Making Mobility Work for All:

Strategies for Inclusive Short-Term Study

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Contents

Contents 3
Acknowledgements 5
About the author 5
Executive summary 6
Fellowship aims 6
Major findings 6
Provision of opportunities 6
Process: staff-related actions 7
Process: student-related actions 7
Recommendations 8
For government and relevant sector-wide organisations 8
For higher education institutions 8
Introduction 10
Background to the project 10
Purpose of the report 11
Researching short-term international student mobility 12
Country and case selection 12
Australia 12
USA 12
Other countries and contexts 13
Interview content and format, and processes of analysis 13
Ethics 14
Findings 15
Introductory comments 15
Outcomes of short-term study abroad 15
Provision of opportunities 16
Type of programme: the salience of staff-led opportunities 16
Length of stay 18

Curriculum integration 20
Use of third-party providers 21
Destinations 22
National programmes 23
Finances 24
Implications for the UK 26
Process: staff-related actions 27
Convincing colleagues of the value of study abroad 27
Normalising the centrality and reporting of equity participation 28
Sharing good practice: networks, training and standards 28
Implications for the UK 31
Process: student-related actions 32
Reconceptualising study abroad 32
Kindling interest in study abroad 33
The importance of family 35
Making an application 37
Support before, during and after mobility 38
Implications for the UK 39
Conclusion and Recommendations 41
Provision of opportunities 41
Process: staff-related actions 42
Process: student-related actions 42
Recommendations 43
For government and relevant sector-wide organisations 43
For higher education institutions 43
Next steps 43
Bibliography 44

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About the author

I currently work at the University of Oxford, as Professor of Higher Education. I have had a research interest in international student mobility for almost 20 years, and have conducted many projects and published several books on the topic. I have also taught numerous international students, who have come to the UK for the whole of a degree, as well as 'domestic' students who have gone abroad as part of their UK degree. In the vast majority of these cases, I have seen first-hand the positive impact studying abroad can have – but also the ways in which such opportunities often remained patterned by students' social characteristics. I was keen to undertake this Churchill Fellowship to identify ways in which such opportunities can be opened up to a wider cross-section of students.

Executive summary

Fellowship aims

A period of studying abroad, during a degree, can make a significant difference to people's lives - enhancing confidence, inter-cultural skills and employment outcomes. Nevertheless, students from non-traditional backgrounds are significantly less likely to take up such opportunities than their more privileged peers. The United Kingdom's (UK's) Turing Scheme – introduced in 2021 as the post-Brexit replacement for the European Union's (EU's) Erasmus+ programme – has aimed explicitly to widen participation. Although it has had significant impact in some areas, evidence suggests that significant barriers remain for some historically under-represented groups.

By examining schemes in two contexts that have had some success in widening participation to international student mobility – Australia and the United States of America (USA) – this Churchill Fellowship sought to generate new knowledge about how policies and practices in the UK can be improved to ensure that all students, whatever their background, have the opportunity to benefit from a period of overseas study. Following reassociation to Erasmus+ (in January 2027), the Turing Scheme will end and the UK will no longer have the degree of autonomy over short-term international student mobility that it has experienced over recent years. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the findings can feed into future modifications of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as inform any schemes run by individual institutions and/or national governments.

Major findings

Those involved with short-term international mobility schemes in both Australia and the USA typically acknowledge that there is still work to do, in most contexts, to widen access sufficiently so that all students, irrespective of background, can benefit from spending time abroad during their higher education. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted in both countries identified various initiatives that have given more students from under-represented groups this opportunity. These can be grouped into three main areas: the provision of opportunities; staff-related processes; and student-related processes.

Provision of opportunities

With respect to the provision of opportunities, there is strong evidence from both Australia and the USA, that short-term, staff-led trips can be very effective in engaging groups that have traditionally been under-represented in international mobility. While the Turing Scheme has experimented with short-term trips, they have often not been well-integrated into the curriculum. Enabling staff to travel with students helps to avoid this problem.

Effort should also be devoted to ensuring all students, irrespective of discipline, have the opportunity to study abroad, through better curriculum integration. Examples from Australia and the USA show how this can be done even in disciplines subject to professional accreditation, for example in the areas of engineering and health.

Third-party providers have been used successfully in Australia and the USA to help engage particular groups of students – organisations that typically have a stronger educational focus than their equivalents in the UK. The use of such providers may be difficult under the Erasmus+ programme. However, if additional money is made available (by government or institutions) to fund mobility in the future, then establishing a more educationally-focused third-party sector may help to widen access. Such providers may be able to use economies of scale to offer opportunities to specific groups of under-represented students that would not be possible for an individual higher education institution to do.

In addition, whichever scheme is in operation, it is important that reporting requirements of higher education institutions are not overly demanding or bureaucratic, so that staff time can be focussed instead on maximising the quality and reach of provision. Similarly, ensuring some flexibility with funding will enable to staff to respond promptly to changing student interest.

Process: staff-related actions

If staff-led group travel is adopted more widely (as discussed in the section above), then it will be important to ensure a sufficient level of interest from colleagues across individual institutions. Evidence from Australia and the USA indicates that this can best be achieved when university leaders are strong advocates of international student mobility, and when staff are adequately compensated – financially or through workload adjustments.

Staff involved in international student mobility, in whatever capacity, could benefit from more training opportunities. The UK may also find it useful to follow the example of the USA that has developed specific standards for activity in this area, with associated professional development and training resources.

To maintain progress made under the Turing Scheme, it is important that institutions continue to be held accountable (via reporting) for the extent to which students from traditionally under-represented groups are taking up mobility opportunities, and that the widening participation function of such schemes continues to be emphasised by government.

Process: student-related actions

The UK has made considerable progress under the Turing and Taith schemes with respect to student outreach. However, evidence from Australia and the USA indicates

that it is important that international offices take a proactive approach – for example, working with clubs, societies and widening participation programmes to reach out to students (not expecting them to find their own way to the international office); communicating with families, not just students themselves; and making better use of alumni of mobility programmes.

Ensuring all staff who come into contact with students – and particularly personal tutors, who are often key sources of advice – are knowledgeable about study abroad opportunities has also been found to be effective. They can then signpost students to further information and resources.

Providing students, and particularly those from traditionally under-represented groups, with a safe space to ask questions about study abroad is also beneficial. For example, separate sessions could be run for those who have not travelled abroad before, on the assumption that this may make it more likely that they feel free to ask questions without fear of judgement.

Recommendations

For government and relevant sector-wide organisations

- Provide incentives for institutions to run staff-led group travel, integrated into the curriculum
- Consider introducing voluntary standards for study abroad, with a strong focus on widening access
- Offer bespoke training for international office staff, again with a strong focus on widening access
- Ensure that reporting requirements foreground widening access targets, but are not overly bureaucratic in nature and allow institutions some flexibility in how they use their money

For higher education institutions

- Provide strong messaging from the top of the organisation about the importance of international student mobility and ensuring that all students, irrespective of background, have a chance to participate
- Develop staff-led, group mobility, that is integrated well into the curriculum
- Ensure staff who travel abroad with students are appropriately compensated
- Convene working groups to establish how mobility can be built into programmes with a high level of course content and/or accreditation requirements
- Develop and offer training programmes to all staff, with a focus on mechanisms to widen access

- Take a proactive approach to outreach, liaising with a wide range of campus organisations, and not assume that students will, by themselves, reach international offices
- Provide a safe space for students, especially those who have not travelled abroad previously, to ask questions without fear of being judged by others

Introduction

Background to the project

A period of studying abroad, during a degree, can make a significant difference to people's lives - enhancing confidence, inter-cultural skills and employment outcomes (Wang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, students from non-traditional backgrounds are significantly less likely to take up such opportunities than their more privileged peers (Di Pietro, 2020; Horan et al., 2025). The UK's Turing Scheme – introduced in 2021 as the post-Brexit replacement for the EU's Erasmus programme (and which will end in 2027) – aimed explicitly to widen participation. Although it has had notable success in some areas (Department for Education, 2026), evidence suggests that significant barriers remain for some historically under-represented groups (British Academy, 2023; Brooks and Waters, 2026).

By examining schemes in two contexts that have had some success in widening participation to international student mobility (Australia and the USA), this Churchill Fellowship aims to generate new knowledge about how policies and practices in the UK can be improved to ensure that all students, whatever their background, have the opportunity to benefit from a period of overseas study. Given that, over the course of the Fellowship, the UK made the decision to reassociate to the Erasmus+ programme, the findings of this research may also help inform future developments within European schemes more broadly.

