

Marginson, Simon , Vassiliki Papatsiba , and Xin Xu. "Feeling the Brexit Shock: European Connectedness and the Existential Crisis in UK Higher Education." *Changing Higher Education for a Changing World*. Ed. Claire Callender , William Locke and Simon Marginson London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 67–83. Bloomsbury Higher Education Research. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 29 Jan. 2024. <<https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/encyclopedia-chapter?docid=b-9781350108448&tocid=b-9781350108448-chapter5>>.

Accessed from: [www.bloomsburycollections.com](http://www.bloomsburycollections.com)

Accessed on: **Mon Jan 29 2024 16:08:26 Greenwich Mean Time**

Copyright © Claire Callender, William Locke and Simon Marginson 2020. This chapter is published open access subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may re-use, distribute, and reproduce this work in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

# Feeling the Brexit Shock

## European Connectedness and the Existential Crisis in UK Higher Education

Simon Marginson, Vassiliki Papatsiba and Xin Xu

### Introduction

In June 2016, the UK electorate voted by 52 per cent to leave the European Union, though only 26 per cent of those holding university degrees agreed (Swales 2016: 8). Across the North, the Midlands and in Wales, Remain-voting university communities were isolated amid surrounding Leave-voting populations. Everything began to change, in British politics and in higher education. The EU referendum triggered a protracted negotiation over the terms of withdrawal. There was an increasingly bitter national debate, in which the political centre fell away and the contrary demands for a ‘No Deal’ Brexit, and a second referendum to overturn the first, both gained ground. Three years after the referendum the implications for higher education were still unclear.

What was clear was uncertainty about the future, and the fact the sector was newly vulnerable. Universities found themselves counting the costs of severing ties in Europe without knowing whether there would be a withdrawal agreement, what would be severed, how much change would occur, which mitigating strategies might be needed, whether there were new global opportunities outside Europe or things would shrink inwards and what it meant for the financial bottom line (UUK 2019).

Over the four decades since the UK voted to join the European Economic Community in 1975 the EU trajectory of ‘ever closer union’ was resisted in much of the country (Gifford 2014; Vasilopoulou 2016). Some in higher education were also resistant, albeit to a lesser extent, mainly because of the administrative burden of EU programmes and concerns about quality/prestige

in parts of the EU. However, progressively, UK higher education has moved 'ever closer' to European universities, research networks and people. The extent of engagement has varied by region, university and discipline but includes almost all higher education institutions in the four nations. Higher education's engagement with European colleagues and students has often been sufficiently deep to change the lifestyle, values and identities of higher education people born in the UK. Of course, as will be discussed, with free cross-border labour mobility in the EU, in some universities one in four academics are citizens of non-UK Europe. European doctoral students are often vital to research.

Following the 2016 referendum the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) commissioned a set of research projects designed to investigate the consequences of Brexit and post-Brexit developments in different parts of UK polity and economy. These projects were grounded in the ESRC's UK in a Changing Europe programme. The Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) was awarded a grant for work on Brexit in higher education in the four UK nations,<sup>1</sup> with emphasis on migration-related aspects, resources for responding to Brexit-induced changes and financial sustainability. Between October 2017 and July 2018 the Centre's researchers conducted 127 semi-structured interviews on the effects of Brexit in 12 contrasting UK higher education institutions. The researchers (Simon Marginson, William Locke, Vassiliki Papatsiba and Ludovic Highman) also collected system-wide data on UK institutions engagement with Europe.

This chapter summarizes the UK universities' engagement with Europe and presents early findings from the Brexit-related research. These findings concern the emotions expressed by interviewees. The researchers did not set out to find how people felt about Brexit. Uncalled for, interviewees displayed a range of strong and mostly negative emotional responses, including pain, anguish, confusion and a sense of loss.

## UK Universities and Europe

### **European Research Programmes**

UK universities' work in European Framework research programmes is often described in financial terms. It is true that European funding has become essential to much research in UK but to focus only on the financial equation is to

underestimate the transformative effects of long-term integration into Europe. UK research engagement in Europe is also logistical, cultural, demographic and, most importantly, intellectual.

