



An analysis of the UK's Turing Scheme as a response to socio-economic and geo-political challenges

Rachel Brooks¹ · Johanna Waters²

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Abstract

Following its departure from the European Union in 2020, the UK left the Erasmus + student mobility scheme, replacing it with the ‘Turing Scheme’. The scheme is underpinned by four key objectives that address what the government sees as particular socio-economic and geo-political challenges: to promote ‘Global Britain’, through ‘forging new relationships across the world’; to ‘support social mobility and widen participation across the UK’; to develop ‘key skills’, bridging ‘the gap between education and work’; and to ensure ‘value for UK taxpayers’ in international student mobility. In this paper, we draw on an analysis of the websites of 100 UK higher education institutions to explore the messages given to students about the Turing Scheme. In particular, we focus on geopolitical positioning through ‘Global Britain’, the perceived importance of socio-economic diversification through ‘widening participation’, and the underexplored role played by third parties in the provision and administration of the Turing Scheme (and study abroad more broadly).

Keywords Turing Scheme · Internationalisation · International student mobility · Study abroad · Erasmus

Introduction

For over 35 years, many thousands of young people have experienced outward mobility as part of their UK (domestic) university undergraduate degree programmes. Since 1987, UK domicile students have had the opportunity to take part in an educational mobility initiative known as the Erasmus programme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students—it became Erasmus+ in 2014). The UK was involved in this programme from its inception, along with 10 other countries; it has subsequently enabled students’ short-term international educational mobility (of between three and 12 months), providing students with a grant and waiving tuition fees for study in another member country. In addition, the UK has

✉ Rachel Brooks
r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk

Johanna Waters
Johanna.waters@ucl.ac.uk

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK

² Department of Geography, UCL, London, UK

accepted thousands of students into the UK to study, annually, as part of the exchange agreements built into this programme. Erasmus+ has become a central feature of UK universities' increasingly popular 'study abroad' initiatives.

From this academic year (2022–2023), however, UK students will no longer be able to travel as part of their degree under this scheme, just as students in other European countries will be unable to attend UK universities under Erasmus+. Replacing this programme, as part of the development of what the government has called 'Global Britain', is the Turing Scheme.

To date, there has been virtually no academic analysis of the implications of this change. This paper constitutes an early examination of these implications by focussing on the messages conveyed about the scheme—primarily to current and prospective students—by higher education institutions (HEIs).

Background

In this section, we first provide more detail about the Turing Scheme and situate it within the prevailing policy context. We then give a brief overview of two relevant bodies of academic literature—on short-term study abroad, and socio-economic diversification among mobile students.

The Turing Scheme

The UK government formally announced the Turing Scheme in December 2020, and it came into effect in the academic year 2021–22. It is underpinned by four key objectives that address what the UK government sees as particular socio-economic and geo-political challenges: (i) to promote 'Global Britain', through 'forging new relationships across the world'; (ii) to 'support social mobility and widen participation across the UK' (explicitly linked to the government's 'levelling up' agenda); (iii) to develop 'key skills', bridging 'the gap between education and work'; (iv) and to ensure 'value for UK taxpayers' in international student mobility (Capita, 2022, p.6). It is claimed, by the Department for Education, that the scheme is worth £110 million: it is designed to support students attending UK higher education institutions, further education colleges, and schools in overseas placements lasting between four weeks and 12 months.¹ UK institutions have had to bid for a share of this funding—currently on an annual basis. As a replacement for the Erasmus+ programme following the UK's exit from the European Union ('Brexit'), much of the government marketing of the scheme has sought to emphasise its supposed benefits over Erasmus+—in facilitating mobility to a wider geographical range of locations (not only Europe), its inclusion of shorter periods abroad, and its focus on disadvantaged² students in particular. The Turing Scheme provides a cost-of-living grant to participating students but, unlike Erasmus+, provides travel cost support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds only. It is also expected that tuition fees will be waived by the host institution. Moreover, no funding at all is provided for incoming students (again, this contrasts

¹ The minimum time was temporarily reduced to two weeks in February 2022, in response to concern that the budget was proving hard to spend.

² 'Disadvantage' was defined as having a household income of £25,000 or less.

with what was available to European students coming to the UK under Erasmus +). While the academic literature on the Turing Scheme is, at the time of writing, extremely limited, scholars have critiqued the lack of funding for incoming students and staff mobility, the cost to universities of setting up a new raft of mobility agreements (e.g. Cardwell, 2021) while welcoming the focus on widening participation and, for some, the emphasis on short-term periods of mobility (e.g. James, 2021).