The Fellowship comprised two periods of learning from overseas examples. First, time was spent with Australian colleagues (through a series of online interviews), exploring lessons that can be learnt from the New Colombo Plan (NCP). This scheme was introduced by the Australian government in 2014 to increase knowledge of the Indo-Pacific through the international mobility of higher education students. It comprised two distinct elements: a scholarship programme, which funded an overseas stay of up to 17 months (with the study component lasting for 12 of these months) and a mobility programme, which funded shorter stays – initially of a minimum of two weeks (changed in 2025 to four weeks) up to a year (Tran et al., 2026). It has succeeded in increasing the social diversity of mobile students – in relation to socio-economic status, Indigenous identity and geographical location (Australian Government, 2018; Potts, 2020). Although there is some information in the public domain about how this has been achieved, the Fellowship enabled much more detailed information to be gathered – from individual universities, the federal government and other policy actors – about key factors to be considered in widening access. Although the focus was primarily on the New Colombo Plan, various other Australian mobility schemes were also examined. A second period of time was then spent (through in-person and online interviews) in the USA, exploring schemes – run by national organisations and individual universities – that have also

conducted important work in this area. Again, the aim was to go beyond already-published information, to examine action taken and how specific challenges were addressed.

Purpose of the report

This report sets out the key findings from the research conducted for the Churchill Fellowship in Australia and the USA. It then discusses the implications these have for policy and practice in the UK. It is hoped that these will be of interest to a wide range of academic and professional services staff working in universities (for example, in management roles or international offices, or as personal tutors) as well as policy actors involved, in some way, in facilitating international mobility. It outlines both some 'quick wins' that could be implemented relatively easily, as well as other more structural issues that may need greater discussion and commitment to change across the sector before they can be put into practice. Following reassociation to Erasmus+ (in January 2027), the Turing Scheme will end and the UK will no longer have the degree of autonomy over short-term international student mobility that it has experienced over recent years. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the findings can also feed into future modifications of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as inform any schemes run by individual institutions and/or national governments.

Researching short-term international student mobility

This section describes the data upon which the rest of the report are based, and the methods that were used to collect and analyse these data.

Country and case selection

Although there are now many schemes across the world intended to promote short-term international student mobility (Brooks and Waters, 2027), Australia and the USA were chosen as the subject of this Fellowship because of their focus, at least to some extent, on widening access to such schemes.

Australia

In Australia, most (although not all) of the data collection focused on a single national scheme: the New Colombo Plan. As noted above, this was introduced in 2014, with the aim of increasing short-term student mobility from Australia to the Indo-Pacific region, specifically. This scheme was, unusually, driven not by the federal government's Department of Education but by its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). This was because a key aim of the scheme has been to improve knowledge of and relations with this particular geographical region, because of its perceived importance for Australia's economy and national security. Data from the scheme have suggested that it had been successful in widening accessing – particularly among students from an Indigenous background (Australian Government, 2018; DFAT, 2025; Potts, 2020).

All interviewees were selected on the basis of their connection to the scheme in some way – i.e. because they had been involved in its initiation, implementation and/or evaluation, or because they represented a national body that was relevant to the scheme. All had worked (either at the time of interview or previously) for a higher education institution or relevant higher education sector-wide organisation. Individuals were identified through searches of relevant webpages and by snowball sampling (i.e. interviewees suggesting other people I could contact).

While the main focus of all the interviews was the New Colombo Plan, some interviewees also spoke about other schemes with which they had been involved. This was particularly the case for interviewees who were based in higher education institutions. In total, 14 interviews were conducted in this part of the research.

USA

In the USA, a greater variety of schemes was researched. At the start of the project, I had identified a number of national organisations that were doing work to widen access to short-term international student mobility, as well as some individual universities that appeared to have been successful in their own endeavours in this area. However, following the Trump administration's clampdown on activities related to diversity,

equality and inclusion (DEI), several of the national organisations had stopped or paused their widening access programmes. Others were not willing to be interviewed. I am therefore extremely grateful to those people who did feel able to speak to me. In total, I interviewed 18 individuals working in the USA or with detailed knowledge of relevant USA activity – some from sector-wide organisations and others from individual higher education institutions. As with the Australian sample, some of the interviewees were identified through web searches; others were recommended through snowball sampling.

The interviews tended to follow the same format as in Australia, but focused on the particular scheme with which the individual was involved (in their own higher education institution, or more broadly).

Other countries and contexts

Although the proposal for my Churchill Fellowship focused on only Australia and the USA, a number of people from other contexts contacted me once they had heard about my research, and asked to be interviewed. These comprised three people associated with the 'Taith' short-term international student mobility scheme that has been running in Wales since 2022, and one person connected to an international network of universities (including several UK universities), which, amongst other activities, runs mobility schemes for students. They were interviewed as part of the wider project, and their data will be used for other outputs from this research. However, because of the Churchill Fellowship's focus on only *overseas* learning, data from these interviewees are not included in this report.

Interview content and format, and processes of analysis

Although, as described above, the interviews were tailored to the specific contexts in which individuals were working, they covered similar topics, focusing on what participants perceived had been most effective in helping to widen access for traditionally under-represented groups. In particular, all interviewees were asked what lessons they thought the UK could learn from practice in their country. It should be noted, however, that interviewees were, in addition, asked about aspects that had worked less well in their specific contexts, on the basis that such information is also useful for schemes elsewhere.

The interviews lasted, on average, about an hour. All were conducted on an individual basis – apart from one group interview in the USA (where four people from the same organisation were keen to be interviewed together), and one pair interview in the UK. In the USA, six individuals were interviewed in person; the other 12 USA interviews were conducted online. All the other interviews for the project were conducted online. In all cases, interviews were digitally recorded and automatically transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed thematically, using both deductive and inductive approaches.

Ethics

Ethical approval was secured, before the research commenced, from the University of Oxford (reference number: Education (Educ) DREC - 2202434). All participants were sent a Participant Information Sheet as well as a letter of introduction from the Churchill Fellowship; they were also all asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the interview.

As alluded to in the section above, the topic of the research was very sensitive, given the political context in the USA at the time of data collection. Several interviewees did not want their organisation to be mentioned in any output from the project, for fear of repercussions. For this reason, I have chosen to refer to all interviewees by a number, which signals only the country in which they were located (i.e. Aus 1- Aus 14 and USA 1 – USA 18). Although in the narrative section of the report, I do sometimes refer to 'their organisation', I have done so in very general terms, so that it would not be possible to identify the specific organisation (whether an individual higher education institution or a sector-level body). Although the Australian interviewees did not share the same concerns with respect to revealing their identity, I have treated them in a similar way in the reporting of data for purposes of consistency.

Findings

Introductory comments

In discussing the lessons that can be learnt from one national context and implemented in another, it is important to recognise the limits of such 'transferability'. As a significant body of academic research has shown, policies that are successful in one particular location do not always work equally well in another. Different societal structures, processes and practices can affect such policy transfer, as well as varying norms and cultures. This is relevant to the current report. For example, several USA interviewees explained that philanthropic funding had had an important role to play in the financing of some study abroad schemes. However, the USA has a much stronger culture, within higher education, of philanthropy, and so is likely to be less relevant to UK stakeholders. While the sections below focus primarily on themes that are likely to have resonance in the UK, the 'friction' that can occur when importing policies from one national context to another should be borne in mind.

It is also important to note that not all of those who were interviewed as part of the Fellowship had the same views about how best to build an equitable system of short-term international student mobility. There were differences of opinion with respect to the salience of specific factors and sometimes, where schemes had been successful, the reasons for their success. Where significant differences did arise, these are reported in the text below. In addition, participants were, in general, quite open about aspects of the schemes in which they had been involved that had worked less well and/or had not had the impact they had hoped. These reflections are in themselves valuable, and are thus woven into the subsequent analysis.

This section begins by briefly summarising what were considered, by participants, as the main benefits of study abroad – to help contextualise why all thought such opportunities should be made available to a wider group of students. It then goes on to identify three groups of factors that can help to widen participation: the provision of specific opportunities; processes related to staff; and processes related to students. For each, after discussing relevant evidence from Australia and the USA, implications for the UK are drawn out.

Outcomes of short-term study abroad

Unsurprisingly, there was consensus across all the participants in this research about the value of study abroad to students, and particularly those from traditionally under-represented backgrounds. Comments focused on greater independence and confidence; enhanced understanding of other people, countries and cultures; improved academic performance and sense of belong to a higher education community; as well as employment advantages. The excerpts below are illustrative.

