



Impact of Brexit on people, preparing colleges -podcast 2 transcript

Steve Frampton: I'm Steve Frampton, I'm the President of the Association of Colleges and I'm here today, with Julian Gravatt. Julian's the Deputy Chief-Executive, and Emma Meredith, the International Director at the AoC.

With the current position on Brexit, colleges find themselves in uncharted territory. So, I wonder if we could start today, with the most important element of college life, our students, our staff and our communities. And I'm really interested if you can explain to us please Emma, how Brexit might affect EU students, and their access to college programmes of study?

Emma Meredith: It's a really good question you ask Steve, about students, we know that this is one of college's primary concerns. We think there are over 40 thousand EU students studying in FE colleges, on the same basis as UK students, so a significant number.

Obviously, it varies from college to college, the percentage of EU nationals. But basically, we do have some reassurance in that area, the Secretary of State and the Universities Minister, have made statements to cover EU students, on the same basis as now, for their full duration of their study.

And that applies to students that are already here in the UK for this academic year, and students that are here for the next academic year as well. And just to be clear, this does apply to FE students, so to students in colleges, so we can be sure for college students, that's the guarantee for funding, tuition fees and other kinds of student finance, is in place for college students.

Steve Frampton: And can you confirm that's for the full duration of their course?

Emma Meredith: Yes, that's right, so we don't anticipate any real change until 2021, and that applies to tuition fees, and loans and other financial support.

Julian Gravatt: I mean it's a really complicated area, and it's important that people start from what the existing rules are, and of course, for colleges the rules are different depending on whether somebody is doing a 16-18 study programme, or an adult education budget course, or an apprenticeship.

So those rules currently have the arrangements for UK nationals and for EU nationals. But the key point, and the key guarantee is that for 2020 and that academic year, for anybody who's starting a course there, and then until the end of that course, that the arrangements continue as they are now.

Emma Meredith: And one clarification we should make, is that this really applies to EU students who are already in the UK when they start their course, and who were here before, potentially before the Brexit date.

This is another slight complication, but this is generally the case for EU students that are here, in the UK before Brexit. Now obviously, in colleges there are many EU students who are actually coming to college and they're already in the local community.

So in that case, the students should be absolutely fine, it's going to be maybe a little bit more complicated for students coming directly from the EU to study in the UK. But we still think that potentially the same guarantees will apply for the current academic year and the 2021 academic year.

Steve Frampton: Is that your understanding Julian?

Julian Gravatt: Yeah, it's important to emphasise that there's some very detailed rules here, and so for example, the government recently made a change for people taking higher education courses, to do with where access to maintenance support to extend the residence period from three years to five years.

But that happened regardless of Brexit, so that kind of change, that kind of issue, it's all on the, in that case, on the student finance England website which student loan companies run.

On terms of the FE courses, there's three different rule books and our No Deal readiness pack gives the links to the key points on that, the absolutely key thing is that, whether there's a no deal or deal on 31st October, nothing changes for this academic year or next academic year.

Steve Frampton: So those very technical regulations that are already in place roll over, and it's very important then, that the key staff in colleges are well familiar with those?

Julian Gravatt: Yeah, yeah and the key message is that they don't assume that they need to suddenly make a change on 1st November if things change unexpectedly.

Steve Frampton: And so, there's quite a lot of continuity here, which is very reassuring for colleges and staff, and for students.

Julian Gravatt: Yeah and it's really important then, that staff, that colleges and their messages to staff and students, explain that there are going to be changes in the longer term, but in the shorter term, for this academic year, and the next academic year, nothing changes in this area.

Steve Frampton: And that will give us plenty of time to be able to get to people with the up to date information if there are going to be changes down the line?

Emma Meredith: That's right.

Steve Frampton: Absolutely. This is very significant business though for colleges isn't it, and therefore, there's a funding issue potentially, how do you envisage Brexit will affect Erasmus Plus Programmes, both for those currently running, and those planned Julian?

Julian Gravatt: So, the, Erasmus is a specifically EU funded programme, and government have committed that if there's a no deal, that it will continue to provide that funding up until December 2020, until the programme finishes, that's if there's a no deal.

If there's a deal, then the transition arrangements that were put in place, would also continue the funding and the arrangements up until December 2020.

