

**The (declining) evolution
of outgoing student mobility in the United Kingdom
(from 2013-14 to 2022-23)**

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Introduction

Ten years of student mobility produce many changes not only in numbers, but also show alterations in trends, type of students or destinations, to name some of the aspects to be considered. The analysis of the data available allows a quite accurate estimation of the total number of students who went abroad between 2013-14 and 2022-23. The result is that more than 333,000 students were reported as having gone abroad for at least four weeks. Those students were from 192 different institutions, including some Colleges of Further Education, which also offer higher education courses.

The report covers all mobility activities and levels of education. Both aspects showed clear trends in the ten years. Work placements were growing in importance and represented 30% on average of total mobility. But the percentage they represented grew every year from 26% in 2013-14 to 32% in 2022-23.

Most of the mobility students were undergraduates. However, their percentage has been slowly decreasing with an increase of postgraduates participating in mobility. Postgraduates represented 13% of the students going abroad in 2022-23, 4% more than ten years before.

In addition to external events that are analysed below, a crucial change happened in the last part of the ten years period when the UK government decided to abandon the Erasmus programme and to create a new scheme, named Turing, to support outgoing student mobility.

Despite a slight increase in 2022-23, the number of students who went abroad that year is comparable to 2015-16 and is lower than the number of students between 2015-2016 and 2018-19. After 2019 the negative effect of Brexit and the pandemic is evident in outgoing student mobility.

The origin of the data

All data used for this report has been obtained from five main sources:

- The Erasmus UK National Agency facilitated the detail of all students participating in the Erasmus programme for all years covered by the research. For each student, this information included home and host institutions, area of study (according to the Erasmus classification), gender, nationality, level of studies, type of activity (study or traineeship) and start and end dates of mobility.
- The European Commission publishes the data of all students and staff participating in the Erasmus programme in its website. For students, this covers the same fields as above with the addition of the age of the student when starting mobility and the city of destination (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/statistics/for-researchers>).
- Since 2014, HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) request all higher education institutions to report their student mobility from a four-week length with an optional inclusion of shorter mobility. The data provided by HESA includes home institutions, host country, degree, gender, nationality, level of studies, type of activity (study, traineeship or volunteering) and length of mobility in weeks. The level of information provided by the institutions is not always complete.

- The Department for Education (DfE) provided (through Freedom of Information) the total number of students participating in the Turing scheme in its first three years (from 2021-22 to 2023-24).
- The higher education institutions provided different levels of information with some fields not included for data protection purposes. Out of 117 institutions participating in the Turing scheme, 112 sent the data of their participants in Turing. In the case of a complete set of information, this included home and host institutions, area of study (according to the Turing classification), gender, age, nationality, ethnic origin, level of studies, type of activity (study or traineeship) and start and end dates of mobility.

Merging the data from the five sources, it is possible to take a quite complete picture of outgoing student mobility in the United Kingdom since 2013-14 to 2022-23, despite the lack of detail in some of the information provided. Among the causes, the most relevant are the fact that not all institutions report all their mobility in HESA, mistakes in the data provided by the European Commission from the reports made by institutions (as reporting Belfast as part of the Republic of Ireland, for example) or incomplete data received from the institutions, particularly when missing gender, length of mobility or degree.

A minimum of four weeks of stay abroad, as required by HESA, is considered for this report. Shorter mobilities are not included, because many institutions do not include them when reporting to the statistical agency. However, included in this report are those students who had exceptionally short stays abroad with Erasmus and those participating in the Turing scheme with stays shorter than four weeks.

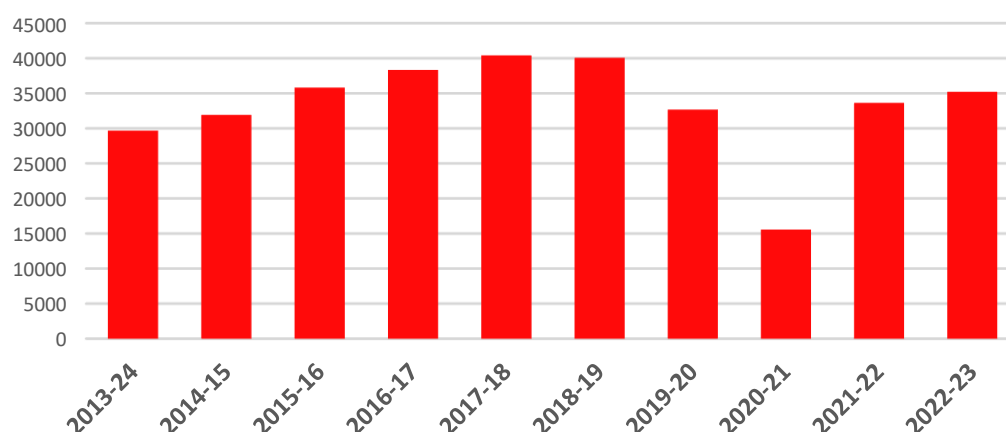
As recently as May 2025 Universities UK International published a very useful report ('Gone International: a new generation') where data on UK students going abroad in 2021-22 is analysed. The difference on the data used (with only HESA as a reference for numbers) and the fact that Universities UK International only considered UK-national undergraduate student produces a large difference in numbers. Comparing data is difficult because Universities UK International refers to the year of graduation, whereas this report refers to the year of mobility. Both non-Uk nationals and postgraduate students are included in this report.

