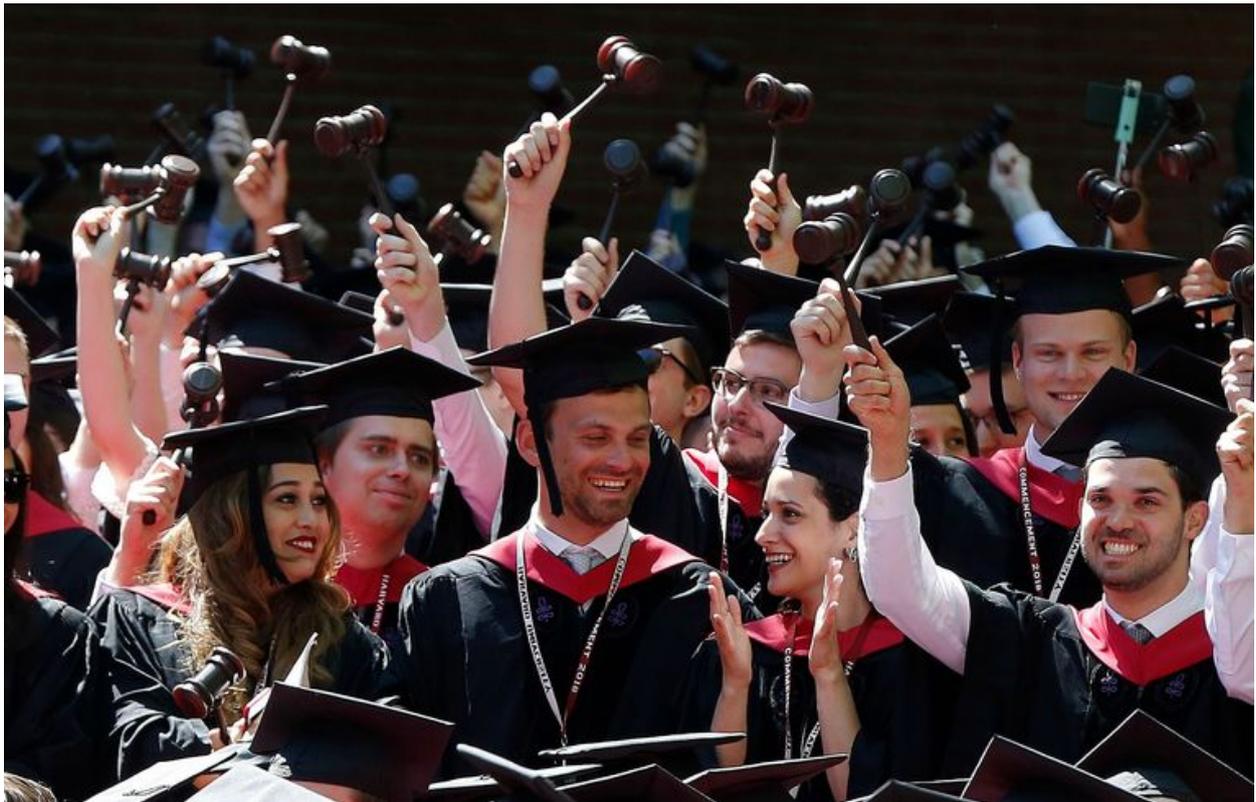


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Brexit won't hold back science

Never underestimate universities as a connecting force, says Rector Magnificus of Leiden University Carel Stolker.

Carel Stolker 8 February 2019, 22:35



Cambridge graduates. Photo AP

In one-and-a-half months' time, the UK will be leaving the European Union – much to the sorrow of the UK's universities, not to mention the universities remaining in the EU.

Brexit will have a particularly profound effect on the UK's universities: fewer students from Europe, fewer researchers and lecturers, and the loss of access to research funds in Brussels. And although the British government has promised our British colleagues that it will make up for the lost European funding, this has not reassured them. Not only do they want to continue working with universities in Ireland and on the European mainland, but they also want to compete with them. This helps them improve, they say.

Because science is about both these things: collaboration and competition. Over the centuries, the two have brought science a long way. And it is on these that I am pinning my hopes because although it may sometimes seem as though the world is falling apart, we should never underestimate universities as a vital and connecting force. In 1796, with war raging between the French Republic and the United Kingdom, biologist and president of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, wrote in his now-famous letter to his French colleague: 'The science of two nations may be at peace, while their politics are at war.'

Why do countries allow their universities and academics to work together when they are in the midst of a blazing row? Primarily because countries need each other to achieve scientific progress. A good example of this is the space research programme of the Soviet Union and America, research that is way too big and expensive for one country, research that countries need each other for therefore. More than ever, the big issues faced by individual countries are common issues: climate change, migration, infectious diseases, energy, pollution and cyber security. Collaboration then becomes a form of enlightened self-interest.

Knowledge diplomacy

Research and education are also a form of soft power in the often somewhat complex international relations between countries and blocks of countries. And as a country you can make use of that soft power too. Science diplomacy is what we call it, knowledge diplomacy. Universities that contribute to science and peace at the same time. So although the relationship between Europe and Russia is very strained, they work well together in research and education. The same is true for America and Cuba. European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, Carlos Moedas, put it like this: 'I believe that science diplomacy can light the way where politics and diplomacy have failed.'

This is how research and education bring people together all around the world – through scientific conferences, journals, mails and social media. And students have become increasingly international too. Take the European Erasmus programme, which has made it much easier for students to study in another European country. For years now, European students have been meeting fellow students from countries with other cultures and

languages. And the marriages born from these meetings have in turn given birth to a million 'Erasmus babies', or so it is claimed. This growing student mobility is not just in Europe but all around the world. The expectation is that by 2025 some three to five million students will study in another country than their country of birth.

All these researchers and students are spinning a web across our planet, a web of people who talk, think, write, stay up all night in their student houses and dream together. Dreams about solving the big issues of our time, about bring the world together and making it a better place. A web through which the core values of science – freedom of thought, rationality, transparency and universality – are conveyed globally, however difficult that may be for some countries.

Harmful?

How harmful will Brexit be in this light? I predict that universities on both sides of the North Sea will find new ways to work together that may just strengthen their collaboration. Almost all universities have dealings with each other, on the British and European sides. The universities of Maastricht and York recently formed a partnership, as have Oxford and Berlin, and Cambridge and Munich. In a few years' time British and EU universities might just offer joint degree and research programmes and have joint institutes. Or there might be British campuses on mainland Europe that work closely with EU universities.

In short, Brexit as a catalyst. When he took office, French President Macron even suggested a network of European universities. This would help create a new generation of European citizens and would make higher education throughout Europe more competitive.

Even if you have your doubts about 'EU universities', new energy will still be generated. Witness what is happening along a border that has seen some of the heaviest fighting in Europe: EUCOR, the association of the universities of Basel, Freiburg, Haute-Alsace, Karlsruhe and Strasbourg, and the joint research and educational programmes that they are developing. They present themselves as 'five universities, three countries, one campus'. Where millions of young men once lost their lives, young people are now studying together. One thing we can be sure of is that the vital and connecting force of research and education and the dreams of young people will continue to surprise and inspire us. Even after Brexit.

This is the lightly abridged address by Rector Magnificus Professor Carel Stolker on 8 February, the 444th anniversary of the foundation of Leiden University.