

# Brexit watch: UK researchers scramble to save science

Uncertainty reigns as the UK struggles with how to sever its relationship with the EU.

Richard Van Noorden

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Chris Radburn/PA Wire

The fate of UK and EU research collaborations remains unresolved.

Scientists usually look down on anecdotal evidence — but for the past month, **alarmed UK researchers** have been grabbing at every anecdote they can find.

The reason: an urgent need to emphasize to politicians that UK science is already being damaged by Brexit, the country's decision to leave the European Union. Because of **uncertainty about the future**, research leaders say, UK institutions that rely on EU funding are already seeing their staff dropped or demoted from planned collaborative EU grant applications, and top talent could already be leaving Britain.

"It's a bit soon to tell whether this is really significant. The stories we are getting are in the tens, not in the hundreds or thousands," Philip Nelson, chief executive of the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), told a House of Lords inquiry into the effects of Brexit on science on 19 July. "The extent to which this is a kneejerk reaction to the referendum is really hard to tell."

Individual anecdotes of Brexit's concrete impacts are emerging. Tom Dowling, a British geologist who returned to the United Kingdom in March after gaining his PhD at Lund University in Sweden, told *Nature* that he has just scrapped his application for a European research grant. He and his supervisor at Cambridge University felt that potential post-Brexit bias against British scientists meant that it "wasn't worth continuing". Dowling adds that he is now considering leaving the country and taking European citizenship.

And Chris Husbands, vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, told a House of Commons inquiry that his institution's academics had been asked to withdraw from three collaborative projects funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, "due to the perceived risk of having a UK partner on the project". Other consortia have asked that the university no longer be a coordinator in collaborations, he said. The UK science minister Jo Johnson, has set up a specific e-mail address ([research@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:research@bis.gsi.gov.uk)) to receive more such examples.



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Still, five UK universities told *Nature* that they haven't yet heard firm examples of negative fallout from Brexit. And spokespeople for two organizations that are collating dossiers for Johnson's inbox — Universities UK, which represents British higher-education institutions, and the Institute of Physics — both told *Nature* on 20 July that despite concerns, they haven't yet seen evidence that Brexit is having a widespread impact.

Research leaders say that waiting a few months for stronger evidence — such as quantitative proof of a drop in UK–EU collaborations, or an exodus of non-British EU academics (who make up 15% of UK university staff) — could be too late. “If we do not raise these real concerns now, by the time we have hard data, the damage may have already been done,” says a spokesperson for the Royal Society.

### Guarantee wanted

Demands are growing for politicians to do something to reassure scientists. On 19 July, seven national academies, including the Royal Society, urged the government to make a “bold public commitment” that the United Kingdom wants to retain and build on its research base, “to assuage any loss of confidence in UK research”. They say it is “vital” that non-British EU academics be given assurances that they will be able to continue to live and work in the country, and that Britain reassures its EU partners of its commitment to current and future research.

The head of the Royal Society, Nobel laureate Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, has called for the government to underwrite grants given to British scientists in multinational EU projects, to prevent EU collaborators worrying about any future loss of funding. And some researchers hope that the government could guarantee to protect UK research from any financial losses from Brexit, by redirecting some of the money that would have been paid to the EU. When science minister Johnson was asked whether he could promise security for science funding at a 19 July debate on higher-education legislation, he avoided answering the question.

But it is politically very unlikely that government ministers can make solid assurances right now, says Sarah Main, director of the London-based Campaign for Science and Engineering. Because Brexit negotiations haven't started — and because constraints on freedom of movement were a crucial factor in favour of the Brexit vote — no one can guarantee that the United Kingdom will be able to easily hire EU scientists, access EU research funding or play a full part in projects with EU partners in years to come.

Main says that, for now, she'd just like to hear from [the new UK government](#) that science is of core importance to its plans for economic growth. “We've moved from a political environment where that sort of thing was said quite regularly, to a point where we don't really know,” she says.

### Science on the agenda

Whatever happens, UK scientists want to make sure that their interests are heard when it comes to the Brexit negotiations with the EU. An [online petition](#) that calls for any Brexit deal to preserve UK access to EU collaborative research and development programmes has attracted more than 15,000 signatures in the ten days since it was launched. “We want to make sure that science doesn't get forgotten,” says the petition's co-founder David Robinson, a metrology specialist who runs Psi-tran, a research consultancy in Surrey, UK.

And more than 1,600 scientists — most of them early-career researchers at UK universities — wrote in a letter to *The Times* on 22 July that the government should protect scientists by acting to maintain access to EU funding and ensure the free movement of researchers. “If these are lost during EU renegotiations, we insist that the government puts equivalent UK-backed schemes in place,” the authors say.

For now, it's important for scientists to remember that the United Kingdom remains a full member of the EU, emphasizes Gill Wells, who heads a team dealing with queries about European funding at the University of Oxford. She says that there is some panicking. But she has sought and received assurances from the European Commission that there will be no bias against UK applicants for European Research Council grants. And she cautions against making too much noise about the impacts of Brexit on job recruitment. “The more awareness [there is] that people don't come, the more people won't come.”

But for non-British scientists pondering UK job applications, the uncertainty must be having an effect, says Philippe Froguel, a French geneticist at Imperial College London. “It is not a good time to go to the UK to do science,” he says. “Nobody in our field knows anything about the future, but everyone imagines the worst: fewer PhD students and academic recruits from Europe, and no access to



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EU funding, which means a loss of UK leadership in many fields of medical research. Many non-UK nationals like me are thinking of either taking a UK passport or leaving. A big mess indeed.”

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