The future of UK research
How will funding and organisational changes impact the UK research landscape? Rebecca Torr speaks to Director of Policy for Universities UK Chris Hale to find out what Brexit might mean for UK research and whether he believes the adoption of Sir Paul Nurse’s recommendations for the future of Research Councils is likely to prove fruitful.

**Could you explain your stance on the 2015 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) and the impact you expect it to have on UK research long-term?**

I think it is a settlement we should be positive about and it did send out a clear signal of support for research and the research base more generally. Whilst ideally we would like to see stronger commitment in terms of moving towards increasing the overall percentage of GDP that the UK spends on R&D, within the current fiscal context it was a relatively positive settlement. Beyond the headlines in the CSR, the devil is, of course, in the detail. We now have the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grant letter from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BISI), the HEFCE Board decisions, and the research council allocations. Overall these would seem to reinforce the positive message. We are particularly pleased about the proposed slight increase in quality related (QR) block grant funding. It is excellent news that Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) has been confirmed at £160 million in 2016-17 (the same as in previous years, in cash terms). However, HEFCE will consult later this year on the development of its funding approach for knowledge exchange from 2017-18.

Overall, the CSR consolidates our position, allows us to continue to invest, but the ambition should be to move us more towards the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in terms of overall investment in science and research.

**It was announced in the 2015 Spending Review that Sir Paul Nurse’s recommendations will be adopted. What was the reaction to that news by universities, and will it affect how UK institutions operate?**

In general the Nurse Review went down reasonably well. It was a well-considered piece of work. The main issue, and main controversy, is around the proposed shift in QR research funding in England to the new Research UK body. It’s probably safe to say there is quite a lot of concern about this in the sector, not least because there is a feeling that the problem this is seeking to solve has not been clearly articulated. This notwithstanding, it seems to have strong political backing and is very likely to happen. The debate therefore needs to focus on how we can ensure appropriate protections for the dual support system are put in place under this new arrangement. We can all agree that dual support is a positive step and it underpins dynamism and diversity within the research base, which are good things in terms of a healthy R&D funding system. We’ve got to get right down into the nuts and bolts about how this new arrangement will work and what the checks and balances are. It’s helpful that the Government asked the question about hypothecation. We would agree that QR should be hypothecated within that new arrangement.

The other thing that will be essential is to ensure that there is a mechanism to allocate QR on a separate basis to the Research Councils, so a mechanism like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) will still be needed. We don’t want it based on simple income metrics from the Research Councils because it would effectively spell the end of the dual support system if you tie the two arms too closely together.

There is a question of whether we can enshrine some of those protections in legislation. This is my personal view, but getting these kinds of protections for dual support in legislation may be quite a clunky way of doing it. I don’t think there are many precedents for actually protecting funding streams in that kind of way. It may be we can get some broad protection and legislation, but focus then on getting the design principles of RUK right and the governance and accountability right. We also need to make sure there’s effective transparency in reporting and making sure budgets are set clearly.

**The Government is preparing to re-evaluate the REF. What are your recommendations for how the Framework could be improved?**

We are talking to our members quite actively about what sort of ideas and thoughts they have on this, and those will be fed into the Stern review call for evidence. It’s quite right to raise the question and I think setting up the Stern review...
in the way that it’s been done is probably the right thing – we do need to periodically step back and evaluate: Is this the right thing to be doing? Are we still getting the kind of benefits that we need from a research assessment system? A lot of people can articulate the benefits quite well, but we just need to understand whether we are still getting those benefits.

We’d probably say that metrics can be part of this, but not exclusively. You do need to have peer review as a core underpinning element of this. There might also be the possibility to go a bit further than we have done to date on the metrics site. I think the work that James Wilsdon has done is very useful in that regard. In terms of the actual framework itself, there are all sorts of potential options such as increasing the intervals between assessments, reducing the number of research outputs required, moving to 100 per cent submissions. Those options will deal with different criticisms of the system, but what we want to do is go out to our members and talk to them about these issues, think about what’s workable and then feed that back into the Stern review.

In anticipation of the EU referendum on 23 June, could you highlight some of the main arguments against Brexit in relation to UK research and universities?

From a research perspective, the first thing to stress is that it’s not just about the money. The income we get from Horizon 2020, and previously the Framework Programmes is significant and the UK does very well, but the benefits are wider and more pervasive. Europe provides all sorts of opportunities for us to strengthen what we do through collaboration, from basic and interdisciplinary research through to more applied research and then supporting knowledge exchange and realising economic benefits.

