

Keeping freedom of movement is the top Brexit priority for young people



*What are young people's priorities in the Brexit negotiations? In focus groups held around the country, **Shakuntala Banaji** and **Sam Mejias (LSE)** found a majority want to keep the right to freedom of movement and maintain trade links with Europe. They also complained about the lack of political education in British schools, which they felt left adults ill-prepared to vote.*

Young people in our focus groups were asked the question 'What are the most important issues to you that you want UK policymakers to focus on during the Brexit negotiations with the EU?' The table below highlights the main priorities articulated in order of frequency.

Table 1: Priorities expressed by young people for Brexit negotiations

Priority
Freedom of movement
EU membership benefits
Provide mechanisms for young people's voices to be heard
Improve education
Economic growth
EU and/or global relationships
No Brexit
Involve youth in negotiations
Single market access
Northern Ireland
EU and/or global trade
EU-UK rights to remain
Guarantee human rights in the UK
Strong and clear negotiation
Improve NHS
Promote an inclusive and multicultural society
Devolve power to regions
Engage young people
Make immigration fairer
Oppose inequality
Youth policy

When asked what their most important priorities for the Brexit negotiations were, almost half of all individual focus group participants in over half of the 40 focus groups stated their preference for keeping essential aspects of their EU membership intact. This included either keeping freedom of movement, EU membership benefits, residency rights for EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU, and in several cases outright calling for Brexit to be reversed. As with their concerns about the impact of Brexit, freedom of movement was mentioned frequently, and often in the context of the impact that its absence would have on economic realities and on jobs; however, some young people were convinced that capital would continue to move flexibly after Brexit and hoped that the same would be true of human beings:

[It's] frustrating that we prioritise the freedom of movement of capital over the freedom of movement of people. *Participant aged 15-17, Swansea*



Photo: [Antoine K](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

Yeah, I [prioritise] free movement of people ... at least free movement of workers, so that we can still have people coming in to fill nursing jobs, and we can go there to find jobs. If you look at what the EU was founded on, the principle that

labour should be allowed to move freely, the idea that if we still have this immigration, if we still have people coming in, if you look at the statistics of nurses, at the moment, the amount of people coming from the EU to apply for nursing positions has dropped. And the NHS is already in horrific crisis, and we're having these EU citizens who are good at what they do, they specialise in what they do, flooding out of the country. I think the single market is really important but also there are other aspects of the economy which are kind of influenced by the talent we have coming in from the continent. *Male, 22, Cardiff*

EU membership benefits, particularly studying in Europe and taking advantage of European education programmes and reduced tuition fees for EU members, were also mentioned many times as priorities:

I'd be quite upset if it was lost because my mum went on the Erasmus plus programme [in the 1980's]. Probably Erasmus maintained, that's the first [priority]. *Male, 19, London*

The one thing I'd ask for is the flexibility to go to university in Europe. Education is the most important thing to us. *Participant aged 15-17, Swansea*

Keeping EU-UK residency rights for citizens currently living outside their country was also frequently discussed, as was the maintenance of EU funding schemes:

Status for EU nationals... and also sources of EU funding like EU structural funds for deprived communities and persons, that's something they've not confirmed when we leave where all this money is going to come from or if these groups and projects are just going to suddenly have no funding left and not be able to continue operating. *Female, 23, Edinburgh*

After EU membership benefits, young people in our focus groups were most likely to prioritise their own involvement and agency during the Brexit negotiations. Specifically, many young people asked for the establishment of mechanisms for their voices to be heard, or to be involved in the negotiations somehow. Some young people also expressed a desire for the government to engage them more generally, or to create specific youth policies to support their voices and preferences.

Leading up to the negotiations they need to create a shadow youth negotiation panel. So they'll have a team of negotiators that will go to Europe, right? I think there needs to be a shadow of that but made up of young people, a panel from all across the UK, from all across socioeconomic backgrounds and ages and up to about 24 maybe 25 ... but they work in tangent with them. And so, whatever they come up, they will be scrutinised. It's almost like a scrutiny panel, but made up of young people. That's what I would suggest. *Male, 18-26, London*

In the focus group sessions, young people spoke of the importance of economic growth to their own life chance and to overall prosperity in the UK. Some young people specifically asked that single market access be maintained, while others spoke of the importance of keeping EU and global relationships stable via strong trade deals. Again, these priorities were often framed both in terms of the disproportionate impact that economic stagnation could have on young people, and also on building a fairer and more equitable future for people in the UK:

The most important thing is to have economic certainty. That whatever the negotiations happen they won't cause either a meltdown in the UK economy or the global economy. Because for young people, we're going to bear these consequences for the rest of our lives. *Male, 18-26, London*

We're a part of Europe, we're a part of something else, there's that coalition between us that we have this reciprocity in trade and work, and I want to see this at the heart of wherever the negotiations end up. I don't want that to go, to change to 'Little England'. People can just say I can go and work there. People from Ireland can trade with them in Europe and it's not going to cost any extra. We make like 200 billion a year in exports. That's so much money for us in the UK. That's what I want to see protected, as well as everyone's freedom of movement. *Female, 19-22, Huddersfield*

Findings from the YouGov survey showed overwhelming support for improving political and media education in schools. 67% of YouGov survey respondents between the ages of 18-24 felt that it was important to improve political and media education in schools. However, agreement about the importance of improving political and media education in schools diminished across generations, with 51% of 25-49 year olds, 49% of 50-64 year olds, and 47% of respondents aged 65 and above finding it important.

In many of the focus groups, young people lamented the lack of information available to them about the EU during the referendum campaign, and they also expressed scepticism about the information they were provided by politicians and the media – the disputed claim that £350m a week would be redirected to the NHS if citizens voted for Brexit being the most often cited example. They also overwhelmingly spoke of the absence of sufficient and critical political education in schools, and education about the EU. Many felt that improving education about both politics and the EU was essential to equipping young people with the tools to participate in politics.

Well one of the bigger things is, you need a political education. I think specifically, if this is gonna happen, we need a specific education around the EU...[and] politics in general but it's pivotal because the young people don't know how it affects them. *Female, 24, Nottingham*

With regard to political education, the male dominated nature of the political sphere and school classrooms dealing with politics was also referenced as a cause for concern:

Gender [is another possible barrier to learning about politics]. Because when I was doing A-levels, whilst we were a female majority class, the two males that there were in the group made it clear that politics was not a place for women apparently ... And it was only because we all basically said to them you have no right to tell us this and you are outnumbered here. So, we respect your viewpoint, but we are not leaving because you tell us to. *Female, 15-21, England*

In over a quarter of all focus groups, youth participants spoke passionately about the importance of the UK remaining an open and inclusive member of the global community of nations and building strong EU and global relationships. They also discussed the importance of arriving at a peaceful and feasible solution to the issue of Northern Ireland's border with the Republic of Ireland. Finally, they insisted that post-Brexit, the UK enact policies that are inclusive and multicultural, and that prioritised a socially just approach to migration and cultural exchange.

The stuff that existed for young people should stay there because, like young people nowadays, my generation obviously had the benefits of the EU. The next generation is just not gonna have any benefits of the EU, it's just gonna, say if Erasmus goes, they're gonna have to just study in the UK and that's it. *Male, 20, London*

On the one hand, the idea that ignorance of other cultures causes greater intolerance was repeated by many of our participants. The idea that travel and encounter discourage closed and racist views, was also nuanced by those who argued that more needs to be done to make travel economically viable for economically insecure young people. On the other hand, amongst the participants who stated that they supported leaving the EU, some stated their desire for maintaining good relationships with their global neighbours, although this was first framed in terms of needing independence from Europe in order to do so:

I hope with Brexit we don't become an insular nation. Well the whole point was that we get independent from Europe and we can spread out to across the world. I would like to see us become more global post-Brexit, rather than less global. *Male, 17, East Renfrewshire*

Others felt that globalisation required the UK to be a stronger member of the global community and that leaving the EU was a step in the wrong direction.

Finally, some respondents saw the UK's role as needing to be one where tolerance and openness to multiculturalism needed to be prioritised post-Brexit. This was accompanied by comments in which young people specifically demanded that the UK government guarantee human rights in the UK that reflected current rights protections afforded by EU membership. And the issue of social justice and fairness continued to appear throughout the focus group sessions, in terms of prioritising improvement of the NHS, a fair immigration policy, and the opposing of inequality in the UK. Some young people felt that fairness in the UK should be extended to all who have legal status in the UK, regardless of citizenship status.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is an edited extract from [UK Youth Priorities and Perspectives for Brexit Negotiations](#).

Dr Shakuntala Banaji is Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, with a research specialism in young people, media and civic participation

Dr Sam Mejias is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, specialising in the fields of human rights and citizenship education, international educational development, youth media, and media for development.