Places of Engagement

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Vice-chancellor of Utrecht University Bert van der Zwaan, also chairman of the League of European Research Universities (LERU), is retiring in a crucial year for Europe’s research, innovation, and education policy. The next elections for the European Parliament are due to be held just over a year from the moment of writing this essay: in May 2019. Later that same year, a new European Commission will take over with a new president, as Jean-Claude Juncker has said he will stand down. The European Union will also need to find a new President of the European Council, as Donald Tusk will reach the end of his term in November 2019; unless, as Juncker proposed recently, one person is going to take up both jobs. The upshot is that 2019 will be fully booked with campaigning, elections, appointments and transition periods. Any policy development and decision-making will therefore have to happen in the next ten to twelve months. This means that European Union institutions are facing some crucial decisions in 2018. To mention just three: the future of the Union; the future of EU finances; and the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union. Major progress must be made on all three in the coming weeks. Further delay on any would endanger timely decision-making in several policy fields, including research, innovation, and education.

For example, the successors to the Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ programmes must be developed, consulted on, and finalized before the parliamentary elections. Informal consultations on these programmes have been going on for a while, but the timeframe is becoming more worrying by the day. A formal
proposal for the next multi-annual financial framework — set to run from 2021 to, presumably, 2027 — is now expected by May 2018. This is essential if there is to be a formal proposal for the next Framework programme in June 2018. Given the political calendar, it seems optimistic to hope that Framework 9 will be announced, negotiated, and signed off before the parliamentary elections. That raises the worrying possibility that the next cohort of members of the European Parliament and Commissioners will seek to impose differing views of research, innovation and education. The wrap-up of Phase 1 of the Brexit negotiations, which covers citizens’ rights, financial commitments, and the Irish border, raised the hope that EU budget discussions would speed up significantly. How much will the United Kingdom pay the European Union for its present commitments? Will it contribute financially to specific policy fields post-Brexit such as research, education, and innovation, and if so, how much? Hoping for fast and clear answers to these questions was seemingly unjustified due to the difficult negotiations on the transition period and the legal write-up of the Phase 1 agreement. Nonetheless, transparency on financial matters is key for all member states and for all present and future policy issues. For Framework 9, the crucial requirement is clear: a significant budget increase as requested by the Lamy Report, the Tallinn Call for Action, the League of European Research Universities and many others. It was good to see that the Budget Commissioner recently already indicated that, for him, the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) would not cut into research and education budgets but, on the contrary, increase them. Not only for budgetary reasons but also for reasons of content, collaboration, and the programme’s success, it is essential that the United Kingdom remains on board. If that means revising the rules on association with the Framework programme, so be it (see below).

As well as implementing Horizon 2020 and shaping Framework 9, further implementation of the policies on open science and open innovation will remain important in 2018. In May, the Competitiveness Council will receive a detailed briefing
on the eight open-science priorities. Hopefully this will include significant progress on setting up the European Open Science Cloud and the Open Access Publications Platform. On open innovation, it is crucial that the regulatory environment in the EU improves. Better-focused and organized EU policies and a more harmonized EU legal framework on taxation, intellectual property, and bankruptcy are essential; a European Innovation Council or Agency is not. The EU must also give the creation of the European Research Area (ERA) a further boost in 2018. The idea that the treaty obligations on the ERA have been fulfilled is an illusion; the free circulation of knowledge and researchers is a long way from being reality. In fact, more and more obstacles have been introduced through various legislative frameworks such as data protection and copyright. And although the ERA is a work in progress, the European Union has just launched another area, the European Education Area (EEA). At present, there is a nice set of proposals and ideas (European Universities Networks, European Student Card, Mutual Recognition of Degrees, et cetera), but without legislative back up and sufficient funding, they will remain soft and difficult to realize. It looks as if the wishful thinking of French President Emmanuel Macron has been contagious.

Almost eighteen months after the Brexit referendum, we all agree with British actor Hugh Grant’s observation: ‘Brexit was a fantastic example of a nation shooting itself full in the face’. Slogans of the pro-Brexit camp such as ‘Brexit means Brexit’ or ‘Taking back control' has proven to be a complete failure. A lack of vision, knowledge, preparation, and political leadership have brought the United Kingdom to the edge of the worst-case scenario: a ‘no deal’ Brexit. The unanimous position and consequent negotiation strategy of the EU 27 have led to a full ‘capitulation’ of the United Kingdom in Phase 1 of the Brexit negotiations: offering a significant financial commitment, a final say of the European Court of Justice on citizens’ rights, and guarantees for a soft Irish border, convinced the EU 27 in December 2017 of ‘sufficient progress made’ and the possibility to move to the
second phase of Brexit negotiations, focusing on the future co-operation between the UK and EU. For research, innovation, and education, the start of this second phase is absolutely necessary and crucial. Phase 1 only had ‘limited’ relevance: guarantees for the continued participation of the United Kingdom in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ until the end of the present multi-annual financial framework; and guaranteeing the rights as citizens of British researchers in continental Europe and, vice versa, of European (continental) nationals in the United Kingdom. And although ‘limited’, this has proven to be already very difficult. Reports indicate that the participation and success of the UK in Horizon 2020 is declining, and worrying amounts of students and researchers have left the country or do not come or apply to institutions in the UK anymore. Clearly, it is time for action.

