

SPICe Briefing

Brexit: Higher Education in Scotland

13 October 2016

16/79

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This briefing offers information and reflection on the implications for higher education institutions in Scotland of the recent EU referendum and the resulting vote to leave the European Union. It is one in a series that consider the implications for different policy areas of the UK leaving the European Union.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The outcome of the referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Union (EU), which took place on 23 June 2016, has implications for various aspects of higher education in Scotland.

Inward Student Mobility

EU nationals comprised eight per cent of the undergraduate student population at Scottish HEIs in academic year 2014-15.

EU nationals at Scottish HEIs taking a full time undergraduate programme are entitled to free tuition. Depending on exit negotiations, it may be that EU nationals will not in future be entitled to free tuition at Scottish HEIs. On the one hand, this would mean a significant financial gain for the Scottish Government. On the other hand, the removal of this arrangement could reduce significantly the number of EU nationals that choose to study in Scotland. This has implications for the cultural diversity of Scottish HEIs and for the Scottish economy, with Scotland losing the spending power of these students.

Erasmus

Over 1,600 students from Scottish HEIs took part in a study abroad opportunity through Erasmus in academic year 2014-15. Erasmus is an EU funded programme that offers students opportunities to study for a fixed period in another EU member state, with tuition fees and some living cost support provided. Advocates of the Erasmus programme highlight the opportunities it offers for enriching learning, enhancing employability and promoting greater understanding of different people and cultures

If, in the future, the UK was to become an EEA member, it is possible that access to Erasmus could be maintained.

Workforce mobility

EU membership brings with it free movement rights for workers. EU nationals represented almost 15 per cent of the academic staff at Scottish HEIs in academic year 2014-15. Depending on the outcome of exit negotiations, EU nationals may in future need visas to work in the UK.

Research funding

The current European Commission research programme, Horizon 2020, allocated almost €202 million of funding to HEIs and research institutes in Scotland by 27 July 2016.

Soon after the referendum result, anecdotal evidence started to emerge that UK academics were either being removed from Horizon 2020 funding bids or asked to step down from the lead role in such bids. The European Universities Association has stated publicly its support for continuing to work with the UK on research in future.

Depending on the outcome of exit negotiations, there is still potential to have access to EU research frameworks. However, without EU membership, the UK will no longer have any influence over way that research funding is allocated.

Structural Funds

Another important source of EU funding comes from European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). This funding is directed at priorities such as tackling youth unemployment, improving education and building business innovation.

Universities Scotland has highlighted its concern about the implications from loss of access to this funding.

Future Options

In the wake of the referendum, HEIs across the UK are pursuing, or being encouraged to pursue, a variety of policy options, including:

- Exploring opportunities for campus development within other EU member states as a means of maintaining student and staff and their links to / relationships with UK HEIs.
- Strengthening bilateral arrangements between the UK and HEIs in EU countries.
- Continuing the focus on attracting international students to study in the UK and also expanding delivery of UK higher education overseas.
- Develop a formal “Anglosphere” in which the UK builds on its current close working relationships with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- Maintaining and enhancing international research collaborations.
- Encouraging increased public investment in the UK research base.

Given that exit negotiations have not formally begun, it is not clear what the outcomes will be for the UK. It is, therefore, not possible to say for certain whether the policy options set out above could effectively replace the current ‘mixed economy’ offered through EU membership alongside other international collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU. This is one of a number of briefings examining the implications of this decision for Scotland.

For higher education, there are effects relating to:

- Free movement of students between EU member states
- Access to the Erasmus programme
- Free movement of EU nationals to work at Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs)
- Access to EU research funding
- Access to European structural funds.

Previous briefings have considered student inward and outward mobility as well as European research income received by Scottish HEIs (SPICe, 2015; SPICe, 2016). Here the focus is on the implications of the referendum result and the future options open to Scottish HEIs.

As negotiations have not as yet formally started, there is significant uncertainty about the UK's future relationship with the EU. As this briefing shows, this uncertainty is reflected in the discussions that are currently taking place.

