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## The UK is poorer without Erasmus – it's time to rejoin the European exchange programme

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The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Erasmus+ scheme – a reciprocal exchange process that let UK students study at European universities, and European students come to the UK – is again under the spotlight.

Campaigns for the UK's re-entry to the scheme are ongoing. But diplomat Nick Leake told a committee meeting in Brussels that the terms for the UK to remain part of Erasmus+ were too expensive, and that Brits' poor language skills caused an imbalance between the numbers of UK students travelling abroad and EU students coming to the UK.

My research focuses on language and intercultural education. The British are not inherently bad at learning languages, but there has been a decline in international language learning among young people. However, this should not be a pretext to justify the withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programme.

Meanwhile, the post-Brexit replacement for Erasmus+, the Turing scheme, has fallen short in several key aspects.

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***Read more: The Turing scheme was supposed to help more disadvantaged UK students study abroad – but they may still be losing out***

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Unlike Erasmus+, which organises student exchanges across European countries with streamlined administrative processes and established partnerships, the Turing scheme lacks the same level of infrastructure and network. The scope of the Turing scheme is more narrow, as it focuses on outbound mobility from the UK rather than reciprocal exchanges.

It also seems to be less accessible than Erasmus+. Institutions wanting to take part are faced with a complicated application process. In short, this scheme is a wheel that did not need to be re-invented – especially not in such a suboptimal way.

Universities across the UK pride themselves on their international status, striving to equip graduates with the skills needed to navigate and shape a globalised world. But the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus+ seems to undermine this aspiration.



Taking part in an Erasmus exchange can be a transformative experience. CarlosBarquero/Shutterstock

Participating in international exchange programmes offers a plethora of benefits, ranging from personal growth to academic enrichment and professional development. For more than a decade, I have witnessed first-hand the transformative impact Erasmus+ has had on my students. I can attest to its profound role in shaping well-rounded individuals equipped with the skills to thrive in today's interconnected world.

### **Benefits on both sides**

There are many benefits enjoyed by students participating in international exchange programmes. But welcoming international exchange students to UK campuses also offers huge advantages to universities and broader society. It provides students with opportunities for intercultural exchange right at their doorstep. International exchange students bring with them unique perspectives, skills and experiences that enrich the learning environment for everyone.

As a languages academic, I am naturally interested in the relationship between language learning and international mobility. Studying or working abroad is often a compulsory part of a languages student's degree programme. For many students the year abroad is life-changing.

During the pandemic and since Brexit, this experience has become significantly harder for universities to facilitate. Rejoining the Erasmus+ scheme would make these processes a lot simpler, and more affordable for students.

However, language and intercultural skills are not just important for languages students. Language learning and international mobility go hand in hand in fostering essential qualities such as curiosity, empathy and effective communication. Without a doubt, being immersed in different linguistic and cultural contexts helps you improve your language skills. But importantly, it also creates a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives.

## **Halting decline**

The ongoing decline in language learning in the UK is concerning. Academics and teachers are trying to address this and have been creating initiatives to re-think how we approach language teaching.

For example, I am a member of a group of academics from different universities who have teamed up with teachers to create new types of language learning materials, hoping to inspire students studying for their A-levels.

Fortunately, there have also been political interventions such as the National Consortium for Languages Education – a £15m investment by the Department for Education.

While these developments signal a step in the right direction, the decision not to rejoin Erasmus+ seems to contradict such efforts and is a missed opportunity to prioritise language and intercultural education. To truly ensure equitable access to language learning, further investment is needed, coupled with a renewed commitment to international mobility.

I believe that now is the time to rejoin Erasmus+. It is time to shift our mindset towards valuing language skills and international experiences, ensuring that future generations won't lose out.