

A less attractive UK higher education to EU students?

An unprecedented challenge, yet a predictable Brexit fallout

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Declining EU student enrolments post-Brexit

- ↓ The impact of Brexit on student demographics in the UK is undeniable.
- ↓ UCAS data:
 - ↪ 44% drop in EU student applications across programmes (30 June 2021)
 - ↪ 56.4% drop in EU student undergraduate admissions (7 September 2021)
- ↓ A direct consequence of Brexit,
 - ↪ with destabilising effects on individual study programmes and academic units;
 - ↪ and ramifications likely to run deep within the system (e.g. student experience for home and international students, HE sector's reputation).

Unprecedented drop of EU students in UK higher education

- ▶ notable individually but,
- ▶ intersects with research culture, performance, quality - as well as the UK's attractiveness to EU researchers and academics.
- ▶ *distinct* but also *compounding* effects - not limited to the immediate quantitative change in student numbers and institutional finances.
- ▶ A large-scale qualitative study (2017-19)
 - ▶ scope and depth - authentic insight into - trustworthy assessment of the myriad impacts that lie beneath and extend beyond numeric indicators.

Project description

- ▶ ESRC-funded Brexit Priority research (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
- ▶ 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.

<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 logo and navigation links: About Us, Research, Publications, Events, News, Blog. The main content area is titled 'Research' and features a project card for 'Brexit, trade, migration and higher education'. The card includes a 'Project 3.6' label, the project title, and a description: '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.' The card also shows the project period '2020-2023' and '2015-2020', and lists related topics: 'Global higher education engagement', 'Social and economic impact of higher education', and 'Local higher education engagement'.

Focusing our analysis on EU students

- 'Students' were quantitatively important - number of references
- Brexit directly affects the status of EU students
 - introduction of international student fees for EU students;
 - discontinuation of their access to the UK student loans system; a
 - visa requirements for migration following the end of freedom of movement.
- European students - a distinctive demographic whose specific circumstances have rarely been considered
 - partly shared with (other) international students similar cultural experiences of living and studying in a different country
 - enjoyed similar rights to those of UK students during UK's EU membership conferring a degree of security, protection, but also agency to exercise their rights – could lead to higher levels of inclusion in the host society.


EU students in the data set – Nvivo coding

- ↴ For the analysis focusing on EU students the coding used was taken initially from the topic: 'Implications and consequences of Brexit'.
- ↴ Within this node, three sub-nodes were dedicated to students: 'EU students' (527 references), 'non-EU international students' (174) and 'UK students' (82 references).
- ↴ Further analysis revealed that there was some overlap - many participants referred to multiple categories of students simultaneously during their interviews.
- ↴ The EU students node in isolation contained 50,000~ words, roughly 10% of the greater data set. All 127 participants referred to EU students.
- ↴ The 'EU students node' was further analysed following a process of inductive coding.

Participants - Distribution of roles

▶ The data consisted of 127 interviews with senior executives, administrators, academic leaders, governing body members, and some student representatives.

▶ 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

Findings;
Three main
themes emerging
in discussion of
EU students

EU Student Numbers

Unanimous prediction of a drop in applicant numbers.

