

By Andy Suggitt

Preparing for Brexit

The hubbub of conversation fills the air as 50 early-career researchers (ECRs) discuss our futures after Brexit. Flipboards around the room fill with sticky notes, each with a scribbled thought or idea. A board labeled “What will Brexit mean for your career?” highlights the toll it has already taken. One scientist abandoned their application for the European Union’s Horizon 2020 funding program. Others are reluctantly making plans to leave the United Kingdom. A note with the word “uncertainty” stands out in the middle of the board. And yet, a month before the official Brexit date, the atmosphere is surprisingly positive. Coming together to discuss these challenges seems to be giving us confidence that we will find a way forward.

After the British public voted in 2016 to leave the European Union, everything felt up in the air. ECRs already face huge career uncertainty because of our time-limited contracts and increasing pressures on funding and publishing. For those of us in the United Kingdom—and anyone who might have considered coming here—Brexit is making it that much worse. I travel abroad for collaboration and fieldwork every year. Will that get a lot harder? Will funding become even scarcer when EU grants are no longer available? An estimated 50% of post-graduate research scientists in the United Kingdom come from abroad. Will they still be able to work and study here?

As the referendum result sank in, I wanted answers to these ques-

tions, and I knew other ECRs felt the same way. I thought a workshop might help us figure out how to move forward, so I assembled a team of organizers and began to recruit speakers. Finding scientists prepared to discuss Brexit outside the usual environs of the pub or coffee room was not easy, but we got the support of the British Ecological Society and eventually booked a date for February 2019.

When I arrived in London that morning, I worried that the ongoing uncertainty about how exactly the United Kingdom will leave the European Union might spell ruin for the event. I had assumed that the government would have some sort of plan by the time our workshop rolled around, and that we would be able to dig into the specifics of what Brexit would mean for scientists. That plan had not materialized.

But I needn’t have worried. Our speakers provided great insight about what could happen, and the attendees engaged in positive, vibrant discussions about how they could influence events or adapt. At lunch, I noticed that Twitter was



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alive with ECRs—including many attendees and thousands of others outside the room—using the hashtag we had created for the event, #ECRsChatBrexit. I tapped away on my phone and chipped in over mouthfuls of sandwich, happy that we had created a space for people to talk about this.

So, what did everyone have to say? Well, like most scientists, our attendees wish the government would take a longer-term approach to science policymaking, as well as funding and developing the people involved in research. We also discussed how Brexit might offer opportunities for ECRs to step up and play a role in shaping policy. For example, a proposed minimum salary threshold for the immigration of highly skilled workers could seriously limit

the ability of ECRs to move to the United Kingdom. We should be weighing in and making sure that lawmakers recognize these implications. The U.K. government will also be writing new environmental policy. Will those of us early in our careers find our voice and reimagine how this policy could work—how it should work?

Of course, we can’t solve all these problems ourselves—or in a single day. But raising our concerns and discussing solutions certainly helped get things clearer in our heads.

What happens in the United Kingdom over the next few years will define scientists’ working lives for decades to come. For us ECRs, that will be most of our careers. We have the biggest stake in the game. We should have our say in it. Hopefully, our workshop was just the beginning of that conversation. ■

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