We are living in strange times. The US has elected the most authoritarian ruler in the country’s history, while the EU has been split by the Brexit vote.

Both Donald Trump’s election and Brexit triggered sharp uptakes in racial violence. In both countries, death threats and hate crime increased rapidly – particularly in schools – while hostility towards minorities was higher than anything seen in the past 30 years.

Both events have been attributed (in part) to the revenge of the white working class – a group of people who have been left behind by globalisation. And in line with this thinking, Marine Le Pen, the nationalist leader who is competing to be the next president of France, has spoken about the war she will wage on “savage” globalism – which she described as “an ideology with no constraints”.

Against this background, internationalisation is promoted as a top priority in many universities around the world. International students are said to be more lucrative than home students, and university profit margins increase in proportion to their ratio.

Indeed, new research into the economic impact of international students in the UK shows that between 2014 and 2015, spending by international students supported 206,600 jobs in university towns and cities. The research conducted for Universities UK by Oxford Economics found that, in that period, on
and off-campus spending by international students and their visitors generated more than 25 billion for the UK economy – providing a significant boost to regional jobs and local businesses.

But while universities need to sustain themselves financially, viewing international students only from an economic point of view means the quality of higher education is cheapened – and the students themselves are commodified. This is an important point, because internationalisation – in the broadest sense of the term – is about a great deal more than just profit margins.

So at a time when our globally interconnected world is not at peace with diversity, I want to offer four arguments in favour of internationalisation in higher education, that reach well beyond economic sustainability:

1. For the greater good

Internationalisation is an ethical imperative. We live in a racist age. Brexit and the US elections have both revealed that if communities do not embrace racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and national diversity, then the world as we know it will cease to function.

The number of people who favour restrictions on minorities has become evident by their strong showing at the voting booths, and the highly radicalised patterns of recent elections.

So in light of this, universities must do more than simply promote internationalisation in the generic sense. They must actively resist the forces that oppose it.
2. **It helps people to grow**

Internationalisation is a necessary means of “self-transformation”. Contact with international students enables people to see the world from vantage points that reach beyond their own backgrounds – and this allows them to learn about new cultures and countries.

It may well be the case that the UK needs international students for monetary reasons too, but if universities do not bring longer term ethical and intellectual considerations to bear on the profit motive, then who will?

3. **Best of both worlds**

Internationalisation is the process through which people contribute to the world, while also being shaped by it.

Successful internationalisation means training students to approach their own cultures, texts, and traditions in different ways and through comparative perspectives.

This is a process through which all involved are transformed, and compelled to think differently about their own traditions.

4. **It helps people to see beyond themselves**

Internationalisation is a comparative project. And it is an agenda with intellectual implications. It gives
students and scholars the opportunity – and indeed the pressure – to view themselves and their cultures in new ways.

But if universities invest in the economic agenda of internationalisation without being prepared to embrace its intellectual consequences, then they embark a doomed project. Internationalisation pursued in this way will end, not only with the failure of its mission, but also with the cheapening of university education. And so for universities to fully internationalise themselves, it is clear that they must look to internationalise their fellow citizens first.