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American brain drain?

The crazier the US seems, the more attractively sane Europe looks to much of the world — including foreign students and academics

Never let a good crisis go to waste. The crazier America seems, the more attractively sane Europe looks to much of the world. Expect a fall in US influence in culture and social attitudes, its soft power fading fast as well as its financial force. Here is where Europe will find itself a magnetic draw for those turning away in revulsion from Donald Trump's US.

One of Europe's greatest exports is education, with 1.66 million students from abroad studying at EU universities. Germany attracts the most, taking 23.3 per cent of the total; France has 16 per cent and the Netherlands takes 10 per cent. Some small EU countries rely on a surprisingly high number of foreign students: three-quarters of students in Luxembourg come from abroad, as do 27 per cent of students in Latvian universities. Three-quarters of Malta's doctoral students are foreign.

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America draws in a million foreign students — fewer than the EU but a ripe plum ready to be plucked by European universities. President Trump's outrageous treatment of US universities and widespread cuts to grants and scientific research are sending some of their top academics fleeing to seek out countries that will welcome their brains, their data and their research. But it is foreign academics and foreign students studying in US universities that have been most brutally treated, sending shockwaves around the world. Trump appears to be doing everything he can to advertise to future global students to stay away and study elsewhere.

Foreign students are being deported for infractions as minor as parking or speeding tickets. A reported 500 student visas have been suddenly revoked — with some students sent to deportation centres, and others

told to 'self-deport'. US universities, in a panic, have warned their million foreign students not to travel abroad for fear of never getting back in again. That is an extremely strong deterrent to others deciding whether to study in the US. The second-largest group of foreign students in the US, after Indians, are Chinese. Is it realistic to expect new cohorts of them to flock to America, or might Europe look a far more attractive place to be?

A vital part of the economy

UK universities are heavily reliant on foreign students, who pay much higher fees than British students. They contribute 23 per cent of the costs of universities. They represent Britain's second-largest export, after the financial sector. The £40 billion they add to the economy is a vital part of the life and employment in university towns, especially in the North, with fewer other big earners.

Beyond that, as in all of Europe, the UK workforce needs to bring in people, none better than university students. Our ageing population, with its sharply falling birth rate, needs to attract skills from everywhere.

There will be global competition for them. But as in every other country, immigration is a fraught issue, fuelling support for the far right. In the British cabinet at the moment, there is tension; the home secretary, responsible for reducing rising immigration numbers, meets opposition from others around the cabinet table who need construction workers for an ambitious building and infrastructure programme, and care workers to look after the growing number of frail elderly people. That conflict is reflected across the continent.

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The UN's international immigration statistics include anyone who stays in a country for a year. That means they include all foreign students, greatly increasing the overall apparent numbers. But students are not migrants: most go home. It's time to take them out of the UN figures, only adding them if they stay beyond their initial student visas. As 40 per cent of the UK's 'immigrants' are, in fact, students, they artificially swell the numbers, allowing the far right to stir up undue alarm.

The EU and the UK should rapidly redouble their efforts to attract students who pre-Trump would have chosen America. This is the time to up the investment in a great promotion campaign. Some of this already

happens, such as the EU's Study in Europe promotion publicising the EU as a destination for higher education, showcasing Europe's array of study programmes. The European Universities Initiative encourages foreign students, sometimes with financial grants, while the Erasmus scheme fosters international collaboration and exchange of knowledge. The UK, post-Brexit, left Erasmus, creating its own Turing scheme, far inferior with much lower funding and no money for fees: as part of the 'reset' with the EU. It's hoped, Britain will be back inside Erasmus.

This is not just about funding, nor even about attracting people to refill our emptying populations. Universities are cultural hubs spreading liberal democratic ideas and social attitudes. As soft power, they are remarkably effective: a recent survey showed, astonishingly, that more than a quarter of the world's countries (58) had national leaders who were educated at British universities. Now that is global reach and influence that could never be bought in any other way.

Here is the chance to diminish the overpowering might of American culture that has dominated us all for too long. Not just universities, but the arts and popular entertainment deserve an extra shot in the arm from European governments to promote an alternative to a US that has turned alien to us. We no longer recognise or feel affinity with those who chose Donald Trump and Europe is the natural refuge for all Americans who no longer feel at home in their own country.

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