

# Brexit and UK Higher Education

Broken Bridges, Turbulent Crossings, Global Futures

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# A Brexit supporter's dream in 2016

*What Britain looks like after Brexit, Daniel Hannan, June 21, 2016*

It's 24 June, 2025, and Britain is marking its annual Independence Day celebration. As the fireworks stream through the summer sky, still not quite dark, we wonder why it took us so long to leave. The years that followed the 2016 referendum didn't just **reinvigorate our economy, our democracy and our liberty. They improved relations with our neighbours.**

**The United Kingdom is now the region's foremost knowledge-based economy.** We lead the world in biotech, law, education, the audio-visual sector, financial services and software. New industries, from 3D printing to driverless cars, have sprung up around the country. Older industries, too, have revived as energy prices have fallen back to global levels: steel, cement, paper, plastics and ceramics producers have become competitive again.

*Jacob Rees-Mogg: hard Brexit would boost UK by £135bn over five years*

# EU membership for UK universities

During the decades of EU membership, British universities had opportunities for:

- Research and teaching collaboration;
- Research leadership;
- Funding;
- Mobility of students and staff.

Their relations with their counterparts in Europe were distinctly positive and productive.



# ‘Take back control’ for the university sector

- ▶ Unwelcome national limits on what universities could do.
- ▶ Risked denting UK universities’ international reputation and strong global brand if the sector was to (perceived to) become more ‘insular’ and ‘inward-looking’.
- ▶ Created dissonance with universities’ self-perception as international.
- ▶ Restrictions on access to EU-wide resources, capabilities and talent - access signified empowerment and agency
  - ▶ “EU membership plays an important role in the global success of our UK universities and in the contribution they make to the economy and society.” Nicola Dandridge , Chief Executive of Universities UK, 13 April 2015.
- ▶ The Leave campaign saw research and higher education as policy issues
  - ▶ It argued that EU collaborations were hindering the UK and that Brexit would provide more international opportunities



# Internationalisation, openness and global reputation

- ▶ Extensive and intensive internationalisation in staffing, students, research and international co-publication, and strategic projects.
- ▶ British HEIs one of the most global UK institutions.
  - ▶ teaching and research excellence;
  - ▶ decades of concerted branding initiatives and reputation.
  - ▶ and extensive engagement in European and international collaboration and mobility as key part of the business of science.
- ▶ Perceptions of Britain as a tolerant, welcoming and open society are key magnets for both international student choice and a talented academic workforce within a increasingly competitive Higher Education landscape.



# Proud internationalism... and the quiet 'Europeanisation' of UK HE

- ▶ In staffing, EU membership has provided UK HEIs with direct access to a large pool of talent via a visa regime allowing ease of movement across borders.
  - ▶ In 2014-15 there were 124,575 non-UK EU citizen students in HEIs, 6% of all students (HESA 2016).
  - ▶ 14,280 EU doctoral students in HEIs in 2014-15, 13% of PhDs (HESA 2016).
  - ▶ 17 % of academics were from the EU, 19 % in STEM, 14 % of Russell Group professors (ASS 2016).
  - ▶ Strikingly, 40% of new posts were filled by non-UK EU nationals, and EU academics are much more likely to be submitted to the REF (HEFCE 2015; 2016).



# The quiet 'Europeanisation' of UK HE pre-Brexit



- ▶ EU nationals won more than half the European Research Council Consolidator Grants awarded to HEIs (Russell Group 2016).
- ▶ Total papers co-authored within Europe strongly outweighs papers co-authored with US and other English-speaking nations.
- ▶ UK HEIs have become highly dependent on European-source research income.
  - ▶ In 2013, 20.7 % of total UK R&D funding was from abroad, compared to 4.3% in Germany and 3.8% in US (UNESCO 2015), reflecting success in European research programmes.
  - ▶ From 2007 to 2013 UK researchers received 70% of all funding (€4.9 billion) under the EU's F7 program (UUK, 2015).

