

Are EU university academics leaving the UK because of Brexit?

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One of the most important concerns about Brexit in the higher education (HE) sector is its impact on the employment of European Union (EU) nationals at UK universities. HE is a sector in which ‘talent’ ought to be welcomed and encouraged to stay. But are we witnessing fluctuations in the number of non-UK EU academics at UK universities?

Until the EU referendum and the beginning of the Brexit negotiations, there was a simple trend: the proportion of non-UK EU nationals working in UK universities had been increasing. The academic year 2016/17 was the first to fall entirely within the Brexit negotiations and it is interesting to examine if there has been a change in the proportion of non-UK EU academics at UK universities.

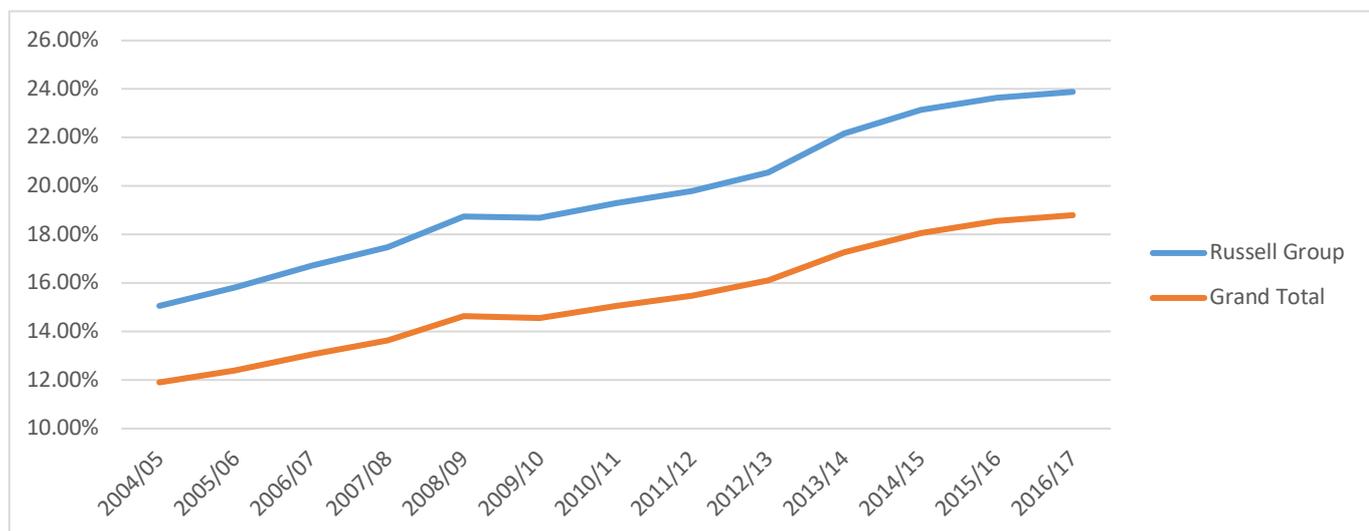
The following data show the percentage of non-UK EU academic staff at UK universities over a period of 13 years. Data are from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and expressed as other EU nationals as a percentage of all academics in full time equivalent posts. Percentages can differ

significantly from absolute numbers and take account of the overall growth in the academic population the UK has seen in recent years.

UK total and Russell Group universities

There was a remarkable growth of non-UK EU nationals in the system before the referendum, especially between 2011 and 2015. In the first year after the referendum (2016/17), the overall percentage still increased, but by less than the previous three years. Figure 1 also shows the trend for Russell Group universities, where the proportion of non-UK EU nationals is much higher, and the growth also seems to tail off.

