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Erasmus and the Turing Scheme – a metaphor for Brexit?

Professor Paul James Cardwell takes a look at the UK government's decision to withdraw from the EU's Erasmus programme and replace it with its own 'global' scheme



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The relief that accompanied the announcement of a Brexit 'deal' between the EU and the UK on Christmas Eve was tempered by the news that the UK would no longer participate in Erasmus+. Instead, the UK government announced that it was creating a scheme named after the scientist Alan Turing to replace Erasmus with a 'global' scheme for 2021. The decision to pull out of Erasmus resembles much of the Brexit process itself. First, the promises: Boris Johnson assured the House of Commons in January 2020 that the UK's participation was 'safe'. Despite the risk of a 'no deal' end to the transition, the popularity of Erasmus was assumed to be one of the aspects that would be protected by a deal. Second, the rapid change in that position, with little notice or consultation. The announcement, on 24 December, led to a flurry of trying to work out what it means. The announcement that a new scheme was being developed gave the impression of careful planning - but few had heard very much beyond vague plans to encourage more students to study 'globally'. Third, Erasmus shifted front and centre in the UK's Brexit cultural war.

The pro-EU side decried the decision as both short-sighted and indicative of the UK's desire to cut all links with the EU. The anti-EU side retorted that Erasmus was used by only a small fraction of the student or working population, and that this outrage represented a middle-class obsession from those who refuse to see any benefit or opportunities in Brexit. These are over-simplified positions, but only just. The Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, criticised proponents for being too nostalgic for a Europe-focused scheme because 'it is easier to imagine what you know, than to visualise the benefits of what is being brought in'. Forth, the government scrambled to provide justifications for its decision. High costs and the unwillingness of the European Commission to allow the UK to 'cherry pick' participation were cited. The replacement Turing Scheme, with a budget of £100m, would provide funding for 35,000 outgoing (but not incoming) students and better value to the taxpayer. Numerous experts questioned how this figure was arrived at, but details are not yet available - even though

it is supposed to be sending its first students in a few months. Fifth, the justifications quickly shifted to the perceived 'failings' of Erasmus. True, the UK has had lower outgoing participation rates than other large Member States, but the numbers have been rising. As the most popular destination for Erasmus, the UK benefited from incoming students. These benefits were not just economic,

since European students left with a (mostly) positive image of the UK and its societies, and the excellence of the higher education system. Soft power is difficult to put a price on, especially over the long

term, as previous participants who are now in the European Parliament can attest. But, we are told, Erasmus did not help less well-off students, who will be the focus of the Turing Scheme - but again with no details or reliance on evidence. Sixth, the new scheme represents 'Global Britain' and the new found confidence that a post-Brexit UK allows young people to, in the words of Iain Duncan Smith MP, 'be out there buccaneering, trading, dominating the world again'. Apart from ignoring the global dimension

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of Erasmus, the idea that Erasmus prevented students or Universities engaging with exchanges globally is ludicrous. The Turing Scheme will ‘open up the world’ to UK students - but assumes the world wants it. Seventh, the ‘Global Britain’ discourse ignores many of the stark realities familiar to anyone involved in organising exchanges. A scheme that only funds outgoing students, with a harsh and costly visa system for incoming students, is hardly going to help facilitate cooperation with developing countries. The Universities Minister claims that disadvantaged

UK students will, under Turing, study at the US Ivy League instead of poorly performing EU universities, by using a ranking system that favours the US/UK University model. No thought is given to such basic practical questions as to who pays the high fees involved at US institutions, nor the myriad challenges involved in setting up and running exchanges. Again, the assumption is that the rest of the world will fall in line with what Global Britain wants. Eighth, Global Britain can be contrasted with an increasingly dis-United Kingdom. The Irish gov-

ernment announced that students in Northern Ireland can still participate in Erasmus via a workaround solution. The Scottish government has expressed its desire to continue to participate, but is hampered by its lack of legal ability to conclude international agreements in its own right. Any support for study abroad schemes is welcome by education professionals. If the Turing Scheme was an addition to Erasmus,

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then we would be jumping for joy. Instead, universities have uncertainty while working out what the new scheme means and how to bid for funds. The answers by the government to urgent

questions in the House of Lords were not illuminating. Erasmus+ has built up over a 30-year period and relies on extensive contacts, familiarity, common standards and understandings. Replacing it in a matter of months is rash. In this, we find many familiar aspects of the Brexit process: grand promises about the opportunities afforded by leaving the EU, but without any of the detail. ★

CV

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