Widening participation post-Brexit: the impact of the UK's Turing Scheme

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Brexit as significant geopolitical shift

- Reconfiguration of relationships over many policy domains

- Has affected education particularly severely

    - **Whole degree mobility**: decline in incoming EU students because of fee and loan changes; NHS surcharge; visa requirements

    - **Short-term mobility**: withdrawal from Erasmus+ programme; introduction of Turing Scheme

The Turing Scheme

- Policy change:
    - Aims: **widening participation**; non-European geographies; skill development; value for taxpayer
    - Funds for outward student mobility only; no staff mobility
    - Additional funds for students from WP backgrounds
    - Shorter duration: minimum of 4 weeks
- New mechanisms for funding:
    - Annual bids from individual universities
    - University discretion about shape of bid

- Research into impact of Turing Scheme; focus today on its success in widening participation

TURING SCHEME

Funded by the UK's global programme to study and work abroad

Methods

Analysis of 100 university webpages, devoted to international opportunities

Analysis of policy documents

Interviews with 17 international office staff, from 15 universities

The importance of different aspects of time (timings, rhythms and durations) in relation to funding opportunities, Post-Brexit, came through remarkably strongly in interviews with international office staff.

Brexit, time and widening participation

- The Turing Scheme has allowed shorter mobilities (of a month's duration) than the Erasmus+ programme did (prior to 2021), which are undeniably more appealing to WP students than either a term/semester or year abroad. Nevertheless, many interviewees stressed that even a month is 'too long' for the most disadvantaged students. It is also notable that since the UK left the scheme, the new and revised Erasmus programme (2021 – 2027), supports even shorter mobilities (of as little as two weeks).

- Shorter duration mobilities are widely thought of as offering 'valuable' experiences (even if their relative value, vis-à-vis longer duration trips, is still considered 'lesser').

- The goal of WP is being inadvertently thwarted by both the (mis-)timing of funding decisions and the uncertainty facing universities around the longevity of the scheme (presently beholden to annual 'spending reviews'), making it difficult to advertise to WP students with any conviction and impossible to guarantee funding ahead of time.

- Universities' experiences of incoming EU students (coming for periods of less than 6 months) are shaped by Brexit and the new visa rules pertaining to EU students.

Consensus amongst university staff that – in line with government claims attached to the Turing Scheme – WP students are far more likely to consider shorter-duration placements than they are a term or year abroad.

The introduction of the Turing Scheme was also important because it had, explicitly and for the first time, raised the issue of mobility duration and linked this directly to widening participation:

'The introduction of the [Turing] scheme changed the focus a little bit, in terms of the recognition of the fact that not all students can go for a full year abroad. That not all students may have the financial means to do so, whether it's a perception or whether it's an actual barrier.' (University B)

This individual argued that such a discussion was long overdue. All staff interviewed noted an uptake in student mobility amongst WP students since the introduction of the Turing Scheme – although the extent to which this was due to the fact that universities were, for the first time, prioritising WP in relation to student mobility was unclear.

All interviewees made the following, important point: that one month was still too long for many students that meet the income threshold for WP.

'The other thing that I suppose is positive [about Turing] is that you can have short term exchanges of four weeks, which may be better for students from disadvantaged backgrounds because they maybe cannot commit to going abroad for a longer period. But I would say, even those four weeks can be too much for a student from a widening participation background. You know, they have work commitments – they are not going to be able to get four weeks off work, whereas they might be able to get two weeks or one week off work. So, if we were able to fund even shorter-term placements [of less than a month], I think that would help as well'. (University D)

'At the moment the minimum duration of Turing is four weeks. One of our most successful programmes this summer was a summer school for two weeks to France. It had a focus on WP students, so it very much spoke to those students who are under-represented. We spoke to the students (we did some focus groups prior) and said...how long duration do you want? Most of them said 'look, two weeks probably is the maximum I can do because I have caring responsibilities' or 'I have a part time job' 'I don't want to be away for a month. Like, please don't do that'.' (University A)

'A lot of our students work. You can't really take a month of work....They say that there is no proof that short term mobilities do help the students, which I absolutely disagree. It's better that they go to for two weeks than nothing, but what we have now, the 28 days of mobilities, I mean, they do help, but that means less students have the opportunity and all of the talk about making these more accessible for students. It just doesn't. You can't expect a student that from a widening participation background to take a month off from work or as a or a mature student that has responsibilities, that works also. And that has kids but wants to do this. It just doesn't make sense. […] We have quite a few students that that are like, 'oh, I'm so sorry. I just can't take it. Just can't take a month off work to do that'. (University I)

A member of staff at a Welsh university was able to compare the Turing Scheme with the Wales-only mobility scheme ('Taith'):

