



# The European Universities Initiative and Post-Brexit Student Mobilities

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# Our studies

## Phase 1

How does the EUI reveal competing spatial imaginaries of the European HE space?  
How does the EUI further stratify that space?

## Phase 2

How do students understand their roles in the EUI?  
How does the EUI reshape and stratify mobilities?

## Spatial imaginaries of Europe (Watkins, 2015)

- universities and students as de facto agents of Europeanisation
- enactment of key initiatives through participation

Analysis of 47 policy documents (2017-2021)  
Interviews with 12 policy actors (8 from EUI alliances)  
Focus on 3 case alliances

Analysis of further 65 policy documents (2021-2023)  
6 focus group discussions with 3 case alliances (2 FGDs per alliance). 24 students in total.

Sharp contestations over purpose and geographic scope; no single, shared vision. Privileging of advantaged, high-performing HEIs.  
Similarly, intra-EUI mobilities stratified, rewarding hypermobility while leaving immobility largely unaddressed; limited evidence of transformative Europeanisation “from below”

# UK Universities in EUI, post-Brexit

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- UK exit from Erasmus+ reduced UK HEIs to associate members in EUI alliances, impairing capacity to engage fully
- Unfunded participation, with limited visibility
- 10 UK HEIs in alliances

University of Edinburgh (Una Europa)

**University of Essex (YUFE)**

University of Warwick (Eutopia)

**University of Glasgow (CIVIS)**

King's College London (Circle U)

**LSE (CIVICA)**

Coventry University (EUPeace)

Durham University (Arqus)

**University of Birmingham (EUniWell)**

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10 of approx. 2,200 'associated partners'

# Impact of Brexit on EUI *partnerships*

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## Demoting and de-risking

“Obviously LSE has been through hell with Brexit... the downside of being such a tight knit group of people is that if you feel one person slightly you know, having to pull out because of things beyond their control, that's concerning and then that then breaks a dynamic and a personal kind of family feeling that is actually quite critical”

(Coordinator for CIVICA at Sciences Po)

## Thematic incoherence

“if these networks are working on issues such as environmental sustainability, migration, all these kind of big societal challenges, [then] it really is strange if we don't include partners outside of the EU and outside of Europe”

(Head of HE Policy for The Guild)

## But also strategic flexibility for UK HEIs?

A coordinator for one UK university felt that British universities are under fewer obligations to fulfil core EUI aims or European Commission commandments, and could therefore choose the extent of engagement

# Impact of Brexit on *mobilities*

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## Uncertainty and confusion on resourcing of opportunities within alliances:

“... after Brexit, everything became more complicated, also with funding.”

(Essex University student, representing YUFE)

“...with the funding thing, in some ways we can't participate or dedicate as much resources in the way that I've noticed other universities have.”

(LSE student, representing CIVICA)

“I know for a fact that we've just stopped receiving funding for the usual exchange programmes we have here at Glasgow University. So for students that do want to go abroad, they kind of are sort of on their own at the moment, whereas they used to receive a lot more funding... So students are kind of on their own when it comes to exchange programmes now, which is disheartening to see. And I am actually a bit scared that the CIVIS alliance will sort of stop in the UK”

(University of Glasgow student representing CIVIS)

# Impact of Brexit on *mobilities*

## Intra-alliance European student mobilities



The screenshot shows the CIVIS agora website. At the top left is the CIVIS agora logo. To its right are navigation links: LEARN ▾, TEACH ▾, RESEARCH ▾, CONNECT ▾, and Sign in. Below the navigation is a photograph of a desk with two laptops, a smartphone, and a pen. Underneath the photo is the heading "Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)". Below this heading is a short paragraph: "A new call for Blended Intensive programmes is open to all CIVIS students! To get all the administrative requirements and details, you may consult the Spring Call for BIPs here". At the bottom left is a green button that says "Consult the spring call". At the bottom right is a blue button that says "Discover previous BIPs".

