

# On geese, gold and eggs

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On 6 September 2017, the government announced its intention to negotiate continued membership to EU research funding programmes, allowing UK researchers to have full access to funds and to lead research programmes. This news may not have caused a public stir, but it was received with relief in the UK higher education and research community. But soon there emerged a worry around the paper's silence over the free movement of people that full access would presume.

And in fact, the government has been studiously quiet about this question, putting into doubt the pledge – without mobility, we will only be able to secure third-party access to programmes, and besides, not as programme leaders.

It is vital that the status of full membership of EU research programmes does come to prevail, because so far it has served the UK exceptionally well, across the full range of EU initiatives on offer. This is amply confirmed

by a mounting body of evidence, including our latest SSH paper and the articles in this issue of the *British Academy Review*. The story, for the sciences and the humanities, is one of disproportionately favourable returns to the UK, not just in terms of funding flows, but also leadership of collaborative projects, policy influence, and the steady flow of outstanding European researchers – emergent and established – to UK universities. These are only some of the highlights of full membership.

But lest this begins to sound like a narrow cost-benefit analysis, there is a deeper story to be told, one about how the UK has emerged as a global player in the advancement of 'frontier' knowledge. Having sat on an Advanced Grant Panel of the very substantial European Research Council (ERC), I saw first hand that the projects funded after rigorous peer review by leading scholars from all over Europe were exactly like those described in this issue by Professors Diamond, Crouch, Goldhill, Keay and Griffith. They were discovery/blue-sky projects on large questions needing the very best researchers from different countries to come together in interdisciplinary

teams. There is no comparable funding mechanism anywhere else, one that bravely chooses to commit large grants to high-risk but high-dividend research that promises to be transformative and of major intellectual and social worth. As Colin Crouch insightfully observes (page 00), Europe has put into place a unique cross-national infrastructure of research support that is not replicated nationally (certainly not in the UK), to enable cross-border research on global issues.

Impressively, the UK has emerged at the helm of 'frontier' research, if funding success rates and flows of people are an indicator, and most importantly, with the appropriate infrastructure and incentives in place to facilitate such research, we have gone from strength to strength. The environment in the UK has improved so much that the UK has become a key hub attracting top researchers to work here, including continental winners of ERC grants choosing to bring their projects to the UK owing to the people, working practices and infrastructures on offer. UK science, social science and the humanities, in good measure because of EU research programmes, have raised their capacity to address the deeper unknowns of the world – past, present and future – which require more than bite-size, disciplinary, national applications. We have come to excel in research that is foundational and fundamental, the kind that helps to place countries at the world forefront of creativity and all its societal benefits. There is a lot to thank the EU for.

The mobility question – more precisely anxieties of having European researchers and students amidst us – has to be interpreted in this context. This should not be seen as a question of wanted or unwanted migrants, but a matter of removing barriers to movements and collaborations that enable the highest quality and most necessary research to be undertaken. If national borders get in the way of the geographies that best deliver research excellence, in turn helping the UK to maintain the very fortunate position in the world that it enjoys, then solutions must be found accordingly. The other day I heard the head of a major national research trust say that 30 years ago UK research seemed parochial compared to today, thanks largely to the embedded cosmopolitanism that has been facilitated by EU research opportunities and infrastructures. I agree. Migration anxieties, if they end up hindering full membership of EU research

programmes, will fracture a mode of working that has yielded an academic cosmopolitanism in the UK that is enviable.

Why kill off the goose that laid the golden egg? Sustaining participation in EU research programmes poses no threat to the UK developing further international collaborations, as some seem to think. In fact, as Crouch argues, it is the *basis* for developing new connections, in so far as the EU-supported research environment in the UK has played its part in attracting researchers from India, China, the US and other parts of the world to the UK. If Brexit means the end of European research participation and collaboration, the wider globalism spoken of by the government will be at risk, for there will be no transnational framework for collaborative research, and in the meantime the attractiveness of the UK research base will have waned. Globalism without Europe seems odd in any case, suggesting that 'Anglosphere' aspirations premised on renewing old colonial and commonwealth ring truer of old imperial fantasies (which our past dominions will find risible) than of a genuine desire to extend the frames of cosmopolitan belonging that Europe – at least in the research arena – has nurtured. Mycock and Wellings (page 00) are right to be wary of this version of globalism championed by Brexiteers anxious of the charge of nativism.

In place of such ethnocentrism, let us ask how the research excellence that the UK has so arduously built up, with the help of incentives from appropriate EU research funding programmes, can be maintained and protected. Then – as Robert Frost (page 00) reveals for the early moderns, when Europeans got used to making compromises and bargains instead of obsessing with the purities of the unitary state, national or otherwise – we might get past the conundrum of EU membership without mobility. A pragmatic Europe might consider making deals on migration packages spread across a credible time horizon so as to help member and affiliated states to better manage national labour and welfare markets, it might puncture any paranoia about national cultural loss and reduced sovereignty, and it might look to forms of belonging beyond the unitary state. At the charged present time, this kind of thinking seems fanciful. Perhaps so, but this is the kind of switch needed to nurture the republic of letters that helps nations to negotiate turbulent waters. ■