OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

# Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

**Thursday 6 February 2025**

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Session 6

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## Thursday 6 February 2025

## CONTENTS

**Col.**

**REVIEW OF THE EU-UK TRADE AND CO-OPERATION AGREEMENT** ........................................................................ 1

## CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

**5th Meeting 2025, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Ellie Bevan (Taith)
Peter Brown (British Council)
Professor Paul James Cardwell (King's College London)
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green) (Commttee Substitute)

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

# Scottish Parliament

## Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

*Thursday 6 February 2025*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]*

## Review of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Good morning, and a warm welcome to the fifth meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Patrick Harvie, and we welcome Gillian Mackay as his substitute.

Agenda item 1 is an evidence-taking session on the second phase of our inquiry into and review of the European Union-United Kingdom trade and co-operation agreement, with a focus, again, on youth mobility. We are delighted to be joined in the room by Peter Brown, director of the British Council in Scotland, and online by Paul James Cardwell, professor of law at the Dickson Poon school of law, King's College London; and Ellie Bevan, head of policy, programmes and engagement at Taith. I warmly welcome you all.

I will start with a broad question. What has been your experience of the change in youth mobility since Brexit and what challenges, if any, have you experienced? I will start with Peter Brown, as he is in the room.

**Peter Brown (British Council):** Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here. I feel slightly intimidated and outnumbered, but I will crack on.

Convener, would it be helpful to the committee if I described the background of the British Council in Scotland a little bit and what we do in Scotland to support mobility agendas?

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Peter Brown:** Obviously, if I go on too long, you will tell me so, but I will very briefly describe the British Council, our vision and what we do, and how that fits in with the wider mobility agenda.

The British Council's vision is of a more peaceful and prosperous world built on trust. We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in Scotland, the wider UK and countries worldwide. Mobility, therefore, is very much part of the organisation's DNA.

Scotland, as one of the four nations, is an integral part of our work. Through our programmes, insights and partnerships—for example, the Connected Scotland umbrella organisation—we engage with every university and the majority of colleges in Scotland. We also engage with universities directly, as well as many schools. We engage with cultural events such as festivals, including the Edinburgh festivals, Glasgow International, Celtic Connections and so on, and with cultural institutions such as Creative Scotland.

What we do—this is where I will home in on the mobility question—is connect Scotland to the world and the world to it through our arts and education programmes and in collaboration with a wide range of partners. We are helping Scotland's education sector achieve its international ambitions and mobility is very much part of that.

We support sectoral and Scottish Government efforts to promote Scotland as a welcoming, inclusive, distinctive and attractive study destination—in other words, what we might term inwards mobility. After all, when we talk about mobility, we will be talking about inwards and outwards mobility—it is very important to mention that. We also support the efforts, if you like, of the education sector to build mutually beneficial partnerships through transnational education, global partnerships and insights.

There are two sides to internationalisation in education: there are the international students who come to study in Scotland's world-class institutions, and there are all the partnerships and collaborations outside Scotland that serve to enhance the reputation of, and build trust in, Scotland and the wider UK.

Young people are a key target audience for us. We aim to encourage young people in Scotland to learn about other cultures and languages, which will help them to prepare for life in the global interconnected world that we live in today. The language assistant programme, which some members might have heard of, is very much part of that, and I can expand on that in due course, if you wish. That covers education.

I will briefly cover arts and culture. We are committed to showcasing the rich diversity and wealth of Scottish arts and culture talent to the world. We make strong efforts to cover the whole of Scotland in that regard, not only the central belt. For example, we are supporting eight visual artists from different parts of Scotland on a study tour to Beijing and Shanghai, in China, to look at collaborations and partnerships that will benefit all.

That is how we build connections, trust and understanding between the people of Scotland and the wider UK and people in the rest of the world. Mobility programmes are an integral part of that. I could go on, but I will pause there.

**The Convener:** Some of us will be more familiar with the British Council than others will be. Since Brexit, what differences have there been, if any, in your ability to do your work? What challenges have you faced?

**Peter Brown:** I know that you are familiar with the British Council and that you know that it is an apolitical organisation, so we do not comment directly on political decisions, because that would not be appropriate.

However, the British Council has a well-established general position on academic exchange, which the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes were all about. We ran the Erasmus programme from 2007 to 2020. In addition, we enable students to study and work overseas through our management of other small-scale mobility programmes. We did that through the Turing scheme, which you might have heard of, until 2022, and through the language assistant programme, which I alluded to.

When the British Council ran the Erasmus programme, every year, approximately 1,600 Scottish students undertook exchange programmes somewhere in the European Union. I cannot tell you the number of Scottish students who are currently studying in the EU—we could try to find that information for you—but my informed estimate would be that the number is much lower than 1,600. The latest data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency shows that close to 16,000 EU nationals are studying in Scottish universities, with the largest number coming from Germany, France, Spain and Ireland. Those are the four primary sending countries, to use the shorthand. Again, I cannot tell you the trend, but I suspect that there has been a change in that regard, too.

If we compare those 16,000 students with the figure of 1,600 that I mentioned a moment ago, it is interesting to note that approximately 10 times as many students now come from the EU to study in the UK as there were Scottish students studying in the EU when the British Council last managed the Erasmus programme.

I am not entirely sure how to pronounce the acronym, but I add that we are working with HEURO, which is the Association of UK Higher Education International Professionals—that is quite a mouthful—through the study abroad campaign, to further facilitate mobility and exchange in the EU. As I have alluded to before, mobility and exchange are very much at the core of what the British Council does.

We also represent the UK's four nations, including Scotland, at Europe's largest international higher education conference, which is held by the European Association for International Education. Around 7,000 policy makers and practitioners attend that conference, all of whom share a belief in the transformative power of international education. That is all about the ability of international education and mobility to bring together people from different backgrounds and to foster understanding—in short, to make the world a better place. We are actively trying to support and encourage that, still.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I will direct the same question to Ms Bevan, who is online. [*Interruption*.] I am not sure whether Ms Bevan can hear us. We seem to be having a problem with that connection. Perhaps Professor Cardwell would like to come in on that question.

**Professor Paul James Cardwell (King's College London):** Thank you very much for the invitation to the meeting. I am sorry that I am not there in person. I usually never miss an opportunity to come back to Scotland, but I am afraid that I have to join you online today. Thank you very much for the question. [*Interruption*.]

I was muted, but I think that I am back. Can you hear me?

**The Convener:** Okay. We can hear you again.

**Professor Cardwell:** Thank you. I will say a little about my background, I am an academic, specialising in law. I have a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. I spent most of my academic career at the University of Sheffield, where I had hands-on experience of the Erasmus and study abroad programmes through developing and sending abroad as many students as possible, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. That was with some success: we were sending about half the cohort, which was more than 100 students per year, on various types of mobility exchange, to spend a year in EU member states, or certain countries outside Europe such as the US and Australia.

From 2017 to 2021, I was a professor of law at the University of Strathclyde, so I have had experience of seeing, from a Scottish perspective, the various challenges and opportunities. Obviously, that was in the period following the Brexit referendum, and then Covid hit. Since then I have been in London, which offers a different kind of environment.

I have written on the academic impact of studying abroad. Unsurprisingly, students who have been abroad tend to do better in their degrees, as well as obtaining all the cultural agility and other benefits that studying abroad brings.

I am currently less involved in the nuts and bolts of such programmes, but I maintain strong contacts with colleagues in universities right across the UK about their challenges on mobility.

