Universities UK International

DECEMBER 2022

The management of outward student mobility programmes in the UK, 2022

Contents

Background

In August 2018, we designed and disseminated a mobility management survey. The aim of this survey and accompanying analysis was to provide the sector with a fuller picture of the breadth and scale of mobility operations across the UK. The survey also provided insight which informed the development of our Go International: Stand Out campaign. The findings from this survey formed the basis of a 2019 report, The Management of Outward Student Mobility Programmes in the UK.

The national and global context in which mobility teams are operating is very different now to what it was in 2018. The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to student mobility as international travel and face-to-face learning were severely restricted. Many students were forced to cut-short, defer, or cancel their mobilities entirely. This disruption has affected the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 academic years so far.

Following the result of the 2016 referendum, the UK exited the European Union on 31 January 2020. At the same time, freedom of movement for UK citizens within the EU came to an end, meaning that UK students planning on participating in a mobility programme in an EU country in many cases now require a visa. As European countries have historically been very popular mobility destinations for UK students, this change has had a significant impact by increasing the administrative burden on many students looking to undertake mobility.

Also following the result of the 2016 referendum, the UK Government opted not to continue associating to the EU's Erasmus+ programme which previously funded placements for UK students to study and work across other EU countries, and for EU students to study in the UK. Some UK universities still have some left-over Erasmus+ funding which they are allowed to continue using until 2023 (as a result of an extension granted due to Covid-19).

To provide an alternative mechanism to facilitate opportunities for UK students to continue to go abroad for study, work and volunteering, following the decision to withdraw from Erasmus+, the government introduced the Turing Scheme. The scheme is, at the time of writing, coming to the conclusion of its first funding year – the 2021-22 academic year – and the government has confirmed that funding will continue for the next three years, up to, and including the academic year 2024/25. In addition, the Welsh Government has introduced its own international exchange programme, Taith, to provide funding for mobilities to and from Welsh educational institutions.

Executive summary

Strategy

- 68% of respondents include outward mobility in their institution's strategic plan and 29% have a dedicated outward student mobility strategy.

- The three most common main priorities for mobility teams are: 'Widening participation', 'Increasing student numbers', and 'Offering short-term programmes'.

- The biggest barriers to increasing the level of outward student mobility are 'Lack of resources' (58% of respondents), 'Covid-19 disruption and uncertainty' (46%), 'lack of student engagement' (39%), and 'difficulties relating to visas' (37%).

Programmes

- Short term mobility (1-4 weeks) has been the biggest growth area in terms of provision over the last three academic years at 69% of universities

- 100% of all respondents offered mobility programmes through the Turing Scheme in the 2021-22 academic year, with 95% offering programmes through Erasmus+. All responses from Welsh institutions had submitted an application for Pathway 1 funding from the Welsh Government's Taith Programme.

Resource

- The most common team size across the sector by number of staff (calculated using full time equivalent units (FTE)) was 0-2 (37%), followed by 3-5 (36%), and 5-7 (14%).

- 75% signed up to the UUKi Go International Stand Out Campaign. The campaign contributed to an increased profile of mobility among senior staff (58%), more support offered to encourage widening participation (29%), increased or refreshed strategic focus on mobility (27%), and greater diversity of mobility opportunities offered (25%).

Covid-19 recovery

- 78% of universities estimate that mobilities from their institutions have recovered to at least 50% of pre-pandemic levels in the 2021-22 academic year, with 14% stating that mobility has entirely recovered.
- 63% of institutions introduced or expanded virtual mobility in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of those who did, 63% plan to maintain these opportunities, 21% don't plan to maintain them, and 16% don't know.

Methodology

During May and June 2022, we circulated a survey to UK universities with the goal of understanding more about how they manage their outward student mobility programmes. The survey was circulated to members of UUKi's networks including the Outward Student Mobility Network, PVCI Network, and Director's Update, comprising staff at UK universities likely to have strategic and operational oversight of mobility operations. The survey was hosted on Microsoft Forms and was open to all UK universities for just over four weeks.