Diversity

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

Competition

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

EU Student Numbers

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

Diversity

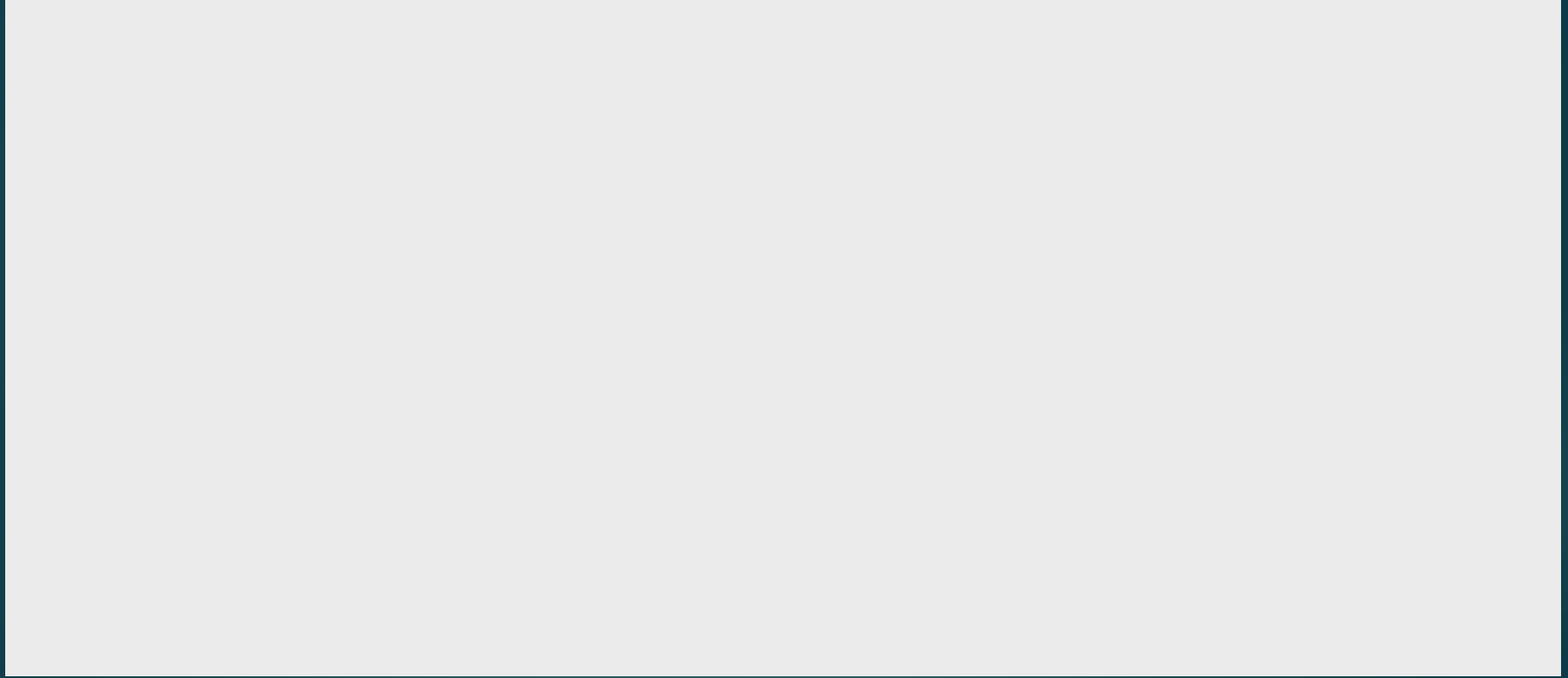
The impending threat to student **diversity** second most dominant concern. The potential loss of EU students remained undesirable - regardless of income concerns. 83 (of 127) participants

Competition

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

Three main themes emerging in discussion of EU students

EU student numbers:
drop is on the cards



EU student numbers: drop is on the cards

- ↓ Disincentive of bureaucratic processes (i.e. visas) and the newly introduced economic obstacles for EU students (e.g. fees, no access to loans).
- ↓ Brexit had 'sent out' an 'unwelcoming message', and that EU students would hold off on studying in the UK due to the creation of this 'hostile environment'.
- ↓ Disruptions to different forms of EU involvement would have a concomitant impact on EU student enrolments.
 - ← Fewer EU academics and researchers coming to the UK will drive down the 'organic' growth of EU students.
 - ← Diminished participation in collaboration and research networks - UK becoming more 'inward looking' and isolationist. UK universities will no longer be the partner of choice for their EU counterparts.
 - ← Disruptions in student exchanges and Erasmus mobility



