

Cut off: what leaving the EU would mean for university culture

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*European Studies may be dying out in the UK, but British universities are culturally embedded in the EU, says **Helen Drake**. Severing links with Europe that have been built up over decades would have a profound effect on the university landscape.*



It is September 2017, and the UK left the EU exactly one year ago. At an English university, a Professor of European Studies is contemplating the new academic year.

A tranche of her funding has been frozen by the European Commission since September 2016, and the related undergraduate courses and events have been cancelled. She finds herself having to teach new and different subjects at short notice. The students who signed up to the original courses were told to choose again.

The university has experienced an unprecedented fall in overseas student recruitment in the 2016-17 academic year, and has mothballed half its postgraduate programmes for the coming year. Students who had already embarked on their courses have had to switch campus. They are mutinous, and staff are worried about their contracts.

Many incoming ERASMUS students have not turned up, and outgoing students have had their places withdrawn. These students must be accommodated at short notice onto courses at home. Their dreams of adventures abroad have come to nothing, and they are out of pocket.



Erasmus, who studied, lectured and lived in Paris, Leuven, Cambridge and Basel. Picture: [Wellcome Library](#) via a [Creative Commons licence](#)

The professor's application for study leave in the following semester, dependent on external funding from two European partner institutions, has been postponed until more certain rules of procedure can be established. Her publishing schedule is compromised. Her intended submission to the next REF may be in tatters.

The UK's leading academic association for contemporary European Studies, [UACES](#), has had to cancel its 50th anniversary annual conference in Poland. Many of the 500 would-be delegates have withdrawn their papers due to lack of funding from their institutions, and academics in the host university have come under pressure from their Eurosceptic managers to limit the financial damage by withdrawing from the deal. The association's future is in

doubt.

Of course, leaving the EU would not sever UK universities' ties with the EU overnight. Much university business would continue as usual for some time, and perhaps none of the previous scenarios would occur – or at least not all at once, or so dramatically.

The UK's market share of international students could even grow if the UK left the EU, if universities found themselves moved to lower their fees in mitigation of the new climate of uncertainty, and/or if immigration policy towards non-EU students was loosened. But if the UK became a bargain basement of international higher education, the reputational damage would be impossible to remedy. And in any case, it is unlikely that the government would (or could) regard leaving the EU as a licence to relax controls on student immigration.

The perennial [imbalance](#) between the inflow and the outflow of ERASMUS students could even improve, if fewer students decide to come to the UK from other EU member state university institutions. The UK is already only the fourth most popular destination, after Spain, France and Germany, for Erasmus students. And why would they come? Internationalisation sits high up on universities' agendas, alongside employability, student engagement and the student experience. But it is already hard to internationalise the university curriculum in a meaningful way. That would involve the intellectual and social integration of a diverse student body into the learning process, in the hope of creating graduates who can and wish to be global active citizens. The new cultural environment would surely drive these prospects back down the list of institutional priorities.

The study of the EU may thrive; after all, the subject discipline began its life in the late 1960s *before* the UK joined the then EEC. A note on p.290 of Vol. VI, No. 3 of the *Journal of Common Market Studies* records that at a meeting held at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London in 1967,

a number of University teachers concerned with the study of European integration in the United Kingdom set up a body to facilitate the exchange of information on courses and research, to discuss the future developments of these studies in British universities, to undertake joint activities, and to intensify relations with continental universities. This body is to be known as the University Group for European Integration Studies.

This gathering grew into today's UACES. The association is still thriving as a supportive home for scholars of European integration, but European Studies as a subject discipline has already all but died out at degree level in the UK's universities. Over half of UACES' membership is now based in other EU member states.

Outside the EU, the UK's universities will be a strange cultural environment for academics and students alike, whatever passports we hold. For many UK academics, the loss of the privileges and prestige of EU citizenship will inject yet more uncertainty into careers already marked by a constant stream of new challenges. For many UK-national academics, a Brexit will feel personal, very personal.

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

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