INWARD STUDENT MOBILITY

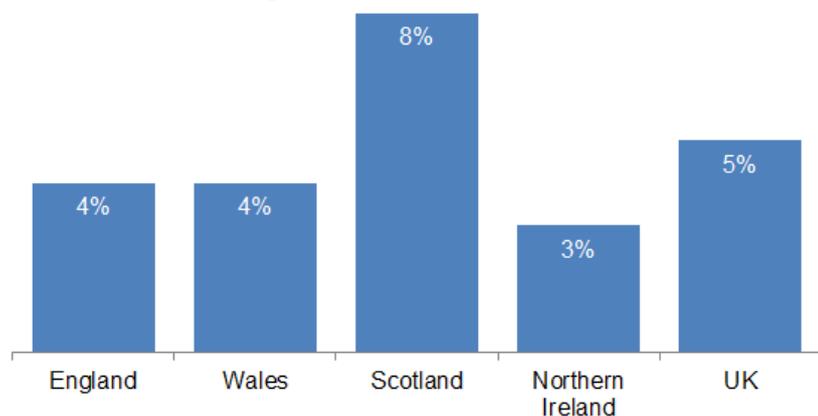
Under current EU Treaty agreements, the right of free movement for workers extends also to students. This means that EU nationals can live and study in another EU member state as a right of EU membership. In doing so, EU nationals studying at undergraduate level are entitled to the same tuition fee arrangements as apply to home nationals (Macpherson and McIver, 2014). In Scotland this means that EU nationals can study full time at undergraduate level without paying tuition fees (SPICe, 2015).

In academic year 2014-15, there were 13,312 EU nationals studying full time for a degree at a Scottish HEI (Macpherson, 2016). While there is no published estimate of the cost to the Scottish Government of teaching these students, our estimates would indicate a figure in the region of £93 million for 2014-15¹.

As Figure 1 shows, EU nationals make up a larger proportion of the undergraduate student population in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. Compared with an average of five per cent of the undergraduate population across the UK, EU nationals represent eight per cent of the undergraduates at Scottish HEIs, four per cent in both English and Welsh HEIs and three per cent at Northern Irish HEIs.

¹ If we assume a figure of approximately £7,000 per full time degree student and 13,312 EU nationals taking a full time degree, we arrive at a figure of just over £93 million.

Figure 1: Proportion of undergraduate students from EU countries (non UK) by location of HEI, academic year 2014-15



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency statistics (data held in SPICe)

The Scottish Government has offered a guarantee of financial support for EU nationals starting or continuing their degree programme at a Scottish HEI in academic year 2016-17 (Scottish Government, 2016a). To date, however, there has been no extension of that guarantee to those students that take up a place starting in academic year 2017-18.

On 11 October 2016, the UK government set out its support for new EU students taking up a place at an English HEI in 2017. This means that new EU entrants will be able to access student loans and grants for the duration of their course (Universities Scotland 2016c).

Universities Scotland has, however, pointed out that the UK government still needs to clarify the immigration status of EU nationals who start but do not complete their studies while the UK is in the process of exiting the EU (Universities Scotland 2016c). This has particular implications for students in Scotland. For example, if Article 50 is triggered in March 2017 and an EU student starts their studies in September 2017, the UK will have left the EU by the time that student enters third year of their studies. They may at that point have two or more years of study still to complete.

Universities Scotland has repeatedly called for guarantees for 2017 entrants to be put in place. When giving evidence at the European and External Relations Committee meeting on 28 July 2016 (Official Report, 2016a) and the Education and Skills Committee meeting on 7 September 2016 (Official Report, 2016b), officials pointed out that the absence of this guarantee has significant consequences for HEIs.

A particular issue arises from publication of academic prospectuses for 2017-18. Due to the long run-in time on applications for entry to higher education, HEIs had to publish prospectuses prior to the EU referendum taking place.² Following the result of the referendum, the commitment to offer free tuition to new entrants in 2017 has placed HEIs in a position of contractual and financial uncertainty.

² For example, applications to study music at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2017-18 closed on 3 October 2016. Places to study medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry close on 15 October 2016. And the final deadline for equal consideration to all university courses closes on 15 January 2017.

