IT IS NOT ONLY COVID-19 TO BLAME:
BREXIT DID A GREAT JOB IN REDUCING STUDENT MOBILITY

It is not a major surprise to claim that Covid-19 had a disastrous effect on student mobility. However, the decline in numbers experienced in 2019-20 and 2020-21 is not entirely due to the pandemic, since the effect of other external events had an important role before March 2020. Therefore, 2017-18 was the best year for mobility with a setback in the following two years. This article analyzes several factors that explain the characteristics of this setback.

1. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Brexit referendum in June 2016 and its result brought high level of uncertainty to students and institutions when considering the possibilities of exchange activities. The political deliberations and lack of clear positive developments brought a period of doubt lasting four years until December 2020. The effect on mobility was not immediate and oscillated depending on the external situation: this came after a period of steady growth up to 2017 as shown by the absolute numbers of outgoing mobility.

Some key dates help explain the influence of the political decisions on student mobility[1]. After the referendum, the UK government triggered Article 50 confirming the intention to leave the European Union. The negotiations brought an agreement that was rejected by the UK Parliament three times (January 15th, 2019, and March 12th and 29th, 2019) before the general election brought a new government to the UK. The general impression in September and October 2019 suggested that a 'no deal' scenario was likely, and the UK could leave the European Union without an agreement.

The dates on which these occurred are narrowly linked to the decision times for student mobility, when students apply to go abroad the following year (December-January), accept the places awarded to successful candidates (February-March) or decide to withdraw due to academic results or personal reasons or uncertainties (May to October). Exactly the months when the Brexit process was at its worst.

The political situation would explain a setback in 2019-20 before the outbreak of the pandemic, but it also had decisive influence in the 2018-19 academic year as we will try to demonstrate.

2. UK STUDENT MOBILITY. HOW MANY. AND WHERE DOES THE DATA COME FROM?

The data for total mobility is obtained from the HESA return annually submitted by all HEIs in the UK that includes student mobility since 2013-14, and the data sets of Erasmus mobility kindly provided by the British Council, the UK Erasmus National Agency. Both sources have some imperfections and show four main caveats of variable importance:

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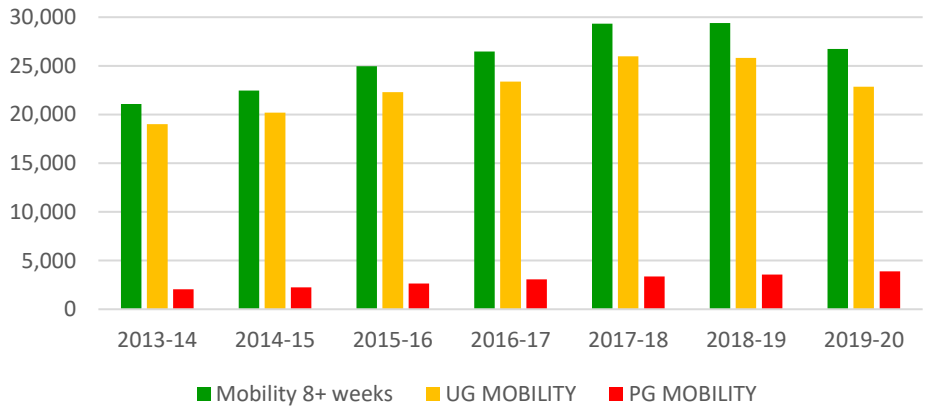
[1] *Chronology based on 'Brexit Timeline 2016–2020: key events in the UK's path from referendum to EU exit' article published by Euronews (https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/30/brexit-timeline-2016-2020-key-events-in-the-uk-s-path-from-referendum-to-eu-exit) last updated on January 30th, 2020.*

- In many cases, the report to HESA does not capture all mobility because some institutions do not include non-recognised periods abroad, such as short Erasmus traineeships, or because of variable inclusion of PG mobility.
- The duration of Erasmus contracts enables institutions to allocate students to one year or another[2].
- Reporting is usually carried out by different offices at the institutions and the information used does not always match, especially in aspects such as nationality of students, degree titles and length of the stay abroad.
- Covid-19 introduced an additional element of distortion, as many students returned to their home countries in March 2020 or after and continued their international experience by following the courses of the host institution online or working from home for a company from abroad. How this mobility period was recorded depends on the institutions with a general tendency to only include the period of physical mobility in HESA and not the continuity in Erasmus through online activities.

Despite these caveats, the figures obtained are generally accurate thanks to the high volume of students included minimising the shortfalls. Thus, it can be said that between June 2013 and September 2020, a total of 180,405 students had an experience abroad for eight or more weeks[3] and their distribution per years can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Outgoing mobility in the UK

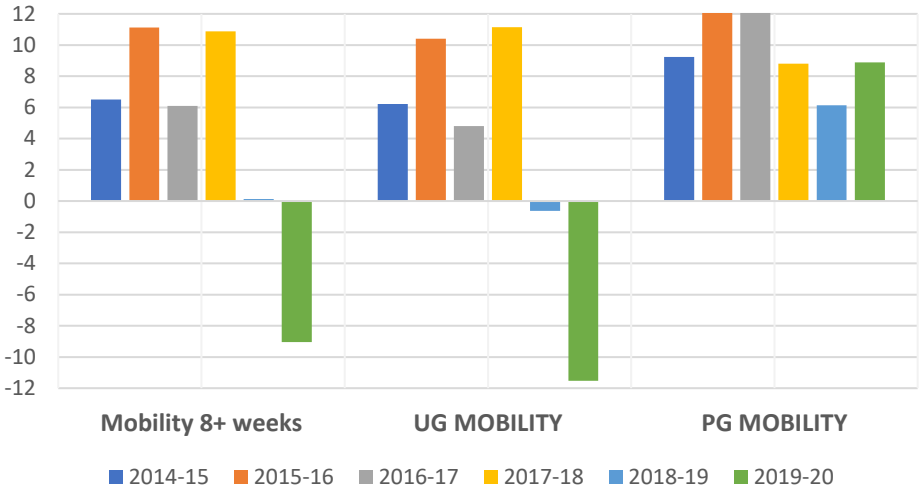


An analysis of the different elements of Table 1 shows clear disparity in the evolution for a variety of reasons that will be discussed separately. Table 2 brings some information about this evolution. Clearly, UG mobility shows a fluctuation with external elements playing a major role.

[2] The Erasmus contracts can last 18 or 24 months from June 1st of the year of signing. In practical terms, this means that the end date varies. Consequently, a student who goes abroad from July to September 2019 could be interchangeably reported as part of the 2018-19 or 2019-20 contracts depending on the availability of funds for each year. To use similar criteria for all years in this research, it has been considered that, for example, any mobility starting between June 1st, 2019, and May 31st, 2020, corresponds to the 2019-20 academic year.

[3] All mobility included in this report refers to periods of study or work abroad lasting eight or more weeks, although the HESA return is expected to record all mobility from one week. However, the level of accuracy of shorter mobility periods is much lower, as only 69 institutions reported such mobility in 2020, much less than half of those who submitted the return.

Table 2: Evolution of student mobility in %



It would be unfair giving the same consideration to Brexit than to Covid-19 in the decrease of student mobility in the UK. Each of them had a differentiated effect with several elements involved, such as the destinations, the length of mobility, the fields of study, the nationality of mobile students, their level of studies, the participation in a mobility programme or, even, the accuracy in the report of PG mobility.

An immediate sign of the decrease is provided by the UK participation in the Erasmus KA103 action (mobility in higher education) where 15% of the students participating in the action had the UK as the origin or destination of mobility in 2015. This figure was reduced to 13% in 2019.[4]

3. TEN QUESTIONS TO EXPLAIN THE DECLINE IN NUMBERS

Different factors can be considered to explain the decrease in the number of students going abroad. Some are more relevant than others, but when considered together help explain the reduced numbers and the effect of events prior to the pandemic.

Ten of these factors are analysed including the characteristics of student mobility and the final number of students going abroad. They go from absolute numbers to the typology of students and the changes experienced in recent years.