> So they gain, they value cultural differences. They value being with other individuals not like them … This is part of the cultural experience, the food. Myths about the area that, you know, we hear about it and then we go there and we're like, uh oh [it's different] ….. It's also the first time they travel without family, so that feeling of independence, even on the faculty-led …. to get to do their own thing and there's not somebody on top of them. ….. And also they become savvy travellers. Especially for those that it's the first time, it's just how do you get yourself around? …. And they really do come back a different person, more mature, more open to new experience, especially for the shyer students. (USA 15)

> You think about an environmental science student in Australia suddenly working with a poor community in a remote area on a strategy that has the chance to really lift their economic and quality of life factors, that to me is the best thing that could ever happen to a student. (Aus 7)

> We've seen students come back and as I said, sort of take on peer mentoring and ambassador roles so that that confidence - and that sense of belonging and enhanced student experience, I think has been really important as well. So there's been lots of really great outcomes that we've seen through our student body that have participated in the programme. (Aus 2)

> The biggest outcomes are …. the personal growth and professional growth as well …. An improved sense of belonging, …. cultural competencies and also the desire for global mobility. (Aus 13)

Such comments are not unique to Australia and the USA – and are, indeed, likely shared by many of those working in relevant areas in the UK – but do provide an important context for what follows, in outlining the perceived value of international student mobility and the importance of widening access to such opportunities.

Provision of opportunities

Type of programme: the salience of staff-led opportunities

Although the focus of the research in Australia was a specific programme – the New Colombo Plan – many interviewees believed that it was important, in order to maximise uptake of study abroad, to offer students a variety of options. With respect to the New Colombo Plan in particular, many welcomed the inclusion of both longer- and shorter-term options, and also the involvement of employers. With respect to the latter, Aus 2 noted that 'within the NCP, there are more than 300 business champions who work with the university to support students and create opportunities for internships in the Indo-Pacific countries'.

USA interviewees typically thought that offering opportunities of different durations (see below) and also of different types, was important – including more traditional-format exchanges, where students study at another institution for a semester or longer; several-week programmes either led by institutional staff or organised by a third-party provider; and internships and other forms of work placement.

In both countries, however, staff-led opportunities were deemed to be particularly successful in widening access to under-represented groups. USA 13, for example, contended that this form of study abroad was 'less scary if you have not travelled abroad before' and was very popular in his own institution. Very similar sentiments were expressed by others:

> It [staff-led study abroad] gives them that safety net that they're going with a professor .... And once they arrive at their destination, they're met by the professor ..... They're in a group of students. So for a student that will be going abroad for the first time .... faculty-led, in my opinion, will be the best fit for them. And also for the parents. (USA 15)

> And the academics who were leading it, [they] are experts on those topics with some connection with the country they're going to. And they were really effective. And so the criminal justice one to Malaysia, for example, [they would visit] the Malaysian Bar Council, Amnesty International, various NGOs who are working to prevent corruption and so on. They'd go and visit the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, the federal police people there, and the government liaison working with the Malaysian criminal justice system .... So they'd get a sense of who's who in Malaysia and see how similar and how different that is to how things work in Australia. (Aus 11)

Staff-led trips can also facilitate peer learning, as a result of students travelling as part of a wider group:

> I think one of the advantages of the NCP is that it uses collective learning or cohort mobility. So students have the opportunity to travel together and they can support each other together (Aus 2)

Such programmes were also considered advantageous because of the impact they often have on the teachers themselves:

> So it's like a two-fold benefit because not only are they taking the students abroad and guiding them through this experience, they themselves are starting to understand the impact of education abroad and then they bring that back to your university and they become champions [for study abroad] within your university (USA 18)

Thus, in both national contexts, there was strong support for this model of short-term international student mobility.

Length of stay

The vast majority of interviewees, across both countries, believed that relatively short stays were particularly effective in widening access to study abroad. Many of those located in Australia held that a key reason for the success of the New Colombo Plan was because it had provided funding for stays of as little as two weeks. Short stays were deemed to be easier to fit around paid work and caring commitments, and less intimidating for students who had never travelled abroad before.

> There was a huge uptake by students from widening participation backgrounds of NCP funding, specifically around the short-term experiences or the mobility programme as it used to be called or still is called, particularly those two-week programmes. (Aus 10)

Aus 11 believed that short stays were also useful for replicating the kind of professional learning about other countries often encountered in later life:

> when I travel [for work] … I go for a week or five days. I fly in and …. I stay in hotels and other places. I have lots of business meetings. I go out, I eat the food. I might spend a day sightseeing and then I zoom back. I'm teleporting in and out of this society, lots of different societies. I don't speak the local language. I might have a few words, but I understand enough about those countries in order to be able to relate to people … and do my job. Australian students are really interested in that sort of engagement as well. And the study tour replicates really what's professional engagement with the region. If you're an engineer or a doctor or any other professional working in Australia, or even if you're a mining executive, your engagement is going to be fairly fleeting with different countries that you come in contact with. So the fact of doing short term mobility and even an internship where you go and spend four weeks …. That's more like the kind of experience that you're going to have in your career. And it's much more career relevant than becoming proficient in one particular language.

Australian interviewees were thus concerned that the decision, announced in 2024, to increase the minimum stay under the New Colombo Plan from two to four weeks would reduce the inclusivity of the scheme. This comment was typical of many:

> I think all of us who are experienced in learning abroad believe that it will fundamentally impact access because so many people from diverse backgrounds have other things that other commitments that they just can't shift; somebody first in family, they're a carer for their mum who's crook and they're working a part-time job. They can't get away for four weeks, they can't get away

> for a semester, but they can get away for a two-week immersion if they manage to organise it and when it's funded. (Aus 9)

Similar views, about the value of short-duration opportunities, were expressed in the USA by interviewees from a variety of different institutions and organisations. The following excerpts are illustrative:

> for students with financial needs, if you shorten that time that you're abroad, it's less of a burden on you academically, financially. .... Like if you leave for a year, if you have a job that you're doing while you're in college, that job is probably not going to hold on to your place. Whereas if you say, oh, I want to go for two weeks or a summer or a six-week course [they are more likely to hold it] ..... These short-term study abroad opportunities or internships abroad have given students much more flexibility (USA 3)

> I personally have travelled abroad with students for short-term faculty-led programmes and seen incredible impact on, particularly, students who have not been abroad before. .... I'm thinking of one individual student who had never been outside of his home state and was on a plane with 22 classmates headed to Brazil. And having conversations with that student was really remarkable and understanding in just a short period of time how his worldview had shifted and his view of, I won't say his whole view of himself in the world, but he understood that his place in the world was not necessarily exactly as he had thought it was. (USA 8)

One critique of this position, sometimes heard in the UK, is that short stays may be less beneficial for individuals than longer stays because immersion into local cultures is significantly more limited (Coker et al., 2016; Waters, 2022). However, most interviewees did not see the two as mutually exclusive, and many pointed to the progression that often occurred, with students from under-represented groups taking advantage of longer-term stays after they had built their confidence with a short period abroad. USA 14, for example, stated that 'the short-term, staff-led programme is often the entry point', while USA 15 noted:

> And by then [once they have completed a staff-led programme] they already have that sense of, you know, independence, I can do this, I can be abroad on my own now with the faculty member and so forth. So that a lot of the students that do a faculty-led, they kind of just transition into a semester programme.

Some specific advantages of longer stays were, however, also outlined by interviewees, including the greater ease of accessing financial aid if they are abroad for longer:

> We actually recommend that students do semester and academic year programmes because more financial aid applies to those programmes and

> there's less out of pocket expenses. So while the perception at least on our campus is that short term may be better for high need students, we advise actually that semester is a better option from a financial perspective and of course the immersion and all that goes along with that too. (USA 17)

While financial aid works very differently in the UK from the USA, the same point may also be relevant once the UK rejoins the Erasmus+ programme – with more funding potentially available for semester- and year-long exchanges and less for the short-term mobilities that have become common under Turing and Taith.