Implications

There are a number of issues for inward student inward mobility. At UK level, commentators (e.g. Miller, 2016; Hillman, 2016) have considered both the advantages and challenges that arise. For Scotland these include:

- Financial savings for the Scottish Government if full time degree students from EU countries are no longer eligible for free tuition when attending a Scottish HEI.
- Potential revenue income for Scottish HEIs from any tuition fee charges to EU nationals choosing to study for a degree at a Scottish HEI. The income generated for Scottish HEIs could be somewhere in the region of £58.5 million to £119.7 million per year.³
- Changes to tuition fee arrangements could reduce the number of EU nationals studying at Scottish HEIs; so offsetting any predicted revenue from tuition fee charges.⁴
- Any reduction in student numbers could have a detrimental effect on the social and cultural diversity of HEIs. There may also be economic costs with fewer EU students contributing to the Scottish economy.
- As EU nationals are not distributed evenly across courses and HEIs in Scotland, any reduction in number has risks for the future viability of specific courses.

ERASMUS

The Erasmus programme offers students enrolled in a programme of higher education the chance to pursue a fixed period of study at an HEI in another EU member state with tuition fees paid and some living cost support also available.

“Erasmus+” is the current programme offering opportunities to take part in education, training, youth and sport in other EU member states. This programme is for a seven year period, from 2014 to 2020. At European level it is funded by the European Commission, while the UK manages its involvement through the UK National Agency (a partnership between the British Council and Ecorys UK). (UK National Agency Erasmus+, 2016a).

While Erasmus+ is funded by the European Commission, the scheme is also open to non-EU countries: Norway; Iceland; Turkey; Liechtenstein; and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (UK National Agency Erasmus+, 2016b).

Over 1,600 students from Scottish HEIs went to study in another European country through the Erasmus programme in 2014-15. The number of students from Scottish HEIs taking part in Erasmus rose by 50 per cent in the seven years between academic years 2007-08 and 2014-15 (UK National Agency Erasmus+, 2016c). In written evidence to the European and External Relations Committee in July 2016, Colleges Scotland (2016) pointed out:

“The opportunity for student exchange within Europe enriches the learning experience, enhances employability and promotes greater understanding and respect of different people and cultures.”

³ The lower figure is based on an estimate of 6,500 degree level students from EU member states coming to study at a Scottish HEI, and the latter figure on 13,000 degree level students, with a charge of £9,000 per annum for tuition being applied. Tuition fee income could be higher where the UK was allowed to charge higher tuition fees to EU nationals (depending on the agreements arising from negotiations on this subject).

⁴ If the UK wishes to treat EU nationals differently to other non-UK nationals after exiting the EU, legislative measures will be needed. It may be that HEIs will have to charge the same fee level to students from any non-UK country (see Jones, 2016).

Implications

The future of Erasmus has been discussed in a number of quarters. For example:

- The House of Commons Library has pointed out that students who pursue a year abroad as part of their studies could lose out if Erasmus is no longer available.
- The National Union of Students has said that: “Erasmus has been extremely successful in creating academic, scientific and cultural exchanges across Europe”.

The benefits of Erasmus are recognised as both affecting those that take part and those who gain from the more diverse learning environment that emerges. In light of this, the NUS is calling for negotiations on exiting the UK to include consideration of how to ensure the UK maintains access to the Erasmus programme (Agerholm, 2016).

WORKFORCE MOBILITY

It is a fundamental right of EU membership that workers from EU member states are able to work in another EU member state without facing discrimination in employment, remuneration or other conditions of employment.

At Scottish HEIs, 11.1 per cent of staff⁵ in 2014-15 were EU nationals. Among academic staff⁶ the figure was 14.8 per cent (Universities Scotland, 2016).

Implications

Current arrangements allow EU students to remain in the UK to live and work once they graduate. This means Scotland at present gains from retention of skills workers who have settled here during their studies. In addition, HEIs gain from the skills and experience of those EU nationals who exercise their free movement rights to take up employment at Scottish HEIs.

Uncertainty for EU nationals working in the UK, not just those working in HEIs, is recognised as an issue since the referendum result (Holyrood, 2016). There is currently no clarity on whether EU nationals will need visas to work in the UK and, if so, what such a visa scheme would look like. This uncertainty could deter people from coming to work in the UK.

Many current EU staff at HEIs have registered concern about their future right to work in the UK. Within that group are people who have lived in the UK for many years and make up a “key and integral part of our university community” (Arthur, 2016).