# Declining EU student enrolments post-Brexit

The impact of Brexit on student demographics in the UK is undeniable.

- - 40% drop in EU student applications across undergraduate programmes (UCAS, 2021 end of cycle).

A direct consequence of Brexit:

- ▶ - destabilising effects on individual study programmes and academic units;
- ▶ - various ramifications (e.g. student experience for home and international students, HE sector's reputation).



# EU academics

- ▶ Almost twice as many EU academics left the UK for a job in a university abroad in 2019 than before the Brexit referendum.
- ▶ In 2022, one in eight of the UK-based recipients of the 2021 round of European Research Council (ERC) grants had left the UK to move their grant to an eligible EU organisation (Science/Business, 2022)
- ▶ Almost 50 per cent of all UK-based ERC grantees are nationals of a country other than UK, a higher proportion than anywhere except Switzerland (Siftova 2020).

THES HIGHER EDUCATION STATISTICS AGENCY

PROFESSIONAL CAMPUS JOBS EVENTS RANKINGS STUDENT

More European staff leaving UK for universities abroad post-Brexit

Many EU academics also now likely to choose 'simpler option' of staying in bloc even after trade agreement, expert warns

May 26, 2021

Simon Baker

Twitter: @HigherBaker

Almost double the number of European Union academics left the UK for a job in a university abroad in 2019 than before the Brexit referendum, according to the latest available data.

The breakdown of figures on staff leaving higher education in the UK, from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, shows that more than 600 EU academics went to



## Number of EU academics working in the UK drops again

Hesa data also reveal proportion of black professors remains at 'appallingly low' levels

January 17 2023 #News

## Fewer early career researchers heading to UK from European Union

Warning that trend has much wider implications for the UK system than missing individual expertise

March 30 2022 #News

# Once rich...

- ▶ UK declining success in EU Horizon funding
  - ▶ decreased UK participation and coordination
  - ▶ In Horizon 2020, the UK was the second largest recipient - UK institutions received €6.9 billion in grant income (House of Commons Library, 2020).
  - ▶ Between 2017 and 2020, UK participation dropped to fifth place, behind Germany, France, Spain and Italy (THE 2021).
  - ▶ Had the UK kept pace with Germany, they would have participated in 2,742 more projects - 30% more than it actually did.
  - ▶ UK grant income dropped by 38% between 2015 and 2020 - Brexit cost UK research £1.46 billion in grant income
  - ▶ UK participation in Horizon Europe has fallen by half compared to Horizon 2020.
  - ▶ Oxford earned €523 million during Horizon 2020 but €2 million in Horizon Europe. Cambridge, recipient of €483 million from Horizon 2020, has not received any Horizon Europe funding to date (Science – Business, 31 Jan 2023)



PROFESSIONAL CAMPUS JOBS EVENTS RANKINGS STUDENT

## UK 'lost £1.5 billion' Horizon 2020 funding after Brexit vote

Scientists for EU says country now needs a plan to regain lost ground as Horizon Europe kicks off

June 24, 2021

[Simon Baker](#)

Twitter: [@HigherBaker](#)