Short-term study abroad

The Turing Scheme clearly sits within a broader landscape of short-term international mobility. Moving abroad to undertake so-called credit mobility (rather than for a whole degree) has become increasingly popular, and encouraged by HEIs, governments, and even, in the case of Europe, by regional bodies. Although such mobility has typically been arranged through study exchanges, where students move to another country for an entire semester or year and follow degree-level courses in the host institution, over the past decade, it has broadened to include international work placements (Cranston et al., 2020; Deakin, 2014); faculty-led programmes (Tran et al., 2021); and the emergence of ‘gap year’-like programmes, where there is little attempt to ‘match’ academic content of courses between institutions (Courtois, 2018). As a consequence of this diversification of opportunities, the time spent abroad has also, often, been reduced. Indeed, Miller-Idriss et al. (2019) note that, in the USA, there are now significantly more students going abroad for eight weeks or less.

Analyses of the purposes and impact of short-term student mobility have focussed heavily on employment and perceived employability, potentially appealing to less privileged students (e.g. Deakin, 2014; Gaultier & Mountford-Zimdars, 2018). Indeed, in their study of international work placements offered to students in UK higher education, Cranston et al. (2020) show how, despite an emphasis on fun and personal development, their participants understood their experience primarily in terms of securing an experience that would allow them to ‘stand out’ from others within a congested graduate labour market. Such placements were seen as an effective means of demonstrating ‘an individual’s employability, but also their “global mindset” and ability to work in different national contexts’ (p.141). Research on the perspectives of universities has also, in some cases, evidenced a strong focus on employability (e.g. Tran et al., 2021), sometimes to the near exclusion of academic learning (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2017). However, Miller-Idriss and colleagues (Miller-Idriss et al., 2019) demonstrate how, in the USA at least, messages about the purpose of study abroad propagated by HEIs tend to focus not on employability, but on having fun, maturing, and developing and transforming personally. In this way, they contend, these messages closely align with expectations of elite US higher education more generally—and may serve to exclude historically marginalised or non-traditional students who often view higher education in more instrumental terms. Such messages also tend to position host countries in very limited ways—and primarily as places for US students’ ‘consumption, entertainment, and personal edification’ (p.1104). These images may serve to discourage less privileged students from considering short-term study abroad opportunities.

At the governmental or regional level, (geo)political objectives of mobility schemes have also been noted. This has particularly been the case with respect to Erasmus +, which has explicitly aimed to inculcate a sense of European identity amongst participants (King, 2003)—although empirical studies have tended to show that patterns of Erasmus + mobility tend to reinforce geographical inequalities across the continent (Resitaino et al., 2020).

Political goals are also evident in Australia's New Colombo Plan (Schulz & Agnew, 2020), which has funded short-term mobility within the Asian region, with the aim of enabling students to 'gain[...] experience ("Asia cultural literacy") to further social capital networks, ostensibly for the purposes of facilitating trade and economic engagements' (Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2017).

Socio-economic diversification

As noted above, a key aim of the Turing Scheme is to increase the participation in international mobility of students from disadvantaged groups. The substantial body of literature on international student mobility has highlighted the often highly privileged profile of those who do take up such opportunities—for short-term 'credit mobility' as well as for the pursuit of whole degrees (e.g. Lörz et al., 2016). This has typically been explained in terms of the greater confidence that students from higher socio-economic groups have about living abroad—derived from experience of frequent familial travel (Bahna, 2018)—and the desire of such groups to use international study as a means of distinguishing themselves from other graduates of mass HE systems, thus preserving their social advantage (e.g. Kratz & Netz, 2018). It is also the case that, within the UK, older, more prestigious universities have typically offered more study abroad opportunities than their 'lower status' counterparts, and students from higher socio-economic groups are more likely to attend such institutions (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these broad patterns—documented across the world, not just in the UK—there is evidence of some change (Waters & Brooks, 2021). Various scholars have, for example, indicated that international opportunities are increasingly being opened up to a more diverse group of students (Lipura & Collins, 2020). Writing with respect to Erasmus+, Deakin (2014) has shown how the introduction of work placements widened the participation of UK students in the programme—likely because they were seen as less of a financial commitment than study placements, and of more obvious benefit to subsequent employment. Moreover, focussing on the Erasmus programme more generally, Souto-Otero (2008) has argued that participation widened from the late 1990s onwards—with greater representation of those from average and below-average economic backgrounds. More recently, Van Mol (2014) found no statistically significant relationship between a student's socio-economic status and their likelihood of participating in an international exchange programme within Europe (although there were notable differences between European countries), while Calvo's (2018) ethnographic study of Erasmus+ students in Lisbon, Portugal highlighted the heterogeneity of such mobile students—including those with relatively low levels of economic capital.

