

# Wake up, students – the freedoms you take for granted are under threat

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*Students have come to take freedom of movement – for study, for work and to travel – for granted, says **Beth Button**. Some don't realise the threat that leaving the EU poses to that freedom. Universities have focused on economic productivity, research and funding when they talk about a Brexit, but to students the EU means a great deal more. We mustn't take it for granted.*



Research recently conducted by the [Higher Educational Policy Institute](#) (HEPI) found that 77% of students surveyed would vote to remain in the EU if the vote were to take place tomorrow.

Yet when you dig down into the data, many of those students said they hadn't actually given the referendum much thought. For me, this demonstrated one of the biggest challenges facing us in the months leading up to the referendum – how to ensure students are educated and engaged.

I believe that students have a vital role to play in this referendum. Not only because it's clear that an exit from the EU would have a massive impact on UK higher and further education, but because students should be active citizens in society, and shape the debate that influences this referendum.

But if we want students to contribute to this debate, we have to reframe the narrative that surrounds it. Throughout the debate about the implications of a Brexit on higher education, discussions have been framed around economic productivity, research capacity and funding within the UK. And the public debate has so far failed to adequately address the direct repercussions for students, current and future.



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The ability to study abroad has been proven to have long term benefits for those individuals who take advantage of it – in their future employment, and in developing an understanding and awareness of other cultures and societies.

However, the UK currently has the second lowest level of outward student mobility in Europe. For me, this is characteristic of an already insular society, where the decline in modern foreign languages has led to further reluctance to study abroad. Whilst the Erasmus scheme has been successful in increasing the mobility of generations of students, an exit from the EU would risk limiting such opportunities, and further reduce the mobility of an already static student population. In addition, UK students currently benefit from the markedly cheaper or free tuition fee levels across most of Europe, but withdrawing from the EU would increase the cost of study in Europe, ensuring it is only accessible to well off students.

Free movement holds benefits not just for the individual but for society and the economy – outward student mobility is essential in preparing students for an expanding global workplace. With existing collaborations with European and global manufacturing, some of the knowledge economy fostered in our education system is preparing our students for jobs that simply don't exist in the UK. Free movement is essential in organisations where job placements require regular rotation between different countries – and many graduate schemes rely on their graduates being mobile within Europe.

## **Fewer students from the EU**

A reduction in outward student mobility would be mirrored by a decrease in the number of EU students coming to study in the UK. There are currently 125,000 students in the UK higher education system from Europe, bringing with them knowledge, skills and cultural diversity. Whilst comparably UK fees remain higher than the rest of the EU, EU students benefit from only being charged the rates of home student, as opposed to the higher fees charged international students. An exit from the EU would result in students from the rest of the EU consequently being charged international students' fees, of upwards of £13,000 per year. As attractive as that may sound to some universities in the UK, over-reliance on international student fees as a source of income is already unsustainable, and given the stark contrast in tuition cost to the rest of Europe, it's likely that if they were charged international student fees the recruitment of EU students would fall drastically.

Already an increasingly hostile country to come for study due to aggressive immigration controls, the tightening of visa regulations that would result from non EU status would probably discourage EU students further. UK students wishing to study in Europe would find similar financial and physical barriers, making affordable study outside of the UK more difficult.

## **We fear isolation**

Like many aspects of the debate, when we examine the benefits of student mobility on the individual and society, it can be easy to fixate on the economic. But it's the social and cultural benefits that are harder to measure but provide some of the most powerful rewards.

Freedom of movement has given us diverse communities and campuses. But students aren't just concerned about the impact of a Brexit on universities, but on the broader insularity that would ensue. My generation is connected to young people around the world more than ever before, with globalised networks, campaigning collectively on global issues. We don't fear this diverse, international world. We fear isolation.

Nowhere is this more evident than in my work with the [European Students' Union](#) (ESU), where student representatives from across Europe meet regularly to influence education policy formation at a European and global level, and strengthen the rights of students. Able to directly shape the work of ESU, NUS UK's involvement in ESU ensures we have a voice in European level decisions. Able to access EU funding for collaborative projects with other countries, we work in partnership to better the European education system, to cooperate in social justice and change projects.

The EU was set up in postwar Europe to foster peace and solidarity, and ESU is a vital vehicle for furthering that. It demonstrates that as a generation, we want to work together for a peaceful world.

Though many students interviewed in the HEPI survey hadn't considered why they'd vote yet, that reflects a generation who have grown up within the EU, and when asked, probably haven't considered why they have such faith in the institution. Students and young people have benefitted immensely, whether from educational opportunities, or direct EU investment in employment funds such as Jobs Growth Wales. But even at a very basic level, students benefit every year from EU membership simply from cheap and easy travel across the continent. They may have taken the EU for granted until now, but I can guarantee that the prospect of higher air fares would worry them.

The debate around our membership of the EU has to begin talking to young people and students about the issues they care about – their future work opportunities, the continued protection of their rights, the cultural and social opportunities abroad. But my generation must now also sit up and listen, before the decision is made for them.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.*

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