

The Impact of Brexit on the Italian Academic Community in the United Kingdom

Embassy of Italy in the United Kingdom

The Embassy of Italy in the United Kingdom conducted a survey among the Italian academic community in the UK to understand if there are already explicit consequences - even though Brexit has for now only been announced - and, if so, to quantify them. In this report, the results of the survey are presented and analysed.

The Italian academic community in the United Kingdom

In the academic year 2014/2015, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) more than 28% of the academic staff in the UK were non-UK nationals; 16% of the total were EU nationals. The Italian academic community in the UK counted, in the same period, 5755 staff members in British universities, thus representing the second largest foreign scientific community. In addition, there are 6749 Italian PhD and master's students attending UK higher education institutions. All data below refers only to staff members.

Figure 1 – Italian staff in UK universities: Age Distribution

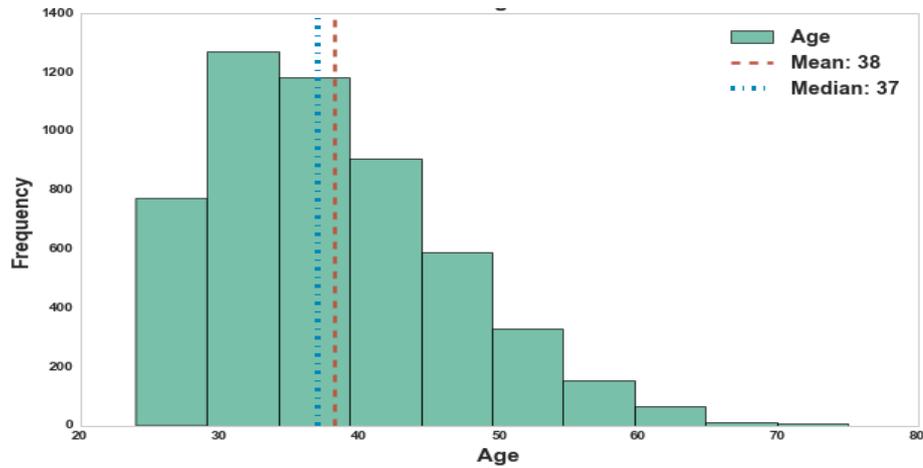
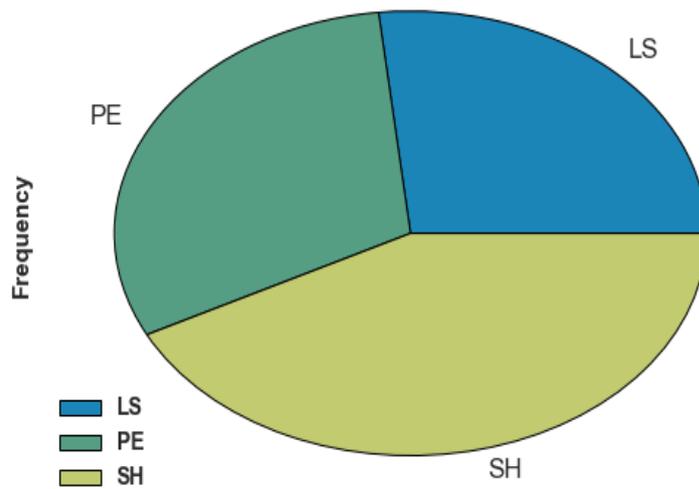
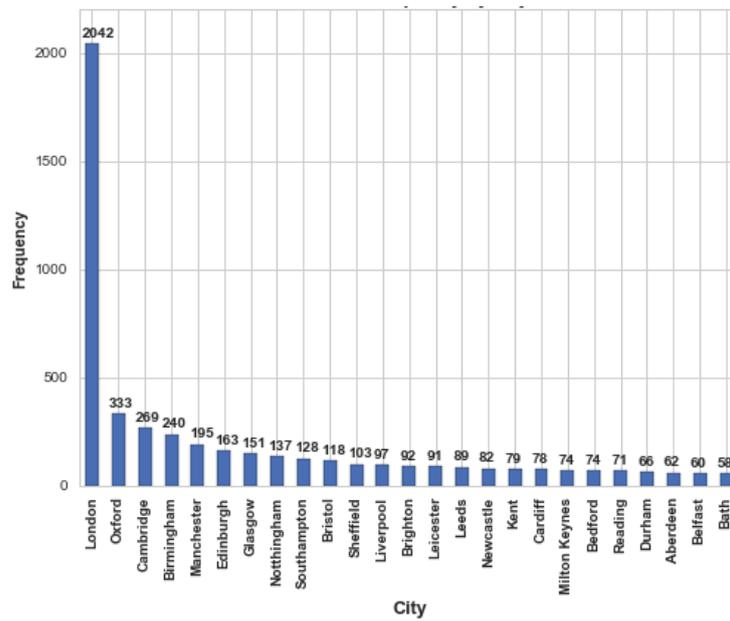