Some elements explaining the evolution of outgoing student mobility from 2013-14: a summary

Outgoing student mobility has followed a tortuous path in the last ten years. From an evolution showing a steady increase every year, two distorting elements broke the trend: Brexit and the Covid pandemic. Brexit slowed down mobility particularly due to the uncertainty created by the political evolution of the process, particularly between 2018 and 2020 when the conditions for the UK leaving the European Union were being negotiated. When the situation was clarified, the UK decided to abandon the Erasmus programme on the 24th of December 2020 and create an alternative scheme (Turing) for students going abroad. Covid dramatically changed the conditions for mobility. From closed institutions at home to difficulties to travel and closed borders abroad (in the United States, Canada and Australia, for example), the institutions adopted different policies going from total cancellation of outgoing mobility to restrictions according to the requirements of the country destinations.

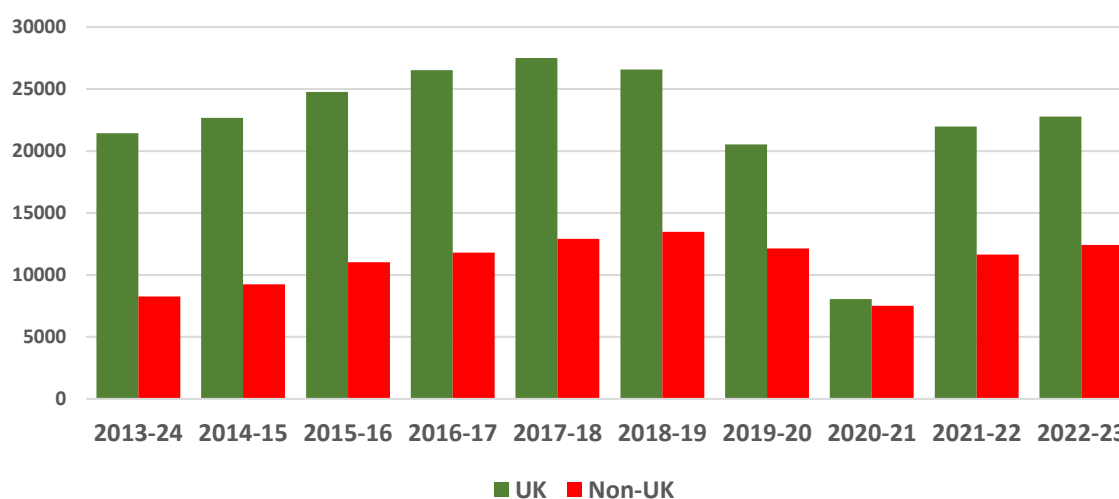
The consequence of these two obstacles to mobility was a constant decline in numbers from 2017-18 (the highest figure in the ten years analysed) to 2021-22 (when mobility was mostly restored) with a decrease of 18% in the total number of students going abroad.

Table 1: Evolution of outgoing student mobility from 2013-14 to 2022-23



Student mobility started a slow recovery in 2021-22 when the number of students participating was slightly higher than in 2014-15 and 2022-23, when the level was comparable to 2015-16.

Table 2: Evolution of outgoing student mobility from 2013-14 to 2022-23 by nationality

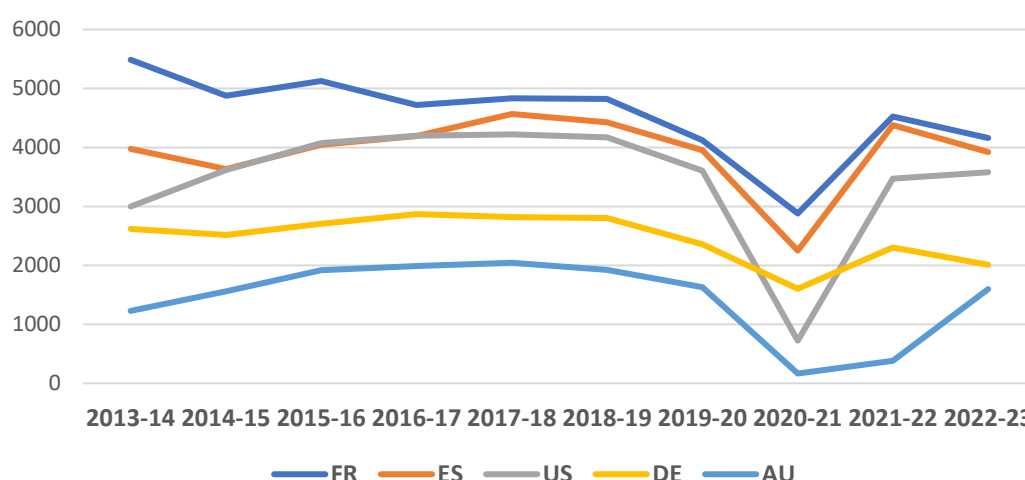


The number of students with UK nationality, which represents most participants, follows a similar trend to the total figures, but the non-UK group follows a different pattern. Their number grows in 2018-19, when the total of students going abroad slightly decreases, and is almost equal to the UK group in 2020-21 but returns to previous levels faster than the UK group.

