

## Written evidence to the Commission of Enquiry “Brexit: Auswirkungen auf NRW”

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### Introductory notes

I’m very pleased to be able to contribute to and support the work of the Nordrhein-Westfalen Brexit Commission of Enquiry, and this crucial research into Germany and the UK’s post-Brexit relationship. I am conscious that the NRW is not only the most populous German state but also has the largest number of resident British citizens, with strong historical ties to the UK as a result of developments following the Second World War.

The outcome of the UK’s 2016 referendum on continued membership of the European Union delivered an enormous shock to the Higher Education Institutions within the country. Oxford was no exception. Over the four decades prior to the referendum, Oxford had been transformed from an exceptionally good and world-famous British university, largely teaching UK undergraduates, into one of the foremost research universities in the world. That is not to say that Oxford did no research until towards the end of the twentieth century, simply that research was not at the forefront of most Oxford academics’ minds.

Membership of the European Union from the mid-1970s brought increased resources for research through the EU’s Framework programmes, particularly in FP7 and Horizon 2020, in which UK universities found enormous success. At the same time, Oxford was rapidly internationalising both its research base and its student body. By the time of the referendum, almost half of Oxford’s academics and researchers came from outside the UK, as did over 60% of its graduate students. Many of these, approximately half of the numbers, came from elsewhere in the European Union. Oxford currently has about 1,000 EU27 undergraduates and some 3,000 EU27 postgraduate students. So, Oxford has long considered itself both an international university and a European university. Withdrawal from the European Union was seen to pose an existential threat to its size, shape, and position in international higher education.

Therefore, as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Brexit Strategy in Oxford in 2017 and 2018, I looked for ways in which to mitigate the impact of withdrawal from the EU, not only for Oxford, but also for much of the rest of the sector. Part of the strategy was to seek to maintain our existing links with European institutions, as well as to develop new links. In December 2017, the University of Oxford signed a memorandum of understanding with the Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin (together forming the Berlin University Alliance). The agreement was encouraged and supported by the Mayor and Senate of Berlin, and Oxford’s presence in Berlin has gone on to include research links with other institutions in Berlin, such as the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung and Universität der Künste.

## Research

### *State of the art:*

*Do you know about research cooperations between the UK and Germany that can serve as a role model for research cooperation between the UK and NRW? If so, what are their lessons learned?*

Obviously, the model that I know best is that between Oxford and the BUA. In this relationship, focussed initially on research with some limited graduate student mobility, the partner institutions have provided workshop funding and also two rounds of research seed-funding, making over 60 awards for projects with a value of up to 30k€. In total we have committed 1.1M€ across the workshops and seed funding awards. A provisional budget for 2020-22 commits the partners to research and mobility expenditure of a further 2M€ across the three years. In addition, Oxford has established a gGmbH, "Oxford in Berlin" which will form the nucleus of its research presence in Germany. Other UK institutions have formed partnerships with German universities<sup>1</sup>, although the models of collaboration, do, I understand, differ to that for Oxford and Berlin. But it is an indication of the concerns felt by UK institutions to maintain their research links with Germany in particular, but also elsewhere in the EU.

### *Operational framework:*

*How can research cooperation between the UK and NRW/Germany be maintained and even strengthened despite Brexit?*

I think this is best done through local agreements between institutions. Obviously, Oxford-Berlin has benefitted from the support of the Berlin Senate, and it is regional authorities that must step up to help create such entities, as, with negotiations still ongoing between the departing UK and the EU, national governments cannot be involved. So I would suggest that it should be the NRW government that encourages and supports – perhaps financially - its leading universities to make arrangements for continued cooperation with UK universities.

*How can academic work and the research sector in NRW become more attractive for internationally active academics?*

Germany has some of the very best universities and research ecosystems in Europe. That, together with Germany's continuing membership of the EU is an obvious draw, not just for other European scientists, but also for academics and researchers from around the world. The BUA has just had considerable success in being designated as a consortium of excellence (as of course have two NRW universities), thereby receiving considerable sums of research funding to help them develop interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and international research programmes. Berlin's location, at the heart of Europe, obviously helps, but little speaks to academics and researchers like the potential of research funding. In addition, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subject areas, a major attraction is the possibility of bringing research to the market-place. Oxford has had considerable success in technology transfer for several decades, so a

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<sup>1</sup> These include University of Cambridge with LMU München, University of Glasgow with Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Imperial College London with TU München, University of Cardiff with Universität Bremen, University of Birmingham with the Goethe Universität Frankfurt, and King's College London with TU Dresden.

legislative environment that either encourages, or does not hinder that process, could be extremely helpful in encouraging internationally active academics.

*Which options does NRW (the government ...) have in order to support bilateral exchange and cooperation with the UK?*

I think that one has to assume that the direction in which the UK Government is heading, especially under the impact of the pandemic Coronavirus, requires us to work towards the possibility of no deal on 31 December 2020. So it is improbable that collaborations and researcher and student mobility are likely to be supported by Horizon Europe research funding schemes and Erasmus/MSCA initiatives. The solution therefore is to implement schemes and initiatives that support your universities to foster research and mobility collaborations with British universities, and help to maintain the collaborative links that have grown up as part of the EU's Framework programmes and funding streams.

## **Education**

*State of the art:*

*Is there transnational cooperation in the education sector between the UK and NRW/Germany that could serve as an example for best practice? If yes, why do these cooperations qualify as role models?*

Although Oxford has not made very great use of Erasmus programmes, for reasons such as continuous assessment and the structure of the academic year, my sense is that Erasmus-like initiatives to encourage student mobility are greatly valued in both Germany and in much of the UK's HE sector. Hence I would suggest that the Commission consider ways in which your universities might continue to promote such activities with articular institutions within the UK, or even more generally.

*In context of educational institutions, are there locations in NRW that should be explicitly promoted in order to grow their international reputation/impact?*

I regret that I am not sufficiently well-acquainted with the region to suggest particular locations. I am certain that if regional government is able to foster an environment conducive to high quality research and the promotion of the knowledge economy, international researchers and students – particularly research students - will be greatly attracted to your universities.