Curriculum integration

Alongside considerations about the length of opportunities, many interviewees emphasised the importance of integrating study abroad with the student's curriculum at their home institution. This was important for those from traditionally under-represented groups, interviewees argued, for reducing the perceived academic risk of studying abroad, and for streamlining the decision-making process. (For USA students, it also made it easier for them to continue to receive financial aid during their time abroad.) USA 13, for example, argued that curriculum integration helped to reassure students that they were not going to miss any credits on campus, and that they would be able to meet their degree requirements. Similarly, USA 6 maintained that building study abroad into programmes and advertising it to students from the start of their degree programme helped to normalise it. This perspective was also evident in Australia:

> So a student then knows early and upfront that if I choose business, commerce or engineering, science or IT or whatever it is, that these degrees will have access to that early immersion programme. So I think that that's the first thing again though for widening participation. … I'd say yes, the biggest barrier is, it's without a doubt curriculum for students. (Aus 12)

Curriculum integration was deemed to be particularly important for programmes where it has typically been difficult to send students abroad because of specific academic requirements – such as health-related degrees, where students are required to spend considerable time on clinical placements, and engineering, where there are often very prescriptive curriculum requirements.

> Historically, it may have been in the humanities and social sciences where there was a lot of global exchanges. What's been great about the NCP programme is that it really did encourage the STEM fields to provide opportunities. (Aus 3)

USA 2 explained how a 'credit clearing house' for engineering had been established to ensure credits secured during study abroad were recognised by a student's home institution. This had, in turn, made overseas study much easier for engineers.

Use of third-party providers

In the UK, it has historically been rare to use third-party organisations to provide study abroad opportunities. While this became more common under the Turing Scheme, such providers typically offer only short-term, volunteering-type opportunities (Brooks and Waters, 2026). In both Australia and the USA, there is a much more established third-party provider sector, which offers traditional semester-long study-focussed 'exchanges', as well as much shorter-term stays.

On the whole, the interviewees had a positive view of this sector (which includes both for-profit and not-for-profit providers), and contended that it played an important role in both study abroad generally and opening up opportunities to students from under-represented groups specifically. USA 14, for example, described how his institution made frequent use of such providers and noted than some brought expertise in targeting specific 'diversity groups', and even offered their own scholarships. Indeed, USA 10, representing a third-party provider explained:

> we partner with quite a few institutions [third-party providers] on specific first gen [students who are the first in their family to go to higher education]. So for instance, [name of institution], if you went to their website, you'd see a really cool, basically a financial commitment that we partner, we match. The university will give the students so much, [we] will give the students so much and they can do it anytime during their four years. And so it's a first-generation commitment, very specific to that.

She went on to explain that her organisation catered particularly well for students with disabilities because, through studying at its centre abroad, rather than at a local institution, the levels of support that they were used to at home could be maintained:

> One of the reasons why many students would choose maybe to work with an organisation like mine - we're up to about 12 to 15 per cent of our students would identify it as having some sort of neurodivergence – [is because] we provide academic accommodations or housing accommodations - like we can accommodate students with disabilities using more of an Americans with Disability Act framework.

She noted that, within British universities, offering 25 per cent extra time is common, whereas her organisation's study centres could offer considerably more, to match what students would have received at their USA institution.

Interviewees located in higher education institutions also valued the diversity in destinations that such providers could often offer, which – as discussed below – can be beneficial with respect to widening access. Aus 9 argued that third-party providers offered a 'critical infrastructure' for widening access, as they can typically run a wider range of schemes than a single university is able to do.

In addition, having expertise, through such providers, in destination countries can help to mitigate risks. Aus 7 explained that their-party providers 'are our fundamental key to risk management' – as they know staff locally and thus can provide excellent support in an emergency.

Nevertheless, it is important, USA 17 claimed, to foreground equity considerations when contracting with third-party providers, and then to monitor their performance in this area through, for example, student evaluations:

> When we are vetting [third-party providers], we are verifying that they do have support in place and that they have thought [about it]. .... We actually ask them in our office to do a presentation on diversity, equity and inclusion. I think we're one of the few in the country that does that, but it's a signal to colleagues that this is something that matters to us. And we also look through programme evaluations and in talking with students and when students don't feel supported, those are conversations that we then have with providers. And, you know, I'll give you an example of a Jewish identifying student .... she didn't feel supported. So we talked, I listened, and then when I met with the provider, I explained some of what she was feeling. Those are things ethically I feel that are important to raise.

Destinations

Many of the interviewees believed that it was important to pay attention to the destinations that students were offered through study abroad programmes, and that these could have an impact on widening access. USA participants, in particular, spoke about how many students were interested in visiting countries that family members had emigrated from – and that this was often an effective means of engaging students from traditionally under-represented groups.

> We need a variety of locations with thoughtfully constructed programmes that allow students from diverse backgrounds and who have diverse goals for themselves, their careers, their lives post college to experience and that can't and should not only be available through programming in Western Europe. (USA 8)

> If I look at like who's going to Latin America, or Senegal or Kenya .... of course, we have lots of different students that are going, but a lot of them are our heritage seekers ..... so I also think destination is important, like what appeals to which student group. So destination also plays a part in the access question, so that it's a destination that is appealing and relevant and intriguing to students. (USA 18)

Relatedly, USA 8 also reflected that students of colour were sometimes attracted by destinations where they would not be a racial minority, as there were in the USA.

National programmes

In Australia, where the majority of the interviews focused on the New Colombo Plan, interviewees made a number of specific points about the running of national programmes. To ensure that such programmes ran smoothly, and higher education institutions could operate in a strategic fashion – which would include their plans to widen access – interviewees emphasised the importance of programme stability and flexibility. This would comprise, for example, guarantees of funding for beyond one year; the ability to move funding around (similar to research block grant funding); and streamlined and straightforward administrative processes for both students and institutions. The relative stability of the New Colombo Plan was remarked upon by several interviewees:

> What really has been great about the programme is that it has had that ongoing bipartisan political support. So even with changes of government over that decade period, it has had stability and it's meant that it's been something that institutions have been able to plan and build capability year on year. And so through that we've been able to again build awareness, profile opportunities. There's been consistent sort of funding pools that has supported really strong engagement between government, universities, but also with our partners offshore. (Aus 3)

> They've made changes, which governments are entitled to do, but they've continued the same name, the same branding, the same message that we need to get people to the Indo-Pacific. So all that's fantastic. (Aus 9)

Nevertheless, other interviewees thought that in the recent past flexibility had sometimes been lacking with respect to the New Colombo Plan, and the time that had had to be allocated to administrative processes had diverted staff attention away from more important concerns, such as widening access.

> the amount of administration has grown and grown over the years. And I think sometimes universities have to weigh up resourcing versus the amount of administration. If it just gets too hard, then universities don't do it. (Aus 10)

> Back in the old days ..... if, for example, we didn't have enough students apply for Thailand, we could ask for a variation to Malaysia or somewhere else and they used to grant those quite easily because the fact is we never really can predict student demand year to year, it changes and it depends on the groups of students coming through. Quite often they don't give you the funding with enough of a timeline for recruiting students into global experience .... So we definitely need a model where there's flexibility built into it for universities to be able to direct it to where student demand is. (Aus 10)

Aus 11 also argued that it would be better if the money coming into the university from the New Colombo Plan was for different types of student, not different types of programme:

> So the funding that comes to the institution is not for particular types of students. So if you get funding for 20 students to, like [former institution] gets funding for 20 students to do exchange on its Vietnam campus in a year, that's not for particular types of students. I mean, it's open to, I think you have to be an Australian citizen to be eligible. But it's not as though the funding is only for Indigenous or low SES or students with disadvantaged backgrounds in one way or another. So it's not really targeted in that way for student characteristics. It widens participation in terms of just increasing the number of students who travel because there's funding available and that's going to increase numbers. but it's not particularly targeted. So I mean, what you could do, again, if the decisions were able to be made at the institutional level, you could have some kind of means test or something for the funding support because universities also are providing their own funding for outbound mobility.

A small number of Australian interviewees were also critical about the location of the scheme within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade rather than in a department more closely aligned to education because, they argued, it did not have a deep understanding of how the higher education system operated.

Finances

The financing of study abroad differs in Australia and the USA from the UK. In Australia, as well as funding linked specifically to the New Colombo Plan, provided by the federal government, some institutions (typically the larger, richer ones) dedicate some of their own resources to study abroad. In addition, students are able to access specific loans for overseas study. Aus 7 claimed that these loans 'have been as important, if not more important, than the New Colombo Plan in helping students access mobility'. In the USA, if study abroad contributes to academic credit, students are often able to use their standard financial aid (a scholarship or loan) to cover costs. In addition, there are both national and institutional scholarships available – some funded through philanthropic sources. Making greater use of philanthropic donations was an aim of some Australian institutions, too.

Although funding is often thought of as key to successful study abroad programmes, and a crucial determinant of whether an individual student participates, interviewees held a variety of views on this topic. In Australia, interviewees tended to think that the substantial injection of money from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade into the New Colombo Plan had been a 'game-changer' with respect to student participation, as the excerpts below indicate.