**civis**  
agora

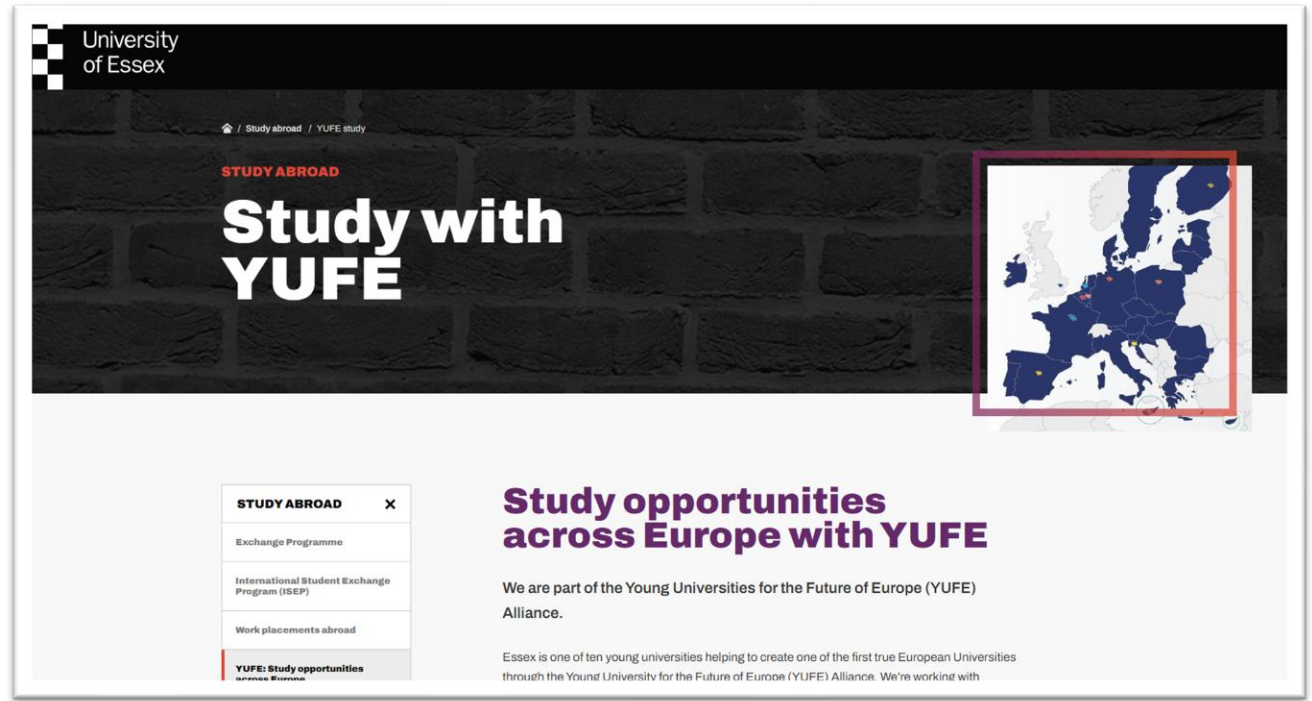
LEARN ▾ TEACH ▾ RESEARCH ▾ CONNECT ▾ Sign in

**Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)**

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Consult the spring call

Discover previous BIPs



The screenshot shows the University of Essex website. At the top left is the University of Essex logo. Below it is a breadcrumb trail: / Study abroad / YUFE study. The main heading is "STUDY ABROAD" in red, followed by "Study with YUFE" in large white letters. To the right is a map of Europe with a red border. Below the map is a dropdown menu for "STUDY ABROAD" with a close button (X). The menu items are: Exchange Programme, International Student Exchange Program (ISEP), and Work placements abroad. Below the menu is a section titled "YUFE: Study opportunities" with a small logo. To the right of the menu is the heading "Study opportunities across Europe with YUFE" in purple. Below this heading is a paragraph: "We are part of the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Alliance." At the bottom right is another paragraph: "Essex is one of ten young universities helping to create one of the first true European Universities through the Young University for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Alliance. We're working with".

