REVIEW

POST-BREXIT STUDENT MOBILITIES BY RACHEL BROOKS AND JOHANNA WATERS (BRISTOL, BRISTOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2026)

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In their book *Post-Brexit Student Mobilities*, Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters (2026) examine the implications of Brexit for educational mobility to and from the United Kingdom. Brooks, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Oxford, and Waters, Professor of Human Geography and co-director of the Migration Research Unit at University College London, bring more than two decades of collaborative research on the internationalization of higher education and international student mobility to the book. Their interdisciplinary partnership, combining sociological and geographical perspectives, has been highly influential in shaping scholarship on student migration, higher education policy, educational inequalities, and the spatial dimensions of educational mobility. Their major joint publications include *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education* (2011), a foundational and widely cited text in the field, *Student Migrants and Contemporary Educational Mobilities* (2021), and numerous highly cited journal articles that have advanced contemporary conceptualizations of international student mobility and the changing nature of higher education. Individually, Brooks is widely recognized for her work on higher education policy, student identities, youth transitions, and the sociology of education, while Waters has made major contributions to the geography of education, transnational migration, and the relationship between education and social reproduction. As long-standing, influential contributors to these fields, and building on extensive prior research, Brooks and Waters are particularly well placed to interpret this rapidly evolving policy landscape.

Indeed, the book both documents and embodies the uncertainties that characterize UK–EU educational relations in the 2020s. The fact that only weeks after the book was published, the European Commission (2026) announced that

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the UK will rejoin Erasmus+ in 2027 underlines how volatile this policy field is and how difficult it is to capture in a single monograph. At the same time, UK higher education is facing acute financial pressure. Universities' growing reliance on international tuition revenue coincides with a more restrictive migration and visa regime, while many institutions are responding through staff reductions, course closures or broader restructuring – developments that have intensified debate about a sector-wide institutional crisis (Alexiou–Saridakis 2026; Sollom 2026). This context of institutional turbulence and shifting patterns of cross-border mobility is important not just for understanding a specific post-Brexit trajectory but also for offering insight into the broader reconfiguration of the global higher education market, within which the UK has long occupied a prominent position as a destination for students seeking internationally prestigious degrees (Németh et al. 2026). For the Hungarian reader, the UK's repositioning is particularly relevant both from the perspective of a potential sending country (Hordósy–Szanyi-F. 2020) and in relation to exploring the alternatives to Erasmus+. Although they have emerged under different political and institutional circumstances, the UK's Turing Scheme, Wales's Taith Programme, and Hungary's Pannónia Scholarship Programme are all nationally organized alternatives to the EU's student mobility scheme and therefore offer an instructive point of comparison for those familiar with the Hungarian higher education context (Turing Scheme 2025; Taith Programme n.d.; Pannónia Scholarship n.d.).

Drawing on policy documents, university websites, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with university administrators, international office staff and representatives of sector-level organizations, Brooks and Waters examine how the UK's departure from the European Union reshaped both inward and outward student mobility in the period from the immediate post-Brexit transition following the 2016 referendum to 2025. Particular attention is given to the replacement of the Erasmus+ program by the Turing Scheme and to devolved responses, most notably Wales's Taith Programme. The authors argue that the UK government remains the most dominant actor shaping the conditions of mobility, with decisions concerning legal status and mobility schemes exerting greater influence than the efforts of universities, sectoral bodies, and devolved governments to sustain educational ties. This central claim – that the government retains "by far the most influence" (Brooks–Waters 2026: 42) over patterns of mobility – underpins the book's broader argument that student mobility is highly susceptible to political change, as evidenced by the persistent uncertainty that has characterized the post-Brexit period.

The book opens with an overview of key policy changes and the main concepts framing the analysis, such as the characteristics and types of

international mobility and the notion of widening participation. A particularly important distinction is drawn between whole-degree and within-degree mobility: the former refers to students undertaking an entire degree program abroad, while the latter involves shorter periods of study abroad undertaken as part of an ongoing degree program. The chapter also introduces the study's methodological approach, with further details on the data sources in the appendix. The subsequent chapters address shifts in whole-degree (Chapter 2) and within-degree mobilities (Chapter 3), followed by three thematic chapters on the temporalities of mobility (Chapter 4), the growing role of third-party providers as part of new migration infrastructure (Chapter 5), and the spatial imaginaries underpinning post-Brexit policy (Chapter 6). A brief concluding chapter summarizes key points and reflects on possible futures for student mobilities within and beyond the UK.

The decision to include both whole-degree and within-degree mobilities supports a comprehensive account of Brexit's effects. However, this breadth is not evenly sustained throughout the book. Whole-degree mobility, focusing mainly on inbound flows to the UK and the impact of regulatory change, is largely confined to Chapter 2, while subsequent chapters shift their attention primarily to outward, within-degree mobility among UK students. As a result, whole-degree mobility – both inward and outward – as well as inward short-term mobility receive comparatively limited analytical attention. This imbalance is particularly evident in the thematic chapters. For example, the discussion of new migration infrastructures in Chapter 5 focuses almost exclusively on the role of third-party providers in short-term mobility, particularly their involvement in the Turing Scheme. Greater consideration of how such providers and recruitment agencies have been involved in whole-degree mobility would have expanded this picture, especially given the changing regulatory environment.