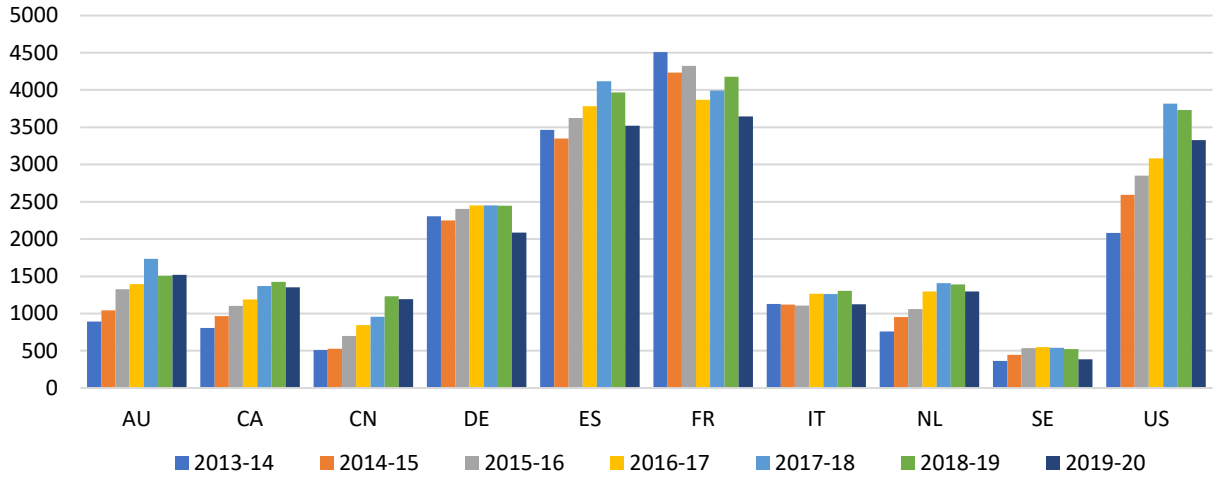
3.1. HAS THERE BEEN A CHANGE IN THE DESTINATION OF MOBILITY?

A general assumption would be that a decrease of mobility due to Brexit would have a higher effect on European destinations, but a decrease occurred for most of the main destinations.

[4] *Data extracted from the respective Erasmus + Annual Reports available at the website of the Publications Office of the EU (www.op.europa.eu/en/home).*

Between 2017-18 and 2019-20 there was a clear decline in the number of students who went to the most popular European destinations. That decrease included 28% fewer students going to Sweden, 15% to Germany, 14% to Spain, 11% to Italy, 9% to France or 8% to the Netherlands. This decrease started in 2018-19. When comparing the data of the 2018-19 data with those of the previous year, this gives percentages going from negative figures for Spain, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands and slight increase for France and Italy. The distribution by fields of study seen later helps explaining that difference.

Table 3: Top ten destinations



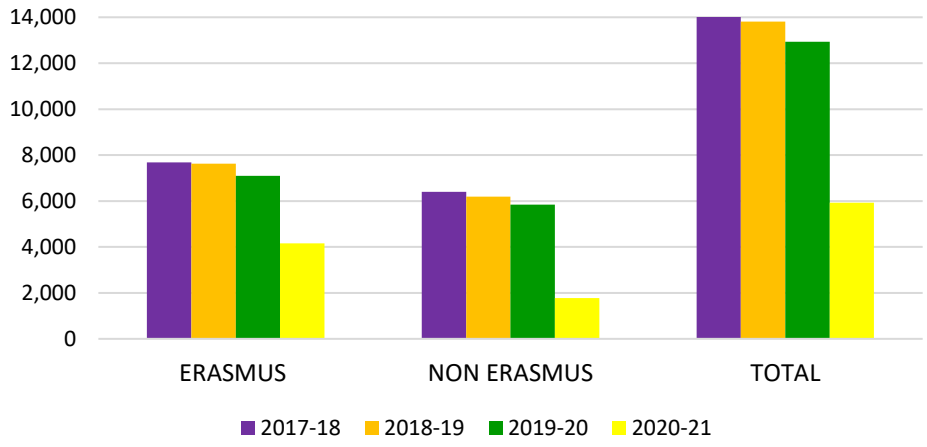
More relevant is the fact that the decrease can also be perceived when looking at non-European destinations. The comparison between 2017-18 and the two following years shows that Australia and the United States received fewer students in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 than two years before. Canada had a negative year in 2019-20, but numbers slightly grew in 2018-19. The exception is China recording an increase of 25% in the three years analysed. However, an important element to consider in this case is the nationality of those involved. In 2013-14, 72 Chinese students went on mobility to their home country, a figure that grew to 339 in 2018-19 and 809 in 2019-20. Or, in other words, 893 non-Chinese students went to that country in 2018-19, but only 383 one year later. Thus, all main destinations saw their numbers reduced in the last two years with the majority also decreasing between 2017-18 and 2018-19, implying the importance of external factors in the decision of going abroad.

3.2. HAS MOBILITY BEEN SHORTER IN RECENT YEARS?

An average mobility for the years analysed cannot be easily calculated. Despite the accuracy of the Erasmus reports (even with the unusual situation in 2019-20 mentioned in footnote 2), non-European mobility is not always as well reflected in the HESA return. Several institutions do not report an exact number of weeks abroad and, instead, consider certain number of weeks for semester mobility (typically 15) and another for full-year mobility (that can be anything between 30 and 52 weeks). Thus, a calculation of the average length of mobility is not possible. However, making a distinction between three main groups is still worthwhile in order to see the evolution.

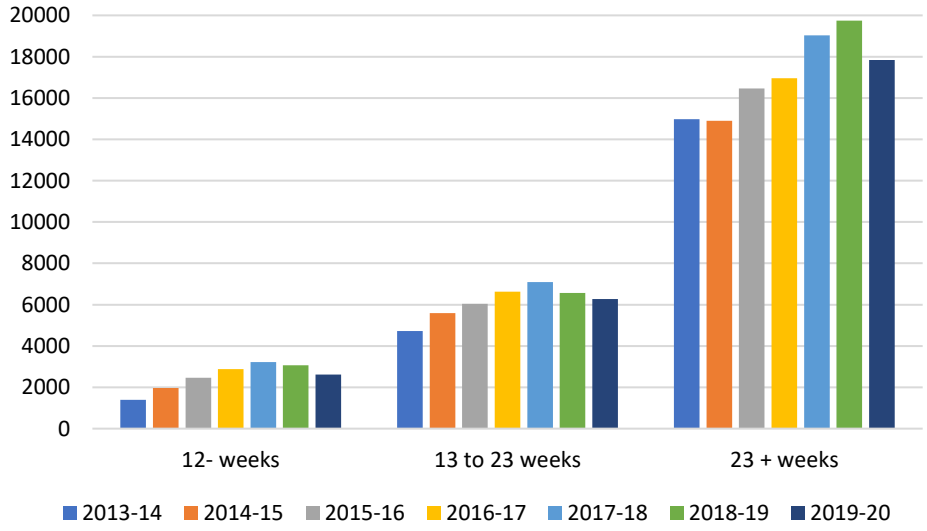
A first hint on the decline of recent years was observed when looking at the official statistics. The Office for Students collects the forecast of the number of students from all institutions in England. This makes the HESES (Higher Education Students Early Statistics) compiled every year. One of the features of the data is the number of students predicted to go abroad for the full year with a distinction between Erasmus and non-Erasmus. The data provides early indication of the number of students in that particular year and is available from 2017[5].

Table 3: Full year abroad students included in HESES (only England)



The decrease is clear in all four years with higher effect in 2020-21 in the middle of the pandemic. However, the effect is different when looking at the distribution according to the actual length of reported mobility and not to the plans reported before the mobility.

