

Was Erasmus Altogether Too European?

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Abstract: Britain's exit from the European Union need not have meant quitting the very successful Erasmus+ scheme for student and staff exchange; but such was the enthusiasm for complete severance from European institutions following the 2016 referendum, among jubilant 'eurosceptic' Conservatives, that this was one more link that had to be broken. The Erasmus+ scheme is being replaced by the so-called Turing scheme; but in a number of ways, it is an inferior scheme, not least in that it is not truly reciprocal. What is more, it is 'global', and therefore more expensive, and more exclusive, than the scheme that it is replacing.

Keywords: Erasmus+, Turing scheme, 'Brexit', student testimonies, reciprocity.

On the 15th of January 2020, a Scottish National Party MP addressed the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in the House of Commons: he regretted that the government had decided against participating in the Erasmus scheme. He was 'heartbroken', he said. Johnson's reply was unequivocal:

"The right honourable gentleman is speaking out of the back of his neck. There is no threat to the Erasmus scheme. We will continue to participate in Erasmus. UK students will continue to be able to enjoy the benefits of exchanges with our European friends and partners, just as they will continue to benefit from the scheme."²

There was a resounding shout of "Hear! Hear!" from the Conservative benches, signalling hearty approval. Conservatism, by definition, is about leaving things that work as they are, so it was a bold Conservative, Margaret Thatcher, who attached her signature to the treaty that set up the single market with its guarantee of 'free movement'. This led to the UK's participation in Erasmus, in 1987.

It was said of the 'Brexit' Johnson government that it was the Treasury that balked at the costs involved in our continued participation in Erasmus+. It was also said that ministers, and perhaps voters in general, were under the impression that Erasmus privileged middle-class university students – that the programme gave an expensive licence to young people to have fun at taxpayers' expense. The government's expressed aim was to 'level up' UK society, not to subsidize the life-chances of the elite. Of course, it was also said that withdrawing from Erasmus was just another way in which the UK could regain its 'sovereignty', and to demonstrate that we were now a global nation.

Johnson was right to say that UK students 'enjoy the benefits' of the exchanges that the Erasmus programme has made possible. I have taught many Erasmus students at the University of Miskolc, Hungary, over the years, and all have mentioned three benefits of the programme, in particular:

1. The experience increased their self-confidence: they proved to themselves that they were capable of leaving home, travelling to, and living in, a foreign country;

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² UK Parliament, 15/1/2020: <https://www.parliament.uk/.../prime-ministers-questions-15-january-2020>

2. They made a circle of friends from very different cultures, with many of whom they have kept in touch,

3. It improved their spoken English; they discovered that the language that they had learnt at school had utility – it was the language that they had in common with their peers.

As their teacher, I was myself impressed by the way in which Turks and Spaniards, Germans and Poles – and, yes, even Hungarians, who are ordinarily rather shy about speaking in English, lest a teacher reprove them for a grammar mistake – were heard to be speaking in English to each other in the corridors, the cafés, and the canteen. The reinforcement of English as an effective *lingua franca* was, surely, an unintended consequence of those who drew up the Erasmus programme; for me, it was a happy consequence.

But it was the first two of the above effects that I sought to draw students out about. Orsolya, a Romanian said, simply: ‘It helped me to grow’. A French girl, Marine, wrote:

My Erasmus experience was one of the best experiences of my life. It was the first time I left my home, my family and my country for such a long time. I discovered a new home where I had to manage to live by myself. I have now that curiosity and need to go deeper to understand things. At work I am not scared to make speeches in front of hundreds of people. It changed my personality, my way of seeing things, my life. I am much more open-minded than I was before.

Eva is a Hungarian who spent a semester in Finland. She was a country girl who embarked on an undergraduate course at Miskolc at the age of 28 – she was testing herself. In Finland, she said, ‘I was assured that I could cope at a foreign university, in a foreign country.’ Iwona, a Pole, was another self-confessed introvert: ‘I’ve become so much more self-confident’, she reported, ‘as an introvert I learned that stepping out of my comfort zone is not scary after all.’ She went on:

Young people have little chance of work experience, so the fact that they were brave enough to study abroad, in a foreign language, can be proof that they can quickly adapt in a new work environment and are open to new challenges.

