

THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON STUDENT AND ACADEMIC MOBILITY

**The role of the Spanish scientific diaspora in
addressing Brexit challenges**



**Society of
Spanish Researchers
in the United Kingdom**

This report has been produced by

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Prologue

Brexit has had and continues to have severe consequences for Spanish researchers who live and work in the United Kingdom. This report details some of the consequences of Brexit which range from strict restrictions to academic mobility to administrative hurdles and several others. Together, these have had profound and long-lasting negative effects on the community of Spanish researchers in the United Kingdom, which we are honoured to represent here through the Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK/CERU).

One of the founding objectives of SRUK/CERU is to provide the community of Spanish researchers in the United Kingdom with a voice in front of both Spanish and British institutions. In the context of Brexit, SRUK/CERU has conveyed its demands to diverse institutions through concrete actions which are detailed in the present report. Behind these actions is the tireless work of hundreds of SRUK/CERU volunteers who have used the Society's Executive Committee and Science Policy Department as a platform to foster positive change. Through yearly surveys, we have compiled the opinions and perceptions of SRUK/CERU members regarding Brexit. Moreover, we have proposed concrete actions to alleviate the negative effects of Brexit and defend the rights and interests of Spanish researchers in the United Kingdom.

Another of SRUK/CERU's aims is to foster collaborations between Spanish and British institutions related to R&D&i. Given the rupture of the bonds weaved by the European Union between the United Kingdom and other European countries, this objective has taken precedence and gained traction in the last few years. The SRUK/CERU Department of International Collaborations, through two academic mobility programmes, has promoted the continuation of bilateral collaborations between Spanish and British research institutions even in the absence of European mobility programmes such as Erasmus+. Through these programmes, it has contributed to the personal and professional development of Spanish and British researchers.

Brexit has led to a notable reduction in the number of European students, researchers, and research-adjacent staff in research institutions in the United Kingdom. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that Brexit has also had a negative impact on SRUK/CERU itself, which has observed a reduction of its membership in the last few years. Nevertheless, SRUK/CERU has not diminished in the quality of its initiatives, in the cohesive nature of its community, nor in the determination and passion with which its members give back to the community.

This report reflects the time and effort of a group of Spanish researchers in the United Kingdom who, after leaving work, synthesise the consequences of Brexit on academic

mobility; quantify and analyse opinions and sensations regarding Brexit; express these perceptions and develop proposals to improve and advance the current situation; and support the personal and professional development of a new generation of researchers in the face of difficult and dynamically evolving challenges.

Behind all the Society's initiatives is the institution which put their trust in SRUK/CERU from its earliest days and which, to this day, keeps supporting us and helping us grow: the Fundación Ramón Areces under the directorship of Don Raimundo.

Irene Echeverria Altuna

SRUK/CERU President 2023/2024

Igor Arrieta

Coordinator of the report

Executive summary

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit) on January 31, 2020, has significantly transformed scientific relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union (EU), particularly affecting the mobility of students, researchers, and academics due to the implementation of a new immigration system, among other reasons. The Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK/CERU), representing the Spanish research diaspora in the United Kingdom, has monitored this impact through surveys regularly distributed among its members. In these surveys, more than 60% of respondents reported a moderate to dramatic impact of Brexit on their lives, with this percentage remaining constant over recent years. The rights of EU citizens continue to be of significant concern, with respondents reporting considerable impacts.

This report analyses the barriers and obstacles that Brexit has resulted in for student and academic mobility in the United Kingdom and highlights the role of SRUK/CERU as a key player that has proactively contributed to mitigating the consequences of these challenges. Among other initiatives, SRUK/CERU has established agreements with Spanish universities and collaborated with organisations such as the Ramón Areces Foundation, the Banco Santander Foundation, and the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) with the objective of strengthening relations between the United Kingdom and Spain. SRUK/CERU has also led the establishment of the EU scientific diaspora in the UK through the CONNECTS-UK project, co-funded by the EU. These actions reflect SRUK/CERU's ongoing commitment to supporting the Spanish and European scientific community in the United Kingdom, ensuring that researchers and students can continue their work in a collaborative environment despite the challenges posed by Brexit.

The Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom

The Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK/CERU) is a non-for-profit organisation founded in 2012 which represents Spanish citizens who work in R&D&i in the United Kingdom. Spanning over 720 members, SRUK/CERU has actively followed the challenges stemming from Brexit and their impact on Spanish researchers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Through a multitude of initiatives, SRUK/CERU aims to tackle the challenges posed by Brexit and to defend the interests of its membership. The Society interacts with different stakeholders, including academic institutions and governmental organisations, to propose public policies related to science and foster positive change. Find out more: www.sruk.org.uk or info@sruk.org.uk.

Index

1. Introduction	7
2. Evolution of concerns of the Spanish research community in the UK	9
3. The new regulatory framework for mobility in the UK	12
Entry routes for students	12
Entry routes for researchers (typically holding a PhD)	13
Recent changes in immigration policy	14
4. The impact of Brexit on the numbers of international students and academics in the UK	16
5. Specific problems in student mobility	21
The case of doctoral candidates in the UK funded by the European Commission	22
Student - worker duality	22
National vs international students	23
Inequalities among doctoral candidates and the circulation and attraction of talent in the UK	23
6. Mobility programmes spearheaded by SRUK/CERU	25
SRUK/CERU Summer and Winter Studentships	25
On the Move SRUK/CERU Fellowships	26
7. SRUK/CERU's contribution in response to Brexit	28
References	31

List of abbreviations

ERA	European Research Area
EU	European Union
FECYT	Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
MSCA	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
NHS	National Health Service
R&D&i	Research, development and innovation
SRUK/CERU	Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom
UK	United Kingdom
UKRI	United Kingdom Research and Innovation

1. Introduction

The official exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) on January 31, 2020 (Brexit) occurred in accordance with the Withdrawal Agreement reached between both parties on October 17, 2019. However, this agreement has not prevented Brexit from causing significant changes to the relationship between the EU and the UK and, consequently, between the UK and Spain. In academic and scientific fields, bureaucratic barriers impair the exchange of talent and ideas, particularly regarding the mobility of students, researchers, and scientists and the UK's participation in EU-funded research programs.

On the one hand, the end of the free movement of individuals between the UK and the EU led to the implementation of a new immigration system in the UK, effective from January 1st, 2021. As a result, European citizens wishing to reside in the UK are now required to obtain a visa, with the only exception being short stays of less than six months. This rule does not apply to those European citizens who arrived in the UK before Brexit. Given the inherently international nature of research, it is not surprising that this has hindered scientific collaboration between EU member states and the UK.

