

Brexit by the numbers: the fear of brain drain

Evidence to parliamentary inquiry puts some figures on the uncertainty hanging over EU university staff.

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Jane Barlow/Reuters

Barred from research? UK chancellor Philip Hammond helps set policies that could determine whether EU nationals in the UK can still work there after Brexit.

British universities fear losing large swathes of their research staff as the country faces up to Brexit, the split with the European Union. More than 31,000 academics at UK universities are non-British EU citizens, and so may lose their rights to live in the United Kingdom after Brexit.

Last week, a UK parliamentary committee [published evidence](#) from British institutions and funding agencies on the problem, as part of its inquiry into the effects of Brexit on the UK higher education system. It is "crucial that the long-term position of non-UK EU nationals is clarified as soon as possible", said Research Councils UK, the umbrella body for the country's seven main grants-funding agencies, in its written statement.

Unless the government guarantees EU national academic staff the right to remain, it may not be easy for them to stay. Many have not lived in the United Kingdom long enough to be classified as permanent residents under current rules, and a large fraction do not earn enough on academic salaries to stay by gaining a 'skilled worker' visa. *Nature* runs through the numbers to illustrate the scale of the problem.

Science shock

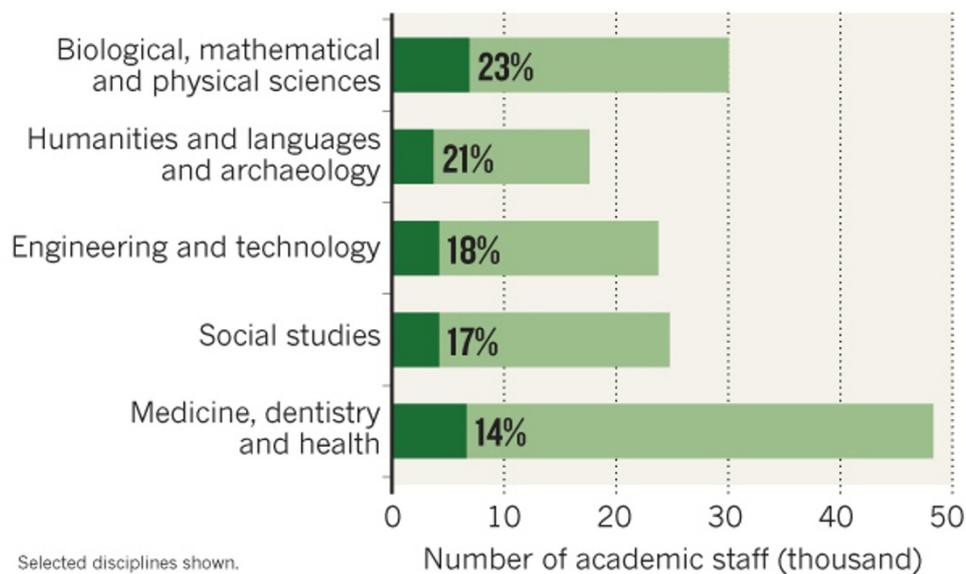
On average, some 16% of university researchers are from non-UK EU states. If these EU nationals were to leave, basic science research would be hit harder than other disciplines. Statistics sent to the parliamentary inquiry by the UK Department for Education show that 23% of academic staff in biology, mathematics and physics are EU nationals.

BREXIT RISKS

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Non-UK EU staff make up around 16% of academics at UK universities — but the proportion is higher in the sciences.

■ EU nationals ■ UK and other nationalities



Source: HESA

Status anxiety

EU citizens gain permanent residency rights in the United Kingdom if they have lived there for five years. In the past year, the number of EU nationals applying for cards to prove their residency rights has tripled, according to media reports. But many academics have not lived in the United Kingdom long enough to qualify for permanent residency. At Imperial College London, for example, only 30% of non-UK EU staff are currently eligible to apply for the cards.

The university told the House of Commons inquiry committee that it has had “a few examples of scholars choosing not to join Imperial citing the referendum result as a factor”.

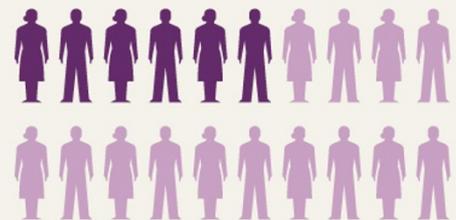
Salary woes

Another route for people to remain in the United Kingdom is to obtain a visa: the ‘Tier 2’ visa designated for skilled workers. But the Russell Group — a set of 24 leading research universities — says that 5,880 EU staff, or around 26% of those institutions’ total workforce, earn less than £30,000 (US\$38,000). That salary will be the cut-off for a Tier 2 visa from April 2017.

And if non-UK staff do need skilled-worker visas, they’ll have to find more money to pay for the cost of obtaining a visa. The University of Cambridge told the inquiry that visa costs for its non-UK EU staff would amount to some £1.25 million per year.

RIGHT TO REMAIN

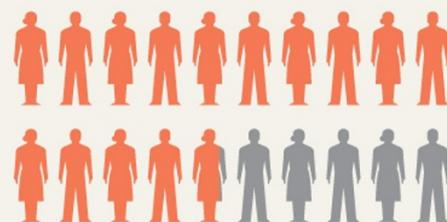
At Imperial College London, only 30% of non-UK EU staff have lived in Britain long enough to be classified as permanent residents under current rules.



Total: 2,063 non-UK EU staff.

VISA BARRIERS

Around 26% of the EU staff at leading research universities earn less than £30,000, which from April 2017 will be the salary cut-off for applying for a ‘skilled worker’ visa in Britain.



Total: 22,600 non-UK EU staff at ‘Russell Group’ universities.

The Scottish quarter

24.8%



PROPORTION OF SCOTTISH
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH-ONLY
STAFF FROM THE EU

Scotland could be particularly at risk from staff problems. Its universities employ 4,595 EU nationals, who make up 17% of academic staff, and an even higher proportion (almost 25%) of research-only staff, according to Universities Scotland.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.21142

Corrections

Corrected:An earlier version of this story discussed EU citizens seeking permanent residency, where it should have referred to their seeking proof of this status. The story has been updated.