To respond to the question, the main theme in the immediate pre and post-Brexit periods has been one of uncertainty. I will limit my comments to the Erasmus programme, because that is my speciality. Erasmus as we know it has evolved. It has been around since the late 1980s and had steadily increased the number of students outgoing from and incoming to the whole of the UK. The system was very familiar, so someone like me who wanted to set up an agreement with a university in an EU country could do so in almost a matter of minutes. Everyone was signed up to the same charter—all that had to be agreed was the number of students, the number of months and whether staff mobility was to be included.

10:15

Everything was on a standard form, so—apart from some other considerations such as the number of courses in English, whether there would be help for housing and so on—the actual agreement could be done very quickly and easily.

In contrast, setting up bilateral agreements with universities outside the EU takes a huge amount of effort and resource. There are all kinds of issues to deal with relating to semester dates, health insurance coverage, satisfying visa conditions and so on. We have moved away from a system that was very familiar and had relatively low transaction costs.

In addition, from a budget perspective, Erasmus was—it still is—an EU programme, so we would know several years in advance that the budget was going to be there for students going out and coming in. That certainty is extremely important in trying to sell the benefits of studying abroad to students, in particular in the UK, where we often integrate study abroad into a degree programme. We were able to say to students, “In three years, you can spend a semester in France or Germany, or wherever; there is Erasmus funding available, and we know more or less how much you would get.” We do not have so much certainty now, because we do not have the guarantee of multi-annual funding to quite the same extent.

When those risk factors start to be introduced, students and potential students get a bit worried. That increases when we are talking about students who are really conscious of their financial position. In addition, we cannot always give the same kind of certainty on all the other costs—for example, visa costs, what might be needed for healthcare and so on. The attempt to shift towards a global Britain sending more students outside Europe is actually, in practice, much trickier than using the system that we had under Erasmus+.

**The Convener:** I will try to bring in Ellie Bevan. Do we still have a problem with the connection? We are going to try again.

**Ellie Bevan (Taith):** Hi, can you hear me?

**The Convener:** Yes, we can—thank you.

**Ellie Bevan:** Sorry, convener—I am having a nightmare with my internet, as is typical, but I have just rejoined on my phone. I hope that it will work, but please let me know if not.

Taith was set up in Wales to address the direct impact of Brexit on international exchange. The then Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, on the back of the UK Government’s decision to withdraw from Erasmus+, created Taith, which was initially set up to fill the gap that was left for all the sectors in Wales.

Taith is an opportunity for schools, youth and adult education, further education, vocational education and training and higher education to continue to participate in the majority of activities that were offered under Erasmus+. That was the initial intention. As we have developed the programme and consulted with the sectors, and seen how Taith has worked in Wales, we have refined the programme and developed it further so that it works better for Wales, not only to meet the gap left by Erasmus but to provide new opportunities for learners and young people who would previously not have had the chance to travel and learn abroad.

**The Convener:** That is helpful—thank you.

We go to questions from members. Alexander Stewart is first.

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Mr Brown, you talked about the academic exchanges that are taking place, but I want to ask about business and commerce. In the past, there was a reasonable level of exchange going on between apprenticeships in organisations and businesses. Has that completely stopped or are there opportunities to ensure that a sector or a business that is looking to exchange individuals has the opportunity to do so? How is that progressing? It was relatively successful in the past, and I would like to hear your view on where you think it currently is.

**Peter Brown:** First of all, I note that the relationship with business and commerce is, to a large extent, outside the remit of the British Council.

We see a number of the colleges in Scotland trying to realise their internationalisation ambitions. We see more colleges working in skills and employability programmes and trying to establish relationships and partnerships outside the UK and, indeed, outside Europe. For example, a number of colleges are establishing partnerships in Africa to support skills development there.

However, I am not in a position to comment directly on business and commerce per se.

**Alexander Stewart:** I want to look at where we are now with the Turing scheme. This morning, we have heard that there are some limitations in relation to the funding for the three-year period. Are any other limitations being experienced? Is the Turing scheme working in a slightly different way from what we have experienced in the past? What lessons have been learned from that process?

**Peter Brown:** The British Council managed the Turing scheme until 2022, but we are not directly involved in the scheme now.

I note that the Turing scheme is unidirectional. The British Council's perspective is that we would welcome more mobility schemes of a nature that sees flow in both directions.

**Alexander Stewart:** Professor Cardwell, you touched on the experiences of students going back and forward and the ease that there was in managing that. What are now the obstacles—if there are any—to engaging and progressing, to ensure that we have that seamless task between academia and individuals who are seeking to go to Ireland, France or wherever it might be?

**Professor Cardwell:** Although I am a higher education person, so that is my experience of it, I would make the point that the Erasmus scheme has evolved into lots of different things over time. You mentioned apprenticeships and scholarships for people spending professional time abroad, and I do not think that the UK ever made as much of that as possible.

One of the issues around the decision to withdraw from Erasmus was funding—and not just for higher education, because it goes beyond that. Also, given that there is a lack of free movement of people going from the UK to the EU and vice versa, the working opportunities have been restricted, which meant that it was going to be very difficult to make use of that scheme in the same way as other EU member states.

There are other barriers related to freedom of movement as well. Unless you are a UK student who happens to have EU citizenship, you will need to go through visa processes and so on. Certainly in the first couple of years, that meant that embassies in London, which were not used to giving out study visas, because there had never been a need to do so before, had to ramp up their capacity. There were therefore some delays and uncertainty, which I know meant that some students just said, "Well, I'm going to drop out, because I can't guarantee that I am going to have everything ready for me to go. It's not worth it."

There are those bureaucratic hurdles, but there are also the financial ones. It is also about people having certainty about what they need to do and show in order to be compliant with any residence requirements as a third country national in the EU.

Of course, the case is likewise for students coming into the UK. Unless they can obtain funding from other sources or they do not particularly need funding, because they have the financial means, those students, even if they want to do courses in English, instead of going to the UK will perhaps go to Ireland or to another member state where those courses are offered.

Although we do eventually get over those bureaucratic hurdles, through the familiarity of dealing with them, there is no doubt that they add to the list of reasons why people might not take part in the scheme.

As we know, in the UK, sometimes it is quite difficult to convince students to take the plunge to study abroad, and none of those barriers particularly help. The issue between the UK and the EU is wider than just the Erasmus scheme, but it speaks to the sensitivity and to some of the challenges. We tell students that they can go to another member state—yes, there are challenges in living there and dealing with a different situation and so on, but they can do it. However, when we tell them about all those barriers as well, it makes it more difficult to convince them.

**Alexander Stewart:** Let us look forward to what we want to achieve in your sector, to ensure that there is progress. We have heard about the new relationship that the new UK Government wants to have with the EU: it has been called a "resetting"—words of that nature have been used. Are there areas in which you see some glimmers of hope that there may be progress? Are the discussions still just rhetoric or are there real opportunities for the future?

**Professor Cardwell:** I should mention that, helpfully, my academic area is EU law.

For the Erasmus scheme and for youth mobility—the UK operates such schemes with other countries as well—the numbers of people going from and to countries in the EU would be greater than for other countries, which would have an impact on migration debates. However, once we lose the opportunities for youth mobility, it is very difficult to get them back. We do not want a generation of young people who miss out on them and who are then not able to pass on the benefits to future young people.

Another thing, which was mentioned in the committee's previous evidence session is that, although more students are coming into the UK—including Scotland—than are outgoing, and we tend to focus on those numbers and resources, that does not take into account what the programmes mean for the soft power of Scotland

and Scottish universities, and for the rest of the UK. For example, we know that students who have spent a few weeks, a semester or a year in a UK university have a great experience, by and large, and they go back home and tell others about it. Those others might then come to the UK as fee-paying students to do a masters or so on, even if they do not necessarily do it at the same university or in the same city. It is difficult to buy that kind of reputation.