A joint statement between the Scottish Government and Universities Scotland (2016) notes that any immigration policy that is developed as part of the exit arrangements should recognise the needs of the HE sector. This includes recognition of the importance of attracting the best talent from across the world to deliver high quality teaching and research at Scottish HEIs.

RESEARCH FUNDING

Scottish HEIs received £88.8 million of research funding from EU sources in 2014-15. This represented 13 per cent of the total research funding to Scottish HEI's. Most came from European Commission programmes (85%) with the remainder from European charities and business (Universities Scotland, 2016a).

⁵ This figure represents the full time equivalent number rather than the headcount.

⁶ Academic staff are those involved in both teaching and research activities.

The European research funding landscape is complex. For example, both the EU and individual European countries fund research and researchers collaborate with each other within Europe and internationally.

There are two major routes by which the EU directly funds research in the UK: Framework Programme funding; and structural funds. The UK is very successful in attracting Framework Programme funding, particularly that allocated for excellence. Far less funding comes through the structural funds due in to this being targeted at building capacity in the least economically developed regions of the EU (Royal Society, 2016).

The current framework programme, Horizon 2020, is managed by the European Commission. Horizon 2020 aims to allocate €76.4 billion for research and innovation across the UK in the period 2014 to 2020. Funding is mostly allocated competitively through calls for proposals. Criteria for allocating funding are varied, including scientific excellence, alignment with a number of strategic objectives (“grand challenges”), geographical and disciplinary diversity and potential for commercialisation.

Opportunities for funding are set out in biennial “work programmes” published by the European Commission. The proposals are judged on scientific excellence, how they will be delivered and the expected impact of the project. No geographical allocation or weighting is built into the distribution of Horizon 2020 funding (Miller, 2016; McIver and Wakefield, 2016).

Scottish organisations had been involved in successful funding bids to Horizon 2020, amounting to a total over €248 million by 27 July 2016. This represents 11.4 per cent of the total Horizon 2020 allocation to the UK to date. HEIs and research institutes have been the main beneficiaries, securing just over 81 per cent of this funding - €184 million going to HEIs and over €17.7 million to research institutes. In addition, almost €40 million has been awarded to businesses; almost €30 million of this going to small and medium enterprises (Scotland Europa, 2016).

Implications

A significant concern is whether, and in what capacity, the UK may be able to continue accessing EU research funding after exiting the EU. Various options have been put forward by Universities Scotland (2016b). One is for the UK to negotiate access to “Associated Country” status. Other non-EU countries (e.g. Norway and Iceland) have taken this route. It means the UK would financially contribute to the research framework (at a rate proportionate to GDP). In return HEIs and others could take part in collaborative bids for research funding. This would only be possible if the UK was a member of the European Free Trade Association.

While the specific terms of association open to Associate Countries differ between countries, what they have in common is that they are not involved in negotiations that shape how EU research funding is allocated (Universities Scotland, 2016b). This has potentially significant implications. It means that, even if the UK is able to buy-in to continue accessing future framework programmes, as a non-EU country the UK will not be in a position to influence the way that research programmes operate, including how funding is allocated.

Universities Scotland has highlighted that the UK has to date been influential in ensuring that “excellence” is a core criteria in the awarding of EU research funding. With other EU member states seeking a move toward funding based on geography / developmental needs, there is concern that the UK will in future lose access to much of this funding, even if it continues to put funding in to the programme (Holyrood, 2016).

There are also issues about the perceived place of the UK in the EU research community. Immediately after the vote, for example, anecdotal evidence started to emerge that UK academics were having their names removed from European research funding bids (Semple, 2016). There have also been stories of UK researchers being asked to step aside as Principal Investigators (PI) on bids for Horizon 2020 funding (Arthur, 2016). Losing PI status has implications not just for the reputation of the individual researcher and associated HEI, but also for funding for Scottish HEIs. It is typical for the PI on a collaborative research bid to hold a larger share of the funding as: (a) the total award will come to that HEI and then be passed on to the relevant partner(s) for the work that they do; and (b) “back office” costs are usually allocated by the PI, so funding for administration etc. will sit with the lead HEI.