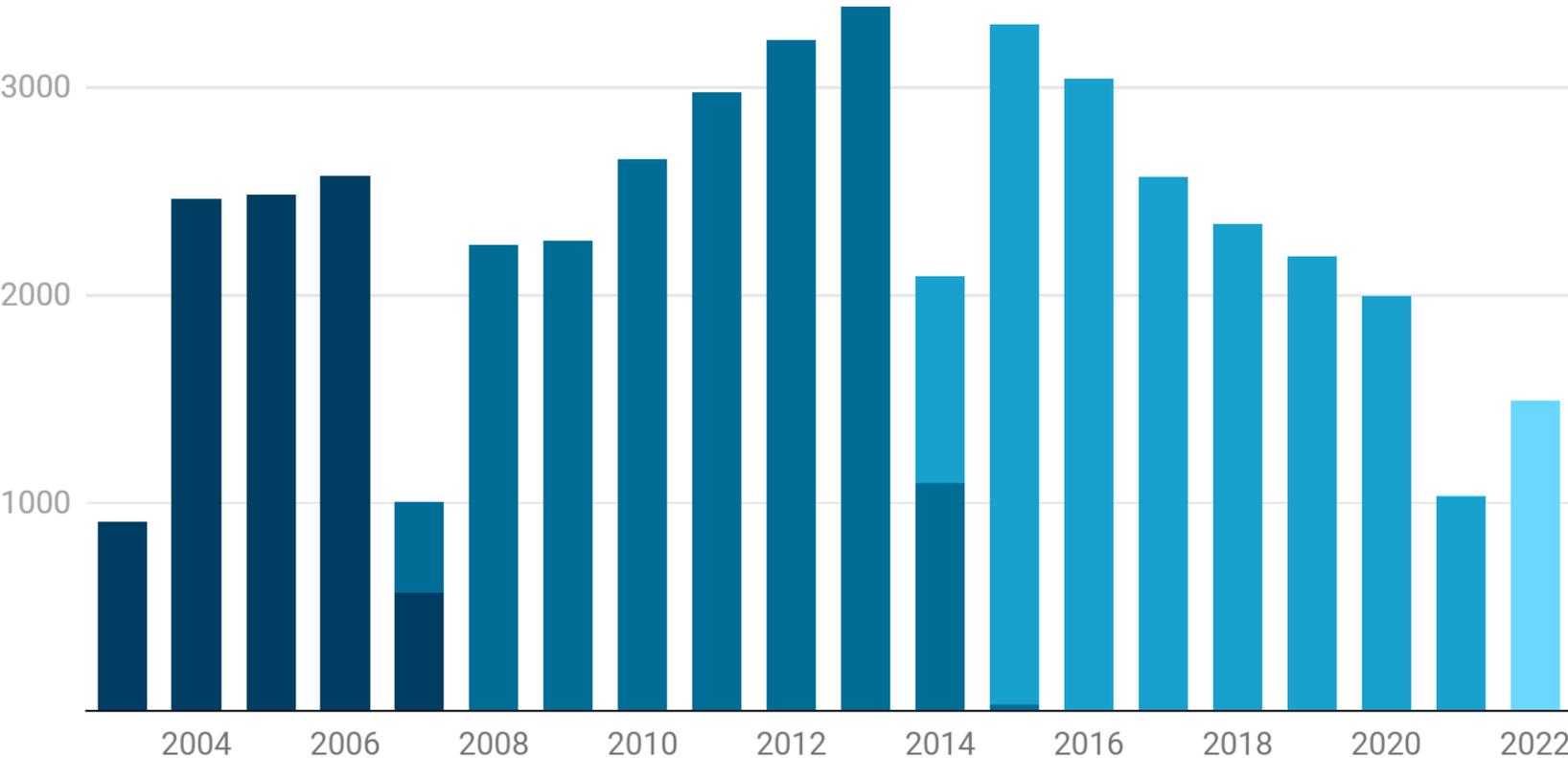
The UK may have lost out on almost £1.5 billion in funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme in the years after the country's vote for Brexit, a new analysis has estimated.

According to the analysis of funding data from the scheme, by the campaign group Scientists for EU, grants to the UK steadily



# UK participation in framework programmes 2003 - 2022

■ FP6 ■ FP7 ■ H2020 ■ Horizon Europe



Source: [European Commission](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

