

Regional

Brexit bad for higher education worldwide

Last Thursday 52 percent of British voters expressed their opinion that the United Kingdom should split from the group of 28 member states that form the European Union. The immediate consequences of such a vote – nicknamed Brexit – were striking. Financial markets worldwide plunged, the British pound halved in value and Prime Minister David Cameron announced his resignation effective in October. All the while the Scottish nationalists renewed calls for separation from Great Britain after nearly two thirds of Scots voted to remain in the E.U.

All this turmoil was the consequence of various factors that combined to form the perfect storm. One was a promise by Cameron himself in 2013 to hold the referendum to keep the anti-European wing of his party happy before the 2015 general election. From the beginning he misread the feelings of the British electorate, ruining not only his political career and his legacy but also changing the place of the U.K. in the world for decades to come. Another was the increasing dissatisfaction among voters worldwide with the political establishment of western nations (including the U.S.) that has given rise to populism, demagoguery and provincialism in a world that is more and more globalized and interdependent, and where voters are confronted with decisions that are more and more complex and that require cooler heads and more effort to understand.

But what does all this have to do with higher education? Much more than what most people realize.

Just a week before the June 24 referendum, a poll that surveyed 1,082 respondents showed that 90 percent of faculty members and administrators in

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British higher education wanted to remain in the European Union, with 40 percent of them saying that they would be more likely to leave the U.K. if the pro-separation forces won.

Why this strong and striking difference of opinion between people in the British academy and the general population?

Until last year there were 403,835 staff employed in higher education in the U.K. A lot of academic research among European Union countries is financially supported by the E.U. That means that these people in higher education in Britain would see funding opportunities for research diminished in a separated Britain. It is estimated that U.K. universities will lose 1.2 billion pounds (\$1.7 billion) in E.U. money. Not only that, but if the economic predictions of a recession for the U.K. become true – as the vast majority of analysts believe – internal support for academic endeavors will also be severely curtailed.

What will also happen is that freedom of movement policies within the E.U., which allow citizens of any of their member countries to work freely throughout the continent, will end, curtailing joint academic programs. This, in turn, will increase the isolationist sentiment of a country when academic endeavors are being seen more and more as international efforts.

The effect of the Brexit on students will also be significant because it will mean less student mobility,

curtailing opportunities to study abroad, which, in turn, will curb enrollment estimates for many universities. U.K. universities will see their enrollment numbers decline since E.U. students would have to pay higher tuition and fees to gain access to British universities. At the same time, programs such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus, that financially support European students to study and work in other E.U. countries, will no longer be available to British students.

No wonder that university administrators in an unprecedented move lobbied intensely for Britain to remain in the E.U. About 100 U.K. university vice chancellors signed a letter published two days before the referendum expressing concern about the impact of a vote for Brexit on universities and students. The letter said, among other things, that membership in the E.U., "...supports British universities and initiatives from across Europe, enhancing university research and teaching and contributing to economic welfare.

Voluntarily cutting ourselves out of the world's largest economic bloc would undermine our position in science and innovation, impoverish our campuses, and limit opportunities for British people."

The Brexit process will take some time. First, the separation from the E.U. has to be approved by Parliament. Then, according to the Lisbon Treaty, Britain has to notify the E.U. two years in advance of their intention to leave the organization. In the meantime, they could try to negotiate specific treaties to keep some collaborations going, but they are likely to find little sympathy in continental Europe.

Yet, Brexit is not just a nightmare for higher edu-

cation in Britain and the E.U. in financial, structural and international cooperation terms. It is a symptom of what is wrong with society in general. Since its inception in Medieval Europe, higher education has relied on the free flow of ideas and people to gain strength and to become one of the pillars of modern and robust societies. It has been a strongly held belief that without a strong higher education system, nations face a weakening of their economies and democratic institutions. But now things seem to be changing worldwide.

In the last few years we have seen how support for higher education – both financially and politically – has diminished. Interestingly the same groups of individuals who are badmouthing higher education are the ones aligned with a specific subset of ideologies: nationalism, xenophobia and racism. They include those who deny a human-induced climate change or even the reality of evolution as a biological phenomenon. Because these ideologies have proven to be detrimental to the progress of humanity, and those providing proof that such is the case have been people in academic institutions, they are being seen as the enemy. In other words, if you don't like the message, kill the messenger.

Although the alternatives are worse, democracy is far from being a good system of government. In elections, people, for the most part, vote with their hearts, not with their heads. That is why elections are not meetings of philosophers.

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