Data for 2019 show the UK had the highest success rate in European Research Council grants, hosted 22.3 per cent of ERC funded researchers, attracted 20.5 per cent of talented researchers via the Marie-Sklodowska-Curie scheme, and coordinated almost one in five Horizon 2020 projects (European Commission 2019). Research works on the basis of collaborative networks, and the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020 showed the UK to be the most connected Horizon 2020 participant (European Commission 2017: 69), positioning UK universities favourably in the world's largest single pool of ideas and people, and drawing an immense flow of talent into the UK.

In the European Research Area's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) cycle the UK contributed €5.4 billion to the €50 billion EU research and development budget. UK universities and other research organizations secured €8.8 billion in FP7 grants, a net gain of €3.4 billion. In Horizon 2020 the UK has so far spent about €3 billion and gained €6 billion. However, it has slipped to second place in Horizon 2020 funding after Germany, having lost first place in the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum.

In addition, UK research and innovation has been resourced by European structural funds, in two ways: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) grants, which in 2007–13 provided €1.9 billion to UK research organizations compared to €7.0 billion provided by Framework Programme grants, and loans for research activities from the European Investment Bank (EIB). Whereas Framework Programme grants tend to favour the leading research universities, Structural Funds have been especially linked to poorer regions, notably Wales. 'All regions are benefitting from substantial flows of research income from EU government bodies' (Technopolis 2017: 1, 4, 10).

In total 12 per cent of the research income of UK higher education institutions was from EU sources in 2014–15, but this proportion varied by discipline. Research in the UK social sciences and humanities has especially benefitted from European resources as these disciplines are better funded in Europe than in the UK. While UK-based clinical medicine took in £119.9 million in European research funding in 2014–15, the largest amount to any discipline, this was only 7 per cent of UK research income in that discipline. Yet as Table 5.1 shows in archaeology the level of dependence was 38 per cent, in classics 33 per cent and in computing-related research 30 per cent (Technopolis 2017: 15–16, 18).

**Table 5.1** UK Discipline-Based HESA Cost Centres Most Dependent on EU Funding: 2014–15

<b>HESA Cost Centre</b>	<b>EU Share of Funding (%)</b>
Archaeology	38
Classics	33
IT, Systems, Software Engineering	30
Media Studies	27
Law	26
Philosophy	25
Modern Languages	24
Anthropology, Development Studies	23
Business and Management	23
Chemistry	23
Area Studies	23
Politics & International Studies	21
Architecture, Building, Planning	21
Art & Design	21
Sociology	20

HESA = Higher Education Statistical Agency.

Source: Technopolis 2017: 16.

European research funding has also played a disproportionately large role in a group of middle-tier UK universities that are less UK STEM heavy than the peak of the Russell Group and less strong in domestic competition (Technopolis 2017: 3, 20).

## **Research Collaboration**

In total, UK researchers collaborate more in Europe than in the English-speaking world. For example, Table 5.2, drawing on data sourced originally in Scopus, shows that in 2016 the number of papers co-authored with researchers from Germany, France and the Netherlands together equalled those with researchers from the United States and Canada.

Table 5.2 also demonstrates the propensity to collaborate – the rate at which UK researchers collaborate with other countries, relative to the overall patterns of the two countries. 1.00 indicates collaboration at the expected level, 0.50 a low propensity to collaborate and 1.50 a high propensity. With almost every country in Europe, UK researchers exhibit a higher than expected propensity to collaborate. This is not the case in North America, or in East Asian Southeast Asia or South Asia.