> I think the sort of funding envelope for it is quite important. If you want to have a programme that can make an impact, then you do have to make reasonably significant resources available to it. (Aus 1)

> Institutions for a long time have been talking about the need to activate diverse backgrounds. It has been part of the policy discussion here for quite some time and the NCP has been I believe a strong enabler of that because it's put the money into the system to allow those students to have experiences where otherwise they may not have had the means to do so. (Aus 9)

Moreover, the nature of scholarship programmes in the USA were also held to shape the type of mobility students took up. For example, USA 1 contended that one reason why short-term stays were the most popular form of mobility under one key USA scholarship programme was because the maximum awarded through the programme was $5,000 (i.e. not enough to cover longer-term mobility). Referring to the same programme, USA 3 noted that research with scholarship recipients indicated that, without the funding, they would not have been able to study abroad at all.

Irrespective of how students are funded to travel, it can be useful to provide basic and easy-to-access information about money on institutional websites and also to enable students who have particular financial concerns to access on-campus financial advisers. Both of these had been put in place at USA 13's institution. Other interviewees flagged up the importance of ensuring that any loans and scholarships are paid on time and before recipients are likely to incur the expenses associated with study abroad.

Nevertheless, other interviewees held more nuanced views and indicated that while they thought funding was important, it was not necessarily the most important factor affecting participation. USA 8 explained that her organisation had produced evidence that the bureaucracy around study abroad was often a more substantial barrier than funding. Similarly, USA 17 believed that 'it's not just about the money .... It's also about whether these programmes are built for me, whether students can see themselves in these programmes', while Aus 13 commented:

> we actually ran a survey just to ask them, what are the barriers? What holds you back from participation? In our eyes, it'd always been, oh, it's just the money, it's just financial, easy fix. But the responses were so varied that we went like, wow, we never thought of that. So many students said, well, I moved to [city] from a very small town. I'm finding it very hard to find my way around public transport. How do you want me to get on a plane or even finding my way to the airport? Others were saying, I don't have a passport. I don't know how to apply for a passport. Or it was, well, I've never been away from my family. I would miss them a lot. I think language would be an issue. And of course, financial barriers came up as well. But so it was a lot more varied than what we thought.

Implications for the UK

There is strong evidence from both Australia and the USA that short-term, staff-led opportunities can be effective in widening access to under-represented groups. The Turing Scheme in the UK has shown that short-term opportunities are indeed popular with students, and can be a valuable means of enabling those with caring and/or work commitments to study abroad (Department for Education, 2026). Often, however, these have been organised through third-party providers who have come from the 'gap year' or volunteering sector and thus rarely have a strong educational orientation (Brooks and Waters, 2026). Running staff-led short-term trips is a useful means of achieving better integration with the curriculum as well as providing a familiar source of support when abroad for those who have no or less experience of independent travel. This model has been used in the Welsh Taith scheme; it would seem worth rolling it out more widely. There are obviously costs associated with this model, but it appears to offer very significant benefits in terms of both widening participation and curriculum integration. It also perhaps replicates well the kind of learning about other countries and contexts that is likely to occur later in life (through short work trips abroad, for example). It should not however be assumed that all individuals from under-represented groups necessarily prefer this form of mobility; where possible, offering a variety of opportunities to all students remains important.

Pursuing other means to ensure curriculum integration is important, too – particularly for courses that have typically not sent many students abroad because of the perceived need to follow content in the UK. Examples from Australia and the USA show how curriculum content can be matched and credits obtained abroad for such courses, including engineering, nursing and other health-related subjects.

In the recent UK context, increasing use has been made of 'third-party providers' of mobility opportunities. However, as noted above, these have typically been organisations from the volunteering sector, and the opportunities they offer have often not had a strong formal educational orientation (Brooks and Waters, 2026). The evidence from Australia and the USA suggests that there is potential for this sector to play a rather different role. Indeed, in both countries, those working in universities spoke positively about the impact such providers had had in, for example, offering a wider variety of destinations and types of opportunity than many institutions could offer themselves (often ensuring that they fitted with students' degree programmes) and providing in-country support – all of which can help to widen access. The educational focus of such providers seems qualitatively different from that seen in the UK, and this may be an area where UK provision could grow. Presumably it would, however, require a critical mass of students and institutions to be interested in such provision to stimulate growth.

The funding of study abroad in Australia and the USA differs quite considerably from that in the UK, and thus limits the lessons that can be learnt. However, irrespective of the source of funds, it seems useful for UK institutions to consider, if they have not already done so, supporting students' financial planning for their time abroad – through, for example, dedicated financial advisers or, if this is too expensive, bespoke information available online.

Finally, the reflections discussed above – about the administration of national schemes – may be less relevant for UK now that it will not, at least for the 2027-28 academic year, be running it its own mobility programme. However, whether under Erasmus+ or a resurrected Turing Scheme, it is useful for higher education institutions to have some flexibility in how they use the funding awarded to them (to cater, for example, for changing student interest in particular locations and types of programme); guarantees of funding for more than one year at a time (to enable them to advertise opportunities in plenty of time to students); and reporting procedures that are not overly bureaucratic. Such measures are important in order to free up staff time for the other actions outlined in this report, particularly at a time when many institutions are reducing their overall headcount.

Process: staff-related actions

Convincing colleagues of the value of study abroad

To widen access to study abroad, many of the interviewees argued, substantial engagement by staff is required - in terms of leading programmes, integrating study abroad into the curriculum, and encouraging students to participate. Thus, a key challenge is to facilitate this engagement.

In both Australia and the USA, the role of institutional leadership was deemed to be central to this facilitation. The New Colombo Plan was thought to have been particularly successful in this respect because of the high political profile given to the scheme. As a consequence of this, university leaders were keen to show that their institution was fully engaged with the programme, and emphasised the importance of such engagement in their dealings with colleagues.

> The New Colombo Plan was an initiative of the Foreign Minister and the information about it and its outcomes … go straight to the Vice Chancellor. So we suddenly had 39 Vice Chancellors personally invested in competing for this government money. …. it has been such a catalyst. Once you have the attention of the Vice Chancellor, then all the senior people get excited about it. And they're a little more signed up, shall we say. And because the New Colombo Plan short-term funding supported faculty-led [mobility] and gave small grants for the faculty … And so what we got was a whole lot of academics who'd never even

> thought about it, engaging in developing and delivering these short term programs because the profile was raised. (Aus 7)
>
> I think once you elevate a discussion to that level, then you get buy-in across an institution. It changes the dynamic and from a student perspective as well, suddenly, if there's money in the system. And then by default, you know, once, once you have that level of imprimatur, that gets then pushed out to university vice chancellors who start going, oh gosh, are we doing, what are we doing in this space? And the whole thing flows down (Aus 9)

Various interviewees described how this kind of senior leader messaging had substantially increased staff interest – which had, in turn, enabled more opportunities to be opened up to students.

Normalising the centrality and reporting of equity participation

In Australia, interviewees believed that the foregrounding of equity concerns within the New Colombo Plan – in its stated aims and also in the required reporting from institutions – had brought about substantial change in both staff attitudes and practices. With respect to the aims, Aus 2 remarked:

> I think the first and foremost reason [for its success in widening access] is that it's clearly stated in the programme policy. About the goal of widening access and equity and encouraging students from indigenous background, regional Australia, first in family, non-English speaking background and lower socioeconomic background to participate in in the programme. And that those were communicated with the university and you know, made it one of the important selection criteria … within the NCP, within the scholarship programme.

Speaking about the reporting requirements, Aus 7 said that because institutions had to provide information about how they target specific under-represented groups, and participation levels per group, prioritising such groups had become so embedded in practice that 'we all think about it all the time now'.

Sharing good practice: networks, training and standards

In both Australia and the USA, many interviewees believed that key to improving study abroad practices, including those seeking to widen access, was the sharing of good practice. In Australia, various interviewees commented positively about the 'grassroots' networks of study abroad professionals that had been in existence for quite a long period of time. Not only did these provide useful fora to discuss how institutions were implementing the New Colombo Plan, but they also facilitated sharing of other schemes and initiatives – including those developed by a single individual or institution.