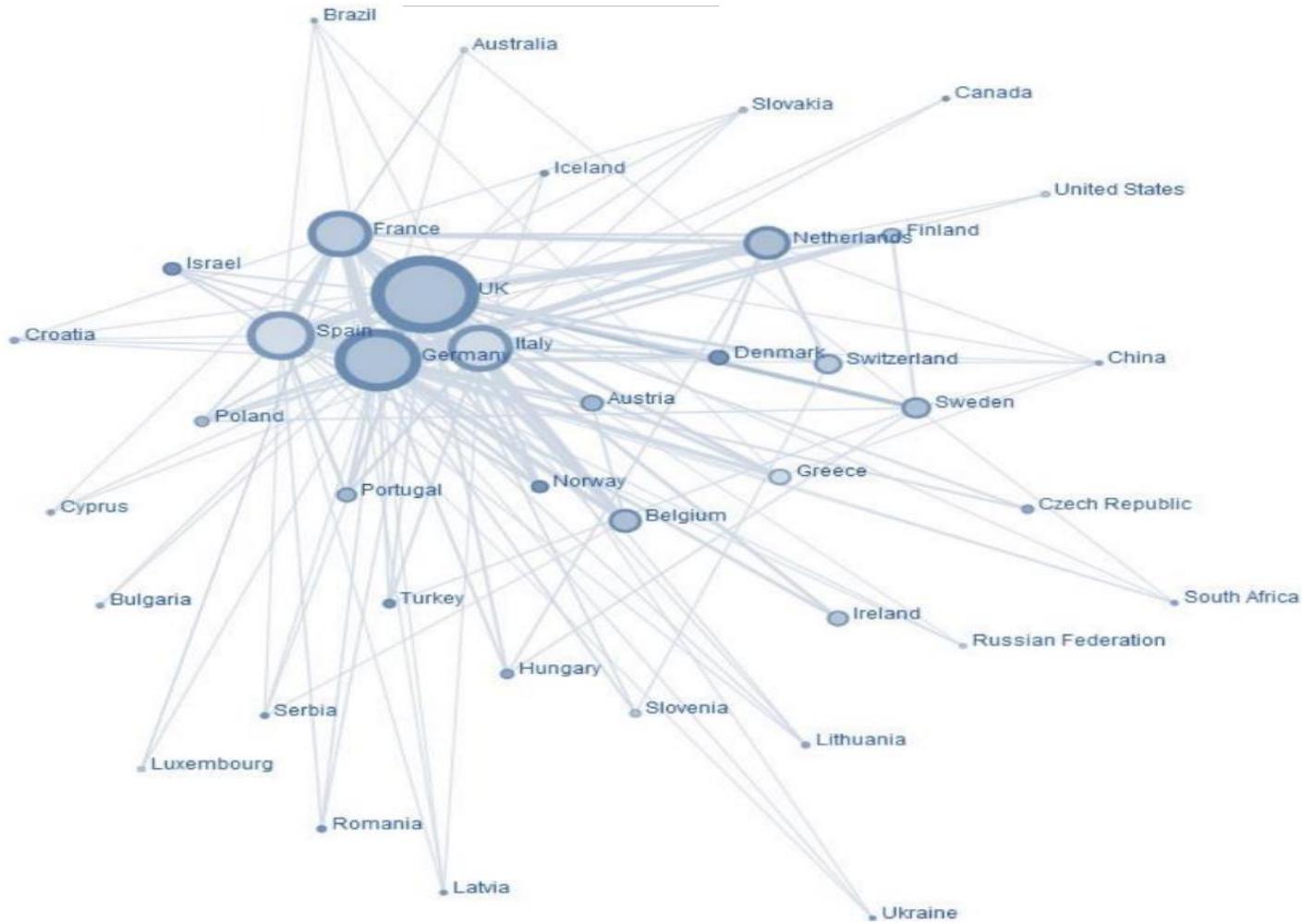
## Non-association hits UK participation hard

### Top 15 countries by proportion of project participants

Country	H2020	Country	Horizon Europe
Germany	11.7%	Germany	11.3%
Spain	10.6%	Spain	11.2%
<b>UK</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	Italy	9.5%
Italy	9.6%	France	8.6%
France	9.6%	Netherlands	6.6%
Netherlands	6.2%	Belgium	5.8%
Belgium	4.7%	<b>UK</b>	<b>4.9%</b>
Greece	3.1%	Greece	4.6%
Sweden	2.9%	Austria	2.9%
Switzerland	2.9%	Portugal	2.8%
Austria	2.9%	Sweden	2.7%
Denmark	2.2%	Denmark	2.6%
Portugal	2.2%	Finland	2.4%
Finland	2.0%	Switzerland	2.3%
Norway	1.8%	Norway	2.1%