The survey focused on four areas: i) strategy; ii) programmes; iii) resourcing; and iv) Covid-19 response. 59 responses were received from universities across the UK. This represents 42% of the total UUK membership. This report shares the results of the survey. Individual responses have been anonymised, with the focus on aggregated findings and trends across the UK.

Who responded to the survey?

59 responses were received from 59 universities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with the following breakdown:

- 48 universities in England
- 7 universities in Scotland
- 3 universities in Wales
- 1 university in Northern Ireland

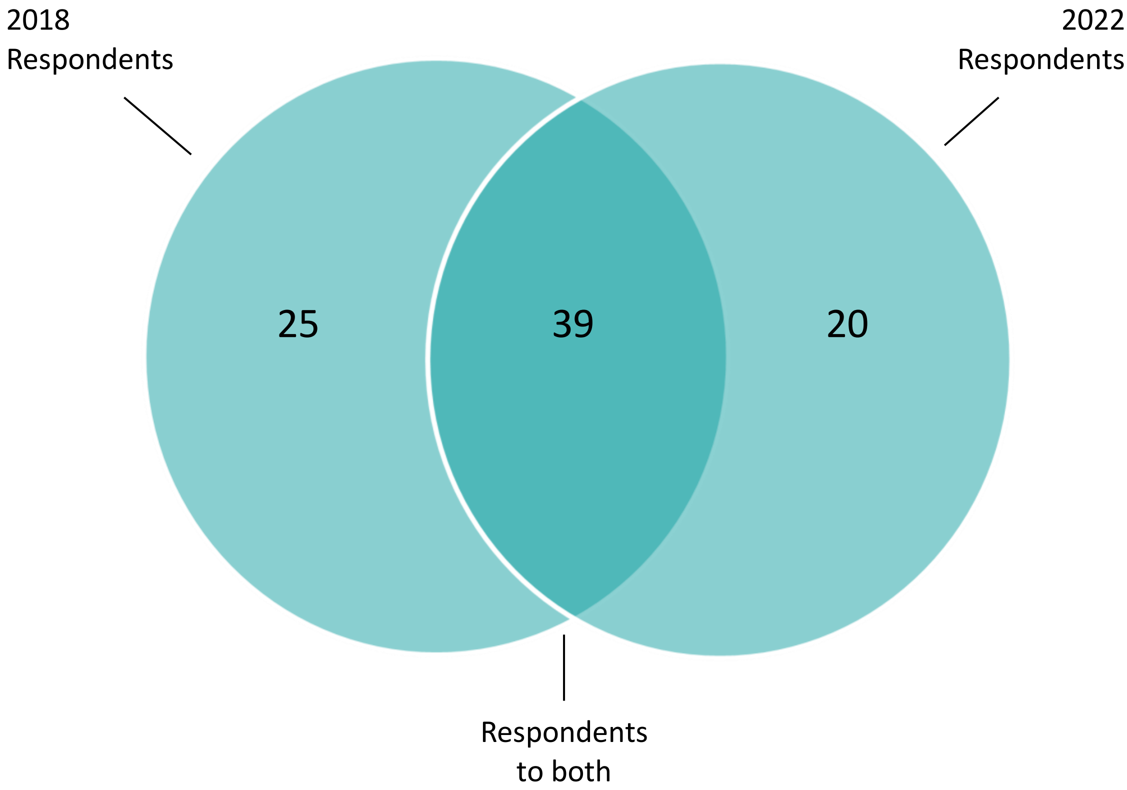
The survey received responses from universities across a mix of different mission groups: 13 universities in the Russell Group, 11 universities in the University Alliance, and six universities in the Million+ group. 29 universities were not affiliated to any group.

The proportion of responses from different groups was largely similar to the proportion of the UUK membership represented by those groups. The proportional representation of each UK nation in the survey was less than 1.5 percentage points different to their share of the total UUK membership. In terms of mission groups, University Alliance and Russell Group institutions had slightly larger proportional representation in the survey results than across the total UUK membership, while Million+ and Non-aligned institutions were slightly under-represented.