**Table 5.2** Research Papers Co-authored by UK Researchers in Europe, the English-Speaking World, and Propensity to Collaborate with Each Country in the Pair Relative to the Overall Co-authorship Patterns of Both Countries (1.00 = expected rate of collaboration): 2016

<b>Partner Country</b>	<b>Propensity to Collaborate</b>	<b>Co-authored Papers</b>
<b>Europe</b>		
Ireland	2.16	2,621
Greece	1.74	2,531
Netherlands	1.50	8,039
Denmark	1.43	3,658
Hungary	1.43	1,274
Norway	1.40	2,720
Finland	1.28	2,317
Italy	1.27	10,023
Sweden	1.27	4,967
Belgium	1.26	4,174
Switzerland	1.21	5,720
Portugal	1.19	2,309
Spain	1.16	7,789
Poland	1.12	2,523
Germany	1.07	14,200
Austria	1.03	2,514
France	1.01	10,079
Czech Republic	0.96	1,535
Russia	0.77	2,335
<b>Anglosphere</b>		
New Zealand	1.35	1,640
South Africa	1.33	2,170
Australia	1.19	8,838
Canada	0.84	6,685
United States	0.77	25,858
<b>East Asia</b>		
Singapore	0.77	1,541
Japan	0.65	3,659
China	0.62	10,472
Taiwan	0.57	981
South Korea	0.45	1,589
<b>South and Southeast Asia</b>		
Thailand	0.94	862
Malaysia	0.84	1,428
Pakistan	0.76	847
India	0.67	2,494

Source: Authors, drawing on NSB 2018: Tables A5.43 and A5.44. The total number of co-authored papers with all countries in 2016 was 87,577.

## **Research Partnerships with Industry in Europe**

Collaboration between UK universities and industry in continental Europe has become more important over time. Tijssen, van de Klippe and Yegros (2019) examine the 2008–17 research papers of forty-eight UK universities with high output, to discern co-publication between researchers in those universities and researchers in industry. While 14.7 per cent of the partner firms were within 100 kilometres of the university's headquarters and 21.3 per cent elsewhere in the UK or Ireland, 28.9 per cent were in continental Europe and 33.8 per cent elsewhere in the world. Over the ten-year period the most rapid increase in research cooperation, with average annual growth of 12 per cent, was with firms in Europe.

Many such collaborations were in public–private consortia which also involved multiple European university partners. Collaborations with firms located within 50 kilometres grew by a much lower 3 per cent per annum, and those elsewhere in the world by 11 per cent. Commenting on the possible implications of Brexit for UK higher education, Tijssen (2019) finds that 'UK universities have become increasingly embedded in the industry-relevant segment of the European Research Area and are therefore vulnerable.'

## **European Doctoral Students in UK**

Like all national research systems, the UK research system relies on a continuing flow of postgraduate researchers. PhD students generate a high proportion of all research activity and also teach and co-publish with academic staff. Many later become academic staff. With British universities open to talent from all over the world, in 2017–18, 13.1 per cent of all research students (nearly all at doctoral level) were non-UK EU citizens and 28.5 per cent were other international students. Dependence on non-UK EU citizens was high in STEM disciplines, including mathematics, physical science, computer science and engineering (HESA 2019). Table 5.3 has details for the preceding year, 2016–17. Many of the EU research students worked in European research funded projects.

The role of EU postgraduate researchers peaks in the most research-intensive UK universities. In 2017–18, non-UK EU students constituted 40.1 per cent of all postgraduate researchers at each of Cambridge and Imperial, where there were very large concentrations of STEM researchers, and at least one-quarter of all postgraduate researchers at eleven of the twelve research universities in Table 5.4 (HESA 2019).

**Table 5.3** Non-UK EU Citizens in UK Postgraduate Research Programmes, 2016–17

	<b>Non-UK EU Research Students</b>	<b>Total Research Students</b>	<b>Non-UK EU Students as Proportion (%)</b>
<b>Science Fields</b>			
Mathematics	645	2915	22.1
Physical Sciences	2205	12,750	17.3
Computer science	775	4870	15.9
Engineering and Technology	2210	14,150	15.6
Veterinary sciences	45	305	14.4
Biological sciences	1965	15,230	12.9
Architecture, Building, Planning	225	1950	11.5
Medicine allied subjects	935	8380	11.2
Medicine and Dentistry	910	8495	10.7
Agricultural sciences	95	885	10.7
TOTAL for all science fields	10,015	69,925	14.3
<b>Non-Science Fields</b>			
Social studies	1365	9055	15.1
Law	310	2245	13.8
Languages	775	5710	13.6
History and Philosophy	830	7435	11.2
Creative Arts and Design	455	4090	11.1
Business studies and related fields	725	6670	10.9
Mass communications	120	1205	10.0
Education	390	6180	6.3
Combined studies	0	15	0.0
TOTAL for all non-science fields	4970	42,595	11.7
<b>Combined Total</b>			
All fields	14,985	112,520	13.3

Source: Author, drawing on HESA 2019.