[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

UK participation in Horizon Europe – that is the percentage of total participants the UK accounts for,





# Losing Network Centrality

- Network centrality continually improves ‘the knowledge, capabilities, organisational structures and strategies of the organisations involved’ (Breschi et al. 2009, p. 833)
- Universities capitalised on access to EU and global scientific networks: *resources and talent*
- Horizon 2020 Interim Evaluation concluded that British universities acted as *key knowledge brokers*
- Gradually surrendering its leading position, the UK risks forfeiting potential appeal.

# Virtuous circles

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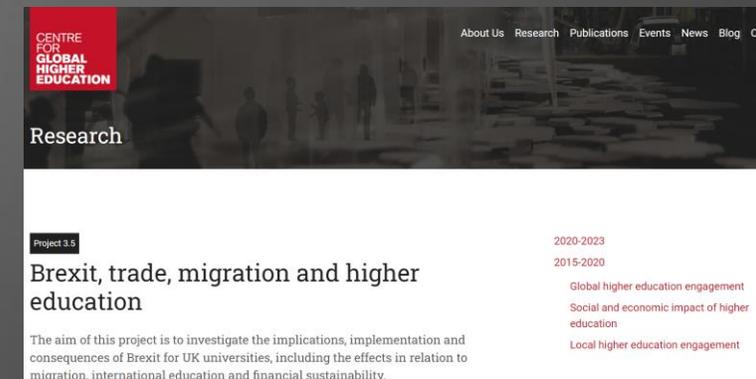
- Leverage from participating in large multinational EU funded research and innovation has a compounding effect.
- A key factor in a country's success in EU research funding is its ability **to attract researchers and prevent brain drain** (De Domenico and Arenas, 2016)
- In the 2007-2014 FP, Switzerland and the **UK** were the most **attractive** countries whereas Israel and the **UK** had the highest '**stickiness**'
- Prior to Brexit, the UK attracted many EU doctoral students and researchers due to its language, university reputation, and open labour market.
- Prior to Brexit the UK excelled in winning MSCAs and ERC grants. UK top performing country in FP7 (2007-13), receiving €1.665 billion in ERC grants and €1.086 billion in MSCAs. Next most successful was Germany with €1.087 billion and €0.564 billion respectively (EEAS 2021).
- ERC grants from 2007 to 2020: the UK retained the position of leading recipient nation (European Research Council 2023).
- European funding supported fields such as Archaeology, Classics and Computing (Technopolis 2017).



# Project description

- ▶ ESRC funded study (award no. 540006) of the perceived effects of Brexit on higher education institutions in the UK (2017-2019)
- ▶ Nested case studies, entailing interviews and review of documents - in 12 diverse UK universities in the four nations.
- ▶ Most of the fieldwork took place in 2018
  - ▶ *England:* UCL, Manchester, Durham, Sheffield Hallam, Coventry, Exeter, Keele, SOAS
  - ▶ *Scotland:* St Andrews, Aberdeen
  - ▶ *Wales:* South Wales
  - ▶ *Northern Ireland:* Ulster

<https://www.researchcghe.org/research/2015-2020/local-higher-education-engagement/project/brexit-trade-migration-and-higher-education/>



The screenshot shows the website for the Centre for Global Higher Education. The header includes the organization's name and a navigation menu with links for 'About Us', 'Research', 'Publications', 'Events', 'News', and 'Blog'. The main content area features a 'Research' section with a sub-section for 'Project 3.5' titled 'Brexit, trade, migration and higher education'. The project description states: 'The aim of this project is to investigate the implications, implementation and consequences of Brexit for UK universities, including the effects in relation to migration, international education and financial sustainability.' On the right side, there is a list of related projects: '2020-2023' (Global higher education engagement), '2015-2020' (Social and economic impact of higher education), and 'Local higher education engagement'.



