ON 23 JUNE 2016, a referendum will be held to decide whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU. This decision will have a rippling impact across the science and technology research spectrum within and outside of Europe.

A key area of consideration is funding. Horizon 2020 – the biggest EU Research and Innovation programme ever, with €80 billion of funding available – requires collaborative projects to have researchers from at least three organisations in different EU Member or Associate Member States. If the UK were to leave the EU, the country would lose its EU membership and, in turn, many of its existing funding privileges. “Although non-EU members can participate in Horizon 2020, they don’t receive funding from the EU if they are from a country where the GDP level is above a specific threshold,” explains Kurt Deketelaere, Secretary-General of the League of European Research Universities (LERU). “In those cases, the countries are considered wealthy enough to fund research itself.”

A LOOK BACK AT SWITZERLAND
During the Swiss referendum in 2014, the vote was passed to block the free circulation of Croatians into Switzerland and thus revoke access to the country’s employment market on terms equal to those of the Swiss population. One of the consequences was that Switzerland was excluded from participating in Horizon 2020, and was thus no longer entitled to its funding – a notable blow to the country’s researchers, institutes and universities. Although Switzerland has since regained partial and temporary access to Horizon 2020 (which ends this year), the country only has access as an Associate Member State to the first pillar: Excellent Science. In terms of pillars two (Industrial Leadership) and three (Societal Challenges), Switzerland is considered a Third Country, like China or the US, and thus is not automatically eligible for funding and must meet certain criteria.

A LOOK FORWARD AT THE UK
Therefore, an important question is: what type of status would the UK hold if it leaves the EU? In order to have fuller access to Horizon 2020 projects than a non-EU country, an attempt to become an Associate Member State seems likely. But this would only be possible if all the other 27 Member States were to agree. “I’m fully convinced of the fact that the other 27 EU Member States have reached such a level of discontent with the UK’s approach that they will not agree to grant the country Associate Member status,” says Deketelaere. The UK would therefore gain a similar status to countries such as Brazil, Kenya and China – and be treated as a foreign nation.

Additionally, as one of the best performing countries in the world in terms of research and innovation, why would the UK want to leave the EU and relinquish its decision-making power in matters of utmost importance, including
Why would the UK want to leave the EU and relinquish its decision-making power in matters of utmost importance, including guidelines and policies?

In order not to go about this endeavour alone, it would be necessary for the UK to enter into negotiations with other countries and consortia. Therefore, another question is:

Why would other countries bring the UK on board as a preferential partner if their own institutions and researchers are based within and funded by the EU? Although the UK would be able to sign up as an international partner, preferential access to research infrastructures is key.

THE IMPACT ON EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

If the UK were no longer an EU Member State, tuition fees would increase significantly for continental students. “It would no longer be possible to attract bright students to the UK so easily,” Deketelaere adds. It is very likely that students on the continent would look for education opportunities in countries other than the UK because of the heightened costs.

While most universities strive to employ the best researchers, the UK currently has access to top researchers from the continent because of the easy circulation of people. How will this be affected by the need for visas to get into the country and work? “Within LERU, the UK and continental Europe members work very closely together,” Deketelaere explains. “This collaboration would become much more problematic if the UK were to leave the EU due to the additional rules and burdens that are associated with collaborating with non-EU Member States.” Internationalisation and collaboration between the best researchers and students in the best environment with the best infrastructures is crucial – and this becomes far more difficult in a scenario in which the UK leaves the EU. As the EU facilitates frameworks for the exchange of staff and students between countries, both the UK and continental Europe could suffer for years to come.

While it remains uncertain which way the vote will go, the repercussions of the UK leaving the EU would permeate almost every facet of the way in which collaborative research is carried out, from funding and infrastructures to training and partnerships.