And Erasmus provides opportunities and benefits to home students, both to those who are travelling and those who are receiving students, and also to staff. And it's really important that there's a sort of keep calm and carry on message that people talk to their international partners, and potentially also sign a Memorandum of Understanding.

And that again, nothing specifically changes on 31st October, there may be some travel disruption. But people who want to understand more about this could listen to our travel podcast.

Steve Frampton: That's an excellent link, and it's an excellent programme, and I advise you to do that, I really do.

Emma Meredith: It is a great programme, Erasmus Plus, we know that many colleges have Erasmus projects with European partners. To add to what Julian said about the commitment of the government, what colleges can do, is register with the Cabinet Office portal online, for something called the Government's Guarantee.

So, as Julian said, there's no change until 2020, the scenario is slightly different depending on whether we leave with a deal or we don't. But the government has committed to underwrite existing Erasmus projects.

So, colleges need to go onto this Cabinet Office portal and register their Erasmus projects, to be sure that they will continue to receive funding, in the event of a no deal Brexit.

As Julian also said, he mentioned a Memorandum of Understanding, the advice from government is to set up a kind of Memorandum of Understanding, or a partnership agreement with their EU partners to evidence that they've got these partnerships in place.

It's just good practice, it may help further down the line as the UK looks at the replacement programme for Erasmus Plus, or whether it continues in Erasmus Plus.

But it's just good practice to get registered with the Cabinet Office portal to make sure that projects can continue.

Steve Frampton: Thank you very much for that. If we've got governors listening and their colleges have significant international provision, what sort of advice can you give them, perhaps, about developing their international strategy.

Because this is going to be very critical, bearing in mind the funding implications and everything else that you've talked about. Emma what advice would you be giving them?

Emma Meredith: I think it's a very good question, and we're very keen at AoC that governors are more aware of the international work that colleges do, and probably every college will do some element of international work, whether it's a simple exchange for the football team, or the college orchestra.

You know, there'll be something very simple right the way up to colleges offering, you know, multi-million-pound ventures internationally. So, at the moment, for any non-EU work that continues at the moment business as usual, although we need to think that the UK may look at different trade agreements in the future with countries outwith the EU.

But for now, in terms of the EU aspect, I think it goes back to the Erasmus Programme, if the college has got Erasmus Programme, ESF funding, which we're going to talk about in one of our other podcasts.

And also, how many EU students maybe come to take English language programmes, or summer schools at the college, and who pay full fees for that.

So again, there may be some changes around travel, and how EU students can come to the UK in future. But the reality is that none of that will really change until 2020. So, colleges can continue as usual.

But there are changes that colleges need to plan for and think about in the longer term, which governors also need to be aware of.

Steve Frampton: Julian, do you think this has implications for colleges for their risk register at an operational and a strategic level?

Julian Gravatt: Yeah, I think it's really important that when colleges are making their plans and looking at their risk register, that they think of all the external events that could make a difference. And one of them will be changes in policy and rules, in the market, as a result of Brexit.

But I think a really important thing is that most of the big changes for colleges don't come until 2021, and in the short term its limited disruption, limited change.

Steve Frampton: Thank you for that. Now colleges are big employers as well, and we've had the benefit of employing some fantastic EU nationals, I know I certainly have, and it's going to have a very strategic impact on the college that I work in now.

So, we employ dozens, sometimes even more than that really, so can we have a little look at the issues relating to employment, and particularly for those employees, and how colleges should be preparing for that Julian?

Julian Gravatt: I think the first thing, as with several other areas, is to offer reassurance to all staff, that there's no change in the short term. That the government's made very clear commitments to all EU nationals, who are currently here.

And it's focusing very much on encouraging people to register for the Home Office Settlement Scheme. And I think there's two million applications have already been made to that scheme.

There's some controversy about how efficiently it's working, about the fact that people in some cases, have been living here for decades, have got to apply to register.

But I think the really important thing is that in order to protect their rights in the 2020s, it's worthwhile encouraging people to do so. And from a college HR point of view, there's a lot of information from the Home Office on this, and there particularly is an Employer Guide for Settlement Scheme. and I guess that using that to filter messages to staff

Steve Frampton: Can I just ask you a little bit about this, the Employer Guide to the Settlement Scheme. You said it was almost an advisory thing you think, is it more than that, should they be actively encouraging, insisting, is it a requirement?

