

AN IMMIGRATION SYSTEM FOR THE UK'S RESEARCH AND INNOVATION SYSTEM



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Over two years have passed since the UK voted in the EU referendum and we do not stand in a much better-informed position now than we did in 2016. One of the biggest areas of concerns is the state of the freedom of movement that the EU has granted for the past decades to UK citizens to work in other countries of the EU and vice versa.

The uncertainty that the referendum unleashed over the post-Brexit immigration policy for EU workers has only intensified the closer we get to the exit date and is already affecting the attractiveness of the United Kingdom as a favourite destination to do science. Currently, there are around 2.29 million EU workers in the UK¹, and their importance in particular sectors of the British economy is unquestionable. One of these sectors is the Research and Development (R&D) UK sector. Nowadays, around 28% of academic staff in UK universities are non-UK nationals, and from them more than half (16% of the total) comes from the EU². This figure increases to 22% in the most research intensive universities³. To these numbers, we need to add the number of PhD researchers, from which half of them come from outside the UK, with 14% of the total from the EU². Little is known at the moment about what the future relationship between the UK and the EU will look like, so it is very difficult to predict whether the makeup of the research workforce will change, but here we show how without a clear immigration system the UK's attractiveness is being affected. The ability of the UK to keep

attracting the best and the brightest is dependent on a clear and straightforward immigration system, without which the UK might be on the path to lose its best researchers to other countries.

HOW IS BREXIT PERCEIVED OUTSIDE THE UK?

At the Society of Spanish Researchers in the United Kingdom (SRUK, <http://sruk.org.uk/>) we have been monitoring the challenges and opportunities associated with Brexit and their impact on Spanish researchers, and hence other EU citizens, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. We have been particularly concerned about the effect of Brexit on the UK's reputation as a leading destination for international researchers. To investigate this, SRUK has run a large-scale international survey among Spanish researchers currently living outside the UK to understand their perceptions around Brexit^{4,5}. The survey was responded by 284 participants, and it shows that Brexit has already affected the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for Spanish researchers. Specifically, over 75% of the respondents consider a post-Brexit UK less

attractive. Among the biggest concerns are international mobility, citizen rights and access to EU research funds.

Both mobility and access to funds are essential pieces of any R&D system, so to evaluate how important an easy immigration system and access to EU funds are for Spanish researchers, we asked them how attractive the United Kingdom would be after Brexit (compared to what their perspective was before the EU referendum) in four different scenarios, combining the possibilities of maintaining or not the access to Horizon Europe, as well as having or not an easy and straightforward immigration process for EU researchers and their families.

Although each and every one of these hypothetical situations result in a diminished attractiveness of the UK as a destination as a result of Brexit, the scenario where no access to Horizon Europe is kept and a hindered immigration process is implanted shows a remarkable detrimental effect on the attractiveness of the UK. Among the rest, a milder and expected outcome is observed if the UK maintains access to European funds and an easy immigration process is granted. Remarkably, the results show that less

respondents perceived as a negative scenario if the UK permits a straightforward immigration process and loses its access to Horizon Europe over the opposite possibility, suggesting that Spanish citizens value free movement of EU citizens more highly than the access to funds. We believe that an easy immigration system is essential to mitigate the negative perception of the UK in a post-Brexit scenario.

Besides, our results also point out that Brexit is regarded as a destabilizing process for the ongoing collaborations among different research groups and UK-based ones. Approximately half of our respondents that currently have British partners in their research consider that these collaborations will be affected. Remarkably, over 70% of the respondents consider that both collaborations and research visits will worsen after Brexit. Importantly, it is not all about the UK, our respondents also believe that the effect of Brexit within the EU R&D landscape will be negative, being the perception of the EU as an attractive destination and a reduction of excellent science the biggest areas of concern.