Table 4: Distribution of mobility by length of stay



[5] *Available at* https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-collection/get-the-heses-data/

The result shows a decline in number for the groups comprising 12 or less weeks of mobility and from 13 to 23 weeks. Those qualifying as a full year (23+ weeks) grew in 2018-19 but clearly declined a year after due to early return because of the pandemic. Not surprisingly, the effect is more notable for European destinations, the first affected by Brexit. Considering the fact that the length of mobility is usually more accurate for participants in the Erasmus programme, the evolution of recent years is clear:

Table 5: Distribution of Erasmus mobility by length of stay

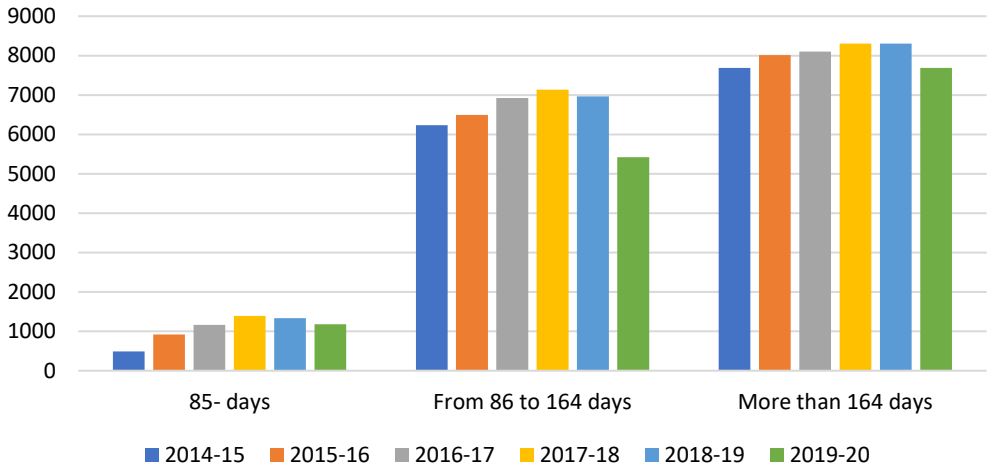
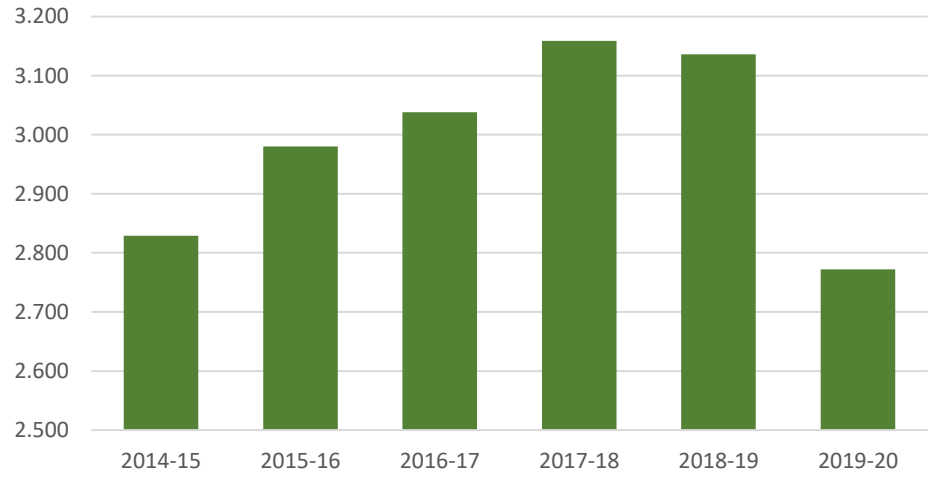


Table 6: Erasmus grant days (in milions)

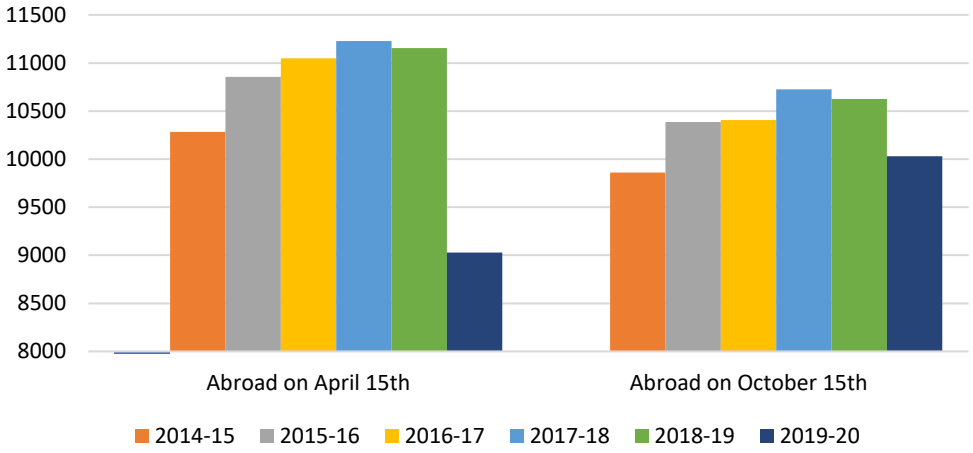


The requirements for the reporting of Erasmus activities include not the mobility weeks (as the HESA returns do), but the days the student spent abroad for each mobility period. The total number of days granted clearly demonstrates the impact on Brexit and the pandemic in the last two years, especially for the reduction of stays obliged by lockdowns at destinations. Thus, data suggests that students not only reduced their mobility periods because of the pandemic, but also did so the year before as a reaction to the external political reasons.

3.3. HOW DOES THE TIMING OF MOBILITY COMPARE?

March 2020 defined the effect of the pandemic with almost 1,400 students ending their mobility period that, in many cases, had started only a few weeks or days before. That represents conclusive evidence of the effect of Covid-19 in mobility but is exceptional for that year. Less exceptional is the fact that Erasmus mobility had declined the year before. As the Erasmus reports contain starting and ending date of mobility, the periods abroad can be easily defined.

Table 7: Erasmus students abroad in April and October



A look at the number of Erasmus students on a concrete date for some consecutive years provides an insight into the evolution of mobility. Two dates have been selected:

- October 15th, when all students going abroad for the full year, or the first semester should be at their destinations and
- April 15th, when all students going abroad for the full year are still abroad, as well as those who went abroad for the second semester.

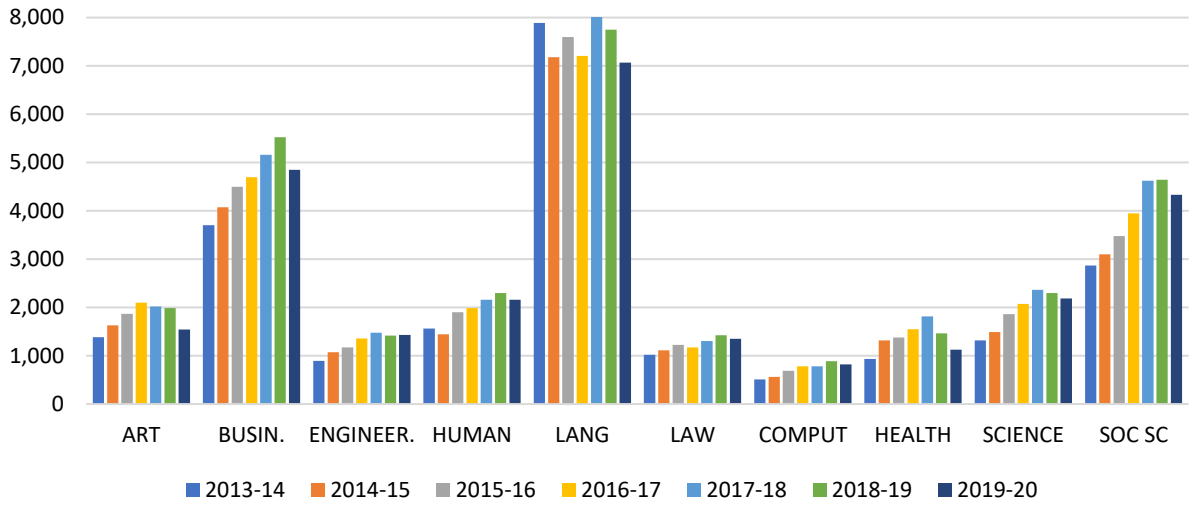
Most students should be included in one of the groups or in both. Table 7 shows that mobility went down in both 2018-19 and 2019-20 in October when the effect of the pandemic had not started. The decrease was of 6.5% between October 2017 and the same month in 2019. More evident is the reduction in April because an important number of students had to abruptly interrupt their mobility period to return home. The decrease was of 5.6% in only one year from April 2019 to the same month in 2020, although those whose mobility was stopped are still fewer than those who, in one way or another, managed to continue or start their mobility, by a proportion of four students starting/continuing for each one abandoning[6]. However, Covid-19 was not the reason for the 1% decrease experienced between April 2018 and April 2019 or 5.6% the following year.

[6] *There is a discrepancy between the reports for Erasmus and HESA regarding the length of mobility. Some institutions reported the real physical mobility in HESA but included the continuation of mobility from home in Erasmus, as allowed by the European Commission.*

3.4. DO THE FIELDS OF STUDY ALSO SHOW THE DECREASE?

The different fields of study also showed their own evolution in the last seven years. However, not all of them followed a similar trend. This is mainly conditioned by the decrease of language students, particularly seen within the Erasmus programme. The increased number of students following non-European languages did not compensate for the fall in numbers experienced by French, Spanish, German and Italian. From 2014-15 to 2018-19, the number of students going abroad with Italian in their degree decreased by 25%, by 10%, for French and by 9% for German. Only Spanish increased the numbers between those two years. Despite a significant growth, adding all students with Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Russian in their degree who went abroad still represents less than 50% of those with French or Spanish in their degree.