On the other hand, Brexit led to the UK leaving the European Research Area (ERA) and, consequently, the EU's research, development and innovation (R&D&i) programs. Among these, Horizon Europe stands out as the EU's main framework program for R&D&i activities between 2023 and 2027, being the largest program to date with a budget exceeding 95 billion euros. Among other novelties, Horizon Europe emphasizes disruptive innovation programs led by small and medium-sized companies, establishes specific missions to address global challenges (such as climate change, smart cities, cancer, etc.), and promotes greater efforts towards open science.

Since Brexit took effect and the UK subsequently left the Horizon Europe program, the EU and the UK were engaged in a lengthy negotiation process aimed at allowing the UK to rejoin the program as an associated country. Over two and a half years later, in September 2023, the association agreement was finally announced, a development that was met with great enthusiasm by the research community and various European and British institutions. This agreement allows the UK to participate in Horizon Europe on equal terms to EU member states. However, uncertainty is likely to intensify in the future, partly due to the lack of a stable agreement ensuring the UK's association with future EU R&D&i programs, and partly due to the inherent complexity and rigidity of the UK's immigration system, as mentioned earlier.

The aim of this report is to analyse the barriers and obstacles that Brexit has created for student and academic mobility in the UK, and to explain the role of the Society of Spanish Researchers in the UK (SRUK/CERU), which represents the Spanish research diaspora in the UK, as a key stakeholder that has proactively contributed to mitigating the consequences of these challenges. The structure of this report is as follows. In Section 2, we examine the evolving concerns of the Spanish research community in the UK, as monitored through seven surveys conducted by SRUK/CERU between 2017 and 2024. Section 3 addresses the legislative framework governing the current UK immigration system. In Section 4, we analyse the trends in the number of international students and academics in the UK and the impact that Brexit has had on them. Section 5 discusses specific issues related to student mobility, and in Section 6, we describe the mobility programs promoted by SRUK/CERU and the impact Brexit has had on them. Finally, Section 7 summarizes the actions SRUK/CERU has taken to mitigate the effects of Brexit.

2. Evolution of concerns of the Spanish research community in the UK

The Society of Spanish Researchers in the UK (SRUK/CERU) has actively monitored the concerns caused by Brexit through surveys regularly distributed among its members (students, researchers, academics, and scientists from Spain in the UK), with at least one survey conducted annually between 2017 and 2021 (see [6-13] for more information). Below, we highlight the evolution of some of the data collected over the years.

	No impact	Minor impact	Moderate impact	High or dramatic impact
2017 (N=201, [6])	10.4 %	17.2 %	26.7 %	45.8 %
2018 (N=168, [8])	3.0 %	17.9 %	32.1 %	47.0 %
2020 (N=67, [11])	7.7 %	24.6 %	38.5 %	24.6 %
2021 (N=87, [12])	5.8 %	29.9 %	33.3 %	31.0 %

TABLE 1: Results of the question: "Evaluate the impact that the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership in the EU and Brexit has had or will have on your life". N indicates the number of responses.

When asked about the impact or potential impact of Brexit on their lives, it is observed that the percentage of respondents who have experienced or expect to experience a moderate, high, or dramatic impact from Brexit has consistently averaged over 60% in all the analysed years. This reflects the ongoing concern and impact that Brexit has had on Spanish researchers in the UK (see Table 1 and Figure 1). On the other hand, we also note that the proportion of respondents showing high or dramatic concern significantly decreased in 2020 and 2021, possibly due to the signing of the Withdrawal Agreement in October 2019, which excluded the possibility of a disorderly Brexit scenario without an agreement between the parties (commonly known as "No Deal").

Respondents in 2019, 2020, and 2021 were asked whether they found the UK more or less attractive than when they arrived in the country. As shown in Figure 2, in all these years, respondents rated the UK as less attractive than at their arrival, although the intensity of this assessment has decreased over time. This change may be attributed to the gradual increase

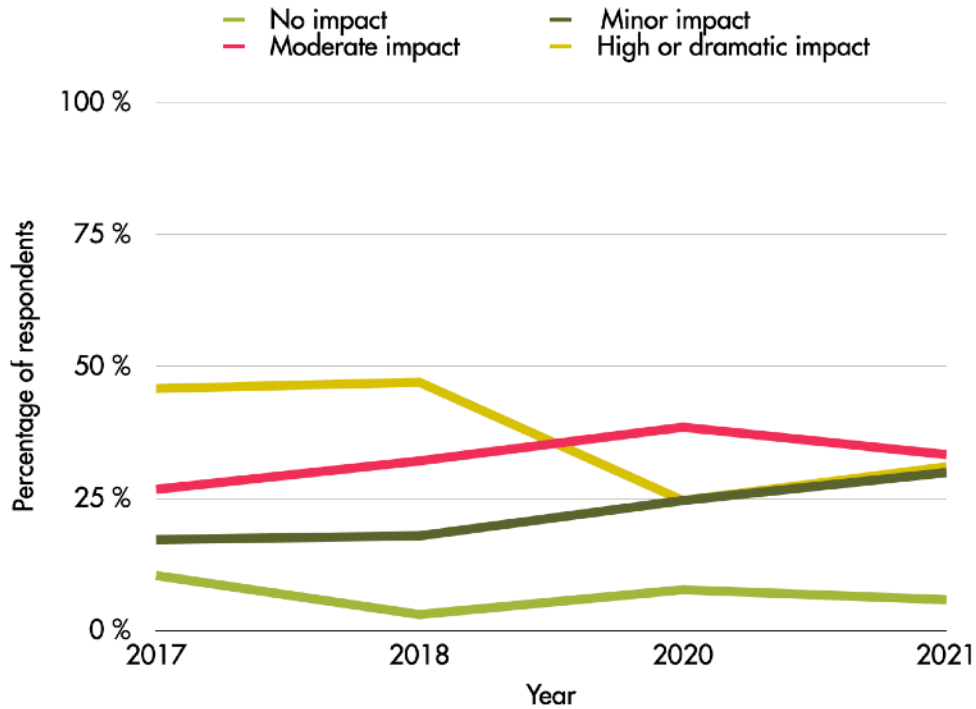


FIGURE 1: Graphic representation of data from Table 1.

in certainty regarding Brexit-related processes (e.g., the Withdrawal Agreement in October 2019 or the implementation of the new immigration system in January 2021). Another factor that may have contributed to this shift in perception is the arrival of new respondents to the UK post-Brexit. Additionally, in 2020 and 2021 ([11,12]), respondents were asked about the main reasons for their responses, and in both cases, immigration policies or the immigration status of EU citizens were the most frequently cited reasons, highlighting the concern generated by Brexit regarding the mobility of people.

