

NUS Written Evidence for the Education Committee

Inquiry on the impact of exiting the European Union on higher education

3 November 2016

Introduction

1. The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of more than 600 students' unions, representing more than 95 per cent of all higher education and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, NUS represents the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students' unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.
2. We welcome the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Education Committee on the now generation-defining challenge for the higher education sector that the UK's exit from the European Union presents. We would welcome all other opportunities to contribute to the Committee's work on this vitally important issue as this inquiry progresses.

Executive summary

3. NUS takes the view that students from outside the UK – whether from within the EU or beyond – bring immense cultural, economic and educational benefits to our universities and colleges, as well as wider society.
4. EU students are already applying for study for 2017/18 and, whilst we welcome assurances from the government of continued support for these students, we are concerned that the uncertain length of the process to leave the EU requires assurances for future academic years.
5. Student mobility provides a range of benefits to individual students and institutions. Programmes, such as Erasmus+, that facilitate this should be protected.
6. UK universities and colleges receive significant amounts of financial support from the EU, providing for millions of pounds for research grants and college places. Any potential shortfall as a result of leaving the EU should be mitigated by the British government to avoid irreparable damage to our institutions international reputation.
7. Discussing the future of international education within the context of leaving the EU provides an opportunity to examine and reframe our overall approach towards international students who come to the UK to study as well as resourcing opportunities for UK students who wish to study abroad.
8. Providing a welcoming environment and offering the opportunity to remain in the UK through the reintroduction of post-study work visas would ensure that the UK is an

attractive place to come and study and help reduce the skills gap we face. It will also form positive relationships that will help us develop new international partnerships.

9. As the UK develops a new relationship with other countries and plans for a future outside the EU, we will be in greater ever need of internationally literate graduates who can provide the future leadership we need to create new partnerships and relationships at a global level.
10. Students and young people should be consulted throughout the process of negotiating our exit from the EU as it will have a major impact on the future of the student experience and future employment opportunities.

Background to NUS' involvement in the EU referendum

11. The National Union of Students was clear throughout the EU referendum campaign that EU membership provided students with overwhelmingly positive benefits, and that exiting the European Union would create severely concerning risks for home students, EU students and the wider higher education sector. The situation has the potential to restrict the future academic and employment opportunities of current and future students
12. As such, we engaged positively with the debate in the referendum campaign and supported the 'Remain' campaign: our then-President Megan Dunn was a board member of Britain Stronger In Europe, as well as our devolved nations' Presidents being board members of the devolved Stronger In Europe groups. This position had a democratic mandate from our National Conference in 2015.
13. We also orchestrated a voter registration drive and 'Get out the Vote' campaign that contributed to an estimated 64% of young people voting in the referendum; an increase of over half compared to turnouts for the 2010 and 2015 General Elections.¹
14. A recent NUS survey showed that over two-thirds of students who voted in the referendum did not agree with the results. Furthermore almost 90% of students agreed that understanding and interacting with other cultures were important to bring people closer together, and 80% agreed there should be global cooperation in all projects, with Education being the highest rated. These results speak to the outward looking focus of our student members, who potentially stand to lose developmental opportunities that would be of benefit not just to the individual but society as a whole.²
15. We accept the result of the EU referendum as the historic exercise in democracy that it was; however, this does not allay our concerns – or the concerns of students across the country – about the risk and impact that exiting the EU presents to the student body. This evidence submission will explore these concerns.
16. We welcome comments made by Jo Johnson MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science, in recognising "EU and international students make an important contribution

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/09/young-people-referendum-turnout-brexite-twice-as-high>;
<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3575/How-Britain-voted-in-2015.aspx>

² NUS Student Opinion Survey October 2016

to our world-class universities and our European neighbours are among some of our closest partners. There are obviously big discussions to be had with our European partners, and I look forward to working with the sector to ensure that its voice is fully represented and that it continues to go from strength to strength".³

