Scientists for Britain – Written evidence (EUM0075)

Overview

The title of the inquiry is 'Relationship between EU membership and UK science inquiry', so we are deeply concerned that all of the questions and preamble of the inquiry are on matters that are not contingent upon the UK’s membership of the EU.

Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, Iceland and Israel are all non-EU nations that participate in and contribute towards the science networks operated via the EU.

Norway, Switzerland and Turkey have all been represented on the governing bodies of the ERA, either in the Scientific Council which currently governs the work of the ERA or its forerunner the European Research Area Board (ERAB). European scientists within the ERA rightly see the benefit of ensuring that scientific cooperation is done openly and is not exclusive to political membership. It is within this environment that the UK’s participation in EU science networks would continue if the UK were to leave the EU.

Therefore, it is essential for us to say with regret that the House of Lords inquiry appears to be premised on a fallacy in this respect. The nature of the inquiry’s title points to EU membership while the preamble and questions (about the funding, collaboration, regulation and advice) point to a discovery of the merits of science cooperation which is not contingent on membership.

It is clear that the inquiry is written and designed in such a way that an assessment of the UK’s science relationship with the EU is intended to inform the currently live debate about whether the UK remains a member of the EU. It would be a serious mistake for anyone to connect the two.

We address the above point in prefix to every answer except one that we provide to the inquiry’s official questions (these prefixes are labelled as ‘Advisory’).

However, we do also provide full answers for the sake of clarity and understanding, as our perspective towards each topics might provide a useful counterbalance to any of the misinformed or politically-motivated views that have so far found their way into the public debate.

We believe that to conflate the relative desirability of UK collaboration with the EU with the UK’s membership of the EU amounts to further misinformation and the perpetuation of a miscalculation by observers – that science collaboration depends on EU membership – which is prevalent among the scientific community.

For this reason, we believe that regrettably no conclusions from the inquiry that are based on the original questions and preamble can be considered as valid to the issue of the UK’s membership of the EU, regardless of the inquiry’s outcome of whether the EU is a favourable or not favourable influence on UK science.
We also feel obliged to point out that if any of the reasoning derived from the inquiry’s questions were used intentionally or unintentionally to support a view regarding the UK’s decision on whether to remain in or leave the EU, it would have the potential to diminish Parliament’s reputation among the public.

However, conclusions from the inquiry may inform a future decision on how the UK might continue its participation in EU science programmes, should the UK choose to withdraw from the political institutions of the EU. For example, regarding the funding questions, the UK is currently a net contributor to overall EU funding; determining the current value to the UK of participation in EU science programs would inform a future decision as to what level of contribution to EU science programmes provides value for money.

Introduction to our methodology

Scientists for Britain arises from an experiment to test the integrity of the EU-UK science hypothesis by taking the alternative viewpoint and challenging established notions, reflecting scientific methodology.

The experiment, a discussion between current professional and former scientists, was so successful at proving an alternative path for UK engagement is not only viable but also more productive that we decided to maintain our activity and attract new members to our group.

The main established wisdom that we wished to test was that the UK-EU science relationship made UK membership of the EU beneficial. To speak against the established wisdom had become a taboo, but a few of us like to challenge taboos.

We had become aware that much of the reports on science benefit relating to EU membership had been based on the questionable dual pillars of ‘audience perception’ and ‘whether funding is beneficial’.

We address both of these in detail in our material below, but the general point to remember in both is that a UK exit from the EU would not exclude or hinder continued participation in EU science frameworks. A common misperception that a UK exit would exclude or hinder participation can create a distorted picture via audience perception studies and any analysis of whether funding can ever be argued to assist a scientific project.

The public debate so far

We are extremely concerned that organisations such as the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) have made very little effort in asserting the difference between continuing European Union membership and continuing European science participation. Their members and subscribers therefore remain less than clear on this subject and this deficiency is apparent in their survey results which draw no distinction between the two outcomes.
We believe that the high response rate in the CaSE study and others show that the number of scientists who say they “wish to stay in the EU” is likely to be a result of this misunderstanding – scientists have been led to believe EU funding and Europe-wide collaboration are contingent on EU membership.

We’ve recorded several instances where our explanation of why and how our UK-EU collaboration would continue outside the EU has reversed initially hostile correspondents who were incorrectly led to believe that for the UK to adopt the same EU science participation as non-EU science players is somehow “anti-science”. It plainly isn’t.