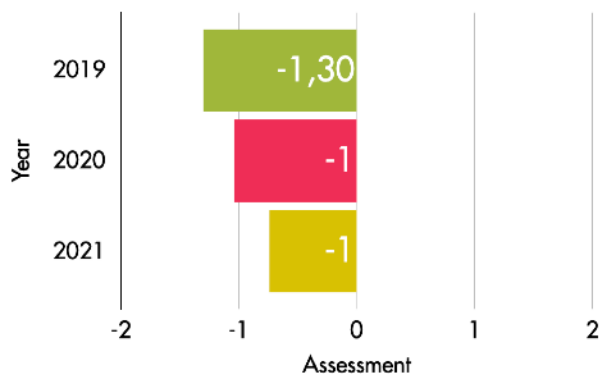


FIGURE 2: Results of the question "How attractive is the UK now compared to when you first arrived in the country?" (-2 = Less attractive, +2 = More attractive).

Focusing specifically on immigration policy, Figures 3 and 4 illustrate respondents' perceptions of the impact of Brexit on two related areas: the mobility of family members of workers (Figure 3) and changes in the rights of EU citizens residing in the UK (Figure 4). This

aspect has been of significant concern, with over 70% of respondents rating the impact on both areas as considerable, high, or dramatic, with this figure even reaching 90% in 2017 and 2018.

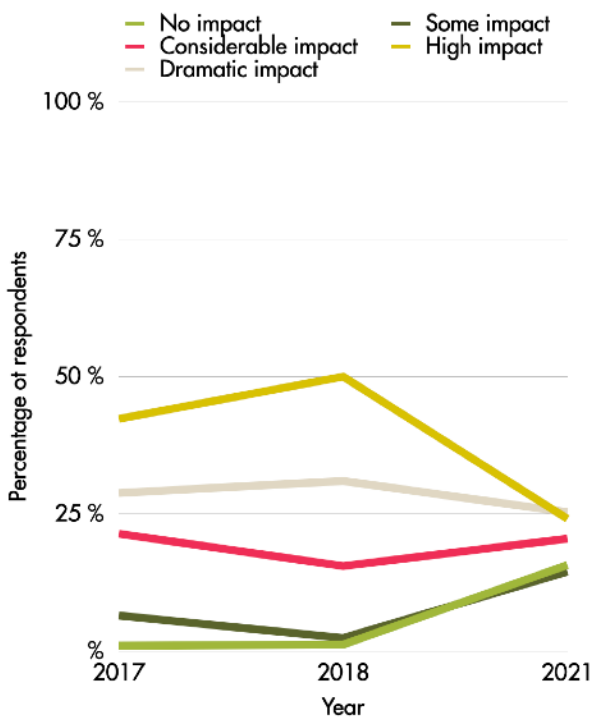


FIGURE 3: Results of the question "Evaluate the potential impact of the referendum outcome on the mobility of the worker's family members" (in 2020 and 2021, respondents were asked to assess the potential impact once the UK's departure becomes effective).

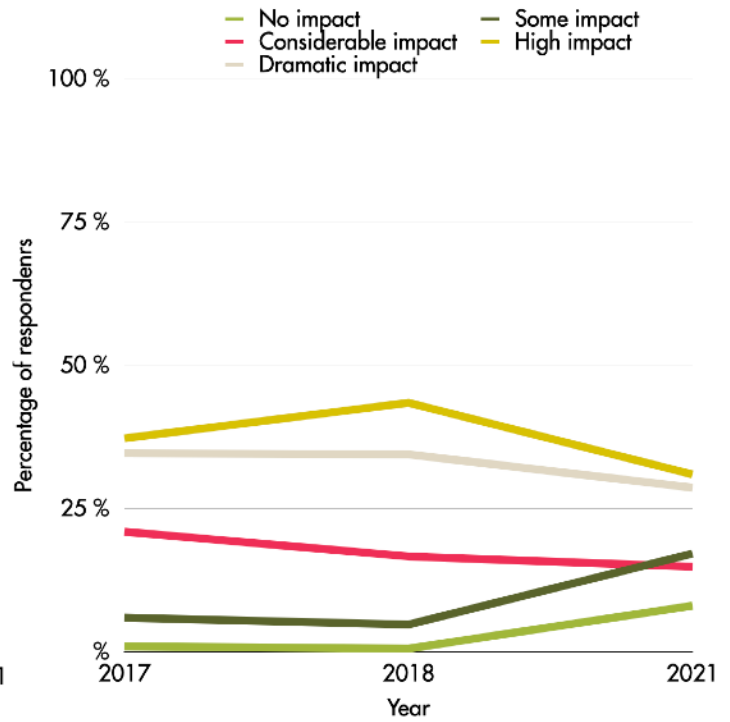


FIGURE 4: Results of the question "Evaluate the potential impact of the referendum outcome on the rights of EU citizens residing in the UK" (in 2020 and 2021, respondents were asked to assess the potential impact once the UK's departure becomes effective).

3. The new regulatory framework for mobility in the UK

Among the many consequences of Brexit is the end of the free movement of individuals between the UK and the EU. Since January 1st, 2021, a new immigration system has been in effect that regulates residence, work and study in the UK. The complexity, requirements, costs, and frequent changes of this system have complicated scientific collaboration between EU countries and the UK.

Under the new system, anyone wishing to reside, work, or study in the UK for more than six months is required to obtain a visa. This does not affect EU citizens who were already residing in the UK before December 31, 2020, and who were able to secure their right to remain in the country by obtaining pre-settled or settled status [22].

The following sections aim to describe the various routes through which European students and researchers can currently enter the UK under the new immigration system. This overview seeks to highlight the complexity of the system and address the most common cases, without providing an exhaustive analysis. Researchers needing specific guidance on their immigration status can seek advice through the Brexit information service at the Spanish Embassy in London and from the British institution that will be hosting them.

3.1. Entry routes for students

EU students over the age of 16 who are pursuing a course or degree with a British equivalent can enter the UK for a research stay of up to six months relevant to their studies. In these cases, a visa is not required; they can enter the country as Standard Visitors, providing only a letter from their home institution outlining the purpose of the visit.

This route does not permit any form of work, whether paid or unpaid. This situation presents some challenges, as determining what work really is can be subtle (e.g., in the case of university internships or traineeships, where the student may have some expenses covered). In such cases, it is the responsibility of the universities or host institutions to assess the circumstances and determine whether the stay qualifies as work before proceeding with a visa application, if one is required.

Length of stay	Type of stay	Visa required	Conditions for visa
Up to 6 months	Relevant research stay for overseas course or degree, work is not permitted.	No	N/A
Up to 2 years	Temporary work, internships, or research stays in government authorised programmes.	Yes - Temporary Worker - Government Authorised Exchange route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in a British government authorised programme • Host institution's certificate of sponsorship • Other economic conditions
Up to 5 years	Studies at a UK institution or university	Yes - Student Visa route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance in a UK education provider • Language requirement • Economic requirement

TABLE 2: Entry routes for EU students

The Temporary Worker Visa - Government Authorised Exchange route allows for stays of up to two years and permits work. The process to obtain this visa is more complex and is limited to specific programs authorised by the UK government.

