

News story: Robin Walker: Securing the future of MRPQ

Good morning and thank you for your kind introduction.

Represented here today are people from a huge range of sectors – from health professionals to architects, to lawyers, vets and dentists.

It's great to have this opportunity to explain the government's approach to the negotiations and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the future partnership.

British services and medical professionals have a global reputation for quality.

And that global reputation has been made possible, in part, by the freedom you have had to work and practice outside of the UK and attract key talent from the EEA.

For many of you, your work takes you right across Europe, and the world – supported by a system that recognises your professional qualifications, whether you earned them here or elsewhere.

You will have seen your own businesses and professions grow and develop thanks to the ability to access professional expertise within the EU, and the ability to provide your own services in another Member State.

And I know the same can be said for businesses in the EU.

Making sure that you can continue to practice and work across Europe, after we leave the EU, will be an important aspect of the new partnership we want to agree.

Because as the Prime Minister has said, whilst we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe.

Our European neighbours will continue to be friends and allies, and our trading partners.

Brexit should not be about pulling up the drawbridge. It is about putting our relationship with the European Union on a new footing.

The approach we need to take is one that respects the result of the referendum – and reflects the many decades of cooperation between the UK and other European states. Very beautifully illustrated I thought Baroness by your point about cooperation since the war.

In the future, UK citizens will still want to work in other EU countries – just as EU citizens will want to do the same here.

And that's something I want to focus on a bit today in my comments.

I'm sure many of you are keen to hear more about the government's approach to the future partnership discussions.

But first, I would like to make a few points about the progress of negotiations so far.

In March, we agreed the terms of a time limited implementation period with the EU, that will start the day we leave the EU and end in December 2020.

During that implementation period though we will no longer be a Member we have agreed that British people will be able to travel and work in the European Union, and European Union citizens vice versa during this period.

And businesses will be able to carry on trading on the same terms they do now.

Importantly for people and professions represented in this room, we have also agreed that common rules will remain in place – this includes the EU's existing rules on recognising qualifications.

This means that, in practice, professionals will be able to move easily according to their needs between the UK and the EU, and that they will be able to have their professional qualifications recognised.

Just as they do now.

I've heard from many different stakeholders in both public and private sectors how important this is, to give certainty about the arrangements that will apply immediately after our exit.

And to make sure that where there may be changes in the future there should only be one set of changes at the end of an implementation period rather than multiple sets of changes.

We have also made rapid progress on the details of the Withdrawal Agreement.

We have reached agreement on much of the legal text and locked down full chapters on citizens' rights and the financial settlement.

Now, our aim is to finalise the rest of the Withdrawal Agreement by October, and develop the framework for our future partnership.

So, the key question is – what does this mean for you?

We talked about the importance to citizens and professionals who are already here and operating on the basis of their qualifications. Rightly the Prime Minister has put citizens' rights as the first priority for negotiations. And that includes rights relating to the recognition of professional qualifications.

And this is a commitment that we are delivering.

The deal on citizens' rights secured in the Withdrawal Agreement will give UK and EU nationals living in each other's jurisdictions much needed certainty. And we have agreed full legal text on this including on residence, pensions, healthcare and social security coordination.

As part of this, we have also agreed to continue recognising qualifications for residents and frontier workers if their qualifications have been recognised, or are in the process of being recognised, before the end of the implementation period. So right up until December 2020.

This will cover everything recognised under the MRPQ directive, as well as lawyers practising under host title and approved statutory auditors and toxic product handlers.

It means that EU professionals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU will have their rights preserved so that they can carry on living their lives broadly as they do now.

Now there were some issues that we would have liked to get covered in the Withdrawal Agreement but which the EU determined related to the future relationship, particularly on services and we will return to those issues as we focus on the future partnership.

Now, as we look towards the future, we are seeking a bold and ambitious agreement that goes further on services than any of its predecessors or precursors.

It is our intention that the future economic partnership includes further provisions for professions such as yours, to continue working and sharing your knowledge with partners in the EU.

As the Prime Minister herself has said, UK qualifications are already recognised across the EU, and vice versa. So it would make sense to continue doing so in the future.

Encouragingly, this is an objective that is shared by the EU and one that is reflected in their own guidelines for the future relationship, where they refer to "ambitious provisions" for MRPQ.

That is not surprising given the benefits that the current system are benefits to UK and EU professionals, public services, and businesses alike.

In fact, since 1997, the UK has recognised over 142,000 EU qualifications under the MRPQ Directive. And over 27,000 decisions to recognise UK qualifications have been taken in the EU and its Member States.

An ambitious agreement on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications will mean for example, UK architects can continue to design buildings in Paris, or Berlin.

That lawyers right across the EU27 can continue advising clients in the UK and that enormous international expertise and value of UK law is available to EU citizens and companies in their international dealings.

That Spanish nurses and doctors can continue to care for British patients in our hospitals and our NHS.

This next stage of negotiations will also include discussion of topics such as the ability of professionals to provide services on a fly-in fly-out basis.

We will be outlining our position for the future economic partnership in the forthcoming White Paper. This will offer detailed, precise and ambitious explanations of the UK's position on our future relationship with the EU and I would welcome your views from all the professional bodies around this table following its publication next week.

Because we want to make sure that the future system for continued mutual recognition works in practice – not just in principle – for both professionals and regulators.

Because this is in all of our interests.

And I know that you all have valuable networks and connections with business, regulators, professionals, and public services across Europe.

Your voices are important in this debate.

Just as we listen to British businesses and professional networks, we know the European Commission and its Member States are doing the same.

Existing EU arrangements with third countries – for example the EU's Free Trade Agreement with Canada – don't go far enough in providing the level of mutual recognition that we believe our professionals need.

So we hope that you will use your platforms to engage with your European networks to emphasise that an ambitious agreement, going beyond its precursors on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, is in everyone's best interest.

In this context I particularly welcome the open letter to the Prime Minister regarding the key asks of the professional and business services sector that was sent yesterday by the PBS Council. And that's something that closely reflects the discussions I have had with that council in terms of what the sector wants to see.

The feedback, engagement and support we are receiving from businesses professionals and regulators and all the bodies represented around this table, is invaluable.

Because it is vital that as we negotiate our exit and our new relationship with the European Union, we continue to work together, so that we can reflect your needs, and your interests, at the negotiating table.

And ultimately get the right deal for you – which I strongly believe will be the right deal for the country.

Thank you.