European and External Relations Committee

The EU referendum and its implications for Scotland

Written submission from Peter Dayan, Head of the Department of European Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh

I write as the Head of the Department of European Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh, which is the largest languages department in Scotland, and one of the largest in the UK. Many of our concerns are similar to those of colleagues throughout the University sector in Scotland. Particularly, a high proportion of our staff are from EU countries. They are central to what we do. We are concerned about their status in the Brexit process. In the longer term, it will cause considerable damage to us, in many ways, if our ability to recruit and retain staff from Europe is put into question by restrictive immigration policies.

However, there is one issue that is of particular importance to us and our students, which I would like to bring to the attention of the Committee: our participation in the Erasmus scheme.

All students on our degrees (over two hundred every year) have to spend a year abroad. The majority of them go to EU countries, under programmes co-ordinated by Erasmus. This system, largely funded by the EU, works principally as a magnificent international collaboration between universities all over Europe. It is the only viable way for the vast majority of our students to find a place to go and study in Europe; and it brings to us a corresponding number of European students who never lose their love for Scotland.

Since the scheme is an EU one, our place in it will inevitably be under negotiation in the Brexit process. If we lose our ability to participate in Erasmus, it will be a disaster for us, and may well pose a threat to our entire degree structure. We do not consider this an inevitable consequence of Brexit. Switzerland is not a member of the EU, but it participates in Erasmus (we have an Erasmus exchange with the University of Geneva).

It is, then, of the greatest importance to us that Scotland continue to be part of the Erasmus family. But the importance of Erasmus goes beyond its essential part in our degree structures. It was conceived from the beginning as a strategy for giving young people an international European outlook. It succeeds spectacularly in that. Scotland needs that international outlook, both for its own people and from Europe. Keeping our place in Erasmus is, then, not just vital for my department, and for languages in Scottish universities generally; it should be a strategic priority for Scotland.