## European Staff

The role of European citizens in UK university staffing is similar to that in postgraduate research, in that it peaks at the top of the Russell Group and in STEM. In 2017–18, there were 37,255 academic staff and 14,515 non-academic professional staff from EU countries other than UK. This represented 17.5 per cent of academic staff and 6.7 per cent of non-academic professional staff. The EU proportions had risen markedly from four years before in 2013–14 when they were 15.0 per cent and 5.2 per cent. In 2016–17, more than one-third of academic staff in economics and modern languages and more than one-quarter from mathematics, physics and chemical engineering were non-UK EU citizens (HESA 2019). The European share of recent appointments was much higher.



**Table 5.4** Non-UK EU Citizens in UK Postgraduate Research Programmes, Twelve Largest Populations in Individual UK Universities, 2017–18

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Non-UK EU Research Students</b>	<b>All Research Students</b>	<b>Non-UK EU Proportion (%)</b>
University of Cambridge	1130	2820	40.1
University of Oxford	910	2495	36.5
Imperial College London	845	2105	40.1
University College London	845	2240	37.7
University of Edinburgh	745	1850	40.2
University of Manchester	470	1880	25.0
Kings College London	385	940	41.0
University of Nottingham	380	1295	29.3
University of Glasgow	335	1000	33.5
University of Birmingham	320	1110	28.8
University of Southampton	300	980	30.6
University of Sheffield	300	1295	23.2

Source: Author, drawing on HESA 2019.

As with postgraduate research, European research funding won by leading UK research universities has brought many European staff to UK. In 2016–17, 32.0 per cent of academic staff from Imperial (1,385 persons), 27.2 per cent from UCL (2,020), 26.1 per cent from Cambridge (1,555) and 25.1 per cent from Oxford (1,700) were from EU countries aside from UK. Dependence was greater in proportional terms at LSE (39.0 per cent), and Ulster (35.3 per cent) which recruited across the soft Irish border (HESA 2019).

## European Students

In all in 2017–18 there were 139,150 non-UK EU students enrolled in British higher education institutions at all levels of study, 5.9 per cent of the total. These European students had larger weight in postgraduate research (13.1 per cent) than in taught postgraduate (6.7 per cent) and all undergraduate education (5.3 per cent) (HESA 2019). First degree students in England paid home country fees and accessed tuition loans. On 27 May 2019, the higher education minister Chris Skidmore announced that this arrangement would persist until at least the 2020–1 academic year.

In some institutions European students have had a larger presence, especially in Russell Group universities, in London, in Scotland where they pay no fees, and in some universities that have attracted EU students in order to boost their income (are thereby especially vulnerable to Brexit). There were 4,930 non-UK EU nationals at UCL in 2017–18, 4,080 at Kings, 3725 at

Edinburgh, 3,245 at Coventry, 3,175 Glasgow. The University of the Arts in London enrolled 2,460; LSE had 2,060. The highest proportional enrolments were at Aberdeen (19.9 per cent) where the 2,865 Europeans were one student in five, and LSE (17.7 per cent). Europeans played a much larger role at LSE at Masters level (HESA 2019). In addition to those enrolled full-time, there are the many temporary students who enter the UK via Erasmus and Erasmus Plus. The future of those programmes in UK will be determined by the character of the UK's exit from EU.

### **Financial Implications**

Brexit has profound net financial implications for UK higher education institutions. Engagement with Europe creates a larger than otherwise portfolio of activity, with financing to match in the form of research programme funds, structural funds for research and European student fees. But disengagement means scaling back finance more than activity. First, as noted, the UK makes a large net financial gain from European research programmes. Second, when European student numbers drop in low-demand institutions where they cannot be readily replaced there are likely to be diseconomies of scale – similar fixed costs and facilities, less student income. Third, European structural funds have been a vital source of not only research funding but also infrastructure funding.

