

Brexit is going to be yet another fissure in the UK's generational divide



*Brexit is going to be yet another fissure in the UK's generational divide, writes **Richard Brown** (Centre for London). Its impact can, however, be alleviated – here's how.*

This summer, around three-quarters of a million UK 18-year-olds, will be able to apply for a free InterRail pass, allowing three weeks unlimited travel across Europe. The European Commission scheme, which will provide 30,000 passes each year until 2020, reflects one of the chasms between how the EU is perceived either side of the Channel. What is discussed in almost exclusively economic terms in the UK is seen much more as a programme of cultural exchange, of international solidarity, in Brussels and many continental capitals.

The scheme also targets the age group most likely to be enthusiastic about the European Union. 71 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds [said](#) they voted remain in summer 2016, and another 1.5 million voters will have come of age by the time the referendum anniversary rolls around this year. Support for remaining within the EU diminishes with age and becomes negative for the over-45s. More [recent polls](#) suggest that this divergence is persisting if not growing.

It is this post-millennial generation, who voted most strongly against Brexit, who are going to have to live with its consequences for longest. Many were distraught at the referendum result, in a way that is perhaps hard for any but the most sentimental Europhile of an older generation to understand.

Like many UK citizens, young people will be worried about the impact of Brexit on GDP, on service sector exports, on the price of goods in shops. But they feel more immediately deprived too – not just of subsidised or free rail travel, but the opportunity to move freely around the continent, to study abroad, learn a language or teach English, to pick up a holiday job working in ski resorts, in beach bars, in vineyards and orchards – without filling in forms, or paying a cut to middlemen and gangmasters.

So, is Brexit going to be just one more fissure in a generational divide that already takes on housing, work and pensions, one more reason for younger people to complain that baby-boomers have seized opportunities for themselves, but denied them to their children and grandchildren?

It doesn't have to be this way. As we are passing the mid-way point of the 'Article 50 period', there are still deals that can be done to mitigate the impact of Brexit for the citizens least likely to have voted for it. Centre for London's [Open City](#) report, published last summer, argued for three measures that would soften the impact of Brexit on young people – in London but also across the UK.

*Inquiry into EU*

funding opportunities 2014-2020. Image by [National Assembly for Wales](#), (Flickr), CC BY 2.0.

The first would be to [extend the Youth Mobility Scheme](#) to all EU countries and to ask them to reciprocate. The Scheme (previously known as 'working tourist visas') allows people aged 18-30 to travel between participating countries to work for up to two years. There are some conditions and limitations – you need to have £2,000 in savings and cannot claim most benefits. But you don't have to have a job in advance of arrival either, so the Scheme bypasses the bureaucracy of sponsored work permits, and maintains frictionless, if not free movement, extending to all the rights that those with dual citizenship enjoy.

A second priority would be to [ensure maintenance](#) of overseas study arrangements for EU nationals. Currently, students from other EU countries pay the same fees as domestic students across the EU (compared to two to four times as much for non-EU students), and students can also benefit from the Erasmus Scheme that supports them in studying overseas for a year. Figures from [earlier in the decade](#) show 15,000 UK students studying overseas on the Erasmus scheme and 27,000 EU students studying in the UK, but these figures only show part of the picture: the UK has more than [134,000 EU students](#) overall; [33,000 of these](#) – ten per cent of student numbers – are in London.

A third area for action is [post-study work permits](#). These used to allow international students to stay on for two years after graduation but were discontinued in 2012. The Mayor of London has already called for these to be reintroduced; this would not only cement London's position as a magnet for talented young people from across the continent, but also offer the basis for agreeing on reciprocal arrangements with other EU countries.

Like all the measures proposed, reintroducing post-study work permits would be an economic boon. London and other cities depend on EU workers – not only in high skilled sectors such as healthcare, but also in the accommodation and food services that keep the capital running – and are most easily accessible to young people visiting for the experience of spending time away from home, learning a new language and meeting new people.

But for once, let's take the economic benefits as ancillary rather than central to the case. At least two generations of young people have benefited from the opportunities offered by cheaper travel, and by working and studying abroad in the EU. Sustaining that easy interchange is the surest way of ensuring that leaving the EU does not mean leaving Europe, and of keeping alive the cultural connections and – to use a thoroughly un-British term – social solidarity that has unified a continent for 70 years.

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

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