# The State of Higher Education

## Post-Lockdown and Post-Brexit

**GovNet**

EVENTS

**The state of UK higher education (HE) is being affected by the dual issues of the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertainty surrounding the Brexit outcome. In our guide, we've compiled the information which will explore the current state of HE, how it's dealing with these issues and what you can do to help your institution prepare for the future.**

# The State of HE: COVID 19 and Brexit

The UK has some of the best higher education institutions in the world. Universities here attract thousands of global students. The UK Council For International Student Affairs found that between 2017 and 2018, 458,490 foreign students were studying at UK institutions. Of that number, 142,715 were non-UK EU students.

On top of that, almost 50,000 EU nationals work in universities around the UK. The nature of HE precludes the ability to staff positions with a fully homegrown workforce, due to the high need for specialists in niche fields.

However, a mixture of the two problems (most notable the coronavirus restrictions at the time of writing) are causing financial issues for both state and private education. Universities UK, the representative group for the UK's HE institutions, said on the subject:

> Some universities will face financial failure, with severe impacts on their students, staff, local community and [the] regional economy" without 'proactive support' from [the] government.

Universities UK has stated the sector is facing losses that could amount up to £790 million, usually generated by accommodation, catering and conferencing. There will also be the impact of the 100% fall in international students which amounts to a loss of £6.9 billion in income for HE providers.

This is a critical time in HE and is currently looking to the UK government for support. Alistair Jarvis, the Chief Executive of Universities UK, said support will "help to protect the student interest, to maintain research capacity, to prevent institutions failing and maintain the capacity to play a central role in the recovery of the economy and communities following the crisis."

Let's explore some of the challenges HE institutions are currently feeling.

# HE and COVID-19

Universities have been hit hard by the COVID-19 outbreak. Many are finding it challenging to maintain consistency within educational delivery and create high student recruitment numbers.

COVID-19 has completely changed the nature of HE delivery, resulting in challenges surrounding:

- Maintaining safety for students and staff with minimal impact on normal operations.

- Staying up to date with current information and guidance.

- Moving from traditional teaching methods to e-learning, as well as overcoming the issues associated with that move.

- Reallocation of funding affected by fewer student recruits.

- How to successfully enforce social distancing in student environments.

The global pandemic has completely shaken the HE industry. Also, universities are independent entities so don't have to follow specific government rules that would affect primary or secondary schools. For example, universities aren't following the trend of opening schools in June, but are rather making their own roadmaps to follow.

## University Entrance

University entrance is very likely to be affected. For example, A-level exams aren't taking place in 2020. Instead, teacher evaluation, coursework, participation and previous results will judge student performances.

At this point, it's difficult to say whether this represents an accurate portrayal of student ability and performance. However, universities will likely lower the required grades for courses, due to the loss of international student applications and fees.

What's important to note is teacher evaluation is critical for some students who may be 'mismatched' with universities, which particularly affects lower-income students and can harm social mobility.

A possible solution universities could provide is creating their own admissions tests. Alternatively, it's also possible to enhance the importance of previously assessed results, such as GCSEs to create a more comprehensive view of student performance.

## Online Learning and Assessments

The impact of COVID-19 puts students in an awkward position. While it's perfectly possible to get rid of exams, some students could have been relying on them to improve their average results. Postponing exams would also create uncertainty around assessment timing and affect students who would find themselves going back to studies they had to stop in the previous year.

Online learning and assessments present a potential solution. However, this poses issues - namely access to resources and lack of designated study areas (such as libraries). Similarly, students from lower-income bands may experience issues with technology and could be unable to access online learning if anything were to happen to the devices they owned. This makes digital accessibility a huge focus for universities wanting to create online learning options.

To make the online assessment portion of COVID-19 response fairer, universities can consider the following:

• Increasing the time allowed to complete exams.

• Creating many possible submission avenues.

• Ensuring research and revision resources are made widely available and easily accessible.

# Implications of Brexit for HE

The decision to leave the EU was met with dismay from HE circles, as there was much uncertainty surrounding the outcomes of each Brexit case, be it hard, soft or no-deal. It's largely possible there will be a very noticeable decline in EU students studying in the UK post-Brexit. Similarly, the amount of EU nationals employed by HE providers will fall.

If Brexit were still to include access to Horizon and Erasmus+ schemes, the blow to HE would be less intense. However, it's uncertain at this point what the outcome will finally be.