The question of numbers does not speak to all the advantages that we get from those students coming in. Of course, they take up resources, down to the level of academic departments, but the advantage for students in Scotland or in the rest of the UK, who are sitting in classrooms with students who have come in, is that they are already getting that international experience, even if they do not go out of the country themselves. The benefits should not be seen simply in terms of an imbalance in numbers.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** I will continue on the same subject that Alexander Stewart raised and that you have been commenting on, Professor Cardwell. Can you give us a breakdown of how much of the roughly £270 million a year that the UK was paying in to Erasmus+ would have been spent directly on UK students—specifically students rather than staff or others—for them to go and spend time in the European Union?

**Professor Cardwell:** The short answer is no, I cannot, because I do not have an eye on the figures. If you compared students from the UK with students from EU member states that had a history of sending more students abroad—France and Spain, for example—you would find that the budget that was allocated to the UK, as a large state, was shared between fewer students than it would have been shared between had they been French or Spanish students. That meant that a UK student who went abroad might have got an Erasmus grant of, say, £2,000; a Spanish student might only get £200 or £300 because the budget was shared between a lot more participants, although, sometimes, different regional Governments might support them with extra funding. That is another reason why the numbers do not give the full picture.

09:30

The numbers also do not tell us whether payments are means tested. In the Turing scheme, the emphasis is on disadvantaged students and means testing, but that does not come into the EU system at all. That is based on the UK idea about how to target things. In the Erasmus scheme, everyone gets the same, depending on how many months their stay is. There was a little bit of variation if someone was going to a country where the cost of living was lower. So, those going to some of the countries in central and eastern Europe got less than those who went to western Europe. However, most students went from the UK to France, Spain, Germany and possibly Italy.

**Stephen Kerr:** Was the income of the parents of students who went on Erasmus+ exchanges not a factor in the support that they got? I thought that it was.

**Professor Cardwell:** It might have been considered. There were some additional forms of support, but my understanding is that the Erasmus grant was not means tested. As I said, I have not been involved in the nuts and bolts for a while, and Covid changed things as well, because of the lack of students going abroad and the money that was left over as result. Apart from the differences in destination, which were set out by country and in just a couple of tiers, there were no huge differences in funding amounts. There was some supplementary funding for students with particular needs, but the Turing scheme has introduced much more of the factoring in of family income.

**Stephen Kerr:** So, the Turing scheme provides more support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, basically.

**Professor Cardwell:** That is the stated aim of Turing, and that is where a lot of the funding has been targeted.

**Stephen Kerr:** Staying on the topic of balance and of how much of the £266 million—or whatever the number is—that we were paying, Professor David Collins of City St George's, University of London said:

> "Britain was losing money on Erasmus ... Far more Europeans used Erasmus to come here than British students used it to go to Europe."

Is that factually correct?

**Professor Cardwell:** First, I should say that David Collins is a former colleague of mine, because I was also employed at City, University of London after I left Strathclyde.

As I said before, the numbers do not tell the whole story. It might be said that, if the number of students participating was lower in the UK than in comparable large member states such as France, fewer students were benefiting. However, if we look at the imbalance, more students were coming in, and there is a resource implication for students coming in, because we have to teach them.

One of the advantages and one of the certainties of Erasmus for students is that they cannot be charged tuition fees. However, that is usually regulated, because universities have a

limited number of places. A university partner might say, “We will send two students a year to X university in X country and receive two back,” and it might be that, every year, other countries use the maximum and the UK does not send any students out. That is where there is imbalance. But that does not account for all of the other advantages that the UK gets, namely the soft power and the reputation of UK higher education, particularly among those who come to do master’s degrees and who would be paying.

It is difficult to quantify. If a student went on Erasmus to, let us say, Glasgow for a year, had a great time, went back home and told their friends and someone then says that their university or department has a link with another university in Glasgow, we can never trace where marketing of that sort has come from.

**Stephen Kerr:** You describe a qualitative measurement, and it is very hard to measure quality compared with quantity.

**Professor Cardwell:** One of the other challenges in getting students out was not necessarily a lack of desire on the part of the students but the fact that we tended to see Erasmus as for use by students studying for language degrees or degrees that included politics—politics and French, for example—or something like that. However, there has been an increase in courses that are offered in English, particularly in member states where the language is not widely spoken.

In UK higher education, there are some structural challenges in getting students out, because it is quite difficult to integrate with the relatively shorter degree periods in other states, which take a more flexible approach. It takes a lot of effort for individual university departments and academics to integrate with those systems.

**Stephen Kerr:** At the beginning, I should have declared an interest in that my daughter took part in the Erasmus+ programme when she was a student. She went to Nancy for, I think, five months as part of her degree at the University of Stirling.

I am a big, enthusiastic supporter of student exchanges, but I want to ensure that the maximum opportunity is available to students, regardless of their background. That is why I am interested in how much of the funding was spent directly on UK students and how that money was spent. I have a fair idea, because I have in front of me some numbers from the House of Commons library that are contained in the wider briefing that we received. According to those numbers, there were roughly 10,000 UK higher education participants in the Erasmus+ programme annually, but the number who participate in the Turing scheme is three times that. I think that Peter Brown said that the Turing scheme is all-directional.

**Peter Brown:** It is unidirectional.

**Stephen Kerr:** Unidirectional?

**Peter Brown:** Yes. It is one way—it is outwards, not inwards.

**Stephen Kerr:** Oh, I am sorry. I misinterpreted that. That is my fault. I thought that you were talking in geographical terms, because the scheme involves global outreach as opposed to specifically EU outreach.

How do you account for the dramatic increase in the number of UK higher education learners having the opportunity to engage in student exchanges? I am talking specifically about students; we will come on to staff in a minute, if we have time.

**Professor Cardwell:** Sorry—is that question for me?

**Stephen Kerr:** Yes. We have two witnesses who cannot make too many comments on policy issues—I respect that—so I am coming to you all the time, Professor Cardwell.

**Professor Cardwell:** That is no problem at all.

I work in a higher education institution, and the Turing scheme applies to a much broader range of institutions, but my understanding is that it allows for different types of visits. For example, a school or another organisation could bid to take a group of 15 students to a country for two weeks, so there is the possibility—

**Stephen Kerr:** That is a separate number—about 5,000 a year.

**Professor Cardwell:** There are, of course, advantages to shorter visits, which give students exposure to other countries and might open up opportunities.

In relation to the amount of time being spent outside the UK, you mentioned that your daughter was away for five months, which would be the standard for a semester—being away for 10 months would count as a year. That is generally how the Erasmus programme worked. That was largely because that is the way in which universities work—having summer schools and things like that was not impossible, but it was a bit more challenging.

**Stephen Kerr:** Do you know what the length of stay in an institution would be? I mentioned five months. Do we know how long the nearly 30,000 students spent in the institutions that they went to? Is that information available, to your knowledge?

**Professor Cardwell:** I imagine that it should be available somewhere, but I do not have it. I

suspect that a lot of them will have been short visits.

With the Turing scheme, a lot of institutions and bodies have to be very specific about what they want to do when they make bids in advance. I would check whether the figure of 30,000 that you cited is the number of people who actually participated, because some people might have been granted funding but not have participated because of other hurdles, particularly bureaucratic ones. That is one of the challenges of the Turing scheme, which is understandable given that the system was set up very quickly, because the exit from the Erasmus scheme was not entirely foreseen. Setting up a new system to replace something but also expand it and have a slightly different focus will always be beset with issues.