Evidence

17. We will address each of the questions posed by the Committee in more detail. Some areas may necessarily overlap.⁴

The likely impact of the UK exiting the EU on EU students studying in England

18. Leaving the EU will have clear consequences for student mobility and access to financial support for EU students, and for those UK students who wish to study in the EU. For the purposes of tuition fees and fee support, EU students are treated as home students in the part of the UK in which they study. This means their fees are capped in England (as well as in Wales and Northern Ireland), with loans via the Student Loans Company to pay for these (and tuition is entirely free in Scotland). EU citizens who have exercised their right of movement and been resident in the UK for 5 years can claim maintenance support too. Equally, UK students have these same rights in the other states of the EU. If those students are now to be treated in the same way as international students from outside the EU, with much higher fees and no loan facility to pay these, the most likely impact of the UK's exit from the EU is that EU student numbers will decline significantly. This will have several damaging effects.
19. In addition, the UK participates in the Erasmus+ programme which provides study and work placements, both for students based in the UK and who wish to study abroad, and for those from other participating nations who wish to come to the UK. As well as funding the cost of the placement, Erasmus+ pays a stipend to students while on their placement. Membership of Erasmus+ is not directly linked to EU membership, and some non-EU countries participate. However, it is linked to freedom of movement and if this did not form part of the Brexit settlement we may be forced to withdraw, as has happened with Switzerland.
20. Having fewer EU students diminishes the student experience: the future of the UK depends on having graduates that have a well-developed sense of understanding of international issues. There are 125,300 students from EU countries studying the UK who, it is estimated, bring in £1.13bn worth of fees income⁵. There are, in addition, 21,000 students from EU member countries studying in Further Education colleges in the UK. Many of these students use FE as a gateway to study in the HE sector. The presence of these students in our HE sector brings diverse, multi-cultural, welcoming cultures to campuses, and the friendships and new perspectives that grow between students from every corner of the world during their time at university are one of the things that make higher education so transformative. A likely impact of the UK exiting

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-higher-education-and-research-following-the-eu-referendum>

⁴ We will restrict our comments to matters relating to tertiary education whilst recognising that the process of detaching ourselves from the EU will necessarily require further consultation and discussion as laws that might impact on our student members that are underpinned by EU regulations and directives come under scrutiny and potential change.

⁵ [http://www.ukisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges---schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-students-in-UK-HE/#International-\(non-UK\)-students-in-UK-HE-in-2013-14](http://www.ukisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges---schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-students-in-UK-HE/#International-(non-UK)-students-in-UK-HE-in-2013-14)

the EU is that this culture would be jeopardised if the number of students coming to the UK from the EU reduces.

21. Indeed, once the UK has formally exited the EU, in the long term we are at risk of making the UK a less attractive – and less open – place for study. As we note above, at present the UK treats EU students in the same way as domestic students: they pay the same tuition fees and receive the same fee loans, and if they have been resident in the UK for at least 5 years, they can access the same living costs support. Whilst students applying for study who will start their courses in 2017/18 or earlier, and those who have started already, have been guaranteed the continuation of this support until the completion of their course, future years remain uncertain. We would welcome as a clear sign of intent to EU students in the interim of Brexit negotiations, amongst other measures, a reversal of the extension of the residency requirement for living costs support from 3 years to 5 years; a change that was only made in March 2016. We would also welcome urgent clarification on longer term government plans for the future of EU student access to undergraduate and postgraduate student support and research council funding.
22. Following the formal exit of the UK from the EU, a change in the status of EU students so they are instead treated in the same way as other international students would leave them subject to differential fees (which may well rise with the new TEF arrangements) and without access to the Erasmus programmes. New immigration regulations (yet to be developed) may well present another obstacle that makes studying in other EU countries much easier than the UK. There are some initial signs that EU students might be deterred: the initial round of data for 2017 admissions to Oxford and Cambridge shows that applications to medicine, dentistry veterinary courses has fallen by 9% (16% for medicine).⁶
23. Additionally, as part of the wider community in which they are situated, universities and colleges play a key role in sharing the benefits of their European and international student population with the local community and those students bring with them positive benefits. Through organised cultural events, targeted outreach programmes to schools, community groups and others, and daily interactions with local residents, these institutions contribute to a greater understanding of other nations, their cultures, traditions and perspectives. Research carried out by Universities Scotland, for example, has shown the social and cultural benefits of a diverse international learning environment, many of which are lifelong.⁷ The British Council's *Influence and Attraction* report further discusses a number of ways in which communities benefit from the cultural exchange facilitated by HE, and highlights these as reasons for governments to support such exchanges. These findings include⁸:
 - Cultural understanding reduces conflict at both international and interpersonal level;
 - Healthy impacts on tourism;
 - Increased employability of those involved who have gained cultural sensitivity and language skills; and,
 - Improved innovation, learning and enquiry.
24. Finally, a reduction in the numbers of EU students would have consequences for the economy at a national and local level. In purely financial terms, Universities UK research shows that EU students contribute £3.7bn to the national economy⁹, based on

⁶ Wonkhe. Monday Morning HE Briefing. 31 October 2016.