Also, we’ve found that many scientists including in the private sector are reticent because of the prevailing view among scientists and because private sector companies feel an obligation to stay out of politics. One science company we spoke to said that although they felt EU membership has no tangible benefit for either their company or for UK science as a whole, it was a view they would never openly express as two of their principal clients are universities whose views are known to differ in that respect.

We are concerned at some of the presumptive and bogus statements made by Scientists4EU, an organisation formed by two highly political scientists from the Scientists for Labour group. They have said that the UK would have difficulty ‘re-entering’ the ERA after leaving the EU and would receive less science funding from outside. We strongly disagree with this statement and object to its sentiment. The selection of projects for funding is done on the basis of merit, peer-reviewed excellence and ‘frontier research’. These principles are to be found in the ‘about us’ sections of the ERC, ERA, Scientific Council and Horizon2020.

Scientists4EU are effectively theorising that in a future where the UK is a contributing participant in Horizon2020 the European Commission would choose to intentionally and secretly relegate or dissolve funding applications that featured UK teams specifically because it is outside of the EU. If Scientists4EU are alleging that the European Commission is capable of such underhanded malevolence against a paying participant, they should urgently spell out their reasons for this assessment and any measures for combatting it.

They are suggesting the EU would effectively be willing to dispense with scientific collaboration with Europe’s leading science powerhouse and for political objectives. We believe that is incorrect, particularly since the ERC is governed by the Scientific Council, composed of scientists. It is completely infeasible for the EU to refuse to collaborate with a willing EU science partner that would pay its way, especially one that offers so much. A refusal to cooperate is made even more implausible by the fact that the EU is guided by its own EU Neighbourhood Programme which means it is obliged to pursue policies of cooperation and openness with its immediate neighbours.

It is deeply erroneous and frankly ridiculous that pro-EU groups such as Scientists4EU and UniversitiesUK have cited the European Space Agency, CERN and the European Transonic Windtunnel as examples of why the UK should stay in the EU. These three bodies are international rather than supranational and are not underpinned by the EU as a political project.
We feel that another organisation, UniversitiesUK, has become unsuitably preoccupied with the EU question when there is far more to gain from an emphasis on the UK funding policy debate and theorising on the UK’s options as an independent and cooperating nation.

International cooperation between the UK and EU and elsewhere would continue and thrive outside the EU.

Questions

Funding

1. **What is the scale of the financial contribution from the EU to science and research in the UK? How does the financial contribution the UK receives compare with other member states in terms of, for instance, population, GDP, scientific strength or any other relevant indicators?**

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The EU’s financial contribution to UK science is funded by the UK and other member states. The funding that the UK receives back from the EU in the form of science funding is lower as a proportion of total science funding than the UK’s financial contribution to the EU (figures below). However, this should not be regarded as a reason for non-participation in EU science after UK exit from the EU, merely a point of negotiation for the future, over which the UK would arguably have greater control from outside.

From 2007 to 2013, the UK received 5.2bn out of 50bn total ERC funds available, i.e. 10.4% of total.

The UK’s total EU contribution was between 13bn in 2007 to 17bn in 2013, both of which are about 17% of the EU’s total contribution and budget for each year.

The UK’s funding of 10.4% of total EU science funding is also less than its relative population size of 12.7% of the EU population.

The money the EU returns to the UK in the form of science funding accounts for about 10% of the UK’s total Research and Development expenditure.

The UK government has indicated that science spend will be maintained at its current level, at least, as a proportion of UK government spending. This principle has consensus across the political spectrum.

It would be reasonable and legally justifiable to expect any future UK government that finds itself independent from the EU to be expected to account for EU funds returned to the UK.
as a legacy of the function of overall UK governance and that therefore the funds initially contributed or equivalent of funds returned should either continued to be paid into the EU science frameworks by the UK government or paid directly into UK science as a substitute. In short, funds returned to the UK by the EU in the form of science funding can be considered as part of the total funding that future independent UK governments are duty-bound (via previous assurances) to protect.

2. What is the scale of the financial contribution from the UK to the EU that supports science and research activities?

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A crude estimation of the UK’s contribution to the EU science frameworks can be calculated as the UK’s overall percentage contribution to the EU budget, between 15% and 17% based on recent history. This contribution is already higher than the proportion of the science budget the UK receives back from the EU. However, what might also be included is the funding the UK government contributes in the form of individual project funding, match funding and contribution to UK higher education, training and science infrastructure that allow UK teams to apply successfully, but which are far harder to quantify.

3. What is the effectiveness and efficiency with which these funds are managed in the EU compared to the management of science funding in the UK? Particularly, when administrative overheads, quality of decision-making and advisory processes are considered?