**The Convener:** I think that Mr Brown wants to make a comment, too.

**Stephen Kerr:** Yes, of course—sorry. There are two Mr Browns in the room; that is the difficulty.

**Peter Brown:** If I may, I will declare a personal interest. My daughter was one of the last beneficiaries of the Erasmus programme. On your question on length of stay, she studied French and Italian and was six months in France and three months in Italy, but she is just one individual, obviously.

I will perhaps provide additional information on the numbers, as regards Erasmus. British Council data for Scotland shows that, from 2014 to 2020, the Erasmus+ programme enabled 37,635 young people, students and staff from Scotland to study, train or volunteer overseas. That number is comprised of, more or less, 10,800 from higher education, 8,200 from schools, 8,800 from vocational education and 3,800 from youth projects. Scottish organisations also led 503 Erasmus+ projects. During that period, when the British Council was heavily involved in Erasmus, Scotland was very well represented in the broader UK picture in terms of participation.

I echo the point that Professor Cardwell made. The financial angle is important, but the soft power element that he referred to brings social, cultural and economic benefits to Scottish society, and, with regard to inward students to Scotland, it adds to the diversity of Scottish communities, enriches the learning experience and supports local businesses and jobs.

If you look at it in the long term, you see that these mobility programmes bring about young people who become valuable friends of Scotland and ambassadors for Scotland. That is a really important element of the programmes.

**Stephen Kerr:** Yes, I completely agree. To be frank, we have record levels of international students in Scotland at the moment, so we are, indeed, beneficiaries of the soft power issue that Professor Cardwell mentioned.

**Peter Brown:** That brings economic benefit as well, of course.

**Stephen Kerr:** Absolutely. It does.

**The Convener:** Mr Kerr, we will move on to another couple of members, but we will come back to you if we have time.

**Stephen Kerr:** I have a load of questions, so I am happy to come back in later.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** I want to compare Erasmus with the Turing scheme. Under Erasmus, participating countries waived their tuition fees. However, under Turing, the Government placed only an expectation on institutions that they would waive fees. Given the pressure on university finances across the UK, is there any data on whether universities have waived fees? If an institution does not waive its fees, has that had an impact on engagement by students from disadvantaged backgrounds? Also—this is specifically for Ellie Bevan—what is the position in Wales with the Taith scheme? Is it the same?

**Ellie Bevan:** Similar to what I imagine is the Turing scheme position, there is no tuition fee waiver. Obviously, that would be a benefit in terms of the opportunity for students to study abroad, but it has not been raised with us as a significant issue by the higher education institutions in Wales.

As other speakers have alluded to, there is more flexibility and there are shorter-term mobility opportunities with Turing; the same is the case with Taith. We offer mobilities of a minimum of three days for learners in most of the sectors. For higher education students, the minimum has gone down to one week to make it as accessible as possible. We still offer semester-long and year-long mobility opportunities, but the HEIs have been able to negotiate those opportunities and have not raised the waiver as a significant issue with us. Obviously, if it was resolved, it would be to the benefit of all involved.

09:45

**Neil Bibby:** Are there any other thoughts from panel members on that question?

The key difference between Taith and Turing is that the former is reciprocal, whereas the latter only allows for outward mobility. Another important difference is that Taith is open to staff as well as learners, but Turing is only open to learners. Is there data yet that details how staff and inward students engage with Taith? If so, when could that become available?

**Ellie Bevan:** We are currently working on a page on our website that shares information on completed projects. We report participant data once it has been reported to us. At the moment, we report what is planned. At the point of application, the project organisers will say to us that they want to take X number of staff and learners away to do Y activity. We publish those numbers on our website, and once the project is complete and all the mobilities have taken place, we will publish that as part of the completed project page, so all that information will be available.

I have some current data on outward mobilities, inward mobilities and staff, which is just to date, so it is only up to December 2024. Across all the sectors, we have funded around 1,800 staff to participate and just over 5,000 learners and young people. Obviously, we get reports every day from the participants, so the numbers will continue to increase, but at the moment that is where we are at.

We are currently on 5,600-odd outward mobilities and just over 800 inward mobilities—that is across staff and learners. Up to 30 per cent of the funding is offered for use in inward reciprocal mobility opportunities.

We have found that how much is taken up varies across the sectors. Schools are particularly keen on inward opportunities because it enables them to form partnerships and to bring staff in, which can be quite difficult for them to do otherwise. Primary schools are also particularly keen because it enables them to bring teachers in who will benefit a wider year group of children who may not be able to travel.

However, the uptake of inward opportunities is definitely lower than we would have anticipated at the beginning of the programme.

**Neil Bibby:** Thanks very much.

**The Convener:** I will ask a supplementary question on that, just to be completely clear. There will be students in Wales who go through the Turing route as well as the Taith route—is that correct?

**Ellie Bevan:** Yes. Schools, higher education institutions and further education colleges can apply to Turing as well as to Taith. I think that most of the HEIs do that; they apply to both Turing and Taith. They will not always apply to both each year—if they have sufficient funding, they will not reapply. However, I think that all the HEIs have applied to both programmes.

Fewer FE colleges apply to both. There are a number that apply to Turing, but the majority apply to Taith. In schools, it is much more weighted towards applying to Taith than to Turing. However, in principle, they can all apply to both.

**The Convener:** Okay, thank you. Mr Bibby, have you finished?

**Neil Bibby:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I bring in Mr Brown—our Mr Brown.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** I will first give a bit of context before I ask the question, because I want to make sure that the question is well understood. I entirely agree and accept the point about the soft power element and the generational impact that the exchanges that we have had over many years have had, and I think that we underestimate soft power at our peril.

I participated in an exchange scheme at university for a year—not in the EU. I do not know whether I deserve praise or blame for this, but I was the first one to go to Canada on the scheme, and I was followed a few years later by someone who is now a Conservative member of the Parliament, which shows that when you have established that link, it grows over time. As a result, we also had people coming from Canada to Dundee university.

I will not go down the fruitless avenue of trying to compare Turing with Erasmus. I agree with the UK Government—I do not often say that—when it says that doing so is comparing two different types of activities. However, is there a danger that the institutions and the students involved overestimate the complexity of what is now required to continue these exchange schemes? The scheme that I was on in the 1980s had no support from the British Council or anybody else—the university just did it with another university in Canada, and, of course, that involved visas and so on. They just had an agreement that no fees would exchange hands and that they would support accommodation and food and so on. Is there a danger that, because it was so easy and seamless before, we do not take the full opportunities because there will be complication and bureaucracy? We keep comparing the situation with what we had before.

For what it is worth, I think that we should never have left the EU. It has been a disaster in many ways, and every local authority area in Scotland voted to stay in. However, is it not the case that the memory of what was there before and how easy it was might prevent us from taking up the full raft of potential opportunities? I invite my namesake, Mr Brown, to respond first.

**Peter Brown:** That is an interesting question. The honest answer is that I do not know. I imagine that there is a theoretical danger, but the complexities that Professor Cardwell described in

bringing that mobility to pass for travelling to and from Europe might still be there. However, yes, there are still opportunities for international mobility. It is a personal opinion. I am not sure what my view on that would be, but there is a theoretical possibility of that being the case.

**Professor Cardwell:** I should have also declared an interest in that I was an Erasmus student in the 90s, also in France. For me, it was a life-changing opportunity. I do not come from a wealthy background, and I was the first in my family to go to university. Subsequent to that, as a graduate student, I went on an exchange to Japan for a year, which was also life changing and career enhancing.

You are right: many of the links that UK institutions and individual departments have with other institutions have continued on the bilateral basis of what has been agreed and operated for a number of years. It has always been a challenge, for the reasons that I identified, to get students on board. The resourcing issue for universities and how the financing works means that a lot of energy is focused on bringing in fee-paying students from abroad, to support the financing of the UK students. Erasmus has been a strong part of that, and universities were very much behind it, but making those links between the soft power and the economic benefits of having those links is challenging.

