

# United Kingdom sees dip in European research applications after Brexit vote

**But overall data don't show a big impact on UK's involvement with European science.**

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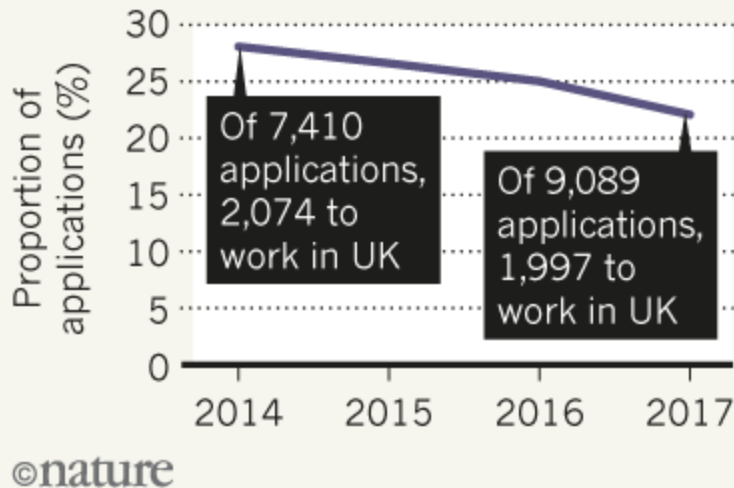
21 September 2017

The number of researchers applying for Europe-funded Marie Curie fellowships in the United Kingdom has dipped slightly since the country's vote to leave the European Union, data released to *Nature* show. But there is no evidence yet of a sharp collapse in interest, which some scientists had feared in the wake of the Brexit referendum.

Every year, the European Commission funds thousands of experienced researchers — most of them European — to undertake work in other EU countries, typically for one or two years, with individual fellowships usually worth between €150,000 (US\$180,000) and €200,000. More than 9,000 academics have applied for the popular programme this year, in an application round that closed on 14 September. Of those, 1,997 people — around 22% of the total — requested to work in the United Kingdom. In 2016, the United Kingdom had received 2,211 applications, some 25% of the total that year; while in 2014, the UK share of applicants reached 28%.

## FELLOWSHIP FALL?

The UK share of applications for EU-funded Marie Curie fellowships is dropping.



Source: European Commission

Although the numbers hint at a decline in interest in working in Britain, they give no clear sign that the Brexit vote has immediately dented the United Kingdom's attractiveness to EU scientists. But "the slipping success rates show that British science is not impenetrable, so we must not be complacent", says Mike Galsworthy, co-founder of the advocacy group Scientists for EU. He says the results may suggest that other European countries are increasingly attractive to researchers.

"It is unreasonable to expect an immediate effect from Brexit. The university and research system in the

UK is massive, and it will take many years for the system to bleed out and gradually lose its competitiveness," says Andre Geim, a physicist at the University of Manchester, UK, who won a Nobel prize for his work in graphene.

Geim told Bloomberg News last month that he hasn't received any applications under the Marie Curie scheme this year, unlike in previous years. But he is sponsoring two applicants who applied to work with his colleagues, he clarifies to *Nature*. A spokesperson for the University of Manchester says that for the university as a whole, "Marie Curie application numbers have remained consistent over the past four years. This includes 2017, and we have several being processed in graphene at the moment."

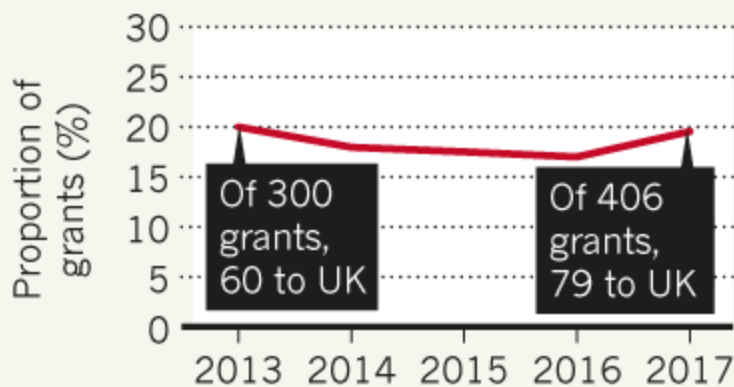
### Strong starting grants

Other statistics on the United Kingdom's involvement in Europe-funded grant schemes since the Brexit vote give a more optimistic picture — although it isn't possible to conclude from any of the data whether changes in 2017 represent significant deviations from existing trends, notes statistician Michael Lavine at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

## CONSISTENT SUCCESS

The UK share of prestigious European Union Starting Grants and involvement in EU training networks hasn't significantly changed.

### UK share of European Research Council Starting Grants



### Applications for EU Innovative Training Networks with UK involvement



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Source: European Commission

For example, Britain has seen a negligible decline in its involvement in multinational European research collaborations called Innovative Training Networks (ITNs) — which, similarly to the fellowships, are paid for under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, a €6.2-billion slice of the European Commission's Horizon 2020 funding programme. In 2016, 78% of ITNs had at least one British partner; the 2017 awards — all of which were applied for after the Brexit vote — show a slight dip to 74%.

And Britain has achieved its usual success in winning European Research Council (ERC) 'starting grants', awards of up to €1.5 million over 5 years for highly promising early-career researchers to start their own laboratories anywhere they wish. The United Kingdom secured 19.5% of the 406 starting grants awarded in 2017, up from 17% in 2016; its success rates have fluctuated between 17% and 20% in the past four years.

UK nationals, relative to non-British Europeans, are making up an increasing proportion of the United

Kingdom's starting-grant winners, however. This year, Britain is hosting 79 grantees under the scheme — more than any other EU country — and just under half (47%) are UK nationals. In 2014, UK nationals represented just over one-quarter of those with ERC starting grants in the United Kingdom.

## **Funding guarantee**

Two months after the Brexit vote, the UK government announced that it would underwrite EU grants won before the date scheduled for the United Kingdom to leave the EU. This promise has reassured some European researchers that they can have a future in Britain even without EU membership, says evolutionary biologist Simone Immler, a Swiss national who moved her ERC starting grant to the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, despite the Brexit vote.

Immler says that what really matters to researchers is getting their dream post, and that they will continue to come to the United Kingdom as long as there is a chance of this happening. “The beauty of these grants is they allow people to choose a host institution that they would like to go to, and they are likely to be offered a permanent position there,” she says. “But if these grants stopped, it would hurt.”

Michael Browne, head of European Research and Innovation at University College London, says that the most important thing is to ensure that British researchers do not drop out of European projects as a result of the Brexit vote, even temporarily. He says that EU research consortiums are highly competitive, and if one partner leaves, another will quickly step in to plug the gap, which makes it hard to re-enter. “That’s why my main message to researchers would be to, despite the uncertainty, really try to stay plugged into European platforms and networks,” he says.

*Nature* [doi:10.1038/nature.2017.22624](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2017.22624)