

A We're pleased to welcome John Russell to our programme about Erasmus students in Britain. John, you're the current UK Erasmus scheme director. Britain faces exclusion from Erasmus, one of the glowing successes of the European Union. This university study programme has benefited tens of thousands of British students and many more from the EU visiting Britain. What's in store for the scheme in the wake of Brexit?

B Under the Erasmus scheme, British students can study at European universities for up to a year and European students can do likewise in the UK. Now we're facing a sad moment of uncertainty after thirty years of this enrichment of so many lives. The potential end of British participation in the scheme would be a devastating tragedy, according to those who founded and administer it.

A What would be the consequences of Britain's possible exclusion from Erasmus?

B Brexit poses a challenge to universities. For instance, some one thousand European students had applied for an Erasmus place to study at the Welsh university of Aberystwyth, but within a month after the Brexit vote, over one hundred of those European students had withdrawn their applications.

A How many students are on the Erasmus programme this year? And what about future applicants?

B There are one hundred and twenty thousand students from EU countries at UK universities, and over twenty-seven thousand of these have come through Erasmus with grants paid by the EU. Those who are in the scheme shouldn't be affected, but in the long term, it's an unknown situation. The situation after 2017 is totally uncertain and we have no alternative but to wait.

A The Erasmus programme, named after the Renaissance humanist philosopher, was launched by the European Commission in 1987.

B Yes, and since then more than two million young people have benefited from the EU-funded grants to study across twenty-seven countries. In Britain, interest has accelerated. In 2007 we had seven thousand five hundred applications to study elsewhere in Europe. By 2013 that had risen to fifteen thousand. And UK universities have been a powerful magnet because of the English language and the excellent reputation of their teaching.

A Ironically, Erasmus has its genesis in the UK. Its founding father was Dr Hywel Ceri Jones who had worked at Sussex University. The Sussex European Studies Department inspired the European pilot Erasmus scheme in 1976. The idea was that the internationalisation of study had to be open to all disciplines, not just languages.

B Exactly, so the natural sciences, the social sciences and the arts were all brought into the Erasmus scheme. Dr Ceri Jones has said he feels bereaved by Brexit. If it leads to the exclusion of the UK from Erasmus and the end of freedom of movement, this would be a tragedy of staggering proportions for universities throughout the country. It would undermine the structured internationalisation of British academic institutions, which is what Erasmus is all about. Erasmus would still continue to flourish in continental Europe, of course.

A Erasmus has opened young people's minds and broadened their horizons, leading to changed and enriched lives, and lifelong relationships. Ninety-eight per cent of students reported having hugely benefited from their time studying under the Erasmus scheme.

B If we consider the options open to negotiating a way to keep Britain in the scheme, it has been pointed out that Norway is a participant, but the country has accepted freedom of movement as part of its relationship with the EU. Otherwise Britain could initiate its own scheme, like Switzerland, which has voted to limit freedom of movement.

A But the Swiss scheme costs a lot of money, which raises the issue that only better-off families can afford to take part in it.

B Yes. The great thing about Erasmus is that it's made a whole range of European opportunities available to every student, whatever their family's means. Britain is a European country and Erasmus has become part of the rich cultural relations that we must keep in Europe. I very much hope that the UK can negotiate a deal that keeps us in full membership of the programme.

Outline

In the wake of Brexit, Britain faces exclusion from the Erasmus programme, one of the glowing successes of the European Union. The university study programme has benefited tens of thousands of British students and many more from the EU visiting Britain, opening young people's minds and broadening their horizons, leading to changed and enriched lives, and lifelong relationships. The Erasmus scheme, which has its genesis in the UK, embodies the idea that the internationalisation of study has to be open to all disciplines, not just languages. If Brexit leads to the exclusion of the UK from Erasmus, this would be a tragedy for universities throughout the country, for the structured internationalisation of British academic institutions, which is what Erasmus is all about.

Questions

1. For you, what is the most important aspect of the internationalisation of higher education institutions?
2. Which country and university would you choose to study in under the Erasmus programme?
3. If the UK is excluded from the Erasmus scheme, who stand to lose most, the inhabitants of the UK or other Europeans?
4. Is the word 'internationalisation' just another buzz word, without any definite meaning?