Figure 2 – Italian staff in UK universities: Distribution by ERC macro area



The average age of members of the Italian academic community is 38 (fig.1). Of the three ERC domains, Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) is the most popular (2,052 Italian academics), followed by Physics and Engineering (PE) (1,490 Italian academics) and Life Sciences (LS) (1,290) (fig.2).

Figure 3 – Italian staff in UK universities: Frequency by city



London hosts the largest number of Italian academics, with a total of 2,042 members (35% of the total Italian academic community) (fig.3) whilst for the rest of nationalities - including British - only 18% are in London (fig. 4).

After London are Oxford (334 members), Cambridge (269), North London and Birmingham (241) and Manchester (195). In Scotland, the top two cities for Italian academics are Edinburgh (163) and Glasgow (151) (fig.4).

Figure 4 - Italian staff vs Other academic staff in UK universities: Frequency by city

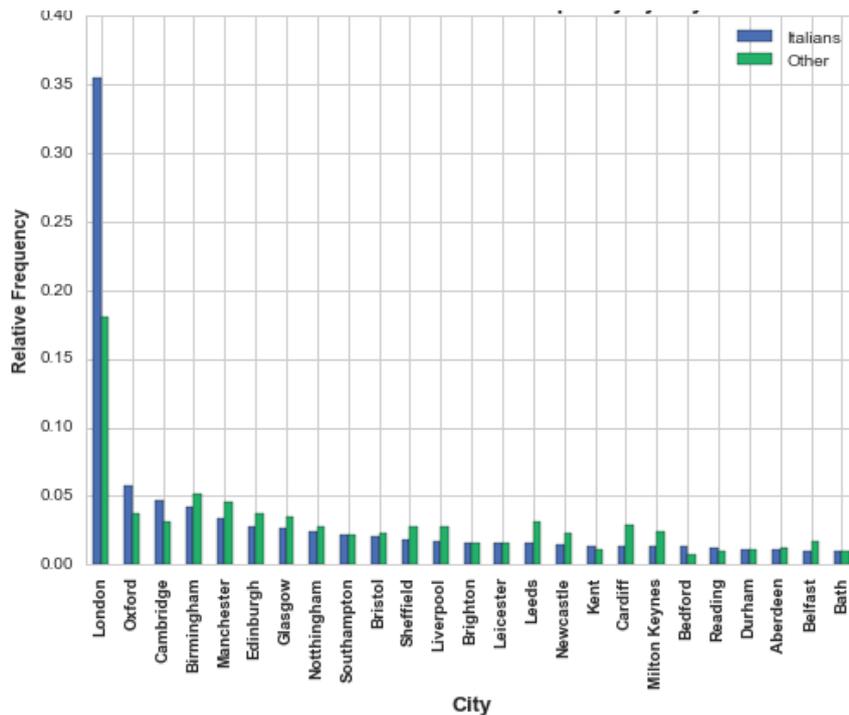
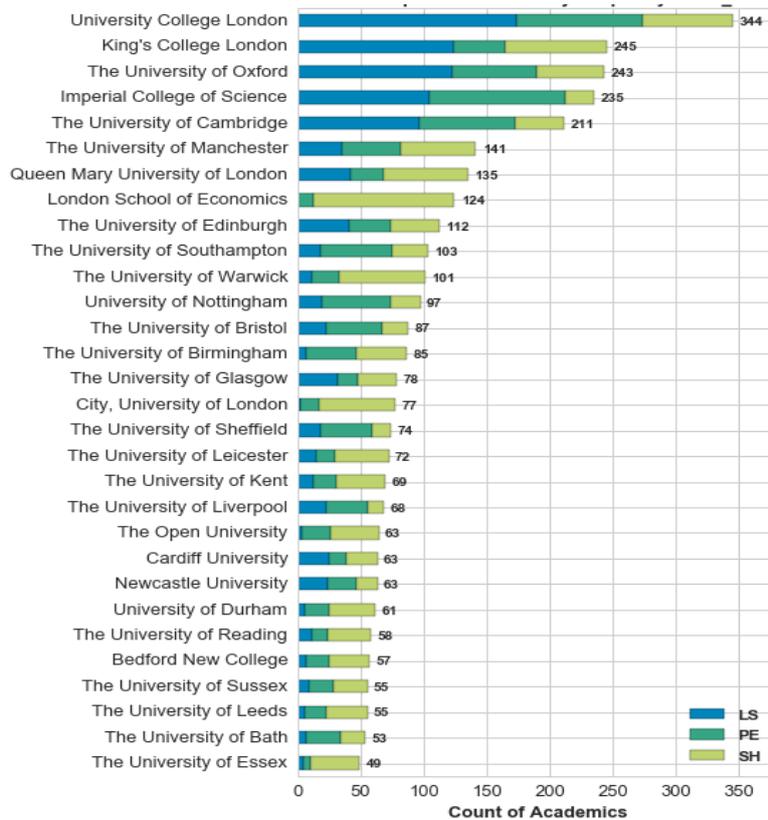


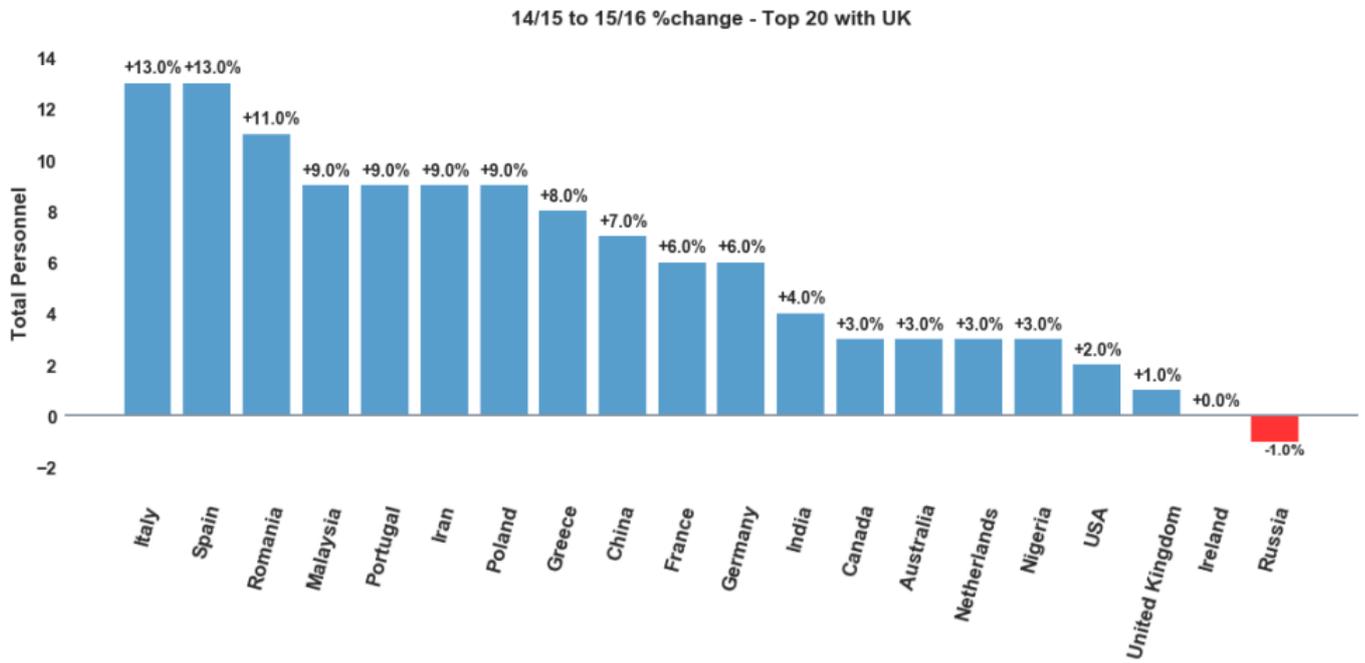
Figure 5 – Italian staff in UK universities: Top 25 universities by frequency in ERC Area

