
Students' perspectives on Brexit

Students' perspectives on Brexit and its implications for the Erasmus Programme

Since its foundation in 1987, over 200,000 British students have studied or worked in Europe under the Erasmus exchange programme.

The United Kingdom has also proven to be one of the most popular destinations for Erasmus students, receiving 31,727 students and trainees in 2016/17. Yet faced with the impending prospect of Brexit, the certainty of this programme has become a matter of confusion and ambiguity for the student population.



Valeria, a Ukrainian student of English literature at Charles University, will be going on Erasmus to the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom this coming September, and says that the process (and what Brexit will potentially mean for Erasmus exchanges) is shrouded in confusion, saying she “has no idea what is going to happen”.

According to the British Department of Education, the Erasmus programme should remain in place until 2020 in both the case of a deal or no-deal exit. But Valeria explains that even despite assurances, Brexit still feels like a “black hole for everybody”. There are worries, she says, funding will run dry in the future.

Despite the uncertainty, Valeria was determined to select a British university as her preferred Erasmus destination, in her view a guaranteed high standard of education and language possibilities.

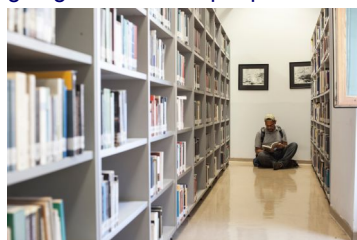
“I am studying English so I think it's really important to apply to English-speaking countries. It just makes sense. I am also really interested in the type of educational system they have in the UK and how it differs from other European education systems, I hear a lot (about it) and want to experience it for myself”.

Another incentive for Valeria was the potential career prospects from the experience, “I also think I will get more employment opportunities in the UK or US if I will have already studied in the UK”.

For Alice and Dan, two British students currently on Erasmus at Charles University, Brexit represents a threat to a popular scheme hosting a wide range of benefits. Having currently spent over six months on Erasmus in Prague, what the program has given them is an exposure to new experiences and people and has supported this process through financial means.

“It's one thing to live in a different city in your own country, but it's another to live in a different city in a different country where everything is different: the language, the culture even stuff like customs” Dan says, “I just think it's a great opportunity and everyone should just go”.

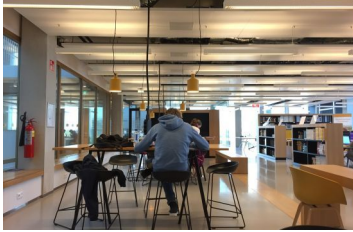
Alice agrees: “It's definitely given me the confidence that I could live abroad, because you obviously are moving country but it's an easier process, like the Czech language course offered to us, and you are put into situations where you're going to meet new people. So I think it's like a stepping stone”.



While the EU has ensured current Erasmus exchanges will not be affected by Brexit, the prospect of the move may have an impact on the program and students' decisions in relation to it. “I haven't spoken to anyone directly in that situation (selecting Erasmus destinations), but how could it not put people off?”

“I think it will push people outside of Europe” says Dan, “I think if I was applying now there would be way more anxiety which itself puts people off doing it anyway. Like, will I get funding? But with us there was no questioning what was going to happen”.

For Alice, the experience itself is still worth it even in the potential future absence of financial support within the Erasmus program. “I would say I would do it without the grant, the grant is really good but at the end of the day I think it would be doable [even] without it”.



From a broader perspective, Brexit raises numerous concerns for students, such as accessibility to Masters programmes: “In terms of masters I’d like to go abroad to Europe to do one, but I think it just wouldn’t be possible” says Alice, although she is confident that “the universities are doing their best in this situation. Sussex, my university for example set up a Brexit part of their webpage to help”.

As Brexit looms, it is impossible to escape the feeling of being in uncharted territory: if the British government delivers a hard or soft Brexit is still an open question, as are the possible eventual negative effects on a programme that has proven to be pivotal in the lives of hundreds of thousands of students.

Universities themselves are struggling with the question although they reassure students that for the time being at least that no negative impact will be felt.

About the author: Molly Fergus is an Erasmus program student writing for iForum

Article edited by: Jan Velinger

Photo on main page: Shutterstock.