Julian Gravatt: It's unknown what exactly the government will do if we have Brexit and then once we've gone past any transition period, and we've got some new rules through new legislation.

It is genuinely unclear what arrangements will be made for those who haven't applied for settled status, or haven't got settled status, or pre-settled status. But given that uncertainty, I think it's worth employers actively encouraging people to do so.

But it is actually ultimately, their own choice.

Steve Frampton: Of course, Emma?

Emma Meredith: And I think it's important to add that employers aren't obliged to give out any kind of immigration advice, in fact it's actually illegal for them to do that.

So, they're not obliged to do that, but I think good practice would be to signpost staff to the Settled Status Scheme, and the same will apply to students as well, and maybe their families. And I think because colleges play such a big role in our communities, we can help make sure that the message about registration for the Settlement Scheme actually filters through students, their families, and staff.

Perhaps into sections of the community that aren't aware that this is going to be a requirement. So, putting the information out is very important, but I think also, as you said Steve, we've all worked with great staff in colleges who are EU nationals.

And I think we need to make sure that they continue to feel welcome working in our colleges and reassured. So hopefully, at AoC we can help that by putting out more information and working with government.

But it's an important community message as well, to make sure staff feel reassured.

Steve Frampton: Absolutely, so what sorts of things do you think HR departments, and other people in colleges can do to support staff. It's a very worrying time for some of these employees?

Emma Meredith: I think so, I think it is quite worrying because we've had three years of quite a lot of uncertainty, and things are still uncertain now about the final outcome of Brexit.

I think maybe HR teams can make sure they have a support service, they don't necessarily need to contact EU nationals directly, because that would perhaps be singling them out from everybody else.

But making sure all staff know that if they are affected by any Brexit related issues, that they could come and seek some support.

Julian Gravatt: And also, potentially raising it with Trade Unions in those sorts of discussions. I think also putting the messages out to everybody, not assuming that it only, that this only applies to people who are known to be UK passport holders, because everybody has partners, families, parents, children and it's never quite clear what anybody's status is.

But absolutely important as Emma says, that nobody gets into the business of offering immigration advice, because you have to be regulated to do so. But there is so much information around from the Home Office website and on other places, about what the process involves that just to signpost people to that.

Steve Frampton: So, what we're really saying then to HR departments is, the very good advice you've been given round inclusivity applies to this group, really as well, and how you handle that situation will be largely similar.

Julian, you've mentioned therefore, there will be other groups of people that will be affected by Brexit, members of staff who've got EU family and friends, and have relatives living in the EU. So, what sort of advice can we give them?

Julian Gravatt: So, for people who've got family members or relatives living in the EU, then it would depend on each of the different countries in which they're in and what happens.

One of the features of Brexit, particularly if we have a no deal, is that some things will be decided at the EU level, and some things will be decided in individual countries. And so, countries with lots of EU nationals it will be fairly straight forward, and other countries it may be something more complicated.

But in a way, you have to understand people are people, and encourage people to look at the official advice there is, there is advice on the government Get Ready website for every different country in the EU.

I think it's really important then, that colleges don't get involved into affairs that aren't really their business, but what they can do it to just encourage people to make sure that they exercise and protect their rights in a changing situation.

Steve Frampton: Because colleges are right at the heart of those communities, and it is having a very, very big impact in many of those areas, isn't it?

Julian Gravatt: Yeah, and I think it's really important that we're seen as a sort of positive, inclusive kind of safe harbour in a world that's feeling quite uncertain at the moment.

Steve Frampton: So, there's a massive opportunity there isn't there, I think for the colleges to engage with those communities as they always have done. But particularly over, in some parts of the countries Emma, I guess this is a bigger issue than others?

Emma Meredith: I think so, again, you know, some colleges have a high percentage of EU nationals amongst their staff and students, who are equal in the local community in other parts of the UK, it's very much less so.

There aren't very many EU nationals, so it's going to depend on the individual college context. I think the important thing is that the college is aware of that and that it offers the information it can. But as Julian says, it makes sure that it doesn't get involved in providing advice.

Or doing anything that really takes it beyond its reach.