75% of institutions that completed the survey had pledged support for the Go International: Stand Out Campaign.

There was a considerable degree of overlap between the institutions who responded to the 2018 Mobility Management Survey and the 2022 edition. Nearly two thirds (66%) of the 2022 respondents also submitted responses in 2018, with 34% being first time respondents. 25 institutions provided responses in 2018 but did not do so in 2022.

FIGURE 1: RESPONDING INSTITUTIONS 2018 AND 2022 OVERLAP



Findings

Strategies

68% of universities responding to the survey confirmed that outward student mobility is included in their institution's overall strategic plan, down from 83% in 2018. 29% of respondents have a dedicated outward mobility strategy, down from 46% in 2018.

FIGURE 2: IS OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY REFERENCED IN YOUR INSTITUTION'S STRATEGIC PLAN?

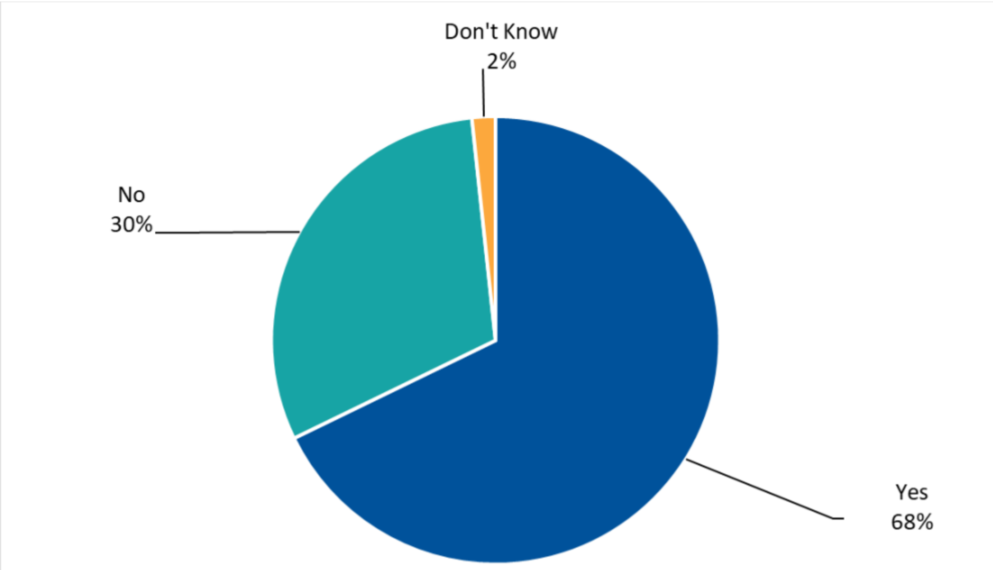
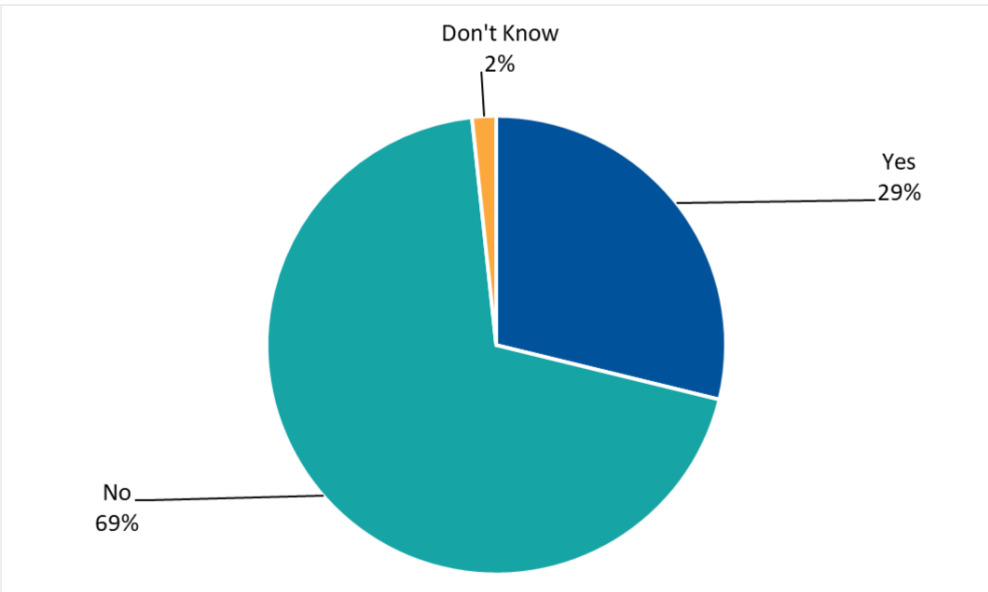