⁷ <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Richer-For-It-US-270813SMALL.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/influence-and-attraction-report.pdf>

⁹ <http://thepienews.com/news/eu-students-contribute-3-7bn-to-uk-economy/>

data from 2011/12. £2.27bn of this is contribute outside of campus activity. In a broader sense of the impact on the UK's economy, EU students also help to address future demographic concerns with an aging population, when those of pensionable age are expected to represent 40% of the population by 2039. At present EU nationals represent c.5% of the UK population and to not have their contribution to the working and financial life of the UK could be very damaging. Indeed, if EU nationals currently working in UK universities and colleges were to leave then it would greatly diminish the student and academic experience.

What protections should be in place for existing EU students and staff?

25. NUS welcomes the Government's announcement that EU students applying for a place at an English university in the 2017/18 academic year or earlier will continue to be eligible for student loans and grants for the duration of their course.¹⁰ We welcome similar reassurances given by the Scottish Government. However the recent High Court judgement that the British government does not have the authority to proceed with the UK's exit from the EU could potentially lengthen the process of leaving the EU beyond 2019.
26. NUS recommends that students should be reassured that their funding and status will continue on the current agreed basis until the conclusion of their programme and that no changes should be made until a clear deal on the manner in which the UK will leave the EU is agreed upon. We believe that the "status quo" should prevail until such time as article 50 has been triggered, negotiations are complete and the UK formally withdraws from the EU. There is a pressing need that students are given a cast iron set of certainties about their course programmes.
27. NUS is also concerned about the situation of students whose educational journey takes longer than the traditional 3 year degree programme, and about the situation of students who may be moving from entry courses in colleges into further years of study. Provision will need to be made for them to complete their courses.
28. A failure to clarify the immigration status of EU nationals wishing to study in the UK will act as a deterrent to prospective students. A survey by Hobsons found that 82% of students would view the UK as less favourable option to study if the UK voted to leave the EU;¹¹ now that this is the reality, it is vital to take urgent and visible action to mitigate such perceptions.
29. If maintaining the funding status of EU students is not possible whilst the UK is negotiating in years 2018/19 and potentially 2019/2020 then it is highly important that students signed onto study in these years are provided with some form of transitional protection. Students who have started a programme of study under one set of regulations should be able to complete the course under the same conditions. We would encourage temporary arrangements to be put in place whilst negotiations are finalised, which we believe could be achieved either through a British government scheme or through arrangements with universities and colleges.
30. A diverse academic workforce is of tremendous benefit to UK students and greatly enriches the overall student experience. Students need exposure to a greater level of diversity, not less. We would argue that UK universities and colleges should be able to continue to recruit from other European countries and that academic staff already

¹⁰ <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20161011132122774>

¹¹ <http://www.internationalstudentsurvey.com/2016>

domiciled here should be allowed to remain and continue to contribute to the academic, cultural and economic life of the UK. As part of developing a positive partnership approach with other countries after we have left the EU, action should be taken to make it easier for academics to come here to work in our universities and colleges from other countries and, equally, for our own academics to work abroad.

The future of the Erasmus+ programme following the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

31. The Erasmus+ programme is an EU funding programme. It promotes transnational co-operation amongst universities across Europe on different projects, and encourages student and staff mobility for study and work. As mentioned above, membership of Erasmus+ is not directly linked to EU membership, and some non-EU countries participate; however, its student and staff mobility elements are linked to freedom of movement.
32. UK universities receive an additional 15% in funding from the EU on top of British government grants. These funds are targeted at research and development and, currently, the UK is in receipt of the second largest share of EU research funding. In 2012 funding requests worth £714m were submitted to the EU by UK universities.
33. NUS believes that, in the short term, UK higher education institutions should be allowed to continue to access Erasmus+ funding until such a time as the UK formally withdraws from the EU. Partnership with the UK should not be discouraged and the Government should undertake to fund any projects that go beyond the exit deadline, as they have Horizon 2020.
34. As a negotiating position we would suggest the British government seek continued access to this vital funding stream. However, if this is not possible, then a replacement fund should be established to support the mobility of UK students and staff in Europe and beyond, as it is their understanding of international partnerships, culture and history that will be essential to creating new relationships in the future.