It is also relevant to consider the destinations of students in the ten years covered by this report. Ignoring the level of study (UG, PGT or PGR) overall France, Spain, the United States, Germany and Australia were the most popular destinations and represented almost half of the total mobility.

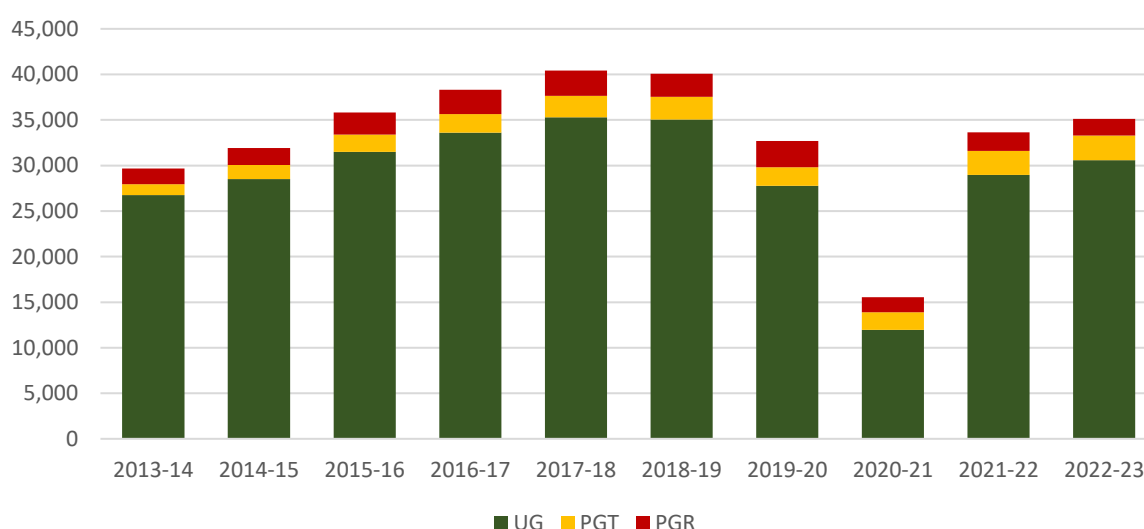
However, these figures are affected by a wider, more diverse set of destinations being chosen in more recent years.

Table 4: Number of students going to the five most popular destinations (from 2013-14 to 2022-23)



The gradual cancellation of the Erasmus programme and the creation of the Turing scheme produced substantial changes. The last Erasmus contracts were signed by UK institutions in 2019 and extended by the European Commission because of the pandemic for those institutions who applied for one extra year. That meant that the end of the Erasmus funding could be at the end of the 2020-21 academic year or the two following years. In parallel, the UK government decided to create the Turing scheme. One of the changes introduced by the new programme was the minimum length of stays abroad to qualify for funding. Erasmus required a minimum of eight weeks for work placements and twelve for study periods. The minimum length for Turing was only four weeks for higher education students and only two in 2021-22 due to the conditions created by the pandemic. This represented an incentive for mobility to countries that has had small numbers in the past. As an example, Fiji, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Thailand together received 463 students in 2013-14, but 1,432 in 2022-23. In parallel, other destinations such as the United States or Australia, which were not included in the Erasmus programme, benefited from the possibility for students to receive Turing funding.

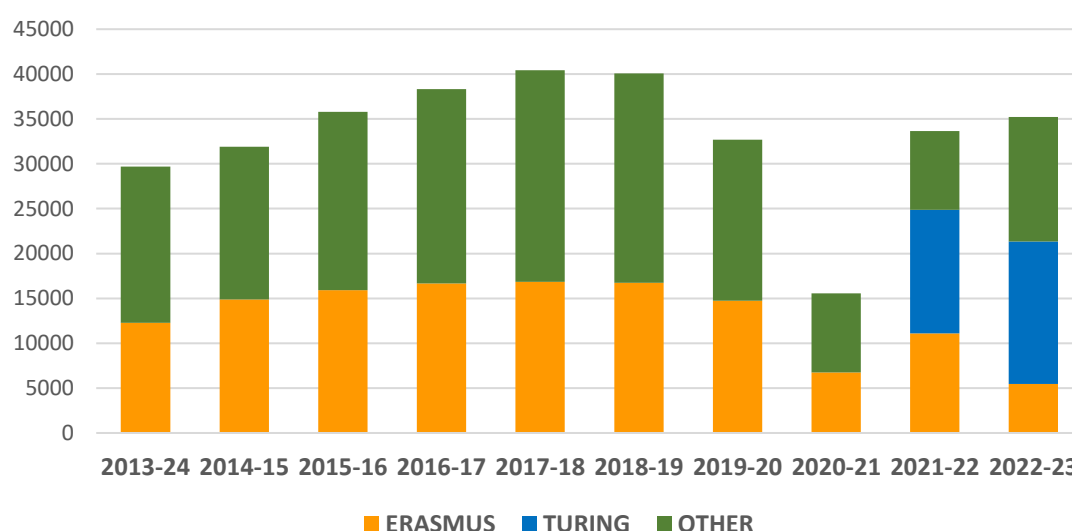
Table 5: Distribution of students going abroad by level of studies