- ▶ *(...) if the fee structure is such that it becomes prohibitively expensive - and we already have high fees in our country, if you look at our fees compared to Europe, generally they don't have any - so you know, why would you go to the UK to study when you can go elsewhere, and you don't come out with an amount of debt?*
- ▶ *(...) lot of the students are going to be worried, with visas and funding and money and then they feel like it's too much trouble to come over here and study, that they'll maybe just stay over there.*
- ▶ *(...) now it's pretty easy, you know, it's just across the sea and there is no paperwork to do, it's going to make the recruitment process as well more complicated if there is a visa.*
- ▶ *(...) fees are one thing but access to the loan book becomes absolutely mission critical.*



↓ (...) since Brexit, and since just before Brexit as well, I think that we've had a lot more feedback from students that they feel that - to use the phrase 'hostile environment' - certainly for international students, but even for EU students, there have been conversations around that, and about that they, merely the fact the vote happened makes them feel unwelcome (...)

↓ I think the white European students, because they haven't faced any kind of racism or discrimination before, they find it more marked (...)

↓ (...) issues around attitudes and how that's changed since Brexit is something that we talk to a whole range of people about, including the Chief Constable, so there's been a definite turn towards intolerance (...), so I would say that that's something that we talk about a lot.

Reduced EU student numbers: an 'existential' threat (to financial institutional viability)?

- ↓ Senior leaders found themselves confronting the scale of the threat to their institutions. The destabilising effect of Brexit prompted leaders to examine whether or not the danger could be considered 'existential', as the senior executive below describes:
 - ↩ *(...) there are institutions where these things are existential, if you're an institution, you know this rough figure that about a third of British universities have lost about 20% upwards of their UK student numbers since 2013, so you've got this happening... you've filled your boots with EU students (...)*
- ↓ The risks to the sector were described by some as: 'sector shrinkage'; others feared 'universities going under'; 'closure of a large number of universities'; or 'universities disappearing'; some questioned whether the government would take action to prevent universities from 'going bust'.
- ↓ UK universities contemplate and appraise changes of 'size and shape' through the lens of financial 'viability' for individual institutions, and whether or not their operations could be affected to a degree that could cause business failure.

Reduced EU student numbers: an 'existential' threat (to financial institutional viability)?

- ↳ The majority of our participants did not anticipate their institution to experience a substantial loss of income.

We reckon we would be able to plug gaps, but for some other universities anecdotally, I hear it would be extremely difficult for them and you know, it could be that some universities end up going to the wall or having to merge or whatever, but we're not in that situation.

- ↳ Only a minority expanded for why this was the case: less students paying higher fees either mitigates income loss or presents an opportunity to make money.

I think our international fees are double our UK/Europe fees, so we will need, if it's half the number of students, we should be okay (...) So on Brexit specifically, our working assumption is half the number of students but twice the fees, so it will net off.

Reduced EU student numbers: Prevalence of an institution-wide view

- ↳ Participants show more allegiance to the university as a whole.
- ↳ Changing student demographics could impact on particular academic departments, units, and subject areas - however, as long as overall numbers could be accounted for, the specific negative consequences for individual departments and subject areas could be tolerated:

(...) we've got a certain number of schools or courses where we've got more than 50% of our students are from the EU, so (...) over 50, you've definitely got an issue, because you may lose, like, Psychology is one of those, you may lose lots and lots of EU students, but Scottish students might want to come and study something else.

(...) so whilst the university might see its income and its student numbers maintained, actually it won't necessarily be in the same bits of the institution.

- ↳ Restructuring at a departmental level was simply noted by senior executives, often in an impassive way and without receiving thorough exploration in the interviews.

Reduced EU student numbers: Threat to academic units

- ↳ In contrast to institutional leadership's bird's eye view, staff members closer to 'boots-on-the-ground' daily activity were more concerned with the risk to individual departments and programmes.

(...) cause European students tend to come for specific courses (...) without those European students, you know, not all the modules would be viable, so it's not just something you can sort of say, 'that's all, we'll put a border around that'

- ↳ In one of the potentially affected faculties, the anxiety was palpable:

Financially for me it threatens quite a lot, to be honest, because income that we currently derive from European students in my faculty is about £1.3 million, so without that, that leaves a fairly sizable hole to fill.