Risks and opportunities for UK students

35. We would suggest there are a number of risks and opportunities that the British government needs to be mindful of.
36. In terms of risks, we would have concerns if:
 - a. UK students lose out on Erasmus+ funding and the opportunity to participate in the European Higher Education Area becomes a great deal harder.
 - b. There is a decline in students from the EU because of different study visa arrangements after Brexit, and from the rest of the World due to high costs and Government statements that appear to deter students, that significantly diminishes the overall student experience just at the time when the UK will require internationally literate graduates.
 - c. A lack of internationally literate and experienced graduates compromises the future competitiveness of the UK just at a time when it is seeking to develop new partnerships. This will happen if there are less EU/International students studying in UK universities, thereby reducing the opportunities for UK students to meet with and learn from students from other countries. It will also be impacted by the numbers of UK students studying abroad declining and missing out on the benefits of international study, learning and living in another country

37. In terms of opportunities, we would encourage the government to:
- Take opportunities to develop wider mobility schemes in partnership with the rest of the world. These opportunities should be linked to mutual understanding and exchange and not to any potential trade deals. Mutual understanding will, we believe, form a strong basis for future partnerships in all areas.
 - Ensure that, on graduation, UK students do not find it harder to live and work abroad but instead reach agreements and partnerships with other countries that facilitate the exchange of experience and opportunity.
 - Assess the value of considering the right to work for EU and international students whilst they undertake a higher education course, both for their local community and economy, and to make higher education as accessible as possible for non-UK students from any background.

How changes to freedom of movement rules may affect students and academics in English higher education institutions.

38. The UK's decision to leave the EU will not end involvement with the "Bologna Process", and the "Bologna Process" (EHEA)'s aspiration to harmonise academic qualifications by 2020, it will become a lot harder for UK students to take advantage of the scheme due to increased costs. They will, after all, be treated like other non-EU students. Similarly, other barriers such as new visa arrangements may create barriers to higher education for both EU students wishing to study in the UK, and UK students wishing to study in the EU. In 2012/13 14,572 UK students studied in European countries supported by the Erasmus programme.
39. Evidence suggests that students who have taken the opportunity to study abroad have a greater level of employability: the unemployment rate amongst Erasmus students is 23% lower than those who have not taken or who were unable to take up the opportunity.¹² The British Council estimate that up to one third of UK students are considering study abroad.
40. There is also a very specific potential impact on students from the Republic of Ireland studying in Northern Ireland, and Northern Irish students studying in the Republic of Ireland. An arrangement that preserves the status quo needs to be reached and their ability to move with ease across the border is essential not just in academic terms but in terms of social cohesion going back to a time when the "border" is an issue of discussion that could well damage the hard won peace process and social cohesion.

How to ensure UK universities remain competitive after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

41. Keeping our universities competitive is intrinsically linked to keeping the UK competitive. Highly effective graduates who have experience of living and working abroad are much prized by employers. Making it easier for students to do this within Europe and beyond can only benefit the UK in the future as our country forges a new set of global relationships and partnerships. By the same token encouraging and not deterring international students from studying within the UK would seem to be a better strategy to develop strong international partnerships for the future.

¹² For more research on the link between study abroad and employability see NUS Scotland's report "Study Abroad Experience and Graduate Employability: Scottish Employers Perspectives"
https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/2012_NUS_Scot_Study%20Abroad%20Experience%20and%20Graduate%20Employability.pdf