From 2007 to 2016, UK universities received €2,625 million in EIB loans. For example, in 2011, the University of Strathclyde received €100.9 million for restructuring its two main sites. In 2014, Ulster's relocation to Belfast City Centre received €182.6 million. Kent borrowed €94.3 million for teaching and research facilities. Imperial received €178.5 million in 2014; Oxford €278.8 million in 2015; UCL €365.7 million in 2015 and 2016; Edinburgh €257.0 million in 2016 (Technopolis 2017: Appendix D). This kind of funding is unlikely to be replicated by the UK government.

## **The Research: Emotions Associated with Brexit in UK Higher Education**

The chapter now moves to the first findings from the Centre's Brexit project research. As noted, these findings concern the emotions expressed in the 127 interviews.

## **The Research on Brexit and UK Higher Education**

The case studies were conducted in UCL, SOAS, Manchester, Sheffield Hallam, Durham, Keele, Exeter and Coventry in England; St Andrews and Aberdeen in Scotland; South Wales in Wales; and Ulster in Northern Ireland, over a period of time 16–25 months after the referendum decision. Four of the universities were from the Russell Group; five were from other pre-1992 universities, which accordingly were over-represented; and three from the post-1992 universities, which were under-represented.

Among the 127 interviewees, 44 were senior executives, 28 were academic leaders, 23 were senior administrators, 14 were other academics, 10 were from institutional governing bodies and 8 were students. There were 38 (29.9 per cent) women and 89 men. In the case of the 86 persons who were academics, academic leaders and senior executives, disciplines were identified: 42 were from the social sciences (including a small number of people from the humanities), 26 were from the sciences and 18 were from the health sciences.

## **The Importance of Emotions**

Spontaneously shared emotions link the micro and macro levels of social practice (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015: 74; Zembylas 2012: 167). Though emotions are part of everyday life they are often heightened at moments of transformation and displacement, for example migration (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015) and unexpected loss. In the research on Brexit in UK higher education the drier financial or administrative concerns become mixed with more potent tropes like belonging and identity. During a shift of this magnitude people experience emotions on a shared as well as individual basis, and the forums of institutions have an amplification effect.

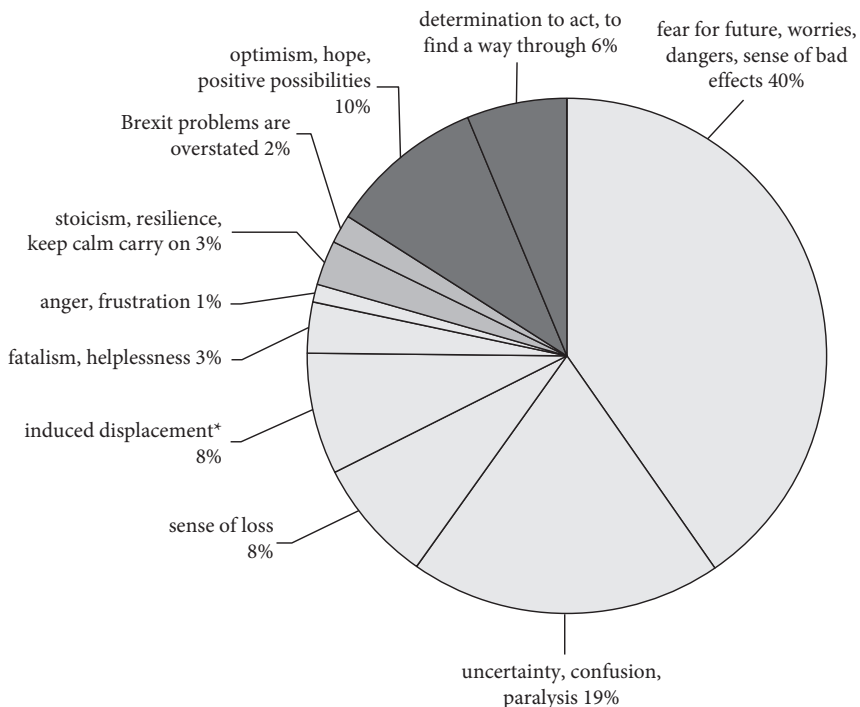
Emotions are often overlooked in social research. But actions are not always based on rational calculation. Identity, values and organic ties to communities understood as a sense of belonging, all shape regret or resistance in the face of changes seen as negative, like Brexit in UK higher education. Uncertainty is one of the emotions typical of moments of sharp change and transformation, as Ho notes in relation to migration (Ho 2014: 2214).

