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The Impact of Brexit on the Education Sector in the United Kingdom: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the effect of Brexit on the education sector in the United Kingdom. As the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) has unfolded, it has triggered substantial shifts and uncertainties across various domains, including education. This study aims to evaluate the repercussions of Brexit on key aspects of the education sector, including student mobility, research collaborations, funding opportunities, curriculum development, and institutional partnerships. The analysis combines qualitative insights from diverse sources, including governmental reports, academic studies, and expert opinions. It explores the pre-Brexit landscape, identifies the core factors that shape the post-Brexit educational environment, and assesses the short-term and long-term consequences for educational institutions, students, and researchers in the UK.

Keywords: Brexit, education sector, visa regulations, EU students, student mobility, funding opportunities

A. INTRODUCTION

The decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to withdraw from the European Union (EU), commonly referred to as Brexit (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017), has had far-reaching consequences across various sectors. One domain significantly impacted by this historic event is the education sector (Posen & Rengifo-Keller, 2022). Brexit has introduced a wave of uncertainties and challenges that have reshaped the landscape of higher education and research in the UK. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the effect of Brexit on the education sector, examining key aspects such as student mobility, research collaborations, funding opportunities, curriculum development, and institutional partnerships. The education sector in the UK has long benefited from its association with the EU, which facilitated student and faculty mobility, fostered research collaborations, and provided access to funding programs (Kalaitzake, 2020). However, with the implementation of Brexit, the higher education community faces a new reality marked by changes in policies, regulations, and relationships with European counterparts. One critical area that has been significantly affected is student mobility. Prior to Brexit, the freedom of movement principle allowed students from EU member states to study in the UK without visa restrictions and enjoy access to domestic tuition

rates (Mindus, 2017). However, the end of this principle has raised concerns about the potential decline in EU student enrolment. Changes in visa regulations and the potential reclassification of EU students as international students could lead to increased tuition fees and additional administrative burdens (Scott, 2021). These factors may impact the attractiveness of UK higher education institutions and influence the choices made by prospective EU students.

In addition to student mobility, Brexit has also raised questions about the future of research collaborations. UK universities have historically been active participants in EU-funded research projects and have benefited from collaborative networks established through EU initiatives (Protogerou et al., 2010). However, with Brexit, the UK's eligibility for certain funding programs has changed, and researchers may face difficulties in accessing EU research grants. This has the potential to impact the quantity and quality of research collaborations between UK institutions and their European counterparts, leading to a loss of opportunities for knowledge exchange and innovation.

Furthermore, Brexit has implications for curriculum development and accreditation processes in the UK. The EU has played a significant role in harmonizing educational frameworks and promoting academic standards across member states (Osler, 2020). The UK's departure from the EU raises questions about its future relationship with these frameworks and the impact on curriculum design and accreditation. Changes in educational priorities and potential divergence from EU standards could reshape the content and structure of academic programs in the UK, impacting both domestic and international students. Institutional partnerships, including student exchange programs, joint degrees, and research networks, are also under scrutiny in the wake of Brexit. EU membership has facilitated collaborative endeavours between UK institutions and their European counterparts, enabling students and researchers to benefit from cross-border experiences and expertise. However, the new post-Brexit reality raises uncertainties about the continuity and ease of such partnerships. Institutions may need to renegotiate agreements and establish new frameworks to ensure the sustainability of these collaborations, potentially leading to disruptions and administrative complexities.

While Brexit presents challenges for the education sector, there are also opportunities for the UK to redefine its global educational positioning and forge new international partnerships. The UK has a rich history of academic excellence and a strong reputation in higher education. Brexit could provide the impetus to strengthen ties with non-EU countries, attract international students from new regions, and foster innovation and autonomy in the education system.

B. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the decade leading up to the Referendum, there was a significant rise in the number of foreign faculty members in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), especially those from other EU nations (Locke & Marini, 2021). This increase was not unexpected, given the EU's fundamental principle of allowing free movement of citizens and their families within the Union for work and study purposes. Between 2004/05 and 2017/18, the number of EU academics in UK HEIs almost tripled, and their proportion of the total academic population almost doubled (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020). Several institutions had grown dependent on academics from other EU countries, and those from outside the EU, for a significant portion of their research, teaching, and other activities, albeit some HEIs were more reliant on them than others. Though the

proportion of professional, administrative, and technical staff in HEIs from the EU was lower than for academics, it still represented a substantial minority at 7.3% (Locke & Marini, 2021). Similar to many other employment sectors in the UK economy, there was concern about the status of EU workers following the Referendum and the overall impact of Brexit on higher education in the UK. The uncertainty about the precise nature of Brexit, whether it would be 'soft,' 'hard,' or the UK would leave with 'no deal' at all, and what the UK's future relationship with the remaining 27 EU countries would be, exacerbated these concerns (Keating, 2022).

In UK HEIs, foreign staff were classified as either 'other (non-UK) EU' or 'international' while the UK was a member state of the EU (Highman et al., 2023). This classification was similar to the categorization of students for tuition fee purposes, where EU students were charged the same amount as UK-domiciled students, and 'international' students could be charged higher fees without any limit. Similarly, academics and other HE workers from the EU were treated the same as UK-domiciled staff (Locke & Marini, 2021). After the Brexit Referendum, concerns arose that there would be a departure of 'other EU' and 'international' staff as Britain appeared to express an isolationist and anti-immigrant sentiment in both public opinion and government policy. Hence, there has been significant apprehension about the potential 'Brexodus' of EU and different international faculty (Courtois & Sautier, 2022). According to data from HESA, the number of foreign faculty members in UK HEIs (including those from other EU and non-EU countries) grew rapidly in the decade leading up to the Brexit Referendum in 2016 (*Contents of Releases - HE Provider Data: Finance* | HESA, 2019). Specifically, in 2017/18, 12.6% of academics in UK HEIs were from other EU countries, which was nearly double the proportion in 2005/06. In absolute terms, the number had increased from 31,961 to 92,546 over the same period. In comparison, the proportion of international (non-EU) faculty members had only increased from 7.7% to 9.5% during the same period and had grown in line with the overall expansion of the academic population between 2008 and 2016 (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021).

After the 2016 Referendum, most higher education institutions in the UK reassured their EU academic staff (and students) that they were still welcome and would be supported to continue working (and studying) there (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2021). However, at first, the UK Government did not confirm whether EU citizens residing in the UK would be able to remain without additional visa requirements or application processes after Brexit. While some other EU and non-EU nationals had already obtained permanent residence or British citizenship, the majority had not (Radziwinowiczówna & Lewis, 2023). This uncertainty has been attributed to causing increased psychological strain and lowered morale among other EU and non-EU staff. A 2018 survey of other EU academic and professional staff at English and Scottish universities revealed that 90% were very or somewhat concerned about their rights, 88% felt less welcome in the UK, and 64% had either decided to leave or planned to leave if the Government did not secure their rights (Naseem, 2019).

In 2019, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) conducted a sector-wide survey of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and conducted qualitative interviews with senior Human Resources staff (Luthra, 2021). The aim was to understand the impact of Brexit-related uncertainty on academic recruitment and retention and identify concerns for the future. Results showed that about 25% of respondents reported moderate impact on academic recruitment and retention, while the same proportion expressed high or medium-to-high degree of concern about their ability to recruit and retain European staff over the next 12 months. The

majority had at least a moderate level of concern, which was an increase in anxiety compared to the previous survey conducted in 2017. The uncertainty had also affected EU academics who bring research grants to UK HEIs as they were unsure if they could continue to live and work in the UK after Brexit. The weakened currency due to the Referendum result and prolonged negotiations with the EU over the terms of withdrawal had further reduced the international competitiveness of UK salaries, exacerbating the difficulties faced by HEIs (Luthra, 2021).

C. INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

The European commission has previously emphasized on the importance of international cooperation and collaboration in their financial support for research projects within the European Union. They view that the higher education and graduate research as extremely valuable endeavours that are successful, purposeful, progressive, and economically advanced. These are characterized by mainly international collaboration.