For many, the experience of living and studying abroad in one country was the first step on the path to living and working in another. For Sabina, like Orsolya, her time in Miskolc was the first time that she had been abroad alone. ‘It gave me a taste for living abroad – I’d always wanted to do that.’ It enabled her not only to improve her English, but (as a Romanian native speaker, unlike Orsolya) her Hungarian, too. She is now living in Germany, and learning German. Irodion, a Greek, admitted that the experience, ‘affected me on a deep level: it made me determined to pursue my career outside Greece.’ He lived for almost five years in Bratislava. ‘Being in Miskolc, he said, ‘was the key factor to my working in Slovakia.’ Asked whether, if she had the chance, she would return to Miskolc, Magda, a Pole, adapted the famous saying of Heraclitus: ‘We shouldn’t step into the same river twice. If I had the opportunity, I’d choose another country’. Magda has lived and worked in Barcelona for the past ten years or so.

The real bonus of the programme is the insight it gives into other cultures: Iratxe, a Spaniard in Miskolc (who later lived and worked in Italy and Argentina), spoke of the ‘fruit cocktail’ of nationalities by whom she was suddenly surrounded in provincial Hungary: she noted a difference in attitude between students from once ‘Iron Curtain’ countries and those from Western Europe:

‘We were bolder, noisier, and the Germans were even a little arrogant. This instilled a certain knowing caution in dealing with different peoples. Living in close proximity with a veiled Turkish girl was a revelation.’

Katarzyna, a Pole, also learned that ‘Turkish students behave differently, and you can talk about it.’ It was thanks, indirectly, to Erasmus, that at least two of my respondents met their husbands-to-be: Esra, a Turk, and the above-mentioned Spaniard, Iratxe. This happy chance must certainly rank as another unintended consequence of the scheme.

If the original Erasmus scheme had been about providing for the exchange of university students, across borders within the EU, the same could not be said of Erasmus+, launched in January 2014, which brought together seven existing programmes, including Comett and Lingua. According to the latest available programme report, published in December 2020³, between 2014 and 2020, four million people benefited from participation in the scheme. To be sure, half of these were 'students', but around 650,000 were explicitly vocational education and training students, and 500,000 were young people on youth exchange schemes; 125,000 schools, vocational education, and training institutions, were involved in so-called 'strategic partnerships'.

A vocational college in Miskolc, specializing in catering and hospitality, regularly sends apprentices to partner institutions in Ireland and Germany. Marcell, an apprentice chef learned as much about Hungarians as he did about the Irish:

'My Irish boss was peaceful and helpful – this type of boss is very rare in Hungary. The Irish have a very calm mentality. They like to live, not just living life, like us. I knocked accidentally into a drunk in a bar, and he said "Sorry". That wouldn't happen in Hungary.'

Péter, an apprentice pastry-cook, and Kamilla, an apprentice waitress, agreed: 'The Irish people are very friendly and open-minded. They're all so nice and welcoming to foreign people. It's easy to make friends at work, in a shop, in the pub, even in the street.' And Bianka, an apprentice pastry chef owned up to becoming 'an open person; I can see the "new" in everything.'

Having spent a semester in Miskolc, María, a Spaniard, was placed in a small enterprise in Cork. She was disconcerted by the 'terrible weather', and the cost of living, and: 'They left many decisions to me'; but, she added, 'I realized this was the beginning of my adulthood – I was the owner of my decisions, establishing my own goals.' Natalia, a Ukrainian, had a background in commerce, but was placed in a Polish nursery: the experience opened up for her the option of a completely new profession. The associated self-development seminars steeled her to approach a stranger to ask for change on her way to the airport – something, she says, that she would have been too shy to do before.

Özge, a Turk in Romania, observed that, since students are all on social media, they already have much in common. She continued:

'Since I was raised in the Islamic culture, I was a little alien to the Christian culture. I met with Christian feasts, like Easter. To be honest, in these times, religious rituals are not important for young people. They only enjoy these ornaments and family dinners. This is much the same for a person raised in the Islamic, as in the Christian culture.'

This cultural assimilation – if Özge is right – may be yet one more unintended consequence of the Erasmus+ programme. In any event, that Scottish National Party MP had reason to be 'heartbroken' at the thought that the UK might abandon it.

In a UK Government press release⁴, on (of all days) 26 December 2020, and less than a year after Johnson's ringing declaration in the House of Commons, Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, announced the launch of the 'Turing Scheme' to replace Erasmus+. Williamson wrote:

We have designed a truly international scheme which is focused on our priorities, delivers real value for money, and forms an important part of our promise to level up the United Kingdom.