While such studies suggest that study abroad opportunities are being opened up (albeit slowly) to a wider socio-economic group of participants, there is also evidence to indicate that, alongside this, we are witnessing an increasing stratification of opportunities, with more privileged groups tending to monopolise those which are perceived as of 'higher quality' and 'greater value' (Waters & Brooks, 2021). A clear example of this is provided by Courtois (2018) in her analysis of changes to patterns of credit mobility from Ireland. She shows how the number of opportunities for studying abroad increased substantially in 2013, as a result of the specific targets for outward mobility set for individual HEIs. While this enabled students from lower socio-economic groups to participate in greater numbers (not least because in some institutions a period abroad was made compulsory), they were typically found within lower quality programmes—for example, where the content of their

studies abroad was matched poorly with their degree courses in Ireland, and where there was little or no monitoring or grading of the students' work while abroad. This apparent process of increasing differentiation of opportunities reflects similar processes that have been observed with respect to higher education more generally. As the UK HE sector has shifted from educating a small, elite proportion of the population to around 40–50 per cent or more of young people (OECD, 2020), so those who are socially privileged have found new ways of protecting their advantage—through, for example, placing more emphasis on the prestige of the institution attended, and enrolling in postgraduate programmes (Reay et al., 2005).

Methods

In this article, we draw on a content analysis of the websites of UK HEIs—conducted in March and April 2022—to examine what messages are being conveyed externally about the Turing Scheme, because webpages constitute a key means of communication between HEIs and their student communities (as well as with the public more generally) (Lažetić, 2020). While there has been important work on the messages communicated about study abroad through university websites conducted by Miller-Idriss et al. (2019), this focussed on only US HEIs, and on visual images rather than text. Lewin-Jones (2019) has provided a useful analysis of university marketing websites with respect to internationalisation, but did not focus on study abroad specifically.

In total, we analysed for content the relevant pages of 100 HEIs.³ The institutions were chosen randomly, out of a list of all 165 UK HEIs produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Our sample was sufficiently large to include institutions of differing ages and statuses; it was also diverse geographically, including institutions in all four home nations of the UK. For each HEI, we analysed the webpages devoted to 'international opportunities'/study abroad for outgoing students (i.e. individuals who were already students at the HEI).⁴ The number and length of such pages differed considerably between institutions—with some having only one page devoted to this topic, while others had a large number of pages, providing a very significant amount of information. After completing an initial smaller sample (20 HEIs) where we identified recurrent and relevant themes and topics, we proceeded to complete a grid for each institution, recording what was said, if anything, about the following:

- How international opportunities are presented to students
- The geographical spread of opportunities
- The type of opportunities available
- The Turing Scheme, specifically
- The availability of opportunities to students who are traditionally under-represented in higher education and/or within international student mobility

³ A sample of 100 was chosen so as to be large enough to capture sufficient HEI diversity, but also manageable within the time we had available for the analysis.

⁴ It is possible, of course, that some relevant information would not have been available publicly but stored on the institution intranet. However, as universities appear to use information on study abroad opportunities as a means of attracting potential students (i.e. for marketing), most of the information we were interested in for this project is likely to have been accessible to us.

Our analysis focussed primarily on text rather than the layout or visual representation as we were interested in what universities communicated via words, although we sometimes noted the visual representation of text when it was particularly striking (examples are given below). We also searched each HEI's website for any mention of the Turing Scheme that was outside of the international opportunities' pages, noting, for example, where HEIs had provided in a news item information about the amount of funding they had been awarded under the scheme. (This was evident in only 11 of the 100 cases.) Finally, where various third parties were mentioned (see discussion below), we examined their websites, too. We now turn to consider our findings in the light of the discussion above, focussing on geopolitical positioning through 'Global Britain', the perceived importance of socio-economic diversification through 'widening participation', and the underexplored role played by third parties in the provision and administration of the Turing Scheme (and study abroad more broadly).

Analysis of findings

Study abroad, the Turing Scheme, and 'Global Britain'

As explained above, a key goal of the Turing Scheme has been to enhance and develop the idea of 'Global Britain', one of the UK's ambitions following its exit from the European Union. According to the government, Global Britain represents a need to respond to a:

shifting global context, a new relationship with Europe, and the need to deliver more with finite resources, [which] requires us to evolve and enhance how we achieve our goals.... Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage. ([gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk), 2018, n.p.)

Specifically in relation to the Turing Scheme, the government has had the following to say on its relationship to the Global Britain agenda:

In line with the UK Government's vision of a Global Britain, Turing Scheme projects support high-quality placements, enhance existing partnerships and encourage the forging of new relationships across the world. ([turing-scheme.org](https://www.turing-scheme.org), 2022, n.p.)

These relationships, then, are both institutional/educational (formal agreements between universities and, in some cases, countries) and 'social' (inter-personal relationships which students might forge during their time studying abroad). In this section, we reflect upon the extent to which—and the ways in which—'Global', 'Global Britain', and 'partnerships' were evoked upon the websites of UK universities when discussing study abroad, in general, and the Turing Scheme, in particular. As Maringe and De Wit (2016) have noted, 'partnerships' (notably between academic institutions) have become a defining feature of the contemporary higher education landscape and represent key geopolitical relationships within the modern nation-state system (Si & Lim, 2022).

