Brexit and funding for UK R&D

THIS time last year, the UK’s electorate was gearing up to vote in a referendum to decide on the country’s future in the European Union. This week, the electorate is gearing up to vote again, this time to decide on the government it wants to lead Brexit negotiations.

Among those who will be following those negotiations closely will be members of the UK’s research, development and innovation sector, including the veterinary research community. The EU currently has a total estimated budget of €120 billion available to support research and innovation activities up until 2020 and, in recent years, the UK has been one of the most successful EU member states when it comes to securing funding for R&D.

In a report examining the role of the EU in funding UK research, published in December 2015, the Royal Society noted that, between 2007 and 2013, just under one-fifth of the total money the UK received from the EU was used to support research, development and innovation. Over the same period, the UK was a net beneficiary of EU funding for R&D, contributing €5.4 billion towards the EU’s R&D budget but receiving €8.8 billion of the EU’s total spend (of €107 billion) on research, development and innovation. This was the fourth largest share in the EU after Germany, Poland and Italy.

Veterinary research in the UK is world-leading and the UK’s veterinary schools and research institutes all benefit from EU funding. Figures submitted to the most recent Research Excellence Framework evaluation in 2014 show that, between 2008 and 2013 – a similar time frame to that evaluated by the Royal Society – the seven veterinary schools existing at that time attracted almost £22 million from EU government bodies.

The UK’s research institutes involved in veterinary or veterinary-related research are also recipients of EU funding – the Moredun Research Institute, for example, is currently collaborating in three EU projects. Between them, these projects have attracted a total of €28 million over varying time periods from the current EU funding round to be shared among participating institutes and universities.

The Pirbright Institute announced in February that it was to play a key role in an international multipartner project relating to insectborne diseases that threaten human health and animal industries. This project, funded by the EU’s Horizon 2020 programme, has been allocated almost €10 million to be shared between 24 institutions across Europe and further afield.

The APHA is involved in multiple projects with an EU dimension, including acting as the EU’s Reference Laboratory for diseases such as avian influenza, Newcastle disease and transmissible spongiform encephalopathies.

Given the level of EU backing to the UK R&D sector, there is, therefore, definite concern about the potential impact of Brexit. Giving evidence to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee last year, Professor Sir David Greenaway, chair of the Russell Group of universities – which includes most of those with veterinary schools – identified funding for research as a ‘high risk’ area under threat following Brexit. He indicated that, even before Article 50 had been triggered, universities were beginning to think about how they could lay down foundations to ensure that they continued to succeed, whatever the outcome of negotiations. At the moment, he said, ‘we are looking at building longer-term, deeper relationships with a smaller number of partners in other EU member states.’

The Veterinary Schools Council (VSC), which represents the interests of seven UK vet schools, has also expressed its concern about future access to EU funding and the effect that this could have on veterinary research in the UK.

Ewan Cameron, chair of the VSC, has warned that, given how deeply embedded UK veterinary research is within European networks, the impact of Brexit could be significant. ‘UK access to future funding that maximises the potential of Europe-wide collaboration and synergy is threatened by Brexit,’ he says. ‘Funding is a crucial part of our European collaborations, but the current uncertainty is a concern on many levels, especially the recruitment of high-quality staff and in maintaining our international research networks.’

The previous administration indicated that it was aware of concern about future funding for R&D after Brexit, committing to underwriting funding for approved Horizon 2020 projects applied for before the UK leaves the EU. It confirmed that this support would be new money, not taken from the existing science budget. Prime Minister Theresa May also pledged a real-term increase in government investment worth £2 billion per year by 2020 for R&D.

In their manifestos for the forthcoming General Election the main parties make promises on funding for R&D. The Conservatives say they will stand by the increase in government investment announced last year. They also say that, within 10 years they will meet the current OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) average for investment in R&D of 2.4 per cent of GDP (the UK currently invests 1.7 per cent of GDP), with a longer term aim of 3 per cent.

Likewise, the Labour Party says it will meet the OECD target of 3 per cent of GDP being spent on R&D by 2050. It will also seek to remain part of the Horizon 2020 programme and any successor programmes.

The Liberal Democrats pledge to protect the science budget, including the £2 billion increase announced by the Prime Minister. The long-term goal, they say, will be to double innovation and research spending across the economy. They also guarantee to underwrite funding for British partners in EU-funded projects such as Horizon 2020.

Leaving the EU may not mean that UK scientific institutions and researchers can no longer compete for EU money. For example, researchers in Switzerland have received funding from the Horizon 2020 programme. A number of mechanisms exist to allow non-EU countries to apply for EU funding, but there are conditions attached. In some cases, these countries contribute to the EU’s R&D budget but have no say in strategic decisions on how it is spent; freedom of movement of researchers is also a major condition of participation.

The Brexit negotiations will begin in earnest after the General Election and, until they are concluded, the UK is still subject to European law. This means that researchers can continue to apply for EU funding and, indeed, they are still doing so.

However, given that no-one knows what sort of deal the UK will eventually get from the EU, the R&D community is right to be concerned about the future. The UK’s universities and institutions will still represent excellent places to do research after Brexit, but access to wide-ranging sources of funding will be key to their future success.

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