Written evidence submitted by the University of Birmingham

About the University of Birmingham

For more than a century, the University of Birmingham has thrived by being purposeful, pragmatic and pioneering. Founded in 1900, we now have more than 20,000 undergraduate and 14,000 postgraduate students and employ more than 7,000 staff from more than 150 nationalities and backgrounds.

Characterised by a tradition of innovation, our teaching and research has broken new ground, pushed forward the boundaries of knowledge and made an impact on people’s lives. In the recent UK-wide assessment of the quality of research in universities, 28% of our research was rated as world-leading and a further 53% rated internationally excellent. The University was also commended\(^1\) by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2016 for both the quality and enhancement of its student learning opportunities.

The University of Birmingham’s ability to attract and retain globally competitive talent is a vital component in ensuring our research and teaching are world-class. Furthermore, our international community plays a valuable role in us being able to offer an enriching international social and cultural experience for all at the University, and indeed to the wider local community.

The University of Birmingham, and the wider UK Higher Education sector, is incredibly well-positioned to play an important part in post-Brexit Britain and, as an anchor institution in the city and region, is uniquely-placed to work with its local communities as a leading driver of economic, social and cultural growth and to act as a bridge to international thinking and market opportunities.

Executive summary

The UK Higher Education sector is a success story. It is held in high regard around the world and is known for the exceptional quality of its teaching and research. The steps that the Government takes in preparing for and implementing Brexit must build upon this success, rather than in any way diminish it, and its contribution to the economy.

As the UK leaves the EU it is essential that the UK sends strong message that it is open for business, putting in place the conditions for universities to be able to continue to attract the brightest and the best talent, to support international research collaborations, and to provide international mobility opportunities for students and staff.

We are deeply concerned that Brexit will lead to the country being – or being perceived to be - considerably less welcoming to overseas students, particularly

\(^{1}\) A commendation is the highest rating possible awarded by the QAA.
when combined with the alarming proposals from the Home Office to reduce international student numbers. Non-UK students are an important part of our success. They create a diverse community on campus and help all our students to become internationally-minded, culturally aware, global citizens. The benefits extend well beyond the university in which they study; in the West Midlands international students contribute £408m to the regional economy in off-campus expenditure, generating 5,180 jobs in the region and beyond. EU and international students return home with a long-standing connection to the UK making a valuable and enduring contribution to our soft power, this will be of increasing importance to how the UK positions itself internationally post-Brexit. In summary, our response sets out:

- **The impact of Brexit on HE, students and staff - now and prior to Brexit**
  Highlighting the need to provide as much certainty and stability as possible to enable students and staff to make timely decisions about their future.

- **Staff and student mobility post-Brexit**
  Outlining the assurances that staff and students need post-Brexit, and the future of the UK’s participation in Erasmus+.

- **Taking the opportunity of Brexit to ensure UK HE remains world-class and internationally competitive**
  Setting out the strong international character of UK HE and how we should build on this competitive advantage, and the importance of the future direction of immigration and research policy and funding.

- **Priorities during Brexit negotiations**
  Summarising what the University of Birmingham considers to be the main priorities for Brexit negotiations, and the parallel steps the UK Government can and should be taking to ensure that UK HE remains world-class and internationally competitive.

### The impact of Brexit on HE, students and staff - now and prior to Brexit

1. There is obviously significant uncertainty about the nature of the UK’s future relationship with the EU, which, in turn, fuels considerable uncertainty regarding the status of EU students and staff and the future choices they make. Currently, 794 (11%) of the University’s staff are EU (non-UK) nationals, and 1,625 (4.3%) of our students are EU (non-UK) nationals.

2. We are deeply concerned at the lack of clarity for our EU staff and there have been a number of instances where potential highly-skilled EU academics have withdrawn from recruitment processes citing Brexit. We also have examples of our EU academics being targeted for recruitment by European universities.

3. The decisions of EU students to come to study in the UK are also being adversely affected by this uncertainty in relation to their status and access to student finance. While the University of Birmingham welcomed the announcement the Government made on 11 October 2016 that European
Union students applying for university places in the 2017 - 2018 academic year will have access to student funding support, we are disappointed that this decision was made at such a late stage, coming just four days before the deadline for the 2017-18 UCAS admissions cycle. Numbers of EU students applying for the most competitive UK university courses dropped 9%; for the University of Birmingham, applications from EU students fell 14%. This is clearly attributable to the lack of clarity regarding access to student finance.

4. We strongly urge the Government to provide immediate clarity on EU students’ access to student funding support for the 2018-2019 academic year, including stipulating that this these terms will apply for the duration of their course. This will help eliminate uncertainty as students begin to make decisions about whether to study in the UK.