One notable aspect of the 100 websites we reviewed was the prominence of the 'global' and, conversely, the way in which 'international' was significantly less evident within the marketing of study abroad programmes. The term 'global' was invoked repeatedly (see, for example, Fig. 1) to indicate 'limitless' opportunities as well as extensive geographical



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Turing Scheme

The Turing Scheme is the UK Government's scheme to provide funding for international education and training opportunities around the globe.

Fig. 1 The University of Sheffield advertises the Turing Scheme on its website

reach and influence. This extract from the study abroad webpages of De Montfort University is emblematic of this discourse:

The Turing Scheme is the UK government's global programme to study and work abroad. The scheme provides funding for international opportunities in education and training across the world. Supporting the government's Global Britain objectives, the Turing Scheme unlocks the opportunity for UK organisations to offer life-changing experiences across the world for their students.' (emphasis added).

Again, we see evidence of the importance of geographical expansiveness ('across the world'), how global indicates and equates to, and is frequently used alongside, the term 'opportunities', and how study abroad offers 'life-changing experiences'. Interesting also, but perhaps not surprising, is the way in which the 'global' was often de facto represented by a relatively narrow number and 'range' of countries (in terms of income level and geographical location). Kingston University's 'world-wide partners', for example, are based almost exclusively in the USA, Canada, and Australia. For Abertay University, the USA is the only non-Erasmus+ destination students can apply to study in. The ubiquity of the US in HEIs' study abroad offerings was apparent, featuring in the vast majority of webpages (when this information was given). Such a preference (for a relatively wealthy, Anglophone and neo-liberal country with a high level of exposure through media in the UK) reflects renowned geographical disparities within international higher education, which in turn are mirrored in the relatively circumscribed 'international' mobilities of students (Brooks & Waters, 2022), particularly British students (Brooks & Waters, 2009). This observation is not just limited to the UK: in the case of popular 'study abroad' programmes in the USA, the top five destinations of American students in 2019/2020 were Spain, Italy, the UK, France, and Australia (high income European or Anglophone countries) (Open Doors Report, 2021). Despite increasing diversity in the locations sought by mobile students and the increased number of universities across all continents offering 'international' study (incoming and outgoing), recent trends within international student mobility continue to reflect the

The image shows a screenshot of the Bournemouth University website. At the top left is the Bournemouth University logo. To its right is a navigation menu with links: Home, Why BU?, Study, Courses, Research, and Collabo. Below the navigation menu is a blue banner with white text listing various services: Careers & employability, Health & wellbeing, Things to do, Learning, Help & advice, Log-in services, IT information, Academic dates, Library, Services on campus, Coronavirus, Your feedback, AskBU: contact us, Got a question?, and Student news and events. The main content area features a large image of the European Union flag. Overlaid on the left side of the flag is the text 'A unique opportunity to learn' in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below this text is a dark grey button with white text that reads 'Contact us about Erasmus+ funding'.

Fig. 2 Bournemouth University promotes Erasmus +

dominance of HEIs within Anglophone and European countries (many teaching in English) located in the Global North as student destinations. Rapidly developing countries, such as China and India, persist in sending the most students abroad (mostly at degree-level rather than for credit mobility).

Could this limited engagement with a range of ‘host’ countries simply be a characteristic of the UK and USA, however? Macrander (2017) has explored the question of whether ‘global’ patterns of international student mobility (predominantly students flowing from lower income to higher income countries) are replicated *within* emergent *regional* patterns of international student mobility, notably the Southern African Development Community, the European Higher Education Area, the Union of South American Nations, and University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific. He concludes that findings.

reaffirm previous global analyses which indicate that higher-income countries play a preeminent role as receivers; whereas, lower income countries function primarily as source nations. This study demonstrates that this pattern is replicated fractally within the four regional networks as well. Globally and regionally, economically developed countries comprise the core of the world-system in tertiary education while less-developed nations are relegated to peripheral status. (p. 243)

Thus, we should perhaps not be surprised that the Turing Scheme would, at first glance, appear to be reinforcing these previously entrenched patterns of geographical inequality and relatively limited mobilities, centring on wealthy countries in the Global North, despite referring to the ‘global’ nature of these exchanges. As we outline, below, this continues also in relation to Europe.

In spite of the clear adoption of this post-Brexit language (i.e. Global Britain) that has become part of the Turing Scheme, it was notable also that Erasmus+ remained prominent on the vast majority of websites we analysed and that Brexit was explicitly mentioned only a handful of times. A minority of HEIs displayed out of date information about Erasmus+ and continued to market this as an attractive option for students. Many others continued to ‘sell’ Erasmus+ and it featured prominently on their websites, although a disclaimer

(that funding would only be available for the 2021–2022 academic year) was usually included (see Fig. 2).