A joint statement signed by leaders from universities in 25 European countries stresses the importance of continuing collaboration between European researchers. Within this, the European Research Association has stated:

“Given the strength of the UK’s research base, isolating the UK from European cooperation structures would not just have negative consequences for the UK, it would also undermine the profile and impact of European research more widely. It is through working together within a united, European knowledge community that universities can achieve the best outcomes and tackle the big challenges.” (Universities UK, 2016a)

To date, the UK Government has committed to underwrite any funding already awarded through Horizon 2020. This means that funding will be available to complete all existing structural and investment fund projects the UK is involved in. Universities Scotland has called for the UK government to go further, by investing in continued access to Horizon 2020 on the same terms as at present until the end of the current funding period (2020) (Universities Scotland, 2016a).

STRUCTURAL FUNDS

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) provide EU member states with financial assistance to deliver the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2016), focusing on the following priorities:

- **Smart:** developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation.
- **Sustainable:** promoting a resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy.
- **Inclusive:** fostering a high employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

The Scottish Government has identified its own priorities under these themes, including:

- reducing poverty and social exclusion
- boosting educational attainment and skills development
- growing employment levels, economic activity and innovation
- climate change/renewable energy (Scottish Government, 2016a).

The Scottish Government’s 2014-2020 ESIF programme includes a “strategic intervention” focused on business innovation. There are three lead partners in this work: Scottish Enterprise; Highlands and Island Enterprise; and the Scottish Funding Council. One of the strategic aims of this work is to promote “business investment in research and innovation, developing links and synergy between enterprises, research and development centres and Scotland’s higher education sector.” (Scottish Government, 2016b). The activity to achieve this strategic aim involves a significant role for HEIs.

An investment of £31 million has been secured from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to support Scottish businesses to develop new products and services and collaborate with Scottish HEIs (Scottish Government, 2016c).

Scottish HEIs currently receive around £5.5 million a year from ERDF and around £1 million from European Social Funds (ESF)⁷. Much of this funding delivers activities that build on and embed the infrastructure to support closer engagement with the business community and increase commercialisation of university research, as well as making a significant contribution to regeneration projects in Scotland.

Examples of “innovation focused” projects funded through ERDF include:

- University of Edinburgh’s Scottish Centre for Regenerative Medicine, which received over £5 million of funding.
- University of Strathclyde’s Technology Innovation Centre, which received a contribution of over £6.5 million towards a total investment of £90 million. This Innovation Centre and the surrounding International Technology and Renewable Energy Zone are expected to generate 700 new jobs and attract millions of pounds of inward investment to Glasgow.

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) has been a major recipient of ESF funds due to its capacity to deliver one of the ESIF core objectives: addressing regional and social disparity within the region. ESF funds represent 35 per cent of UHI’s external income. Leaving the EU means potentially losing access to £19 million of ESF funding, which is being used at present for university places, student support and curriculum development to meet regional skills needs.

Implications

ESIF is an important source of funding that can enable Scottish HEIs to participate in activity focused on business innovation and investment in skills.

It is not just HEIs that gain from this funding; colleges also receive significant funds. For example, both ERDF and ESF funding is used by colleges to pursue activity focused on developing skills for learning and employability (Scottish Government, 2016b).

Uncertainty as to future access to this funding stream has implications for sustaining some or all of these activities once the UK leaves the EU.

FUTURE OPTIONS

At the moment, given uncertainties over the UK’s future relationship with the EU, the implications for Scottish HEIs remain unclear.

On the one hand, if a “soft Brexit” is pursued, the UK could continue to access many of the same rights of EU membership as at present (e.g. free movement of workers and students). This could mean the UK remains relatively attractive to students and staff from other EU member states.

On the other hand, if a “hard-Brexit” is pursued, there may be far more significant challenges for HEIs. This could include limited, if any, rights of free movement for students (MacKay, 2016).

The First Minister has outlined her concern to ensure that there are Scotland level negotiations on areas such as Horizon 2020 funding and access to the Erasmus programme (Sturgeon,

⁷ ERDF and ESF are individual funding streams under the umbrella of [European Structural and Investment Funding](#)

2016). However, until there is greater clarity as to what direction negotiations take, both at UK and Scotland level, the implications for Scottish HEIs remain unclear.