The initial budget for the scheme is just over £100 million, somewhat less than the sum of Erasmus grants to the UK of £130 million, in 2019⁵ It is envisaged that this will provide funding for 35,000 students in universities, colleges and schools. Bids for funding opened in March 2021, and the first recipients of grants embarked on their courses in September.

³ European Commission, Brussels, (undated) <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/-en>

⁴ UK Government, London, 12/03/2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-turing-scheme-to->

⁵ Waters, Johanna L., "Erasmus what the turning scheme must be?" *The Conversation*, London 5/1/2021: <https://theconversation.com/erasmus-what-the-turing-scheme-must-do-to-ensure-uk-students-dont-miss...>

What are the ‘priorities’ to which Williamson referred? In a later bulletin⁶, the government announced ‘four main objectives’:

- **Global Britain** (to enhance existing partnerships and encourage the forging of new relationships across the world)
- **Levelling up** (to widen participation, support social mobility across the UK and give equal access to all regardless of background)
- **Developing Key Skills** (to give unique career-building opportunities in hard and soft skills looked for by employers)
- **Value for UK Taxpayers** (to optimise social value in terms of costs, benefits, and risks).

Professor Dame Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool observed that there were ‘shortcomings’ to the Erasmus scheme: ‘Unlike Erasmus,’ she said, ‘students will not be tied to an exchange lasting a full academic year or semester’. Instead, ‘we can offer short, flexible opportunities to students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic disciplines than was possible under Erasmus.’⁷

In line with the first of the above objectives, Michelle Donelan, the universities minister, said the scheme would ‘open up the globe to our young people’⁸. Of the countries to which students might go, there are five ‘priority countries’: India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Nigeria. These particular countries appear to be targeted with a view to increasing the number of fee-paying international students applying to study at UK universities. It is clear that it is not exactly an ‘exchange’ that is planned: in spite of the claim by a government spokesperson that ‘UK universities will build reciprocal relationships’⁹ with global partners, the costs of incoming students are to be covered by their own governments and institutions.

This is, perhaps, the single biggest criticism that has been levelled at the scheme: that it is unlikely to be ‘reciprocal’; there is no money in the budget to pay for international students coming to the UK. Will ‘global’ governments and institutions be minded to enter into partnerships that are one-sided? It must be asked, too, whether consideration has been given to the administrative burden that there will be, on UK universities, colleges, and schools (and perhaps especially schools), of setting up agreements with ‘global’ partners, at a time, in particular, when those institutions are only now getting back on their feet after more than a year of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Making arrangements with institutions in Vietnam and Indonesia is likely to be very different financially and otherwise from doing so with institutions in Toulouse and Vienna – to say nothing of the cost of flights (to the taxpayer and the climate) to the other side of the world.

Furthermore, as Johanna L. Walters, Professor of Human Geography at University College, London, points out¹⁰:

The Turing Scheme is intended to encourage mobility globally, but no mention has been made of how tuition fees – which vary considerably, internationally, will be covered. Under Erasmus, students paid no tuition fees to their overseas university, and received a grant for living expenses.

The UK government would seem to have excluded the costs of supporting incoming students purely to meet the above fourth of the ‘main priorities’: value for UK taxpayers. In doing so, it has ignored the fiscal benefits incoming students bring. Chatham House is a respected independent

⁶ UK Parliament (undated): <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9141/CBP-9141.pdf>

⁷ Hazell, Will, “Turning scheme. Erasmus students exchange placements”. *The i*, London, 06/02/2021: <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/turing-scheme-erasmus-student-exchange-placements-860600>

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Hazell, Will, London: *The i*, 6/02/2021: <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/turing-scheme-erasmus-student...>

¹⁰ Water, Johanna L., *op. cit.*

policy institute: Ben Horton and Max Fras point out¹¹ that students coming to the UK are a lucrative customer base for higher education, for services of all kinds, including the hospitality sector. They report that ‘research by Universities UK suggests that UK made a net profit of £243 million per annum from participation in Erasmus.’ Whilst one might ask how such a figure can have been arrived at, there can be no question that, as a popular destination for European students (who do not come to the UK for its weather) the UK benefits greatly in terms of what the above authors call ‘cultural diplomacy and soft power’¹². Moreover, to give the lie to the supposition that Erasmus is all about benefiting metropolitan, middle-class students, just one third of Erasmus+ funding is earmarked for higher education¹³; the rest covers vocational training opportunities, apprenticeships, adult education, volunteering and youth-work schemes – and there is protected funding for young people with special needs and disabilities¹⁴.

