

May's 'Global Britain': the decline and fall of European Studies

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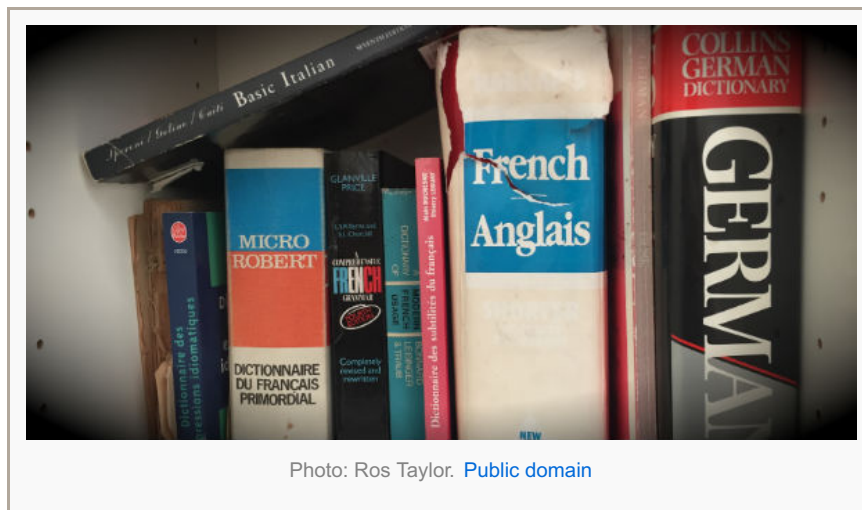
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*Brexit comes after a decades-long decline in European Studies in British universities. The subject boomed as the UK sought to join the EEC, but has steadily declined and no longer merits a sub-panel in the Research Excellence Framework. **Helen Drake** asks whether Brexit will lead to a recovery in the field – or whether 'Brexit studies' will prove to be as short-lived as the formal exit process itself.*



The UK's European Studies Association ([UACES](#)), which I chair, is – cruellest of ironies – 50 years old this year. Since 2013, I have been a recipient of a European Commission-funded Jean Monnet Chair of European integration. These are difficult times for many academics in British universities, and for many of us whose careers are closely entwined with the EU, the line between academic and activist is becoming ever harder to respect.

Education was a [decisive factor](#) in the referendum vote: a lower level of education [correlated](#) with a higher propensity to vote Leave. Educational attainment is in general linked to higher levels of identification with and support for 'Europe', however 'Europe' (and 'identity') are defined; and specific knowledge and understanding of 'Europe', such as that acquired during an Erasmus+ exchange period abroad, can amplify that effect. Arguably, a UK population more routinely exposed to knowledge about and experience of 'Europe' in an advanced educational setting might have produced a different referendum result. Or perhaps not: Kristine Mitchell [finds](#), by way of example, that British students are the sole exception to the "(...) 'Erasmus effect on European identity'", in that they tend to remain immune to the "clear relationship between Erasmus participation and enhanced European identity" that she found typical of Erasmus exchange students of other nationalities.



Such findings fit into a broader picture, whereby the study of Europe – its nation states, its languages, its history, its project for integration – has drastically dwindled in UK universities since the UK joined the EEC in 1973. The UK's failure to join the EEC on two occasions in the 1960s had itself spurred what [Alan Milward called](#) the 'European Studies movement' in UK universities. It was also the catalyst for the establishment in 1967 of the 'University Group for European Integration Studies'. That Group was the forerunner of the 50-year-old UACES.

My own institution, Loughborough University, has been no exception to the story of the [slow decline of European Studies](#). This new subject discipline emerged at Loughborough in the 1968/9 academic year when, in the School of Human and Environmental Studies, a Bachelor of Science was offered in the Institutions and Languages of Modern

Europe. The new degree, according to the prospectus, responded to a perceived need:

'... for a course which combines languages with a knowledge of the Social Sciences, particularly Economics and Politics. (...) It is vocational in character, though not exclusively so, in that the course aims to produce graduates with a linguistic capability in two European languages, and a knowledge of Economics and the Political and Economic Institutions of major Common Market countries'.