Table 8: Main fields of study - world mobility

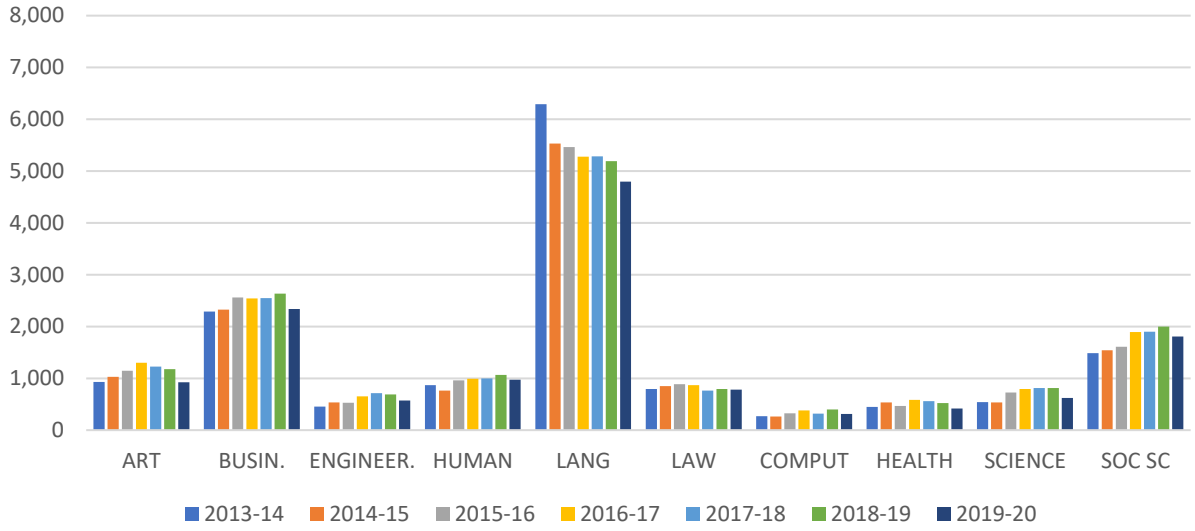


Not only language students reduced their numbers. As table 8 shows, all main fields of study decreased in 2019-20 and most of them also in the previous year. Difficulties in the accurate reporting of PG mobility can lead to an artificial picture of true mobility across all levels: this, however, disappears when we consider UG and PG as separate entities[7]. With an exception for Business (see footnote), all fields of study are in regression in 2019-20, although not necessarily in the preceding years. However, it can be said that the positive evolution slowed down in 2018-19 in the most popular fields of study. Thus, comparing 2018-19 with the precedent year, Computing, Law, Humanities and Business grew between 6 and 9%, but Art and Design, Engineering, Languages, Health and Science decreased. All fields of study suffered the double effect of Brexit and the pandemic in 2019-20 and their numbers were notably reduced.

In the case of Erasmus mobility, the reporting is more reliable and Table 9 shows this development. In addition to the negative trend of languages, other big areas of study also showed a decline.

[7] It is important noting that, since 2017-18, an increasing number of students from double degrees are included in the HESA return. They represent large cohorts of students going to the same destination and, in many cases, most of them are citizens of the host country. This phenomenon explains an increased number of students in Business in 2018-19.

Table 9: Main fields of study of Erasmus students

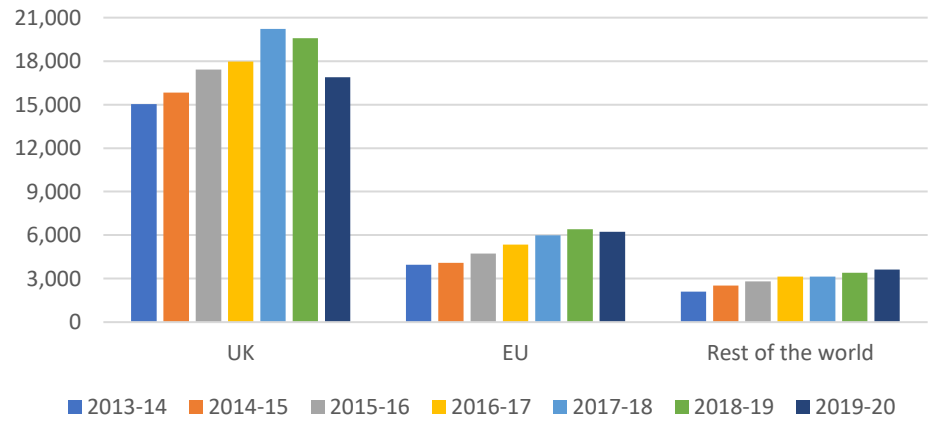


Between 2017-18 and 2019-20 the highest decreases in the number of students[8] were recorded in Health and related fields (-26%), Art and Design (-25%), Science (-24%) and Engineering (-20%), fields of study where the influence of foreign languages is small. Only Law (2%) showed an increase in the same years.

3.5. WHERE ARE MOBILE STUDENTS FROM?

The nationality of the students participating in mobility provides more information on the reasons for recent development. The total number of students has been divided into three groups: citizens of the UK, citizens of the member states of the European Union and citizens of the rest of the world. Table 10 shows us how behaviors have been different in the last six years.

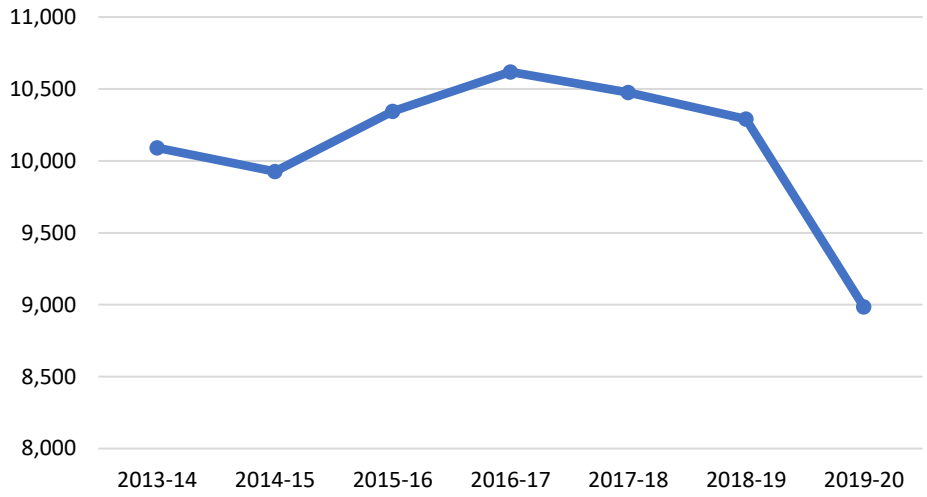
Table 10: Nationality of mobile students (all destinations)



[8] It is important to note that tables 8 and 9 refer to the number of students and not to mobility periods. This is particularly relevant due to a high number of students going to two (or three) destinations in the same year.

Non-Europeans represent the smallest part with 13% of the total, but it is the only group that does not decrease in number, perhaps due to the irregularity of the data on PG students that vary each year in their inclusion in the HESA return. Students from the rest of the European Union represent a higher percentage (23%), but their number decreases in the last year, in line with decreases in total mobility. Finally, British citizens show the greatest effect of Brexit and Covid-19, since their number is reduced by 16% in just two years.

Table 11: UK nationals participating in Erasmus



Even more significant is the number of British students participating in Erasmus. From a maximum in the year 2016-17, there is a continuous decline that is accentuated in 2019-20 due to Covid-19. The decline can be explained mainly by the influence of Brexit and the political uncertainty of the years 2017-2019 when the relationship with the European Union and its consequences had not been clarified. Despite the assumption that British students prefer non-European destinations, the figures refute this claim, since the number of students who traveled to non-European destinations did not grow in the same proportion between 2016-17 and 2018-19, before of the influence of the pandemic. The decline is structural and not just based on destinations.

3.6. DOES THE DECREASE AFFECT ALL LEVELS OF STUDY?

It has been repeated several times that the evolution of mobility varies according to the nationality of the participants and their level of studies. Tables 12 and 13 show this behavior in five groups:

- UG Mobility
- PG-Teaching students
- PG-Research students
- UK students
- Students from the rest of the world.