# Participants - Distribution of roles

- ▶ **127 semi-structured interviews with predominantly institutional leaders: senior university executives, administrators, and academics - with some student and governing council representatives.**
- ▶ **Approx 500,000 words, roughly 1200 pages of single-spaced text.**
- ▶ **The majority of the primary data collection took place in 2018.**

Senior Executives (VC - DVC - PVC)	44
Academic leaders (Heads of Faculty or Dept)	42
Senior Administrators	23
Governing Body	10
Students	8

Three main  
themes emerged  
in discussions  
about EU students

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### **EU Student Numbers – a unit of resource**

Unanimous prediction of a drop in applicant numbers.

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### **Diversity**

Concomitant fear of a fall in national and cultural diversity of students attending universities across the UK.

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### **Competition**

Anticipation of intensified competition

## Resource

**The primary concern raised by institutional leaders and senior academics and implications for income. All 127 participants referred to EU student numbers.**

## Diversity

The impending threat to student **diversity** second most dominant concern. The potential loss of EU students remained undesirable - regardless of income concerns. 83 (of 127) participants

## Competition

Anticipation of intensified competition for EU students (and other resources) amid the changing circumstances of the sector. 72 participants discussed competition outlook

Issues raised within this theme included: the anticipation of demographic shifts between home, EU, and international students within UK HEIs; the extent to which these shifts represented 'existential' threats to the institution; as well as what disciplines and departments were particularly vulnerable

## Resource

The primary concern raised by institutional leaders and senior academics and implications for income. All 127 participants referred to EU student numbers.

## Diversity

**The impending threat to student diversity second most dominant concern. The potential loss of EU students remained undesirable - regardless of income concerns. 83 (of 127) participants**

## Competition

Anticipation of intensified competition for EU students (and other resources) amid the changing circumstances of the sector. 72 participants discussed competition outlook

Participants felt that a fall in the diversity of the student body may impact student experience and academic quality, as well as working to undermine the international reputation of UK universities - leading to the sector becoming more 'insular' and 'inward-looking'.

## Resource

The primary concern raised by institutional leaders and senior academics and implications for income. All 127 participants referred to EU student numbers.

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**Competition** is the last major theme, characterised most often by participants outlining their concerns around effects of Brexit on revenues, people (students and staff) and reputation, all contributing to intensifying the competitive pressure between institutions within the UK higher education sector. In consideration of an anticipated fall in EU students, most participants recognised that institutions with significant 'exposure' to EU students would need to 'make up

# EU Research



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## **Attracting talent**

Concern around UK's capacity to act as a magnet for academic talent.

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## **Collaboration: scale – dynamics - impact**

Concomitant fear of a 'shrinkage' of research collaboration opportunities and capabilities.  
University research benefiting local communities and regions.

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## **Giving up on EU research leadership and the rich becomes richer**

Expectation of compounding and interaction effects resulting in reduced research capacity and standing

# Attracting 'talent'

- ▶ *the UK is becoming a less attractive destination and we already know that the life of an academic is a very uncertain life, in many ways, because of the uncertainty of funding, even as it currently stands and it's a very competitive environment (...) and this is an extra twist of the screw in some ways, or perhaps an extra two nails in the coffin and again, not wanting to come across as entirely bleak, you know, I'm not entirely clear what the alternatives are, other than it's becoming increasingly less attractive. (Academic Leader, post-92)*