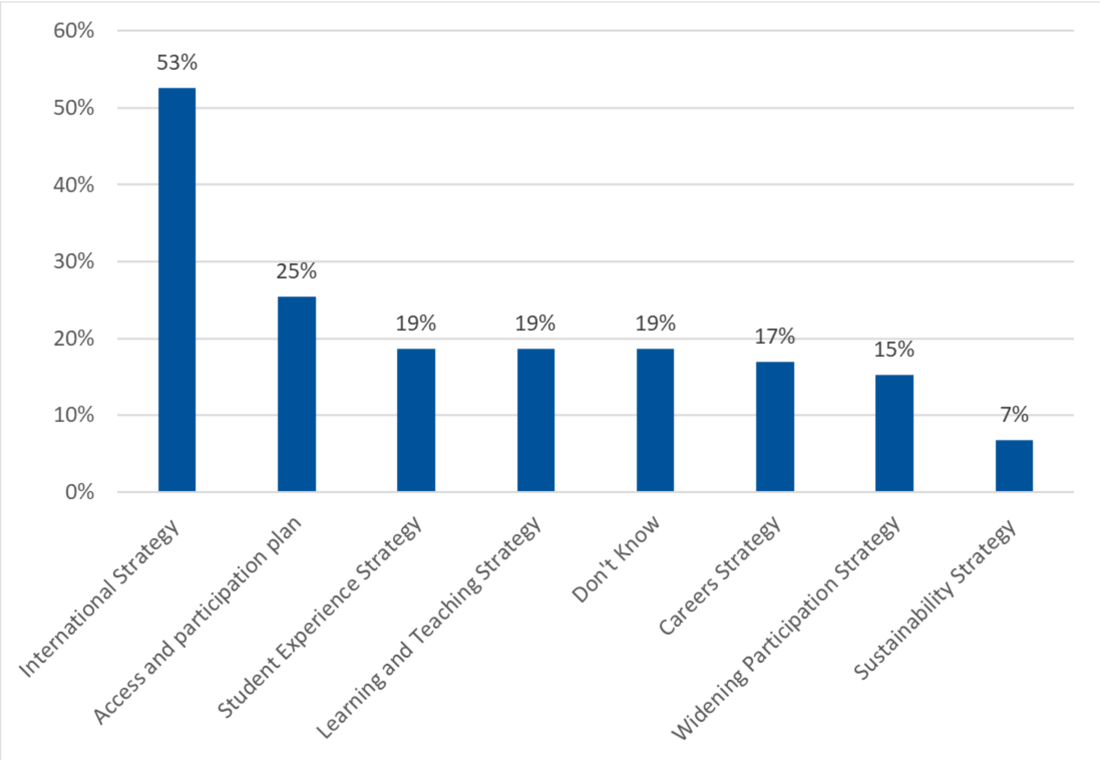
FIGURE 3: DO YOU HAVE A DEDICATED OUTWARD MOBILITY STRATEGY?



Respondents were asked if mobility was included in any of their other institutional strategies. 53% of respondents' universities include outward mobility in their international strategy, down from 69% in 2018. A quarter of universities reference mobility in their Access and Participation plans (25%), while mobility is referenced in around a fifth (19%) of universities' Student Experience strategies and Learning and Teaching strategies.