Non-British students have been grouped together to obtain more significant figures. In this way, the differences between the groups and where the most significant imbalances occur can easily be identified. Regarding the UG level, British students experienced a decrease of 2.7% in 2018-19 to which an additional 13.5% is added the following year. The decline did not occur among non-British students in 2018-19, but the effect of the pandemic was also recorded in 2019-20, albeit at a lower level, undoubtedly due to students who studied or worked in their home countries.

Table 11: UG participants in mobility (all destinations)

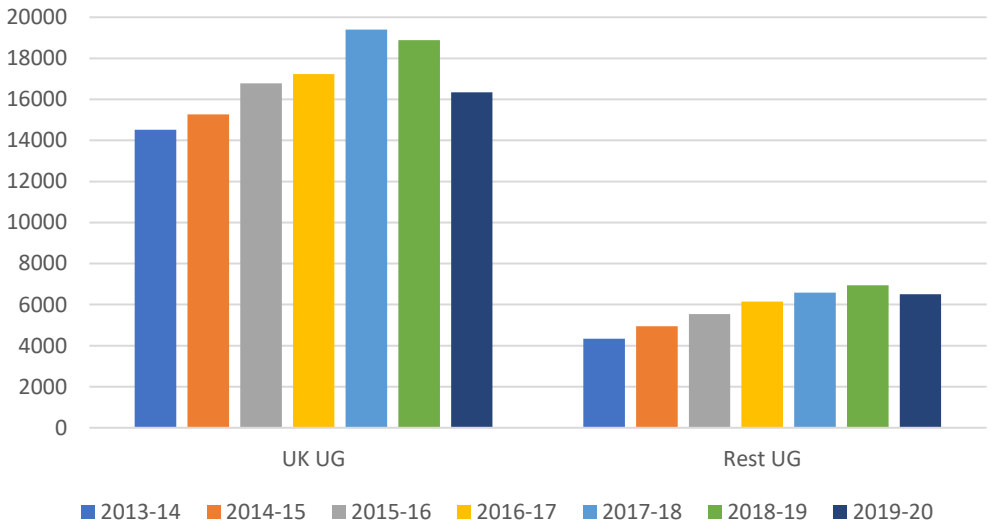
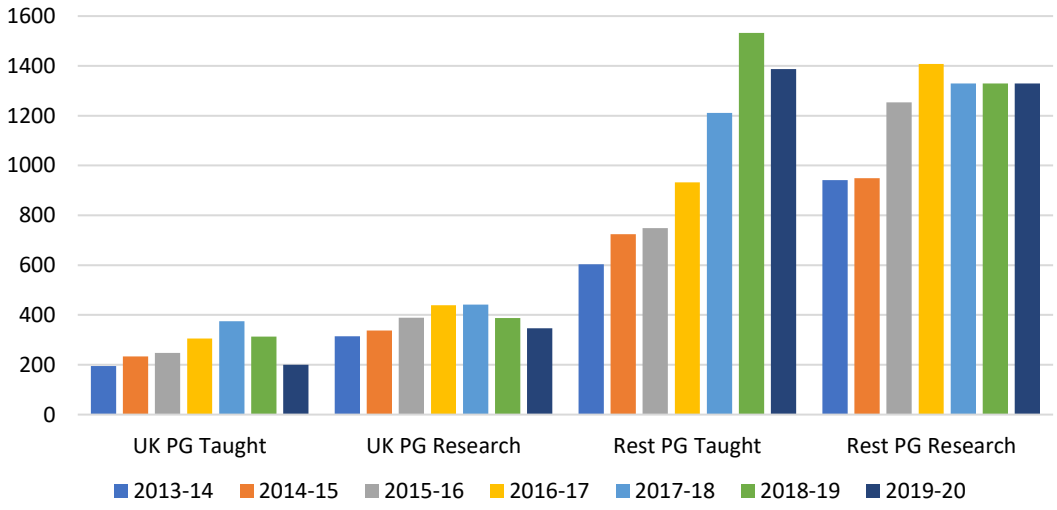


Table 12: PG participants in mobility (all destinations)



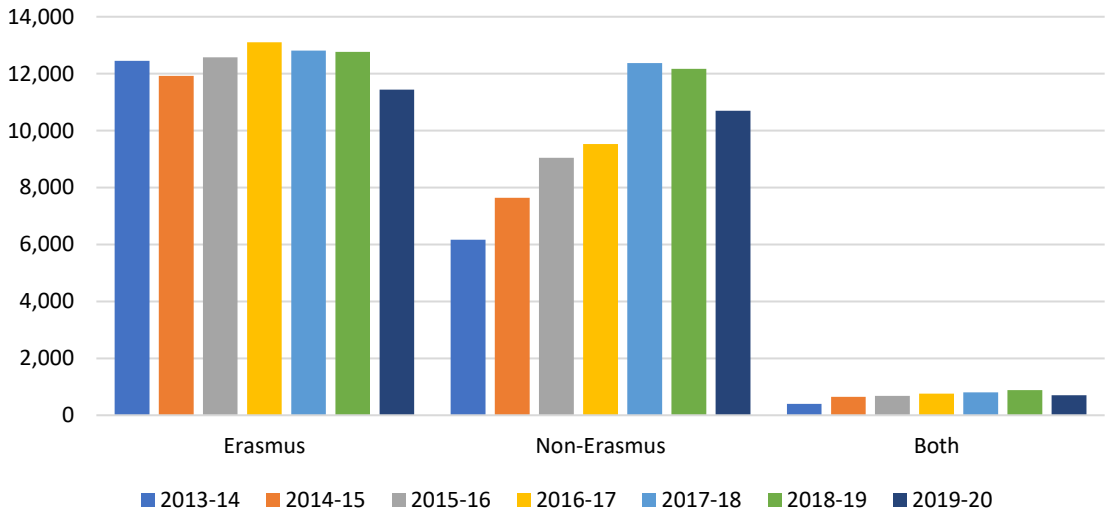
The differences become more apparent in PG courses. The first observation is the difference in volume between UG and PG students, with a higher proportion of UG students in mobility than would correspond to their percentage in the total of HE students in the UK. In general, postgraduate students are under-represented in mobility as there are seven UG mobile students for each one at PG level, when the proportion is 3 UG students for each PG student in the whole UK higher education sector. If considering

nationality, there are also clear differences: UK students represented 60% of the students of PG-Taught courses and 59% of the PG-Research courses in 2019-20[9], but their mobility was much lower, since they only represented 13.5% and 21% of mobility of their respective level. Their low number reflects the fragility of student mobility at those levels, and it is not surprising that the existence of obstacles such as Brexit or a pandemic reduces their number even more. Thus, greater decreases are observed since 2017-18 in the case of British students than those for students born abroad that, in a considerable number, may be going to their home country on mobility[10].

3.7. ERASMUS OR NON-ERASMUS? WHAT WAS THE EVOLUTION?

In a general, student mobility can be divided into two large groups: those who participate in the Erasmus program and those who go abroad through agreements between universities or individually for work placements or volunteering, for example. Additionally, some students combine both experiences. Traditionally, Erasmus had been the choice for the majority of UG students going abroad. In 2013-14 they represented 65% of total mobility, with an additional 2% that combined the two options. However, the proportions have been changing over the years, especially due to the decline in the number of Erasmus students. Thus, its percentage has dropped to 52% in the last three years, although it still exceeds the number of those who do not participate in the program. Apart from a decrease in 2014-15, created by the difficulties in the implementation of the new Erasmus+ programme, the total number of UG students participating in Erasmus had been growing for several years but went down since 2016-17 breaking that positive trend. The same pattern has been observed for PG students.