In the early 2000s, there was a shift towards market competition in the region of Western Europe which had challenged the previously held belief in the value of collaboration and cooperation. This then became culturally significant due to the increase of collaborative research within the region. The definition of collaboration and competition was dependent on the development of strategies and tools that would be extremely successful. Some policymakers argued that market competition would greatly enhance the quality of higher education, with quality and excellence being regarded as normative values. However, this point has been highly debated, as many researchers observe that competition, particularly through rankings, has diverted universities from their original public good objectives.

As a result of this change, research networks that favour more prestigious higher education institutions (HEIs) have emerged (Courtois & Veiga, 2020a). The global competition for finding international students has posed a challenge to the fundamental values and principles of HEIs (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004). This transition from collaboration to competition has led to a shift in European higher education policies, driven by economic rationales. The imperative to compete among higher education systems and institutions is evident in national and institutional strategies aimed at attracting students. The adoption of market-oriented practices has transformed international education into an economic sector and has contributed to stratification among institutions.

According to a report that was commissioned by the European Parliament, there are several developments in the internationalization of higher education (Highman et al., 2023). These include a rise in institutional strategies aimed at internationalization. Another trend is the increasing privatization of higher education institutions through the generation of revenue. The report highlights a noticeable shift from primarily focusing on cooperation to focusing on competition in the sector of higher education. Attracting foreign students became an increasingly important national and institutional strategy, specifically in the United Kingdom. The increase in international student has more vividly present in the years 2014-2015 in which EU students had become burden on the UK governmental budget (Highman et al., 2023).

Leading to the referendum, the higher education sector in the United Kingdom strongly supported the importance of the EU membership in its success. It emphasized the important connection between collaboration, freedom of movement, and scientific productivity (Corbett,

2016). Such arguments were based on the normative concepts, where collaboration and cooperation were seen as translations of public philosophies into policies. However, during the anti-Brexit movement in the UK higher education sector, a tension was present between the adherence to the EU's foundational principles and the emergence of novel and ideas which aimed to pragmatically address Brexit (Corbett, 2016). Within this context, the importance on the economic benefits of the European membership in the UK higher education could be seen as a rational concept that blended with the broader normative discourse opposing Brexit within the sector.

One of the European Union's distinguished accomplishments in developing a collaborative European identity is the Erasmus program. It is considered as a successful multilateral initiative for academic cooperation, which enables students to engage in study or work experiences in the different countries that participate in the program. This program was initially established in 1987 and has since been expanded with the addition of various EU schemes. Over the past 27 years or so, there were around 3 million students who have benefited from the Erasmus program. The program, over the years, experienced a significant increase in the number of outgoing students. The program had a budget of about €26.2 billion compared to €14.7 billion for 2021-2027 and 2014-2020, respectively (Kumar & Adithyan, 2022).

According to (Böttcher et al., 2016), the countries that have hosted the greatest number of students through the program are France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. It is important to note that the United Kingdom is among the top five host countries but not sending countries. This shows that the UK is a favourable destination for Erasmus students. Moreover, it is also important to mention that the UK's participation in the Erasmus program for the years of 2014-2020 has significantly declined. Between the years 2014 and 2018, the Erasmus program had awarded a total of 680 million euros in the United Kingdom. Over 167,000 participants were part of the program (Kumar & Adithyan, 2022). However, in 2019, the program faced significant challenges because of the impact of the COVID-19 and Brexit. As a result, the statistics for that year showed a total of 144.69 million euros awarded, with 54,619 participants taking part in the program. These statistics indicate a decrease in funding, participants, and funded projects in 2019 compared to the previous years. The adverse effects of the pandemic and the uncertainties surrounding Brexit likely contributed to these changes.

More recently, a Turing scheme was introduced by the UK government to replace the Erasmus program. The scheme offers opportunities and funding for individuals to study and abroad. The funding is available to organizations in the UK to allow them to apply for projects that provide study or work experience abroad for the academic year of 2021-2022 (Kumar & Adithyan, 2022)A budget of approximately 110 million pounds was offered for the Turing scheme to support around 40,000 students. Unlike the regional limitations of the previous Erasmus program, the Turing scheme offers students the freedom to choose study destinations worldwide.