It is a sad fact that ‘Brexit’ has emphasized differences among the four nations of the UK. Independence is on the agenda of the ruling party in Scotland; and it is talked about even in Wales – more modestly, though, the further and higher education ministers of both nations, Richard Lochhead of Scotland, and Kirsty Williams of Wales, have explored ways in which the two nations might continue to participate in Erasmus+. Both nations, they claim, have been more active in the programme than England. They note that the £100+ million budget for Turing is only for one year in the first instance and that it is ‘puny in comparison’ with the seven-year Erasmus+ budget, at €26.2 billion¹⁵.

Hywel Ceri Jones was a Welsh pioneer of the Erasmus scheme. As EU Commission Director for Education, Training and Youth, in 1987, he is particularly exercised by the omission from the Turing Scheme of opportunities for initial and further vocational education and training abroad, including opportunities for the disabled. He points out, also, that withdrawal from Erasmus+ means the loss of interconnection between this programme and Horizon 2020, the EU’s flagship programme for research and innovation¹⁶. In the Welsh Senedd, on 6th February, First Minister Mark Drakeford echoed Jones’s complaint, calling the exclusion of Wales’s young people from Erasmus+ ‘shameful’.

Asked in a press conference how probable it is that Scotland and Wales might re-enter the Erasmus+ programme, Sonya Gospodinova for the European Commission answered: ‘in general, based on the Erasmus regulations, only countries can join the programme.’¹⁷ The irony for the ‘United’ Kingdom is that students at Northern Ireland universities can continue to participate in Erasmus+ under an arrangement with the Irish government, in order that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic (and, therefore, the EU) be not a ‘hard border’¹⁸. German Green MEP Terry Reitse asked Ursula van der Leyen, in a letter co-signed by 150 colleagues, whether special consideration might be given to Scottish and Welsh participation. Van der Leyen’s response

¹¹ Horton, Ben & Fras, Max, “Turning scheme holds lessons for global Britain” *The Royal Institution of International Affairs*, London, 13/01/2021: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/01/turing-scheme-erasmus-holds-lessons-global-britain>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ German Academic Exchange Service, Brussels (undated): <https://www.daad.brussels.eu/en/eu-higher-education-policy/erasmus/...>

¹⁴ European Commission, Brussels (undated): <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/individuals/students/students-and-staff-with-mental-or-health-rel...>

¹⁵ Scottish Government, Edinburgh, 26/01/2021 <https://www.gov.scot/news/erasmus-exchange-programmes/>

¹⁶ Jones, Hywel Ceri, Nation Cymru, Wales, 27/01/2021: <https://nation.cymru/opinion/five-reasons-why-the-uk-governments-opportunities-decision-to-exit-erasmus-was-a...>

¹⁷ Nation Cymru, Wales, 05/02/2021: <https://nation.cymru/news/european-commission-appear-to-shoot-down-Welsh-and-scottish-hopes...>

¹⁸ BBC, London, 26/12/2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55455532/>

was uncompromising: ‘The only possibility for the UK is to associate as a whole, or not at all.’¹⁹ In a briefing to members of the European Movement in the UK on 27 January 2021, former Attorney-General Dominic Grieve explained our withdrawal from Erasmus as based on ‘a mixture of money and pique.’ He urged the movement to make re-attachment to the scheme its very first campaign. Alan Turing was very much an Englishman (with an Irish connection on his mother’s side); could it be that Erasmus, a Dutchman, was altogether too European? And is this nationalism what Grieve meant by the ‘pique’?

If Erasmus+ has had unintended consequences that have been undeniably benign, the UK government’s Turing Scheme would appear to have unintended consequences – even before it has been tested – of more significance than the ‘bumps in the road’ that ministers foresaw ‘Brexit’ would bring.

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¹⁹ Morgan, Sam, Nation Cymru, Wales, 16/02/21: <https://nation.cymru/news/eu/-commission-dashes-welsh-and-scottish-erasmus-hopes-for-now/> (see also: Banks, Martin & Johnson, Brian, London: The Parliament Magazine, 17/02/2021: <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/ursula-van-der-leyen>)