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Keeping higher education top of the Brexit agenda

Ulster University is determined that north-south research collaborations continue post-Brexit

In the welter of coverage of Brexit and the Irish backstop, very little attention has been paid to the extensive cross-border research collaborations and linkages which have been developed over the past few decades. Higher education institutions and academies across the two islands have voiced their concerns about the potential impact of Brexit on these collaborations and have been calling for greater clarity in relation to the issue.

“From a university perspective, when Northern Ireland and Brexit are discussed, everyone seems to talk about the backstop,” says Prof Cathy Gormley-Heenan, pro-vice-chancellor for research and impact at Ulster University. “The focus of the media appears to be on that issue alone. An unintended consequence is that attention has been diverted away from other issues like higher education.”

And there are real concerns within the higher education sector. “Many institutions have called for further clarity,” Prof Gormley-Heenan adds. “We want to continue to collaborate in the same way as we have been. The universities have been very vocal about the potential loss of research funding through Horizon 2020 and so on. We have about 900 EU-supported collaborative research projects. We want to make sure this support is not diminished.”

Universities Ireland, the organisation which includes the nine universities on the island of Ireland, seven in the Republic of Ireland and two in Northern Ireland, has produced a Brexit working paper on the issue.

“This built on earlier papers issued by the Royal Irish Academy and the British Irish Chamber of Commerce,” she says. “We are all on same page. We want to continue the north-south and

east-west research and innovation collaborations as well as those with Europe. The question is how we make it work.”

Fortunately, there are solid foundations to build on. “We have to ensure that we don’t miss out on the infrastructure that already exists north and south and use that for the future,” she notes.

That includes the North South Ministerial Council. According to Prof Gormley-Heenan, the council could decide to establish a new cross-border body to take responsibility for

research collaboration on the island of Ireland. Short of that, higher education could be added to the list of areas covered by the council.

“That is one way forward. We could use the British-Irish Council as well. This looks after the east-west relationship. We should enlist the British Irish Council’s support to ensure the issue stays on the agenda. We know that the Governments want to see higher education and industry research collaborations continue post-Brexit.”

There are also opportunities through Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) for cross-border projects post-Brexit. “SFI has 17 research centres in the Republic of Ireland at present,” Prof Gormley-Heenan explains. “One possible way forward would be to open up membership of those centres to Northern Ireland research. This would enable further north-south collaborations. New all-island research centres could also be established. Paediatric cardiology is one potential area for such a centre.”

Time is of the essence. “It is critical for all universities to continue to lobby and ensure collaboration north and south and with UK



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partners continues. It is not a time to sit back on our hands. We have to lead the debate and ensure that attention will not be deflected.”

Some progress has been made and the UK government has announced that international students will be granted visas to allow them to stay for a year after graduation. But this does not compare with the arrangements in the Republic of Ireland. “The announcement is welcome, but it is in no way comparable to the position in the Republic of Ireland. We are all in the game of internationalisation and that will be more challenging for the two universities in Northern Ireland.”

Another issue relates to non-UK-national workers. The UK government has proposed salary thresholds for different categories of worker and the one applicable to laboratory technicians is £30,000. “Northern Ireland has a low average salary and 69 per cent of people here would earn less than that. In fact, the average salary as a whole in Northern Ireland is £24,000. You can’t do excellent research if you can’t get appropriate technical support. It’s about having the whole team in place.”

Predicting what might happen is difficult. “I am reluctant to crystal ball gaze,” Prof Gormley-Heenan says. “It keeps coming back to all of the universities and academies being of one mind; collaboration will continue. But we will need some infrastructural support changes to ensure that north-south and east-west collaboration continues.”

She notes that negotiations on the EU research programme to follow Horizon 2020 have been taking place in parallel to the Brexit talks and that the UK has made it clear it wants to be part of that programme. Timing is everything, however. “The deal for a new programme won’t be signed off until after European Parliament elections so we don’t really know what will happen.”

She remains hopeful, however. “The infrastructure is in place already. We can make higher education a success story of how to work your way through challenging circumstances. That’s what we teach our students to do. We are known for developing innovative solutions to difficult problems. We will find a way through this in the end.”



Above: Prof Cathy Gormley-Heenan, pro-vice-chancellor for research and impact at Ulster University.