Written evidence submitted by the University of Birmingham (FCR0008)

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 commended¹ 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.

The desirability of transitional arrangements

In the Prime Minister’s speech on 17 January 2017, in which she set out her priorities for how the UK will leave the EU, she stated that: “One of our great strengths as a nation is the breadth and depth of our academic and scientific communities, backed up by some of the world’s best universities. And we have a proud history of leading and supporting cutting-edge research and innovation...So we will also welcome agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners on major science, research, and technology initiatives.”

We welcome the Government’s commitment to the UK’s continued academic and scientific collaboration with European partners post-Brexit. It is essential that this commitment is firmly reflected at every stage in the Brexit transitional period as the UK and the EU redefine their relationship with one another.

UK HE is one of the most successful UK exports. It is held in high regard around the world and is known for the exceptional quality of its teaching and research. Much of this success is due to UK HE’s strong international character, particularly our ability to attract talented students and staff from around the world and the world-class research we produce with international partners, of which the EU Horizon 2020 programme is currently a major funder.

¹ A commendation is the highest rating possible awarded by the QAA.
To remain competitive, UK HE needs the flexibility to attract the best and brightest minds regardless of their nationality, supported by research funding that actively encourages collaboration with academics and businesses from around the world. This will also support the message that UK HE Plc is open for business, and that it remains resolutely outward and internationalist in outlook.

If post-Brexit immigration or research funding regimes are 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. A phased approach to implementing Brexit through a managed transitional period will be vital in order to prevent a cliff-edge scenario. The priority should be for a smooth Brexit with sufficient time for universities, and other parts of the economy, to make the adjustments needed to make Brexit a success.

**Issues that need to be taken into account as the UK transitions out of the EU**

For the University of Birmingham and the HE sector more widely, it is vital that the following matters are planned for, and incorporated into, Brexit transitionary arrangements:

- Guaranteeing the residency rights of EU staff employed before the UK leaves the EU
- Extending existing commitments around EU student finance to include those starting a course in 2018/19 at least
- Ensuring the UK continues to be an attractive destination for EU and international student and researcher talent
- Maintaining and enhancing the UK's international research collaboration.
- Supporting UK students and staff to access vital global opportunities

To take each of these matters in turn:

**Guaranteeing the residency rights of EU staff employed before the UK leaves the EU**

In making transitionary Brexit arrangements, we would strongly urge the Government to confirm the continued working rights of existing and future EU staff and their dependants in our universities at the earliest possible opportunity. This need not wait until the Article 50 negotiations or for any ensuing transitional period.

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 of Birmingham’s staff are EU (non-UK) nationals, and 1,625 (4.3%) of our students are EU (non-UK) nationals.

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.

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.

_Extending existing commitments around EU student finance to include those starting a course in 2018/19 at least_

We call on 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.

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 UK university courses dropped 7.4%; for the University of Birmingham, applications from EU students fell 9%. This is a major concern for UK universities, and although clearly attributable to the effects of Brexit, earlier confirmation of funding access for EU students will enable universities to plan recruitment and seek to mitigate these effects.

_Ensuring the UK continues to be an attractive destination for EU and international student and researcher talent_

Post-Brexit, we need to ensure that the UK continues to be a destination of choice for talented EU and international students and staff. Our capacity to recruit the highest quality staff, regardless of nationality, to work collaboratively on global challenges and the pressing research questions of the day must not be impaired.

We therefore strongly urge Government to exclude international students (which, post-Brexit, is likely also to include EU students) from net migration figures. The UK immigration system should be reformed to ensure that highly-skilled 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.

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.

It is important, both for universities and for prospective students from the EU, to understand at what point EU students will move to the status of being international students (currently EU membership allows them to pay the same fees as UK students). This should be confirmed as early as
possible to provide all parties concerned with the information they need to be able to plan and make decisions.

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.

**Supporting UK students and staff to access vital global opportunities**

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 students 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.

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 in-bound students on an Erasmus+ study placement. Our desire will be to increase these numbers significantly.

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.

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, could also be compromised.