Figure 1. Other EU nationals as a percentage of total academic staff in UK higher education institutions. Total and Russell Group universities. Time series

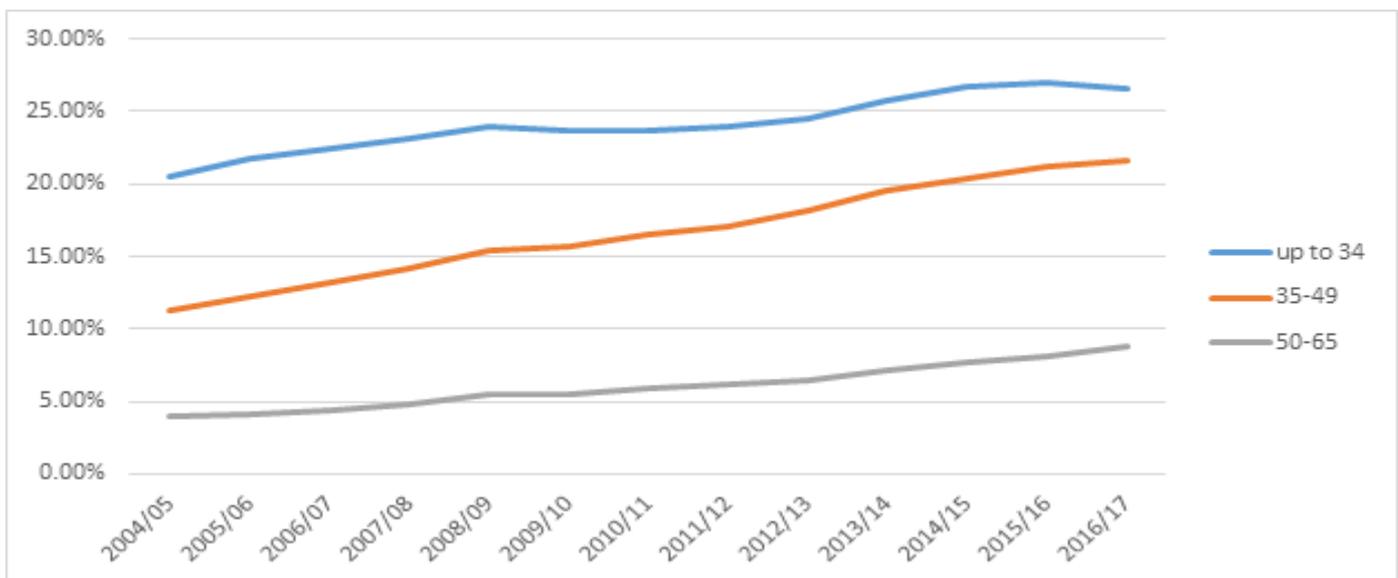


Source: HESA data, HEIDI+.

▪ Age

Analysing by age bands is one of the few ways to predict possible future trends, assuming that a person who is already established in a career is less likely to change their country of residence compared to someone at the beginning of their career. As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of academic staff aged 34 and under in the first academic year since the referendum decreased (from 26.99% to 26.61%), indicating a possible reduction of non-UK EU nationals in the future. This figure suggests that although the absolute number of non-UK EU nationals is still growing, the UK is losing some of its attractiveness among younger academics.

Figure 2. Other EU nationals as a percentage of total academic staff in UK higher education institutions; age bands. Time series



Source: HESA data, HEIDI+.

▪ Discussion

From this simple analysis, we can begin to anticipate the impact of Brexit on academic staff in UK HEIs. We can trace a reduction in the increase of non-UK EU nationals in general, and an actual decrease in those aged 34 or less, albeit from a high level.

Brexit has still to happen. At present, nobody knows what specific arrangements will be in place from 2019. The terms of the agreement between the EU and the UK in EU research and student mobility schemes will dramatically affect the mid- and long-term capability of UK HE to attract and retain academics from the EU. The attractiveness of the system as a whole for students might also have an indirect impact on maintaining the number of non-UK EU nationals at UK universities. UK higher education is not benefitting from the uncertainty triggered by Brexit. A deal to enable academic staff mobility and to confirm the status of EU nationals who were residents at the date of the referendum is essential and urgent if the country's HE sector is to continue to thrive.

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