The Taith Program and the Politics of International Learning in Post-Brexit Wales

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In December 2020, Wales, like the rest of the United Kingdom, lost access to the Erasmus program when the UK Government chose not to participate in the 2021 -2027 cycle (Adams, 2020). This paper examines how the Welsh Government responded to that loss by establishing Taith, its own international learning exchange program. Drawing on analysis of Welsh Government policy documents, ministerial statements, press releases and Senedd committee evidence, alongside academic literature on paradiplomacy and small-state strategies, the paper investigates how Taith sustains elements of European cooperation within a devolved and post-Brexit context. It argues that Taith represents an act of adaptation, resilience and policy innovation through which Wales asserts international agency and aligns itself with European values despite lacking the foreign policy competence to influence UK-wide decisions on mobility. To develop this argument, the paper outlines the context of the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus, examines Taith's design and diplomatic functions, and assesses its limits of scale and sustainability. It concludes by highlighting how Taith serves as a form of devolved diplomacy that projects a distinctive Welsh international identity and underscores the growing political pluralism in post-Brexit UK.

Loss of Erasmus & The Emergence of Taith

Initially launched in 1987, the European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students (Erasmus) has provided structured mobility opportunities for individuals across more than thirty countries (European Commission, 2025a). The program had linked British learners, teachers, and researchers with thousands of European institutions for more than three decades. The European Commission itself reports how, over 37 years, Erasmus has provided opportunities to over 15 million participants, from students to learners and education professionals (European Commission, 2024a). Clearly, Erasmus has provided a large-scale system of cooperation that improves skills, supports institutional partnerships, and promotes the European values of inclusion, participation and cohesion (European Commission, 2025b).

The UK's decision not to participate as an associated third country in the new Erasmus+ program 2021-27 was a significant change in international education provisions (European Commission, 2024b), and a political and symbolic shift away from European integration. As academic accounts report, the impacts of the UK's withdrawal on student mobility were immediate and significant. Highman et al., (2023) recorded a sharp decline in EU student enrolments and noted the loss of hundreds of institutional partnerships built through Erasmus+. Similarly, Wakeling et al., (2024) found there was a substantial reduction in EU students enrolling in the UK after Brexit. First-degree entrants declined by over two-thirds, erasing fifteen years of steady growth. Similarly, Postgraduate numbers also fell, with enrolments for both taught and research degrees decreasing by around 40%,

pushing totals below their 2007 levels. As this literature shows, there was a measurable contraction of the UK's international educational presence, reducing both the scale and the depth of its engagement with European partners.

To replace Erasmus, the UK Government announced the Turing Scheme in 2021. This funding scheme supports UK students to study or work abroad, but offers no reciprocal mobility into the UK (Department for Education, 2025), leading to criticism from the Welsh and Scottish ministers for its lack of reciprocity (Adams, 2021). For instance, Scottish Ministers described the Turing Scheme as a "watered down and less well funded version of Erasmus…[that's] not even an exchange program because there is no support for visits to Scotland" (Riaghaltas na h-Alba, 2020, p. 2). The Welsh Government described the gaps Turing leaves as supporting a "retention of the principle of two-way exchanges and the inclusion of youth work" (Adams, 2021, p. 2). In this context of growing discontent, both the Welsh and Scottish Governments initially requested to rejoin Erasmus+ as nations in their own right. However, in 2021, despite MEPs' efforts to find a pathway for regional participation (Gallardo, 2021), the European Commission confirmed that Wales and Scotland could not associate separately from the UK: association was open only to the UK "as a whole, or not at all" (ACA Secretariat, 2021).

In 2022, in response to this loss of access to Erasmus and the perceived inadequate alternative provided by the UK Government, the Welsh Government announced the creation of Taith, its own international learning exchange program (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2023). Officially launched in 2022, with an initial budget of £65 million for 2022–2026, Taith was designed to fund learners and staff across higher, further, and vocational education, schools, adult education, and youth sectors (Adams, 2021; Nation Cymru, 2022). Most importantly, it sought to preserve two-way exchange and staff opportunities. Taith therefore filled the gaps left by the UK's Turing Scheme, which funds only outbound participation and provides no reciprocal support (Adams, 2021).