Similarly, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are the equivalent of Erasmus+ but aimed at researchers. 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.
The HE sector therefore needs to be able to continue to participate in EU mobility schemes such as Erasmus+ and MSCAs. The UK Government should seek to negotiate access to EU student and researcher mobility programmes post-Brexit and current funding contributions should be maintained by the UK Government. If it is not possible for this to be brokered through the Brexit negotiations, the UK Government should invest in its own bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives with European and international partners, both to meet the gap in funding and to ensure that the UK remains globally competitive. This should come into effect at the point at which access to such EU programmes ceases.

*Maintaining and enhancing the UK’s international research collaboration.*

The UK Government should ensure that Brexit transitional arrangements support UK universities to maintain their international excellence and to work collaboratively on global challenges by providing the conditions and mechanisms for supporting international research collaboration, with partners from both within and outside the EU.

EU funding has been increasingly valuable for funding groundbreaking, collaborative and interdisciplinary research – in particular for multi-lateral collaborations where we can tap into expertise from a number of countries. Horizon 2020 benchmarking data shows that the University of Birmingham had the 7th highest number of participations (69) in the UK, 10th highest level of funding (€32.9m) in the UK, and the 25th highest share of funding overall.

In order to maintain and build upon our successful levels of international research collaboration, UK HE needs to be able to access international funding streams. This should include continued access to EU research framework programmes, but should also include collaborative funding arrangements with other international partners such as the US, Canada, China and Australia, for example as part of trade deals. It will be essential for the UK Government to commit to investing funds that have previously gone to EU framework programmes 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. We recommend this be done through a specific allocation to UKRI to invest in projects and collaborations on a peer-reviewed basis with international partners.

**The design and negotiation of transitional arrangements**

To reiterate, a phased approach to implementing Brexit through a managed transitional period will be vital in order to prevent a cliff-edge scenario. The priority should be for a smooth Brexit with sufficient time for universities, and other parts of the economy, to make the adjustments needed to make Brexit a success.

While the point at which the UK formally leaves the EU is a highly significant milestone, we would urge the Government to view Brexit transition as an iterative process, taking place from now up until the UK’s final, settled, relationship with the EU becomes effective.

The University of Birmingham urges the Government to prioritise the following matters as part of the UK’s Brexit negotiations and transitional arrangements:

- Guaranteeing the residency rights of EU staff employed before the UK leaves the EU
• Extending existing commitments around EU student finance to include those starting a course in 2018/19 at least
• Ensuring the UK continues to be an attractive destination for EU and international student and researcher talent
• Maintaining and enhancing the UK’s international research collaboration.
• Supporting UK students and staff to access vital global opportunities

As outlined above, for some of these matters (for instance, guaranteeing the residency rights of EU staff currently employed in our universities and extending commitments of EU students’ access to student finance in 2018-19) we are clear about what needs to happen and urge the Government to take steps needed now.

For the remaining matters, we are equally clear about the about the course of action that would be most beneficial in maintaining the competitive position of UK HE. We recognise, however, that it is difficult to comment on the details of any necessary transitional arrangements and timescales, as this will largely be dependent on the outcome of the Government’s Brexit negotiations with the EU and whether this results in access to EU funding programmes and the reciprocal mobility of students and staff. These are examples of the practical difficulties of identifying the transitional arrangements needed before agreement has been reached about the shape of the UK’s final relationship with the EU. We would, therefore, strongly urge the Government to maintain an open dialogue with the university sector as the results of the Brexit negotiation become clear in order to co-design, and understand any unintended consequences of, any successor arrangements that the UK may have to put in place itself to support HE international collaboration and mobility.

Underpinning the Government’s approach to Brexit transition and HE, should be the principles of building upon the success of UK HE’s international reputation and economic reach, rather than in any way diminishing it, and ensuring that any successor arrangements that may be needed are designed in consultation with the HE sector and without any time, policy or funding gaps.

In a similar vein, we also support the recommendation of the House of Commons Science and Technology’s report on ‘the implications and opportunities for science and research following the vote to leave the EU’ that a Chief Scientific Adviser to the Department for Exiting the EU be appointed. This would help to ensure that the significant implications of leaving the EU for science and research are reflected in the Government’s Brexit transitionary plans.

Brexit poses many challenges, but with the right Government support, universities can play a central role in both shaping and delivering the UK’s economic success and global influence outside the EU.

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