**Staff and student mobility post-Brexit**

5. Post-Brexit, we need to ensure that the UK continues to be a destination of choice for talented EU students and staff. In redefining the UK’s relationship with the EU and the world, the UK should be taking this opportunity to strengthen and broaden opportunities for UK students to study or work abroad as part of their studies. International experiences, and the global cross-pollination of people and ideas, are key to ensuring the development of a talented, highly-skilled, well-connected workforce needed to power the UK economy. The mobility of EU staff and student has also been key to the University’s business engagement, particularly with companies that operate an international supply/innovation/knowledge chain; these kinds of benefits are important in the context of the UK developing international trade agreements and a new industrial strategy in the post-Brexit economy.

**Staff and student assurances**

6. The HE sector requires continued freedom of movement of academics and researchers, to and from the EU, to enable the EU and UK’s leading researchers to work collaboratively on global challenges and the pressing research questions of the day. Our capacity to recruit the highest quality staff (including from the EU) for specific roles must not be impaired. This will require confirmation of the continued working rights of existing and future EU staff and their dependants in our universities. There have already been a number of instances where potential highly-skilled EU academics have withdrawn from recruitment processes citing Brexit. We also have examples of our EU academics being targeted for recruitment by European universities.

7. There should be a commitment to protect the status of EU nationals already in this country in order to provide reassurance to our academic, research, support and professional services staff, and to avoid a brain drain from our universities. Failure to do so will undermine the leading position of UK HE. There also needs to be confirmation of the immigration status of existing and prospective EU students and their right to remain in the UK for work or postgraduate study.

8. Information regarding the fee rate EU students might move to (currently they pay the same fees as UK students) and when this would come into effect needs to be decided and communicated as early as possible to provide students and universities with the information with which to be able to plan.

Erasmus+

9. The University of Birmingham sees Erasmus+ as an essential means of being able to offer an international experience to our students. In the 2016-17 academic year the University of Birmingham has 283 outbound students on an Erasmus+ placement (study, work or teaching assistantship) and 308 inbound students on an Erasmus+ study placement.

10. Such experiences not only enrich the student experience and help to create global citizens and leaders, but we also see the positive impacts this activity has on the overall student experience as documented in NSS (National Student Survey) and in students’ employability outcomes. Moreover, participation in Erasmus+ further enhances the international reputation of UK HE, and participating institutions such as the University of Birmingham.

11. The HE sector therefore needs be able to continue to participate in EU mobility schemes such as Erasmus+. UK Government should seek to negotiate access to the Erasmus+ programme post-Brexit and the current funding levels for Erasmus+ should be maintained by the UK Government.

12. Without access to such a scheme we face a situation where mobility may be restricted to UK students who can afford it without a grant and, similarly, fewer EU students will be able to come to study in the UK without Erasmus+ funds. Furthermore, student placements abroad in enterprise, including during sandwich courses, might be compromised too.

13. It should also be noted that in 2014 the European Commission launched International Credit Mobility (ICM) as part of Erasmus+ which provides funding opportunities for Erasmus+ countries to work with partner countries (those outside Europe), essentially creating an Erasmus+ programme on a global scale. Therefore, EU students now have opportunities to use this funding to go anywhere in the world, including other English speaking countries such as USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. ICM is proving to be a very popular and competitive scheme among EU HEIs, and further demonstrates the global nature of competing for and attracting EU students. This scheme also shows the international opportunities that Erasmus+ provides for UK students.

Taking the opportunity of Brexit to ensure UK HE remains world-class and internationally competitive

A strong international character: Building on the competitive advantage of UK HE

14. UK HE is one of the most successful UK exports. It is the second most popular destination for international students (behind the USA) although the
UK is losing market share as other countries gain ground. To remain competitive, UK HE needs the flexibility to attract the best and brightest minds regardless of their nationality. Moreover, we also support proposals from Universities UK for the launch of a UK international student strategy, backed by investment, to support international marketing, mobility and partnerships globally to increase higher education export earnings. This will also support the message that UK HE Plc is open for business, and remains resolutely outward and internationalist in outlook.

15. If the immigration or research funding regime is not attractive to the best staff and students then we risk substantial damage to the reputation of one of the UK’s largest and most successful export sectors.

**Immigration**

16. We are deeply concerned that the vote to leave the EU has led to the country being – or being perceived to be - considerably less welcoming to overseas students, particularly when combined with the alarming proposals from the Home Office to reduce international student numbers. Non-UK students are an important part of the success of the HE sector and of the University of Birmingham. They create a diverse community on campus and help all our students to become internationally-minded, culturally aware, global citizens. The benefits extend well beyond the university in which they study; in the West Midlands international students contribute £408m to the regional economy in off-campus expenditure, generating 5,180 jobs in the region and beyond. EU and international students return home with a long-standing connection to the UK making a valuable and enduring contribution to our soft power.