Since launching Taith has provided international learning opportunities for over 11,000 participants, facilitated exchanges with more than 90 countries, and supported more than 140 projects across Wales, including significant numbers of learners from underrepresented groups (International Learning Exchange Program Ltd, 2025b; Minister for Education and the Welsh Language Jeremy Miles, 2023). By 2025, total participation exceeded 15,000, prompting the program's extension to 2028 (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2025).

These achievements reflect Taith's early success in restoring international learning opportunities. Yet, as outlined in the abstract, the purpose of this paper is not simply to describe the program, but to examine how it reinterprets Erasmus's ideals within a devolved and post-Brexit landscape. The next section, therefore, considers the political conditions that produced Taith, showing how its development was shaped by limited devolved authority, and how its design reflects a conscious effort to retain European values and support Wales's international positioning.

Taith: Adaptation in Conditions of Constraint

Taith emerged from a context in which devolved governments had no control over the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus. Wales repeatedly expressed their desire to remain in Erasmus, despite the UK Government's position. News reports and ministerial statements from 2016 to 2021 capture this disconnect between the two devolved administrations and the UK Government. Dr Jones, one of the founders of Erasmus, noted in 2017 that Wales wished to continue but was constrained by the UK's stance (Wells, 2017).

> "The Welsh Government has in principle recommended continuing with Erasmus, if Brexit happens, but we don't know what the UK position will be. I want to support the Welsh Government but their efforts are in isolation of what the UK government is doing." (Wells, 2017, p. 3)

Then in 2019 the Education Minister in Wales, Kirsty Williams, described how "with only weeks to go before we leave the EU there are still no plans for a national replacement scheme" and noted that "If the Prime Minister insists on crashing out of the EU without a deal it could cause severe damage" to Welsh education (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2019). These examples show that withdrawal from Erasmus was not a consensus-based decision. This illustrates how Brexit exposed constitutional asymmetries in the UK, leaving devolved governments, like Wales, responsible for addressing the consequences of a policy they did not support.

Taith is therefore an act of adaptation and policy divergence, enabling Wales to assert international agency and uphold connections with Europe in a context where its influence over UK-wide decisions is limited. By using devolved powers to create an alternative mechanism for international learning, even without the authority to remain in Erasmus, Wales protected its policy priorities, which differ from those of the UK Government. The program thus demonstrates how devolved competence can be used creatively to mitigate UK-level decisions that undermine Welsh educational and international ambitions.

This practice of adaptation aligns closely with patterns identified in the paradiplomacy and small-state literature. Lecours (2008) demonstrates that sub-state governments such as Flanders, Quebec and the Basque Country routinely engage in cultural, educational, technical and scientific cooperation as part of the 'second layer' of paradiplomacy. These activities, including bilateral partnerships, decentralised cooperation, and educational exchanges, allow non-sovereign governments to maintain external relationships despite lacking formal foreign-policy powers. Keating (1999) similarly argues that regional governments increasingly operate across borders through networks that blur the boundary between domestic and international affairs, with influence depending on the capacity of regional institutions to articulate and pursue distinctive territorial interests. Taith reflects these practices. By building educational partnerships and maintaining European-facing mobility networks,

Wales uses devolved competence to exercise soft power and sustain international visibility in a post-Brexit context. In doing so, Taith exemplifies how a small, non-sovereign nation can innovate within constitutional constraints to preserve external ties and advance policy priorities that diverge from those of the state. Importantly, this is also evident in the values Taith foregrounds. The program's commitment to reciprocity, inclusion and shared learning forms the substantive content of the international identity Wales seeks to project.

Reciprocal Values of Inclusion and Global Engagement

Taith is consistently presented as a program of reciprocity, inclusion and global engagement. Official Welsh Government guidance defines its purpose as "enabling education staff and learners to spend time abroad as part of their studies" while also "bringing learners and educators from around the world to Wales" (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2023, p. 1). Evidence submitted to the Senedd similarly identifies reciprocity as a core principle, linking two-way exchange to mutual benefit, shared learning and skills development beyond formal education, including creativity, sustainability and digital capability (Taith, 2023). Delivery partners such as Cardiff University (2022), emphasised Taith's aim of developing global mindsets and intercultural skills that support employability and civic participation. Collectively, these policy and institutional narratives conceptualised Taith as a values-driven mobility scheme, aligned with principles that underpin Erasmus.