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There is no evidence to suggest the EU’s model of supranational administration of science funding is more successful in terms of effectiveness and efficiency than the international model of administration as conducted by CERN, the European Space Agency, the International Space Station, the International Council for Science and others.

Decisions by a supranational organisation must inevitably find a generalised set of goals for nations with different scientific agendas and specialisms. The reason the EU seeks to take a supranational approach to an issue that was formerly international is to place a political underpinning to scientific output in a way that seeks to ensure credit for the funds and outcomes is attributed to the EU entity. There is nothing that the EU science structure currently achieves that could not be achieved at an international collaborative level across the same nations. In fact, if funding returns could be entirely proportional with funding contributions then governments that perceived benefits from continent-wide collaboration
in science would feasibly be expected to increase their funding and participation to access the assured payback that such a structure, coupled with collaboration, would provide.

There is also a disproportionate amount of box-ticking to be done by applicants for funding, which means only those teams that have access to skilled grant administrators should consider applying regardless of the merits of their project. We feel that if funding were to be organised on an international basis, the propensity for a team to engage directly with their domestic funding agency would bring a more tangibly meritocratic outcome to funding decisions. One of the reasons for this is that the team’s proposed research would form part of a national debate in the domestic scientific community about various forthcoming projects and which were most interesting or deserving. This national debate would in turn nurture public interest, political interest and investor interest. At present, where the decision making of the EU science frameworks is centralised, decisions and projects are not part of a single domestic science debate and are thereby taken further from public or domestic industry consciousness.

Collaboration

4. What are the benefits to UK science and research of participation in EU collaborations and funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the European Research Council?

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The opportunity for UK scientists to collaborate with peers in academia and business in other countries can be very useful. It is essential and inevitable that UK teams will continue to enjoy this choice whether the UK is in or out of the EU.

It is worth noting that the propensity to collaborate with domestic-only teams is higher in the UK than any other EU country.

With that in mind, the EU’s appetite for projects that are across more than one member state is also higher than the UK teams’ appetite or requirement for this. This wouldn’t ordinarily be considered a problem but it has two unfortunate repercussions.

A significant portion of EU funding is allocated to the concept that scientists in one part of the EU should have equal employment opportunities as a scientist who lives in the town where the project is conducted. Mobility funding ensures that travel and accommodation expenses are paid for the travelling scientist, even if that person is on an equal skills footing with a local applicant.

Another significant downside to this effort to fund a single and level marketplace for science personnel is that science teams particularly in the public sector have a tendency to abdicate responsibility for training the next generation of scientists in their ‘home patch’ when it is so
easy to recruit from other EU nations. This is being shown to have detrimental effects on the level of engagement in science among young people in the UK.

We applaud universities with an outreach programme for schools and colleges, such as Surrey University’s Brilliant Project which allow particularly disadvantaged youngsters to investigate a route to study science at university.

5. What is the influence of EU membership on bilateral collaboration between the UK and other EU member states? Are collaborations with member states stronger than with non-EU countries as a result of EU membership? Or, are bilateral collaborations with member states inhibited by requirements to work through EU mechanisms?

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According to data from the European Commission for every UK team that applied successfully for Horizon2020 funding, another 7 were unsuccessful. The EU has such a strong grip on the more accessible and liquid forms of grant funding (that were previously administered by domestic agencies) that it has a far more prominent and pervasive presence in the psyche of scientists than it deserves, compared to the 10% proportion of UK funds it provides.

For this reason, we believe that the supranational structure of EU funding actually diminishes the level of collaboration and therefore investment that UK teams would otherwise seek with non-EU and non-ERA nations such as the US, Canada, South Korea, Japan, China, India and Australia.

Although leaving the EU would have no detrimental impact on the UK’s choices in EU science collaboration, we believe that UK science could benefit from a concerted effort to modify a current unhealthy over-focus on the EU by looking to additional geographies that might in some cases provide a more effective collaboration partner. We believe scientific partnerships should always be formed on their respective merits rather than via a political effort to create EU/ERA-only partnerships.

6. How is private investment in UK science and research influenced by EU membership? Is international investment leveraged on the basis of this membership? How does EU membership affect the growth of research-intensive UK companies?

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Science that is done on scientific rather than political merits nurtures far greater confidence among private investors.
When a science funding mechanism is attached to a developing political entity as it is with the EU, it brings enormous uncertainty for the outlook of science in every member state. The domestic science markets become more dependent on centralised EU funding and when they see their home nation investment dwindling as result, the only apparent certainty is that funding is eventually transitioning to the centre of the EU.

