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Seite: 19
Druckausgabe: Hauptausgabe

Mediengattung: Tageszeitung
Auflage: 85.740 (verbreitet)

Parlez vous francais? No longer in the UK

The government's decision on the Erasmus scheme will harm Britain's bottom line

Sander van de Rijdt

THE UK has always lagged behind its European neighbours in foreign language learning, and the vote this week to eradicate the Erasmus scheme will only slow that adoption further.

For many, Erasmus was an opportunity to live and learn a new culture and language, free from class and income boundaries. The programme gave the UK's youth an international edge. But now that the government has denied university students this exchange scheme, following Wednesday's Brexit votes, it runs a serious risk of making British students more insular, constricted, and less culturally open.

Concerns about this decision don't just begin and end with the loss of cultural and social benefits for students - it will inevitably affect the UK's future workforce and bottom line.

In the midst of the Brexit process, where we have already seen a reduction in net migration since the referendum, how will British industries fair without this source of diversity in learning and incoming talent? This decision is arguably the worst one made for the British education system since 2004, when Tony Blair's Labour government chose to scrap compulsory foreign language learning at the GCSE level, which led to a severe drop in the number of UK pupils taking subjects such as French

and German. In fact, there has been a huge 63 per cent fall in GCSE entries for French and a 67 per cent for German since 2002.

The government is setting a dangerous precedent. It sends the message to young Brits that foreign language skills aren't important, and that English is the language of the world. It isn't. In fact, only 20 per cent of the world's population speaks English - this includes both native and second language speakers.

In 2013, the now-dissolved Department of Business, Innovation and Skills revealed that the UK's language skills deficit could be costing the economy up to £48bn each year. So it is concerning that this Brexit-driven decision has gone ahead without a regard for its implications. For example, non-UK nationals account for 40 per cent of the workforce in the construction of buildings. This results in a language barrier on-site so large that the industry's productivity is one of the lowest globally.

There is also a knock-on impact for the EU's economy. The businesses and universities which take on UK talent during the programme and thereafter will now experience a void that they will desperately need to fill.

Germany, for example, is projected to have a labour shortage of three million skilled workers by 2030. Whereas this

gap could have been filled by workers from the UK, without programmes like Erasmus, these opportunities won't be as readily available. As we train and educate the next generation of engineers, doctors, scientists, economists, journalists and artists, during constant political turmoil and the exit from the EU, the government should consider it a desperate priority to offset this decision. Reintroducing compulsory foreign language learning in schools, partnering with businesses, or replacing the Erasmus programme altogether could all be viable options to help industries.

Scrapping Erasmus does, however, create a unique opportunity for private businesses to invest in more international working and language training to enrich those deprived of opportunity. As the saying goes: "If you're buying, I'll speak your language; if you're selling, you speak mine."

The UK will now need to strengthen its relationship with Europe through the power of business, and the government must realise the importance of foreign languages and immediately make changes to ensure that further opportunities are not denied to the talent of tomorrow.

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