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Left to right: Jo Johnson, U.K. Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research, and Innovation and Mark Walport, chief executive designate of United Kingdom Research and Innovation.

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UK science seeks ‘a new and special relationship with the EU’

By [Meredith Wadman](#), [Adrian Cho](#) | Sep. 20, 2017, 5:35 PM

Two of the most influential figures in U.K. science were in Washington, D.C., this week, meeting with the directors of the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, among others. But their top priority was signing an agreement to support the **Deep Underground Neutrino Experiment (DUNE)**, which will be built in South Dakota and Illinois. It's the kind of international collaboration that the U.K. government is keen to nurture, as its impending exit from the European Union has injected many existing relationships with uncertainty.

Earlier this month, the U.K. government's Department for Exiting the European Union released a position paper on its goals for access to European research programs post-Brexit, but **the aspirational document was criticized for its fuzziness.**

Taking a break from their hectic schedules in the U.S. capital, Jo Johnson, minister of State for Universities, Science, Research, and Innovation; and Mark Walport, **chief executive designate of United Kingdom**

Research and Innovation (UKRI), the new organization of research funding councils that will launch next April, spoke with *ScienceInsider* about the difficulties in being concrete about post-Brexit science relations with Europe. Johnson promised "more detail shortly."

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But for U.S. researchers, Brexit could offer some new opportunities. In addition to contributions by U.K. researchers to DUNE, the U.K. government in July announced **a £100 million pot, called the Rutherford Fund**, to attract researchers. In addition, Walport addressed the future of the international ITER fusion reactor project.

The transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: What's the exact nature of the future scientific relationship the U.K. wants with the EU?

Johnson: I would point you to the [position paper](#) which describes in some detail the value we see in European collaboration and our desire to forge a deep and special new relationship with the European Union. We haven't been specific about the exact mechanisms and modalities that would make that kind of relationship possible, because, as you understand, it's all still subject to the discussions that are ongoing in Brussels.

But we do see huge value from programs such as [the EU research funding program] Horizon 2020, the space programs that the EU runs, and also from the nuclear research programs. We would want those sorts of collaborations to continue one way or another, subject to the discussions that are underway in Brussels.

Q: So you're saying that the criticisms about lack of implementation details in the position paper is just the nature of the beast right now?

Johnson: It's a function of the fact that we're still discussing these matters and will have more detail shortly.

Q: Are you talking directly to the officials responsible for the Brexit negotiations?

Johnson: We have a nonstop dialogue with colleagues across government. We also have mechanisms to ensure that the sector—the university sector and the science community—is feeding in both directly to me, but also simultaneously to my ministerial colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union. We have a [high-level working group](#) on which the relevant representative bodies are all present.

Q: How much, if any, of the £100 million Rutherford Fund announced in July to attract researchers to the U.K. is earmarked for the U.S.?

Johnson: We're not earmarking it for specific countries at this point. We want to use it to attract the best and brightest from around the world to the U.K. But we do hope that early career researchers in the U.S. will look at it with interest.

Q: Much about the attraction of the U.K. as a destination hinges on the eventual immigration plan that the U.K. settles on. Do you expect it to be harder for U.S. scientists to immigrate to the U.K. than it currently is?

Johnson: No, no, I wouldn't think so at all. I would point you to the prime minister's [Lancaster House speech](#) in January where she made very clear that she wants the U.K. —we want the U.K.—to remain a go-to place for scientists, researchers and tech investors from all around the world. We want to remain open to bright and brilliant people.

Q: If the U.K. loses scientific talent before and after Brexit because of the departure of top scientists who are EU citizens, won't that make it less attractive as a collaborative partner? What will UKRI be able to do to make up for that?

Johnson: I don't think we are going to lose talent.

We're providing extra resource to our research and development efforts. As I said, the government's committing an additional £2 billion to our science, and we have been absolutely clear that we see our future as an economy as being one that's at the cutting edge of science and innovation. UKRI has a huge part to play in delivering on that vision. But I'm confident we'll succeed.

Q: Prime Minister Theresa May pledged that applied research will get an extra £4.7 billion over the next 4 years as part of the new industrial strategy. But how much of this will be available for basic research?

Johnson: The £4.7 billion is not just for applied research, it's for the totality of our research and development activities. So it will encompass a very significant amount of extra money for basic research.

Q: Brexit will cut the U.K. out of the EU-funded programs of the European Space Agency, such as Copernicus (Earth observation) and Galileo (satellite navigation)—

Johnson: To be discussed.

Q: Will the U.K. subscribe individually to remain part of these programs?

Johnson: You see, we are sort of leaping several stages ahead of where we are in the discussions and I don't think we have reached any of the kind of conclusions that your question assumes.

Q: The U.K. is a world leader in fusion energy research. But leaving the Euratom treaty will cut U.K. researchers off from the international ITER fusion reactor project. Will you be seeking to remain part of ITER?

Johnson: I think there's a misconception in the question.

Walport: ITER is a global project. So China participates, U.S. participates, Russia participates. And so the U.K. can find mechanisms to take part in it. ITER is a global collaboration with partners from many countries around the world. And so, obviously subject to negotiations, in principle it would be possible for the U.K. to find a mechanism, working partnership, to carry on.

Q: ITER is hugely over budget. And the EU was formally one of the seven partners. There has been an enormous amount of handwringing over this. One could imagine that the U.K. uses this as an opportunity to simply leave ITER and do something else. Has that been considered?

Walport: There are no plans to do that. And you know we are a very active participant through JET [Joint European Torus] and the R&D that is necessary for the ITER project to happen.

Q: Most researchers opposed Brexit. Many bodies have argued the U.K. will be demonstrably worse off in terms of research after March 2019 with less funding, fewer opportunities for collaboration and restricted mobility. To what extent are you arguing within government that science needs to be treated as a special case to protect it from the worst effects of Brexit?

Johnson: Everyone is aware of the benefits that we have from EU nationals working in our institutions. They make a huge contribution. And that's widely appreciated across government. We want those sorts of contributions to continue. And I just refer you again to the various papers that we've been putting out over the summer that will make all of this possible in the future. We want our research base to continue to attract brilliant people from around the world from the EU and beyond, so that we remain a go-to place for science and tech investment in years to come.

Q: So no special case for protecting science as opposed to other sectors of the economy?

Johnson: Well if you look at the [paper](#) that we put out [on 6 September], that makes it very clear that we see enormous value from European collaboration. And that we will be keen to put in place a new and special relationship with the EU that will make that possible and something that we can even build on and develop in years to come.

Q: Regarding DUNE, is this the science version of [Global Britain](#)?

Johnson: This is an agreement that's been underway in the pipeline for two and a half years so it's not it's not a sort of a knee-jerk reaction to Brexit, if that's if that's what you mean. This is a demonstration that Britain is an open, outward-looking country that is keen to collaborate with the most brilliant scientists around the world wherever they are.

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