## **Balance of Emotions**

As indicated, the power of emotion in relation to Brexit is shown by the fact that in the research, a barrage of emotional expression pushed through the framing

of what was a fact-seeking investigation. Interviewees were asked about the likely effects of Brexit at institutional level, or in their part of the operation, and on the responses and strategies of the institution/unit in the face of the coming change. When the 127 interviews were coded using NVivo, clear emotions were listed as arising in all of them. In all, 1,784 instances of emotional expression were coded. Of these 1,418 (79 per cent) were categorized as negative, 284 (16 per cent) as positive and 82 (5 per cent) as neutral.

Remarkably, every interviewee expressed negative emotions at least once, 73 per cent expressed positive emotions and 42 per cent expressed neutral emotions. On average 11 negative emotions were expressed per interview, three positive emotions and two neutral emotions. Some interviewees expressed more than one kind of emotion in the same sentence. As Figure 5.1 and Table 5.5 show, neutral emotions included stoicism and resilience. Among those expressing such neutral emotions were some people who regarded Brexit as less of a problem than



**Figure 5.1** Coded emotions arising from CGHE interviews in 12 UK universities in 2017–18, concerning Brexit and higher education (n=1784).

\*Includes loss, regret, sadness, distrust, disappointment, disillusionment, ironic detachment or unpleasant shock.

Source: Authors.

**Table 5.5** Summary of Emotions Expressed in Brexit Project Interviews in 2017–18

Emotions	Number of Interviewees (n=127)	Proportion Interviewees (%)	Times Occurred (n=1784)	Proportion All Coded Emotions (%)	Average Times per Interview
<b>Negative (79% of all coded emotions)</b>					
Fears, worries, dangers, bad effects	122	96	720	40	5.90
Uncertainty, confusion, paralysis	106	83	347	19	3.27
Loss	71	56	138	8	1.94
Feeling of induced displacement*	59	46	136	8	2.31
Fatalism, helplessness	36	28	57	3	1.58
Anger, frustration	12	9	29	1	1.67
<b>Neutral (5% of all coded emotions)</b>					
Stoicism, resilience/keep calm carry on	33	26	50	3	1.52
Brexit problems overstated/not there	14	11	32	2	2.29
<b>Positive (16% of all coded emotions)</b>					
Positive possibilities, optimism, hope	76	60	173	10	2.28
Determination to act/find way through	59	46	111	6	1.88

While the coding was checked and rechecked, the assignment of expressed words to categories of emotion is fraught. Sound recording allows tone to be considered. Nevertheless, sorting imposes an undue 'flatness' on what is a complex of feelings in different contexts. Some expressed emotions are more strongly expressed, or clearer as to type, than are others.

\* Includes loss, regret, sadness, distrust, disappointment, disillusionment, ironic detachment or unpleasant shock.

Source: Authors, with primary assignment of textual material to categories by Xin Xu.

most of the other interviewees considered it to be. Positive emotions included optimism, belief in unspecified post-Brexit opportunities, determination and a sense of personal or institutional agency.

Though there was some criticism of 'Remainers' and of negative talk of the effects of Brexit, there was no expression of unambiguous support for Brexit in the 127 interviews.

