

## Written Submission to the Science and Technology Committee (Commons)

### Surveys on the perception and impact of Brexit on Spanish researchers

### Recommendations for a prosperous British R&D system

5th February 2018

Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom

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## Executive Summary

- Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK) is an independent non-profit Society to promote communication within Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom and facilitate collaborations between private and public British and Spanish R&D institutions.
- Our recent survey ran among SRUK members showed that only 14% of respondents would have come to the UK under the current circumstances, whereas 46% would not have come and 40% are unsure.
- Another survey ran among students and researchers in Spain showed that over 70% of respondents consider the UK less attractive now than before the referendum due to Brexit.
- It is essential to ensure that the UK remains an attractive country to highly talented and skilled students and researchers. For this, it is essential to:
  - Swiftly provide concrete details about how the process to apply for **Settled Status** will work for EEA researchers already in the UK, and ensure an easy and affordable visa application process for new ones.
  - Secure the UK's participation in multilateral **EU research programmes**, such as FP9.
  - Prioritise the **investment** in research, science and technology to boost the competitiveness of the UK's economy.
  - Improve the **communication strategy** to show that the UK is open to research, science, and technology.
  - Strengthen the importance of **evidence-based policies** in the guidelines that will direct the Brexit negotiation.



## Background

Around 129,000 Spanish nationals live in the UK [1], among which 3,500 are scientists working in universities [2]. This figure rises to **5,000** when considering Spanish scientists working in other R&D public institutions, companies and administration [3].

With over 600 members, the Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK) is an independent non-profit organisation officially established in 2012 that represents a large proportion of Spanish nationals working in R&D in the UK. Our members work and study in all research disciplines and are at different levels in their careers, ranging from undergraduate students to professors. Our objectives are:

- To develop collaborations between our members and R&D-led institutions and businesses in Spain and the UK
- To help closing the gap between researchers and the general public through scientific outreach
- To represent Spanish researchers in the UK to British and Spanish organizations, the society and the media
- To promote networking within the community of Spanish Researchers working in the UK.

In order to gather insights on the concerns of our members, we conducted the first SRUK survey on Brexit from October 2016 to December 2016 [4]. The main results of that survey were:

- Over 30% of SRUK members changed their future plans following the referendum result.
- 43% of SRUK members were unsure about their future and they would leave the UK if no certainty and security was offered to EU nationals already living and working in the UK.

One year on, SRUK have been monitoring the challenges and opportunities associated with Brexit and their impact on Spanish researchers in the UK. Moreover, we have aimed to understand this impact on students and researchers in Spain interested in moving to the UK in the near future. For this, SRUK have recently conducted two surveys: one in UK and one in Spain. This report describes the surveys and main results, and proposes recommendations to mitigate the potential negative effects of Brexit in the ability of UK to attract European talent and seize its opportunities.



## Surveys

Both surveys were designed by the Science Policy Committee and approved by the Board of Directors.

### The impact of Brexit on Spanish researchers in the UK

SRUK ran a survey on Brexit among our regular members (i.e. Spanish researchers working or studying in the UK). The survey was hosted by SurveyMonkey, and distributed among 505 Spanish researchers between the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2017 and the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018. A total of 168 members answered this survey.

#### Background of the respondents

1. Most of the respondents are based at **universities** (79.8%) or public research centres (7.1%), with smaller percentages working at private or joint research centres or industry. A large number of them are **postdoctoral researchers** (47.6%). This group is followed by PhD students (24.4%) and principal investigators (11.9%).
2. Respondents have lived in the UK for a variable numbers of years, with **4.8 years on average**. The highest percentage are between 3 and 4 years (20.2%), between 2 and 3 years (18.5%) and between 4 and 5 years (14.3%).
3. **Only 20.9% of respondents have permanent contracts**, reflecting the fact that most surveyed researchers are at the PhD or post-doctoral level. The contract of 36.8% of respondents will have finished by the end of 2018 and the contracts of a further 18.4% of respondents will end in 2019.

#### Impact of Brexit on Spanish researchers in the UK

4. The majority of SRUK members think that Brexit will have **major or dramatic impact at a personal (45.2%) and professional (48.8%) level**, with the biggest areas for concern being the access to **research funding** (89.9% expect major or dramatic impact), the level of **bureaucracy** to live and work in the UK (86.9% expect major or dramatic impact), and the impact on the **British economy** (81.0% expect major or dramatic impact).
5. Most of SRUK members are **waiting for the outcome of the negotiations to decide on their future (45.2%)**, whereas 24.4% of them have already changed their plans due to Brexit. This shows that a considerable number of Spanish researchers are uncertain about their future and, indeed, the percentage is remarkably similar to the 43% of respondents to the first SRUK survey on Brexit in autumn 2016 that were



uncertain about their future plans.

6. In the event of moving to another country, most of the respondents would go to Spain (45.5%) or another EU country apart from Spain (44.2%). **Only 10.3% would move outside the EU.**
7. Only 14.3% of responses would consider moving to the UK under the current circumstances if they were based outside the UK now. **46.1% of responses indicated that they would not have moved to the UK in the current scenario** and 39.6% are unsure.

Full results are available at [5].

## **Has the perception of the UK changed as a research destination due to Brexit? Views from researchers in Spain**

SRUK ran a survey to evaluate the impact of Brexit in the attractiveness of the UK for Spanish researchers in Spain. The survey was printed and distributed among attendants to the **CienciaUK event on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017 in Madrid (Spain)**. *CienciaUK* is an annual event organised by SRUK to inform interested students and researchers about the research careers in the UK (both inside and outside academia). The results were gathered in print and transferred online for analysis with SurveyMonkey. A total of 67 researchers answered this survey.