It is also hard to escape the fact that many of the ‘partnerships’ that universities are promoting (in addition to the Anglophone destinations outlined above) are European and that these were originally developed through Erasmus+. Thus, it seems likely that they are not new partnerships but a repackaging of older relationships, adapted to support student exchange in the post-Brexit era. These pre-existing partnerships were being resold as ‘global’ in line with the government’s (geopolitical) agenda, wherein ‘global’ is the preferred term (and used in opposition, and as superior, to ‘European’).

The term ‘global’ was also being deployed in relation to the notions of skills and employability (discussed above). There is a sense that study abroad enables the accumulation of ‘globally’ valuable skills. Brunel University suggests that its students will become ‘global graduates’ by virtue of their year or term abroad options. Coventry’s study and work-abroad placements create both ‘globally aware’ and ‘globally employable’ graduates. Roehampton University claims that funding from the Turing Scheme will: ‘allow students and recent graduates to develop key transferrable skills, boost their employability prospects, create a global network and improve cross-cultural understanding.’ This idea that study abroad can boost employability is nothing new—indeed, for many years employability has been given as a main reason why students engage in international mobility (Brooks et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2019). There are, however, several reasons to be cynical about the substance underpinning these claims.

First, and according to Courtois (2019), the stress on employability in relation to study abroad is a product of the neoliberalisation of the university and the devaluation of ‘academic capital’ and (oftentimes) the ‘suspension’ of academic standards and assessment criteria. Employability becomes about engagement with the ‘real world’ (while abroad) and not an academic pursuit. It could be seen as feeding into wider societal pressures to make university graduates into workers (Cheng, 2016), to the neglect of a wider sense of learning as a ‘public good’ (Marginson, 2011). Second, it is unclear that students can, as a consequence of short-term study abroad experiences, legitimately describe themselves as ‘globally’ astute and competent. As Raghuram (2021) has argued, there is a geography of skills—skills are ‘situated’ and the recognition and portability of ‘skills’, on a global stage, often results in the reinforcement of established socio-economic inequalities. Are students on short-term study abroad acquiring the ‘correct’ skills to advantage them later on? And third, we are also compelled to ask: do the temporally shorter placements and exchanges offered by universities funded by the Turing Scheme allow students *the time* to ‘develop’ such skills and networks (Waters, 2022)? We touch on this in relation to the fact that Turing promotes shorter duration placements, below.

It is also worth reflecting on the ‘soft-power’ implications of the Turing Scheme in relation to Global Britain in a post-Brexit era (Lomer, 2017). Under Erasmus+, students were frequently seen as ‘ambassadors’ for a unified Europe (Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021). Is the same true for the Turing Scheme and ‘Global Britain’? One argument undermining this suggestion relates to the exclusion of incoming international students from the Turing Scheme. There is no provision for hosting students: thus, as a tool of ‘soft power’, it is considerably weakened (Lomer, 2017). How do universities frame the role of ‘outgoing’ students? On their webpages, this is framed almost entirely in terms of *personal* benefits:

[W]e understand the importance of cultural experiences to help academic and personal development. This is why we offer a range of studying opportunities outside of the UK to make sure students can get the best possible experience and share forever

lasting memories. (Cardiff Metropolitan University)

Our Go Abroad schemes offer all... students multiple opportunities to gain international experience and acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills and become globally-agile citizens and globally-employable graduates. (Coventry University)

Study, work or volunteer abroad as part of your degree for a life-changing experience. Discover other cultures, learn a new language and forge friendships to last a lifetime. (Cardiff University)

Bath Spa University suggests study abroad creates more cosmopolitan citizens, asking students: ‘Why stay within your comfort zone, when venturing out of it could transform the way you see the world?’. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, Global Britain is framed in terms of personal benefits rather than anything more (geo)politically or societally motivated.

Widening participation

As discussed above, it has long been understood that study abroad ‘favours’ more privileged students. Indeed, in introducing the Turing Scheme, the UK government has been quick to point out that the Erasmus+ Programme, in contrast, has not enabled widening participation in study abroad to occur in any meaningful way and has, in fact, continued to benefit already advantaged students (UK Government Turing Scheme, 2022). While the picture is more complex than this portrayal suggests (for example, Deakin, 2014, noted that the Erasmus work placements were being undertaken by notably less privileged students, and see points above), a substantial number of studies have generally indicated that credit-level study abroad, of which Erasmus+ is one example, tend to be undertaken by individuals from high socio-economic backgrounds (Netz et al., 2021; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Similar trends have been noted for study abroad in North America (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012) and Asia (Park, 2018).

This picture can be contrasted with the way in which the UK government has attempted to ‘sell’ the Turing Scheme to the wider public, by emphasising that widening participation (of ‘disadvantaged groups’) is one of its primary objectives (see above). It is also built into the criteria for funding; universities are assessed on their plans to target widening participation students. We were interested in exploring, therefore, through our review of the 100 websites, the extent to which UK universities foregrounded the ‘access’ agenda underpinning the Turing Scheme in their related online materials or, conversely, the extent to which widening participation appeared to be an afterthought in the narrative presented about study abroad. The emphasis placed by the UK government on Turing as a potential vehicle for ‘levelling up’ was very notable, but would this message appeal to universities attempting to attract potential applicants with their study abroad offerings in the same way as Global Britain has?