Science is being used as an expression of a developing political entity, akin to a vanity exercise. The EU is a project in cross border nation building. To claim that such cooperation can't be done without a political union is pure deception. In the same way that billionaires buy football teams to enhance their public persona, the EU is investing member states’ money in science programmes that it hopes will lead to the enrichment of its reputation. There is absolutely no reason why European science can’t be done on an international basis just like the successful CERN, ESA and International Space Station.

7. How does the UK participate in the creation and operation of international facilities that are available as a consequence of our EU membership? Are there any restrictions in the creation and operation of international facilities outside the EU as a consequence of our EU membership?

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It has been argued that the UK’s contributions to the EU and allocations to EU match-funding ventures places a squeeze on UK subscriptions to non-EU or international facilities. EU match funding means that the UK government is incentivised to spend in a way that follow EU’s decision making. This means that even money allocated to domestic science agency spending ultimately complies with the supranational decision making.

An example of spending squeeze is the UK’s Infra-Red Telescope in Hawaii – the UK withdrew from this and several other facilities to save money while allocation to EU match funding has risen.

The centralising effects of EU decision making are thereby amplified.

8. What contribution does EU membership make to the quality of UK science and research through the free movement of people? How does this compare with flows of people between the UK and non-EU countries such as the USA, India, China and Singapore?

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EU membership has no bearing whatsoever on this topic. A UK scientist would be met with utter bemusement if he or she tried to persuade science colleagues in Norway, Turkey, Iceland or Israel that the quality of their EU projects would be enhanced by joining the EU.

Ending EU membership does not on its own predicate a change in freedom of movement. There are several non-EU European states that maintain free movement with the EU. Freedom of movement would have to be assessed separately by the UK electorate if voters had chosen to leave the EU.

There are commentators who argue that a UK exit from the EU makes movement limitations more possible or more likely.

Despite the complexities of this issue, we believe through our investigations that none of the possible scenarios necessitate impediment to scientists in any way that would, in consequence, discourage cooperation between the UK and nations that are part of the EU’s collaboration and funding networks, whether they are EU or non-EU.

If the current terms of non-EU immigration to the UK are taken as a basis, even leaving the EU’s free movement environment is highly unlikely to impede meritorious EU scientists. In other words, if the UK applied its tightest tests for immigration and movement, the deserving scientists and engineers would in any case meet the Tier 1 or 2 qualification for UK work visas.

It is commonly cited by pro-EU campaigners that Switzerland was excluded from EU science collaboration for a short period due to impact a nationwide vote on inward migration had had on the opportunities for EU scientists to work there. It is important to remember that the Swiss referendum proposition on migration went further than restricting movement – they voted to give job preferences to Swiss nationals, which is the part that conflicted with agreements in Switzerland’s science cooperation arrangements with the EU.

The Swiss subsequently negotiated their way back into science cooperation projects.

In the UK context, even the strictest possible application of UK border and immigration controls for non-EEA citizens, if applied to EEA citizens, still would not have the effect of the Swiss proposals because of the applicability of Home Office Tier 1 and Tier 2 visa criteria to anyone taking part in research work in the UK as part of UK-EU science projects. The NHS already takes advantage of thousands of these Tier 2 visa applications for non-EU staff and the same would be immediately applicable to EU scientists even without any change of legislation.

Scientists chosen from anywhere in the world who are sufficiently qualified can already be employed by an organisation in the UK without risk that someone says it is a. illegal or b. that someone else should be doing the job.

9. Does EU membership inhibit collaborations with countries outside the EU, for example by requiring the UK to adopt EU-wide immigration policies rather than bespoke ones for the UK?
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We would refer you to the answer we gave to Question 7. In brief, the centralising effects of EU decision making are amplified by the incentive for the UK government to match-fund EU funding decisions. This inevitably draws UK science funds towards the EU and away from international collaboration.

It is significant to recall that EU science has been engineered to produce social and industrial gain for the EU. This means that UK projects that aim to reduce suffering for diseases or social problems in developing countries are arguably squeezed. UK science partnerships in developing countries are essential for saving lives. They are also influential over the UK’s joined up aid-giving projects and the UK’s impact and reputation worldwide.

Regulation

10. What are the key EU regulatory frameworks/mechanisms that directly affect the science and research community in the UK?

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All of the EU’s regulatory frameworks have a bearing on UK science. The only part that arguably has a lower benefit for individual UK scientists compared to scientists from other EU/ERA countries is mobility funding – UK scientists are least likely to travel to take advantage of opportunities in another EU state and therefore least likely to take advantage of this funding.