Finally, students who have received a formal offer from a UK institution to undertake a course or degree program (including undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels) must apply for a Student Visa.

3.2. Entry routes for researchers (typically holding a PhD)

For researchers wishing to enter the UK, there are several options available. If the goal of the visit is a short research stay of up to six months, they can enter the country without a visa as a Standard Visitor. For academic visits lasting between six months and one year, the typical route is the Standard Visitor Visa (as Academic), which generally requires the applicant to hold a doctoral degree and be affiliated with an academic institution in their home country that continues to employ them during their stay.

There are several routes for EU researchers moving to the UK to undertake paid work, which are detailed below.

Researchers who have secured funding, typically from another country, to conduct research at a UK research center or higher education institution can apply for the Temporary Worker Visa - Government Authorised Exchange (usually through the "UKRI – Science, Research and Academia" or "Sponsored Researcher" routes) if their stay does not exceed two years. This visa allows the holder to conduct research, teach, act as an examiner, and engage in typical academic activities at the host institution. It requires meeting a minimum salary threshold and the host institution being authorised to sponsor the applicant.

Length of stay	Type of stay	Visa required	Conditions for visa
Up to 6 months	Research stay	No	N/A
From 6 months to 1 year	Research stay	Yes - Standard Visitor Visa (as Academic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a PhD degree • Be employed in an academic institution overseas
Up to 2 years	Work in a British academic institution, generally funded by a third country	Yes - Temporary Worker Visa - through the "UKRI – Science, Research and Academia" or "Sponsored Researcher" routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certificate of sponsorship issued by an authorised institution • Other economic conditions
Up to 5 years	Work employed by a British academic institution	Yes - Skilled Worker Visa route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certificate of sponsorship issued by an authorised institution • Other economic conditions • Language requirement
Up to 5 years	Leaders or potential leaders in the field	Yes - Global Talent Visa route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligible offer, award or fellowship, or positive assessment in leadership

TABLE 3: Entry routes for EU researchers

For researchers who are directly employed by a UK academic institution, the usual route is the Skilled Worker Visa. This visa has a maximum duration of five years and has conditions similar to those of the Temporary Worker Visa - Government Authorised Exchange.

The Global Talent Visa allows researchers who demonstrate exceptional skills or leadership potential to stay in the UK for up to five years with greater flexibility. The eligibility for this visa typically depends on having a job offer, award, or fellowship (e.g., Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions fellowships). Despite initial requirements for this route [5], the system has gradually become more flexible. It is now common for researchers contributing to a research project with external funding or those who have accepted a position as an Associate Professor (equivalent to Spanish "Professor Titular") at a UK university to qualify for this visa. Unlike the Temporary Worker Visa or Skilled Worker Visa, the Global Talent Visa does not require a host institution or ongoing sponsorship from a host institution during the visa's duration, allowing for more stable residency in the UK.

3.3. Recent changes in immigration policy

In this context, the UK government announced in December 2023 further restrictions in immigration policy, which came into effect in the spring of 2024, leading to reactions from the European community [1]. The changes are described below (see [3]). On one hand, the minimum salary for jobs under the Skilled Worker Visa was increased to £38,700 from April 2024. Although this threshold is reduced for certain professions such as postdoctoral

researchers (currently reduced to £32,640 annually for science, technology, engineering, or mathematics fields, and £36,720 for other disciplines), it is important to point out that a significant number of these researchers earn below the established minimums. Other research-related positions, such as technicians or lecturers, are not eligible for this reduction, adding an extra challenge for these groups in obtaining the visa.

Another significant barrier to obtaining visas is their high cost. In addition to the application fee itself, the UK government introduced the Immigration Health Surcharge in 2015, a fee that has progressively increased, especially after Brexit, and which grants access to the UK's National Health Service (NHS). Payment is mandatory for most visa routes and must be made in a single payment along with the visa application. From February 2024, this surcharge increased by 66%, from £624 annually to £1,035 annually. For example, an applicant for a Skilled Worker Visa for a three-year period will need to pay at least £4,525 at the time of application, covering both the visa fee and the Immigration Health Surcharge. Due to this high cost, some researchers may be forced to abandon their intention to move to the UK despite having a job offer from a UK institution. Additionally, some universities and companies cover these costs for visa applicants, meaning that hiring foreign individuals in the UK requires extra effort, creating a comparative disadvantage relative to British citizens or citizens with residency rights. Furthermore, a significant number of job postings on the most popular job search websites in the UK only accept applications from individuals with residency rights, thus reducing job opportunities available to EU citizens. It is anticipated that, following the general elections on July 4, 2024, there will be further changes to the UK immigration system.

4. The impact of Brexit on the numbers of international students and academics in the UK

The new obstacles and complexities of current migration routes and the loss of appeal of the UK have already affected the demographics of students and university staff. This is especially relevant given the relatively short period of time since Brexit. When studying changes in the presence of European citizens, with particular interest in Spanish citizens, we have used data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [2]. This agency is part of a non-profit organisation that supports activities in the higher education sector in the UK and is responsible for collecting, verifying, and disseminating data about this sector, in coordination with the main higher education providers in the country.

Among the variety of data it collects, HESA has been tracking the nationality of students and university staff since the 2014/2015 academic year. Table 4 indicates the absolute numbers of Spanish students and university staff at British universities.

Course	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Students	7200	8050	9050	9915	10650	11280	12290	10330	-
University Staff	2800	3140	3345	3405	3445	3460	3475	3390	3335

TABLE 4: Absolute numbers of Spanish students and professional staff in higher education institutions in the UK.

Course	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Spanish Staff	2800	3140	3345	3405	3445	3460	3475	3390	3335
Total	198335	201770	206870	211980	217065	223525	224530	234020	240420
% Spanish	1,41%	1,56%	1,62%	1,61%	1,59%	1,55%	1,55%	1,45%	1,39%

TABLE 5: Absolute numbers of Spanish university staff, and from all other nationalities, in higher education institutions in the UK.