42. NUS believes that the debate on the future direction for the UK and on future academic relationships and partnerships is an opportunity to reframe our approach to the recruitment of international students, especially as in all likelihood any new regime will treat EU and non-EU students in the same way, unless, of course a different status is agreed as part of wider negotiations.
43. In 2014-15 there were 436,585 international students recorded as studying in the UK, of these the largest cohort (18,320) were from China with India as the next highest country of origin (18,320).¹³ Both these countries represent significant markets, vital if the UK is to forge new partnerships and trade deals in the future. At present the UK is second only to the US in the share of international students it takes (13%). NUS would suggest that this percentage needs to increase and that we need to reach out to students in countries that have not traditionally seen the UK as an academic destination.
44. The way in which the UK welcomes and monitors international students from arrival to departure has a profound effect on future international research projects, educational and trade relationships.
- International students should not form part of the calculation of net migration figures. Their arrival and departure is easy to monitor. We benefit from the contribution made to academic life in the UK; we also, of course, benefit from the large fees that universities can charge, but ultimately we benefit in terms of our international reputation and the potential this carries for future partnerships.
 - The post-study work visa should be reinstated. It provides an opportunity for international students to contribute their skills to the UK economy and in some cases it allows them to attain professional recognition linked to their academic achievement.
 - The costs for international students are very high and we would invite the British government to reflect on the extent to which this acts as a deterrent to an international student's motivation to study here, given the growth of other international HE providers. We have come across situations where fees have risen mid-course and where hidden costs have not been made explicit. NUS takes the view that international fees should be capped. We note with concern suggestions that the ability to recruit international students will be linked to TEF ratings, once the government's latest HE reforms are complete.¹⁴ We would also suggest that fees be payable in instalments wherever possible.
 - International students should have the same access to NHS facilities as home students and should not have to pay a surcharge. Allowing international students to work whilst they are studying can ensure tax contributions in the same way as other members of society.
 - Student migrants who have been displaced through conflict should be treated in the same way as domestic students, as they do not have the resources (or government backing) to continue their studies. Allowing students to continue their studies, recognising their qualifications and prior learning will be of benefit for them personally, for the UK whilst they have temporary residence here, and for the long term when they return to their country of origin with qualifications at critical moments in their national future. We would also encourage universities and colleges to develop scholarship schemes or fundraising focussed on alleviating hardship for students who may suddenly find their source of income cut off due to circumstances back home.

¹³ <http://institutions.ukcisa.org.uk//info-for-universities-colleges--schools/policy-research--statistics/research--statistics/international-students-in-uk-he/>

¹⁴ <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/10/full-text-amber-rudds-conference-speech/>

- f. NUS also believes that the tone of some government announcements concerning migration and linking it to international study could have the impact of making the UK appear to not be a welcoming and supportive environment in which to study. In a survey conducted by NUS in 2013 it was found that 50% of the 3,000 international students interviewed felt unwelcome¹⁵ and we would suggest that the atmosphere in the post referendum environment has exacerbated such feelings. Less invasive procedures for monitoring the presence of international students would do much to build stronger social cohesion.
- g. Programmes for international students to study English (ESOL for example) should be adequately supported to ensure that international students can fully engage in UK study programmes and can be empowered to integrate within local communities.

What the Government’s priorities should be during negotiations for the UK to exit the EU with regard to students and staff at higher education institutions?

45. NUS would suggest the following priorities:
- a. The preservation of student and academic mobility within the EU and the EHEA whether under current arrangements or through newly developed system.
 - b. Funding for research, mobility and other innovative projects that will be lost as a consequence of leaving the EU should either be maintained or replaced.
 - c. The continued opportunity for UK universities and colleges to access funding for collaborative projects that build our expertise and the economy as a whole.
 - d. The continuation of the ability of EU academics already here to live and work in the UK and for UK academics currently in the EU to continue to work within the EU and EHEA.
 - e. Reiterating in the strongest possible terms the UK’s commitment to the Bologna Process (EHEA) and working with the sector to develop a higher profile for and participation in study abroad.
 - f. Making sure that students from Northern Ireland studying in Ireland, and vice versa, are not penalised in any new arrangement. Cross border exchange needs to continue.

What steps the Government should take to mitigate any possible risks and take advantage of any opportunities?

46. We note that the impact of leaving the EU on university research and funding will not be covered by the inquiry as these are policy areas for the responsibility of the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The Science and Technology Committee is conducting an inquiry into the implications and opportunities stemming from the UK’s exit from the EU on science and research. However we would make the more general point that the research grants from the EU provide an opportunity for cross-border collaboration that ensures we maintain our competitive edge in terms of the reputation of our institutions but also in terms of future trading partnerships and relationships.
47. We expect the withdrawal negotiations to be open and fair, with all affected policy areas considered in necessary detail. Students should be consulted throughout the process, particularly on the issues that will affect them, such as research funding and

¹⁵ <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/international-students-feel-unwelcome-in-uk-as-immigration-bill-set-to-create-new-barriers-to-study/>

Erasmus+ participation. If we cannot either negotiate participation in the Erasmus+ scheme or if no funds are forthcoming to support student mobility we are concerned that study abroad will introduce yet another layer of inequality with only those who can afford to take up the option taking part. We would argue that 16-17 year olds should also be consulted since it is arguably their future that will be affected most.

48. Given that employers have clearly indicated that they value those students who have studied and lived abroad then NUS would recommend that any new mobility programmes could find some resource from employers themselves. We would also invite universities and colleges to look at creating more flexible windows of opportunity for international study to enable the greater levels of participation and engagement that the UK will need in the future.