In Phase 2, the United Kingdom will indeed have to put its research cards on the table. In its September 2017 Future Partnership paper called Collaboration on Science and Innovation, the British government stated: ‘Given the UK’s unique relationship with European science and innovation, the UK would also like to explore forging a more ambitious and close partnership with the EU than any yet agreed between the EU and a non-EU country’. This is a nice and reassuring message, in the first place for British and other UK-based researchers. The question is, of course, whether it is a realistic position. Next to the fact that the Future Partnership paper is a perfect public relations document for the outstanding research being conducted in the United Kingdom, it also suffers from wishful thinking, window dressing, and impossible interpretations of EU law when it comes down to a possible future partnership with the EU. What is a better partnership than, for example, the one the European Union already has with non-EU countries like Israel, Switzerland, or Norway? Indeed, EU membership is the better option, but the whole issue is that this is what the UK wants to get rid of. Is it an option then to become an EFTA country? This option has already been ruled out twice — very explicitly — by UK Prime Minister Theresa May herself. Or perhaps become a so-called Neighbourhood
country? The United Kingdom evidently does not even want to consider this option. However, the three above-mentioned options (EU member state, EFTA country, Neighbourhood country) are the only ones according to Horizon 2020 that give access to the status of a country ‘associated’ with the framework programme. And although even this notion of ‘associated membership’ seems unacceptable to the United Kingdom, it is a key condition for ERC grantees, who need to stay in an EU member state or associated country for up to six months or a year in order to be in compliance with their grant conditions. So becoming a third country and not being associated with Horizon 2020 or Framework Programme 9 is a nightmare for UK-based ERC grantees or new grantees planning to go with their grant to the United Kingdom. It bears the threat of a significant brain drain from the UK to the EU 27 and the Horizon 2020-associated countries. And of course, we do not want brain drain but brain circulation, cross-border collaboration, multi-national teams, all including the United Kingdom, in order to bring the best researchers together to solve societal problems.

A possible solution to this dilemma was launched earlier by the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and was picked up more explicitly by the LAMY group where its report states the following as recommendation 10: ‘Make international R&I cooperation a trademark of EU research and innovation; Action: open up the R&I programme to association by the best and participation by all, based on reciprocal co-funding or access to co-funding in the partner country.’ Although the official narrative is that this is a way to bring strong research countries like Canada and Australia on board of the framework programme, it is clear this also opens the door for a global research power like the United Kingdom. So, instead of getting the UK in one of the three above-mentioned groups of countries for association, let us change the rules for association to and participation in the programme. Obviously this will require the United Kingdom to input money into the EU budget, to use European Commission contracts, and to accept the authority of the European Court.
of Justice and the decision-making power of the EU 27 when it concerns research policy. Suggesting a kind of ‘association+’ whereby the associated strong non-EU research countries also have a formal say in the EU policy development and decision-making process will perhaps be a bridge too far for the EU 27, although it certainly could have added value in the case of the UK.

UK universities and research institutes are fully aware of all these issues. It is unclear to what extent the British government really is, notwithstanding the above-mentioned Future Partnership paper. Is the British government conscious of the destructive consequences of its ‘policy’ of the past twenty-plus months, not only for universities but for British society as a whole? Surely, vice-chancellors from British higher education institutions, with the explicit support of their continental colleagues, must and will increase the pressure in the following days, weeks, and months, in order to reach an ‘acceptable’ Brexit deal by the summer of 2018. After all, they are among the few societal forces left that can speak up and guide this country in these extremely challenging times. But — who can tell — perhaps none of the above will be necessary. Perhaps common sense will return in the United Kingdom and through new elections or a new referendum or a parliamentary vote, Brexit will not take place in the end. Just keep in mind how even the Swiss changed their minds after two years. Day by day, it becomes clear to all British citizens that Brexit does not mean Brexit and that taking back control actually means losing control. Let us see when the flipping point is reached.

Unlike the government of the United Kingdom, Bert van der Zwaan has prepared Utrecht University and the League of European Research Universities (LERU) in a perfect way for the challenging times ahead. For LERU, he has been a fantastic chair and a great supporter and promoter of the League. His no-nonsense approach, impressive knowledge and strategic vision of the professional field, clear target setting, and great people management have clearly reinforced LERU’s position and reputation at both the EU and the member state level.