The internationalization of higher education systems has brought about significant tensions regarding the ideas of competition and cooperation. These tensions highlight the different dynamics at play in response to Brexit and shed light on the diverse perspectives and approaches taken in the internationalization strategies of various nations and institutions. In the context of Brexit, there is a noticeable tension between cognitive and normative ideas. Normative ideas encompass the principles and values that promote collaboration and

cooperation, while cognitive ideas are more pragmatic and focus on addressing the challenges posed by Brexit in a practical manner. This tension between normative and cognitive ideas has influenced the discourse surrounding Brexit, shaping the strategies and actions taken by different stakeholders. The European Union (EU) has played a crucial role in promoting international research collaboration through funding mechanisms for collaborative research projects, shared research facilities, and student exchange programs. The EU has facilitated mobility for students and staff within Europe, creating opportunities for cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange. The UK has been an important research partner for teams across Europe, hosting key research facilities and attracting staff and students from EU countries. The desirability of the UK as a key partner in international research collaboration has been driven by a normative stance, reflecting the consensus among stakeholders regarding the value of the UK's contributions to research and the benefits of collaboration with UK institutions. It is important to note that international research collaboration can take various forms, some of which do not rely on centralized funding mechanisms. However, the EU's role in fostering EU-wide research collaboration has been significant, and the potential impact of Brexit on collaborative research efforts has raised concerns and further accentuated the tensions between cooperation and competition. Overall, the tensions between normative and cognitive ideas in response to Brexit have influenced the discourse and strategies related to international research collaboration. The importance of collaboration and cooperation in research remains widely recognized, but the challenges posed by Brexit have necessitated a pragmatic approach to ensure continued collaboration and address potential disruptions.

D. IMPACT OF BREXIT ON THE ACADEMIC LABOUR MARKET

Participants in several case study across different countries have expressed the belief that Brexit presents an advantage to attracting high-profile academics who are currently based in the UK. They were open about their aspirations to take away academics from the UK. However, there were concerns raised about the crowded academic job markets for entry-level positions, especially in Ireland. It was stated that inviting different UK residents might not be well-received by the local applicants who have been awaiting positions. Despite these reservations, applications from UK staff had already increased, resulting in several recruitments taking place in these countries (Courtois & Veiga, 2020b).

The Brexit has given many academics based in the UK anxiety about their position. They have expressed their concerns about their potential job loss, restructuring, and reduced fundings. This is especially evident in the disciplines that are considered to not being profitable (i.e., humanities) . People with a career in Early Research have been feeling the most vulnerable since their contract of employment heavily relies on the availability of research grants. The uncertainties that surround the Brexit has also further put strain on the perceptions of the early career researchers and their future in the United Kingdom. Previous research has shown that ECRs have already been facing a lot of anxiety and the possibility of the Brexit, at the time, further increased these concerns (Courtois & Sautier, 2022).

According to the Times Higher Education, Brexit has caused several British academics to leave the country as they are citing future funding and research network opportunities. Their data shows that almost twice the number of EU academics have left their positions in the UK in the year 2019 as compared to before the referendum (Bothwell, 2021). The British scholars who

have relocated and changed their jobs to academic positions in the European Union area have clearly stated that Brexit played a major role in their decision, despite not being directly affected by immigration policies in the United Kingdom. Simon Watson, a professor of wind energy systems at Delft University of Technology, stated that the Brexit was one of the decisive factors in his decision to leave his current position at a UK based university. He expressed his concerns about the potential reduction in future opportunities, both for career development abroad and for securing European funding. According to an analysis conducted by Times Higher Education, grants from a European Union research funding program to different UK based research-intensive decreased by over 20% in the final year of the program. Moreover, the campaign group 'Scientists for EU' conducted a broader analysis which suggested that the UK will more likely miss out on £1.5 billion in funding. These findings have indicated a great decrease in research funding for UK universities and a potential inconsistency in funding compared to institutions in the European Union (Bothwell, 2021).