> We've kind of over time evolved from running a series of sort of one-off web events and workshops for people working in learning abroad offices, mainly for professional staff. Then that kind of that graduated to running a kind of one-day event once a year. That became the Australian IEAA [International Education Association of Australia] Learning Abroad Forum. I think now it's two days, it's a two-day event each year. And that was really successful in attracting people from the international mobility officers from all over the country to come and hear presenters and you'd get policy updates there each year. .... And I think that's part of the reason the Australian system has been quite dynamic in international education is there's a lot of visibility of who's doing what across the sector through events like that. (Aus 11)

Australian interviewees who were positive about the impact the New Colombo Plan had had, often made reference to the very consultative way in which the scheme had been developed – seeking feedback and input from study abroad professionals across the country, often through pre-existing networks. Aus 1, who was involved in setting up the scheme, commented:

> We did spend quite a bit of time with the university sector on making sure that the crafting of the messaging on the New Colombo Plan and then also the flexibility to be able to deal with applications and proposals was such that we were not, you know, disadvantaging low SES [socio-economic status] applicants.

In the USA, there was also evidence of a desire to share good practice. Some of this is 'top-down'. For example, the Institute for International Education (a USA-based not-for-profit private organisation that facilitates international exchange) sends outreach teams to individual higher education institutions, and runs local learning sessions (USA 3). The Forum on Education Abroad also works on a national basis. A key aspect of its work is to develop standards that are then made available to all institutions that wish to make use of them. In addition, the Forum provides professional development opportunities for staff, that are often closely linked to topics contained within the standards – including relating to equity, diversity and inclusion. USA 8 noted:

> There are four guiding principles for the standards of good practice. One of those is EDI and unlike some organisations, we don't take EDI and just make it a separate department or a standalone initiative. Equity, diversity and inclusion are woven throughout every piece and component of the standards.

Study abroad staff are also supported in meeting the standards by the Forum in other ways, too – through, for example, guidelines and conferences. The latter has the additional benefit of bringing staff together to share experiences and good practice.

Other organisations also work across the USA to provide training to study abroad professionals. USA 9, who runs a national organisation that aims to help achieve 'full

participation' in global opportunities among students, described the training he oversees in this way:

> I put our training development into two kind of two camps. The general, which you would get at our annual conference. Part of the value of that has obviously been for the people who've attended, but also the type of content that we've put out, I would say has inspired other organisations and other conferences to have more content, learning content that focuses on inclusive excellence in global education and so on and so forth .... And then I would say what continues to be, I think, incredibly impactful ... are the trainings that we do on campus where we bring together professionals from global education and then other parts of campus, student success, diversity, inclusion, first gen offices, financial aid, otherwise, and really walk through what everyone's role is in making global work for students and for the campus.

Training is sometimes also run in destination countries, to help reduce the likelihood that students from under-represented groups will face problems during their time abroad. For example, USA 10 described work that she did in the UK, with staff who would be teaching USA students:

> And it's really interesting because most people in the UK don't quite understand what a hyphenated identity is or why it's important to a student. ... So I do training with our faculty here. So to explain to them why it might be very important to a student to identify as an Asian American, not an American.

Furthermore, training can be beneficial for staff leading programmes from their home institution, as USA 12 explained:

> Oftentimes, at least within the USA context, faculty who are leading these programmes are people of privilege, are white folks who haven't maybe thought through how their identity impacts their time abroad, as well as how it impacts their students' time abroad. With appropriate training, faculty leading these short-term programmes can do a better job of supporting students and preparing them so that they are able to thrive while abroad, taking like an assets-based approach rather than sort of a deficit approach, which is often the case for students of colour and just empowering them to think through what their identity means to their time abroad before they get there.

Finally, it is notable that some books have been written by USA study abroad professionals, to disseminate good practice amongst the wider community. Several of these are published by the Forum on Education Abroad. Those that have a specific focus on widening access to study abroad include:

- *A House Where All Belong: Redesigning Education Abroad for Inclusive Education* (edited by Nick J. Gozik and Heather Barclay Hamir);
- *The Half Yet to Be Told: Study Abroad and HBCUs* (edited by Andre P. Stevenson and Keshia N. Abraham); and
- *Voices from the South: Decolonial Perspectives in Education Abroad* (edited by Andrea Rizzotti and Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano

Implications for the UK

If, as suggested in the previous section, staff-led mobility presents a significant opportunity for UK institutions to engage in short-term international student mobility more students from under-represented groups, then enthusing staff becomes important – so that sufficient numbers are willing to lead such trips. Such enthusiasm is also required to help integrate mobility more fully into the curriculum. The data from Australia and the USA indicate that strong support from institutional leaders can help engage staff, as well as ensuring that staff involvement is properly rewarded, through financial or workload compensation. This seems particularly important in a UK context where staff are under increasing pressure as a result of contacting staff numbers as well as budgets (Tsiligkiris et al., 2026).

The importance of making widening access prominent in both targets for short-term international student mobility and the reporting of activity, as discussed in this section, has to some extent already been supported by evidence from both the UK's Turing Scheme and the Welsh Taith scheme. Indeed, research that I have previously conducted (with Johanna Waters) has argued that the foregrounding of widening participation under both initiatives gave new priority to this aim, and substantially refocused the work of many international offices (Brooks and Waters, 2026). The evidence from Australia and the USA underlines how important it will be to maintain the

same degree of focus in the new landscape of international student mobility under the Erasmus+ programme.

Finally, the UK study abroad sector could usefully follow the example of Australia and the USA in giving increased prominence to the training and development of those working in this area. It may be useful for it to consider, for example, whether it could replicate the standards developed in the USA, and the support provided to help institutions attain them, in addition to the well-developed professional networks that have operated in Australia, through which staff have been able to share practice in a relatively informal manner. Some such networks do already exist in the UK (for example, facilitated by Universities UK International and the British Universities International Liaison Association), but there is capacity to develop these further.

Process: student-related actions

Reconceptualising study abroad

A key argument made by one of the USA interviewees was that study abroad had to be rethought; it was no longer sufficient to rely on understandings that dated back decades, if not centuries. He argued:

> At least in the United States, study abroad as we know it was really developed early on as a programme for white females who were either affluent or at affluent institutions in the humanities, primarily with a focus on language. … Sometimes study abroad was viewed as a finishing school of sorts. It was the answer to the grand tour that young males would go on throughout Europe and other parts of the world. And so one of the arguments we make, the primary argument that we make, is that if we are going to be successful, we need to actually pull apart all of these pieces and restart how we envision who these programmes are for. (USA 17)

He went on to suggest that as part of this rethinking, and to enable opportunities to be opened up to a wider group of students, it was necessary to envisage the whole of the study abroad journey from a student's perspective: 'that actually involves reimagining every stage of the process that a student goes through in terms of thinking about education abroad' (USA 17).

Other participants, from both Australia and the USA, shared a similar view. In addition, some emphasised the importance of recognising differences between students, and acknowledging that the perspectives, motivations and needs of those who are traditionally under-represented are likely to be heterogeneous. Aus 3, for example, noted that her institution had paid particular attention to the needs of Indigenous students:

> [we had a] dedicated focus around our Indigenous students to really look at what might be the barriers to participation and how those might be removed. And so some of that has been through the shorter experiences, some of that has been through greater partnership work and actually really ensuring that the destination, the host destinations have a good understanding of some of the sort of cultural complexities or other complexities that students might be facing as part of their learning experiences.

As a result, it had then done well in increasing their participation. In contrast, she acknowledged that the institution had done less well in addressing the often different barriers experienced by disabled students and those who are first in their family to go to higher education. Aus 5 also pointed to the considerable work that had been done, at the level of the New Colombo Plan nationally, on the participation of Indigenous students, but reflected that this had not been replicated for all other equity groups.

Kindling interest in study abroad

As part of thinking through study abroad from a student's perspective, attention has to be given on how students hear about opportunities initially, and how these opportunities are framed.

Several interviewees, particularly those based in very large USA institutions, emphasised the importance of seeking out students where they are, rather than assuming that they will necessarily find their own way to the study abroad office. This was described in this way:

> Another thing that I have seen to be very effective is, if you are trying to get to students who aren't walking in the door of the study abroad office, don't waste your time trying to get them to walk in the door of the study abroad office. Go to where they are. Whether that is going to the athletic department and talking with the coach or that's going to relevant student organisations or going to particular classes where faculty are supportive and will welcome you as a guest speaker. (USA 8)

> We have strategies that are based on certain student groups that have been under-represented or felt under supported so that will look at our students of colour, first generation students and LGBTQI+ students. And for each of those groups, our advisors are going into the spaces where students are likely to be, like identity centres, and spending time there. (USA 17)

Australian participants also believed that it was not sufficient to assume that traditionally under-represented students would turn up at the doors of the international office. Instead, they often needed to be targeted through other institutional routes. Aus 7, Aus 10 and Aus 13 all described how their universities targeted explicitly those on dedicated widening participation programmes.