It has to be noted that the Italian academic community is highly represented in the Russell Group Universities. 59% of the total Italian academic community work in the 24 universities of the Russell Group. If one considers the entire academic staff, 42% work in the Russell Group universities. The British universities with the greatest number of Italian academics and researchers are: University College London (334), King's College London (245), The University of Oxford (243), Imperial College London (235), The University of Cambridge (211), The University of Manchester (141), Queen Mary University London (135), London School of Economics (124), The University of Edinburgh (112), The University of Southampton (103), The University of Warwick (101), The University of Nottingham (97) – all of them belonging to the Russell Group.

The Italian academics – A growing community

Recent data from HESA showed that in 2015/2016 the Italian community had a 13% increase vs the previous year (figure A), while the overall academy personnel increased by 1.6%. Among the different nationalities Italian and Spanish are the ones that increased the most. It should be noted, however, that this trend reflects the pre-Brexit era.

Figure A - Italians in the UK: a growing community (14/15 to 15/16)



The survey

The questionnaire ‘The effects of Brexit on the Italian academics and researchers in the United Kingdom’ was delivered to 2,789 individuals present in the database of the Italian academics and researchers in the UK of the Scientific Office of the Embassy of Italy in London. A total of 632 anonymous answers were received.

Results

A. Information on the respondents

Figure 6 – Age

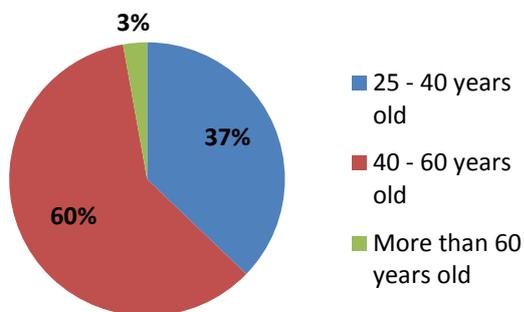


Figure 7 – Academic Position

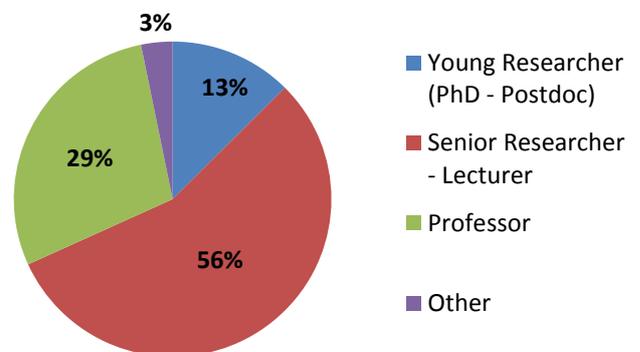
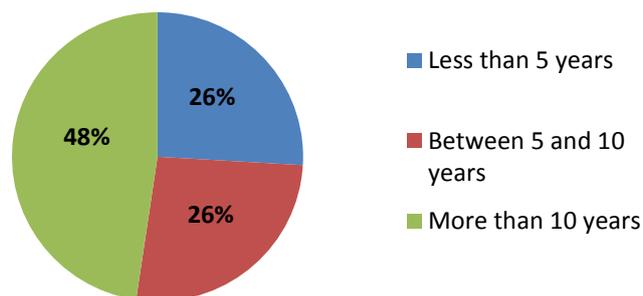
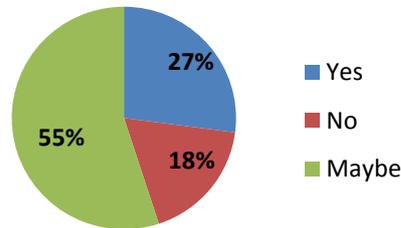


Figure 8 – Time working in the UK



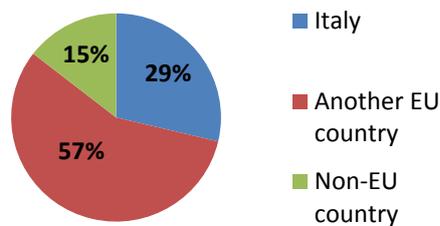
B. Intention to leave the UK

Figure 9 - "Are you thinking about leaving the UK?"



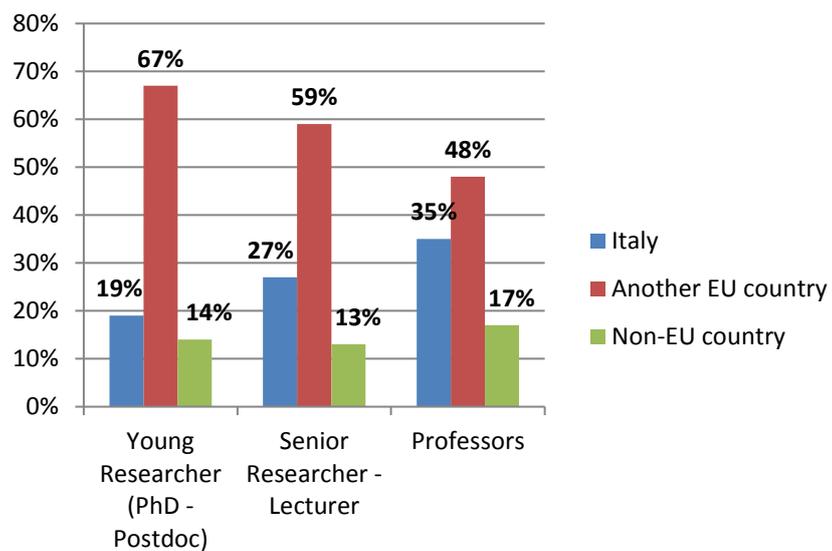
82% of our respondents are considering leaving the United Kingdom whilst only 18% are not planning to move out (see “additional poll” at the end of this report”).

Figure 10 – “If yes, where would you move?”



According to our survey, the vast majority of members who replied ‘yes’ and ‘maybe’ would move to another EU country (57%). A significant proportion of researchers would like to go back to Italy (29%).