The mobility of postgraduate students does not appear to follow the same patterns as those of undergraduate students. Two main reasons could explain the difference: the number of postgraduates participating in mobility depends on the accuracy of the reporting made to HESA by the institutions, and the participation in funding initiatives such as Erasmus and Turing is much smaller than for undergraduate students. Despite these obstacles, postgraduate students represented 12.5% of students going abroad in 2018-19 and 12.8% in 2022-23 showing a similar relative weight in the total number of students going abroad.

An element that conditioned the evolution of mobility was the weight represented by the Erasmus programme in the total number of students going abroad. Until the 2019-20 academic year, the percentage of students receiving European support was never below 40% of the total. The following year the proportion changed to almost 50% because the number of students receiving the support was closer to that of those who had other sources of funding. The end of Erasmus in the UK and the birth of the Turing scheme changed the percentages.

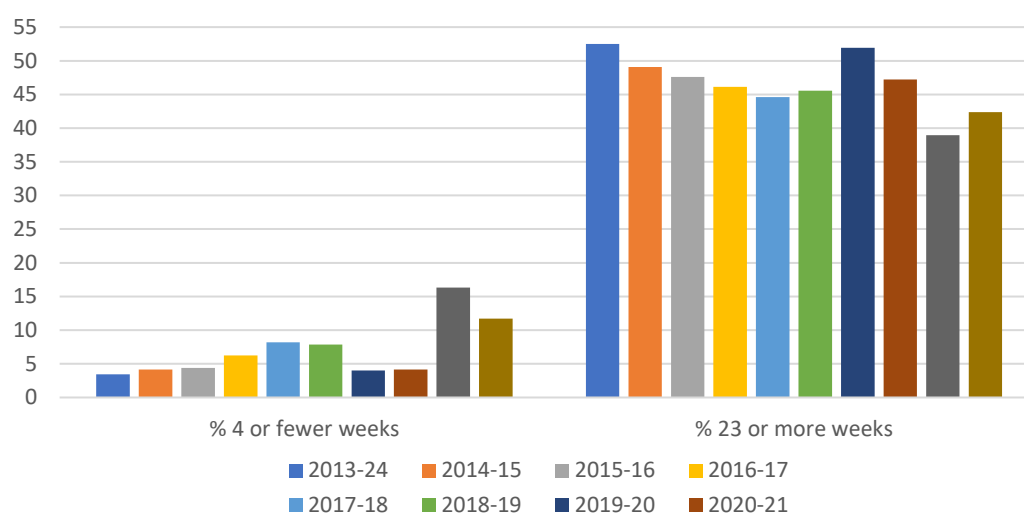
Table 6: Students going abroad according to the funding received (from 2013-14 to 2022-23)



Other sources of funding are not documented by the information compiled by HESA. Only Taith, the mobility programme created by the Welsh government in 2022, is reported by the Welsh institutions, although the number of students receiving funding for stays of a minimum of four weeks was very small in the first year of the programme. The number of students going abroad without the support offered by Erasmus or Turing was growing until 2018-19 and started to recover only in 2022-23, although their number was still lower than in 2013-14.