### **Background of the respondents**

8. Most respondents were **students**, either at the Bachelor or Master level (29.9%) or PhD level (43.3%) with a smaller percentage being post-doctoral researchers (9.0%). This agrees with the fact that the UK greatly benefits from attracting trained international researchers to develop their career in British institutions.
9. *CienciaUK* attracts students and researchers interested in knowing more about the UK's R&D development system and how to develop a career within it. Thus, **most respondents (56.25%) indicated that they were considering moving to the UK in the near future** (within two years) whereas 43.75% said they were not considering moving to the UK.

### **Attractiveness of the United Kingdom to researchers in Spain**

10. When asked about how attractive the UK is now to them considering Brexit in comparison to the situation before referendum, **most respondents (71.6%) indicated that the UK was less attractive now than before the referendum**. This



perception is motivated by an extremely high proportion of respondents (44.8%) who indicate that the UK is now somehow less attractive, followed by about a quarter of respondents (25.4%) who find the UK less attractive now. Alternatively, 26.9% of respondents indicated that they find the UK equally attractive now.

Full results are available at [6].

## Interpretation

Our surveys show that, while researchers in Spain are mainly concerned about the mobility of skilled workers, Spanish researchers in the UK are more concerned about access to research funding. Research and innovation, as well as a researcher's potential, thrive on clear long-term professional and personal frameworks. Times Higher Education World University Rankings have recently showed that UK universities benefit from excellent levels of internationalisation [7], reflecting the high proportion of foreign staff, students and ongoing international collaborations. This long-standing international collaboration tradition has a positive impact on the British economy, as well as on the exchange of revolutionary ideas which come with highly skilled individuals – something that Spanish researchers and many other European scientists have been part of. However, our surveys show that the potential loss of access to European networks and funding, and the changes in the conditions of EU researchers in UK, among other factors, are causing a **stark decline in the attractiveness of UK to European researchers**, something that could result in a less innovative and productive British economy. At the same time, the respondents indicated that, should they move, only 10.3% would do so outside the EU. This illustrates how attractive the European Research Area (ERA) is to European researchers.

## Recommendations

Promoting collaboration on R&D between Spain and the UK is one of SRUK foundational aims. Our surveys show that the attractiveness of the United Kingdom's R&D system has decreased due to the uncertainties associated with Brexit and the negotiations. Thus, we would like to encourage the UK Parliament to adopt specific measures to address such uncertainties and maintain the already prosperous British R&D sector:

- **Swiftly protecting the skills and talent essential to the UK Science and Technology sector.** It is essential to provide concrete details about how the process to apply for Settled Status will work and ensuring that it will result in no major loss of rights to the EEA researchers working in the UK. Over 45% of respondents to our survey think that Brexit will have major or dramatic effects at personal and professional levels; and the level of bureaucracy to reside and live in the UK is one of the major areas for concern (86.9% expect major or dramatic impact) (Finding #4). A large number of Spanish researchers in the UK are unsure about their future





plans and waiting to see how the negotiations develop (Finding #5). EEA nationals in the UK have already had to cope with this uncertainty for over one year and a half and there is a high risk that, at some point in the near future, they will relocate from the UK to other countries.

It is also paramount to ensure a smooth, affordable, and short visa application process for new researchers and students coming to the UK, exempting EU researchers already working in the UK from any wider potential immigration controls, and removing the number of students from the net immigration target. Our survey among students and researchers in Spain showed that the UK is a less attractive country to carry out research now than before the referendum (Finding #10). On the other hand, the results from our survey among Spanish researchers in the UK showed that the vast majority of them (89.7%) would choose EU countries (Spain or other) if they were to move (Finding #6). Our survey of Spanish researchers in the UK also indicated that only 14.3% of them would consider moving to the UK under the current circumstances (Finding #7). Facilitating a hassle-free migration process and an alignment as close as possible to the ERA is thus essential to ensure that the UK remains as attractive as possible to EU researchers post-Brexit.

- **Continued participation in multilateral research programmes, such as FP9.** The acknowledgement of the fruitful relationship between UK and EU in science and research [8] is very positive and we also welcome the commitment to keep participating in H2020 as well as new international collaborations such as [9,10]. However, bilateral agreements are not capable to replace multilateral collaborations that the societal challenges of EU Framework Programmes enable. Likewise, there is no clear replacement for the European Research Council projects or the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. Thus, among the Spanish researchers in the UK, the biggest concern is the access to funding (89.9% expect major or dramatic impact in this area, Finding #4). This is hardly a surprise considering that the UK is a net receiver of R&D funds within H2020.
- **Prioritising, and if the economy permits accelerating, the investment in research, science and technology to boost the competitiveness of UK's economy.** We welcome the commitment to increase the fraction of national GDP devoted to R&D and new instruments to invest in science and research (e.g., ISCF) but the UK has been lagging behind other countries of our environment (OECD and EU) in investment in science and technology, which are recognised as essential for a productive economy. This agrees with the concerns of Spanish researchers in the UK about how Brexit could destabilise the sources of funding and its impact in the UK economy (two of the three most major concerns, Finding #4).
- **Improving the communication strategy to communicate to convey that the United Kingdom is open to research, science, and technology.** Our results



indicate that researchers and students in Spain consider the UK less attractive due to Brexit (Finding #10). Despite efforts by government, it has already been recognised that the communication must improve to emphasise that the UK is interested in keeping attracting the brightest minds [11].

- **Maintaining and strengthening the importance of evidence-based policies in the guidelines that will direct the Brexit negotiation.** It is essential that the best evidence is used to guide the Brexit process to ensure that best outcome for the UK economy, society and R&D system is achieved. To this end, we believe that the best available evidence must be considered, including the due consideration of views of highly-talented EU and overseas researchers already working in the UK.

## References

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