'So, Taith is a minimum of two weeks versus four weeks [for Turing]. And that's really key in terms of, you know, widening participation, because four weeks is quite a long stretch for a student. You know, the most vulnerable groups of students such as care leavers or caregivers or, you know, students that are having to work. It's quite a long period, even two weeks sometimes. But having two weeks is really helpful'. (University C)
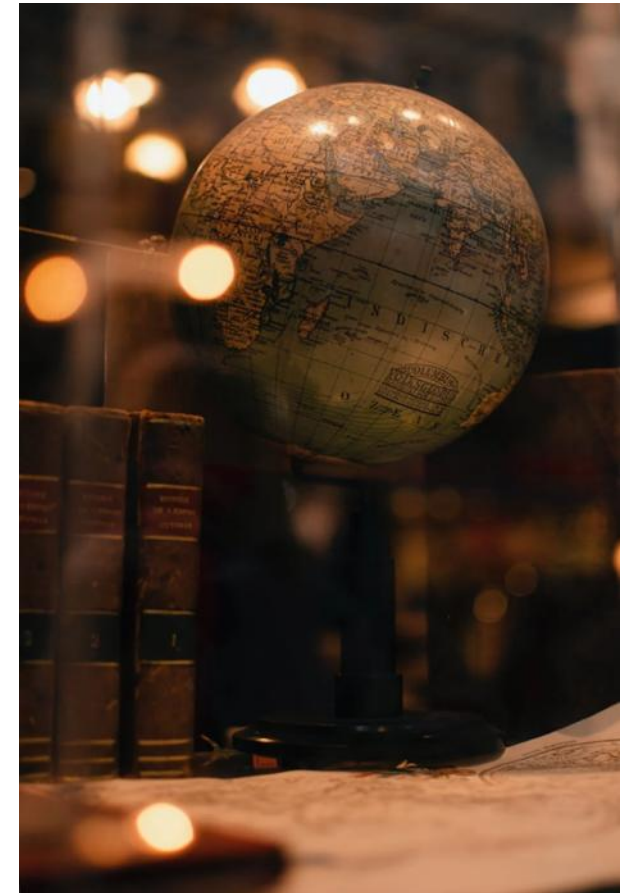
Study abroad remains a risk for WP students

- *'We [the university] apply once a year. And we apply in Feb, well March, April time. Then we don't find out whether we have an allocation. So that's the first question and if successful, how much and then there is little clarity on what the expectations are in terms of the paperwork, the durations, the countries, the requests to make changes and....The results are announced in July. By that time, some of our students would have already gone because the academic calendar doesn't align across the world. So, this is creating additional difficulties for our students and if we are talking about the scheme, that, in its ambition, and its mission statement, states that it's the students who are from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds that are the most important group for the government, that's great, but...they also need time to plan...you can't allocate money in July and expect that students will travel in September. It simply just doesn't work like this.' (University B)*

'Nothing is guaranteed in terms of Turing. But I think it does create this kind of quite unusual like conflicting message where, you know, we're encouraging students to kind of think big and you know travel far. But we're also saying 'oh, but we can't offer you any guarantee of funding'.... and it just creates an unusual sort of messaging and it's difficult to send that message to students in the preparation programme because, you know, on one hand we're sort of talking about Turing as being this fantastic opportunity, but then we're having to underpin it by saying, 'well, but it's not guaranteed. We don't know how much you'll get. We don't know how when you'll get it, it's prioritised for WP, but we don't know when or if you personally might receive it'. (University L)

'I think the scheme itself is very badly designed in terms of the timelines for, for being able to reach disadvantaged students. Because, you know […] students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they need to be able to plan. They need some certainty around what their funding is going to be for further year abroad. And you know, they need that many months in advance to be able to make plans to be able to get the cheapest rates for their travel, to be able to apply for visas and things like that in, in advance. So not knowing that you've got funding until two months before you're meant to go, those disadvantaged students have already dropped out of the process by then. (University D)

The future?

- Change likely following UK-EU 'reset' summit on 19 May

- Commitment to re-joining Erasmus+

- Likely that Turing funding will be cut
    - Government letter to Office for Students on 19 May

- Erasmus+ now has stronger focus on widening access e.g.
    - Emphasis on 'students with fewer opportunities'
    - 'Inclusion and diversity' one of four 'horizontal priorities'
    - Additional funding; blended mobility

The future?

- Despite limitations of Turing Scheme, lessons that can be learnt with respect to widening participation:
    - Clear goals
    - Incentivising institutions
    - Short-term opportunities (although risk of stratification?)
    - Robust financial processes

To find out more:

Brooks, R. and Waters, J. (forthcoming, 2026) *Post-Brexit Student Mobilities* Bristol, Policy Press

Brooks, R. and Waters, J. (2024) An analysis of the UK's Turing Scheme as a response to socio-economic and geo-political challenges, *Higher Education,* 88, 5, 1809-1827.

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