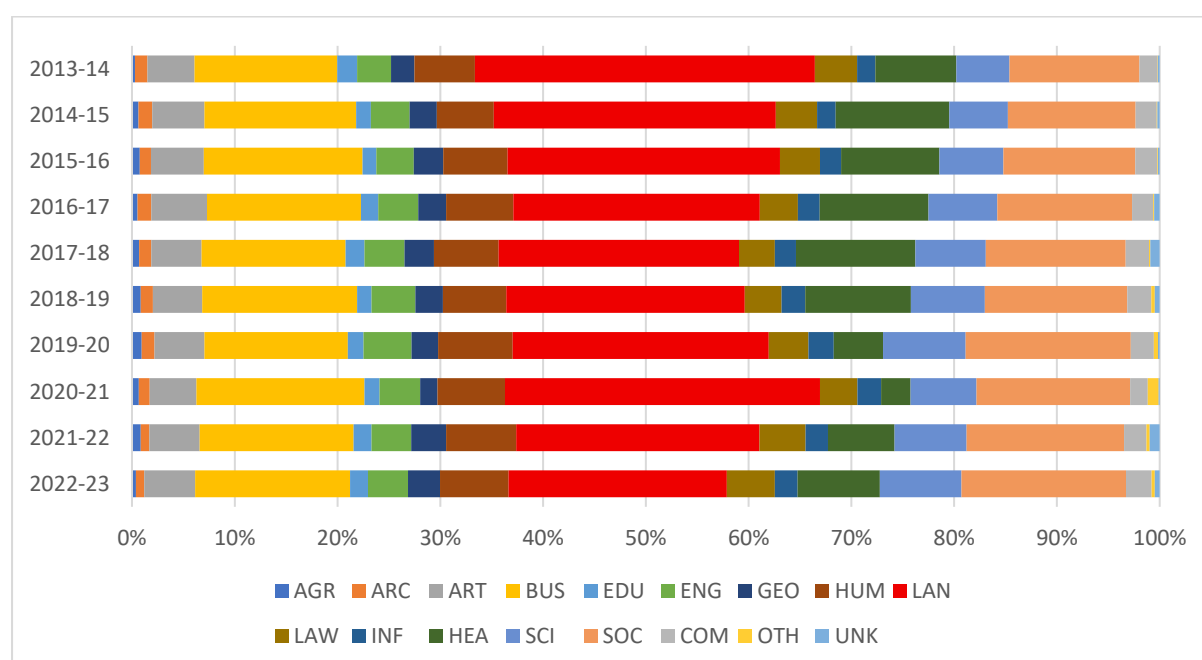
A significant change was produced in the length of mobility. It went from an average of 185 days (or 21 weeks) in 2013-14 to 149 days in 2021-22 and 152 days in 2022-23. However, the average stay was decreasing every year except for those years most affected by the pandemic (2019-20 and 2020-21). The reason for this trend can be seen when looking at the number of students going abroad for 4 or fewer weeks and for 23 or more weeks. Of particular interest is the Turing funded mobility from two weeks in 2021-22 and from four weeks in 2022-23. The possibility of accessing funding for mobility for short periods made this option more attractive and opened mobility up to other fields of study, instead of being mainly restricted to areas such as Medicine, Art or Geography, which have consistently recorded higher levels of short mobility.

Table 7: Students going abroad for short or long mobility (from 2013-14 to 2022-23) (in %)



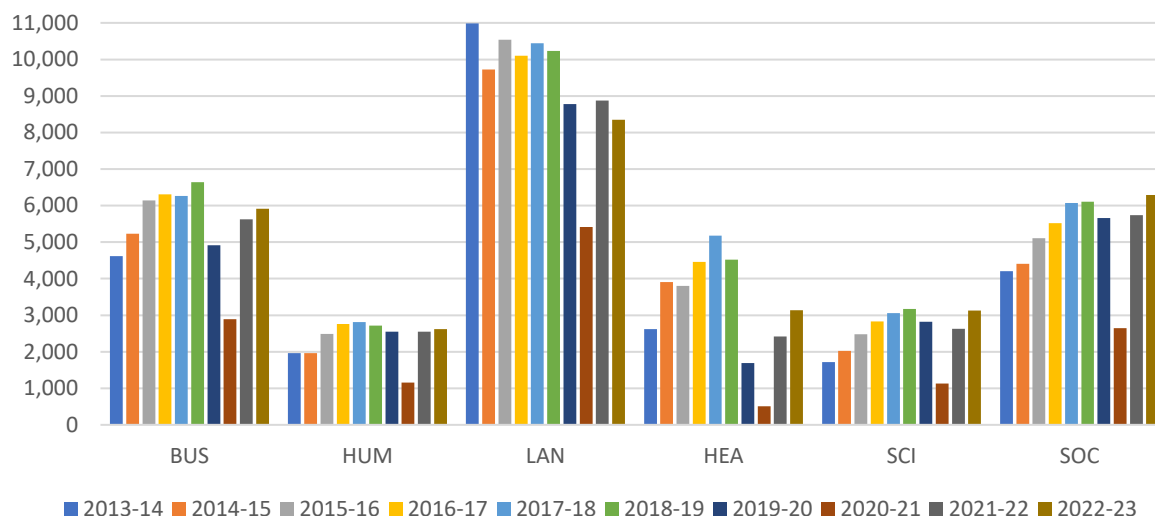
It is evident when looking at the fields of study from which students go abroad there is not a balance. Using the division created by the Erasmus programme to classify the students going abroad there are sixteen different groups, in addition to those students whose degree at home is unknown. Traditionally, Language students represented the highest percentage, followed by Business students.