University of Essex

/ Study abroad / YUFE study

STUDY ABROAD

**Study with YUFE**

STUDY ABROAD X

- Exchange Programme
- International Student Exchange Program (ISEP)
- Work placements abroad

**YUFE: Study opportunities**

**Study opportunities across Europe with YUFE**

We are part of the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Alliance.

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HM Government

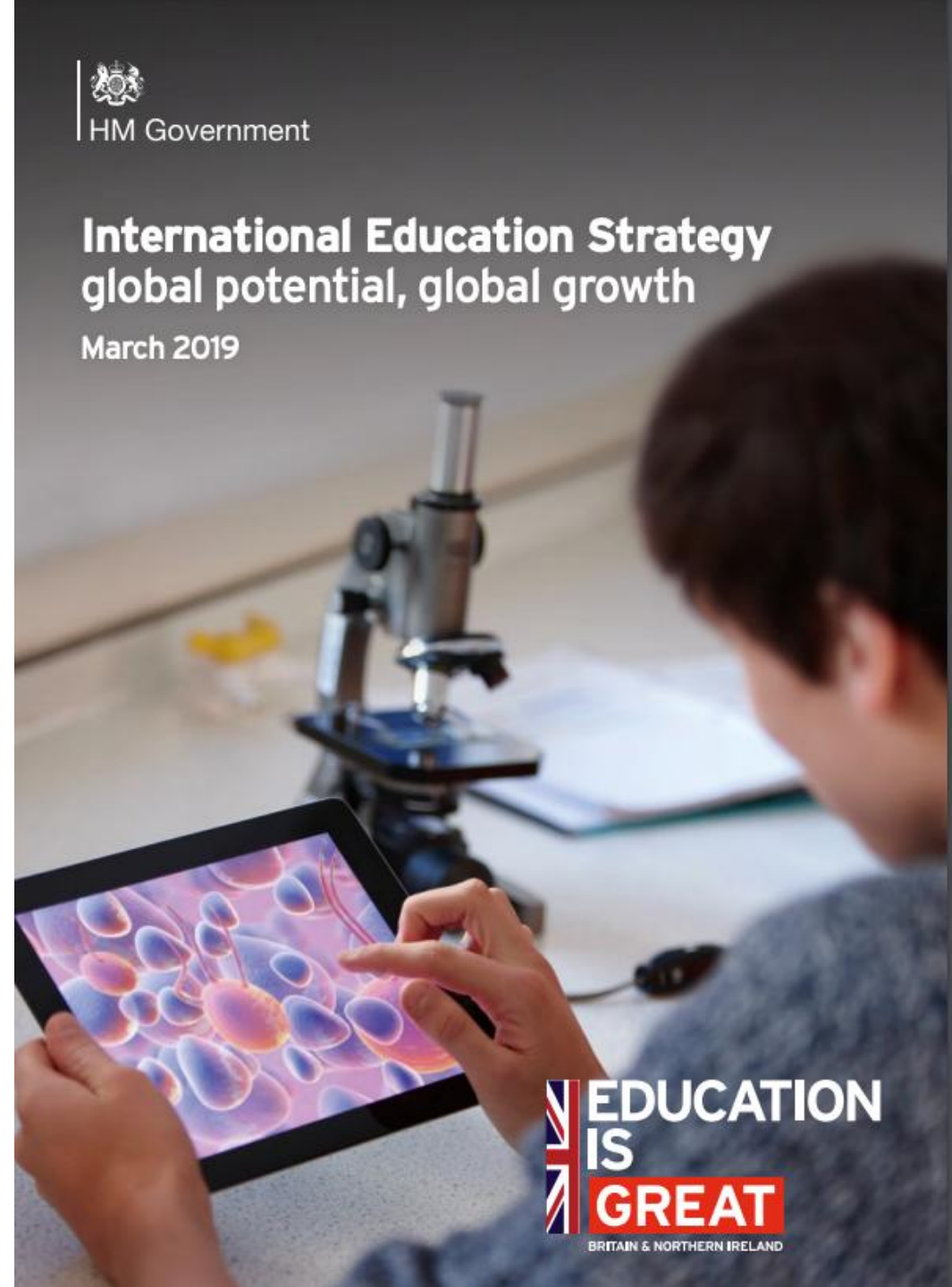
## International Education Strategy global potential, global growth