Nonetheless, the authors do make important connections across mobility types. Although whole-degree mobility is largely absent from the thematic chapters and appears only in passing, the treatment of inward within-degree mobilities is particularly revealing. Chapter 4, for example, includes a brief but insightful discussion of how post-Brexit visa changes have inadvertently shortened the duration of EU exchange students' stays in the UK – from a full academic year to a single semester – because stays exceeding six months now trigger student visa and National Health Service surcharge requirements (ibid. p. 89). Similarly, the contrast with Taith, explored in Chapter 6, is especially instructive. Whereas the Turing Scheme is explicitly designed as a one-way program, funding only outgoing UK students with no reciprocity obligation, Taith is built around the idea that "hosting people in Wales is a fundamental principle of the programme" (ibid. p. 130), with dedicated funding for inward as well as outward exchange.

This comparison underscores the very imbalance the book itself reflects: post-Brexit settlement has structurally marginalized inward short-term mobility and left whole-degree inflows to be shaped by market and regulatory forces largely outside the scope of the Turing framework, the continuing importance of the UK as a destination in the wider higher education space notwithstanding.

The empirical basis of the book is substantial and methodologically diverse. Brooks and Waters draw on data from four research projects conducted between 2019 and 2025, described in detail in the appendix. The principal project on post-Brexit international student mobility (2019–2025) provides the core evidence base: semi-structured online interviews involving 19 university international office representatives and academic staff across 17 higher education institutions, interviews with representatives of 10 third-party providers, analysis of over 100 university webpages devoted to study abroad, 30 policy documents and webpages from governments and sector-level organizations, and statistical data on international student mobility from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and UNESCO. Three additional projects contribute additional layers: a British Council-funded study of UK–Turkey partnerships (2020–2021), which involved interviews with international office staff from 14 UK universities and 8 national-level organizations; an ESRC-funded project on the European Universities Initiative (2021–2025), contributing 45 policy documents and interviews with 12 EUI policy actors; and a study of "Global Britain" in higher education policy (2021–2023), drawing on 25 policy documents and webpages published between 2016 and 2023. This breadth of evidence – across methods, institutional types and policy levels – lends the central argument about state power considerable empirical weight.

The authors show, for instance, how participation in study abroad among UK undergraduates peaked just before Brexit, and how the subsequent loss of home-fee status and access to tuition-fee loans produced sharp declines in EU whole-degree enrollments. Interview excerpts from international office staff vividly convey the administrative burden and uncertainty associated with the transition from Erasmus to Turing: staff at some universities describe receiving Turing Scheme funding notifications only weeks before the academic year begins, making it nearly impossible to guarantee places or to communicate reliably with partner institutions, alongside compressed application timelines, cumbersome reporting requirements, and late funding decisions – grounding the policy discussion in the realities of day-to-day institutional practice.

The book's central argument about power imbalances is consistently developed and well supported. Brooks and Waters show that, despite the rhetoric of partnership and global networks, the UK government's regulatory decisions – concerning legal status and scheme design – have the greatest impact on

who can move, where, and under what conditions. This is well evidenced by the changing enrollment figures and mobility patterns. The number of whole-degree EU students enrolled in UK higher education fell from approximately 135,000 at its peak in 2020–2021 to around 68,500 in 2023–2024, effectively halving enrollments in just three years. The relative presence of EU students also diminished markedly, with their share of the total student population (including both whole- and within-degree mobilities) falling from 6% to 3% over this period (see Brooks–Waters 2026: 35–37, Tables 2.1–2.4). Similarly, while international student numbers from non-EU countries increased following Brexit, more recent restrictive measures – such as preventing most international students from bringing dependents to the UK – appear to have slowed this growth. By contrast, participation in outward within-degree mobility through the Turing Scheme has in some years exceeded levels previously recorded under Erasmus+.

Importantly, the scheme design itself reflects the broader reorientation of UK student mobility following Brexit: whereas Erasmus+ was built on reciprocal exchange within a shared European framework, Turing prioritizes outward mobility by UK students, operates on shorter timescales, and extends participation beyond Europe to destinations worldwide. Attempts by universities, sector bodies and devolved nations to sustain European ties and promote inclusivity are presented as significant but structurally constrained. Well-resourced universities that offer fee waivers or bursaries for EU students (such as the University of Portsmouth's "home fee" initiative and Coventry University's EU support bursary, discussed in Chapter 2) cannot compensate for the systemic loss of reciprocal exchange agreements and changes in legal status. Likewise, although UK institutions have established new inter-institutional agreements to keep exchanges with European partners alive, and Welsh universities have drawn on Taith to maintain reciprocity, broader patterns of inward and outward mobility remain strongly shaped by national policy decisions.

A productive direction for future research that emerges from this book concerns the student perspective. While the authors acknowledge the differential impact of policy changes on "less affluent" or "widening participation" students, most of this analysis is mediated through institutional staff and policy reports. This approach is understandable given the focus on governance and infrastructures, but it means readers gain less insight into how students themselves narrate Brexit, Erasmus, Turing or Taith, and how they personally navigate the uncertainties described. Sustained student-voice data would complement the institutional account offered here. In addition, the strong focus on the UK–EU relationship leaves scope for broader comparative work. Turing's global orientation raises important questions about whether its design genuinely opens new access

pathways or whether it reproduces existing inequalities by favoring already-mobile, advantaged students traveling to more traditional destinations. These are questions the book raises but does not fully pursue, and they mark fertile ground for subsequent study.

Overall, Post-Brexit Student Mobilities provides a timely and nuanced account of how Brexit has transformed student mobilities. The book builds up a clear argument about the enduring power of the state and carefully documents the uncertainties inherent in student mobilities, highlighting their "politically contingent nature" (ibid. p. 144). While readers seeking in-depth qualitative accounts of student experiences may need to supplement it with more micro-level studies, Brooks and Waters offer an indispensable resource for scholars and policymakers interested in the governance of international student mobility and the challenges of navigating uncertainty.

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