Professor Joy Carter, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Winchester, stated in an interview with University Business that the 'landscape' of UK educational offerings towards EU students would not be as desirable:

> A big unknown is what impact Brexit will have on students coming from the EU into UK universities. In terms of future student recruitment from within the EU, access to continued funding via student loans is crucial. Many universities have undertaken to set any future EU fees at the same level as home fees, but without recourse to funding, many EU students will not consider the UK as a study destination. There will still be a market among international schools within the EU, and among more affluent member states, but the landscape will be more challenging.

One the other hand, the current weakness of the British Pound is making the UK a more financially viable study location than it was in the past. Brexit is also making UK universities refresh their focus on attracting EU or non-EU international students while also creating better environments for students of all backgrounds.

Fortunately, the UK is still an attractive study option because of its world-renowned teaching standards. Similarly, the introduction of the two-year post-study visa for international students will further increase the desirability of higher education in the UK. Although, it remains to be seen what kind of economic impact Brexit will truly have and whether that will diminish the UK's job market.

> Brexit has had – and will continue to have – a major impact on the sector. From the lack of uncertainty to the impact of the election outcomes, it is clear that many policy decisions impacting on the sector will continue to be delayed – and uncertainty in already turbulent times makes it harder for universities to plan.
>
> The impact on international students will need to play out – the impact of Brexit on sterling has arguably made the UK more attractive in some markets but, for now, the quality of a UK education remains attractive despite increasing competition from other countries.
>
> **Emma Leech, Director of Marketing and Advancement,** Loughborough University

# Higher Education and Post-Lockdown Britain

Students are currently missing out on valuable face-to-face tuition. There's been a loss of trust in the UK's education system, with 250,000 students petitioning to have their accommodation and tuition fees waived for this year. Current and prospective students are having to consider the impact of COVID-19 on their studies and prepare for a future of online learning - depending on the state of the UK in the future and social distancing measures.

There are several possibilities for UK HE institutions, but the hopeful scenario is e-learning can be fully rolled out, vulnerable students can still receive the support they need and incomes can be preserved as much as possible. On top of this, students and parents alike also want to see no dip in teaching standards across the UK.

However, the move towards online, remote learning is a big challenge. Universities need to consider features such as:

- 24/7 back-end IT support.

- Learning Management Systems (LMS).

- Cybersecurity.

- Creating a successful online learning community.

Fortunately, the global pandemic and subsequent lockdown has forced the UK's education providers to rethink their strategies and fully commit to a broad-based digital offering. This period may represent a learning revolution, which is likely to be welcomed by older students who are already in a good position to navigate digital environments. The key issue is, will universities provide the correct digital offerings to respond to their students' needs?

Universities are currently capitalising on the surge of video-conferencing platforms, such as Zoom and Webex. While engagement may initially be rocky, these apps can provide a solid basis for facilitating the same face-to-face learning experiences that students are used to. If universities are slow to implement their own digital offerings, other platforms can fill the gap.

For example, Coursera is an online learning platform designed for higher education studies, featuring short programmes offered by universities worldwide. Most of these courses are free and only need login details to access. The key benefit of Coursera is it's flexible, accessible and relies on transparent video content which keeps students on their toes by asking for questions to be answered while watching.

The higher education market is valued at $2.2 trillion and online learning only accounts for <u>less than 2%,</u> meaning it's a valuable target for education disruptors. It could also be a viable source of income for universities ready to develop digital platforms (like Coursera) that represent not only current needs but are also created with remote working in mind.

> Online learning may have been a competitor to universities in the past – now it's a firm ally.

In short, the current state of online learning is just a small step towards a future of integrated online and in-person learning opportunities. It's a chance for universities to re-evaluate their offerings and create programmes that more accurately reflect the capabilities of higher education today.

# Supporting Universities Post-Brexit

If you'd like more information about how universities can support themselves post-Brexit (and post-lockdown), take a look at our Higher Education Conference. The conference is aimed at protecting students and universities through a survival period for the sector, and will address:

• The value for money of online teaching.

• Global competitiveness.

• The safety of university estates.

• The long-term impact of COVID-19.

Through experts, panels and case studies, you'll discover solutions to support and maintain top-quality university experiences.

Universities must also consider preparing for a no-deal Brexit. Fortunately, there are many ways in which you can do this. We've outlined them in our No-Deal Checklist below.

# The No-Deal Checklist

In the event of a no-deal Brexit, HE institutions must take precautions to ensure maintained financial stability and teaching quality. Here's what they need to prepare for.

