European and External Relations Committee

The EU referendum and its implications for Scotland

Written submission from the University and College Union

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK, representing over 110,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland.

Introduction

UCU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the European and External Relations Committee’s work on the implications for Scotland of the UK leaving the European Union (EU). UCU did not take a view on the referendum leaving it up to individual UCU members to decide how to vote.

EU citizens currently working in Scottish universities

With around 16% of staff in Scottish universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) EU citizens – the figure is even higher for research only positions at 23% - it is not surprising that one of the main areas UCU is concerned about is the right of those people, many of whom are our members, to continue to live and work in the country. Our concern is twofold – first for them as individuals and their ability to continue to live and work in the country they have chosen to, but also for the institution they work for which will suffer if the intellectual talent that has been drawn to Scotland is forced to leave.

We are aware of institutions in Scotland who are providing free immigration advice to staff and some outwith Scotland who are helping their staff financially with the cost of applying for UK citizenship. Clearly this isn’t the right answer for everyone - having to change something as intrinsically personal as your nationality to keep your job would be an uncomfortable situation for anyone to be placed in - and nor could there be any element of employers pressurising anyone to do so, but the fact that employers are considering offering it shows the scale of the problem.

We need clarity from the UK Government that EU citizens currently living and working in the UK, along with their families, will be able to continue to live and work here in future.

We also have very real concerns over future immigration policy and how this will affect EU citizens’ ability to contribute to the work of our universities in the future. Currently, non EU foreign nationals wishing to enter the country for work purposes need to have an offer of employment and for the offered salary to be over a threshold amount. If the UK leaves the EU and EU citizens are, for immigration purposes, treated in the same way then the arrangements around the threshold are important for the higher education sector.

The system currently recognises the comparatively low pay of the higher education sector for the level of qualification people working in it commonly have. The threshold for tier two visas with indefinite right to remain for non EU citizens who are
experienced workers is currently set at a minimum income of £35,000. Many highly qualified university staff with post graduate degrees and many years’ experience will not hit that benchmark. It is for that reason that the current UK immigration system contains an exemption from the threshold for defined PHD level occupations.

Immigration was a major aspect of the campaign in June with aspects of the tone of the debate being a matter of regret to UCU. If EU citizens in the event of the UK leaving the EU become subject to immigration rules then we believe that it is important that the exemption for PHD level occupations is retained for those working in higher education and that the clamor evident earlier in the summer around immigration doesn’t result in the exemption being withdrawn. Such a move would harm not only the individuals concerned, but also Scottish universities who will be able to draw on a smaller pool of talent. While immigration remains reserved we would look to the Scottish Government and the new minister for Scotland’s place in Europe, given his experience of higher education, to help put this point across to UK ministers.

Implications for research

Scotland has done well from EU research funding, largely through the competitiveness of our institutions and the excellence of the staff who work in them. Scottish HEIs received over €111 million through EU Horizon 2020 funding in the first 18 months of the programme up to mid-2015. This amounted to 1.5% of the total awarded and 10.5% of the UK total.

We are anecdotally aware of current research proposals being prepared where academics from Scottish institutions are under pressure for their name to be placed further down the list of institutions collaborating on the research so as to not harm the project’s chances of successfully attracting funding. This is a real and immediate effect of the 23 June vote.

The Horizon 2020 programme allows for countries other than EU member states to have associated country status. Norway, Iceland and 13 other countries currently have such status and in the event of the UK leaving the EU then it would be important for Scotland and the UK to seek and be awarded such status to Horizon 2020 and successor schemes. International collaboration is the lifeline of successful research and has proven part of what has made Scottish higher education institutions so successful in recent years. If we turn our backs, or are seen to have turned our backs on the international academic community then the results would be calamitous not only for the higher education sector but also our economy and society.

Implications for students

UCU warmly welcomed the early clarification from the Scottish Government about the funding status of the 2016/17 cohort of EU students studying in Scotland. We would join other sectoral interests including our universities in calling for the Scottish Government to make the same pledge for the 2017/18 entrees from the EU to Scottish universities. These students will be applying now (September 2016) to their institutions of choice and as the prospectuses they base their choices on can be regarded as contractual, any doubt on the status of them post Brexit, or their funding,
has profound implications for them as individuals, for the likelihood of them coming to Scottish institutions, and for the universities themselves. If we do see a reduction in the number of EU applicants in the absence of assurances on funding from the Scottish Government then, while a small number of institutions might make up any shortfall with other Scottish and UK students, there will be a shortfall elsewhere in the system. Such a shortfall will affect the sector and ultimately jobs and the reputation of our universities. Other EU countries will be also be looking at this issue when forming a view on the Scottish Government’s desire to maintain a close relationship with the EU. EU students enrich the culture of our campuses and add a huge amount to the learning experiences and connections of Scottish students.

Around 1,700 Scottish domiciled students currently take part in the popular Erasmus scheme to study in the EU annually and many EU students study in Scotland in return. There are huge benefits for them as individuals but also in the learning experience our universities offer all students including those who stay in Scotland but benefit from meeting and learning from students from different backgrounds to their own. Participation in the Erasmus scheme is not dependent on states being in the EU and we would ask that the UK government buys access to the scheme for UK students. If there are consequential costs for the Scottish Government to be part of this then this is something we would encourage the Scottish Government to undertake.