We operate links with universities, and we are aware of the challenges. One of the challenges in getting students on board is being able to offer certainty, particularly when we talk to the students who are conscious about funding. Non-European institutions do not have the sort of guarantees that Erasmus had—you knew that you were not going to be charged fees because that was an absolute no-no. you knew what the cost of living would be and so on. The situation is not quite the same now. The issues are not insurmountable, but the situation is a bit more challenging.

We sometimes assume that setting up bilateral links with institutions in, say, North America will be easy, but it is actually very challenging because the education model there is very different to ours and there are issues around fees and what students expect that they are going to do. Likewise, there are not that many higher education institutions in Australia, because of the population figures. Sometimes we approach institutions and they say, “We already have a link with the UK but our students are interested in going to places in Asia or places that are non-English speaking,” so, although the UK is always a draw, there are definite challenges in setting up those links.

There is a raft of other countries that have not had a tradition of welcoming students, and academics and universities must be aware of our duty of care to students and make sure that we are sending them somewhere that will be academically worth while but which can also provide levels of support, so that students do not have a bad experience that could have been prevented. Again, that speaks to our familiarity with universities across Europe under Erasmus, which had been built up since the 80s.

**Keith Brown:** I will come to Ms Bevan shortly, because I know that that question was probably less relevant—

**The Convener:** Mr Brown wanted to come back in on that point.

**Peter Brown:** I just want to add something. Although I accept the premise of the question, I think that it is important that we emphasise the benefits of mobility schemes, which include supporting connections, understanding and trust, broadening horizons, preparing young people to operate in a global interconnected world, supporting international ambitions, and so on. Certainly, we would be very interested in seeing what more can be done proactively to encourage more outward and inward mobility.

**Keith Brown:** That was my next question. Professor Cardwell referred to challenges with attracting North American students, but those problems were overcome in a fairly straightforward way in the 1980s, when things were perhaps more complex, in some ways. I am not sure what has changed since then, although, there have certainly been changes to visas and so on in the US.

I have a question about what Peter Brown has just said. I do not need to be convinced about the value and benefits of programmes such as these. When I came back from Canada, a woman followed me and married me and gave birth to our three children, who are Canadian Scots, so a link was established with the Maritimes and Canada that had not been there before.

Peter Brown made a point about peace; I think that peace and understanding are key here, but they are very hard to quantify—although, of course, the EU was awarded the Nobel peace prize, because of its ability to diminish the prospect of war after the second world war. The way to try to convince Governments of whichever stripe to reinstate such programmes and, I hope, to reverse Brexit, is to be much more explicit about the benefits. I am not sure that we have done that; I think that we have taken them for granted. What metrics can we use to measure the value of soft power in order to make a more effective case for exchange schemes to continue in future?

**Peter Brown:** I do not have the details, but I can certainly make a report on the benefits and value of soft power available to the committee.

**Keith Brown:** Will that report have objective standards that people will accept, if you know what I mean? Will it be quite a compelling report, and not just someone's opinion?

**Peter Brown:** It is a data driven and compelling report. I can make it available to the committee.

**Keith Brown:** Before I go to Professor Cardwell with the same question, I invite Ellie Bevan to talk about the benefits of the programme in Wales.

**Ellie Bevan:** From our perspective, there are huge benefits. The loss of Erasmus+ was devastating and damaging to education sectors across the UK. With the introduction of the Taith programme, we have seen, as I mentioned before, that we can do something that not only fills the gap, but provides more and greater opportunities for those who may not have engaged under Erasmus+ or other previous programmes.

One of the speakers alluded to additional support being provided. In Taith, we have tried really hard to do that to ensure that those who have little or no experience of international exchange programmes, particularly in the youth, adult education and school sectors, are given the appropriate support to enable them to participate in them. There is a huge desire for and interest in international opportunities, but we need to overcome the barriers and help people to engage with and participate in them.

We established Taith very quickly. It was introduced and set up within about six months of the work on the programme starting. That has meant that we have continued to engage with stakeholders after its launch. Broadly, although we launched a version of Erasmus+, we have spoken to stakeholders about what worked with that programme and what did not, what we should keep and what we should maintain, and to establish where we could meet a need that had not been met before.

In my submission, I shared some numbers—which were kindly shared by British Council colleagues who used to run Erasmus+—on Welsh engagement with Erasmus+ versus Taith. They are not completely comparable because the programmes and how we operate are different, but the numbers show that, within the youth, adult education and school sectors particularly, there was huge untapped potential and that a lot of young people and learners in Wales who, for various reasons, would previously not have been able to go on an exchange are now getting that opportunity.

We have Erasmus+, Turing and Taith. There are a lot of different ways of doing things. We can learn a lot from how each programme operates to create a genuinely inclusive, accessible opportunity for all learners, young people and staff in the education sectors.

10:00

**Keith Brown:** Professor Cardwell, I am conscious that everybody I have spoken to who did a year's exchange described it as the best year that they had at university or of their academic career. How can we best demonstrate the benefits of that?

**Professor Cardwell:** You are absolutely right. What is generally needed are people who advocate for exchanges. The risk of lower numbers participating means that you do not have the people who are able to pass that on. At a micro level in the department, I made sure that the students who came back told the students in the year below who were eligible to go, "You might feel nervous or you might be apprehensive about it but I did it, I was fine and it was great."

The other way to do it is to get employers on board. I would present students with the opportunities and a quotation from a law firm saying that, if it saw something like that on the student's CV, it would want to see them because it tells you so much about somebody that they took that step and went.

In a sense, it also does not matter where people go. When I worked at the University of Sheffield, I created links where the UK did not have many—largely with central and eastern European countries. I had two students go to the University of Zagreb in Croatia, for example. They were the only UK students there on Erasmus, so I told them that they had just made their CVs unique and that few people can do that. Sure enough, when they came back and turned up at a job interview alongside lots of other graduates with the same degree classification and similar experiences, an interviewer would ask them why they went there and they could say that they wanted to challenge themselves.

The opportunities are there, but it took a lot of personal effort as well as institutional support behind it to do that. I needed to get parents on board and put on open days to ensure that we had buy-in from them and that they would tell the students that they should take the opportunity. It is nerve-wracking to leave home for five or 10 months, but it can be done. As you said, I have never had a student say that they wished that they had not done it.

I have published an academic study on the benefit to academic grades. I can send the link. If we ask whether students who have participated in an exchange do better in their degrees, the answer is yes. That is backed up by evidence from me and others.

**Peter Brown:** I spent a year in Germany as a language assistant back in the day. I am not overdramatising when I say that that year changed my life and that, in one way or another, it probably led to me sitting here talking to the committee.

I will move to a slightly different angle on demonstrating the value and look at arts and culture. At the British Council, we are working on a report on the value of international working in culture. It is not quite ready yet, but it will be ready soon. The early data—the headline findings, if you like—includes the following points. First, international working builds cumulative benefits over time, which enables sustainable growth and deeper artistic connections. Secondly, creative exchange fosters artistic development and challenges organisations to innovate. Thirdly, international working creates essential revenue streams and long-term economic returns. Finally, international collaboration strengthens communities through shared learning and cross-cultural projects.

That is a slightly different area, if you like—international working in the arts and culture—but the report demonstrates the value in that way. We will share the report when it is available.

**The Convener:** That is very helpful, given that we have been looking at the impact on and challenges for touring artists, particularly in the area of Scottish culture and folk artists.