These values are embedded in the program's design. Taith restores two-way mobility across schools, youth work, adult education, further and higher education, and vocational training (Batchelor, 2021), closely mirroring key principles associated with Erasmus+, including widening participation, staff mobility and long-term partnership-building (Adams, 2021). This design choice is particularly significant when contrasted with the UK Government's Turing Scheme, which funds only outbound mobility and offers no reciprocal support. As Fox and Beech's (2023) show, parliamentary discourse surrounding Erasmus+ emphasised European integration, while the Turing Scheme was framed through "Global Britain" rhetoric centred on sovereignty and soft power. Taith therefore reflects a fundamentally different understanding of international mobility: one grounded in relational exchange rather than one-directional national projection.

This distinction also connects Taith to Wales's broader post-Brexit identity. Taith was conceived within a wider strategic vision for Wales's future place in the world and is closely aligned with the Welsh Government's International Strategy. The strategy frames Wales as an outward-looking nation committed to cooperation and partnership (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2020). Ministerial statements repeatedly link Taith to ambitions to raise "the profile of Wales internationally" (Taith, 2023), with the program described in 2025 as a "shining example" of Wales strengthening its global presence through meaningful exchange (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2025). Within this discourse, mobility is an educational

policy tool and mechanism for articulating Wales's longer-term approach to international engagement in the post-Brexit period.

Building on the patterns of paradiplomacy discussed earlier (Keating, 1999; Lecours, 2008), arguably Taith uses educational and cultural exchange to maintain external relationships and articulate a distinct Welsh presence abroad despite limited devolved powers. This approach reflects what the small-state literature identifies as norm entrepreneurship, where actors promote values such as cooperation, reciprocity and inclusion to maintain visibility and influence (Corbett et al., 2019; Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006). By embedding values of reciprocity, inclusion and cooperation into Taith, the Welsh Government signals continued alignment with European norms and practices. This is reinforced by ministerial rhetoric describing how "Wales is, and will always be, a proudly outward-looking European nation" (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2025). Taith therefore operates not only as a replacement for Erasmus, but as a symbolic and practical expression of Wales's continued alignment with European values and partnerships within the constraints of devolved governance.

However, Wales' capacity to sustain alignment through devolved tools like Taith is structurally limited. Operating on a far smaller scale than Erasmus+, the program has already reduced its initial participation targets by approximately 9,000 in response to rising costs and budgetary pressures (Jones, 2025). Unlike Erasmus+, Taith also lacks the stability of a multi-annual funding framework, with its continuation dependent on Welsh Government budget decisions beyond 2028 (Jones, 2025). These constraints illustrate a central tension of devolved governance: while Wales can reproduce the ethos of Erasmus, it cannot replicate the scale or long-term security of EU-level provision.

Despite these limitations, Welsh policy trajectory signals an ongoing commitment to maintaining alignment with European mobility norms. A Written Statement in May 2025 on youth mobility shows Wales actively seeking pathways back into structured EU mobility frameworks (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2025). If UK-EU youth mobility negotiations progress, Taith would work alongside any new arrangements; if they do not, it will remain the main mechanism through which Wales sustains mobility opportunities.In both scenarios, Taith preserves relationships, expertise and visibility, keeping Wales institutionally prepared for deeper European engagement while UK-level policy remains uncertain. This trajectory reflects a broader sub-state strategy of using devolved tools to sustain an outward-looking international profile despite divergence at the UK level.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper has highlighted how Taith's creation is both a practical response to the loss of Erasmus and a political expression of Wales's preferred international direction, in a devolved, post-Brexit context. Taith clearly adapts Erasmus principles of reciprocity, inclusion and cooperation through a Welsh policy lens. The program's existence reflects a continued commitment to cooperation and openness, supporting devolved diplomacy and the projection of Wales's identity through education.

Evidently, whilst the program has helped maintain outward connections at a time when UK-wide mobility structures are limited, its limits reflect the constraints faced by a devolved government.

In sum, Taith is a practical example of how Wales has reinterpreted European ideals and used the tools available within a devolved context to maintain alignment with European values. In doing so, it projects an increasingly distinctive Welsh voice on the international stage and asserts Wales's preferred identity in its external relations as fundamentally 'European'. This rhetoric underscores how Brexit has widened the gap between devolved nations and the UK Government over the direction of international engagement and exemplifies how small nations can still exercise agency, shape their external identity, and sustain meaningful international ties even without foreign-policy competence.

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