Overall, our findings showed that universities paid surprisingly scant attention to widening participation on their study abroad webpages, despite the emphasis placed upon this in the government’s own declarations around the Turing Scheme. It is hard to illustrate an absence of something in our data, so instead we will give a few examples of where and in what ways widening participation was mentioned. Newer (‘post-1992’) universities were far more likely (explicitly or implicitly) to encourage participation from under-represented groups, although this was not exclusively the case (no doubt in part reflecting the characteristics (and concerns) of their wider student body). Explicit mention was usually accompanied by a link to the government’s own Turing website, where widening participation is

discussed at length. Implicit mention could be seen in the reference to the financial ‘costs’ attached to study abroad and the inclusion of an indication of where help and support could be obtained.

Edinburgh Napier encourages students to engage in study abroad ‘regardless of background’. Keele University makes a point of stating that ‘WP [widening participation] students receive a higher cost of living grant. Students who fall into any one of Keele’s WP criteria (including mature students, care leavers, household income of below £25 k, first in family, student carers) will receive a higher living grant’. Newcastle University and Queen Mary, University of London proffer two of the longer statements addressing this issue on their website:

The [Turing] scheme aims to improve access to international opportunities by providing additional funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes an amount of funding to go towards the direct costs of travel, including extra expenses such as passports and visas and a higher grant for living costs, to tackle the barriers some students face to studying overseas. (Newcastle University)

[Turing funding supports] the Queen Mary 2030 Strategy in the area of inclusivity, ensuring mobility opportunities are available to all groups of students from across Queen Mary’s diverse student body. (Queen Mary, University of London)

While Newcastle stresses the practical issues facing students wanting to study abroad, Queen Mary mentions its institutional strategy on inclusivity and diversity. Sheffield Hallam University provides a notable example of an institution for which widening participation within study abroad is seemingly important. Sheffield Hallam received, for 2021–2022, £600,000 through the Turing Scheme. According to their webpages, the main aim of the Turing Scheme is to ‘encourage students from all backgrounds’ to study abroad. They offer one of the widest range of opportunities for travel abroad within their degree programmes that we have seen—summer and winter schools, work placements and internships, and more conventional study abroad. They make a point of claiming that 40 per cent of students receiving Turing funding will be from ‘widening participation backgrounds’. Indeed, this is in line with the university’s policy as a whole—Sheffield Hallam appears proud to be educating (according to HESA data for 2019–2020) the ‘highest number’ of students from widening participation backgrounds of any other UK university: ‘23 per cent of Hallam’s students are from low participation backgrounds compared to the UK average of just under 12 per cent’. De Montfort University also mentions the Turing Scheme in relation to the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda. Very few universities, however, have related the introduction of the Turing Scheme, and their involvement in it, to this particular government initiative (cf. Global Britain).

The UK government has also expressed the intention to expand access to the Turing Scheme to include other ‘under-represented groups’ including ‘ethnic minority, part-time, disabled and mature students, and students who are first in their family to attend university’ ([turing-scheme.org](#), 2022, n.p.). Virtually no explicit reference was made to these other under-represented characteristics on any of the university webpages that we reviewed, although students from ‘different backgrounds’ were sometimes mentioned, hinting at, if not spelling out, the different ways in which students can be seen to be structurally disadvantaged in a system that tends to privilege White, middle-class, and able-bodied young people. Where widening participation was mentioned, as noted above, it was almost solely in relation to socio-economic (financial) disadvantage. It was also notable that ‘higher status’ universities were far less likely to offer and promote work placements than were other institutions with higher numbers of widening participation students. This is likely to reflect

the more ‘vocational’ emphasis of some of the newer universities in their outlook and discourse but will inevitably dissuade less advantaged students attending higher status HEIs from taking advantage of study abroad opportunities.

Government promotional material on the Turing Scheme makes much of the fact that, compared to Erasmus+, students will be able to travel abroad for trips of a much shorter duration. This, they argue, has implications for access and widening participation: ‘We will reduce the minimum duration of a HE placement to four weeks to make going abroad more accessible to a wider group of students, particularly those with other commitments’ ([turing-scheme.org](https://www.turing-scheme.org), 2022). And we found plenty of evidence that universities were encouraging shorter trips. Although more traditional credit mobility continued to dominate study abroad (for a year or a semester/term), many universities were offering summer placements (such as Edinburgh Napier—from 2 to 8 weeks’ duration; and Edge Hill University—from 2 to 5 weeks funded by Turing). Roehampton University included internships, summer placements, and volunteering under their ‘study abroad’ listings and Staffordshire University was promoting ‘short visits and conferences’ alongside more conventional forms of study abroad. So clearly universities are embracing the fact that Turing explicitly encourages diversity in type and duration of ‘study abroad’. Will this have an impact on widening participation and access? As discussed above, existing scholarship would suggest that it might—shorter placements might appeal to less privileged students (in the governments’ own words, these students are more likely to have ‘other commitments’. They are also more likely to worry about the risks attached to study abroad and a shorter placement may mitigate those risks).