Before we move on, I want to ask about soft power. Universities Scotland mentioned in its evidence to the committee the impact that leaving Erasmus+ is having on horizon projects. Professor Cardwell talked about people coming back to the UK to do their masters and so on. Horizon is more in the science and research area, but do you have any thoughts on that? Have you done any work on it, or do you have an indication that there has been an impact on horizon? Since the Windsor framework, we are now back in horizon, but we are not quite back in Erasmus+.

Does anyone have a comment on that?

**Peter Brown:** I echo what Universities Scotland said. From our point of view, it is welcome that we can now access the horizon Europe programme again. The UK and Scotland are a huge part of that, and there is no doubt that the association with horizon Europe will bring further opportunities for Scotland. I come back to the fact that Scotland has many world-class researchers across the country, and participation in the horizon programme enables them to access funding and support that they might not otherwise have. That is a very welcome development.

**Ellie Bevan:** I cannot comment too much on horizon. However, in Taith, we have funding for early-career researchers. One piece of feedback that we got from the sector was that, when people are later on in their career, it is much easier to source funding and get involved in bigger projects. That was one gap that we wanted to fill by providing mobility opportunities for PhD students and early-career researchers, so that they can take part and build their career but also create links and form partnerships with organisations and universities overseas.

The feedback that we have received from the research sector in Wales is that that is a very welcome funding stream and, particularly now that we are back in horizon, it will be a stepping stone for researchers to develop their careers.

**Professor Cardwell:** I echo that. Recently, I was involved in job interviews for academic posts at my current institution. In doing those, we always ask about people's research plans and where they might seek funding, which is, of course, very important to be able to conduct research. Horizon is always mentioned as an advantage. If it was not there, I am not sure that we would attract the top talent to UK institutions that we have traditionally done. That is particularly important for science and engineering students, but it is also important for social sciences and arts and humanities.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much.

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** Professor Cardwell, I will come to you first on this question. Last week, we had feedback from NUS Scotland on the difficulties of timing with some application processes for Turing and for the Scottish education exchange programme, or SEEP. Are you receiving similar feedback from students who might be looking to access those schemes? From an academic's point of view, what else would you like to be incorporated into those schemes to make the process as easy as possible for students, academics and those supporting the students, so that we get as many people as possible to do exchanges?

**Professor Cardwell:** To go back to what I said earlier, the point about certainty is crucial. With Erasmus, because it was a five-year or six-year EU programme, the budget was set up and ring fenced, so we had certainty on what was going to happen, even for the next five years.

I am talking as someone who works in a university: we have to convince students to come in and do a degree in the first place, in particular in those subject areas where it is more challenging to recruit students. By that, I mean languages, given the drop in the numbers of students doing language degree courses; that is even more the case in England with A-levels.

Given the nature of degree programmes, and—to be frank—the competition between institutions to get students in, it is important to be able to give

potential students, in particular those who are concerned about their finances, an indication of what they can expect. You can say to them, "After having done the first two years here, you'll be able to study abroad in that institution for five months or a year; this is roughly the level of funding you can expect, and these are the conditions." It is crucial to give students as much certainty as possible on that, because we do not want them to have concerns and decide to swap out from, or leave, the institution altogether; that is, in general, not good for them and it is certainly not good for institutions.

**Gillian Mackay:** Is there anything else, from an academic's point of view, that you would like to see in the current schemes to facilitate movement among early-career researchers and to enable academics to do teaching exchanges?

**Professor Cardwell:** Absolutely. Teaching exchange is vital, although it has not always been used as much as it might have been—we have not always maxed out on the funding. That is often just because it can be quite tricky from an operational point of view to say, "Where do you want to go and who's going to arrange it?". That often needs to be done individually by academics, often using contacts that they have made at conferences and so on.

One of the key benefits of Erasmus was in enabling the mobility of staff other than academic staff. Academic staff often travel for conferences and so on, so we have that international exposure, but there are people working in professional services, and administrative staff, who do not. Sending someone abroad for a few days—sometimes, universities would do outreach and training courses to bring people together—was an important way of showing that not all universities work in the same way as universities in Scotland or in the UK. Those are the kinds of things that we think about. For example, we treat students in a particular way because that is traditionally how we have done it in higher education, but it is not at all the same in France, where universities have not had the same pastoral role with students. It is really helpful for the wider pool of staff, rather than just one person, to be able to gain that understanding, as they can advise students and say, "This is what it's like there".

Again, it comes back to the point that I made earlier. What we need here is advocates, and as wide a group as possible. It cannot just be one academic saying, "You should do this—it's a good idea". We need people right across the education sectors to stress the benefits.

To go back to students, I note that we are finding that way more students now express anxiety about their current situation, their future and so on. Even though there is almost universal agreement that mobility is a good thing, it takes a lot for someone to do it, and there is always a danger that they will not take that step. Giving students confidence about it, with a number of people around to advocate why mobility is a good thing, is essential, alongside the material questions of funding and so on.

**The Convener:** Mr Kerr, did you want to come back in?

**Stephen Kerr:** I just wanted to agree with colleagues about the influence of the global soft power index; I think that that is what it is called, if I am not mistaken—

**Peter Brown:** That is one measure.

**Stephen Kerr:** It is accepted in the UK. I think that the UK was number 1 in 2021 and is always in the top two, which is something to be grateful for. That is because of the kinds of things that we are talking about.

I have a question for Ms Bevan from Taith. I admire the way in which the Labour Administration in Wales has invested in Taith. You basically have about £15 million a year over a four-year stretch to invest in it. In Scotland, there is nothing, other than—as Gillian Mackay mentioned—SEEP, which has, I think, had only £1 million of funding in total. We are really far behind Wales.

Have you had discussions with the Scottish Government about what we can learn from Taith so that we can fast-track the roll-out of our own version of it in Scotland? I think that that would have cross-party support.

10:15

**Ellie Bevan:** We have not had discussions with the Scottish Government. We are not Welsh Government employees. Taith is Welsh Government-funded, but it has been set up as a wholly owned subsidiary company of Cardiff University, so we cannot talk on the Welsh Government's behalf.

As I mentioned earlier, we can learn a huge amount from one another. I know that SEEP has developed, and there has been a lot of learning from the Turing scheme. We at Taith talk to people in the EU quite a lot about Erasmus+; we learn from one another and from other international exchange programmes in Europe, such as Movetia in Switzerland. There is huge value in those who work on the programmes coming together to speak about the lessons from each of them. We all have different experiences and take different approaches.

At Taith and in Wales, we have seen the huge impact that focusing on all sectors can have. We maintain the number of opportunities in higher

education but we try to extend them to other sectors so that all young people and learners in Wales have an exchange opportunity. The more that we can come together to discuss how we address and approach issues now and in the future, the stronger the opportunities will be for those learners and young people.

**Stephen Kerr:** As a Scottish Parliament committee, we are interested in what is happening in Scotland and the Scottish Government's initiative in this policy area. Did I hear correctly that you have not had any interaction with the people who are administering SEEP? I agree that there is so much to learn from talking to everybody and anybody about all those ideas and how to best make them work. Am I right in understanding that this end of the UK has not engaged with you at all?

**Ellie Bevan:** As I understand it, there were some conversations with the Scottish Government when the initial ideas were announced in Scotland. I was not involved in those discussions, because they happened when Taith was early in its development. I cannot speak for the Welsh Government—I know that it speaks to Scottish colleagues a lot, but I cannot speak about the discussions. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with SEEP colleagues and to learn from one another.

**Stephen Kerr:** The Education, Children and Young People Committee, when I was a member, took evidence from Taith representatives. I do not know whether you gave evidence, Ellie.