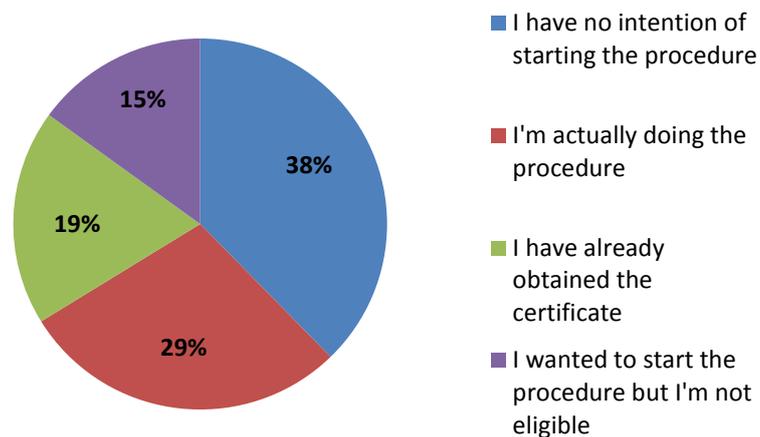
Figure 11 - Destination choice out of UK by academic position



Another interesting aspect is that the more advanced respondents are in their career, the more likely they prefer moving back to Italy over moving to another EU country.

C. Permanent Residence Certificate

Figure 12 - Permanent Residence Certificate



Through various meetings, events and correspondence between the Embassy and the Italian community, the Embassy has registered increasing interest in the Permanent Residence Certificate. The Permanent Residence Certificate is seen by many as some kind of guarantee for the future of EU citizens in the UK. 62% of the respondents have already done something related to the Permanent Resident Procedure (29% are doing it, 19% have already obtained it and 15% want to start the procedure but not eligible). 15% of the respondents wanted to start the procedure but they are not eligible. It should be noted that this procedure requires 5 continuous years of living in the UK, which does not always fit with academic/research jobs. Therefore, it is often difficult for an academic/researcher to be eligible for the Permanent Residence Certificate.

D. Negative consequences of Brexit in the work field

Figure 13 – “Have you applied to EU funding after Brexit was announced?”

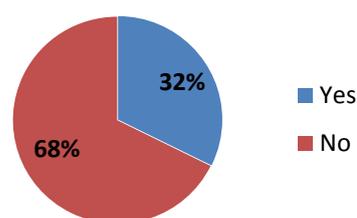


Figure 14 - "Have you noticed any negative effects of Brexit in your work?"

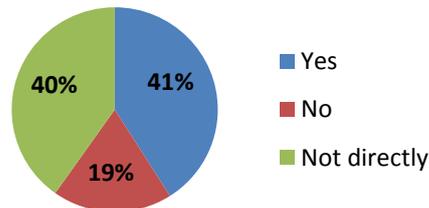
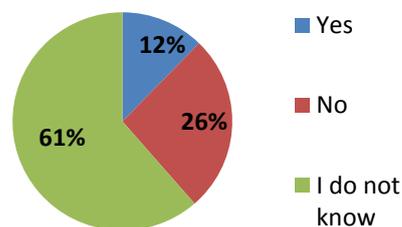


Figure 15 – "As academic/researcher working in British institutions, have you or one of your colleagues been victim of discriminations in EU funding?"



An alarming result that emerged from our survey is that already 81% of the respondents have faced or felt adverse effects of Brexit in their work, directly or indirectly (figure 14). In the 314 open answers that we collected, the major negative consequences that have been reported are:

- Decreasing numbers of EU students, PhD applications from EU students, PhD offers to EU students, and Erasmus applications;
- Difficulty in recruiting EU academics and researchers (many EU researchers have declined job offers);
- A general sense of insecurity, discontent and demoralisation;
- Social tension and antagonism towards Europeans and foreigners in general, with clear episodes of discrimination;
- Exclusions from directing EU projects as members of a British institution, difficulties collaborating with researchers from EU institutions in Horizon2020 and sometimes explicit exclusions from participating;
- Reduced access to EU funding;
- Uncertainty over future EU grants;
- Increasing costs for research facilities and equipment;
- Collaborations with EU universities slowing down;
- Massive moving of EU academics from British universities to other EU institutions.