17% of universities reference mobility in their Careers strategies and 15% reference mobility in their Widening Participation strategies. The growing importance of sustainability means that mobility is now referenced in 7% of universities Sustainability strategies.

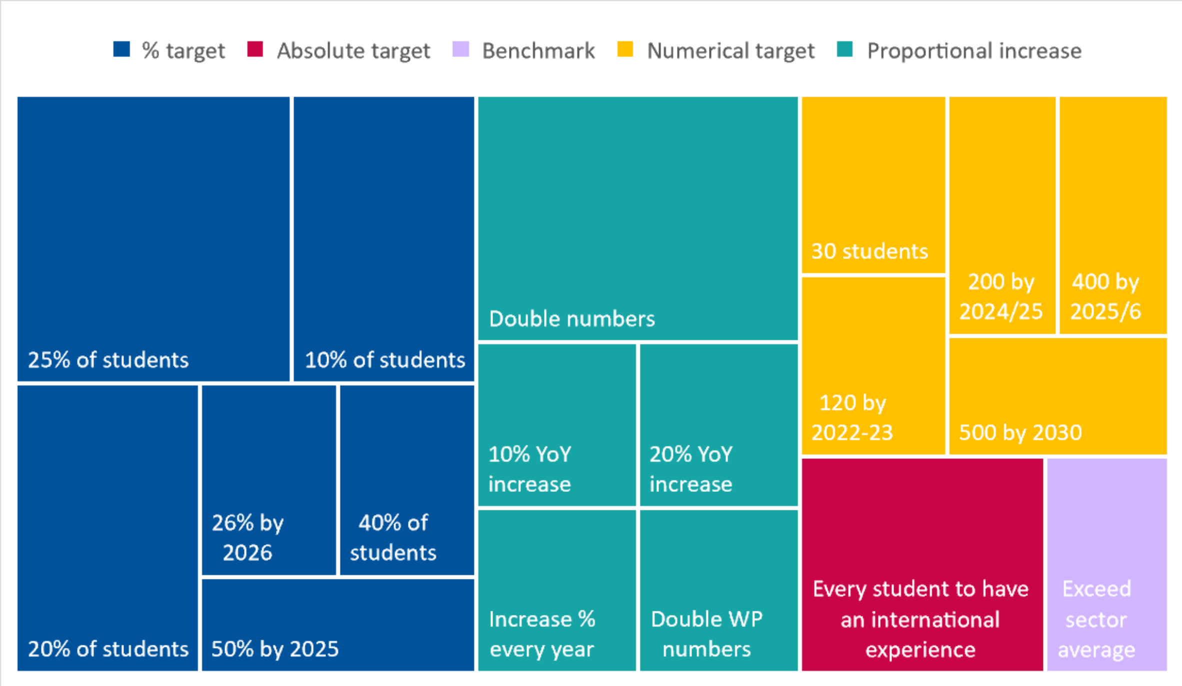
FIGURE 4: IS OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY REFERENCED IN ANY OF YOUR INSTITUTION'S OTHER STRATEGIES?



46% of universities have an outward student mobility target, down from 65% in 2018. As in 2018, the types of targets vary across the sector. The majority focus on a target percentage of the student population to have a mobility experience, or a target to increase participation rates by a certain percentage point. Other institutions have numerical targets they would like to reach by specific academic years, or plan to benchmark themselves against sector averages. In a small number of cases, institutions have set ambitious targets to ensure that all students have an international experience as part of their degree, although this likely also includes virtual and on-campus internationalisation activities alongside traditional international mobility.