March 2019

# Means of resisting post-Brexit government imperatives

Strong government steer to move away from Europe  
(with respect to student mobilities)

- Withdrawal from Erasmus+ (and thus access to EUI funding) and launch of Turing
- International Education Strategy of 2019 – focus on non-European ‘key markets’
- Change to fees and financing for European whole-degree students (with immediate impact on numbers)
- Discourse of ‘Global Britain’



The logo for 'Education is Great', featuring the Union Jack flag to the left of the text. The text 'EDUCATION IS GREAT' is stacked vertically, with 'EDUCATION' and 'IS' in white and 'GREAT' in white on a red background. Below the text, it says 'BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND' in a smaller font.

EDUCATION  
IS  
GREAT  
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

# Means of resisting post-Brexit government imperatives

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HEIs engaged in variety of strategies to resist

- Some symbolic e.g. displaying EU flag on webpages
- Some material e.g. offering scholarships for EU whole-degree students; renegotiating Erasmus partnerships as Turing agreements; using ‘third party providers’ to facilitate European mobility
- EUIs as part of this broader landscape (both symbolic and material)

“Because of the Brexit, UK universities have been forced to reaffirm their European identity, at least for those that were interested to claim that they were somehow European ... a very important component of their DNA” (Executive Director of CIVICA)



# Means of resisting post-Brexit government imperatives

## Signalling commitment to European partners

“The university executive asked me to think through the implications of all of that [Brexit] for our international strategy. One of the planks of that we decided was we'd **need more than ever to embed ourselves in European networks** because ... at that stage there was less a concern that we'd be cut out of the big funding and academic schemes like Horizon 2020 or Horizon Europe as it became, although that subsequently became more of a concern – it was more the medium-term loss of profile of UK universities in the European networks.”

*EUI membership as ‘hedge’ against loss of profile, and ‘also a statement to the university community that we're still a European university, even if the UK is outside the EU’*

(Senior leader, UK university in an alliance)

# Part of wider recalibration of student mobilities

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More diverse landscape of student mobilities, e.g.

