

## FORUM

# Response to 'Brexit, Archaeology and Heritage: Reflections and Agendas'

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This paper is a response to the Brexit, Heritage and Archaeology workshop, run at UCL in May 2017 and focuses on one of the areas where Brexit will affect heritage research and archaeology in practical terms – immigration. Discussing the potential consequences of implementing a points-based system for EU immigration to the UK, something which as a foreign national, the author has experienced.

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Following the lead paper's *Heritage and Brexit* strand, this paper focuses on one of the areas where Brexit will affect heritage research and archaeology in practical terms – immigration. The Brexit referendum stood out by its key phrases and claims, and one of them was the claim of implementing 'an Australian-style points-based immigration system' post-Brexit. From a critical discourse analysis point of view, this suggestion by the leading Leave campaigners had two clear messages. 'An Australian-style' implied something tough, even harsh, in light of the negative reports on Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants (Cohen 2016). 'A points-based system' implied it will be complicated, hence removing the need for quick scrutiny during fast-flowing pre-referendum debates. Although some outlets looked at it briefly (Davidson 2016; New Statesman 2016), most of the public failed to question its viability post-separation.

The UK has been using a points-based system for years when reviewing applications beyond the EU. The author has been granted Tier 4 (PhD student) and researcher Tier 2 (university staff) under point based rules since 2009 for study and work in the UK under UCL sponsorship. As a citizen of a non-EU and non-Commonwealth country with no visa deals with the UK, the author gained insights into the full extent of the points-based system and its challenges. If at least some part of the system is to be implemented in relation to European students and colleagues, will that be a good thing for academic mobility and for the movement of heritage professionals?

The answer is 'No'. It will be extremely damaging for academia in general and heritage research in particular. The existing points-based system is exceptionally strict and unforgiving. It does not take most personal circumstances or country-specific nuances into account. Especially in Tier 2 and Tier 4 categories, which are the most relevant to universities, the system implements strict rules and controls. The process of application requires a Certificate

of Sponsorship which is usually issued by the employer in collaboration with the UK Home Office.

Gaining it through recognised universities is one of the easiest parts of the process, but it places unnecessary strain on the university admissions and HR departments. The applicants have to demonstrate their English language proficiency and education levels. For professionals, they should have a job offer in place with a certain salary grade. In addition, all applicants must demonstrate availability of funds for maintenance for a certain period of time and it could run into tens of thousands of pounds if an applicant has a family.

The application process is extremely costly<sup>1</sup> and includes £200 per head per annum NHS surcharge levied, regardless of the fact that some applicants already pay full taxes and National Insurance contributions. UCL has already taken proactive steps to pay some of these costs (UCL 2017b)<sup>2</sup> for staff, and in anticipation of bigger challenges, also tries to mitigate the financial costs to staff in light of Brexit (UCL 2017a). This is similar to the efforts that certain politicians suggest (Whitaker 2017). The costs are a significant factor, perhaps immoral, and ever-increasing, but focusing on them often trivialises other difficulties.

The migrants under a points-based system should keep track of their international travel and employers have a duty to report this to the Home Office. Registration with the Overseas Visitors Records Office within days of arrival and obtaining a Certificate of Registration is part of the many foreign nationals' condition of stay in the UK. It also requires reporting changes in circumstance (address, passport details, and family situation, among others) to the police. The process is not necessarily demeaning, but time consuming and often unnecessary. The furore around the possible registration of European immigrants (BBC 2017) points to unawareness of the wider society of the existing system. Although the narrative of an 'Australian-style points-based system' was about allowing 'selected talent' in, if a similar approach is

taken, then it might become more about the talent's willingness to come. Whilst currently the citizens of developing countries seem to be prepared to face the challenges, European nationals might not be prepared to go to the same lengths. In the author's experience, the applications are almost impossible to submit without support of friends and colleagues, which many new arrivals will lack. Although UCL works hard to support students through Admissions and the Rights and Advice Centre, these are not available for staff. The burgeoning immigration lawyers market in the UK might not always be affordable for university or heritage sector staff.

The debate over immigration, partly fuelled by the Brexit campaign, also overlapped with acute refugee crises. Caught in between the self-imposed reduction of the number of immigrants and saving face, certain politicians made a distinction between 'deserving' refugees and 'undeserving' economic migrants (Hughes 2016; Travis 2016). Although such simplifications may go down well with certain segments of voters, it places people like academic migrants into the latter, unglorified, category. Putting the reality of people losing lives because of economic hardship across the globe aside, this highlights the attempts made to simplify complex and often value-laden issues. The Government infighting over the issue of immigration – one of the cornerstones of the Brexit vote – is likely to become more biased and may lead to further examples of immigration policy 'governed by anecdote and scaremongering' (Asthana 2017). Hence these multi-faceted challenges of post-Brexit immigration policy should be seen as equally threatening to the discipline as the potential loss of research funding, which not only involves ERC grants and Horizon-2020 but also very practical initiatives such as the Erasmus+ projects.

Sector-by-sector approach to separation and post-separation funding and support cannot be definitely excluded, given the current Conservative government's attempts to give tailored assurances to bigger employers.

The most dangerous possibility would be a similarly selective approach to supporting specific universities or even specific departments. In case of lower-priority, the outward-looking nature of UK archaeology and heritage research and practice, as highlighted in the lead paper, might suffer dramatically. To put it simply, what academia and the heritage sector might inherit from Brexit is a less diverse and poorer workforce.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the last application, the author and his two dependents paid £3,153 for two-year extension under Tier 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Although in author's case the £651 reimbursement was paid after around a year later.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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