- ↳ Participants referred to a wide number of vulnerable disciplines, such as: Arts and Media, Business and Management, Computing / Computer sciences, Engineering, Law, Languages and Literature, Life Sciences, and Politics.
- ↳ The broad range of subjects indicates that no subject area is categorically immune. Specific vulnerabilities could be unique to each institution and their particular distribution of students across subjects and departments.

Reduced EU student numbers: Threat to programmes – ‘student demand’

↓ Participants related the viability of programmes to the student demand.

(...) some programmes may not be sustainable anymore.

(...) for us as a business, that makes that school or unit not sustainable perhaps, so we might have to change quite fundamentally what we do as a university because the student demographics will change and what they want to study will change.

↓ This highlights the power of student demand and preferences within the UK higher education system - framing of students as the customers of higher education.

↓ Shifts in student demand have the potential to either facilitate or impede knowledge diversification and disciplinary growth, making them subject to market forces.

↓ Participants feared that:

- ↪ Courses with an international orientation could decline as a result of reduced demand from UK students who do not show an inclination towards course content with an international or global focus.
- ↪ This could act as a decreased incentive for overseas students to seek out education in the UK
- ↪ Home student choice and experience will be affected as a result of programmes discontinuing.

Reduced EU student numbers: organic growth - overall EU engagement

- ↳ The increase in EU student enrolments was often attributed to the parallel growth of European professional networks and collaborations driven by EU staff.

but then I think there's just a lot of organic involvement with Europe generally because we have a very high proportion of European staff, [...], so there's just a very organic relationship building, I think, with other institutions and with the European Union and research funding, EU students, so on..."

- ↳ This 'organic' growth of EU student numbers contrasts with 'top down' strategy.
- ↳ Highlights not only discrete areas of activity but how academic environments are composed of elements that build on one another.

Diversity: Fundamental and defining

- ▶ 83 (of 127) participants spoke about EU students and diversity. There were no directed questions on student diversity as part of the research design.
- ▶ Diversity was frequently characterised as a defining institutional characteristic, fundamental to what a university is and does:
 - ▶ *...having a diverse campus with loads of different people from different places is just our basic sense of what a good international university should be;*
 - ▶ *[European students] have always been a significant part of our being, it's not just about our growth, it's about our being as a university.*
- ▶ Several participants described their institution by the 'international atmosphere' or 'feel' of the campus, lamenting how their university would be worse off without the visible diversity they recognised was an integral part of their university's 'identity'.

Diversity Under Threat

- ▶ *[the] benefit for us is obviously both in terms of student numbers, but actually it's much bigger than that, it's the cultural, the richness that students from Europe bring, hopefully, and it's an exchanged richness*
- ▶ 'Rich' with; 'poorer' without ;
- ▶ There was widespread concern that the UK would become more 'cut off', 'isolated', and 'insular' - with concomitant impacts on the quality of student experience, and the 'organic development' of research cultures and collaboration networks;
- ▶ Some participants expressed concern that a fall in EU student numbers from a wide variety of nations would be replaced by international students from a significantly narrower range of geographies, lowering student diversity in the sector despite a possible increase in non-UK applicants.

Diversity cont. - Accolade, Selling Point

Many highlighted that having a more diverse student body was a recognised status symbol and accolade denoting quality and international reach:

*a global university wants to **interact** globally, and wants to **be seen to be open** - we want a diverse, international student population*

In some cases there was accompanying acknowledgement that projecting diversity was a marketable asset conferring competitive advantage:

*it makes us outward looking and I would say much more attractive as an institution ... it's a **big pull** for students and academics*

Diversity cont. - Intrinsic Good for students

- ❑ *The experience of students will be a bit more insular than it was so the student experience will be changed and it won't be enriched as a consequence of that.*
- ❑ **A Benefit to Home Students** - particularly disadvantaged home students as an “ongoing mechanism for cultural exchange”, as a rare chance for home students to experience other cultures and interact with people from Europe, to ‘develop as people’, and to be given an ‘opportunity to become good global citizens’;
- ❑ **Benefit to the non-UK, EU/international students** – a chance to participate in ‘globally engaged institutions’;
- ❑ **A enrichment of student personal relationships and networks** - A universal opportunity for students of all origins to meet people from around the world, to develop “friendships” and wider social networks.