Julian Gravatt: One thing we also should just clarify is that we're talking about EU nationals as a sort of, as a block, there are different arrangements for those who are Irish passport holders, and so we have a common travel area with, effectively, that I think has been in place for centuries.

And I think continues in a way, regardless and the government has made firm confirmation.

Steve Frampton: Thank you for that.

Emma Meredith: So that means the Irish citizens actually don't have to do anything with Brexit. So other EU nationals will, but Irish citizens don't actually need to register for the Settled Status Scheme.

Steve Frampton: That's an important point of clarification, thank you for that. I know some people have been very worried, EU members of staff, worried about specific benefits, and particularly pensions actually Julian, is that an issue?

Julian Gravatt: There are things to be aware of about in the future but in the short term, again offers some reassurance on that. And so, people who are members of a Teacher Pension Scheme, or the local government scheme, that continues to get paid regardless of nationality. It's based on the entitlements that get built up.

There would be issues, once people get to pension age, about the state pension, if you live in a different country then the arrangements that are made for indexing that will depend on future deals.

This government is quite restrictive in terms of, if people go to relocate to other countries, there's only certain countries where their state pension would continue to be increased by inflation. But I mean there's a whole another set of financial advice, and again, what people need to do is to make sure that they've got the advice that they need from the people who are qualified to give it.

Steve Frampton: What about right to work checks Emma?

Emma Meredith: Well at the moment, as we're saying, nothing changes immediately, so colleges won't need to instigate right to work checks on EU nationals. However, further down the line, this is something to be considered along with what will happen with our future immigration system.

But at the moment, nothing changes.

Julian Gravatt: The one area where governments particularly focused on is the, is arrangements for people with lengthy criminal records, and so there may be changes which apply in there, but at the moment that's at a point of rhetoric and it hasn't yet gone into legislation.

But the really important thing is, as Emma says, is that colleges absolutely shouldn't be starting to do right to work checks for existing members of staff, they should carry on doing right to work checks for new members of staff, just as they do, but somebody who comes and applies for a job who comes with an EU passport, has just got the same entitlements as somebody who's got a UK passport.

It's important that the existing rules continue until they change in 2021 basically.

Steve Frampton: Thank you for that. I'd like to have a look at one final issue, which I think is a really important one for colleges really, and this is around the single skills- based immigration system. Because colleges at the moment, are finding it difficult to recruit in many areas.

Not just lecturers but support staff, but particularly in some of those more technical areas. How do you think the single skills immigration system could affect recruitment and training of staff, Emma?

Emma Meredith: Well the government's looking at introducing, as you say, a single skills-based immigration system, and what this means is that if the UK leaves the EU, it can completely reconfigure its immigration system when Freedom of Movement ends, so that all nationalities would be subject to the same immigration checks more or less and would apply through a single system, whereas, at the moment, obviously EU nationals can come and work in the UK freely through the Freedom of Movement Directive.

So, this will change, and it does throw up some questions around in the future bringing EU nationals into work, not in the immediate term, but into the future bringing EU nationals into the UK.

Because ultimately, they would need to come through the same immigration system route, for example, tier two visas, which may be quite unfamiliar to many colleges, who haven't had to use this route.

So, it's something to think about for the future, but it's absolutely something that college senior management teams, governors and HR need to be aware of at the moment, so they can plan for it.

Julian Gravatt: And it's a thing that will apply to new people, it won't apply to the people who are already resident and who are settled here. The government's plans are unclear, so they, the last government, Teresa May's government published a specific set of plans, and promised that there'd be legislation which would effectively be starting quite soon.

But then, the new government, Boris Johnson's government has said they want to bring in more Australian style system in which there's points available, and so it's not just based potentially on the sort of job, the sort of level of the job and the salary of a job, but that people might be able to get points for things like English language ability.

And there's rumours also of if they promise to live in certain parts of the country as well. So, it's a shifting sort of thing, and of course, what's happening at the moment is the politicians can make promises, but nothing will change until the politicians can get legislation changed in parliament, and the government doesn't currently have a majority.

And then the timing of that would pretty much be that things will change in 2021, which is also when the Home Office expect to have their new IT systems in place and hope to have had all three and a half million EU nationals registered.

So, it's a big set of changes but.

Emma Meredith: And probably worth adding that at AoC we work quite closely with the Home office, so Julian and I each sit on one of the advisory committees at the Home Office, so we do have the chance to respond to consultations and to discuss with officials, the shape of the immigration system.

