

The Erasmus student programme is about to become another casualty of Brexit

*Here we go again. The EU is accusing the UK of cherry-picking in the Brexit negotiations. And the UK does not deny it. This time the issue is the Erasmus programme, writes **Anne Corbett** (LSE).*

Michel Barnier, the EU chief Brexit negotiator, told the European Parliament earlier this week that he has closed the chapter on Erasmus because there is no agreement. The British side, for its part, claims participation in the next programme running from 2021-2027 is still subject to negotiations. The UK will '[consider options for participation in elements](#) of Erasmus+ on a time-limited basis, provided the terms are in the UK's interests'.

Viewed from Whitehall there is a justification for setting conditions. The UK appears to be buying time for a publicly-funded mobility plan for outward bound students, which it can then boast as a victory for national sovereignty while counting on the ignorance of what else Erasmus+ does that the education world might appreciate. The chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, has already set aside funds in his [latest spending review](#), published by the Treasury. The promise is accompanied by the time-honoured formula 'further details will be set out in due course'.

Viewed from the EU end, Brussels has logic on its side in asking for the UK to sign up for the whole seven-year Erasmus programme and pay an association fee based on a calculation of GDP. Erasmus is not just a cherry-pickable student mobility programme. It is a big and complex education support programme. In 2019 alone it helped almost a million people to study, train or volunteer abroad, involved around 111,000 organisations (including universities and think-tanks as well as private businesses, and around 25,000 projects at a cost of €3.37 bn.) Reviews testify to the [programme's success](#).



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Erasmus is structured in terms of three key actions. The main one is support for learning mobility of students and staff. It started with higher education but now extends to vocational education and training, staff in school and adult education and the youth sector. It also supports the [Erasmus Joint Master Degrees](#), which require students to work for masters' degrees in universities in three different countries.

A second strand is based on cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practice. This includes the support for the new [European Universities Initiative](#) and the development of such higher education tools for an interconnected world as mutual recognition, as well as a host of initiatives for skills development in further education, and the much in vogue civil engagement opportunities for volunteers. A third strand supports policy reform with a focus on youth, the biggest victims of COVID-19.

However for the Brexit lobby, in the ascendant in the UK government, the full Erasmus programme has elements they detest. The [Jean Monnet Activities](#) is one. Designed to promote 'excellent teaching and research in the field of European Studies', Brexiteers class it as propaganda. They also dislike the [European Solidarity Corps](#), a portal for volunteering and trainee organisations offering opportunities for engagement in civic and environmental projects. Down the policy plug hole will also go support for the Joint Masters degree programme of Erasmus Mundus, the knowledge alliances and the capacity building on the European neighbourhood which maybe to a Brexit ear sounds like foreign aid.

Bête Noire – The Jean Monnet Activities aim at:

- promoting excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies worldwide
- fostering the dialogue between the academic world and the society, including local and state-level policy-makers, civil servants, civil society actors, representatives of the different levels of education and of the media
- generating knowledge and insights that can support EU policy-making and strengthen the role of the EU in a globalised world

UK reactions

The UK higher education sector and business interests are [strongly opposed to the UK quitting](#) the Erasmus programme. The reactions run the gamut of 'it would blow a hole in the UK economy' through 'many employers deeply value the kind of international experience the Erasmus scheme helps foster' to regret for the loss of opportunity that Erasmus has provided for students in some of the most deprived parts of the country, 'to level up opportunity, experience and aspiration as well as ensuring that we are viewed as an open, tolerant and welcoming country to the rest of the world'.

The firm pledge to continue funding outward UK student mobility – whatever happens in the UK-EU negotiations – has been [greeted with relief](#). That is a measure of how far university expectations have fallen over the past four years. Universities still do not know the outcome concerning the associated EU programme Horizon, strongly backed by the UK research community. But they are showing how grateful they are for small mercies.

It is hard to overestimate how far Brexiteers have made the running on how to handle the educational initiatives that the Commission has worked on for over 30 years and which have been widely appreciated across the education sector. The clue to their success is the Treaty of Maastricht, 1992. It was then that, despite it being clear that the EU could not infringe national control of education, the EU was empowered to develop educational initiatives tied to quality. And it was then that a very small group of Conservative MPs took Maastricht to start their campaign for Brexit, with new evidence of their efficacy day by day.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.