British academic researchers and scientists have suffered a setback as 115 grants from a prominent EU research program have been stopped due to the Brexit. This development has led to concerns among academics, with one expressing relief at leaving the country and fearing that the UK is heading down a troubling path reminiscent of Germany during the 1930s. Initially, 150 grants were approved for British applicants after the then Brexit minister, David Frost, negotiated the £80 billion Horizon Europe program. However, most of these grants will now be cancelled. The European Research Council (ERC) informed beneficiaries in the UK that if the associate membership was not approved by 29th of June (2022), the grants would only become available if the researchers relocated their work activities to a facility in Europe. The ratification of membership has been delayed due to the UK's failure to implement the Brexit trading arrangements. As the deadline has passed, it has been revealed that only 18 out of the 150 academics will be able to take up the grants, but only if they relocate to an EU institution to access the funds (O'Carroll, 2022).

The exact amount of funds that has been withdrawn from the 115 terminated ERC grants has not been disclosed yet, but it is estimated to exceed £100 million. According to an ERC spokesperson, the preparation of these grants offered to UK-based researchers will be terminated since the 29 June deadline has passed. However, the grants of 18 UK-based researchers who have chosen to exercise their right to "portability" will be transferred to a host institution in the EU or associated countries. There are still 14 cases that have yet to be resolved (O'Carroll, 2022).

Figures reveal that the amount of EU students who have enrolled in British universities has become less than half what it was before the Brexit. It was most notable with scholars from France, Germany, and Italy. The primary constraint for EU students is seen as the Brexit itself, as they are no longer eligible for home fees and student finance unless they already live in the UK with pre-settled or settled status. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has published the data for the first full post-Brexit year and attributed the significant decrease in EU first-year student enrolments to changes in fees eligibility. Prior to Brexit, EU students paid home fees of almost £9,000 and had access to different student finance schemes. However, fees have increased significantly, reaching as high as £38,000 after Brexit. In 2021, the number of EU students enrolling for the first year of a postgraduate or an undergraduate scheme decreased from 66,680 in 2020 to 31,000. This was the first year that EU students were treated the same as international students. However, the impact of Brexit is particularly prominent at the

undergraduate level, with only 13,155 EU students that enrolled in the first year of an undergraduate degree in 2021 compared to 37,530 the previous year. Universities express concerns that the loss of undergraduate students diminishes classroom diversity and weakens the financial stability of colleges that relied on EU students enrolling in longer three to four-year courses. Meanwhile, many of the new international students coming to the UK are enrolling in one-year postgraduate courses. According to HESA, there are still approximately 120,000 EU students in the British higher education system, which decreased from 152,000 in the previous academic year. These figures include students who enrolled before Brexit and are currently finishing up their courses (O'Carroll & Adams, 2023).

E. CONCLUSION

Brexit is expected to have an extremely significant and far-reaching impact on society in both the UK and the EU, and higher education will not be immune to its repercussions. Although the full extent of Brexit's effects on higher education is yet to be fully understood, there are some expectations and potential outcomes that can be anticipated. One of the key areas of impact is likely to be student mobility and recruitment. Changes in immigration policies and the end of freedom of movement between the UK and the EU have already resulted in a decline in the number of EU students enrolling in British universities. The loss of EU students not only affects the diversity of the student body but also has financial implications for institutions that relied on the tuition fees of these students.

Additionally, research collaboration and funding are areas that may be significantly affected. The UK has been a key partner in European research initiatives, and the loss of access to EU funding programs such as Horizon Europe has raised concerns about the future of collaborative research projects. UK-based researchers may face challenges in securing funding and maintaining partnerships with EU institutions, potentially impacting the competitiveness and innovation of the UK's higher education sector. Furthermore, the regulatory framework for higher education, including quality assurance and recognition of qualifications, may undergo changes as a result of Brexit. The UK and EU will need to establish new frameworks and agreements to ensure the continued recognition of degrees and qualifications, which could add administrative complexities for universities and students.

Brexit's impact on the financial landscape is another aspect that will affect higher education. Changes in the UK's relationship with the EU may have implications for research funding, student funding, and the overall economic stability of the sector. Institutions may need to adapt their financial strategies and explore new avenues for funding and collaboration. Overall, while the precise consequences of Brexit on higher education are yet to unfold fully, it is clear that the sector will experience significant shifts and challenges. Higher education institutions in the UK and the EU will need to navigate these changes, adapt their strategies, and seek opportunities to maintain international partnerships and collaborations amidst a changing landscape.

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