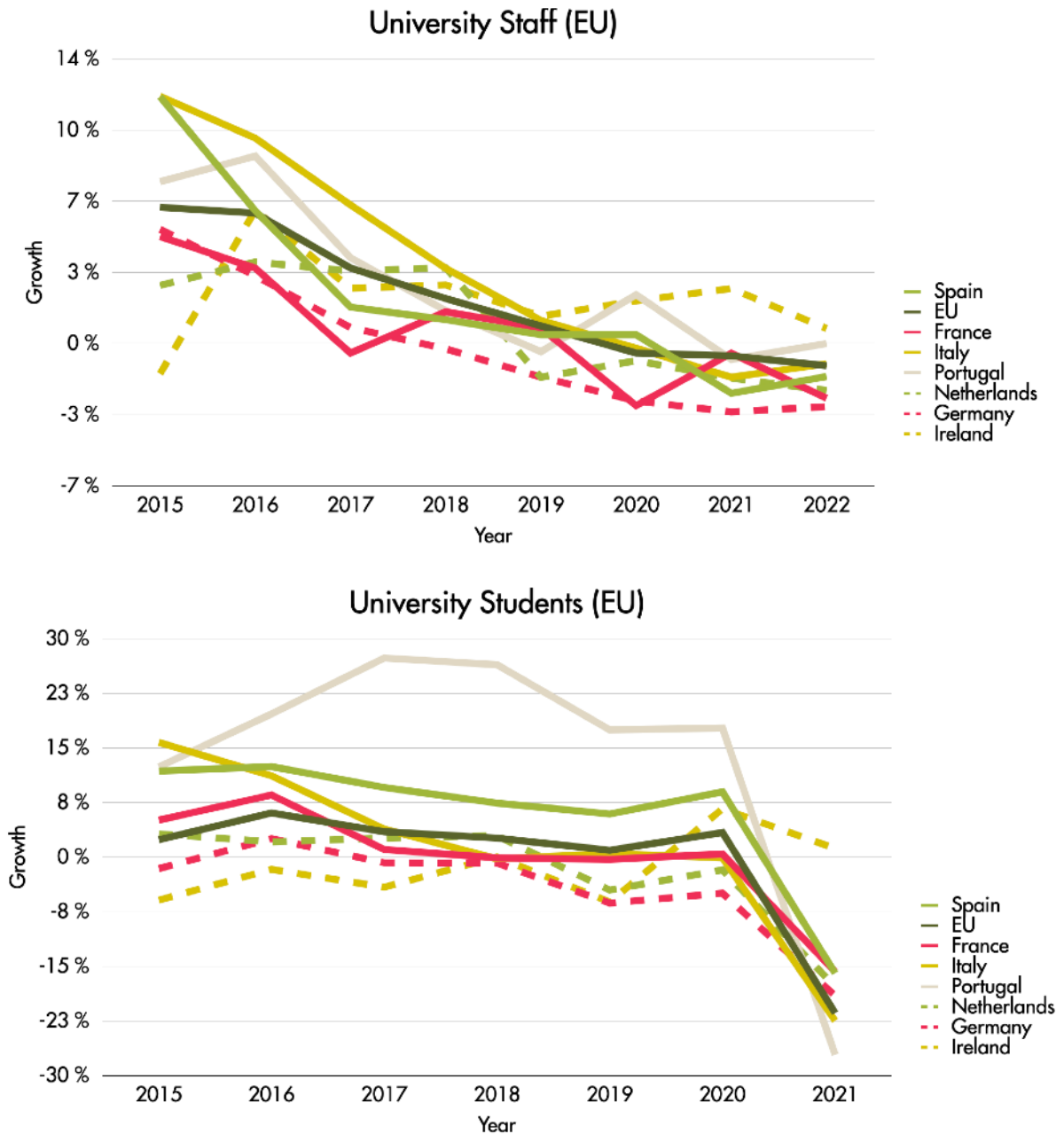


FIGURE 5: Relative growth of the numbers of university staff and students from the EU in British institutions.

In absolute numbers, both groups experienced steady growth year after year until the 2021/22 academic year, where the first decline was observed since HESA began collecting data. To appreciate the evolution of Spanish university staff, we can compare the percentage relative to the total university staff working in higher education institutions (see Table 5).

These data indicate that, what appears to be merely a specific response to the implementation of Brexit, actually has a greater significance that is partially masked by the raw numbers and percentages.

For a nuanced observation of the data, we recommend taking into account the following chronology of processes derived from Brexit. First, we have the referendum in June 2016, followed by the effective departure in January 2020, and finally, the provisional application of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK in January 2021.

With these key dates in mind, we will study the effects of Brexit on the relative (de)growth of the demographics of interest, graphically expressed in Figure 5. At first glance, it is evident that the trend in the period for which we have data is markedly negative, with a nearly ubiquitous rate of decline in the selected EU countries and cumulatively.