Competition - A Zero Sum Game

- ↓ 72 participants refer directly to how competition for EU students or the places left behind by EU students would impact on their institution or the wider sector, with a widespread acknowledgement of differential impacts on institutions dependent on their relative position within the established hierarchy of UK HE.
- ↓ Participants were not directly asked to speak on competition, but were asked questions on recruitment and strategy.
- ↓ Continual vertical comparison emerged within the hierarchy of UK HE, Oxbridge compared to Russell Group, and then post-92, etc.
- ↓ Oxford and Cambridge widely seen as untouchable - totally immune from negative impacts.
- ↓ London picked out as the powerhouse of the UK - being in London is a massive competitive asset; 'high ranking' London universities immune to 'going under the radar' on the world stage.

Competition Cont.- A Zero Sum Game



- ▶ Some high-ranking institutions took solace in their size, activity, and reputation as dominant research institutions to protect them from negative impacts.
- ▶ Smaller, highly reputable universities leaned on their position of traditional advantage, their heritage as elite cultural institutions, or gained security from their unique subject provision.
- ▶ Many institutions had optimistic strategies in place to attempt to counteract the fall in EU student numbers (through e.g. bursaries and scholarships for EU students, TNE activities globally, more aggressive strategic partnerships with EU institutions to continue to encourage EU applicants.)

Competition Cont. - Winners and Losers

- Despite widespread perception that more deleterious effects would be felt in 'lower-ranked', 'less prestigious' institutions, some institutions anticipated a financial gain from the introduction of international fees for EU students despite a potential drop in numbers of up to 50%.
- Perception that there may be a shift in 'quality' across the sector as the decline of EU students opens up more places for the best home and international students at universities higher up the traditional hierarchy.
- Horizontal comparison with mainland institutions, especially as more mainland EU universities opt to deliver provision in English.

Competition Cont. - Winners and Losers

- ↳ The dominance of the English language as global lingua franca of HE and science was a source of reassurance for institutions across the sector irrespective of their size or reputation - all believed teaching in English would allow the UK sector as a whole to remain competitive.
- ↳ Widespread doubt about what would motivate EU students to study in the UK if faced with higher fees and mobility constraints.
- ↳ Sentiment that the UK would retain attractiveness as a cultural destination, but that 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”.

Concluding statements

- ⌘ Brexit presents as a major disruption to that ecosystem with far reaching consequences attributable to the anticipated effects of overlapping elements compounding on one another, spilling over, becoming indistinct.
- ⌘ There is a possible risk of these issues, exposed by Brexit, being once again obfuscated by the impact of the global pandemic.
- ⌘ Brexit has become the instigating factor motivating deeper interrogation of pre-Brexit issues, some deeply ingrained, some newly emergent:

Brexit is only one facet and I'm not even sure it's the largest facet in UK higher education, you know, we've got the higher education review processes, review of funding, we have the change to the research environment post-STERN, so yeah, in many ways, I think Brexit is dwarfed by the larger changing context and it's difficult to then say, when we look at the impact of that total change context, how much of it will be directly attributable to Brexit, perhaps less than we might think, but only because we underestimate the rest of the change.

I think we need to position Brexit in terms of being almost part of a perfect storm, so it's not necessarily Brexit in itself, there's a number of other contributing factors, both pre-Brexit and post-Referendum, that have created a storm, so student fees, loans, issues of migration and the change in landscape, so I think it's not just Brexit, but kind of the wider scope of that that'll make access more difficult.

Concluding statements



Closer to participants' perceptions, through the lens of EU student numbers, diversity, and competition Brexit has revealed, magnified, and accentuated existing issues in the sector, while also motivating consideration of the future, prompting considerations of identity, mission, purpose, and the relationships between universities, policy, and communities.