UK's Turing Scheme: The Challenges Ahead

José M. Guibert and Alex Rayón

Abstract
Brexit supporters did not like the Erasmus student mobility exchange program. During the past three decades, Erasmus helped students, especially those from low-income backgrounds who are the least likely to travel internationally, to gain better employment and improve their skills thanks to their study abroad experiences. Will the new Turing scheme, devised by the British government, be able to provide students with the same benefits?

The future of multilateralism in a world that currently exhibits strong unilateral tendencies is not clear. But in some fields, such as higher education, these last decades have shown that institutions collaborating in networks can achieve significant results. The Erasmus exchange program is a clear example. But the 2020 Christmas Eve Agreement will mark for posterity the day on which the United Kingdom formalized its exit from the Erasmus program.

The movie *The Imitation Game* is about the life of Alan Turing. Born in 1912, this Briton is considered the forerunner of modern computing. In World War II, Turing managed to decipher the Nazi codes, in particular those of the Enigma machine. The period of peace that the Western world has been enjoying for over 75 years is in part a result of his achievement. Little could Turing imagine that, several decades later, the new international mobility exchange scheme that the British government is setting up after Brexit would be named after him.

From a Multilateral Program to Bilateral Agreements

Boris Johnson himself repeatedly stated that the Erasmus program, which has contributed so much socially, culturally, and educationally to Europe and its citizens, would not be in jeopardy. Put simply, aside from granting scholarships, Erasmus stimulates and facilitates mobility and standardizes institutional processes and credit recognition among its 33 member countries, including non-EU members like Iceland, Norway, Serbia, and Turkey.

Mobility may also be organized through bilateral agreements. However, these require significantly more work and make it more difficult to find scholarships for students. In response to these challenges, the Turing scheme is expected to be endowed with GBP 100 million (around USD 135 million), and it is announced that it will open the doors to the world's best universities. But the Turing scheme will face hurdles—we have already identified a few, presented below.

The Challenges Ahead for the United Kingdom

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First, the complex management that bilateral agreements require is clearly being underestimated. Agreeing on credit transfer, language course offer (a common demand of exchange students), academic calendar, and data protection, to name the most relevant, takes considerable time, especially with destinations such as Australia, Canada, or the United States, with their different academic regulations, requirements, and school calendars.

Second, the scheme may face difficulties in promoting social justice and mobility. There is substantial empirical evidence of the benefits of an international experience: It helps develop greater self-confidence, a more open and comprehensive perspective, and lifelong connections; it improves language skills; it strengthens one's appreciation of diversity; and it provides an intercultural understanding of a globalized world. The Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact study also provides evidence as to how it increases job prospects and secures better salaries. This is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Erasmus gives more scholarships to those who need them the most: students from low-income households or with disabilities.

To match these achievements, the Turing scheme will be depending on British institutions securing appropriate partner universities. Furthermore, reciprocity is key: The British government has so far only committed itself to funding outgoing student mobility. In exchange programs such as Erasmus, reciprocity is essential and universities

take great care when developing partnerships, seeking to achieve a balance between outgoing and incoming flows. This is where the United Kingdom is at a disadvantage: It has a high cost of living; study visas remain undefined; and incoming students are apparently not included in the Turing scheme. If their students are not covered, what incentive will overseas institutions have to cooperate with Turing?

Another issue is related to the payoff of participating in the Erasmus program. According to UK government data, the revenue received through UK educational exports is close to GBP 440 million in living expenses in 2018, a 71 percent increase since 2010. Over 30,000 students and trainees have come to the United Kingdom through Erasmus each year (out of about 200,000 students participating in the program every year), spending money on food, accommodation, travel, and leisure activities. The United Kingdom is also a very popular destination for teachers and administrative staff. In terms of outgoing mobility, the European Commission's Annual Erasmus+ Report recorded over 18,000 UK students benefiting from an Erasmus+ study or work placement in 2018–2019. With regard to the research and innovation program, Horizon 2020, the United Kingdom is the second-largest recipient.

These figures reflect the attractiveness of the United Kingdom as an educational partner country. Cultural and linguistic factors are the most important drivers influencing student decisions to study abroad. In the present context, the time it has taken the British government to present its new initiative may work against its universities. European students may now be aiming for Ireland or countries that offer undergraduate and graduate programs entirely in English, such as the Netherlands. The impact of such a "leakage" on UK institutions will be challenging from a variety of perspectives.

The United Kingdom is planning for its new scheme to be up and running from September 2021. But, as mentioned above, setting up partnerships with universities outside the Erasmus framework will take time and a huge amount of negotiation—a very cumbersome task in the midst of a pandemic. And, last but not least, geography presents a challenge. Culturally and linguistically, the destinations closest to the British Isles, outside of Europe, are separated by oceans and continents. This implies considerable time differences (a burden to communication), expensive travel costs, and, above all, different educational contexts. Apart from that, encouraging student travel to distant destinations that are unreachable by train or other sustainable means of transportation will have a huge impact on the environment.

Conclusion

Democracy has once again raised a paradox: Those young British people who did not vote in the Brexit referendum, or voted to stay, may be forced to pay a very expensive price. International mobility experience is more than just spending a semester away from home. It is about opening up to a world that inexorably, once the pandemic is over, will be more global and intercultural than ever. That is why we find more challenges than opportunities for the new Turing scheme, compared to the well-established and accredited Erasmus program. ◢

José M. Guibert is rector of the University of Deusto, Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain. Email: guibert@deusto.es.

Alex Rayón is vice-rector for international relations at the University of Deusto. Email: alex.rayon@deusto.es.