

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

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Following its departure from the European Union, 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.

Full paper

Introduction

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 (Capita, 2022).

To date, there has been virtually no academic analysis of the implications of this change, especially what it means for students themselves – those keen to engage in educational mobility and to experience some time, as part of their degree, 'abroad'. This paper constitutes an early attempt to tease out some of these implications.

Methods

We draw on an analysis of the websites of UK HEIs to examine what messages are being conveyed about the Turing Scheme – not only because of the limited data about the scheme in the public domain, but also because webpages constitute a key means of communication between HEIs and their student communities (as well as with the public more generally) (Lažetić, 2020).

In total, we analysed the relevant pages of 100 HEIs. The institutions were chosen randomly, out of a list of all 165 UK HEIs produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). 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). We completed a grid for each institution, recording what was said, if anything, about the following topics: how international opportunities are presented to students; the geographical spread of opportunities; the type of opportunities available; the Turing Scheme, specifically; and the availability of opportunities to students who are traditionally under-represented in higher education and/or within international student mobility.

Our analysis focussed primarily on text rather than the layout or visual representation. 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.

Findings

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 show how the language used by HEIs reflects this discourse. However, we also argue that opportunities for mobility remain significantly geographically circumscribed – with a strong focus on the US 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 also contend that the Turing Scheme appears to be extending 'migration infrastructures' (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) by increasing the number of 'third parties' involved in short-term mobility programmes (e.g. charities and other largely non-profit organisations providing volunteering and study abroad opportunities). 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 is needed to understand its immediate and longer-term impacts.

References

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