CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS INQUIRY
SUBMISSION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

Background

Although the University of the Highlands and Islands is Scotland’s newest university, its engagement with other universities and organisations across the world is extensive and is of great value to students and staff. Some links can be traced back over many decades through various UHI Academic Partners; they have helped to shape the very model of the institution, as outward-looking and open to collaboration beyond our own borders. We are, therefore, analysing very closely the potential impacts of Brexit on such engagement and planning for a different context post-Brexit – however, our commitment to working with European and international partners remains as strong as it has ever been.

We are, therefore, grateful for the opportunity to participate in this consultation. The following are some comments and observations in that context. These are, of course, general in nature, given the continuing lack of clarity on some aspects of engagement post-Brexit.

Engaging with the European Union

If anything, Brexit places an even greater imperative on Scottish organisations to maintain a high profile and nurture our engagement with the EU. Post-Brexit, we will no longer have the same engagement or influence as an automatic right, as part of a member state, therefore it is important to use every opportunity to emphasise that Scottish organisations remain enthusiastic and willing to collaborate with EU partners and institutions where possible.

However, we need to be realistic about the risks posed by Brexit and recognise that making the case for Scottish involvement will become more challenging. There is a need to focus our attention on key priorities and take a more collaborative approach, sharing information and resources to a greater extent, so that opportunities are not missed.

The work in these areas facilitated by Scotland Europa has been extremely helpful, encouraging a partnership approach to the challenges ahead – this should be continued.

In terms of best practice, we have worked closely with Norwegian institutions, particularly universities and local government and through the INTERREG Northern Periphery and Arctic programme. Despite not being from a member state – or perhaps because of this – Norwegian colleagues are invariably at the forefront of programme and project development, promoting collaboration and engagement. We receive frequent visits from Norwegian delegations – often comprising representatives from a range of different sectors and interests,
but working collectively to promote their regional priorities and develop common areas of interest.

At project level, our experience of working with Norwegian partners is that they tend to be reliable and take a positive, collaborative approach to consortia, committed to working with project partners to achieve positive outcomes for all.

There are good lessons for Scottish partners from the pro-active approach taken by our Norwegian neighbours.

Scotland House has developed an excellent profile in Brussels over the past 27 years and has provided a good template for more recent Innovation and Investment Hubs. Their immediate focus going forward must be to continue to raise awareness of Scottish organisations and reassure existing/new contacts that we are ‘still open for business’.

To achieve maximum benefit from all of these Hubs, there needs to be close alignment between Scottish Government policy priorities and relevant local opportunities, with the Hubs supporting links and participation at local level. This will be challenging over coming months as we approach 31 October and (possibly) some clarity around a deal or no-deal situation – and throughout further negotiations in any subsequent transition period. Of primary importance at this time is effective communication, so that key stakeholders are able to feed in and react to emerging policy and funding implications.

The success of the Hub offices is difficult to quantify or measure, given that a large part will involve initial, preparatory work – making introductions, show-casing good practice and examples from Scotland, etc. However, some form of measurement is essential, so that any impact from specific initiatives (eg trade fairs) can be monitored and evaluated – and resources directed in accordance with demonstrable signs of beneficial impact. For the higher education sector, this might be the number of exchange visits of students/staff, collaborative projects or joint publications. Taken alongside descriptive text on the ‘softer’ elements, such data could be of great assistance in planning longer-term priorities.

Scottish Development International, VisitScotland and other organisations have a key role to play in the work of Hub offices – the list will very according to local situations. At this time, communication is key, to ensure that Hub staff are aware of, and able to support, concrete development opportunities to reinforce the message that Scotland remains ‘open for business’.

**Engagement with the rest of the world**

Wider international engagement is also affected by post-Brexit uncertainties, so there is again an imperative to be flexible and able to react to the evolving change in status.

This would suggest prioritisation for activities supporting/protecting economic growth – however this may be achieved best by working through ‘soft power’, reflecting the need to
reassure international organisations of Scotland’s continued commitment to the wider global stage.

The development of Scotland’s Arctic Policy Framework is a good example of this, which UHI has been able to reinforce through our work with the University of the Arctic network. This has given us the opportunity to collaborate with a wide range of higher education institutions in both EU and non EU countries. These academic links can provide an important starting point for wider economic collaboration – so again, the development of shared, integrated priorities will ensure greater added value.

It is useful to have indicative priorities for international engagement as an agreed starting point, aligned with the Scottish Government’s International Development Policy. However, there is again a need to be flexible, adapting to both individual geographic locations/markets and the emerging policy context post-Brexit.

As more detail becomes available, the key aims of the international offices should, again, be to nurture relationships, reassuring organisations that Scotland remains a willing and enthusiastic partner. Any opportunities for early outcomes (eg potential new trade partners) will need to be followed through quickly to demonstrate such commitment in practice.

Recruitment of international students to Scottish universities and colleges should also be part of this discussion. The full impact of Brexit on EU and wider recruitment is yet to be seen, but this has potential for increased engagement with the Hubs and international offices, as well as financial implications.

A re-focus of aims may be required in future – but as yet we do not know what the longer-term holds post-Brexit, so there is a need to monitor and evaluate, based on available evidence and intelligence-gathering from staff in the international offices and their contacts.

Effective evaluation of international engagement is, therefore, a key part of this exercise, as outlined in the section above.

Also in effective engagement, the same points apply to future relations on the wider global stage as those indicated above.

A further example of this is RETI - Réseau d’Excellence de Territoires Insulaires, a global network of island universities. The University of the Highlands and Islands is currently working with various RETI members on such issues as the impact of micro plastics on island communities and the environment, sharing relevant Scottish activities and policy with the wider group, informing wider collective action. In undertaking such engagement at strategic level, it would be beneficial to align with other Scottish organisations, facilitated by the Scottish Government’s international offices on a two-way basis – receiving advice and intelligence from these offices and keeping them informed of our activities. This has proved successful for recent work with Canadian members of RETI through the office in Toronto and could be developed further in future.