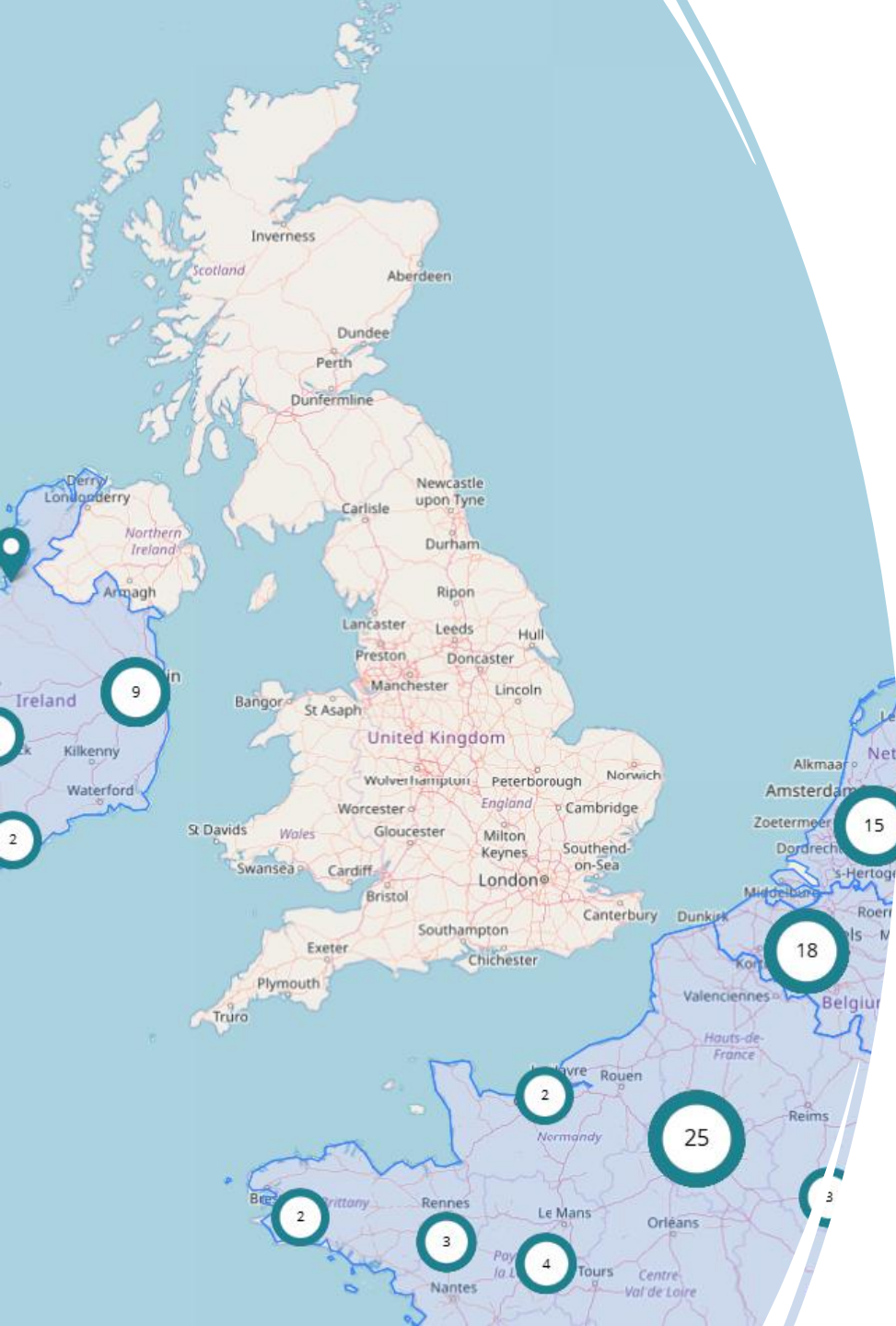
- Summer schools
- International work placements
- Volunteering (through ‘third party providers’)
- Use of international networks (Universitas 21, World University Network)
- EUIs

To some extent driven by Brexit, but also by desire to signal ‘global positioning’; employability agenda; means of marketing a desirable ‘student experience’

# Conclusions

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- Brexit has impacted the EUI alliances and UK universities' participation in them in various ways
- However, alliances have also affected the impact of Brexit (e.g. a means of mitigating the loss of Erasmus+, etc.)
  - limited scope for resisting UK government's shift away from Europe and engaging with European partners
  - opportunity to keep foothold in key initiative as UK-EU relations warm (e.g. re-accession to Erasmus+ in 2027)
- Strategic internationalisation or geopolitical actorhood?



# To find out more

Brooks, R. and Rensimer, L. (2025) Strengthening Europe from the ground up? Students' perspectives on the European Universities Initiative, *International Journal of Educational Research*. (Advance online access.)

Brooks, R. and Rensimer, L. (2025) The European Universities Initiative and European spatial imaginaries, *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 23, 3, 752-765.

Rensimer, L. and Brooks, R. (2025) The European Universities Initiative: further stratification in the pursuit of European cooperation? *Compare*, 55, 4, 660-678.

Brooks, R. and Rensimer, L. (under review) The European Universities Initiative and international student mobility: policy and student perspectives on an increasingly complex and uneven terrain

and

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