In addition, USA 13 spoke about the importance of having accessible videos online as, in big institutions, it is hard to run (or even just attend) in-person events for all prospective students. He also noted that his institution had made effective use of workshops targeted at students who shared a particular demographic. This made it easier, he claimed, for students to see that there were others like them considering applying, and for them to ask questions – as the other students attending often had very similar concerns.

Peers could, in addition, it was argued, play a crucial role in generating interest. Reflecting on effective practice in her institution, Aus 3 commented:

> I think that what has worked well is the use of peer role models … from under-represented groups. So where we've had students that, you know, do see themselves as part of a particular cohort. Being able to have them come back and to speak to others has been incredibly valuable.

The attributes and perspectives of the staff who make contact with students were also discussed by several interviewees. First, attention had been given to the characteristics and experience of those who work in international offices. For example, USA 17 described how his institution's office had stopped making study abroad a requirement for advisor positions. Instead, it looked for a range of other skills including being familiar with intercultural communication (through, for example, being bilingual or being from a bicultural household). This had the effect, he explained, of significantly increasing the diversity of the staff – which had been 'almost exclusively white'. He went on to say that 'it's not just about numbers, but it's about who student see, whether students can see themselves in the staff that are recruiting them'. Very similar sentiments were echoed by USA 8:

> one of the other strategies that I will say is successful when it happens, but it so infrequently happens, is to actually have people working in the study abroad office and in our field who have things in common with students, right? So they look like them. They have grown up where these students grew up. They have faced some of the same challenges. They have been in the position of needing to explain to their parents why they want to do this and why it's important. So diversifying the people who are on the other side of the desk and who are communicating with students.

Second, some institutions had worked closely with staff outside of the international office, to ensure that they had a good understanding of study abroad, and could act as enthusiastic advocates among the students with whom they came into contact. This was emphasised by USA 13, while USA 8 noted:

> I would say one other area when it comes to equity and access that simply cannot be overlooked is the role of faculty. …. The messaging that is provided to

> faculty about why students should study abroad and who can study abroad is critically important. Because as I'm sure you know, oftentimes it is the first conversation a student will have about study abroad is with a faculty member who they trust. And depending on the answer that they get and whether that is encouraging or discouraging or ambivalent, I think has meaningful impact on whether a student does take that second step of perhaps visiting the website or walking into the study abroad office.

With respect to how opportunities are framed, although many interviewees themselves believed that experiencing study abroad benefitted the individual in a wide range of ways (outlined in the 'outcomes' section above), the majority felt that it was important to emphasise the aspects that students themselves would be most interested in, and these, they believed, centred on the likely impact on employability. Framing study abroad in this way, USA 7 claimed, would make it seem less 'fluffy' and, as USA 17 contended, position it as something serious, not just 'fun'. Moreover, such a focus could, USA 8 argued, more adequately address common concerns about likely cost:

> I think when you are talking to students and families who are making very difficult choices about where to spend their time, where to spend their money, why they should consider increasing a student loan to cover these programmes, being able to talk with those folks in very real terms about the career impact and the earning potential speaks to people who are considering this and who may not have studied abroad themselves.

The importance of family

Many of the USA interviewees emphasised that, because students often made decisions about study abroad in the context of their families, it was important for higher education institutions to reach out to them, too. This could take several forms. Some thought that it was useful to provide students with the information necessary to convince parents about the value of study abroad, particularly in familial contexts where hard financial decisions had to be made:

> Outreach and selection has to be … rooted in kind of not only the individual, but the family. The opportunities that study abroad presents, but also what are the trade-offs, which again is not always part of the conversation for other students, for students whose parents are financially able to support them, who don't have the issue of [deciding between] a job or another opportunity. So I think from an outreach and selection perspective, that is a big piece of how outreach really has to look different for these individuals. (USA 3)

> We need to equip students to go home and unpeel what their parents are going to say. They need to have the career outcome research. They need to be able to say, actually, here's a study that showed that in the States, the Forum on

> Education Abroad just came up with this wonderful study [showing that] ... students who studied abroad, their first salary was over $4,000 a year on average higher than those who had not. Wow. That's go and show your parents that data and suddenly you've got a conversation. So I think equipping students to make the case to their families is really important. (USA 10)
>
> [we need to] educate students on what global experiences are available for them, how to pay for it, and how to talk to their family about it (USA 9)
>
> I think what I have seen work particularly with first-gen students is if you bring the parent or the family into the process and educate them and help them understand the supports and resources that are available to their student, when that student calls home and is experiencing a challenge or is homesick or whatever the situation is, if that family member knows what resources are available and has already established a relationship with that Ed Abroad office, they are in a much better position to help diffuse the situation and support the student and support the Ed Abroad office and the host centre or the staff who are working with the student abroad. (USA 8)

In USA 8's institution, brochures had been made, specifically for parents, about the value of studying abroad, and translated into relevant languages. Others had spoken directly to parents, through online sessions and/or on-campus orientation sessions (alongside providing web resources):

> We do massive intake online webinars for parents and families just to educate them to the process and bring them along. We have resources that we share. If you went to the [institution's] study abroad office, there's a really great whole section of the website dedicated to parents and families that really works with them to help them because the parents can project their own fears onto the students really easily, you know? (USA 10)
>
> And we also deal with a lot of first-generation minorities ... And the mentality that the families have is that their child can't do that. There's no money, there's no means for the child to be able to leave the country ... .So we go to over 30 orientation meetings and sessions that the university hosts. We have a meeting with the parents and there we explain how this can happen for the student and the benefits and the resources that they would have, how financial aid covers costs, how there's like a payment schedule for the programmes, how we're trying to keep the programme costs low. .... We're also looking into hosting family nights, which one of our departments did ... family nights to better explain the process as well in case they didn't come to orientation. (USA 15)

Interviewees from a number of institutions as well as sector-level organisations considered this to be a very effective strategy for securing the engagement of students from families with no history of higher education.

Outreach to families was also mentioned, although less frequently, during the Australian interviews. Aus 7, for example, described how her institution had made an effort to address potential concerns of parents, not just of students:

> We have a particular South Asian migrant population. They are aspirational and they want their kids in university. So they are in our universities. They are relatively well represented. But for them and for protective parents of different cultures, letting your child go overseas is also a big deal potentially because of the cultural piece around it. So again, telling stories that address those concerns of families and parents and how you [made sure it] was safe and how it was managed, and what it did for your career.

Such actions recognise that decisions whether or not to study abroad are not always made by students alone; their social networks are significant.

Making an application

In some contexts, relatively high bars have been set for participation in study abroad programmes, based on the assumption that studying in another country can be hard enough in itself, without the additional challenge of having to struggle with academic work. However, several participants believed that such policies should be rethought in order to attract a more diverse cohort of students. For example, Aus 10 described how when the New Colombo Plan removed the requirement for students to have a minimum Grade Point Average and focused instead on other attributes, she was able to nominate a wider range of students to take part.

In addition, interviewees emphasised the importance of thinking carefully about the application process itself, particularly the level of bureaucracy involved for students and the timings of specific decision points. Indeed, USA 8 claimed that such factors were cited as the top barrier to participating in study abroad in research that her (sector-level) organisation had conducted:

> We fully expected that finances were going to be the top barrier. It was not. The top barrier mentioned was actually the timeline and deadlines and kind of the bureaucracy around the administration of study abroad programmes, which we in this profession fully control. That was the top thing that students said was a barrier. So .... that's not about resources necessarily. That's about how we have organised the study abroad process for students.

Similarly, from an institutional perspective, USA 17 reflected:

> We realised that students that were with our identity centre, particularly students of colour, were applying to certain grants and the application deadline was different than the grants that they were applying for within our office. We linked the deadlines and we actually came together to talk about a unified package.

Some Australian interviewees made the same kind of comment, pointing out how multi-stage selection processes can be experienced as intimidating, especially by traditionally under-represented groups.

Moreover, participants argued that application forms themselves should come under scrutiny – to ensure that they do not inadvertently privilege some students over others, and give all a chance to demonstrate how study abroad would benefit them.

Support before, during and after mobility

Pre-departure support was important to many of those who were interviewed. Particularly helpful, according to USA 17, were sessions where students from specific under-represented groups were brought together (see also discussion above, in relation to outreach):

> we have developed sessions before students go that are designed for Black-identified students .... it's where students know you can ask some of the questions that you want to ask, and you can ask it with other students that look like you and where you feel comfortable.