11. If the UK were not a member of the EU, could regulations be reformed to give greater benefit to UK science and research? For example, in areas such as data regulation, VAT on shared facilities, and the use of the precautionary principle?

Although this is the only question relevant to the UK’s membership of the EU, we do not believe there is sufficient appetite for such regulatory changes that the changes themselves create a ‘pull’ in either direction regarding the UK’s membership of the EU.

Therefore, we feel that the inclusion of this question might muddy the waters, especially given the likelihood that the UK would choose to remain as a paying participant in EU science frameworks and adherent to its rules. If in the longer term, the UK chose to exercise its rights to pursue separate legislation that is an entirely separate democratic exercise, which is far more likely to be done in partnership or selective partnership with the ERA member states.
There are firm precedents for this being accepted under ERA auspices. Switzerland operates its own clinical research rules (Swiss Human Research Act) that are different to the EU’s Clinical Trials Regulation. The EU rules in this area are a mixed bag for UK scientists – although some of the rules are welcomed, others are seen as injurious and unwieldy.

12. How is the innovation landscape affected by EU membership?

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As this question overtly relates to EU membership rather than EU science frameworks, it is not necessary to elaborate. EU membership can be discontinued and there is no reason that the UK’s science partnerships with the EU would need to be impinged, for the reasons previously stated. Therefore the innovation landscape would in the short to medium term be unchanged. In the longer term, there are strong reasons to believe that a mindset shift towards a national science industry in the context of global science, where responsibility for UK science was ultimately with the British people and governance, would encourage a sense of ownership, increased sectoral and public debate and enhanced domestic buy-in, interest and investment.

Scientific advice

13. How does the quality and effectiveness of scientific advice on matters of public policy compare between the EU and the UK? What are the effects, if any, of differences in the provision of scientific advice between the EU and the UK?

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The UK has a deserved reputation as the most sophisticated environment for scientific discussion and policy at least among member states of the European Research Area.

There are differences between the UK and EU. The UK has a chief scientific advisor within government. The EU recently scrapped the post of chief science advisor as a function of cross-disciplinary decision making, but it is seeking to replace the role and has a Scientific Council which in some regards performs the same role.

The EU Scientific Council is appointed partly on merit and partly on geographical origin, to produce a council that is as far as possible representative of the breadth of EU and ERA member states. Although all the members of the council are highly distinguished and qualified senior scientists, the council’s composition can be considered to have the effect of spreading the benefits of science funding in a representative manner rather than to the most meritorious projects or those that will produce the greatest results.
A nation that produces great cars or great clothes can expect consumer or investor attention for each of those outputs, but a nation like the UK that produces great science might justifiably expect a greater proportion of attention from consumers and investors in that area goes towards its activity.

In a supranational funding body, where members are not closely acquainted with science developments, debates and landscape of other member states, their deliberations are arguably conducted at a greater administrative ‘distance’ from the subject. Therefore, the involvement of all council members in an active and live science debate can be presumed to be decreased. In turn, it is less easy to see how the simple accountability or effectiveness of decision making can be as readily assessed. Just as decisions by the European Commission are frequently questioned by national parliaments and not adequately answered, it is our contention that the same dynamic could feasibly exist within the supranational Scientific Council. It is arguably considered transcendent of accountability by national scientific agencies. However, this is something the UK would be far better placed to address from outside, for the reasons given in the next answer.

14. To what extent does EU membership enable UK scientists to inform and influence public policy at EU or international levels? To what extent does EU membership inhibit UK scientists from influencing public policy at EU or international levels?

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We do not believe there is sufficient difference between the UK’s ability to influence the debate as a non-EU member of the ERA compared to an EU member of the ERA that the outcome creates a ‘pull’ in either direction regarding the UK’s membership of the EU.

Therefore the UK could leave the EU, remain in the ERA and have at least comparable levels of influence through its appointed members of the Scientific Council, via dialogue between the UK’s national scientific agencies and the ERA and via dialogue between the UK Government and European Commission.

However, we do believe that in the long term, there could be benefits for the UK’s influence by being a non-EU member of the ERA. The other member states, while acknowledging that the UK’s participation is voluntary, would recognise that the country should not be ignored.

This is in line with a widely reported phenomenon regarding the EU and other supranational organisations, which is that the EU has a tendency to listen more to outside partners than to insiders whom leading figures can engineer to outvote. We expect that this would be the UK’s beneficial experience on leaving the EU but remaining in its science frameworks.

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