Collaboration is clearly important in furthering research, but couldn’t this continue without the UK being a member of the EU?

The first point to mention is the importance of the opportunities we have to collaborate, to come together with scientists across different discipline areas across Europe to pull our resources, pull our best brains and our best research teams – to achieve much more than we’d be able to achieve on our own. You could argue that we can still do that outside of Europe, we just develop lots of bilateral agreements. That’s probably right, but not very efficient and Europe provides a very effective and efficient mechanism for building collaboration. You’ve got strong European networks through Horizon 2020 and the various European programmes, which universities can access and make connections. The European framework makes that a lot easier and a lot more effective, and it connects the right people. In addition, the funding provides lubrication and the means to do that.

There’s good data to show that research that is internationally collaborative has far more impact than research we can do on our own. Europe acts as a gateway internationally and there are many international partners connected into the European programmes. Europe allows us to maximise the benefits of that collaboration on an international scale as well.

Isn’t there a possibility to access the European framework on an ad hoc basis?

I think the problem with that is that we would then lose our influence and our power, we wouldn’t be round the table when the decisions are being made, so we’d be paying in and getting money out, potentially, but we would lose our influence. If you think of Europe as a powerful international R&D engine, at the moment the UK is really in the driving seat, whereas if we leave Europe we’d be in the baby seat, at the back, and someone else would be driving. That’s actually a big issue for the UK. We would lose some of the influence that we have and the leadership role.

How will these impacts spread to the wider public and economy, and how are you aiming to communicate these effects to the general public?

We’ve got our Universities for Europe campaign and that’s very much about trying to promote the benefits of the EU and make evidence-based arguments. We’re one voice amongst many, so we’ll be looking to collaborate and work
with other partners where we can, with businesses, and with others. As the voice of universities, we will do everything we can within our resources and campaigning capabilities to get that message out, to talk to the public, and to students and those in the HE community. Certainly with R&D, a lot of the time I don’t think it’s fully understood how important Europe is. So I think we need some good, simple arguments that we can develop and promote, but I think we’ll only be able to do that if we can work collaboratively with other people to get those messages out.

Is it also expected that a UK exit from the EU would have a negative impact on other EU member countries? Why is this?

We have a lot of strong collaboration, which not only brings benefits to the UK, but also to other parts of Europe in terms of collaborative research. If we have a Brexit, the UK isn’t going to disappear, we’ll still work out ways we can build those collaborations where we need to, but I think it will be a lot harder. A lot of the partners that we collaborate with will mourn our departure because I think it will be harder for them to collaborate with us. Often, the benefits of them integrating or being involved in the European programmes means that they can work with UK partners. I think there will be potential, certainly among the science and research community, but there will be a wider negative impact on other countries.

In what ways does Universities for Europe aim to advocate for the importance of the EU to UK universities?

It’s about making the arguments about what the benefits are. Research is obviously one area, but I think we also want to make strong arguments about the importance of Europe to people’s everyday lives and the roles of universities within that. We talk about the importance of universities being able to collaborate, but actually this is about real life issues, tackling global problems from cancer to climate change – it’s about important issues that affect people’s everyday lives. We’d like to get some of those messages across. We also want to articulate the benefits that come at a regional level from universities being an actor within a broader European environment.

If the UK does vote to leave the EU, how will Universities UK attempt to mitigate the negative effects of this on academics, research and students?

Our position at the moment is we believe that we are stronger in Europe and the benefits to our universities, to our country, to people’s lives are far greater being in Europe than leaving. If Brexit happens, we’ll have to work with the Government in the best way we can to mitigate the impact of that. We feel the impacts will be quite severe. In relation to research, we’ll need to have a discussion about any future role that the UK will play in Horizon 2020, in the broader European Research Area, and whether that means us coming to some sort of bilateral arrangements in the same way that I think Norway has.

There’s also all sorts of wider issues around immigration policy, EU students and policies that affect the mobility of staff. There’s a whole raft of wider regulatory issues that will probably need to be looked at – such as data protection, copyright, and tax laws – all which impact on universities.

Hopefully, the messages from our campaign are quite clear, we see that we’re stronger together and we see the importance of us continuing to remain part of Europe and the benefits of that to the country and the role our universities play.