

It's time students took to the barricades over Brexit



*The eve of the new academic year is a key moment for students across the higher and further education sectors to take a more active role in the Brexit debate. As things stand right now, future cohorts of students are at risk of being excluded from the networks of educational and cultural exchange facilitated by the EU, argues **Claire Gordon** (LSE Teaching and Learning Centre). LSE's [Generation Brexit](#) project is a platform for young people to take to the figurative barricades over Brexit, and make their voices heard regarding the future of UK-EU relations.*

Depending on how the negotiations go, students starting degree programmes this autumn will graduate in three years' time into a different country – with the UK outside the European Union and possibly, if the preferences of some members of the Government are realised, outside the Single Market and Customs Union without the right to live and work across Europe. At the same time, future cohorts of students are at risk of being excluded from the networks of educational and cultural exchange which have enriched their education and resulted in transformative learning experiences for so many. Is this a future that students in a 21st century globally connected economy and society want to walk into without having a more active say?

The outcome of the referendum vote took many by surprise and certainly caught the broader higher education and research sector off guard (90% of which voted remain). Though the 64% turnout among young people (aged 18-24), the majority of whom voted to remain, was not as low as initially thought, this was trumped by the 90% turnout among the over-65s as demonstrated by [research conducted by Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison](#).



The general election in May was characterized by some commentators as a 'youthquake' – a 'shout-back' against the older generation making decisions about the future of the young in a context in which the generational contract at heart of the UK welfare state has become increasingly frayed. Of course, we should resist overly simplified explanations about the election result. Nonetheless, some of the frustrations expressed in the increased voter turnout among young people were clearly a response to the 52% who voted leave — which amounted to only 37% of the electorate (given the 72% turnout) — effecting a constitution-changing decision. Nor did this include the voice of 16 or 17-year-olds that many parties, including Labour, Lib Dems, SNP and the Greens, believed should have had the right to vote. But expressing voice at a general election once every five years (or so) is clearly not enough to have a substantive impact on the EU negotiations.

The NUS President made a strong pro-European [statement](#) the day after the referendum.

“This is clearly not the result that many young people wanted or voted for, but most important now is to ensure that students and young people are involved in the decisions that have to be made that will shape their future.” NUS president, Megan Dunn, Friday 24 June 2016

Sorana Vieru, NUS Education Officer (2016-2017) gave oral evidence to the Education Select Committee (ESC) Hearing at UCL on January 25, 2017 underlining NUS's support for removing international students from the net migration targets. She also [highlighted](#) the value that EU students bring — ‘challeng[ing] perspectives, enrich[ing] the overall university experience and help[ing] home students develop new views.’ In addition, a number of students who have participated in Erasmus study and work placement programmes submitted written evidence to the ESC emphasizing the cultural and democratic citizenship values that for them lie at the heart of membership in the EU community. [Charles Hewitt](#) noted ‘The Erasmus programme...has helped me establish connections and feel part of a wider European community...The EU is not only a symbol of inclusiveness but also support for one another in times of need’. Meanwhile [Alice Holden](#) observed ‘There is no better way to gain an understanding and appreciation of the other culture...Unfortunately there has been a [reported rise in xenophobia](#), but if more students could benefit from a period of time spent abroad, this would help combat this.’ Such views have also been echoed by the European Students’ Union.

The voice of young people has been surprisingly absent from the post-referendum Brexit debate.

As [Anne Corbett](#) has observed and this was also underlined in the [LSE Commission on Higher Education and Research](#) where students were among the rare witnesses to stress, above and beyond crucial economic issues, the importance of the democratic values and civic rights including freedom of movement fostered by EU membership. And yet the student voice, and the voice of young people more widely, has been surprisingly absent from the post-referendum Brexit debate during the lead-up and commencement of negotiations. Not only on the future of higher and further education but also in terms of the broader debate about the nature of Britain’s future social, cultural and economic relations with Europe. There is a lot left to play for.

Why is this an opportune moment?

There are a number of reasons why the start of the new academic year is an opportune moment for students and young people to up the ante. As students return or take up their places in institutions of education, Brexit negotiations are well underway though little apparent progress has been made. The government has yet to publish a position paper on higher education and research. Secondly, while the Prime Minister has sought to characterize the Brexit vote as a vote on immigration and doggedly insisted on keeping students as part of UK migration figures, the situation is clearly far more complex than this would suggest. Last week new data suggested that the Government has been (some would suggest knowingly) using the student immigration figures. In fact, fewer than [5,000 students a year stay on](#) after their visas expire, which is a mere 3% of the relevant student population. Furthermore, it has been clear for quite some time that the [public believes that genuine students should be kept apart from immigration policy](#).

Meanwhile, on the opposition Labour benches, there has been movement in the party’s Brexit position with the Shadow Brexit Secretary [Keir Starmer](#) signaling a clear shift to support for a softer Brexit involving at the very least membership of the single market and the customs unions for a transitional period. The growing differentiation between the government with all the apparent inconsistencies in its approach to the Brexit negotiations and the opposition surely provides an opportunity for students to enter the debate.

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What is at stake here?

Fifteen months on there is still no clarity on the rights of students to study, work and live within the UK or across the EU after the UK exits. Instead of construing students (and EU citizens more broadly) as bargaining chips, this is an issue that could have been put to bed before the negotiations started – a gesture of good will, giving clear assurances to students at the very least (if not EU citizens currently working in the country). Nor would this have been pure gesture politics. The evidence of the advantages for students from learning, studying and developing knowledge and skills in a diverse, inclusive educational environment is resoundingly clear. All students benefit from learning in international classrooms with fellow students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds taught by academics from across Europe and the world. [UK Universities](#) has also presented convincing evidence of the broader economic and societal contribution of international students to the UK, EU students [making up just under a third](#) of these students.

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Immediately following the Brexit vote there was anecdotal evidence of students rethinking their decision to study and seek future employment in the UK, students exploring other opportunities and locations to pursue their studies. A year on there is some concrete evidence to underpin these claims. There was a 5% drop in applications from EU students to UK universities this academic year and the UK, while still popular has dropped, a few places in terms in the popularity stakes of places to study with [students highlighting](#) concerns around raised fees as well as the UK appearing a less welcoming place. Of course, this is as yet only a snapshot and too early to evidence a clear trend but it is telling nonetheless.

Students and young people should take the initiative now by (i) developing a clear set of demands both on the terms of the divorce as well as the basis of future relations with the EU; (ii) opening up concrete channels of dialogue with their university and college leaderships, some of whom are in direct discussion with government; (iii) making representations to student and university associations in the UK and across Europe, and (iv) influencing the public debate and negotiations through capitalizing on the possibilities offered by social media. LSE's [Generation Brexit](#) project is one example of an endeavour facilitating many of the above. It offers a platform for young people, to take to the figurative barricades over Brexit, and make their voices heard regarding the future of UK-EU relations.

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

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