While USA 17 was referring to in-person sessions run by his university, online webinars, run along similar lines, were also thought to be effective. Reflecting on one such series, organised by a national scholarship provider, USA 3 remarked:

> So pre-departure orientation, advising during the programme. I think that that's huge .... most of the students have never left the United States. They come from backgrounds or families that don't have a lot of global exposure. So topics like culture shock and the adjustment factors that are necessary during study abroad may be amplified for these groups. And I think [scholarship provider] and other programmes do really intentional work to prepare these students for that experience.

Many interviewees from both Australia and the USA emphasised the value of being able to provide high-quality support during the period of study abroad. As noted previously, some forms of provision – namely staff-led programmes and those run by third party providers – were considered better from this perspective than more traditional exchange programmes.

Post-mobility support is also important – to help students make the most of their time abroad (for example, in job applications and similar) and to encourage them to adopt an

ambassadorial role with respect to future cohorts. USA 3, from her position in a sector-level organisation, reflected:

> I think kind of re-entry and support post-programme is a big piece. I think a lot of colleges and universities have talked about that kind of follow-on support for students and then the engagement of those students after their programme to support others.

Indeed, USA 3 gave the following example of the impact the alumnus of a mobility scheme had had:

> He [alumus from a national scholarship scheme] came to speak to one of the clubs she was in … and he essentially shared 'Like I never thought I would have been able to do this. My family would have never thought that we would be thinking about this and I was able to and I was and this is how it helped me. And just so you know, if you think this isn't even something in your like purview that you think you could be able to do, I'm here to tell you you can and if you have any questions. You know, talk to me' and she said talking to him and like hearing his experience was what actually gave her the idea to go ahead and pursue [study abroad with the scholarship scheme]. So …. I think study abroad offices in the USA do a lot of outreach, but I do think sometimes for students and for families where study abroad is not even on their horizon, it's elements like this ambassador programme, alumni programming [that are influential] – to have others who were maybe in their shoes three years earlier and to have them share kind of why and how they were able to do it and why it's possible.

In Australia, different views were expressed about the current efficacy of the New Colombo Plan alumni network but all agreed that it at least had significant potential in advocating for study abroad and encouraging participation from a wider range of social groups.

Implications for the UK

UK universities have already given significant thought about how best to engage in short-term international student mobility those from traditionally under-represented groups – to some extent prompted by the need to prioritise activity in this area under the Turing and Taith schemes. However, given that many groups still remain under-represented (UUK International, 2025), universities may want to consider some of the strategies that have been used effectively in Australia and the USA. These include:

- Going to parts of the campus (physically and online) where particular groups are likely to be found (e.g. specific clubs and societies), not expecting them necessarily to find their way to the international office;

- Communicating via institutional programmes that target widening participation students in general – which may require closer working between international offices and widening participation offices;
- Making more use of alumni (as well as returning peers) to demonstrate that study abroad can be enjoyed by (and benefit) students of all backgrounds.

Involving students' families in outreach work, as discussed by many of the USA interviewees, also seems a potentially useful avenue to explore in the UK – particularly given the financial commitment many parents now make to their child's education (Callender and Melis, 2022; National Union of Students, 2026), and associated concerns they may have about their child delaying their date of graduation and/or having to give up paid part-time work as a consequence of studying abroad. Parents already hear about international student mobility during many university open days; extending this activity so that they have an opportunity to find out more and ask questions once their child has started at university may be beneficial.

Given the importance of the personal tutor system in many UK universities, ensuring all staff are reasonably knowledgeable about study abroad opportunities (and the funding available) may make it more likely that they will be able to respond effectively to any interest shown by their tutees, and be able to signpost them to further information and resources.

Finally, once a student has applied, ensuring they feel free to ask any questions they have is important – and bringing together those who have not travelled abroad before may make it more likely that they can be open in their questioning without fear of judgement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Those involved with short-term international mobility schemes in both Australia and the USA typically acknowledge that there is still work to do, in most contexts, to widen access sufficiently so that all students, irrespective of background, can benefit from spending time abroad during their higher education. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted in both countries identified various policies and practices that have worked effectively to give more students from under-represented groups this opportunity. These can be grouped into three main areas: the provision of opportunities; staff-related processes; and student-related processes.

Provision of opportunities

With respect to the provision of opportunities, there is strong evidence from both Australia and the USA that short-term, staff-led trips can be very effective in engaging groups that have traditionally been under-represented in international mobility. While the Turing Scheme has experimented with short-term trips, they have often not been well-integrated into the curriculum. Enabling staff to travel with students helps to avoid this problem.

Effort should also be devoted to ensuring all students, irrespective of discipline, have the opportunity to study abroad, through better curriculum integration. Examples from Australia and the USA show how this can be done even in disciplines subject to professional accreditation, for example in the areas of engineering and health.

Third-party providers have been used successfully in Australia and the USA to help engage particular groups of students – organisations that typically have a stronger educational focus than their equivalents in the UK. The use of such providers may be difficult under the Erasmus+ programme. However, if additional money is made available (by government or institutions) to fund mobility in the future, then establishing a more educationally-focused third-party sector may help to widen access. Such providers may be able to use economies of scale to offer opportunities to specific groups of under-represented students that would not be possible for an individual higher education institution to do.

In addition, whichever scheme is in operation, it is important that the associated administration is not overly demanding and bureaucratic, so that staff time can be focussed instead on the quality and reach of provision. Similarly, ensuring some flexibility with funding will enable staff to respond promptly to changing student interest.

Process: staff-related actions

If staff-led group travel is adopted more widely (as discussed in the section above), then it will be important to ensure a sufficient level of interest from colleagues across individual institutions. Evidence from Australia and the USA indicates that this can best be achieved when university leaders are strong advocates of international student mobility, and when staff are adequately compensated – financially or through workload adjustments.

Staff involved in international student mobility, in whatever capacity, could benefit from more training opportunities. The UK may also find it useful to follow the example of the USA that has developed specific standards for activity in their area, with associated professional development and training resources.

To maintain progress made under the Turing Scheme, it is important that institutions continue to be held accountable (via reporting) for the extent to which students from traditionally under-represented groups are taking up mobility opportunities, and that the widening participation function of such schemes continues to be emphasised by government.

Process: student-related actions

The UK has made considerable progress under the Turing and Taith schemes with respect to student outreach. However, evidence from Australia and the USA indicate that it is important that international offices take a proactive approach – for example, working with clubs, societies and widening participation programmes to engage students (not expecting them to find their own way to the international office); working with families, not just students themselves; and making better use, in outreach programmes, of alumni who have participated in mobility programmes.

Ensuring all staff who come into contact with students – and particularly personal tutors, who are often key sources of advice – are knowledgeable about study abroad opportunities has also been found to be effective. They can then signpost students to further information and resources.

Providing students, and particularly those from traditionally under-represented groups, with a safe space to ask questions about study abroad can also be useful. For example, separate sessions could be run for those who have not travelled abroad before, on the assumption that this may make it more likely that they feel free to ask questions without fear of judgement.

Recommendations

For government and relevant sector-wide organisations

- Provide incentives for institutions to run staff-led group travel, integrated into the curriculum
- Consider introducing voluntary standards for study abroad, with a strong focus on widening access
- Offer bespoke training for international office staff, with a strong focus on widening access
- Ensure that reporting requirements foreground widening access targets, but are not overly bureaucratic in nature and allow institutions some flexibility in how they use their money

For higher education institutions

- Provide strong messaging from the top of the organisation about the importance of international student mobility and ensuring that all students, irrespective of background, have a chance to participate
- Develop staff-led, group mobility, that is integrated well into the curriculum
- Ensure staff who travel abroad with students are appropriately compensated
- Convene working groups to establish how mobility can be built into programmes with a high level of course content and/or accreditation requirements
- Develop and offer training programmes to all staff, with a focus on mechanisms to widen access
- Take a proactive approach to outreach, liaising with a wide range of campus organisations, and not assume that students will, by themselves, reach international offices
- Provide a safe space for students, especially those who have not travelled abroad previously, to ask questions without fear of being judged by others

Next steps

Drawing on the findings of this report, I intend to:

- Disseminate the findings to relevant organisations in the UK and also those connected to the European Union's Erasmus+ scheme;
- Run a webinar on widening access to short-term international social mobility – targeted at policy actors and practitioners - with contributions from beyond the UK; and
- Publish at least one academic article on this topic, and give at least one presentation at an academic conference.

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