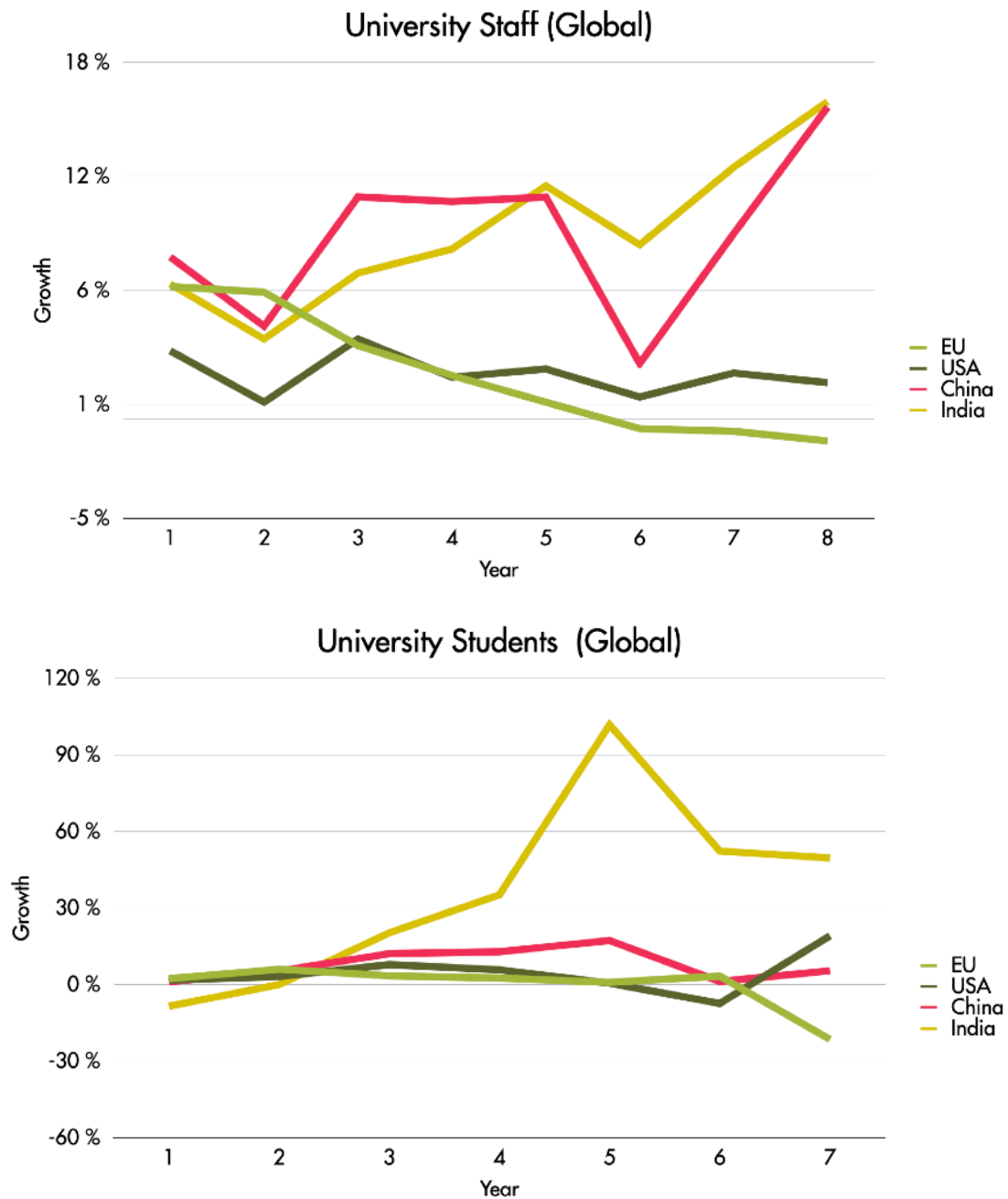


FIGURE 6: Relative growth of the numbers of university staff and students from the EU, USA, People’s Republic of China, and India in British institutions.

The result of the referendum in 2016 had its greatest effect on the increase in the renewal and/or entry of EU university staff to British institutions, with a collective decrease, particularly marked for Spanish nationals (from a 12% growth in 2015 to a 2% growth in 2017). This downward growth trend continues to the present, where most nationals of EU countries (with the exception of Ireland, whose nationals do not require a visa to reside, work, or study in the UK) have entered a period of demographic decline. For the cumulative EU data, the trend in the last recorded year is a 1% decrease compared to the previous year.

In the case of the EU student body at UK universities, the outlook is much more concerning. Although less affected by the Brexit referendum, the relative growth remained on a positive or neutral trend (particularly in the case of Spanish students) until the UK's effective departure from the EU. It is at this inflection point in 2020/21 where we see a sharp decline in the growth trend of the student demographic, with a relative decrease of 16% among Spanish students and up to almost 30% among Portuguese students in the most notable case. For the cumulative EU data, the decrease was 21% in this period.

To analyse the global impact and see if parallels can be drawn, we have created similar graphs comparing the cumulative EU data with geopolitical competitors such as the United States, the People's Republic of China (excluding the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), and India (see Figure 6). Again, at first glance, it becomes evident that the negative growth trend experienced by EU demographics has not been reflected on the international scene and, generally, the trend has been the opposite. In the case of university staff, nationals from the People's Republic of China and India have experienced the highest growth rates, around 16% positive growth in 2022 compared to the previous year. Regarding students, the growth trend is the same, in stark contrast to the marked decline in the EU student body. We highlight the surge of students from India, which doubled in 2019. This decline is even more significant given that the percentage of international students has remained constant or even increased in recent years (see Table 6).

Course	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
% Students	19,43%	20,20%	22,00%	21,99%	23,75%

TABLE 6: Percentage of international students in higher education institutions in the UK. Source: HESA, prepared by the authors.

These changes in migration flows have been reflected in the number of members of SRUK/CERU. If we compare the membership data for the same period covered by the HESA data, we can observe that from 2014 to 2023, SRUK/CERU has experienced a loss of around half of its active members in the UK (51%, from 474 to 230, see Figure 7). The relative proportion of students and professionals has remained constant during this period, with approximately 30% of our active members in the UK self-identifying as students.

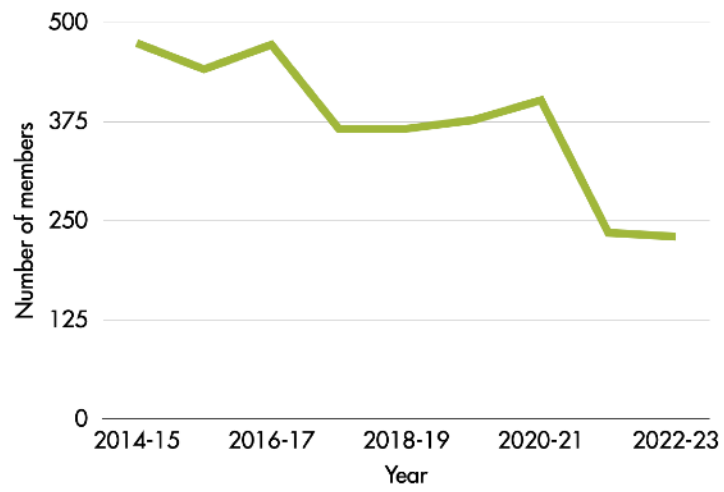


FIGURE 7: Evolution of the number of regular members of SRUK/
CERU.

5. Specific problems in student mobility

In the UK, university students are required to pay tuition fees. The annual cost of these fees depends on various factors, including the student's nationality (national or international), the level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate), the university, and the degree program. Regarding nationality, the governments of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland cap the fees that domestic undergraduate students must pay; for postgraduate studies, universities set the fee levels for domestic students based on guideline values provided by UKRI (a UK government agency). These regulations do not apply to international students, allowing universities to set higher registration fees.

Level of studies	Discipline	University	Home fees (£)	International fees (£)
Undergraduate	History	University of Reading	9,250	22,350
	Mathematics	University of Edinburgh	1,820 - Scotland (*) 9,250 – Rest of the UK	26,500
Master	Economics	Queen's Mary University Belfast	14,850	26,500
	Cancer research	University of Oxford	9,500	31,480
PhD	Mechanical Engineering	Swansea University	4,786	23,100
	Biology	University of Liverpool	4,712	27,800

TABLE 7: Home and international fees of different academic programmes in the UK Universities. (*) This fee in the majority of cases is free as it is fully funded by the Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).

Before Brexit, EU students paid the same fees as national students ("home fees"). However, as of August 1st, 2021, they have been considered international students, with some exceptions, significantly increasing the annual tuition costs at British universities. According to estimates by the British Council, undergraduate tuition fees for international students can range from £11,400 to £38,000 per year, and postgraduate fees from £9,000 to £30,000 per year.

For example, Table 7 lists the annual registration fees for various university programs for the 2024/25 academic year for national and international students (see [24-27]).

The implementation of these changes can explain the data presented in Figure 5, which shows a drop in European students at British universities starting in 2021. As described in the previous section, the decline in EU students has been accompanied by an increase in the number of international students, particularly from Asia (China and India); this is partly because their conditions for accessing British universities have not changed post-Brexit, and partly due to efforts by British institutions to attract students from these regions.

The issues described in this section also affect predoctoral researchers, as doctoral candidates in the UK are considered students and enjoy tax benefits related to this status (e.g., tax exemptions). This contrasts with the situation of predoctoral researchers in other countries, such as Spain, where they are considered employees and are subject to the same rights and obligations as any salaried worker.