17. In considering how the UK positions itself to attract EU (and indeed non-EU students) it is worth highlighting the results of a recent poll, conducted by ComRes (October 2016) showing that the public are supportive of international students with 76% not viewing them as immigrants at all. This is consistent across those who voted to leave the EU and those who did not. The poll also showed that 71% would support a policy to help boost growth by increasing overseas students. 81% of those who expressed a view, agreed that international students have a positive impact on the local economies and towns in which they study. Recent coverage in The Times also suggests that unpublished government data reveals that levels of students overstaying are a fraction of the numbers previously claimed.

18. We therefore strongly urge Government to exclude international students (which, post-Brexit, is likely also to include EU students) from net migration figures.

19. The UK immigration system should be reformed to ensure that talented students and staff can come to the UK regardless of their nationality, alongside sensible and proportionate arrangements for the handling of academic and student visas. This is essential in ensuring that UK higher education and research remains globally competitive.
20. Moreover, many of the UK’s cities outside of London have significant higher-level skills gaps and attracting high quality students who may in turn become local employees and entrepreneurs in sectors facing high-skills shortages is a way of boosting local economic growth. In the context of sustained and balanced growth throughout the UK, we would urge Government to consider the minimum salary thresholds for post-study work visas for international students graduating from UK universities, so that these thresholds are lower for jobs found outside London to reflect the labour market and salary differences between the capital and elsewhere in the country. This would be a practical way to level the playing field and ensure that international graduates are incentivised to make a contribution by seeking work in cities and towns in the UK where high level skills are most needed to boost local economic growth.

EU research funding

21. While we understand that this specific inquiry is not focussing on the impact of Brexit on university EU research funding, as this is a policy area that is the responsibility of the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, nevertheless in addressing the question of the competitiveness of UK universities it is necessary to raise the matter of research funding. Research and teaching at the University of Birmingham are intrinsically linked and therefore research funding issues are of direct relevance to students and teaching.

22. The UK Government can support UK universities to maintain their excellence and to work collaboratively on global challenges and the pressing research questions of the day by providing the conditions and mechanisms for supporting international research collaboration, both with partners within and outside the EU. As seen since the referendum, the mobility and recruitment of the best European academics to the UK HE is also dependent on their capacity to continue to access European funding.

23. Key to this will be ensuring that the UK continues to have access to the current and future EU research framework programmes. Should this not prove possible to be brokered in the Brexit negotiations, it will be essential that the UK Government commits to replacing any lost EU funds by investing in bilateral and multi-lateral research initiatives with European and international partners to both meet the gap in research funding and to ensure that the UK remains a globally competitive scientific nation.

24. Furthermore, we feel it is important that the inquiry considers the future of Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) within its scope. The MSCAs are the equivalent of Erasmus+ but aimed at researchers, and are managed by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Education and Culture (rather than the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation). MSCAs rely on mobility across borders and they have proved essential in the training of British researchers, technicians and scientists who have, in turn, found jobs in UK HEIs, companies and the third sector.

Priorities during Brexit negotiations
25. Underpinning the Government’s approach to Brexit and HE, should be the principle of building upon the success of UK HE’s international reputation and economic reach, rather than in any way diminishing it.

26. As the UK leaves the EU it is essential that the country sends a strong message that it is open for business by putting in place the conditions for universities to be able to continue to attract the brightest and the best talent, to support international research collaborations, to provide international mobility opportunities for students and staff to enhance our workforce, and to ultimately power the local economies within which universities are located.

27. For the reasons outlined above, the University of Birmingham urges the Government to prioritise the following matters as part of the UK’s Brexit negotiations:

- Full and continued access to European student and researcher mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

- Full and continued access to collaborative research opportunities through the EU research funding programmes and research infrastructures for the duration of the Horizon 2020 framework programme, and its successor framework programmes, including influence over their strategic priorities.

28. In parallel, we urge Government to:

- Provide immediate clarity on pre-Brexit matters, where it is in the Government’s gift to do so. For instance in relation to EU students’ access to student finance for 2018-19 applicants.

- Develop a sharper investment and marketing focus on ensuring that UK HE does not lose further market share to other countries.

- Take international students out of net migration figures, recognising their importance to the economy at local and national level.

- Should it not prove possible for access to EU research and mobility funding to be brokered in Brexit negotiations, UK Government should invest in bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives with European and international partners to both meet the gap in funding and to ensure that the UK remains a globally competitive scientific nation.

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