Table 8: Distribution of outgoing students by areas of study (from 2013-14 to 2022-23)



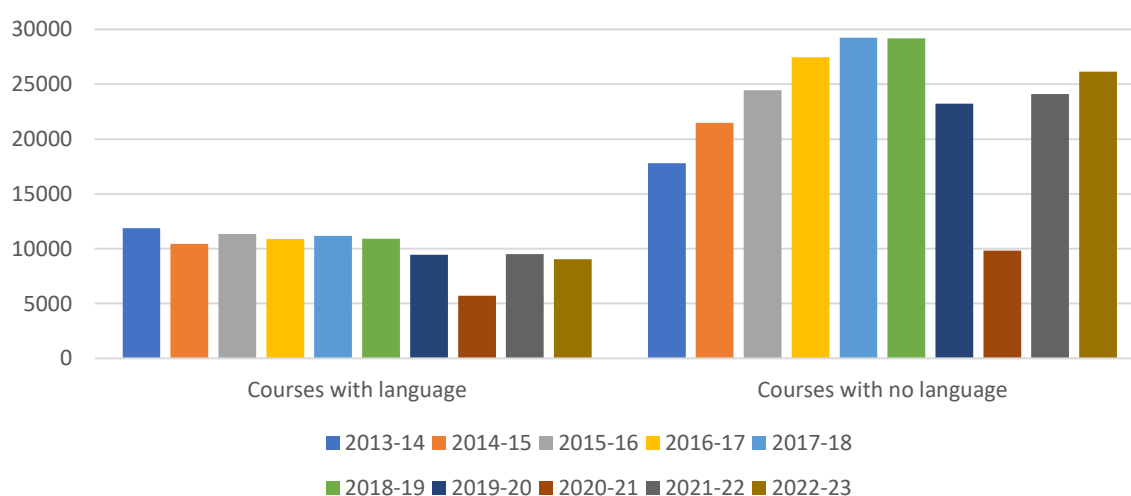
It is important to note that students in a joint course (Politics and French, for example) are included in the groups for both components of their degree. This is not done for students in degrees with a minor (Chemistry with Mathematics, for example) where only the major field is considered. However, students with degrees containing a language as a minor (Geography with Spanish or Business with a Modern Language) have been included elsewhere in the report in order to assess the weight of languages in the total of mobility.

Table 9: Students going abroad for the six main areas of study (from 2013-14 to 2022-23)



The evolution of the six main areas helps explain the decrease in mobility. The most evident trend is the decrease in mobility of Language students, with a lower level in 2022-23 than at the beginning of the series and with no apparent perspective of increasing numbers in the coming years because the number of students enrolled in such courses has been dropping in recent times. Other areas of study show variable trends because of the impact (positive and negative) of Brexit and the pandemic. In the 2017-18 academic year numbers decreased for Humanities, Languages and Health with similar levels for the other three areas of study. One year later, all areas decreased due to the impact of Brexit and the beginning of the pandemic, although this only affected mobility starting after March 2020. The recovery in numbers of the last two years was not balanced, with the higher increases in Sciences, Health and Social Sciences and a slower progress in Business and Humanities.

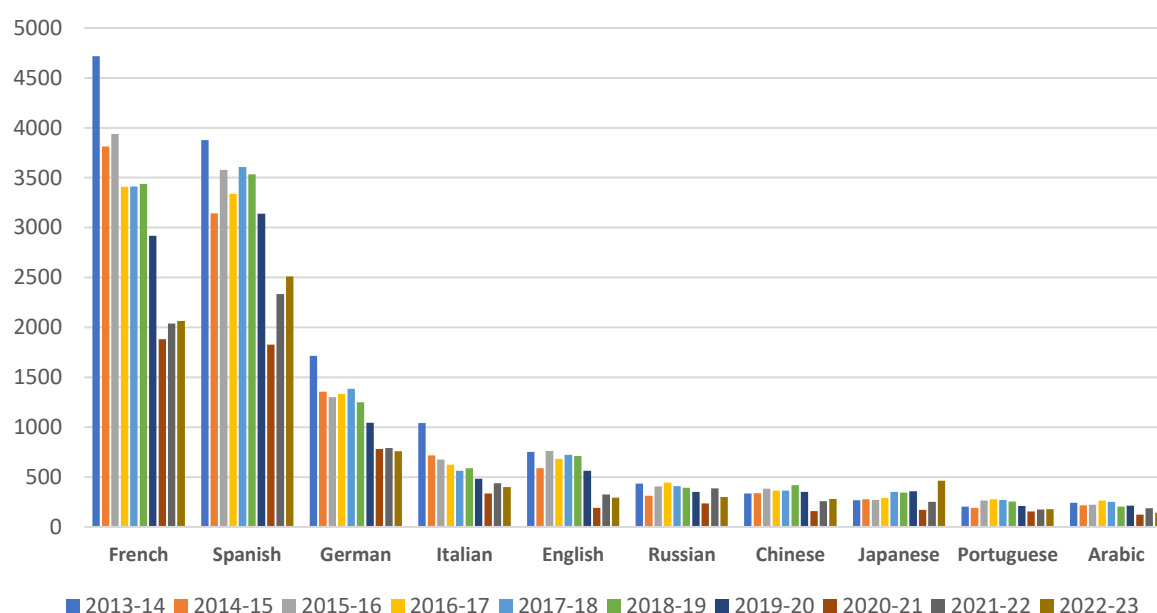
Table 10: Language vs non-Language students (from 2013-14 to 2022-23)



The number of students undertaking mobility from a degree with language decreased by 13% between 2018-19 and 2022-23, compared to a 17% increase for students without languages in their degrees.