The rise of third-party providers

While the previous two sections have focussed on two of the main formal objectives of the Turing Scheme—to promote ‘Global Britain’ and increase the take-up of international mobility opportunities by those from disadvantaged backgrounds—in this section, we explore a third area of interest that lies outside these formal objectives but nevertheless appears intimately related to the Turing Scheme: the rise of ‘third party providers’ within UK HEIs. Our analysis of the 100 HEI websites revealed significant use of such providers—for both study exchanges and, more commonly, for short-term mobility opportunities, typically over the summer holidays. For example, it was notable that nine of our universities were making use of the provider ISEP for study exchanges. ISEP describes itself in the following way on its website:

For more than 40 years, ISEP has partnered with universities and colleges around the world for solutions to help them reach their internationalization goals. In this time, we have grown into the largest global community for study, intern and volunteer abroad programs. We offer an impressive array of ISEP Exchange and ISEP Direct programs among a global community of more than 300 universities and colleges in over 50 countries. More than 60,000 students from our member institutions have participated in our semester-long, full-year, and summer programs. (ISEP, 2022, n.p.)

In addition, at least eight of the sampled universities were making use of similar types of non-profit external provider to offer their students short-term volunteering placements in a range of international locations. These are shown in Table 1. (It is possible that many more HEIs were using such providers, as the information given about international opportunities was quite limited on many of the websites in our sample.)

Table 1 Third-party providers of short-term international placements used by sampled HEIs

Organisation	How organisation describes itself	Examples of universities where used—from website analysis
Play Action International	'Provides opportunities for disadvantaged children to learn, develop and heal through play' [In Uganda]	Bristol; Durham; Leeds Beckett
CADS Enhancement Centre	Non-profit organisation focusing on delivering services for children with special educational needs in Kuala Lumpur	Durham
Think Pacific	'Meaningful programs in the Fiji Islands ... Award-winning projects, placements and internships for students, graduates and gap years'	Bristol; Leeds Beckett; Northumbria; Surrey; UCL
Raleigh International	'We are a youth-driven organisation supporting a global movement of young people to take action'	UCL
Gotoco	'Funded and free global summer camps and TEFL adventures' [in China, Thailand and Europe]. 'Social enterprise aiming to improve cross-cultural understanding'	UCL
Alphard International Centre, Romania	'These voluntary work placement programs are typically 3–12 weeks long and provide students/groups or students with an opportunity to gain teaching experience, improve management skills and enhance life skills through this experience, living with international students and attending social and cultural events and activities.'	Leeds Beckett
Operation Wallacea	'Operation Wallacea is a biodiversity and climate research organisation. For 25 years it has run biodiversity field expeditions to support the research of hundreds of academics and funded from tuition fees paid by students that then gain experience of working with publishing scientists.'	Bristol
Pagoda Projects	'... we are building the biggest & most inclusive global work experience programme. We partner with universities and governments to run award-winning in-person and remote internship programmes and online skills courses.'	Chester; Liverpool [Pagoda Projects website lists 31 UK universities it is working with]
The Intern Group	'We are the leading provider of customized global internship programs. We offer programs for candidates at all stages of their academic or professional career.'	Northumbria

Table 1 (continued)

Organisation	How organisation describes itself	Examples of universities where used—from website analysis
Nurture Africa	‘Nurture Africa is an Irish founded Non-Governmental Organisation and works in the international development and humanitarian sectors in Uganda. Our overseas volunteer programme enables and supports individuals and groups from the global north to volunteer in Africa ... whilst providing them with the opportunity of learning about day-to-day life in Uganda’	Chester
Edge of Africa	‘Edge of Africa [provides] volunteers with unforgettable and meaningful volunteer programs. Our programs are designed to enrich the lives of disadvantaged communities and promote the preservation of the environment.’	Chester

While it is possible that many of the relationships between UK HEIs and these providers could have pre-dated the Turing Scheme (indeed, this is made explicit in the text on the ISEP website, cited above), it seems very likely that the use of such third parties will have increased significantly over the past year—given that, in many cases, the HEIs concerned were covering the costs of students' participation and that, prior to the Turing Scheme, no funds outside the HEI would have been available to cover this kind of activity (other than those provided by students themselves).