The case of doctoral candidates in the UK funded by the European Commission

Doctoral candidates in European programs in the UK face additional administrative and legal complexities that are not always well-defined or interpreted. The European Commission currently funds predoctoral researchers through three scientific excellence programs included in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA): Horizon 2020 – Innovative Training Networks (ITN), Horizon Europe – Doctoral Networks (DN), and Co-fund programs. Following the Brexit results from the 2016 referendum, these programs were compromised, resulting in ongoing administrative uncertainty until September 7, 2023, when the UK's participation in the Horizon Europe program was officially confirmed, as mentioned in the Introduction.

Student-worker duality

In the MSCA doctoral programs mentioned above, the European Commission requires doctoral candidates to be granted a worker status, which coexists with the national regulations of the host country. As a result, these researchers often acquire a dual student-worker status. In the specific case of the UK, this has implications for immigration procedures.

As detailed in Section 3, there are various types of visas for students and researchers in the UK. Due to the student-worker assignment of these MSCA researchers, the duration of British doctoral programs (3-4 years), and the funding source, this group typically enters the country on a Global Talent Visa, usually reserved for potential leaders in their field, instead of the more expected Student Visa. It is worth noting that the Global Talent Visa almost doubles in economical cost compared to the Student Visa but offers greater flexibility within the framework of labour rights in the UK.

National vs. international students

As mentioned earlier, since August 2021, EU students are considered international students in the UK. The European Commission requires that expenses for registration fees and visa-related costs do not impact the budget allocated to the researcher (salaries). These expenses must be allocated to institutional costs which include the budget for research, training and networking costs of the researchers and also to maintain support staff or university research space maintenance. Normally the registration fees, and also visas, are charged to the former, impacting on the financial support available to research activities. Thus, the migratory restrictions of Brexit would ultimately impact British research resources and institutions. It is also true that the host institutions of these doctoral candidates freely determine their annual international registration fees. Thus, there have been cases where mechanisms have been devised to mitigate this loss of benefits, such as reclassifying these students as nationals or seeking additional funding sources.

Inequalities among doctoral candidates and the circulation and attraction of talent in the UK

Researchers accessing MSCA doctoral programs must meet two requirements to qualify for these grants. The first relates to their research experience, and the second to mobility. This latter point is a hallmark of all MSCA grants, aimed at enhancing the exchange and enrichment of knowledge and innovation worldwide by investing in excellent training and employability of their researchers.

It is important to note that these European grants are open to researchers of any nationality, not just EU residents or nationals. Therefore, it is possible to find both EU nationals and non-EU nationals funded by the MSCA, studying or conducting research secondments of up to ten months in the UK.

While the mobility of EU nationals between the EU and the UK has been compromised by the immigration restrictions already described, non-EU participants in European programs encounter numerous obstacles to conducting research secondments in the UK. This group must also comply with the immigration rules of their host European countries. The administrative procedures for obtaining residence permits and health coverage are tedious and costly. The additional and frequent administrative workloads decrease the time dedicated to research. Moreover, increases in their levels of anxiety, uncertainty, and workplace discomfort have been observed as a consequence of these processes. Finally, related explicitly to temporary mobility to the UK, this group must synchronise their European residence permits with visas to this third country, which is not always logistically possible. Consequently, non-EU researchers are exposed to further inequalities compared to European participants in the same programs, decreasing financial support for their research activities or losing valuable professional development opportunities.

These facts impact not only non-EU researchers and the UK but also the EU and their respective institutions. Many participants give up on their efforts to conduct training and research stays in the UK and seek less administratively complicated alternatives within the EU. Thus, the UK's research excellence, attraction and circulation of talent are diminished, and the EU would not fully achieve its objectives of cross-border mobility of researchers, knowledge, and innovation. Finally, institutions both in the UK and the EU are forced to allocate human and economic resources to address these issues.

6. Mobility programmes spearheaded by SRUK/CERU

The primary goals of SRUK/CERU include strengthening relations between the UK and Spain, establishing collaborations and interactions among scientists, researchers, and students from both countries, and exchanging knowledge with other societies of Spanish researchers worldwide. To pursue these objectives, SRUK/CERU, through its Department of International Collaborations, has been actively involved in establishing a network of contacts and negotiations with various academic and non-academic organisations both in Spain and the UK. This has resulted in a wide range of mobility and exchange programs between the two countries. In the uncertain context of Brexit, these initiatives have become particularly important due to their contribution to strengthening the communities of researchers and students in the UK and Spain. However, they have also faced numerous challenges, as detailed below.

6.1 SRUK/CERU Summer and Winter Studentships

The SRUK/CERU Summer and Winter Internships allow members of SRUK/CERU in research groups in the UK to host and train junior researchers (undergraduate or master's students) from Spanish universities, through stays lasting approximately 4 to 6 months. Occasionally, this mobility initiative takes place within the framework of the Erasmus+ internship program and has gained increasing popularity as it promotes continuous academic growth (see data in Table 8).

However, this program has faced numerous barriers related to Brexit. Before the effective exit of the UK from the EU, both undergraduate and master's students, as well as recent graduates, were able to join SRUK/CERU's scholarship programs. However, Brexit brought significant changes to these programs. Before June 2021, recent graduates within the first 18 months post-graduation could also participate in these mobility programs, sometimes without the need to obtain a visa, and in other cases with a visa sponsored by the British Council, as long as it was required by the host institution. From June 2021, the British government updated its policies, resulting in EU recent graduates no longer being allowed to undertake unpaid internships in the UK. Short research stays without the need for a visa were permitted only for those students who had an active affiliation with a university within the EU, as explained in Subsection 3.1.

Furthermore, for entry routes that require a visa, the requirements vary depending on whether the research stay is conducted at a Higher Education Institution or a Research Center, with additional complications arising from the limited capacity of British institutions to sponsor visas (see Section 3 for more details).

Internship	2019-2020			2020-2021			2021-2022		
Home institution	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV
Summer	11	1	0	13	3	-	14	0	3
Winter	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	-	9
Total	24			16			26		

Internship	2022-2023			2023-2024			2024-2025		
Home institution	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV	UAM	UNIZAR	UFV
Summer	14	5	5	3	1	3	14*	3*	3*
Winter	-	-	13	-	-	21			
Total	37			28			Pending		

TABLE 8: Summary of Summer/Winter Internship. UAM: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; UNIZAR: Universidad de Zaragoza; UFV: Universidad Francisco de Vitoria.

In addition, these students face a considerable increase in expenses, including accommodation costs and council tax, from which students residing in the UK are exempt. Since they are not affiliated with any UK university, SRUK/CERU scholars have had to pay council tax for accommodation despite living in shared houses or residences. It is also worth noting the limitation of Erasmus+ funding from the home institutions for stays in the UK, which adds another obstacle for participants in the internship program.