**Ellie Bevan:** No, I did not.

**Stephen Kerr:** It was a very useful session. We can learn so much from Wales, as we think about what we can do in Scotland.

The UK Government's youth mobility scheme visa seems to work as a bilateral arrangement with various countries, but it is not universal. Our briefing mainly mentions Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, along with Andorra, Iceland, Japan, Monaco, San Marino and Uruguay. It is an interesting mix of countries.

Mr Brown and the other witnesses, can we take what we have learned from deployment of a youth mobility scheme visa and extend it more widely on a bilateral basis? Does it work?

**Peter Brown:** I am afraid that, as a representative of the British Council, which is an apolitical organisation, I cannot comment on UK Government visa regimes.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is fair enough. I suspect that Ellie Bevan might be in the same boat. I keep coming back to you for opinions, Professor Cardwell. What is your response?

**Professor Cardwell:** That is a benefit of being an academic. From the EU perspective, the European Commission is not keen for member states to negotiate bilaterally with the UK on that issue. Legally, it is possible, but it depends on whether member states are keen to do it or see the benefit in pushing for tangible EU-wide outcomes of—as was mentioned earlier—reset of relations between the UK and EU.

**Stephen Kerr:** Is youth mobility a basis for development of a reset between the UK and the EU? From what I understand, our youth mobility scheme visa works rather well.

**Professor Cardwell:** Yes. The number of people going to and from Andorra, Iceland and Uruguay will be—

**Stephen Kerr:** A bit limited.

**Professor Cardwell:** —somewhat different from the number going to and from France, Germany and Spain, given the political dimension, but the visa does provide a basis. The public opinion surveys that I have seen show that such a scheme would generally have public support, but that decision would need to be made. Legally, I do not think that there would be too much of a problem in doing that.

**Alexander Stewart:** I have a question for Ms Bevan. The Taith programme has done extremely well, as you have indicated and as we have heard from others. Is that because there has been real outreach and engagement and because the programme has been adapted to fit some of the criteria that you looked at with others? What support mechanism is provided? It certainly appears that the programme is successful because there is the impetus to improve, capture things, provide support, encourage and adapt.

**Ellie Bevan:** Exactly. As I mentioned, we created the programme with such speed that we took the Erasmus+ programme as a starting point, but as we continued to develop the programme, we spoke more and more to various sectors—in particular, the non-higher-education sector. The Erasmus+ programme traditionally focused on HE first, then on other sectors. We got feedback from the non-HE sector, and one of the reasons why it had not engaged was that the programme was felt to be impenetrable—the language was quite difficult to understand, and it was quite hard to get in. If you were in, you knew what the rules were, but it was quite hard to break in. A lot of the organisations in Wales that we spoke to felt that the programme was not an opportunity for them. Schools applied for staff mobility, but did not take learners—a lot of schools did, but that was one of the main pieces of feedback.

We were keen to understand why that was the case. We know that Erasmus+ is an amazing

programme that offers incredible opportunities, so why were not more people and organisations in Wales taking them up? For us, it was about providing support, outreach and engagement, having knowledge of the programme and ensuring that organisations felt that the programme was meant for them.

In October 2023, we refreshed our strategy so that the programme focused on inclusion and accessibility—making opportunities available to those who would not otherwise have them. Alongside that, we continued to speak to the sector as much as possible, in order to understand what the barriers were.

We have programme support officers who are dedicated to the sector. They understand the challenges that the sector faces in operating generally—in particular, in international engagement. They are able to provide one-to-one support, which is much easier for a small programme. Wales is not huge—we do not have huge numbers of people—which enables us to provide direct one-to-one support. We have webinars for group conversations, and we always offer the opportunity to call us to ask us questions. That approach has helped organisations to apply physically, but it has also helped them to understand that we really meant it when we said that we wanted them to apply, because support was in place.

We also have Taith champions—organisations that have experience of applying for and receiving funding. They can provide direct support in the application process for those that have little or no experience in grant, let alone international exchange, applications.

It is an on-going process. There is still lots more that we can do to encourage and support all organisations to apply. We regularly review our documentation and how we talk about international exchange. Can we make the language simpler and more accessible? Can we provide hand-holding for organisations that do incredible work with young people, adult learners and participants, but need a bit of extra help to understand how to articulate that in an application? We all know that they do incredible work, but how can they tell us that so that they can extend it?

**Stephen Kerr:** There was a question about staff that I wanted to come back to. This will challenge Keith Brown's assertion earlier that it is fruitless to compare what we have now with what we had when we were members of Erasmus+. I do not think that it is—

**Keith Brown:** That was not my personal view—the Government said that.

**Stephen Kerr:** In that case, you will be pleased to hear that I do not necessarily agree with it. I think that it is important that we measure what we have now against what we had then.

One aspect of Erasmus+ was that it included academic staff—Turing does not. In the Turing arrangement, staff members are expected to do the bilateral networking that you described earlier, directly funded by themselves or their institution, or through another method. Previously, those exchanges were publicly funded. I want to get a feel for what has changed. Can you quantify the level of academic exchange that is going on now, compared with what we had previously?

**The Convener:** Peter Brown, do you want to come in on that?

**Stephen Kerr:** I was directing that question at Professor Cardwell, unless—

**Peter Brown:** It is fine for Professor Cardwell to do it. [*Laughter.*]

**Stephen Kerr:** I am very happy for you to answer.

**Peter Brown:** I was going to say that I could not quantify it here and now. We could try to get the data for you.

**Stephen Kerr:** That would be brilliant—thank you. I am sorry—I did not mean to cut you out. I was directing my comments to Professor Cardwell.

**Professor Cardwell:** There is always a lot of international engagement because of the nature of universities. Particularly on the academic side, in many disciplines there is always co-operation on writing, research and other things. Post-Covid, there is a case for doing more things online, as we are doing now, which would not have been the case earlier. There has been movement in that sense. Plus, there are sustainability considerations, as well as ones about need.

Under Erasmus+, we used the staff programme to support strong links. If we wanted to know what else we could do or how we could support students using the exchange, staff could have face-to-face meetings or ask the partner institution, then come back and tell students, "Look—I've been and it's great." That happened not just with academic staff but with professional services staff—it was one of the benefits of the programme.

It would be difficult to quantify the change because, even back then, the funding would not always cover a whole visit. The institution would support the visits: it would depend on how much emphasis institutions placed on that. It is also possible—certainly, it is at my current institution—to visit partner institutions not only for exchanges, but for several other things, such as research

partnerships, dual degrees and programmes, or shorter-term projects. However, without Erasmus+, there is no easy mechanism that is built in, with funding available, for us to build on the links that we had before.

**Stephen Kerr:** So, basically, it is pretty hard to say that there is evidence one way or the other.

**Professor Cardwell:** I would say so. You could do a direct comparison of a long-standing link, to show that it used to be funded through an Erasmus+ grant but people now have to fund it themselves, then see how many links are like that. However, with things like online meetings being so much easier than they were before—

**Stephen Kerr:** I presume that institutions' bilateral relations have continued, perhaps with more online meetings.

**Professor Cardwell:** Some of them have, but some have disappeared: it depends on the strength of the link. Links can be set up with the intention to exchange students, and perhaps more students have gone one way than the other. Then, the institutions look at the resource impact and decide that it is not working any more, so there is less desire to continue. That can work in both directions: I have had links that have disappeared because the partners did not think that there was demand for them. It is tricky.

**Stephen Kerr:** I suppose that the institutions have to get what they want out of the relationships in order for them to be justified.

**Professor Cardwell:** Exactly. That is especially the case considering resources in higher education—which, as we know, is a big issue.

