Brexit uncertainty looms over government policies

Brexit is causing much uncertainty and insecurity for the scientific community. It can seem like little has moved on since the referendum over 18 months ago, with limited detail arising from negotiations so far. However, the scientific community has collectively worked hard to speak clearly in the midst of myriad voices in the Brexit debate, and there are concrete signs that our voice has been heard as a sector that drives productivity, economic growth and improves people’s lives.

The Campaign for Science and Engineering is an independent organization aiming to ensure there is a thriving environment for science and engineering in the UK. We focus on the broad areas of education & skills (including immigration), R&D investment, and the use of evidence in policy making. Since the referendum result, each of these areas has a Brexit lens; the future of migration to support international mobility and collaboration, the UK’s interaction with EU funding for research & innovation, and ensuring that the concentration of policy and regulatory decisions facing the UK Government are appropriately informed with scientific advice and evidence.

These topics come up time and again in our meetings with member organizations. We then seek to distil and convey the views of the sector in Westminster and Whitehall. Not just with key Government players such as the Science Minister, but also with government officials across multiple departments, MPs, Peers, Chief Scientific Advisors and those working for Select Committees. Brexit is such a wide-reaching issue that such broad engagement is essential to be heard.

The UK Government has used some domestic policy levers to demonstrate the importance of research and innovation to the UK. The Government have pledged to increase research and development (R&D) spending to reach 2.4% of UK GDP by 2027. Currently, the amount spent on R&D sits at 1.7% of GDP, which makes this an ambitious target to bring the UK closer to other scientific world-leaders. Following a long consultation, made longer by a General Election, the Government released its Industrial Strategy white paper outlining a framework for how Government and industry will work together, aiming to ensure scientific and technological advancements can bring benefits to the UK. These two major pieces of policy shows that the government understands that science is important for the UK, but clearly there is much to be done on the international stage. Many other issues concerning regulatory alignment across the Channel and beyond, future UK participation in EU funding programmes and the movement of people will form key parts of the Brexit negotiations moving into Phase 2.

Immigration is a topic that most see as the key factor in the EU referendum result. Within the scientific community, freedom of movement across the EU has been viewed with overwhelming positivity in enhancing collaborations and being able to welcome talented individuals to the UK. The government will shortly be producing an immigration bill laying the legal groundwork for a future migration system. In the meantime, CaSE has been working hard with our members and collaborators to clearly set out what we need from an immigration system that meets the needs of science. Recent levels of skilled non-European migration have meant that some skilled individuals who hold a UK job offer and meet all visa requirements have been turned away simply because an arbitrary monthly cap has been hit. In addition to calling for these caps to be removed in the short-term, CaSE is determined that these issues will not plague a future immigration system to the detriment of science.

Domestic policy since the referendum has attempted to aid science, but the unknowns and risks of Brexit could undermine these intentions. It is therefore vital that the scientific community continues to use every opportunity to understand and articulate what it needs from Government, making itself heard through this crucial negotiation period.

The Biochemical Society is a member of the Campaign for Science and Engineering and regularly feeds into its consultation responses. If you would like an opportunity to feed your views into the Society’s policy activities, you can join our Policy Network by emailing policy@biochemistry.org.

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