UK science must work with the US, but it won’t replace the EU

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Research in science is by its very definition global, and Europe is a leading continent for research excellence.

The Unesco Science Report from November 2015 showed that the European Union remains the world leader in terms of its global share of science researchers (22 per cent), and the US is well behind, in third place (17 per cent).

The question arises: after Brexit, how can we replace the EU contribution that currently funds our collaborations with the large European facilities such as CERN, the Europe-wide European

Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and the Institut Laue-Langevin?

Recent reports suggest that the UK and the US are in talks to extend their “special relationship” in science after the UK leaves the EU. However, even if we wanted to replace the EU collaborators (which would be foolish when they are world leaders in their field), it is impossible to simply move the work that goes on in the EU to the US.

None of us is asking to terminate effective partnerships that the US can take advantage of. However, if we’re currently working with the best, we don’t necessarily want to swap that for second best, just because US scientists want to take advantage of our political situation.

Universities UK compiled some statistics last year that showed that approximately 14 per cent of all research funding in the UK was from EU funding sources in 2014-15, and that was worth £836 million.

We still don’t know what’s going to replace that funding. Will any proposed agreement with the US provide funding for the UK that is equivalent to what we’re giving up? What impact will that have on our science, including development of new medicines? How will our patents be protected?

It’s not simply about replacing one set of partnerships with another set; rather, it’s about achieving the right partnerships that are necessary to undertake good research — and funding it.

Science can’t work with the construction of new borders and barriers to migration. We already have to manage the politics of persuading talented collaborators to come and work in the UK.

It’s admirable that the UK government is trying to make it easier for us to collaborate across the Atlantic. However, it will be interesting to see if the funding for research after Brexit is anywhere near the level we have received as a member of the EU.