The presence of such players within UK HEIs provides further evidence of the growth of a 'global education services' industry (Baas, 2019; Beech, 2018) with respect to international student mobility. Although the rise of such an industry has been discussed in some detail in relation to whole degree mobility—not least the use of 'education agents' (Beech, 2018) and the marketing of international opportunities (Findlay, 2010)—it has been less evident with respect to credit mobility. This UK data thus contribute to nascent scholarship in Australia (Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2017) to show that 'mobility infrastructures' (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) appear to be developing with respect to short-term international opportunities, too (and particularly, those that are *very* short-term—such as volunteering opportunities, lasting only a few weeks).

In contrast, however, to Sidhu and Dall'Alba's (2017) contention that in Australia, government investment in credit mobility has 'open[ed] the door for greater involvement of private sector actors from the "education services" industry' (p.474), our UK data suggest that it is primarily not-for-profit organisations that are contributing to these new mobility infrastructures. While this is less problematic with respect to the use of public money, the involvement of such a wide range of organisations, from outside the higher education sector, does raise questions about the quality of participants' experiences. Clearly, it is much harder for HEIs to monitor the nature of provision offered by ISEP and the organisations listed in Table 1 than if they had established their own partnerships with overseas universities, for example—with academic staff from the sending HEI likely playing a minimal role, or no role at all. In many ways, this reflects Courtois' (2018) arguments with respect to credit mobility in Ireland: as opportunities have increased, so the quality has varied, with new schemes typically having less institutional oversight, and less emphasis on ensuring a high-quality academic experience.

The growth of such 'third parties' with respect to UK credit mobility also raises some questions about the socio-economic inequalities discussed in the previous section. Although Table 1 indicates that the use of these providers was evident in high status HEIs (such as Bristol, Durham and UCL) as well as those that are commonly seen as much less prestigious (e.g. Chester and Leeds Beckett), in the high status HEIs, there were many more international opportunities for students to choose from. For example, UCL's central webpages list many different international partners, and students are encouraged also to browse additional lists of partners available on departmental webpages. In contrast, Chester has a small number of bilateral partnerships, but emphasises the much larger number of opportunities available through ISEP and its volunteering and internship placements with Pagoda Projects, Nurture Africa, Edge of Africa, and others. Given the strong correlation between social class and status of university attended in the UK (Boliver, 2013), it is likely that these differences at the institutional level will map on to differences at the individual level, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds—more likely to be found in newer, less prestigious HEIs—having significantly fewer opportunities to choose from, particularly in relation to those with greater academic oversight from the home HEI.

As alluded to above, many of the opportunities offered by the providers listed in Table 1 are for very short periods of time (often just a few weeks, over the summer holidays). As

we argued in the previous section, in some ways, this may offer an important means of widening participation to international student mobility—as ongoing caring and/or work commitments have often been a barrier to participation in more conventional study exchanges, where students have been expected to be abroad for a minimum of one semester. Nevertheless, it may also have the effect of further stratifying international opportunities if the only short-term schemes are with external providers and have little connection to formal programmes of study. Here, there are again strong parallels with Courtois' (2018) analysis of the consequences of the expansion of opportunities in Ireland. There are also broader questions about whether a short period abroad, even if of high academic quality, generates the same benefits as a longer stay—in terms of both the personal learning about the host culture and the perceived value by employers.

Conclusion

Information about the Turing Scheme, in the public domain, is currently limited. Nevertheless, our website analysis provides an early indication of how HEIs are responding to this new initiative and communicating it to students, and how their activities map on to the scheme's key objectives. First, with respect to the objective of promoting 'Global Britain', we have shown how the language used by HEIs reflects this discourse. However, we have also argued that opportunities for mobility remain significantly geographically circumscribed—with a strong focus on the USA and other Anglophone nations of the Global North as well as, interestingly, 'older' relationships within mainland Europe. 'Global' is also understood in largely individualistic terms, with an emphasis on the benefits to individuals rather than to wider communities, nations, or 'global society'. Second, despite the clear governmental emphasis on increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups, this objective was reflected much less obviously in the HEI websites. While practice within institutions may be different, the targeting of disadvantaged groups was not presented as a key aspect of the scheme on websites, while the enhanced Turing grants available to disadvantaged groups were mentioned only rarely. This may constitute a lost opportunity to market the scheme to traditionally non-internationally mobile groups. Third, and finally, we have also contended that the Turing Scheme appears to be extending 'migration infrastructures' by increasing the number of 'third parties' involved in short-term mobility programmes. The impact of these is yet to be ascertained. While they may increase opportunities for students who are able to spend only a short time abroad (such as those with caring or work commitments), the lack of academic content and oversight from the host HEI suggests that these experiences may be of a lesser quality. Moreover, the shorter duration of many trips may prove insufficient to develop the skills central to the Turing Scheme's objectives—let alone a broader understanding of other cultures. All of these questions remain pertinent to understanding the socio-economic and (geo)political challenges posed by the Turing Scheme; significantly more scholarship (alongside more publicly-available data about funding and take-up) is needed to understand its immediate and longer-term impacts.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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