

THE SOCIETY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (SOCENV) SUBMISSION
TO
THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE
ON
INQUIRY INTO IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

1 Background

1.1 The Society for the Environment is a Royal Chartered umbrella body made up of a partnership of 24 professional bodies. Our licensed partners represent over 550,000 professionals between them and operate across many disciplines, all of which utilise the work of scientists and researchers in their activities. Their members are practitioners in environmental and natural resources management ranging from chemists and engineers to ecologists and biologists, from front end delivery to the very highest levels of leadership. Our Royal Charter grants us the responsibility to oversee the registration of the Chartered Environmentalist qualification, of which there are over 7000 registered professionals, as well as the recently launched Registered Environmental Technician qualification.

1.2 Aspects of science and research permeate the all of the sectors we represent; it effects every part of our modern world and is being used to combat both social and environmental challenges globally. EU funding, particularly for frontier research, has been essential to continued growth in the diversity, innovation and quality of science and research in the UK; in turn, UK scientists have significantly influenced the shape of EU environmental policies.

1.3 The Society recognises that there are significant risks to the UK's Science and Research professionals by exiting the European Union: In particular, SocEnv recognises five key risk areas:

1.3.1 Knowledge sharing and free movement of science and research professionals

1.3.2 Attracting and retaining investors and a skilled workforce across the science professions

1.3.3 Access to, and retention of, funding and access to research facilities

1.3.4 Attracting and retaining international partnerships

1.3.5 Applying expertise to regulation and the environment

1.4 Whilst our response will focus mostly on the implications and opportunities affecting professionals working across sectors where work is underpinned by environmental sciences, we acknowledge that both social and life sciences are also an integral part of the UK research base and would like to see the same protection extended to them.

2 Knowledge sharing and free movement of science and research professionals

- 2.1 It has long been considered that the free movement of researchers and students allows for the UK to maintain its reputation as a leader in science and research by attracting world-class researchers and lecturers. The UK has been able to further this reputation by exporting our own academics and knowledge and contributing to the knowledge bases of international colleagues. UK environmental sciences have had key roles in shaping EU environmental regulations. One of our licensed partners, The Institution of Environmental Sciences, highlighted the Urban Waste Water Directive and Habitats Directive as just two of the many regulations UK scientists were instrumental in shaping.
- 2.2 There are a number of potential models to consider in relation to ensuring businesses and research facilities have access to the best available scientists and research professionals. For example, the ‘research passport’ model would allow for greater ease of access to the UK for researchers and scientists if the UK were to implement stricter border controls. This model is based on the National Health Service (NHS) research passport which grants honorary research contracts (HRCs) or letters of access (LOA) to those who need to undertake research within the NHS. Whilst a similar system would be a good compromise for those who conduct research, it may not be a suitable model for industries employing scientists who work in the field but do not conduct research as part of their activities. An example of where a research passport would not be appropriate would be in utilities sector, where water companies often employ scientists to ensure the safety and quality of their supply and treatment activities, but do not conduct academic research. A research passport would not, therefore, benefit utilities companies in relation to hiring the best people for the job.
- 2.3 An alternative model to consider is the ‘Norway Model’, which the UK would adopt if it continued to be a member of the European Economic Area (EEA). As the EEA is based on the freedom of movement of goods, services, persons and capital, researchers would be free to move and work within the EEA. This model would provide the best solution for ensuring that British companies have access to the necessary talent and skills required to effectively manage our natural resources, mitigate environmental damage and maintain our innovative, world leading science and research profession.
- 2.4 We would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the case of Switzerland. Switzerland was denied access to all Horizon 2020 funding programmes after a domestic vote to curtail freedom of movement. Whilst we appreciate the political nuances involved in the issue of freedom of movement, there should be serious investigation into whether the risks of freedom of movement outweigh the benefits the UK would retain by remaining a member of the EEA.

3 Attracting and retaining investors in and, a skilled workforce across, the science and research profession

3.1 We have heard anecdotal evidence from our professional partners that some international students and researchers are now reluctant to take positions in the UK as they are unsure as to what their status will be in the future.

3.2 At this point, we would like to address a piece of evidence submitted by our partner the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC). The RSC provides an example of an academic whose KTP grant is now in jeopardy as the company in charge of the project the academic is working on has implemented a recruitment freeze due to the EU referendum result. If the company cannot guarantee the KTP funded research position to the academic, part of the 2-year grant will be forfeited.

3.3 It is important to note, however, that this may have been due to market shock and a lack of preparedness by companies for a leave vote. Increases in stability may reduce the number of incidents like this going forward. As such, we echo the calls made by numerous organisations for the government to urgently issue a statement outlining a framework under which EU nationals currently working and residing in the UK, can remain. We welcome all statements and actions that reaffirm the UK is open to 'business as usual'.

4 Access to, and retention of, funding and access to research facilities

4.1 We welcome the pledge made by The Treasury to underwrite Horizon 2020 projects beyond the UK's EU membership. However, there is now the opportunity for the UK to go further in its commitments to science and research.

4.2 The current method of EU funding is either through the European Social Funds and Horizon 2020. This splits science-based research and social-based research into two distinct groups. We have found that a result of this is a reduction in the number of projects funded, with fundamental research taking priority. When coupled with the fact there is a large administrative burden on organisations seeking to apply for grants, this has led to smaller organisations being unable to pursue funding.

4.3 It would be possible for the UK to follow Switzerland's example and become a partial-associate member of Horizon 2020. This would enable the UK to choose which of the three pillars of Horizon 2020 it can access whilst also investing in its own interests. However, we see that all three pillars of Horizon 2020 can have positive effects on the environment and encourage the UK to remain as a full associate member.

4.4 If neither of these are possible, we would like to see assurances and action from the government to protect or enhance the level of funding broadly equivalent to that the UK

would usually receive from the EU. Whilst this may result in a larger expenditure, as the UK received more from Horizon 2020 than it contributed to the fund, it would allow freedom to pursue research that is cross discipline and also of particular value to UK priorities.

5 Attracting and retaining international partnerships

5.1 Environmental challenges are often transboundary and cross discipline; we believe that collaboration, sharing scientific knowledge and adopting evidence of best practice is fundamental to formulating the right environmental policy strategy for the UK. This is equally true within the broader scientific community.

5.2 We believe that remaining members of the EEA and Horizon 2020 would be best for continued collaboration with our European colleagues. Having an EU controlled approach to funding allows for harmonisation in both research approach and focus. Utilising a set of universal regulations that all procedures must follow allows for easier collaboration across countries. These regulations should also allow for greater ease of commercialisation, as UK products are free to be marketed across the EEA and with EU trade partners. Finally, the free movement of people would mean researchers and scientists may continue to work, travel and share knowledge on an international level.

5.3 We must, however, question whether these regulations are actually effective and if there is room for the UK to improve upon them outside of the EU. If there is a way to maintain similar levels of collaboration whilst being able to remove restrictive regulation, then we urge the government to pursue it.

6 Ensuring that the UK retains a credible and world-leading science and research profession to inform policy and decision makers

6.1 We urge the Government to base legislation and regulations upon evidence provided by professionals and to streamline legislation and regulation where possible, without hindering the objective. The Society wants to ensure that the UK retains a credible and world-leading science and research profession to inform policy and decision makers. Science and research skills are critical to building solutions to climate change challenges and ensuring resilience for UK communities. Credible, skilled academic and scientific professionals should be at the heart of informing policy and regulations in regard to climate change challenges and building a robust and resilient circular economy for the UK.

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