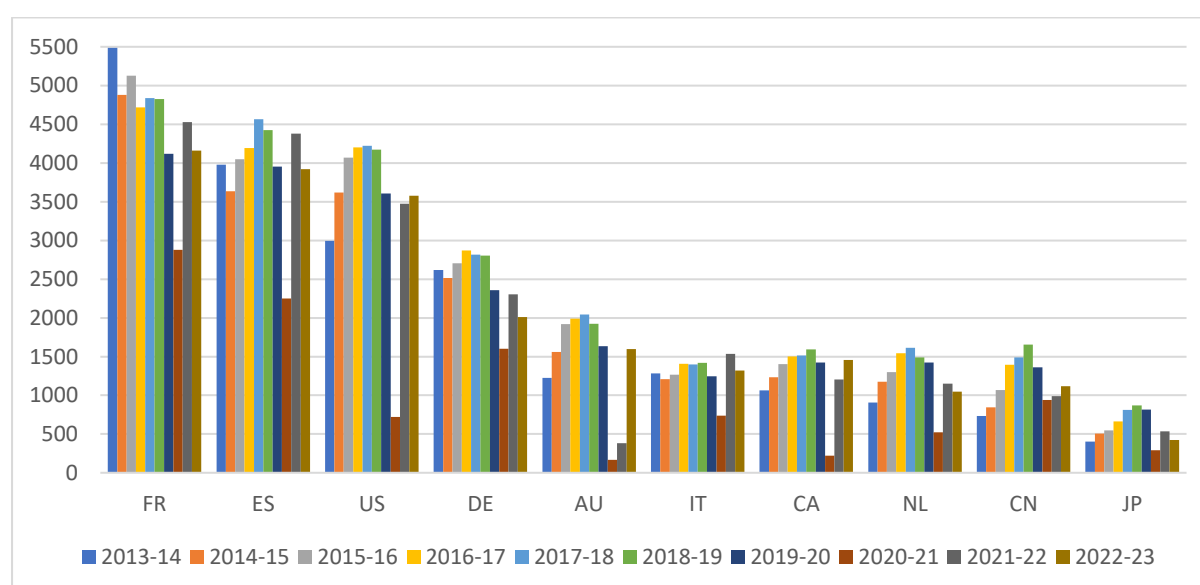
However, the level in the last year shows a different pattern. Non-Languages students achieved a similar level of mobility in 2022-23 to that of 2015-16, but Languages showed the lowest level of all years (excluding the pandemic years). Thus, the slow recovery is more probable from non-Language which are slowly increasing. The total number in the future years will strongly depend on Languages continuing to be an important factor in the total outgoing mobility.

Table 11: The ten languages with more students going abroad



The decline of the number of students of the main European languages illustrated in Table 11 is not compensated by a sufficiently significant increase of other languages, such as Russian, Chinese, Japanese or Arabic. In fact, 2022-23 represented the lowest level for European languages and similar figures than those in 2014-15 for non-European languages.

Table 12: Main destinations of outgoing student mobility



Because of the evolution of Language student numbers, the destinations of mobility have also experienced a notable change in the period analysed. The six main European countries (France, Spain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Ireland) represented 49% of the outgoing mobility in 2013-14, but only 37% in 2022-23. In absolute numbers, this represented going from 15,000 to 13,000 students in ten years. In parallel, the six main non-European countries (United States, Australia, Canada, China, Japan and Hong Kong) went from 23% to 25% in ten years or, in absolute terms, from 7,000 to 9,000 students from 2013-14 to 2022-23. Thus, one decrease was compensated by an increase, but they did not represent an overall increase in numbers of students going abroad.

In general, the countries involved in the Erasmus programme saw a decrease in the number of hosted students. This not only applies to those directly related to languages, but also to others such as Cyprus, Finland or Turkey where the influence of languages is less relevant. The exceptions to this pattern are countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan, replacement destinations for language students unable to travel to Russia because of the Ukrainian war.

One new characteristic of outgoing mobility in these ten years was the diversification in the destinations, particularly to non-European countries. Shorter mobility periods and the possibility of offering funding for such mobility saw the sudden increase in the number of students going to destinations that were clearly a minority ten years before. Two clear examples are Fiji and St Lucia. Through the activity of third parties organising trips for groups of students, the number of participants grew exponentially. The number of students going to Fiji went from 11 (in 2013-14) to 386 (in 2022-23) and to St Lucia from 52 to 128 in the same years. Similar cases were Indonesia, Nepal, Uganda or Vietnam, where the influence of Nursing students was also relevant. Language students also diversified their destinations, with Argentina, Chile, Mexico or Peru seeing increases in student of Spanish courses.

The HESA return classifies students in three categories depending on their activity abroad: study, placement and volunteering. Some institutions include non-credited placements in the latter category and, to clarify the classification, students have been considered as going to work. Once this distinction is made, there has been an increase in the percentage of students in placement in the last ten years. 74% of the students in 2013-14 went to study abroad and 26% to work. This changed to 68% and 32% in 2022-23, meaning that one out of three students went abroad for a placement.