Furthermore, only 26% of these respondents were confident that they and their colleagues had not been victims of discrimination in EU funding (figure 15). The vast majority (61%) did not know whether they have experienced or heard of discrimination whilst 12% had direct experience of discrimination. From the open comments connected to this question it is clear that the 'do not know' responses refer to some kind of discrimination that was not *official* or *explicit*.

Here are the most representative answers (all anonymous and translated from Italian):

1. “We have been formally warned not to give PhD scholarships to EU students. Informally, many colleagues have been advised not to apply for EU grants as ERC grant since it is very unlikely that those grants will be assigned to P.I. affiliated to British universities (the duration of the grant being more than 2 years)”
2. “Although it seems still possible to obtain EU funding for research, I personally know many internationally renowned researchers and professors who – even though they have obtained this funding – are thinking about moving somewhere else in the European Union because they are not quite sure about what is going to happen when the UK leaves the EU”
3. “Refusal from many colleagues who have been offered a job. Difficulty participating in H2020 projects”
4. “Increasing difficulty entering in research groups. British institutions are seen with suspicion”
5. “All the attempts to collaborate with EU colleagues for EU research funding are basically frozen”
6. “There is a clear evidence that EU partners are uncertain about incorporating colleagues from UK universities in proposals for EU funding”
7. “I work at the Joint European Torus and more directly I work at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy (MAST and MAST-U), which depends on the EU for 60% of its funding. The feeling of uncertainty about the future of JET and about research on fusion energy in UK (also considering the exit from Euratom) has an incredibly negative effect on planning future research activities and on the spirit of researchers”
8. “Applications from EU students have decreased. Moreover, in my department there was vacancy for a lecturer: the first three candidates, all EU citizens, refused the job offered”
9. “Internal funding for projects in my current British institution have been drastically reduced as an effect of the dramatic decrease of enrolment of non-UK students”
10. “Uncertainty over future EU research funding. UK groups are not appreciated anymore for future collaborations in EU research projects because of the possibility that they might have to leave the projects before the end of contracts. Reasonably, EU research groups do not want to increase the risks related to the coordination or even the participation of UK groups. The risk analysis of research projects is one of the key elements in the evaluation of the projects themselves and when the risk increases, the probability of obtaining funding decreases”
11. “Many colleagues with EU citizenship - me included – have second thoughts about continuing their career in the UK. The reasons are linked both to the future impossibility of accessing EU funding and to the political orientation of the current British government. We expect that this government will continue with the politics of austerity, which will inevitably affect research funding. This will produce a strong contraction of job/career opportunities for all the researchers in the UK”
12. “There is no official proof, but the discriminations in the evaluation phase of funding is really blatant”
13. “I personally know colleagues who have been asked to renounce big collaborative grants”

14. “During the application phase, research groups based abroad pulled back their invitation to collaborate”
15. “I was going to apply as an Erasmus+ coordinator and I was strongly advised against it”
16. “We have been discouraged from applying for the European Researchers Scheme. I was aiming at this scheme to get funding for three years (non-nominative and transferable), which would have allowed me to go back to an Italian university. At this point, I am not sure if I will ever be able to go back to work in Italy, even though that is my main desire”
17. “Some colleagues have been asked not to participate as lead institutions or not to participate at all in research groups”
18. “I have heard about a research group (physics) that was supposed to coordinate an EU project but they were asked to transfer the coordination to a non-UK research group because of Brexit. They accepted only in order to avoid being entirely excluded from the project (I cannot explicitly mention this group because it is not my research group)”
19. “I have been excluded from two different research groups because the other partners were afraid that the presence of a British institution weakens the application”
20. “Not cases of direct discrimination, but I can mention at least one case where some colleagues agreed to be only an associate partner in an Horizon 2020 bid instead of being lead partners”
21. “One of my colleagues was asked to withdraw from the EU research group with which he was applying to H2020. Currently, having a partner from a British institution is considered a weak point in the referees’ eyes”
22. “To tell the truth only one case: one of my French colleagues excluded me from an application due to Brexit”
23. “I know that one of my colleagues was excluded from an application to EU funding because he was affiliated with a British institution. The other partners were afraid of having less chance of being funded with a ‘British’ researcher in the group”
24. “Many colleagues from my university have reported being excluded from groups applying for EU funding, even after they had already joined the groups, as partners from other EU institutions (non-UK) do not want to risk potential repercussions due to Brexit”