One practical response being considered by a number of UK HEIs at present is expanding campus presence to EU countries (outside the UK). To date, the Republic of Ireland, Finland and the Baltic states have emerged as preferred options, although ties with HEIs in Germany that already exist are also being considered for expansion.

For UK based HEIs, there are various advantages of establishing a presence within EU member states. For example, it can allow continued links and partnerships with HEIs in EU member states. It can also spread the risk for UK HEIs in the event that the negotiations on exiting the EU offer limited opportunities for student mobility or for research collaborations leading to access to EU research funding. Just as importantly, these 'outposts' could offer a way to retain and continue to attract staff who wish or need to work within an EU member state (Adams, 2016).

Formal options for the UK include joining the EEA ("the Norway model"). Under this scenario, the UK's economic relationship with the EU does not change significantly i.e. the UK would continue to contribute to the European budget and free movement of labour would continue. For HEIs, the Norway model means potentially maintaining access to the Erasmus and Horizon 2020 programmes and free movement rights for workers across Europe. It may also offer the opportunity for free movement of students, although this is not guaranteed.

Internationalisation

Looking beyond the EU there is also a significant role for HEIs at an international level. As part of the global reach of HEIs, there is significant work pursued by HEIs to attract talent from across the world to study and work at Scottish HEIs. The messages that Universities Scotland promote to this end focus on three issues:

- Scotland as a welcoming place work and live.
- The international reputation of Scottish HEIs in terms of research and teaching.
- The high profile of a number of scholars who have graduated from Scottish HEIs.

(Connected Scotland, 2014)

The loss of the previous post-study work visa scheme that operated first in Scotland between 2005 and 2008 and then across the UK between 2008 and 2012 united a number of stakeholders, including the Scottish Government, Universities Scotland and the National Union of Students in a call to reintroduce a post-study work visa scheme in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2016d).

The referendum has led to a renewed focus on the global reach of UK / Scottish HEIs. At UK level, Universities UK (UUK) is publicly promoting a view that HEIs, in responding to the EU referendum, should be focusing not just on negotiations over future links with the European Commission, but on how the sector positions itself on the international stage.

In an article in Times Higher Education, a senior official at UUK stated that "the sector should not 'put all our eggs in one basket until we are absolutely clear what the pros and cons of different models are'". Rather, HEIs should set a "vision with global ambition". Formal relationships with the European Commission may, or may not, be part of this (Morgan, 2016).

In line with this focus, Universities UK is calling on the UK government to take steps to support the sector to drive forward the following priorities:

- Maintaining and enhancing international research collaborations.
- Ensuring the UK is "an attractive destination for talent".

- Increasing public investment in the UK research base.
- Supporting UK students and staff to access “vital global opportunities”. (Universities UK, 2016)

On a similar theme, Corbett (2016) considers four proposals for how the UK HE sector could respond to the current uncertainty regarding the UK's future relationship with the EU:

- Continuing the focus on attracting international students to study in the UK / Scotland.
- Expanding delivery of UK higher education overseas.
- Strengthening bilateral arrangements between the UK and HEIs in EU countries. Joint working between the UK and Germany is a current example.
- Developing a formal “Anglosphere” in which the UK builds on its current close working relationships with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Corbett (2016) suggests that internationalisation can offer the UK new opportunities. However, it can also bring threats. He points out that there is no evidence at present that the UK government understands the importance of “the cultural and intellectual links that have been forged through European integration.”

Corbett (2016) notes that HEIs are currently expending energy maintaining and building on international opportunities. However, the UK government could potentially take a hard line on international issues (e.g. focusing on ‘taking back control’ / limiting immigration). The results of this might be significant damage to the relationship UK HEIs have with universities and research centres across the globe.

CONCLUSIONS

At present it is not clear whether the measures being proposed to address the potential changes affecting Scottish HEIs could successfully replace the current ‘mixed economy’ of EU and wider international links.

Leaving the EU does not necessarily mean that Scottish HEIs will no longer have access to the Erasmus programme, EU research frameworks or relevant free movement rights.

Until negotiations have taken place between the UK government and the EU, we do not know what the future settlement will be for Scottish HEIs.

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Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH 99 1SP

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