That the UK will introduce in the future. At the moment, the Migration Advisory Committee, which is looking at the new skills system, and the points-based system concept, is looking at things like salary levels, for example, so what would the minimum salary level be, to bring somebody into the UK for work in the future.

So, we have the chance to provide feedback on that, so if colleges do have any concerns, or questions, we're very happy to receive their feedback.

Steve Frampton: I think that will be very helpful because I know this is a real concern, particularly the salary thresholds. So, there's an opportunity for them to contact you and Julian and that voice can go all the way to the Department.

Emma Meredith: That's right, and we have dedicated accounts, email accounts, it's Brexit@aac.co.uk, if colleges want to get in touch with any queries they have. But yes, the salary threshold is going to be a big determining factor in terms of the future skills immigration into the UK.

So, colleges certainly will be concerned about what that threshold is going to be, and whether it will allow them to bring EU nationals in through that route into shortage skills subjects.

However, again, it's worth emphasising this is not going to happen the day that the UK leaves the EU, it's going to happen into 2021.

Julian Gravatt: And it's, there are other things that may in future be, colleges may be able to use to recruit staff, so just as a moment, there's a Youth Mobility Scheme that allows Australians to come across to the UK, we may find a situation that the EU and the UK have a deal that allows other mobility for short term, possibly for younger people.

And there'll be ways in which colleges can potentially fill their staff needs in future. But it's, that's all for the 2020s, and in a sense, where we are right now, we're in a situation where nothing changes for the next academic year in this area.

Steve Frampton: But we know that our colleges tell us, don't they, that there are already some extreme shortages in certain technical areas, vocational areas, etc., and this is something strategically they're looking at.

Do you anticipate any changes to those patterns?

Julian Gravatt: I think that colleges are going to be in a situation where they're going to need to recruit more staff in the 2020s, I mean we're expecting there to be more students, more funding, more demand.

And so, we're going to be in an expansion situation, so we're going to need to work with the Department for Education, with the Home Office, to make sure that there aren't any unnecessary barriers. Because there's definitely a prospect that the, that people will have to pay visa fees, and other fees, and colleges having to get tier two licences.

Only 20 percent of colleges currently have tier two licences, potentially every college is going to need to do so. The Home Office promised that their new systems are going to be slick and employer friendly and customer friendly, and easy to use.

But I guess we need to see if that actually genuinely happens.

Steve Frampton: I think we heard that with the police and the health service, if I'm not mistaken really. But this is potentially an increased cost and administrative burdens for colleges isn't it really, so are the department listening to this?

Julian Gravatt: I think the departments are a bit behind in terms of understanding all the changes that are going to come as a result of Brexit and the other funding changes, and the changes in the economy.

And so, we're going to need to work with them in the next couple of years to make sure that they shape the immigration system to meet the needs of the country, in terms of the future skills.

Steve Frampton: And of course, as a sector, we'll be working very hard with other departments to ensure we get the right amount of college funding to allow that to happen.

Emma Meredith: Absolutely.

Steve Frampton: So, thank you both very, very much indeed. The podcasts, I think there are three Julian, are there?

Julian Gravatt: Yeah there's three, there's one on travel, there's one on people and there's one on running a college.

Steve Frampton: Thank you very much. And Emma, what are your top tips, do you think, for people?

Emma Meredith: Again, keep calm, carry on, be prepared, and I think keep a watching eye on the information that AoC will put out, and the information that the government will put out through its Get Ready for Brexit website.

And then also, from our own website at AoC, if you just go onto Google and Google AoC and Brexit, you can access all of our updated Brexit information. So, keep having a look at that, but at the moment, nothing changes immediately, but in the longer term, start thinking about potential differences in the way you might be recruiting EU staff from the EU itself.

Nothing changes just now, and it won't change for EU nationals, who are already in the UK.

Steve Frampton: Thank you both very much indeed.

Emma Meredith: This podcast focused on people, and we've also got another two podcasts that you can download to listen to, one on travel and one on running the college. In addition, to our AoC webinar on preparing for Brexit, and our Brexit Readiness pack that is available on the AoC website.

If you have any queries, please contact us, Brexit@aoc.co.uk.