

The emerging post-Brexit strategy for universities may cause reckless damage to the sector

*UK universities are already reeling from Brexit uncertainty and the fallout from COVID-19. We now learn of new measures, which would impose international student rates on EU students and make them ineligible for student loans, further exacerbating the crisis. **Anne Corbett** and **Claire Gordon (LSE)** give their critical view of an emerging post-Brexit strategy for universities and warn of its potential negative consequences.*

Evidence from surveys is not always borne out by the facts. But you might say there are straws in the wind when 84 per cent of prospective EU students in response to an [online survey](#) indicate that they will 'definitely' not study in the UK if charged international student fees. A blow to the rich diversity of UK campuses, already unsettled by four years of post-Brexit uncertainty and the immediate fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The [Johnson government](#) has recently announced that EU students who choose to study in the UK will pay international student rates from 2021 onwards and will not be eligible for student loans. International fees are usually at least double the home student rate which EU students enjoyed while the UK remained a member.

The move could be seen as a logical consequence of Brexit. But equally, it could have been the sovereign choice of a newly Brexited Britain to participate in the cooperative activities of European higher education, not least its widely admired programmes, Horizon and Erasmus that support research and mobility and which are seen in both UK and EU universities as mutually beneficial.

The untethering of the sector from the Continent and the rejection of European institutional cooperation in higher education and research is purposeful. We have seen public finance being allocated to the Dominic Cummings brainchild, the industrial innovation agency, modestly modelled on America's DARPA.

The government in a similarly sovereign mode has confirmed its detachment from the EU satellite programme Galileo, to which British scientists have contributed so much, and had such a significant stake, putting money instead into OneWeb, which had one expert proclaiming this was 'nationalism [trumping industrial policy](#)'.



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A departure from 'Erasmus' seems next on the list. Pro-Leave sites, backed by such figures as the historian of France, Robert Tombs and the businessman John Mills, one-time chair of Vote Leave, have been gunning for Erasmus for some time. According to [Briefings for Britain](#), 'the available evidence suggests that the European focus of the scheme means it is not meeting most UK students' educational needs.'

Also calling for a British Erasmus replacement is Jo Johnson, a respected former minister for universities, who left his brother's government last Autumn citing incompatibility between family loyalty and the national interest. But with a realist recognition that the weather has changed with what the prime minister describes as Britain's '[newly recaptured powers](#)' he has been advancing an agenda that neatly aligns with that vision.

Universities, their academics and their students, who have enjoyed and grown through the human and intellectual connectedness within Europe, while still being open to the world, may not like what they read. His is a manifesto for higher education as a global market commodity and with an overtly soft power role. Among Jo Johnson's recommendations are:

- Put liberalisation of trade in education at the heart of FTAs

Make education exports central to the UK's post-Brexit trade strategy, so that the UK government prioritises liberalisation of trade and cooperation in research and education in each of its prospective FTAs.

- Double student numbers from India by 2024

The UK should capitalise on the post-study work visa change and seek to rebalance the mix of international students coming to the UK. It should launch a new marketing drive in India and include India, alongside China, in the low-risk country category.

- Re-focus the British Council on education promotion

The British Council should be re-focused on its education promotion activity. It should establish and operate a world-class global student mobility network to replace UK participation in Erasmus; create and manage a worldwide StudyUK alumni network; and negotiate reciprocal recognition agreements with governments which don't currently recognise degrees with significant elements of online learning.

But even Jo Johnson misrepresents Erasmus's wide programmatic reach and its global partnerships. It is already in partnership with such countries as Brazil and Nigeria, which he presents as an originality of his scheme. Others may see his manifesto for globalising higher education as mistimed in the midst of a global pandemic.

Nevertheless, Jo Johnson's manifesto at least sounds rational held up against the latest populist onslaught against universities' irresponsibility and their failure to advance social mobility from the recently appointed universities' minister, Michelle Donelan in her [first major policy intervention](#). However, an even more rational approach at this time of national crisis would have been to strike a middle ground between extending the scope and reach of the highly successful UK higher education and research sector while maintaining strong links with our European partners, who have played a critical role in embedding that success.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.