When considering the home nations where the higher education institutions are based, there were slight differences across the ten years. England went from 77% of total mobility in 2013-14 to 79% in 2021-22 and this slight increase was against the decrease of Scotland (from 15 to 14%) and Wales (from 5% to 4%). Northern Ireland kept a similar share of mobility with 3%.

From an institutional perspective, 73 out of the 129 that registered mobility in 2013-14 and 2022-23 increased the number of mobile students and 55 registered a decrease. Seven institutions have not sent any students abroad since 2019-20. In contrast, five institutions with no mobility before 2013 appeared in the list. Looking at the groups of universities, the Russell Group sent about 4,000 more students abroad in 2022-23 than ten years earlier, the pre-92 universities only 400 more and the post-92 universities 600 more. However, the evolution is different when comparing the year 2018-19 with 2022-23. The Russell Group lost 1,500 students and the pre-92 another 1,600 students, mostly from Language courses. The decrease at the post-92 institutions was 950 students: this was not due to the decline in Language student numbers but to the general decline in mobility numbers experienced by outgoing student mobility in the ten years analysed.

Some conclusions

Some 330,000 students went abroad from UK higher education institutions between 2013-14 and 2022-23. Extrapolation of the evolution in the first five years of the cycle would have given rise to an expected figure of over 420, 000 for the ten-year period. However, Brexit and the pandemic changed that course. Brexit created an insecure environment at the time of the negotiations with the European Union and more difficult conditions of travel after 2020 due to visa restrictions. The pandemic almost entirely cancelled mobility in many institutions and several countries did not open borders to incoming students at different stages during 2021. An additional obstacle created by the Brexit process was the abandonment of the Erasmus programme in December 2020 and the creation of the Turing scheme, operational from the 2021-22 academic year. Adjusting to the effects of the pandemic and budget constraints strongly affected the implementation of Turing and, despite an increase in numbers in 2022-23, the replacement of Erasmus represented the loss of funding for staff mobility and limited resources to achieve the level of mobility pre-Brexit and pandemic. The number of participants in Turing in 2022-23 (15,892) represents a similar number to that of Erasmus students in 2015-16.

Comparing the data of the ten years analysed, the first clear output is an alarming decrease in the number of students going abroad with languages in their courses. Apart from the years of the pandemic, their number is the lowest in the ten years period. A decline in European languages was not compensated by an increase of non-European languages and the two thousand student decrease was not replaced by students from other areas of study either.

There was an important difference in student mobility with the reduction of the length of stay abroad. An increasing number of students go abroad for four or fewer weeks periods, mostly through third parties organising group trips that, despite the value of the experience, do not represent any credit recognition for participants. Thus, credit mobility is reduced, and student mobility loses part of its academic value even if the numbers are slowly increasing back to the levels from seven or eight ago.

The decrease in mobility is not only seen when looking at language students. Most of the areas of study have not recovered the previous levels yet and are still below the figures from before 2017. This represents a decreasing interest in mobility from students, but also from many institutions. A total of 55 of them sent fewer students abroad in 2022-23 than ten years before and seven of them has not sent a single student abroad since 2019-20. Perhaps a lack of recognition of the academic and personal benefits of mobility and/or a shift in institutional priorities might explain this decline?

Fewer students and shorter stays abroad have brought a diversification of destinations that can be seen as a positive effect to a certain extent. However, this diversification provoked a polarisation of mobility with a lower academic commitment and an increase of the work of those organising mobility at central level with no evident direct involvement of the academics in charge of exchanges. The requirements of a group of twenty students going to France, Spain or the United States to obtain academic credits are not the same as those of a similar number of students going to exotic destinations in a mixture of cooperation and charity work. The same applies to students going abroad for a long work placement compared to four-week stays in Africa or Oceania, for example. The academic benefit of exchange mobility is partly replaced by an international experience with no evident academic contents.

Clear policies are required to revert the current situation. Credit mobility is being replaced by short period abroad providing a limited international experience, particularly when considering that, in many cases, those trips represent a group activity rather than an individual experience. The number of students going abroad still represents a minority of the higher education population. If the international experience is to be offered to larger cohorts of students, the increase should be

significant. Mobility numbers are lower than in the past and a mixture of long and short mobility could be argued to reduce the benefits of student mobility, particularly as some students who do go abroad for either short periods and/or cooperation or charity work do not get recognition for their period abroad.

Funding is a vital element for student mobility. Although some students will still go abroad even without the backing of a programme or scheme, the majority will not access mobility. Only a third of the undergraduate students going abroad in 2022-23 (representing about 10,500 students) had not the support of Erasmus, Turing or Taith. Without increasing (access to) funding, student mobility growth be limited.

Even with the massive effort shown by the professionals managing student mobility, the lack of a clear institutional policy promoting the values of mobility and insufficient funding available do not bode well for an increase in the percentage of students going abroad in the coming years. A quick look at the Erasmus Annual Report for the last years demonstrates that several European countries are sending more students under Erasmus just to Europe than the UK is sending to the entire world.