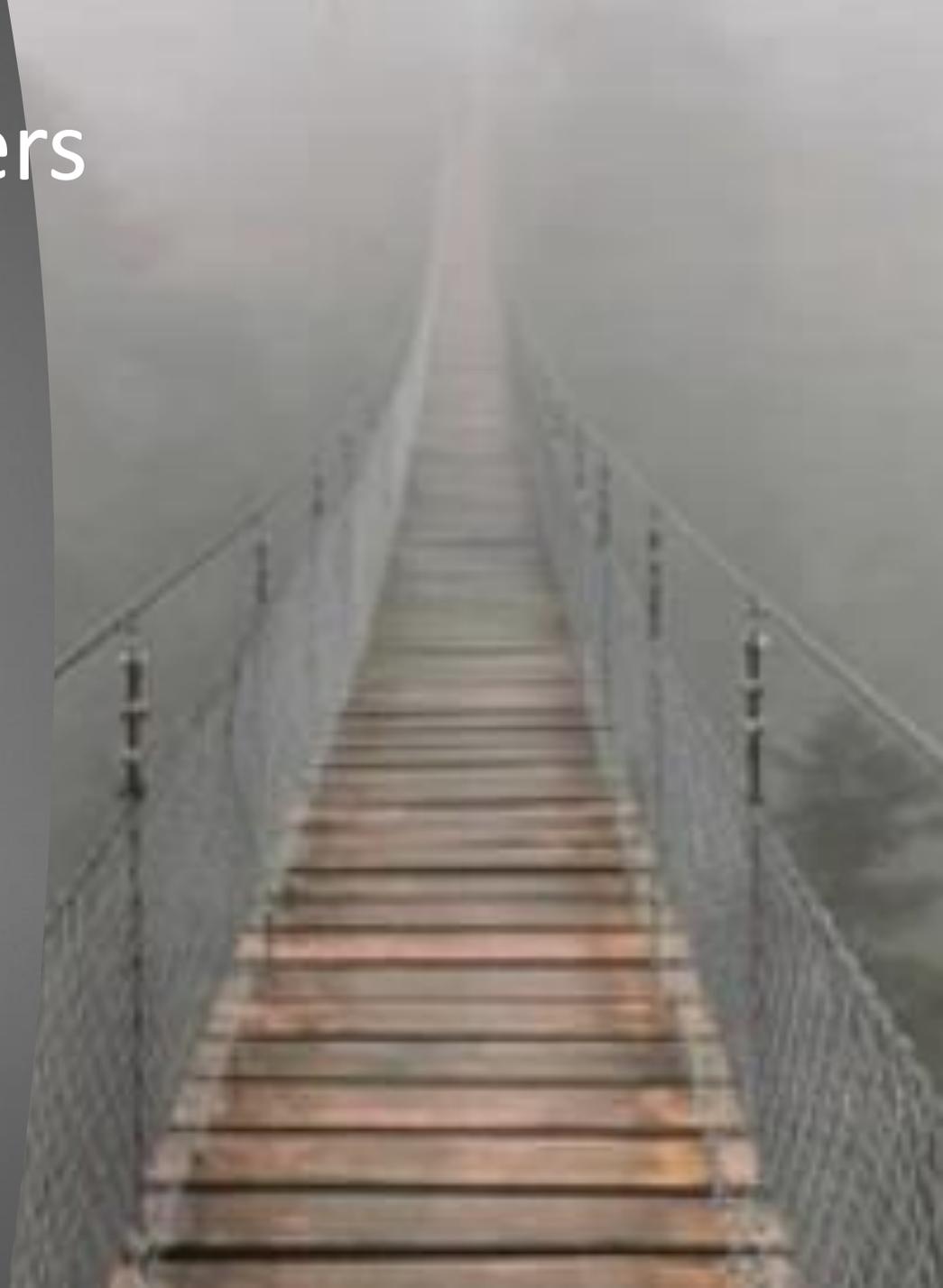
# Giving up on EU research leadership

► *In terms of the actual European Research Council funding, we stand to lose not only grants to individuals in the form of European Fellowship grants, but also we stand to lose collaborative granting opportunities with other institutions across the EU and beyond and finally, the opportunity to apply for funding in collaboration with industry, both in the form of strategic, local strategic funds, so there's a lot of European Council funding, some of which is done through the RC, which is to support regional development and strategic partnerships between industry and universities, so that is also looking uncertain at this time.*



# Interviewing senior leaders

- ▶ Well-told, positive accounts of institutional strategy.
- ▶ Fierce competition – sensitive institutional information.
- ▶ Hesitant to expose their own institution's vulnerabilities, resorting to figurative language suitable for opening conceptual spaces.
- ▶ Predominance of **metaphors of physical movement** (e.g. 'access') and associated representations of physical unity, extension and separation (e.g. 'networks', 'insular').



