the party, you don’t even know there is a party,” he said.

“I strongly suspect that UK politicians simply don’t understand this, and think it is ‘business as usual’, at least until negotiations have been completed. They are wrong, the problems start right now,” he added. As a former European commission official, Gorman oversaw research projects and now advises universities and companies on how to succeed in EU-funded research programmes.

According to Gorman, the UK government must make a clear and immediate statement on how Britain will take part in future EU projects from outside the union. “All the talk is about when negotiations will start,” he said. “We don’t want that. People want to know now what is going to happen. This could all be solved by one pronouncement from one minister.”

Another obstacle British researchers face is the potential bias, whether conscious or not, of the independent evaluators who score applications for EU funding. Xavier Aubry at Zaz Ventures, a consultancy that works with consortiums to win Horizon 2020 funding, said Switzerland was discriminated against at the evaluation stage after its 2014 referendum to restrict immigration.

Aubry’s firm operates a “no win, no fee” policy, which has left him second-guessing how the evaluators will respond to the Brexit vote. “Right now the problem is that we don’t know how the evaluators will react, he said.” “Even if they are briefed that they should not discriminate, they could have unconscious biases.”

As a result, he thinks British organisations will have to bring more to the table to justify the risk of them being included in a consortium. “We are becoming more strict,” he said. “But we are not telling people to stop working with the UK.”

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