Table 13: Exchange programme - UG students only



The number of students who went abroad outside of Erasmus has partially followed its own direction. The growth between 2014-15 and 2017-18 was spectacular, with an increase of 100% between those two years. Apart from an obvious interest in these destinations, the improvement in the HESA return also

[9] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from

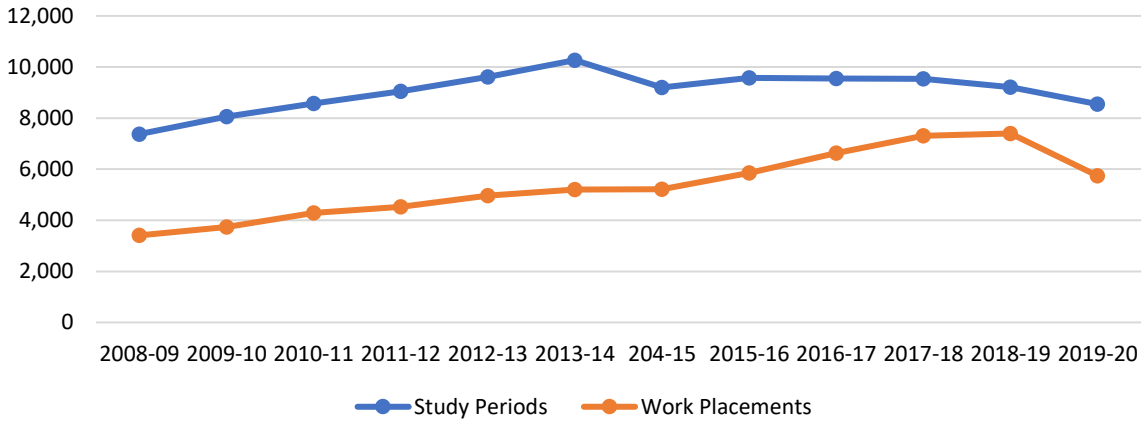
[10] *For example, 59% of PG students going to India where from that country with 55% in the case of China.*

explains this difference. Every year there are more institutions that reflect their mobility more accurately and hence the numbers grow every year. However, non-European mobility has not replaced the decline in Erasmus. On the contrary, there has been a decrease in the years 2018-19 and 2019-20 that can only be attributed to the effect of Brexit and the onset of the pandemic. Unfortunately, non-European mobility does not record departure and return dates and the number of students who were abroad at any given time cannot be compared as has been done with Erasmus participants in section 3.3. In any case, it is evident that the effect of external factors had an influence on the decision made by the students and was not limited to European destinations.

3.8. STUDY OR WORK ABROAD?

Although other options are considered, such as volunteering or research stays, the vast majority of students who go abroad study or work in their host countries. The chosen option is reflected both in the Erasmus reports and in the HESA return. However, the latter offers much less reliability due to the confusion created between volunteering and non-academically recognized stays abroad which make the data much less reliable for non-European mobility. This is not the case of Erasmus, where the activities are more defined and the KA103 action divides the students into two groups depending on whether the participant is going to study or to work. The only exception are research students who, by default, are considered to be working in their destination country. Thus the data of Erasmus participants from 2008-09 show that study periods and traineeships have followed different evolutions in the years analyzed[11].

Table 14: Erasmus periods by type of mobility



Work placements were introduced in Erasmus with the start of the Lifelong Learning Program (2007-2013) and have continued to be included as a mobility option since then and also in the Erasmus + program (2014-2020). At the beginning, the number of students who benefited from this possibility was helped by the decision to include British Council Language Assistants as Erasmus participants if they met the requirements of the programme. This meant that most of the students came from language degrees or degrees with a linguistic component. However, the link between traineeships (official name of their work placements in Erasmus) and employability became more and more evident and the interest in this activity

[11] The European Commission has published the complete mobility data since that year, which explains the choice of the start of the statistical series. The data sets can be consulted at https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset?tags=Erasmus, although those corresponding to 2019 have not yet been made public through the website.

grew every year. Figures ranged from approximately 1,600 non-language degree students in a work placement in 2008-09 to 4,900 in 2017-17, a much larger increase than that experienced in Erasmus mobility as a whole.

Table 14 explains the evolution of both types of mobility and the progressive increase. This trend was interrupted in 2014-15 when the implementation of the new Erasmus + program was carried out with delays and drastic changes in the regulations that impacted on the possibility of mobility for a significant number of students[12]. Once the initial difficulties were overcome, Erasmus + proved to be a unique tool to promote mobility and the data reflects a new increase. However, this increase was altered by a new trend in which the growing number of students going abroad to work was contrasted with a decreasing number of those going abroad to study at higher education institutions. In 2013-14 the number of students going to study abroad doubled that of those going to work. But in 2017-18 those going to work represented 43% of the total mobility, reducing the difference by 3,000 students. A considerable number of institutions with relevant volume of mobility are sending more students to work than to study within the Erasmus programme and this was also helped by the reduction in the minimum length established by Erasmus + in 2014. Since then, the minimum study mobility is established at 12 weeks, but only at 8 weeks for work placements. This increased the offer to students, who took good advantage of the new opportunity. Fewer than 400 students went abroad for 12- week work placement in 2014-15, but 1,300 did in 2017-18.

The influence of Brexit in work placements is less evident than for study periods. The slight growth in the number of placements did not sufficiently compensate for the reduction of study periods and the total number decreased in 2018-19. Covid-19 reduced the possibilities of work placements after March 2020 and, with no doubt, had a detrimental impact in the summer work placements due to start between April and June that year.

3.9. WHAT HAPPENED WITH INCOMING STUDENTS?

There is no data about non-European students arriving to the UK to study or work, as the HESA return only records outgoing mobility. However, the data sets published by the European Commission provide detailed data since 2008 and that allows tracing the profile and volume of such students.

From the beginning of the Erasmus programme in 1987 the number of incoming students has been higher than those going abroad from the UK. However, there are some facts must be mentioned to explain the number of incoming students:

- Some institutions have used the Erasmus program to attract good European students and incorporate them into their courses. With this, the ratio between incoming and outgoing students skyrockets to considerable figures that can reach up to 48 incoming students for each outgoing between 2009 and 2019. The ratio was at least 5 to 1 in the case of 37 institutions.

[12] *In the summary of the Erasmus Final Report for that year (available at the website of the programme) one UK institution stated: '…Year was very challenging in terms of the financial support initially granted by the National Agency and this had an impact on the perception of Erasmus by our staff and students. The monthly grant rates were fixed in December 2013 and when the allocation finally came in May it fell significantly short of what we needed to carry out the mobilities for which we had bid…'.*

- On the contrary, some institutions have greatly reduced the number of students received due to the nature of their student mobility. A high proportion of work placements implies a lower need for partnerships to offer study periods to students and, therefore, the number of incoming students is lower and, in many cases, lower than the number of students sent abroad. This is evident in the Russell Group, where a third of its members receive fewer students than they send.

- Most of the institutions are in a range between 1 and 3 students received for each student sent, especially in the group of post-92 universities. There are large fluctuations caused by policies of the institutions (such as eliminating language courses) or an increase in outgoing Mobility for study that, logically, increases the number of students received.

- Not all students who come to the UK have higher education as a destination. A growing number carry out a work placement in the country and must be considered separately. In cases where the work placement is carried out at universities or Colleges of Further Education with an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), these students have been included as coming to higher education institutions. This is also the case of research students and students who come to teaching hospitals in the UK.

Table xx: Erasmus incoming students per years

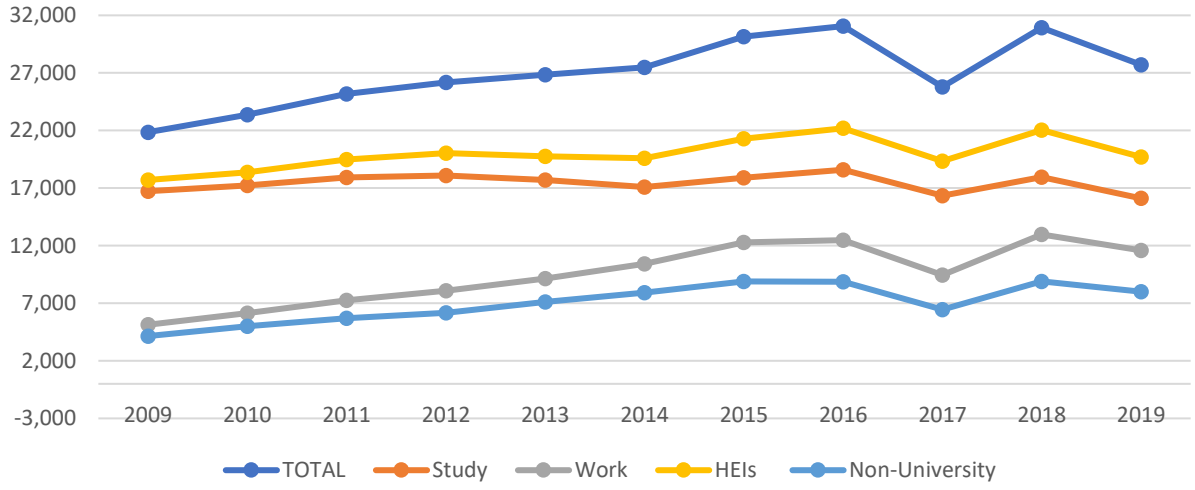


Table 15 shows the evolution of incoming mobility considering five different parameters: the total number of students who came to the UK, those who came to study or work and those who came to universities or other institutions and companies[13]. The differences between them are notable:

- The total number of students grew steadily between 2009 and 2016 and fell in 2017 and 2019, but not in 2018. Brexit fluctuations explain these recent oscillations in years when uncertainty could lead European students to believe that they did not believe they would be well received in the UK.