## Supply Chains, Structural Funding, Procurement and Data

A no-deal Brexit will affect supply chains and essential services. The state of data protection (GDPR) also remains uncertain as this is an EU and EEA-specific law. HE providers can prepare themselves by doing the following:

Talk to suppliers about their no-deal plans and the implications of such an outcome.

Identify structural funding projects and any potential future sources of funding.

Determine the risks associated with each contract you currently have.

Explore the ICO Guide to GDPR. Some of your contracts involving data transfer may need new 'adequacy' clauses. The ICO also has a section on GDPR and Brexit you can use.

## Transnational Education

Guidance for HE institutions that practise transnational education in EU host countries has yet to be given. To prepare yourselves, you can:

Identify the risk associated with exchange rate fluctuations.

Check cross-border provisions for HE in EU locations you may operate. This includes collaborations.

Determine any changes to cross-border tax compliance.

## EU Students and Qualifications

For the intake year 2020/21, EU students will be eligible for home fee status. For qualifications, the government wants a system that covers the same professions linked to the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRPQ).

> Estimate how a no-deal Brexit could affect EU student demand.

> Clearly communicate the home fee status for EU students on your website, email and social media channels.

> Ensure staff are aware of the home fee status changes.

## Immigration for EU Nationals

The outcome of Brexit, be it with a deal or without, still poses uncertainty for immigration. It will affect EU nationals studying, working in HE or participating in research programmes. You can implement these steps to mitigate risk:

> Communicate adequate information on possible changes to immigration rules and statuses.

> Identify risks associated with no-deal Brexit on student intake and staffing.

> Inform EU nationals of pre-settled and settled status and encourage them to secure that status.

> For those expected to start work or study directly after Brexit comes into full effect:

> - Ask them to consider moving their arrival dates to before the Brexit date.

> - Prepare emails and guidance in the event of no-deal.

# Ensuring International Research Collaboration Post-Brexit

The UK is an important player in the world of European research. It has secured 14% of Horizon 2020 funding, amounting to €4.6 billion. The UK is also an incredibly popular place for higher education, with around 130,000 EU students joining every year.

However, the financial and educational relationships with the rest of the EU are likely to change when we leave. There are many important aspects of the current issues surrounding international research that need to be addressed.

## 1. World Class Research Depends on International Collaboration

International collaboration provides an environment for academics to not only increase their impact but also draw from the huge pool of resources available across the EU. The increase in international collaboration has been rapid and has seen an incredible amount of top-quality research produced as a result.

Combined talent produces more useful outcomes. Because of this, ensuring our universities still have a global reach will retain the strength of UK educational providers when it comes to the country's world-leading research base.

## 2. Research Needs the Right Funding

Research is agreed on by international partnerships, but it can only be carried out by funding provided by investors. It also depends on a mutually beneficial agreement between research bodies.

Brexit may make it more difficult to gain these mutually beneficial agreements. We should also be wary of designating potential partners at this juncture because what works for one body may not work for another. Initially, educational providers need to remain flexible and work to identify other sources of funding as well as possible partnerships going forward.

## 3. Addressing Challenges to Research Collaborations

Facilitating consistent international research collaboration requires more than just funding. HE providers need to analyse their capabilities and the capabilities of potential EU partners to determine areas for improvement. Similarly, cultural barriers need to be identified and understood to mitigate any friction between two partners of different origins.

The more research you do on these international connections, their structure and potential, the better prepared you'll be to address challenges as and when they arise.

## 4. Pursue Flexible Bilateral Agreements

A potentially successful way of ensuring continued research collaboration is to create more bilateral agreements between research bodies and EU governments. While Brexit could mean access to EU programmes is restricted, bilateral agreements may be a way of maintaining UK access to the wider research community.

If you'd like more information on these issues, you can access the 2017 Universities UK report on international research collaboration after Brexit.

UK HE institutions are in a key position to prepare themselves for the realities of post-Brexit and post-lockdown Britain. While the challenges are very real, there are also many avenues for growth and innovative thinking.

# Explore Our Higher Education Event

Here at GovNet Events, we offer events and conferences throughout the year - dedicated to creating a better higher education environment in the UK. We bring together experts and professionals to provide you with the most up-to-date information and best practices surrounding developing the UK's education system.

If you're interested, click the link below to explore our events and find out more information on how we're bringing the education sector together to combat the long-term impact of COVID-19, lockdown and Brexit.

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