

The Future of the EU-UK Partnership on Higher Education and Student Mobility

PROCEEDINGS BRIEF of Policy Dialogue, 30 January 2018

On 30 January 2018, CEPS organised a Lunchtime Policy Dialogue dealing with “The Future of the EU-UK Partnership on Higher Education and Student Mobility”. The event represented the second of a series of three Lunchtime Policy Dialogues co-organised by CEPS and the British Council to reflect on the future of a long-term EU-UK partnership in three specific areas: science and research, higher education and student mobility, and external aid. The panel discussion was chaired by Sergio Carrera (Senior Research Fellow at CEPS) and featured a presentation by Naquita Lewis, Erasmus+ Programme Lead-Higher Education of the British Council. The panel was completed by João Bacelar, Executive Manager of the European University Foundation; Isabell Majewsky Anderson, Head of Go Abroad Office at the University of Edinburgh; and João Pinto, President, International Board of the Erasmus Student Network.

The spirit of this series of policy dialogues is to explore options and address priority areas from a depoliticised, expertise- and research-based angle.

The departure of the UK from the EU could have a profound impact on the higher education landscape in Europe and have

detrimental effects on student mobility. Almost one year after article 50 was triggered, the future modalities and practical arrangements for EU-UK co-operation on higher education co-operation and student mobility remain uncertain.

The United Kingdom has an important role in the EU in the context of student mobility. It is one of the most popular destinations, while at the same time sending a large portion of students to other EU member states. Likewise, with its prestigious universities the UK functions as a key attraction point for foreign students –both from Europe and from the rest of the world.

The presentations and the discussions at the Lunchtime Policy Dialogue covered three main angles:

- *First*, the importance of the United Kingdom for the Erasmus+ program;
- *Second*, potential obstacles or barriers that might emerge from UK withdrawal from the EU, hampering the ambition of the Erasmus program; and
- *Third*, the risks of a break in co-operation on higher education and student mobility and its implications.

A poll among the participants of the event unveiled that most of them had benefited from the Erasmus program, highlighting the

popularity and suggesting a potential impact that student mobility can have with regard to active citizenship.

1. The importance of the United Kingdom in the Erasmus+ program

The Erasmus+ program is a true European success story, bringing opportunities not only to students in higher education but also to trainees, university staff, and participants of youth and sports co-operation. As one panellist stressed ‘it is one of the most visible achievements of the EU’.

The program celebrated its 30th anniversary last year and the UK is one of its founding fathers. In 1987, around 1,000 UK students were sent to co-operating countries. Today about 40,000 UK students, trainees, youth, volunteers, apprentices, staff and youth workers benefit of the Erasmus+ program each year.

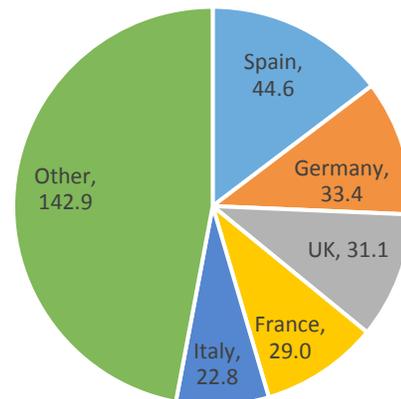
Of the 300,000 EU students participating in 2016/17 Erasmus+¹, around 6% came from the UK – the 6th largest group among the participating countries.

Historically the UK has always had a prominent role in Erasmus. Of the nearly 5 million students that have participated in exchange programmes to this day, an estimated 300,000 have come from the UK.

However, this is only one side of coin, as the Policy Dialogue clearly highlighted. The United Kingdom is in fact the third most popular destination for Erasmus students (see Figure 1). It received over 10% of outgoing students during the past years.

¹ And the previous programmes, since the first students’ exchange programme in 1987, the Erasmus programme.

Figure 1: Top receiving countries, 2015/16, students in thousands



Source: [Statistical Annex](#), Annual Erasmus Report 2016

As one panellist rightly pointed out, the UK actually receives twice as many students as it sends abroad.

This is not perhaps surprising given the absence of a language barrier and, as previously mentioned, the excellent reputation of British universities in the global rankings. This popularity is also reflected in the fact that of the budgeted €14.7bn for the Erasmus+ period 2014-2020, around €1bn is scheduled to be allotted to the UK. This year (2018) the UK will receive €77.4mn for mobility grants. Potential future losses would have a profound impact.

Evidently, there is a lot at risk on both sides of the channel.

2. The potential obstacles to future students’ mobility

With the impending departure of the UK from the EU, it is not certain how and to what extent the UK will continue to be part of the Erasmus+ framework.