- ▶ Metaphors of *directed movement* can be associated with progress and goal orientation
- ▶ but also reveal concerns about being stuck, facing obstacles or having to retreat.
- ▶ Pro-Brexit discourse - Brexit would enable a shift towards a sovereign UK engaging confidently in a wider, more global network.
- ▶ interrogating underlying representations of a future **Brexit Britain and Global Britain**
- ▶ Universities confronted with changing geopolitical and economic relationships, especially with geographically close and historically significant partners.



# Whither UK higher education?

## Narratives of Interconnectedness Post-Brexit



# Narrative of Loss

- **Losing access to networks - actual barriers or perceived isolation**
  - Hindering collaboration.
  - Diminishing opportunities and collaborative potential.
  - Weakening Connectivity
- **‘Status Anxiety’ (Glencross & McCourt, 2018).**
  - Concerns about the UK's international position post-Brexit.
  - Reflection of deep-seated worries about navigating a changing geopolitical landscape and its impact on Universities
  - Questions about the role of universities as outward-looking, internationally-minded institutions.
  - Potential impact on alliances and British influence globally.

# Narrative of Agency

## Confidence, Sense of Security and Alternative Connections

- Confidence that Brexit-induced barriers may have limited impact.
- Consideration of potential for small or informal alternative connections.

## Transcending Boundaries

- Higher education and research seen as transcending national borders and rigid structures.
- Interconnected contexts and activities characterized by fluid and personal collaborations.

## Traditional Academic Autonomy

- Providing stability and flexibility despite external challenges.
- Structural barriers and external processes not viewed as deterministic.

# Reasons to believe... and faith in

- UK universities as organisations espousing **excellence** and **quality**;
  - British education as a **global brand** - faith in that brand as a resistance to doom and gloom narratives;
  - the university as a social institution surviving and thriving throughout several centuries of **history**.
- in the **good of science** triumphing over **evil politics**;
  - research from organic, ground-up collaboration.
- certain aspects of Enlightenment thought such as **human nature** or 'common sense';
  - **rational** decisions and negotiations – bringing about mutually beneficial collaborations

# Worry, fear, and turning fear into hope

- ▶ the UK's present reputation as a research dominant nation would subside over the following decades, the UK will become somewhere:
- ▶ “anyone would love to go, great past, but you're not likely to find anything really happening”.



# Hope is ....our last reason

- ▶ Hope as:
- ▶ the only **reasonable alternative** to uncertainty and threat - as all parties involved would pursue the best possible outcomes
- ▶ a tool to **resist** the immediate instinct of **hopelessness**.
- ▶ an **instrumental necessity**, you must hope because that is the path to success.



# Routes to the future of universities

- ▶ Potential expansion of global collaborations and networks was hypothesised and weighed against a foreseeable diminished connectivity with European partners.
- ▶ Participants feared the risk of the UK becoming more 'insular', institutions becoming more 'insular', the student experience becoming more 'insular', and research and collaboration becoming more 'insular'.
- ▶ However, participants expressed hope. They identified potential risks, evaluated their scale and impact, then dismissed them as being non-threats, and so being hopeful of the future from a place of (real and imagined) security.
- ▶ HEIs are generators of **knowledge diplomacy**, one of the main components of **soft power**.
- ▶ Brexit redefines the international relationships of the UK and in doing so, it directly affects those policies, practices and resources that produce and have implications for knowledge diplomacy.

▶ THANK YOU!