

Why jettison Erasmus?

The negative consequences for the UK of walking away

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There was certainly a sense of resigned relief across the UK that a ‘no deal’ Brexit was avoided at the last minute with the announcement of a Trade Deal by the Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Christmas Eve. A ‘no deal’ would have imposed tariffs and quotas on imports and exports that would have undoubtedly been crippling for many businesses. It would also have surely eroded the UK’s future relationship with the EU as the UK looks to re-position itself globally over the next decade. While academics and journalists waited to scrutinise the detail of the deal, one thing immediately apparent was that

the UK would no longer continue to participate in the Erasmus Plus scheme, the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. In 2019 [almost a million people across Europe, trained or volunteered abroad](#) in over 100,000 organisations ranging from universities to businesses.

From a UK perspective, since 1987, more than 200,000 UK students have benefitted from the scheme studying or working in EU countries. Make no mistake, the omission of Erasmus from the last-minute deal will have major consequences for the UK.

At the EU press conference on Christmas Eve, the EU's Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier passed the blame for this to the UK, stating that ['the British government decided not to participate in the Erasmus exchange programme.'](#) When pushed on this an hour later at the Prime-Minister's press conference, Boris Johnson stated that 'it was a tough decision' to leave the Erasmus scheme and justified it in economic terms, arguing that the ['UK exchequer lost out' and that the scheme was 'extremely expensive.'](#) This in spite of the fact that in January 2020 Johnson clearly stated at Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) that ['there is no threat to the Erasmus scheme!'](#)

At his press conference on Christmas Eve, the Prime Minister asserted that Erasmus would be replaced by the 'Turing Scheme' (named after Alan Turing the British Mathematician and Computer Scientist), which would give students the chance to travel to universities globally including in Europe. This was followed up after Christmas by [an announcement that the £100 Million scheme will offer funding for 35,000 students in Universities, colleges and schools](#) to go on placements and exchanges abroad as of September

2021. Beyond the obvious, logistical problem of trying to sort out new partnerships with global universities outside of Europe within such a tight timeframe, the UK's decision to jettison participation in Erasmus seems imprudent for a number of major reasons.

First and foremost, contrary to the Prime Minister's talk of a lack of value, not remaining part of the Erasmus scheme only serves to weaken further the UK's position as the country faces the economic challenges posed by withdrawing from the EU. It will worsen the shortage of UK linguists studying European languages, with negative effects for UK businesses and universities.

Data from the Confederation for British Industry's (CBI) Education and Annual Skill's report published in November 2018 concluded that 'the need for languages has been heightened by the UK's departure from the European Union' and that ['if there is a lack of wider provision of foreign languages for children, UK business will suffer and will be unable to seize global opportunities effectively.'](#) The report included a major survey of UK businesses, which revealed that it was still the

major European languages that were in demand – with French mentioned by 54% of respondents, German 51% and Spanish 50%. When compared with data compiled by the European Commission in 2019, which shows that only 32% of 15–30-year-olds in the UK stated they were able to read or write in more than one language, [the decision to abandon Erasmus seems even more short-sighted for the UK](#). With the same survey illustrating that the percentage of respondents was between 71% and 99% in all other EU countries, this decision will only serve to polarise these statistics further with a knock-on economic effect for UK businesses. The Westminster government has clearly overlooked the economic arguments in favour of Erasmus, ignoring data like that compiled by Universities UK International, [which estimates that leaving Erasmus+ would cost Britain as much as £243 million a year in terms of its overall economic value](#).

If the economic argument in favour of Erasmus is clear-cut, the cultural argument is equally as compelling. So many UK educators, lawyers, business leaders, civil servants and politicians have had their horizons broadened through this unique

experience of spending a year in a different European country. Erasmus has helped to break down national barriers and to build links and networks which is surely a good thing, particularly if you consider the UK's history of empire and its island status. Why take this opportunity away from the next generation in this country at a time when their future job prospects have been hit hard by the ongoing COVID pandemic? As the Green MP for Brighton Caroline Lucas pointed out this ['is an especially spiteful move, given that young people who are the main beneficiaries of the scheme voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU.'](#)

Contrary to what certain commentators have asserted, Erasmus has always been a great leveller when it comes to social mobility. Students from the UK wanting to study within Europe will not be eligible to the 420 Euros per month from the scheme currently offered. I know from nearly two decades of experience working in Languages and Politics departments in the South West of England what a lifeline this has been to many students. To put it simply they would not have been able to undertake a

year abroad as part of their degree without this funding!

Perhaps what is even more important than all the arguments posited above is that the government has overlooked what Erasmus offers to the UK in terms of its 'soft power' benefits. Currently [over 30,000 European students come to the UK every year through the Erasmus scheme](#) to learn English and to experience UK culture. How can closing off these opportunities to French, German, Spanish, Italian, Belgian and other EU nationals eager to sample the UK's unique culture be conceived as anything other than retrograde and insular? Does the Westminster government really want to deny these chances to all but the most affluent European students?

The Turing Scheme proposed by the government says it will target students from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus ticking the boxes in terms of Social Mobility, but in reality, its stated global reach feels more like a nostalgic return to the safe monolingual ground of the Anglosphere. Looking to send students on placements to countries such as the USA and Anglophone Canada rather than France and Spain

will strip away the linguistic dimension of the Year Abroad and will have consequences for UK universities, in particularly those still offering Modern Language degrees. Since its inception in 1987, Erasmus has developed into a major selling point for university modern language departments across the UK as they seek to enrol students for language programmes in an increasingly challenging recruitment environment. Not remaining part of the scheme will undoubtedly have a considerable impact on the state of language learning in UK universities with inevitable consequences for the number of students enrolling for language undergraduate programmes. In a recent report by the British Academy, Erasmus was described as providing ['a critical pathway for language degrees and the promotion of languages, in a context of continuing decline in the number of students studying languages at secondary school and consequently at university.'](#) Exiting the EU, and at the same time withdrawing from the Erasmus programme, is arguably another nail in the coffin in terms of the reinforcement of the UK (and more specifically England) as a nation of monolingualists!

The UK government's decision not to participate in the Erasmus scheme is short-sighted and will undoubtedly have negative economic, political, cultural and linguistic consequences for a country trying to reposition itself globally. On the plus side, it is great news for the students of Northern Ireland that the Irish government in Dublin has

committed to [subsidise the Erasmus Year for Northern Irish students at an expense of more than 2 Million Euros](#). You cannot put a price on what this offers in terms of 'soft power' influence. The Conservative government in Westminster could learn a lot from their Irish neighbours.

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