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Speech

Developing a UK-Ireland higher education and research partnership

Speech by Science Minister Sam Gyimah at the British Irish Chamber of Commerce event on higher education and research.

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It's an honour to be here today with such a distinguished group of researchers, teachers and innovators from our 2 countries. And a pleasure to speak alongside my esteemed counterpart John Halligan.

Today is a good opportunity to celebrate the special relationship between our 2 countries – and also to deepen it, building on our relationships in the fields of research, innovation, and higher education.

As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech, the UK is committed to establishing a far-reaching science and innovation pact with the EU. It is our aim that Britain remains at the forefront of collective endeavours to better understand, and make better, the world in which we live. The exchange of ideas and of researchers is essential to this.

UK-Ireland collaboration on research

The UK and Ireland collaborate through a number of EU multilateral forums, not least Horizon 2020. We are working together on a dizzying range of cutting edge projects. We're collaborating to find new ways to unlock the energy potential of our oceans through the Marinet project. We are deepening our understanding of serious illnesses, through the Joint Programming Initiative for Neurodegenerative Disease Research. We are working out how best to deploy Ebola vaccine through the EBODAC project. These are just a few of the inspiring examples of joint projects our 2 countries are involved in. Indeed, we are Ireland's second most frequent collaborator in Horizon 2020 projects.

We are also proud of our bilateral work together, like the BBSRC's lead agency agreement with Science

Foundation Ireland, which to date has funded 14 applications, totalling nearly £8 million.

In the last five years, the UK's Research Council funded 119 projects involving partners based in Ireland, representing a total value of £146 million.

When it comes to innovation, I believe the UK has much to gain from working with Ireland.

I'm excited by projects like the new partnership between the cities of Belfast and Dublin to develop new, clean solutions to deliver goods within cities. Cracking the problem of 'last mile' distribution could mean cheaper goods, more reliable deliveries, and cleaner air – 3 big prizes.

Ireland has over the last 30 years built a powerful and dynamic knowledge economy, attracting investment from abroad and encouraging entrepreneurship at home. As the UK pushes ahead with our Industrial Strategy, increasing our investment in R&D and creating the opportunity for high-growth businesses to thrive, we have much to learn from Ireland's successes.

Higher education

Our long history of partnership carries over into the other half of my brief: higher education. Of 15,000 Irish students studying abroad, two-thirds of them are in the UK. And Ireland is the fifth most popular country for UK students studying abroad.

We are keen to maintain our partnership with Ireland as the UK leaves the EU. Indeed, we want it not just to continue, but to get stronger. We welcome Irish students to the UK. And we have no intention to cut or cap international student numbers.

Students from Ireland bring greater diversity to our campuses, an international dimension to the experience of everyone at our universities. They stimulate demand for courses, and add to the UK's impressive research capacity.

In the short term they bring welcome income to UK universities, and to the economies of our towns and cities. In the longer term, they offer something even more valuable: the prospect of ongoing business, political, cultural and research links between our 2 countries. Long may this continue.

That is why we are committed to maintaining rights of Irish nationals to access higher and further education courses on a reciprocal basis. This includes rights to qualify for home fee status, student loans and other support, subject to meeting the same eligibility criteria as UK nationals.

We are working towards agreeing the high-level principles with Ireland, and considering the exact details of future eligibility criteria for student loans and support in England following the end of the Implementation Period in December 2020, including ways to ensure that Irish students continue to have access to student finance support.

The future

At today's conference we'll be discussing a wide range of areas for future collaboration. They range from life science to agri-food to space and satellite technologies, and from pure research to innovation projects taking place within businesses.

Wider EU relationship

I would also like to say a few words about the UK's wider science and research plans as we prepare to leave the European Union. The UK is an active and valued participant in European research and innovation programmes.

The UK and EU Joint Report, published in December, sets out that UK entities' right to participate in EU programmes, including Horizon 2020, will be unaffected by the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In the areas of citizens' rights and the financial settlement, we have translated all of the commitments we made in December, delivering on our promise to reflect the Joint Report in the Withdrawal Agreement.

The Joint Report envisages that existing projects will continue to receive uninterrupted funding for the lifetime of the project.

We want to assure the EU of our commitment to ongoing collaboration in Science and Innovation; we want to work together on a mutually beneficial outcome. This potentially includes continuing to take part in those programmes that are greatly to the UK's and the EU's joint advantage, such as those that promote science, education and culture.

To that end, we would like to ensure that the new FP9 remains open to our association. We recognise that such an association would necessarily involve an appropriate financial contribution in line with other associates, and would like to discuss the details. In turn, our priorities are that FP9 remains focused on excellence, EU-added value, and openness to the world, as we outlined in our position paper, and that the programme allows associated countries a suitable degree of influence, in recognition of the benefits they bring to it and in line with their financial contributions. To this end, we intend to engage fully and constructively in the design of FP9.

We hope that our future participation in FP9 will provide us with a further opportunity to collaborate with Ireland, alongside our bilateral partnerships.

Conclusion

Our relationship with Ireland in the fields of research, innovation and higher education is of the utmost importance to us. Together, we can do better research, promote our mutual prosperity, and build on the deep cultural links between our countries.

I am delighted to share a platform today with John Halligan, and with so many distinguished innovators from our 2 nations, as we seek to deepen our partnership.

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