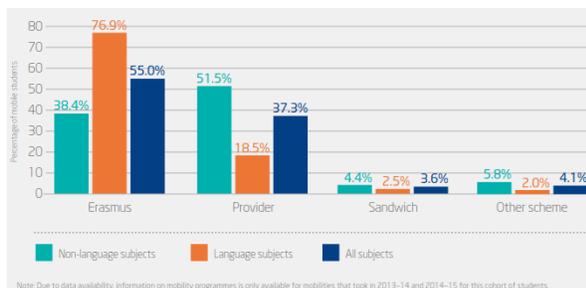
The specific obstacles mobile students will face in the future, either going or coming from the UK, depend on the deal struck between the EU and UK.

No deal scenario

If the UK were to become a mere partner country of the Erasmus+ program, the UK would be able to participate in specific actions under the Erasmus+ program but would be subject to some additional criteria or conditions. This is likely to drastically reduce the participation of the UK. In the call for 2015/16 only 8% of all Erasmus students (some 30,000 students) came from partner countries, altogether.

One panellist assured the audience that UK universities are ready to amplify their bilateral agreements to avoid such a scenario. This could mitigate the fall in Erasmus+ funding, but as shown in Figure 2, the share of non-Erasmus programs contributing to student exchanges is currently still quite modest in the UK.

Figure 2: UK Student mobility by type of program, 2014/15



Source: [Universities UK International, 2017](#)

Nevertheless, bilateral university agreements are the most promising route to ensure a smooth transition into the future EU-UK relationship. As one can see in Figure 2 by the non-language subject exchanges, there is ample room for improvement on bilateral arrangements between universities. **Continued co-operation scenario**

It has to be noted that besides EU member states, there are five non-EU countries participating in the Erasmus+ program as full

members, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey. This avenue could be an option for the UK. However, as in the case of Switzerland, this would most likely require the continued adherence to the principle of free movement of persons, which is contrary to one of the key promises of Brexit. From the UK's point of view, a potential pitfall of such an arrangement is that it would no longer have the decision-making power on the Erasmus+ program, as it possesses now.

Even if the UK would be able to continue participating in the program in full, the Policy Dialogue gave several examples of how student mobility may nevertheless become more difficult.

Firstly, tuition fees in the UK tend to be high. If the fees applied to EU students shifted towards those applied to third-country nationals, this could pose another future barrier to EU student mobility.

Secondly, once the UK has departed from the EU, some of the rights EU nationals enjoy while residing in another member state may no longer apply. If UK students in the EU and EU students in the UK are treated as 'migrant students' instead of 'mobile students', it could have profound consequences in terms of health care insurance, social security coordination, access to allowances and other rights. In general, the administrative burden on mobile students and university staff will rise and potentially deter students from engaging in exchanges between the EU and the UK.

Last but not least, the speakers emphasised not to underestimate the implications of the current environment of uncertainty and its repercussions on student mobility. The sooner a transparent and firm solution is found, the better. Particularly in the transition period and towards the end of the

multi-annual financial framework 2014-2020, uncertainties will mount if this issue is not resolved in advance.

A common call for legal certainty on the future framework for co-operation on higher education and student mobility came from all panellists and the voices from the audience.

3. What is at stake for the EU-UK partnership?

All interventions in the debate made it abundantly clear that it is in the interest of both the UK and the EU to maintain successful co-operation in higher education via the Erasmus+ program. The benefit to participating students is undisputed, however the wider implications for the economy and the process of European integration are not always fully acknowledged.

Firstly, international work experience is highly valued by companies, as it indicates adaptability, inter-cultural awareness and language skills. Thus, student mobility contributes to employability and the resilience of the labour market.

Moreover, it cannot be stressed enough that the student exchanges have a strong bearing on the European project. The exchanges foster better understanding of cultural differences and enable that generation to bridge gaps. Mutual understanding is key for deeper European integration and co-operation between countries.

Consequently, for a successful future collaborative relationship between the EU and the UK, Erasmus+ can be an important tool.

Finally, Erasmus contributes to equality in access to economic opportunity. Students from disadvantaged families are less likely to engage in student exchanges and they make

up a small portion of the students choosing a program abroad. Likewise, the system actively promotes the participation of e.g. students with disability in mobility activities.

Erasmus is an important tool to provide the opportunity to these students to reap the same benefits as other students. If the UK is no longer participating in the Erasmus+ program, it would have a sizable impact on equal access to opportunities in the higher education sector.

Call for action!

Despite the almost universal agreement that the Erasmus+ program is a win-win situation for both the UK and the EU, the panellists expressed concern that the issue could become a bargaining chip in the negotiations.

This should be avoided at all costs. As the decision in the end will be an apolitical one, universities, students, companies and other stakeholders who believe in the benefits of Erasmus+ need to become more vocal in their advocacy for a continued co-operation on the student mobility programs post Brexit. All panellists and participants spoke unanimously about safeguarding the opportunities for students we have built up over the past decades – despite and even because of the departure of the UK.