

Erasmus+ - Professor Charlie Jeffery, University of Edinburgh
Presentation at the Joint Hearing on The Situation and Rights of EU Citizens in the UK,
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I was asked to present on Erasmus+ the long-standing student mobility programme of the EU. I do so amid an irony: Just as we consider the possibility of the UK's departure from the Erasmus+ programme, this year we celebrate its 30th anniversary of its founding – and its founder was one of the pioneering UK civil servants in Brussels, Hywel Ceri Jones, who joined the Commission on the UK's entry to the then EEC in 1973. Hywel was the Commission's First Director of Education and Training. He introduced a pilot programme in 1976 which evolved over the next decade or so to be launched formally as Erasmus in 1987. So I want to start by paying tribute to Hywel's vision, tenacity and impact.

What Hywel Ceri Jones recognised is that what we do in universities - the discovery, the learning and dissemination of knowledge – is driven on more quickly and effectively with the movement and interaction of people and ideas from different places. Our very strong view at the University of Edinburgh – which I can say with confidence is held across UK universities and indeed across the EU and beyond – is that a programme like Erasmus+ which fosters that movement and interaction is an asset not just for universities and students but for our societies more generally; it is a common good. Putting that at risk, as the Brexit referendum has done, is therefore, in our equally strong view, a problem not just for universities and students, but for our societies more generally. Fortunately – and I will come back to this later – this is a widely shared view.

So what is the scale of the issue? A few quick facts and figures ... At the EU level an astonishing 5.5 million students will have been supported by Erasmus by the end of the current programme period in 2020. In the UK we see around 16,000 students annually supported by Erasmus+ to study or work elsewhere, and another 27,000 are supported to come to the UK from elsewhere in the EU. And at my university, the University of Edinburgh, we have seen 12,000 of our students supported by Erasmus to study and work outside the UK over last 30 years, and rather more come to the University. We are currently the #1 university in the UK for receiving Erasmus+ students and have over 250 Erasmus exchange agreements. We have recently seen the very welcome extension of Erasmus+ beyond the EU via the International Credit Mobility initiative. For us this supports 99 exchange agreements and we have secured 20% of the total UK funding for this initiative. In sum Erasmus+ is for us easily our most important international exchange and mobility programme – and I am sure there would be very few universities anywhere in the EU that would have a different view.

What impact does all this have? Universities UK, the UK's national body of university leaders reported last year on an Erasmus impact survey. It found that international mobility boosts academic outcomes and enhances career prospects: fewer Erasmus students are unemployed than non-Erasmus students, and Erasmus students from almost all socio-economic backgrounds reported higher salaries on average than non-Erasmus students. And our latest

cohort of Erasmus students at the University of Edinburgh reported the following in our own survey:

- 71% said they gained knowledge and skills they would not otherwise have gained
- 89% reported that they now had a better appreciation of other cultures
- 90% believe that their employment prospects have been enhanced
- 88% now want to work in an international context

If we imagine benefits like this scaled up across the 5.5 million students who will have been supported by Erasmus by 2020, then the impact of the programme is manifest. That impact is made manifest in student testimony. Let me quote four:

1. "it was a fantastic year and I would encourage anyone to do the same. The grant was very beneficial and really makes the opportunity accessible to all" [the additional funding Erasmus provides for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is especially important]
2. "going abroad with Erasmus was the best thing I have ever done! It gave me the opportunity to live independently, fall in love with a new country, travel all around Europe and beyond, meet best friends from all over the world and further my education tremendously"
3. "it has certainly improved my employability as I have proven experience of living abroad. The fact that I can now speak good French, Spanish and Italian is a huge draw for employers as British people generally have shocking foreign language skills"
4. "please don't let Brexit ruin this amazing opportunity for future young people in the UK"

I share the view put so crisply by the last student. For my university and for universities across the UK the ambition is to find a way to maintain full UK participation in Erasmus+ and to establish this as a key item in the Brexit negotiations. There are some bases for thinking that the UK Government could be persuaded to take this view. In her 12 point speech setting out priorities for Brexit the UK Prime Minister Theresa May said at different points:

- "I want us to be a magnet for international talent"
- "There may be some specific European programmes in which we might want to participate. If so it is reasonable that we should make an appropriate contribution"
- "So we will also welcome agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners on major science, technology and research initiatives"

The direct focus here is on EU research funding programmes. But Erasmus+ could easily be added to the list. The objection of course could be this is simply 'cherry picking'. I disagree. 'Cherry-picking' suggests the pursuit of a one-sided advantage. But the clear evidence – as suggested above – is that there is mutual advantage from exchange. Universities across Europe would favour the UK remaining in Erasmus+ so that their students can gain benefit – not least because of the desirability of building English language skills. There is mutual interest when, like Erasmus, we are talking about a common good.

But if continued participation in Erasmus were not possible, what would be the alternatives? One would be a Swiss-style 'shadow' system to replace Erasmus+ in the UK, run and funded on a UK-wide basis (or possibly a Scottish basis?). This could reproduce some of the benefits we see in Erasmus, but there would be a loss of the powerful 'brand' Erasmus has built up. And we need to remember there will be many other calls on public funding for things lost on departure from the EU. It is doubtful that the same levels of funding we see awarded through Erasmus+ would be available. So, definitely a second-best.

Third best – in the absence of a replacement national system – would be a free-for-all, with each University acting individually to support international mobility for its students. This could happen. In my university we have unilaterally guaranteed mobility funding for those students entering the University in 2018 on degree programmes with a compulsory year abroad whose time abroad would currently be supported by Erasmus+. Is this a hint at what the future might hold? If so student mobility opportunities would be very variable across universities in the UK – both for outgoing and incoming students. Some, perhaps many universities would not be able to fund a significant programme. And without certainty of funding some kinds of student – those from disadvantaged backgrounds without the personal or family means to fill any funding gaps, whether outgoing students from the UK, or incoming students from outside the UK, – would lose out.

The conclusion is clear: Let's continue Erasmus+, with some solution which enables full UK participation, after Brexit.