- The number of Erasmus participants who came to the UK to study have not experienced great variations in the years analyzed. The maximum level was reached in 2018 but the differences have never been

[13] Table 15 includes the results grouped by calendar years and not by academic courses. In this way, the classification made by the European Commission is followed and allows including the data for the entire year 2019 that, otherwise, would be reduced to the months in the 2018-19 academic year, since the data for 2020 is not yet available at the European level.

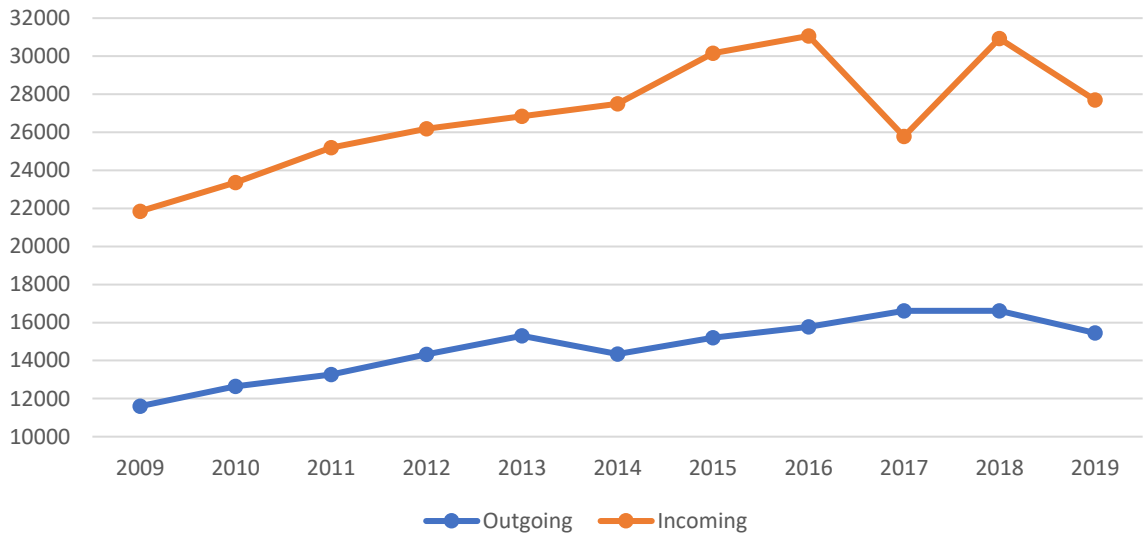
greater than 2,000 students. Despite this, declines are observed in 2017 and 2019 as a result of the political ups and downs in those years with some tranquility in 2018. The negative effect of Covid-19 is not included in the data as it only started in 2020.

- Unlike study periods, work placements did experience notable growth between 2009 and 2018 (153%) despite the decline that was also seen in 2017. A further decline of 11% in 2019 follows the general trend. In total, more than 77,000 students completed a work placement in the UK between 2009 and 2019.

- Students who went to higher education institutions to study or work followed a very similar trend to those who only went to study, with the same variations recorded.

- Minimal differences are observed in the number of students who carried out a work placement outside the higher education sector, although their growth between 2014 and 2016 was not so pronounced. Only external circumstances can influence the evolution of such mobility, since educational institutions are not involved in its implementation. Therefore, external causes are the only ones that justify the changes experienced in 2017 and 2019.

Table xx: Comparison between outgoing and incoming Erasmus mobility



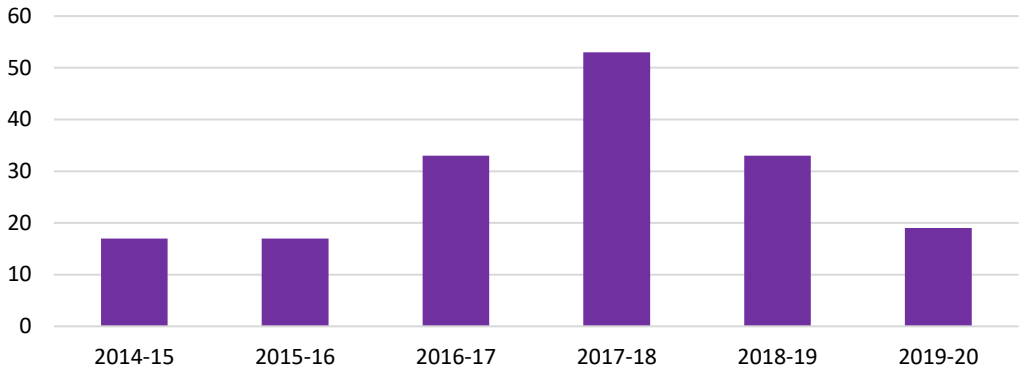
- When comparing outgoing with incoming mobility, clear differences are observed in table 16. Growth is similar for the two groups until 2014 when the progression does not go in parallel anymore. Outgoing mobility grew at a slower rate (10%) than incoming mobility (13%) between 2014 and 2016 and the effect of Brexit disrupts the series with a different incidence for each group of students. While the decline is continuous but discreet for outgoing students since 2017, incoming students are more sensitive to the political situation and recorded significant declines in 2017 and 2019 despite a rebound in 2018 when the situation was calmer.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that Brexit had an important effect on incoming mobility, without being able to evaluate the effect of the pandemic on the arrival of students with the Erasmus programme.

3.10. DID ALL INSTITUTIONS AND HOME NATIONS FOLLOW THE SAME TREND?

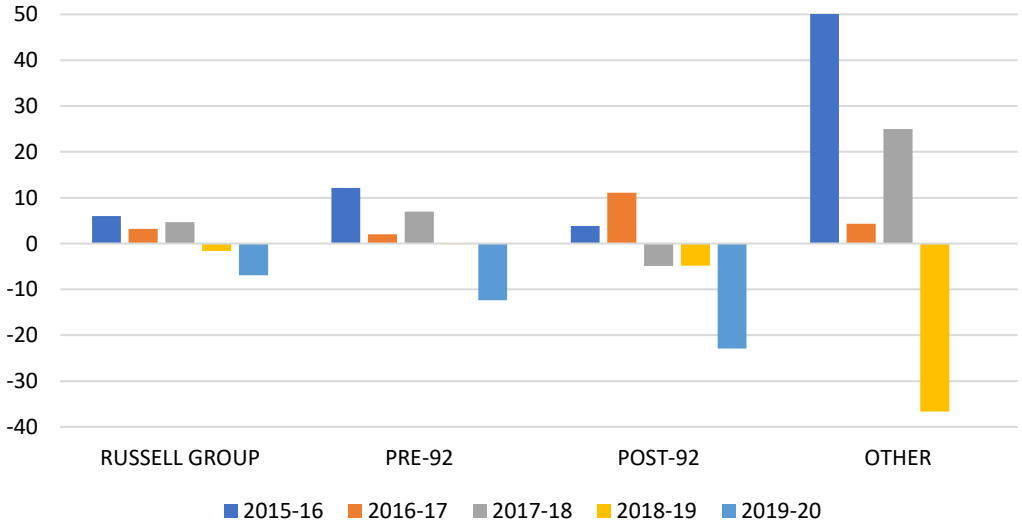
At the institutional level, the progression of Erasmus has followed a similar trend to that shown by all the participating students. Despite this, institutional policies can alter the final result and show the effect of Brexit and Covid-19 in different ways. For example, it is no surprise that the year with the most institutions reaching their maximum number of participants is 2017-18, but the fact that a total of 34 institutions registered it between 2014-15 and 2015-16 shows the variety of factors that can influence student mobility. It is also surprising that 52 institutions registered their maximum numbers in the years 2018-19 and 2019-20 when the general count was down. And this evolution is not conditioned by institutions of small size or reduced mobility. The same pattern is observed in the institutions that sent more than 300 students abroad in the six years considered.