OUR PRIORITIES FOR THE IMMIGRATION WHITE PAPER

Our surveys have helped us quantify the effect that Brexit is already having in the attractiveness of the UK's research and innovation system. The immigration white paper can contribute to reducing some of the uncertainty associated with Brexit if it proposes an easy and straightforward migration system for EU researchers and to sending a clear message to researchers both inside and outside the UK that is committed to remaining an attractive destination for skilled workers. Our survey shows that this is a clear priority for researchers over other elements

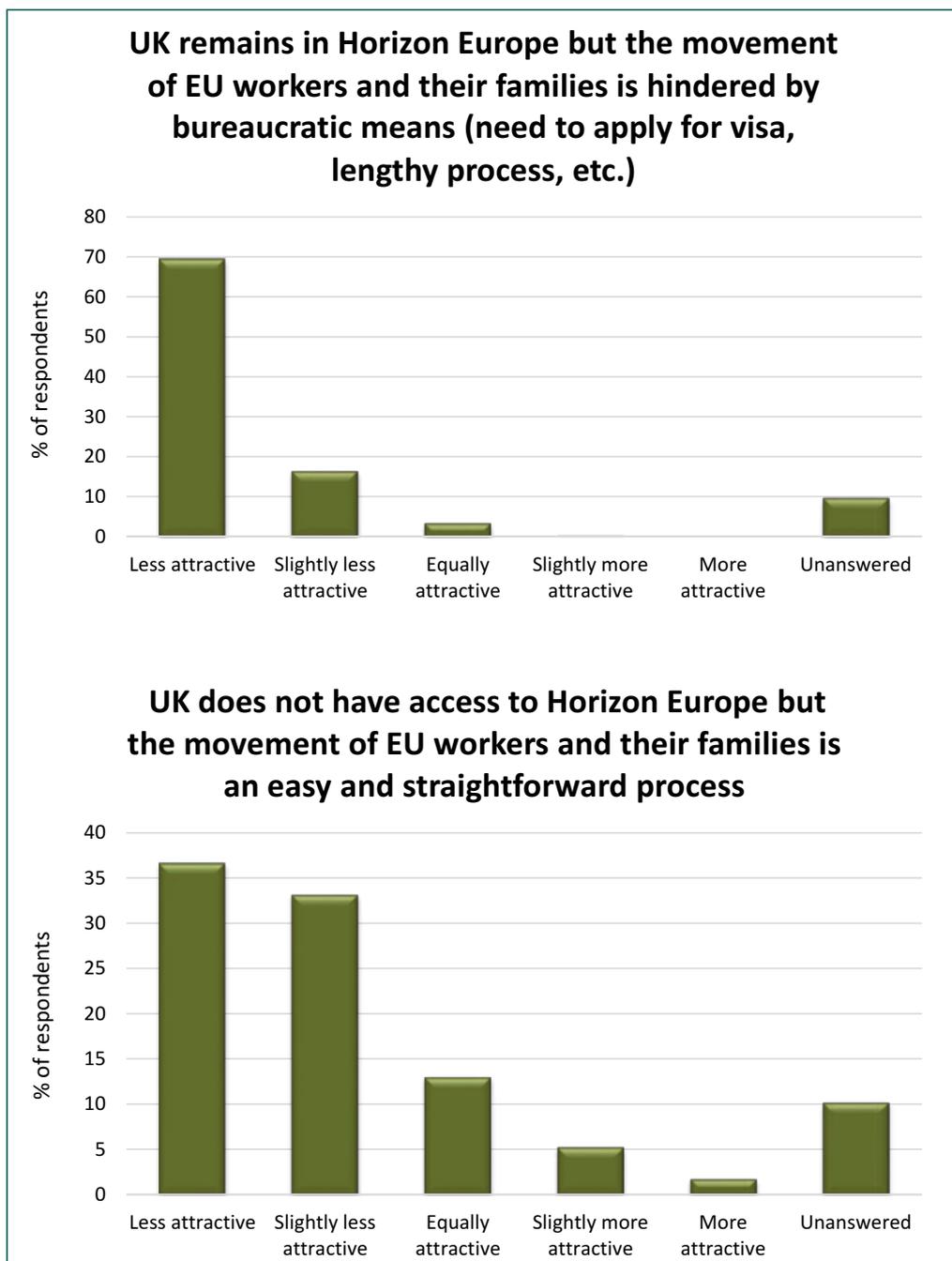
that are currently at stake in the Brexit negotiations. As a result, we believe that the first step to avoid a skills shortage after the exit date is to offer an appealing system to EU researchers and their dependants. A streamlined system that helps support research and innovation by supporting the people that make it possible is essential if the UK wishes to maintain its position as a global centre for excellent science and innovation and we urge the Government to consider this when designing

what a future immigration system should look like.

References

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Results from the survey evaluating the importance of an immigration system over access to Horizon Europe funds. The survey was answered by 284 Spanish researchers living outside the UK. Full results in ⁵