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Brexit and the Law School

Northumbria University, 25th May 2017

The roundtable conversation on “Brexit and the Law School”, sponsored by the Society of Legal Scholars, was attended by approximately 35 academics and practitioners from across the North East, to discuss the key implications of Brexit and future opportunities. The organising team included Sophie Carr, Gemma Davies, Rachel Dunn, Adam Jackson, Guido Noto La Diega, and Emma Piasecki. The event was separated into four distinct themes, discussed in turn below. Also attached to the report is a conversation map of the discussions, with arrows indicating where ideas overlapped into other themes.

Research, Impact and Engagement: Research opportunities and challenges

The main focus of this theme surrounded collaboration opportunities and maintaining our current research agendas. Attendees highlighted the need to build up external contacts to amalgamate funding, with perhaps more of a focus on Asia and New Zealand institutions as partners. There was also an emphasis on law schools and researchers becoming leaders in the discussion of research opportunities post-Brexit. This will help ensure that funding goes to law and the social sciences instead of being dictated by medicine and natural sciences. Further, we can offer our expertise to the government during the negotiation period and we should lobby this. Lastly, there was a concern that Russell Group universities, known for quality of research, may benefit more than the post-1990 universities.

Research, Impact and Engagement: Funding and engagement with external stakeholders

A great emphasis was placed on the importance of research networks and collaborating to maintain research funding. This is not only networks within universities, but including law firms and the judiciary for greater impact of research. Concern was expressed over league tables being dictated by research and funding, with the older universities maintaining a good reputation. Ideas were shared on how we can generate more income. For example, law firms funding research, but writing it in a more accessible, non-academic manner for their audience. We can also create on-going relationships with external funders, but we must be wary of becoming mouthpieces for corporate and consultancy work, though these pressures are hard to resist. Too much research outside of the control of university may result in a lack of research done for the love of it, meaning research questions generated may not be pursued.

Learning, Teaching and the University Community: Curriculum development and the future of EU Law

We are still part of the EU and so we must continue to teach EU law. How we teach it will change and some think we should keep it as a full module until 2020. Some universities have replaced other topics with the impact of Brexit, which begged the question of whether we should be teaching students the implications of Brexit? It is useful when teaching free movement and what rights we are losing on the current module. However, we must be careful not to push our political values on our students. How it will change post-Brexit remains uncertain, but many felt certain it will have a reduced content. Some believe it will become a half-module and EU law will be incorporated onto other modules, such as English Legal System and International Law. We will need elements of single markets and perhaps World Trade Organisation rules, should we revert back. As UK lawyers will need to be able to advise companies in, or investing in, the EU we need to retain an element of it. There are research opportunities here, looking at modules as separate case studies, which can incorporate students as researchers.

Learning, Teaching and the University Community: The changing shape of the University community

The law school sits within the wider university, which sits in the wider community. Any changes impact the whole community and we must adjust for that. UCAS data tells us that there are less EU students applying to UK universities in 2016, but whether this as a trend will take a few more years of data collection to establish causation. There were also concerns of the impact on the Erasmus programme and similar opportunities and a loss of our intellectual environment. Our legal system is unique and working with other EU students exposes our students to other legal systems. We need to remember that there is a world outside of the UK and encourage an outward looking teaching focus. Whatever the changes, we must ensure that we remain positive, to avoid any negativity reaching the ears of potential international colleagues and students, particularly as international students do not feel currently welcome in the UK. We will be competing in a bigger international market and must ensure that the UK remains a desirable destination for international students.