**Stephen Kerr:** We have some evidence in our papers about that underlying issue.

Mr Brown said that he might be able to get us some data.

**Peter Brown:** I am not sure that I can add anything now. I will go with Professor Cardwell's analysis.

10:30

**Keith Brown:** I have a minor question. Again, I am arguing against myself, but I am that kind of fair-minded person. It is on the point that Professor Cardwell made about the fact that people who have been on exchanges—I do not want to put words in your mouth—tend to achieve better grades or better outcomes in their degrees.

Is it not also the case—I genuinely do not know the answer to this—that, in order to qualify for many of the schemes, a person has to have passed all their exams that year? They cannot do a resit because they will be away at the new institution, or something like that. Does the person need to have achieved some other standard? Does a self-selecting group tend to do exchanges?

**Professor Cardwell:** Yes—there is a self-selecting element to it. The study that I referred to was one that I did in my previous department with quite a large cohort over several years. One of the differences was that we said that students have to pass everything. The pass rate was generally not really an issue, given that the A-level grades that are required to get entry to the university anyway mean that the person should be academically capable, if they work. The failure rate was very low—those students were not statistically significant.

Sometimes institutions, especially if there is a lower number of places, will send the best students on exchanges, or they will say that students must have an average of 65 per cent or whatever. I saw value in seeing that it is sometimes not those students who need to go, but the students who need a boost on their CV and have had lower grades. That is where we see the big impact. Regarding the study that I referred to, anecdotally, the difference in terms of those doing better having gone on an exchange was about 5 per cent. It was a bit less than that, but the students who were self-selecting were often already achieving high grades. We simply do not give marks that are much higher than that, so there will be little difference in the average. The marks of students who have taken time to get to grips with their studies might not have been so high, but they are the students for whom we see a boost.

Of course, self-selection by students is only one part. The other part is selection based on socioeconomic background, need and so on. A lot of the criticism that was made of Erasmus+ was that it funded middle-class students to go off and have a holiday, which was largely unfair. Of course, some students went to universities that would not check very intently what they were doing or make sure that they were getting the appropriate number of credits, and so on, but by and large that was not my experience—students went and they worked. Of course, there were more demands on them than on others, but the aim was to try to get people who had not thought about it and who did not have an international background in their family to think about it. Those were the students for whom it really made a difference.

**Ellie Bevan:** Professor Cardwell answered the question very well with regard to HE. I just want to extend the answer beyond HE to other sectors. The feedback that we have received—which is primarily anecdotal, so we are looking at how we can quantify it—is that, within the youth and school

sectors, an opportunity for international exchange can often help to re-engage learners with education. We have examples of participants in school mobilities programmes and youth exchanges who have come back with a renewed desire to get involved in society and education in a way that, for various reasons, they did not have before. That is to do with having an opportunity to participate and engage, but the exchanges also open their eyes to new ways of doing things, new ways of living and new cultures, which can help to re-engage them with education.

It is beneficial, aside from the higher education aspect, for opportunities to be made available to people who are struggling with education, because they can help to get them back into it in a meaningful way.

**Keith Brown:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I will ask a final question. I do not know whether I will be able to get an answer, but I want to ask it anyway. Professor Cardwell mentioned a drop in A-level participation in languages and the difficulties that some universities have in relation to funding for languages. We all support the value of soft power and the positives of exchanges, but it is reported that there has been a general drop in the importance to young people of studying languages.

In addition, the impact of Covid meant that students who were studying at that time were not able to take up the longer exchanges that they might normally have taken up. There were also concerns about the sustainability of some specialist degrees in translation. This might not be related to Brexit in particular, but is there concern that there is pressure on the languages sector and that, over time, it is diminishing?

**Professor Cardwell:** Traditionally, the prerequisite for entry to a languages degree has been an A-level or a higher in the language. Of course, there are some language degrees that students can start from scratch, but the number of those tends to be much smaller, and we have not seen growth in what we might describe as in-demand languages, such as Chinese. We tend to see exchanges through the lens of their purpose being for people to improve their knowledge of the language in question, but in many higher education institutions across Europe, there has been a proliferation of programmes in English. That means that it is possible to send students to Poland, for example, to study in English.

As I have mentioned, traditionally that is how we have seen Erasmus+, but the same is true of other states, too. The UK and Ireland are popular choices because they offer people the opportunity to improve their English in the classroom and elsewhere. However, Erasmus+ is used in a number of ways. We have started to see generations of students who are interested in going to Poland, for example, because they have family heritage there, so it is a way of reconnecting with that and improving their language skills.

One of the questions that I am often asked about Erasmus+—this is mentioned in the paperwork for today’s meeting—is why Turkey, which is not an EU member state, is so high in the table of countries that participate. Turkey has a long association with Erasmus+ and is very active in the programme. One of the ways in which Turkey has leveraged its use of Erasmus+ has been in enabling students of Turkish origin, from Germany and the Netherlands in particular, to spend a semester or a year there.

Likewise, students from other participating countries use Erasmus+ in slightly different ways. For students from Finland, for example, the most popular destination is Sweden. That might seem to be a little unusual, given that Sweden is next door to Finland—you might think that students from Finland would want to go somewhere sunnier or, at least, somewhere a bit more culturally different. However, Finland has two official languages—Finnish and Swedish—but most people do not speak Swedish, so going to Sweden is a way for students to improve their Swedish. That is helpful when it comes to getting civil service jobs, for which it is necessary to speak both languages.

When we look at the patterns across Europe and the different ways in which Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes have been used, we find different things. In the UK, we have overemphasised the language improvement aspect, instead of telling people that they can go abroad and study in English, while learning the language of the country in question on the side, and that they will thrive in doing so. However, it is trickier to convince people to do that who have not had the exposure to languages in school that previous generations had.

**Peter Brown:** I will address the school sector, not the university sector. For some years, the British Council has carried out research on language trends in Wales, Northern Ireland and England. For the first time, we have done that research in Scotland. Only this week—on Monday—we published our “Language Trends Scotland 2024/25” report, which I will share with the committee.

That report contains some interesting data. It does not cover every local authority school and independent school in Scotland, but it surveys a good sample of local authority schools and independent schools. I can make some interesting observations off the top of my head. Ninety-eight per cent of local authority primary schools are

teaching languages. That is a fantastic number—it is great to see languages being taught at the lower level. As we go up through the levels, the numbers get smaller.

It is interesting that the usual suspects—if I can call them that—such as French and German, are still being studied. Spanish has recently overtaken French as the most popular modern European foreign language that is studied in schools at higher level. The report contains a wealth of information that I think will be of interest to the committee, so I will share it with you immediately after the meeting, so that members can look at the data.

**Ellie Bevan:** Opportunities for children and young people to go overseas bring languages to life. I studied French at school, but I found it very difficult to understand why, because I did not go to France and have the opportunity to learn from the experience. As a young person, it was difficult for me to see the value of it, whereas now, I wish that I had been more engaged with languages, because they are so important.

Mobility cannot solve the problem of reduced numbers of children and young people studying languages, but it can help to enthuse them and help them to realise why languages are important, as well as opening their eyes to different cultures and ways of living. It is really important for school children in particular to have the opportunity to travel abroad so that they can put their language skills into practice. A new curriculum was introduced recently in Wales, and it requires more language learning and teaching in primary schools. In Taith, we have seen that schools are wanting to send their teachers away on language immersion courses to help them to better understand how to teach a language when it is not their specialist subject. There is huge value in the physical opportunities.

**The Convener:** That is very helpful.

We have exhausted questions from committee members. I thank the witnesses for attending the meeting.

10:42

*Meeting continued in private until 11:24.*

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