

E-mails show how UK physicists were dumped over Brexit

Researchers dropped from EU grant proposal because UK inclusion would ‘compromise’ project.

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05 August 2016

UK researchers are [suffering because of the country’s vote to leave the European Union](#) — and a British physicist has now gone public with one such tale of woe.

Paul Crowther, who heads the physics and astronomy department at the University of Sheffield, has shared e-mails from late July that explain why researchers in his department were suddenly dropped from an EU collaboration. The European coordinator for the consortium felt that Brexit put UK-based researchers in a “very awkward position” and that their participation would “compromise the project”.

Crowther says that he wants the e-mails to be read because researchers need to circulate such stories widely, given that many reports of the effects of Brexit have been based on hearsay and rumour. He has stripped the e-mails of identifying details and made them public with the approval of all involved, sharing them with both *Nature’s* news team and the London-based Institute of Physics, which is collecting stories of Brexit’s effects on science to send to the UK government.



Nature special: Brexit and science

On 21 July, the coordinator for the EU consortium e-mailed Crowther’s colleague to say that his UK team would be dropped from the project. (Neither individual wants to be named.)

“I regret to inform you that in the end we decided to not include your group in the consortium. The main reason of this decision concerns the Brexit and all the incertitude it brings. It may seem a decision very drastic (at least this is my feeling), but this is the outcome of the discussions I had with [redacted] and [redacted] (my group leader here in [redacted]). We finally decided to ‘remove’ the problem at the base.

Anyway, I really hope that this is not a ‘goodbye’ but a ‘see you soon’. As soon as the rules will be clear (hopefully asap) we will have again occasions to work together, eventually on this subject of [redacted] ... Of course I know very well the value of your work and more generally of the research group you work in. It is my interest to work with people like you. I hope in the future, to come back with better news.”

The consortium is an Innovative Training Network (ITN), a type of multinational project to assist research into a particular field, with costs that often run into hundreds of thousands of euros. The networks are paid for under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, a €6.2-billion (US\$6.9-billion) slice of the European Commission’s €74.8-billion Horizon 2020 funding programme.

Crowther, who saw the e-mail because he was organizing his department’s response to a House of Commons inquiry into the effects of Brexit on science, asked for more information about the exclusion. The ITN coordinator told him that before the Brexit vote, the UK team had been part of a preliminary agreement.

“The Brexit vote put the UK-based researches in a very awkward position. I have been thinking a lot and talking with many people, either related or not to the ITN. Unfortunately, the general consensus was that it is preferable to exclude the UK members. The main argument is a sort of ‘precaution principle’: provided the confusion, incertitude and lack of information about the rules for the EU projects (will they change? if yes, how?) the easiest solution was removing the problem at its root, which meant excluding the UK members from the ITN network.

It is a drastic solution and it may seem extreme. Nevertheless, as a (virtual) coordinator it is my duty to maximise the chances of obtaining the grant. Any possible weakness of the consortium must be avoided and, despite the excellent scientific contribution from the Sheffield group, I feel that their participation after the Brexit vote, would compromise the project.”



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In a [blogpost](#) on the Institute of Physics website, Crowther contrasts this attitude with the words of Carlos Moedas, the EU research commissioner, who told an audience at the EuroScience Open Forum in Manchester, UK, last week that Horizon 2020 projects would continue to be evaluated on the basis of merit, not nationality.

“I urge the European scientific community to continue to choose their project partners on the basis of excellence,” Moedas said.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.20380