On average male interviewees expressed more emotions of each type than did females. Participants from the two Scottish universities tended to express more emotions in all categories; Northern Ireland interviewees the least. Participants from the post-1992 universities (Coventry, Sheffield Hallam, South Wales) expressed more emotions, and were more likely than others to be positive; while on average the participants from the five non-Russell Group pre-1992 universities (Aberdeen, Keele, SOAS, St Andrews, Ulster) expressed more negative and neutral emotions than did other interviewees.

Academic leaders and academics were more likely than were other interviewees to express emotions, and express negative and neutral emotions. Governing body members were the most likely to be positive. Students were less emotional than others. Among those interviewees who were ordered by discipline, the differences were small but the health sciences group was the least often negative and the most often positive.

## **Negative Emotions**

As Table 5.5 suggests, while positive emotions often related to coping in the present, the negative emotions expressed by interviewees were mostly about looking back at the time of the referendum or looking forward to problems in the future. The word 'cloud' in Figure 5.2, which is dominated by the negative emotions, emphasizes the effects of Brexit for 'students', 'research' and 'people' and focuses strongly on 'European', 'collaborate' and 'funds'. Terms like 'concern', 'worry', 'losing' and 'problems' also stand out.

The largest single category, 40 per cent of all expressed emotions, was comprised by fears and worries about the anticipated consequences of Brexit. Almost all of the 127 interviewees (96 per cent) expressed such feelings at some point. Interviewees were anxious about

- people mobility problems;
- the attractiveness and reputation of UK higher education and research;
- the possibility that UK higher education would become less diverse, more 'insular' and 'isolated' and less collaborative than before;

- the outcomes of not being in the European research area;
- the potential for the UK to become distanced from European historical connections, culture, civilization and intellectual heritage.

Another 22 per cent of all responses, expressed by more than four interviewees in every five, embodied loss of personal agency after the referendum. These expressed feelings included uncertainty, confusion, paralysis, helplessness and fatalism. Participants associated uncertainty with the lack of reliable information, the lack of clear direction and the lack of trust in university leadership or the government. A further 16 per cent of emotions referred to displacement: a sense of loss, regret, sadness, distrust, disappointment, disillusionment, ironic detachment or unpleasant shock. Feelings of displacement or disconnection might also be read as diminished agency, as the wording of many of the quotes – and tones of voice in the associated voice recordings – suggest. The sense of what was being lost included collaboration opportunities, funding opportunities,



Figure 5.2 The word ‘cloud’ based on expressed emotions (n=1784).  
Source: Authors.

collegial networks, friendships, mobility, freedom and agency, diversity and high academic capacity. Sense of loss was commonly associated with a sense of belonging in Europe, and with fear about the future. Such feelings were much more prevalent than anger or frustration, which were expressed by just 9 per cent of interviewees and comprised only 1 per cent of the expressed emotions.

### **Neutral Emotions**

The main form of expressed neutral emotion was stoicism: we can get through this, keep calm and carry on. These feelings of resilience were associated with both a sense of helplessness and with mild optimism. However, while resilience was expressed by more than a quarter of all interviewees at some point, it constituted only 3 per cent of all expressed emotions. The theme of a further 2 per cent of responses, expressed by 11 per cent of interviewees, was the downplaying or denial of Brexit-related problems. Some of these interviewees said that they were 'relaxed' about issues that worried others.

### **Positive Emotions**

Participants sometimes reported mixed feelings. Some were hopeful (the future will be great, we can find a way through), while acknowledging the challenges. Some were pessimistic (worried and wanting to find a way through) but tempered this with hope.

A total of 10 per cent of all the emotions, expressed by 60 per cent of interviewees, were optimistic in tone. Optimism was often linked to faith in collegial culture and belief that universities would continue to collaborate with other universities, confidence in the quality and resilience of British higher education, and potential opportunities to expand from a European-oriented vision to a larger international scope. Those emotions were linked to willingness to prepare for the outcome of Brexit, and to strategize in response to potentially undesirable impacts, although few senior executives or professors provided information about specific institutional or disciplinary strategies for the post-Brexit environment. (It is likely that some were reluctant to share plans before they could be announced.)

While 22 per cent of all expressed emotions were directly about loss of personal agency, and in another 16 per cent agency appeared to be diminished, 9 per cent asserted personal agency, as resilience (neutral) or determination (positive).



