

This summer we have witnessed the birth of the “European university”. In June, the European Commission [announced](#) the 17 successful bids for this status from consortia of institutions across the continent.

Given that UK universities are among the best in the world, you would have expected them to be heavily involved. In fact, only three of the 114 participants are British: the universities of Essex, Edinburgh and Warwick. By comparison, the networks include 16 French universities, 14 from Germany and 10 from Spain.

It is not clear why so few UK universities applied to take part in an initiative that the commission calls “a game changer”, and which it will fund with an initial €85 million over three years. My gut feeling is that it has a lot to do with Brexit. UK universities feared being turned away from an EU initiative. Or maybe they are already turning away from Europe, focusing on looking further afield for students and research collaborations.

However, the UK’s under-representation is very worrying – not just for British higher education. A pan-European university eco-system is an essential part of Europe’s prosperity and stability: that is why so many university leaders across the EU want to keep the UK close.

My fear is that if the benefits of maintaining a joint European Higher Education area are recognised too late in the negotiations, there will be a hiatus in collaboration with the UK, during which things fall apart. A decline in the UK’s accessibility for European students (and vice-versa) would risk losing the critical mass of young people and faculty that represent the same spirit and culture, based on our common traditions. Certainly, every seat in UK lecture halls could be filled with students from other continents, but this would risk losing their European core. And it’s very hard, once something has been run into the ground, to build it back up again.

So we need to take things into our own hands. Maastricht has always been one of Europe’s most international universities, but now we are making an even bigger effort by structurally intensifying our links with partner universities in the UK. We are chairing a European University network, Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Association, that includes Essex, as well as universities in Rome, Madrid and Antwerp, among other places. We have also extended our links with the University of York, which will allow both institutions to consider how best to strengthen research ties post-Brexit. We will be collaborating in joint research projects, executive education and student exchanges.

Of course, we don't know what form the Brexit agreements (if any) will take. But waiting to find out could be disastrous. While ministers and parliament are worrying about ferries and borders, UK universities should act proactively, finding partners and drawing up agreements.

Moreover, universities across the continent must fight to keep higher education high on the Brexit agenda, in both London and Brussels. Critically, there need to be short-term solutions to tide us through the transition period, when university funding and partnerships will be at their most vulnerable; I would expect that to last at least two or three years.

If there is a hard Brexit, the EU could stop funding UK universities and push them out of the Erasmus+ student mobility scheme. We, therefore, need interim arrangements for maintaining existing contracts and collaborations.

It is perfectly possible for non-EU countries to arrange to participate in EU research programmes, but, at the end of the day, it means paying money into a common pot. We could end up in a situation where the EU will not fund collaborations in research and education if the UK refuses to pay its "divorce" bill, or decides not to contribute to a European university ecosystem.

But I simply can't envisage a strong European higher education landscape without the UK. This is why European universities must work together to take the future into our own hands. Whatever happens in the Brexit negotiations, we must not let the UK set sail away from Europe with its universities on board.

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