This programme rapidly developed into a LPEME (Languages, Politics and Economics of Modern Europe) degree, and the European Studies department itself was created in 1972/73 as a 'multi-disciplinary' department. 1975/76 saw LPEME replaced by Modern European Studies (MES), and students now no longer had to study two foreign languages *and* politics *and* economics, although all had to study one foreign language. Students who *did* choose a Politics component took a compulsory course in 'the Politics of European Integration' in their final year, and could also choose a course in 'Public Law and Institutions of the EEC'.

Over the following two decades, these courses disappeared and by 2010 the Modern European Studies degree had itself been discontinued, 'European Studies' had been dropped from the Department's name, and students were no longer offered any degree programmes that combined foreign languages and social sciences as rigorously as in 1968. The Department retained its research expertise in the study of European integration until well into the 2000s, attracting European Commission Jean Monnet funding to support teaching and research on the EU up to 2017 – although by then, 'European Studies' in its founding department at Loughborough amounted to only a handful of specific courses (Introduction to the European Union; the UK and the EU), none of which were compulsory for any student. In 2015, the University Library also wound up its European Documentation Centre, previously a regional repository of EEC/EU official documentation.

The story of the rise and fall of European Studies at Loughborough University is representative of a situation where in 2016, European Studies has all but disappeared from UK university curricula, departments have closed, and the subject area no longer merited its own 'sub-panel' in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise that evaluates and ranks, for funding purposes, current research in the UK's universities.

Moreover, from the origins of ES in foreign language study, Michael Smith noted already in 2008 that there had been 'a shift from language-based studies to studies centred on the social sciences and humanities where the medium of research and publication is overwhelmingly English'. Kenneth Dyson, Chair of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) European Studies panel had already **warned** that in his view, the 'absence of urgent and large scale action to support the sector the research base in European Studies will wither rapidly, and Britain will lack the resources of foreign language and cultural knowledge and skills necessary to make a success of Britain's role in Europe'.

Alan Milward too, writing in 1975, had foreseen that '[t]he ultimate justification [for ES] must be an intellectual one (...) and that

'[i]n the last resort, therefore, the future development of European Studies does depend on relating the movement towards a closer association of the European nations with the wider aspects of European civilisation, not in the form of platitudes, but in the form of critical scholarship. The study of the evolution of the Community alone is not enough to do this, although without it there is no basis to build on' (Milward, my emphasis).

Such is the backdrop to the current political debate around the exposure of universities to the risks and opportunities of Brexit. The impact is likely to be as differential as it will be elsewhere, and individual institutions will pursue their

own strategies in response, with opportunities for competitive advantage inevitably in mind. Brexit as research object is attracting UK government funding from bodies like the [ESRC](#); furthermore, the 'sordid compromises of Brussels', as Milward depicted the European integration process back in 1975, are bound, in the case of Brexit, to breathe some life back into the study of the EU27 and the EU itself. In these respects, then, Brexit may be to European Studies in 2017 what rejection and then accession were over 40 years ago. But by definition, this phase of the 'European Studies movement' – if it does materialise – is likely to be far shorter-lived.

The UK's universities were singled out in the Prime Minister's Brexit [objectives](#) as key vectors of the 'Global Britain' that she envisions emerging from the Brexit years, and the [economic value of higher education to the UK economy](#) is likely to ensure the sector remains a priority – among so many others. What is equally certain is that the cultural potential of the UK's universities to transform how new generations of British citizens think (and feel) about Europe will remain untapped, even now. Going global could be the conduit to a genuine internationalisation of the UK's campuses and curricula, where '[ethical and intellectual considerations](#)' are just as prized as the 'profit motive'. Truly global UK universities would surely counter the weakness that, it is argued, comes with the UK's reliance on the English language – which, as Simon Kuper [puts it](#), makes us decipherable by others ('like living in a glass house') who remain 'opaque' to us.

Kuper also makes the point in relation to Brexit that those in the UK in positions of influence who *do* command foreign language expertise, such as the UK's diplomats, 'are distrusted by Westminster and the tabloids'. Why? '[P]recisely because these people understand European thinking'. Maybe he is wrong, and maybe Brexit will trigger a new wave of academic activity precisely to 'understand European thinking'. But I cannot share that optimistic conclusion.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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