## Conclusion

Emotions in social relational contexts are more than interesting. They matter in a practical sense. Discussing cross-border mobility, Zembylas (2012: 16) makes the argument that ‘emotions work to align the subject and the nation-state in specific ways.’ For example, emotional responses to Brexit in higher education have and will affect the resources and strategies of universities, including the extent to which they sustain or reforge links with universities, academics and students in Europe after Brexit takes place. Widely shared emotions, in government or in universities, help to set boundaries of the possible.

The strong and largely negative emotions expressed by interviewees during the Brexit project research are the flip side of UK higher education’s thoroughgoing engagement in Europe. National exceptionalism runs deep in the UK. In this research few of the UK-born personally called themselves European. ‘If you ask anybody ... it’s always been it starts at Calais,’ as one interviewee put it. Yet some interviewees talked of an individual journey towards personal European identity, and many described the UK higher education sector, or their own institution, as ‘European’ or ‘part of Europe.’ In that respect higher education is different to most of the UK. Or it was until June 2016.

In higher education Brexit takes the form of a forced divorce. The couple, UK and EU higher education, are being pulled apart against their will. The absence of the machinery of European ties and the high-volume flows of people will leave a hole, and it is unclear how it will be filled. Most worrying is that Brexit, an agenda welcomed by few in higher education and with nothing positive to offer, appears to have robbed people of energy and agency. It will not stay like this. All things must pass and higher education in UK is always changing, as it is everywhere. University folk are inventive. Much of the alignment with Europe will be remade, partly by replacing institutionalized ties with customized ones. Eventually the hole will be filled locally and internationally. In the interim there will be the lost years – a hiatus with a sense of something diminished, withered or broken.

## Note

1 ESRC Award number ES/R000166/1 – Brexit, trade, migration and higher education

## References

- Boccagni, P. and Baldassar, L. (2015), 'Emotions on the Move: Mapping the Emergent Field of Emotion and Migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16: 73–80.
- European Commission (2019), 'United Kingdom Horizon 2020 Country Profile'. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dashboard/extensions/CountryProfile/CountryProfile.html?Country=United%20Kingdom>
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (2017), 'Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020'. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/33dc9472-d8c9-11e8-afb3-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/form-at-PDF>
- Gifford, C. (2014), *The Making of Eurosceptic Britain*, Burlington: Ashgate.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2019), *Data and Analysis*. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk>
- Ho, E. (2014), 'The Emotional Economy of Migration Driving Mainland Chinese Transnational Sojourning Across Migration Regimes', *Environment and Planning A*, 46: 2212–27.
- National Science Board, NSB (2018), *Science and Engineering Indicators 2018*. <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2018/nsb20181/assets/nsb20181.pdf>
- Swales, K. (2016). *Understanding the Leave Vote*. London: NatCen and The UK in a Changing Europe. <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/understanding-the-leave-vote/>
- Technopolis Group (2017), *The Role of EU Funding in UK Research and Innovation*. <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2017/2017-05-technopolis-role-of-EU-funding-report.PDF>
- Tijssen, R. (2019), 'Why Distance Matters for Collaboration with Industry', *University World News*, 25 May.
- Tijssen, R., van de Klippe, W. and Yegros, A. (2019), 'Globalisation, Localisation and Glolocalisation of University-Business Research Cooperation: General Patterns and Trends in the UK University System', CGHE Working Paper 50. <https://www.researchcghe.org/publications/working-paper/globalisation-localisation-and-glolocalisation-of-university-business-research-cooperation-general-patterns-and-trends-in-the-uk-university-system/>
- Universities UK (UUK) (2019), 'Brexit and UK Universities'. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/brexit/Pages/brexit-and-universities.aspx>
- Vasilopoulou, S. (2016), 'UK Euroscepticism and the Brexit Referendum', *The Political Quarterly*, 87 (2): 219–27.
- Zembylas, M. (2012), 'Transnationalism, Migration and Emotions: Implications for Education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 10 (2): 163–79.

