

After Brexit, UKRI if you want to: a social scientist's fieldguide to the new research landscape

Cambridge ESRC DTP Annual Lecture, 16 May 2017

The topic of discussion for this lecture concerned the social and economic impact of, and responses to, Brexit after the referendum in 2016. The speaker, Professor James Wilsdon, from the University of Sheffield, discussed numerous interesting and engaging ideas in relation to his current work on the restructuring of the research councils in the UK so that they all come under a single umbrella organisation called **UK Research and Innovation**.ⁱ The speaker outlined several of the upcoming priorities for UKRI, which include being realistic about the challenges as well as the opportunities of interdisciplinary working, investing in the next generation of research leaders, building a next-generation research information infrastructure, making a renewed commitment to public engagement in science and innovation policy and priorities, and ensuring a balanced funding system through careful monitoring of the underlying health of disciplines. He preceded this discussion by outlining why UKRI was created, how it will work, and what opportunities will be generated by it. The speaker also outlined the current need for a renewed commitment to public engagement in science and innovation policy and priorities, which was really interesting. Professor Wilsdon also noted that one of the key challenges that UKRI face in the near future is keeping the pressure up on the Article 50 processⁱⁱ whilst continuing to explore other collaborative options.

The question and answer session at the end of the lecture was particularly enlightening, and provided several interesting insights into how UKRI works and what its main goals are for the future. One question concerned the extent to which the government will be interested in what social scientists have to say in Brexit negotiations. I was particularly interested in this question because this is something that I've also wondered myself since talks about Brexit began. The speaker replied by stating his hope that there will be scope for a contribution from social scientists in the near future, and that it is necessary to establish allies in government in order to ensure that our voice is heard. He argued that what is needed is to build a coalition of support and advocacy for social science and academics in this discipline. Another question concerned neoliberalism and institutions of higher education and the extent to which they are rapidly becoming 'shrinking spaces for useless knowledge' and how this might affect the impact of academic discourse in Brexit negotiations. Professor Wilsdon replied by arguing that there is a greater need to recognise priorities and agendas in relation to money and where it is being distributed. He further argued that there needs to be a monetary balance across social science and research as a whole.

Overall, this lecture provided a great deal of insight into the possible repercussions of Brexit in the near future and answered several questions that I had concerning the role of social scientists in Brexit negotiations and the further analytical work that can be done concerning the vast upheaval and change that this decision has made, and will continue to make, in the UK over the next few years.

Tanisha Spratt, "Social experiences of living with AKU or vitiligo in the USA", Department of Sociology

ⁱ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/john-kingman-to-lead-creation-of-new-6-billion-research-and-innovation-body>

ⁱⁱ See: <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7551>