For example, in July 2021, the University of Oxford was close to revoking a student's stay because they had graduated from a Spanish university while still completing their research stay in the UK under the SRUK/CERU mobility program. However, SRUK/CERU's intervention in discussions with the relevant Spanish university allowed the student's affiliation to be maintained until the completion of their stay. Thus, this isolated issue was resolved, although it has not been addressed comprehensively.

6.2 On the Move SRUK/CERU Fellowships

This is a bidirectional mobility program for research staff, primarily predoctoral and postdoctoral researchers, between Spain and the UK, and is carried out in collaboration with the Conference of Spanish University Rectors (CRUE). The main objectives of this program are to establish contact between research groups in both countries, increase participation in

European projects, and enhance the visibility of Spanish universities and mixed research centers in the UK.

Additionally, the program aims to support Spanish researchers in making connections and gaining experience with British groups, as well as assist researchers in the UK in reaching out to Spanish groups to apply for return grants or submit joint European projects.

On the Move research fellows undertake stays of between 3 and 6 months, which are funded exclusively by the participating Spanish universities in the program. SRUK/CERU receives compensation for the coordination and evaluation of the program. However, the participation of Spanish universities has decreased due to budgetary constraints, competition with other programs, and uncertainty about Brexit rules and costs, as can be seen in the data presented in Table 9.

Year	Applications	Hosting groups	Spanish university participating	Research fellow awards	From UK to Spain	Total awarded
2018/2019	35	110	9	28	6	34
2021	9	8	5	8	0	8
2022	12	5	6	5	2	7
2023	1	1	1	1	0	1
2024	5	3	2	3		3

TABLE 9: Summary of On the Move Research Fellowships.

In summary, in the post-Brexit era, navigating potential stays and mobility requirements in British university departments has become more challenging due to constantly changing immigration rules. Despite SRUK/CERU's efforts to provide guidance and gather information from various institutional sources, it is important to note that rules may differ between universities in Spain and the UK, making it difficult to establish a comprehensive and robust guide. Ultimately, the acceptance criteria are determined by the host and home universities according to their interpretation of the requirements set by the British government.

7. SRUK/CERU's contribution in response to Brexit

Throughout the previous sections, some of the obstacles and challenges faced by the Spanish student and research community in the UK due to Brexit have been described, particularly concerning the mobility of people. In this context, SRUK/CERU has played a crucial role in strengthening scientific relations between the UK and Spain, proactively addressing various challenges and establishing itself as a significant stakeholder in the area of science diplomacy.

In addition to establishing bilateral agreements with various Spanish universities to develop the mobility programs described earlier, SRUK/CERU has also reached collaboration agreements with other institutions and organisations, such as the Ramón Areces Foundation, the Banco Santander Foundation, the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT), the Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies (COSCE), and many others (see Table 10 for additional collaborations). This network of partnerships has contributed to strengthening scientific relations between the two countries, and the support from public and private nonprofit organisations focused on scientific patronage has been crucial for achieving SRUK/CERU's objectives.

A crucial milestone in the history of SRUK/CERU has been the conceptualisation, leadership, and coordination of the project CONNECTS-UK (Connecting European Communities Through Science in the UK). This initiative is a partnership among various EU research diaspora associations in the UK, including Slovenian, Finnish, French, Italian, Dutch, Polish, and Portuguese researchers, as well as the nonprofit organisation Native Scientists. The project aims to promote scientific collaborations between the UK and the EU in the post-Brexit era. Recently, the European Commission funded this project with a budget of over €580,000 to be implemented between 2024 and 2025, making it a crucial tool for strengthening the European research community in the UK.

Prior to this, SRUK/CERU actively participated in the Stick to Science campaign, an initiative led by various British institutions (Wellcome Trust, The Royal Society) and Swiss institutions (ETH Zurich) aimed at promoting the association of Switzerland and the UK with the Horizon Europe program. SRUK/CERU coordinated the different European scientific diasporas in the UK —which later formed CONNECTS-UK— to launch a joint manifesto and a social media campaign in support of this initiative, as well as establishing connections with various institutions to achieve these goals.

Universities	Networks	Charities and foundations	Societies	Research intitutions
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid - UAM	Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas - CRUE	Fundación Damián Rodríguez Olivares - DRO Foundation	Asociación Española de Investigación sobre el Cáncer - ASEICA	Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas - CSIC
Universidad de Zaragoza - Unizar	Red de Universidades Valencianas por el fomento de la I+D - RUVID	International Mentoring Foundation for the Advancement of Higher Education - IMFAHE	Real Sociedad Española de Física - RSEF	Fundación Instituto de Investigación Sanitaria de Aragón - IIS Aragón
Universidad Francisco de Vitoria - UFV	Fundación Pública Andaluza para la Investigación Biosanitaria Andalucía Oriental - FIBAO	Fundación CRISCáncer	Sociedad Española de Bioquímica y Biología Molecular - SEBBM	Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas de Málaga - IBIMA
Universidad de La Laguna - ULL			Sociedad Española de Ingeniería Biomédica - SEIB	Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Oncológicas - CNIO
			Federación Española de Biotecnólogos - FEBiotec	

TABLE 10: Some of the institutions collaborating with SRUK/CERU.

During this period, the SRUK/CERU Department of Science Policy has also conducted extensive monitoring and analysis of the situation, as well as provided guidance to the Spanish research community in the UK. As previously mentioned, regular surveys have been distributed to members of SRUK/CERU to assess the impact of Brexit on their professional and personal lives. This information has been crucial in shaping the society's strategy and actions concerning Brexit. For instance, the SRUK/CERU Department of Science Policy published critical responses to both the UK Government's Research and Development Roadmap [15] and the UK's immigration system [16]. Additionally, policy reports have been developed to improve the Spanish R&D&i system based on insights and knowledge from the UK system (e.g., the report "Por un País Innovador" [14]). SRUK/CERU representatives have also engaged with legislative bodies in both the UK and Spain to inform them of the consequences of Brexit. In the Spanish parliament, SRUK/CERU participated in the Subcommittee for the Study of the Consequences of the UK's Exit from the EU within the Joint Committee for the EU [17], and in the UK Parliament, it contributed to the Science and Technology Committee [23].

On the other hand, the SRUK/CERU Department of Science Policy has also published guides on the new visa system in the UK, as well as on other administrative procedures related to Brexit. In collaboration with the Spanish Embassy and the UK Home Office, interactive Q&A

sessions were organised to address questions about Brexit within the Spanish research community in the UK.

All of these activities reflect the ongoing commitment of SRUK/CERU to supporting the Spanish research community in the UK and ensuring that researchers and students can continue to pursue their work in a collaborative and positive environment, despite the challenges imposed by Brexit.

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