Table 17: Number of institutions with the highest number of Erasmus students in a particular year



The distribution of Erasmus students by university groups can help to better understand the decline in mobility. Table 18 shows us how the behaviors are quite different according to the type of institution to which we refer.

Table xx: Evolution of Erasmus mobility by groups of institutions

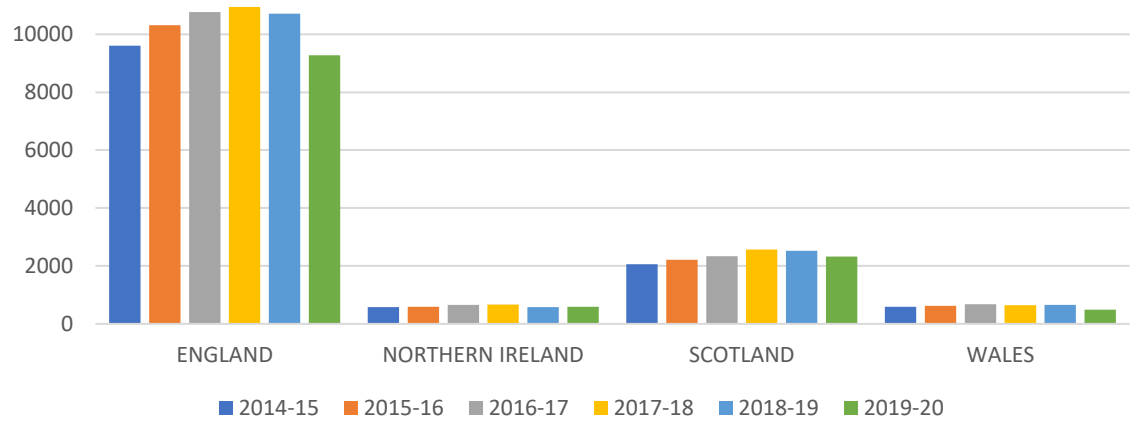


- The Russell Group and the pre-92 universities together represent more than 70% of the UK Erasmus outgoing mobility. But they also have a considerable number of students who follow courses in which mobility is compulsory and not only in languages. Consequently, the variations will be lower than in the rest of the institutions where mobility is optional. Considering the high number of students in compulsory mobility, the decline in 2018-19 is clearly due to the effect of Brexit, which is combined with the pandemic in 2019-20, when the decrease is accentuated. However, the Russell Group sees its mobility decreased by 7% in 2019-20 and the group of Pre-92 universities by 12%. Adding the two years, the difference is also significant, with a decrease of 8.5% for the Russell Group and 12.5% for the Pre-92 institutions showing that the effect of Brexit was higher in the Russell Group.

- The effect on the post-92 universities is much more evident. They have registered a decrease in the last three years of 5% in 2017-18 and 2018-19 and 23% in 2019-20. This is due to the very low incidence of compulsory mobility and the practical non-existence of language courses. Thus, the incentives for mobility are lower and any negative external influence can discourage participation in mobility. In this way, the post-92 universities reduced their percentage in the total calculation of outgoing mobility in the last three years.

- The performance of the 'other institutions' (colleges, art schools…) is unpredictable, as shown in the table. There is no apparent reason for highs and lows in the last five years other than the incorporation of new institutions or the withdrawal of others. Two years of increase (2015-16 and 2017-18) and three of decrease (the rest) only offer a partial vision of the influence of Brexit and Covid-19, but do not explain why a 25% increase in 2017-18 was followed by a 36% decrease a year later. The only reason found is a smaller number of institutions participating, although three fewer institutions between 2017-18 and 2018-19 do not sufficiently explain the difference in the numbers.

Table 19: Evolution of Erasmus students by home countries

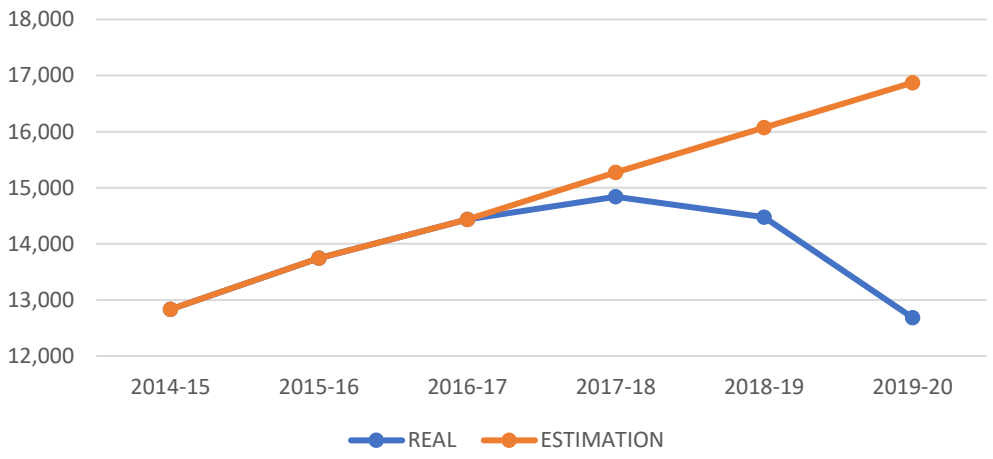


When looking at the evolution of outgoing Erasmus mobility according to the home nations in which the institutions are located, there are no notable differences between them. As table 19 illustrates, all of them register a decrease between 2017-18 and 2019-20 that reproduces the trend in total mobility. The increase experienced since 2014-15 slows down and a decline begins that seems to affect all of them in similar proportions. In fact, the difference between 2017-18 and 2019-20 was 24% in Wales, 15% in England, 12% in Northern Ireland and 9% in Scotland. Significant decreases in only two years.

4. SOME CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, the data show that the decline in student mobility cannot be solely attributed to the effect of Covid-19. A reduction in the numbers has been noticeably observed since 2017 when the possibility of exiting the European Union became a reality. Until this result was reached, the country, its citizens and its higher education institutions lived through two years of controversy and uncertainties that did not help the decision to go abroad to study or work. And not only to Europe, but to any place in the world where the effect of leaving the European Union could impact. Many students gave up the possibility of going abroad due to the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen if there was no agreement or, in the case of Europe, how they would be received. The same happened with the European incoming students who reduced their number in 2017 and 2019 due to the fear of not being welcomed in the country because of their country of origin.

Table 20: Estimation of Erasmus mobility without Brexit and Covid-19



An estimate of the outgoing mobility that would have occurred without Brexit and Covid-19 shows that growth stopped in 2017 and the distance between projected mobility and actual mobility became ever greater. The difference represented just 500 students in 2017-18, but 1,600 in 2017-18 and 4,200 in 2019-20 when the two negative effects came together. In other words, following the evolution of the previous years, Erasmus mobility should have been almost 17,000 students, but it stayed at 12,600. Different factors have been analyzed to see how this setback has occurred and all of them show that the decline started in 2016, after the Brexit referendum and has not stopped yet. In recent years, mobility has been shorter in stays, reduced in study periods and has affected all destinations and fields of study, even if the host country is outside the European Union.

A revealing data is the fact that in October 2019 (long before the start of the pandemic), the number of Erasmus students abroad was 6.5% lower than two years before and the second lowest since 2014-15. The volume of mobility has been sustained in large part thanks to the contribution of language students who, although their number decreases every year, have maintained a minimum of mobility that has not corresponded to the figures of students from other fields of study. When looking at the figures for total mobility (not just European), the decreases in the number of students of Art and Design, Engineering,

Health or Sciences between 2017-18 and 2018-19 and the stagnation of Social Sciences show that the crisis in mobility is not a recent event. In fact, the increase of non-language students going to any destination in the world between 2016-17 and 2018-19 was only of 100 students when considering those who went abroad for a minimum of eight weeks.

After a year in which most universities have been forced to cancel mobility, the academic year 2021-22 is presented as the opportunity to restart activities with new energies, but also with the aftermath of the pandemic and its different situation in the world. Recovering the previous levels will take some time. The first year cannot be expected to reach pre-Brexit and Covid-19 levels, but there are some hopeful signs. The fact that 52 institutions had their highest level of mobility in 2018-19 or 2019-20 indicates that the decline in mobility did not affect all of them in the same way. It is evident that institutional promotion policies have helped to maintain or increase the figures in many cases. The start of the Turing scheme will offer new opportunities that institutions will be eager to take advantage of. With the exit of the Erasmus program, a substantial improvement of the British scheme will be necessary to ensure that student mobility returns to growth as soon as possible.

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June 2021