
Pulling together after Brexit

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Like many physicists in the UK, I spent the final Friday of June in shock. Voters in Britain had just opted by a margin of 52% to 48% to leave the European Union (EU) – and suddenly nothing in the world seemed to make sense any more. I'd never really thought a majority would want a British exit (Brexit) from the EU. As with the referendum over Scottish independence from the UK in 2014, I'd assumed voters would come to their senses at the last minute.

Sadly that assumption proved naïve and misplaced. On the day of the referendum, a narrow majority chose to quit. Some wanted Britain to “take back control” – whatever that means – from a supposedly undemocratic EU. Others seemed angry with high levels of immigration into the UK and were keen to block the free movement of people from the EU into the country. For many, voting for Brexit was simply a protest against politicians in general, who – they felt – had failed them economically.

Scientists in the UK, however, are huge supporters of the EU. A poll of more than 900 researchers by Nature (531 559) in March showed that 83% were in favour of Britain remaining a member. Just 12% wanted to leave, with 5% unsure. That level of support is hardly surprising. Between 2007 and 2013, the UK won more grants than any other EU nation from the European Research Council and snapped up a quarter (€1.1bn) of Marie-Skłodowska Curie actions, which help researchers move around the EU.

By opting to leave the UK, all those benefits are at risk. To use a cliché, the UK has shot itself in the foot. Apart from the potential loss of funding, Brexit will lead to years of uncertainty over EU programmes of which the UK is a member, including the ITER fusion project in France. There are already reports of some UK physicists being frozen out of Horizon 2020 projects by non-UK

EU researchers who don't want their collaborations jeopardized.

For the time being, the UK is still in the EU. To leave, the government first must trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and then has up to two years to negotiate exit terms. That means Britain won't actually leave the EU until 2018 or even 2019. Thankfully the UK government has reduced some uncertainty by promising to fulfil Britain's share of any Horizon 2020 projects that run beyond the date it leaves the EU. But whether the UK is part of future Horizon programmes is unclear.

The other big danger of Brexit is that the UK could set immigration controls that make it tougher for researchers to move to and from Britain. At *Physics World*, we've already heard of EU nationals turning down job offers at UK universities because of question marks over Britain's future relationship with the EU. Some EU researchers based in the UK are wondering if they're even welcome here any more.

The prospect of Brexit makes me sad, disappointed and angry, but those feelings will get us nowhere. One thing is clear: the UK must remain a full participant in future EU scientific programmes beyond 2020 as, without Britain, EU research will be weaker. Few British scientists wanted to leave the EU and, for the sake of European physics, I urge other European physicists to continue working with collaborators here in the UK. We need your support.

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