Additional poll

Given the impressive response to question 9 and since it was not clear whether the type of responses received were consequent to the result of the Brexit referendum, we launched another poll to the same audience (2,789 academics and researchers). We received 485 answers. Below questions and corresponding answers.

Figure 9a – “Are you thinking about moving out from the UK to another country?”

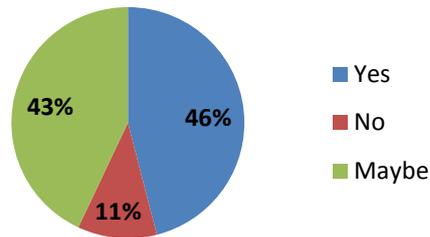


Figure 9b – “Did the start of the Brexit process influence your intention of whether staying in the country or moving out?”

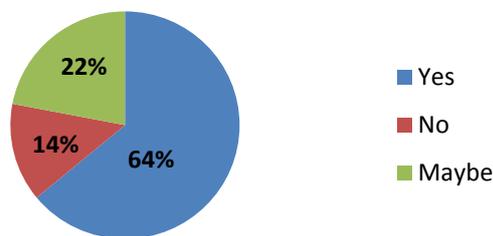


Figure 9c - "The British government ensured that it will give complete financial support to all the projects approved by the EU for their entire duration, even after the UK officially leaves the EU. Are you reassured by this statement when applying to EU funding?"

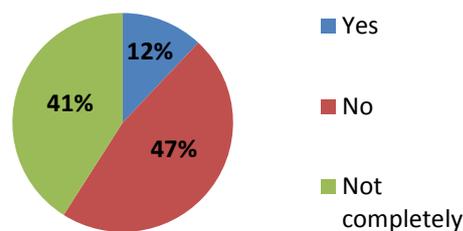
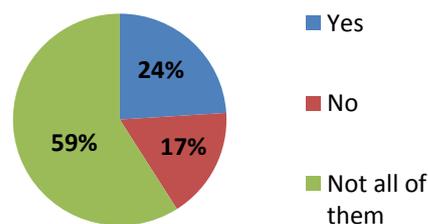


Figure 9d – “Referring to the previous question (figure 9c), do your partners outside the UK know this assurance by the British government?”



Conclusions

1. Italians are the second largest foreign academic community in the UK. This is a signal of the respect and consideration that the Italians have for UK academy and of the consideration that British Institutions have of Italian academic personnel.
2. The significant increasing number of Italians in UK universities between 2014/15 and 2015/16 indicates that this reciprocal respect and consideration is maintained or growing.
3. While the pre-Brexit numbers are in the direction indicated at points 1 and 2 above, our survey suggests a trend among some Italian academics to start looking for new opportunities outside of the UK. It should be stressed however that out of the almost 6,000 Italians who are estimated working in UK universities, we have contacted nearly 3,000 (i.e. those who are registered in the Embassy) and received a response by only 632. Of these, 82% (i.e. 518) are considering to leave the UK (with different level of determination), largely as a consequence of Brexit. It is impossible to know at this stage whether this signal could be read as characterising the mood/intention of the entire community. But it certainly represents an objective piece of data that could be extremely useful to monitor trends in the coming years. Needless to say, anxiety is more pronounced when there are profound elements of uncertainty.