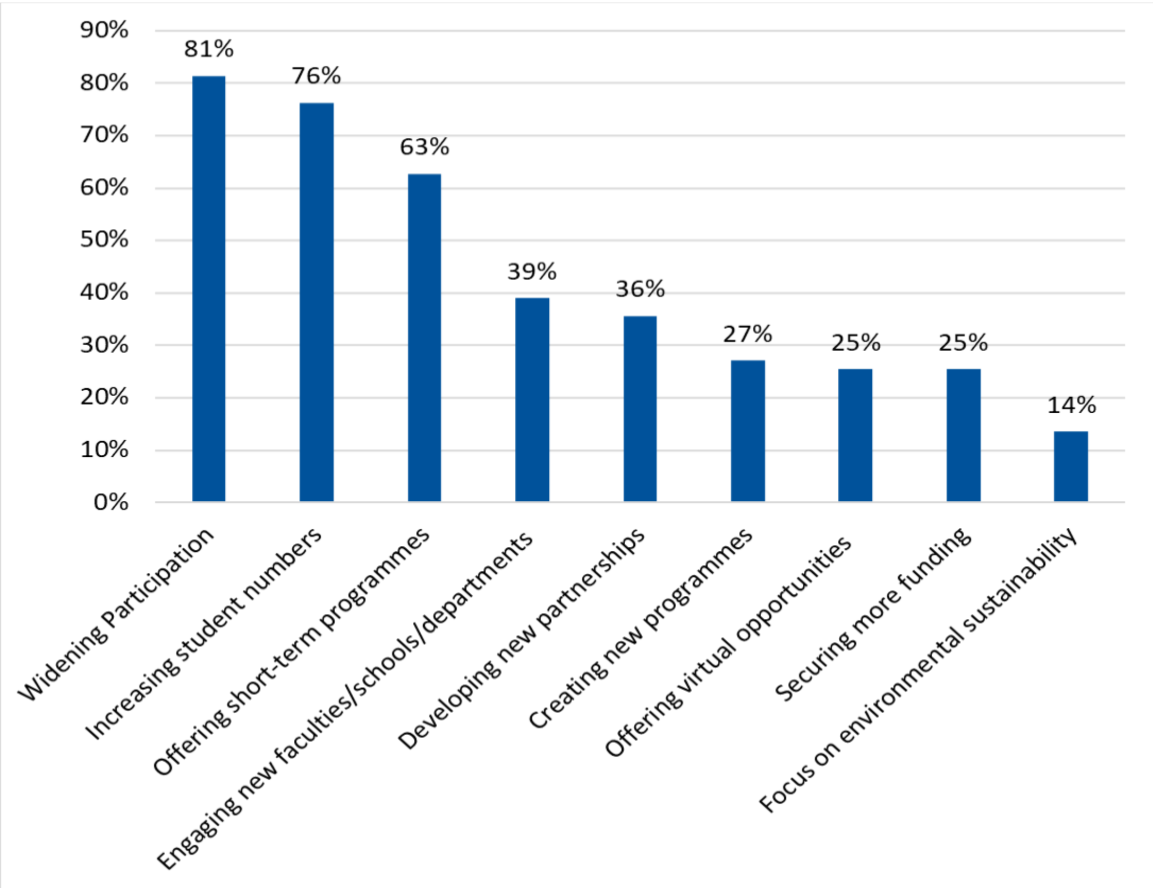
20% have a specific outward student mobility target for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, up from 17% in 2018. Several institutions noted that these targets were connected to their Turing Scheme funded projects. Others have targets to ensure that mobility rates for disadvantaged or under-represented groups are proportional to the institution's overall student population.

FIGURE 5: OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY TARGETS SET BY RESPONDING INSTITUTIONS



Widening Participation is now the number one priority for mobility teams across the sector, with 81% flagging it as a main priority compared to 74% in 2018. Increasing student numbers remains a key priority for 76% of universities, down slightly from 91% in 2018, when it was the number one priority for outward mobility teams across the sector. Offering short-term programmes also remains a high priority for 63% of universities, up from 62% in 2018. Other priorities include: Engaging new faculties/schools/departments (39%), Developing new partnerships (36%), Creating new programmes (27%), Offering virtual opportunities (25%), Securing more funding (25%), and Focus on environmental sustainability (14%).

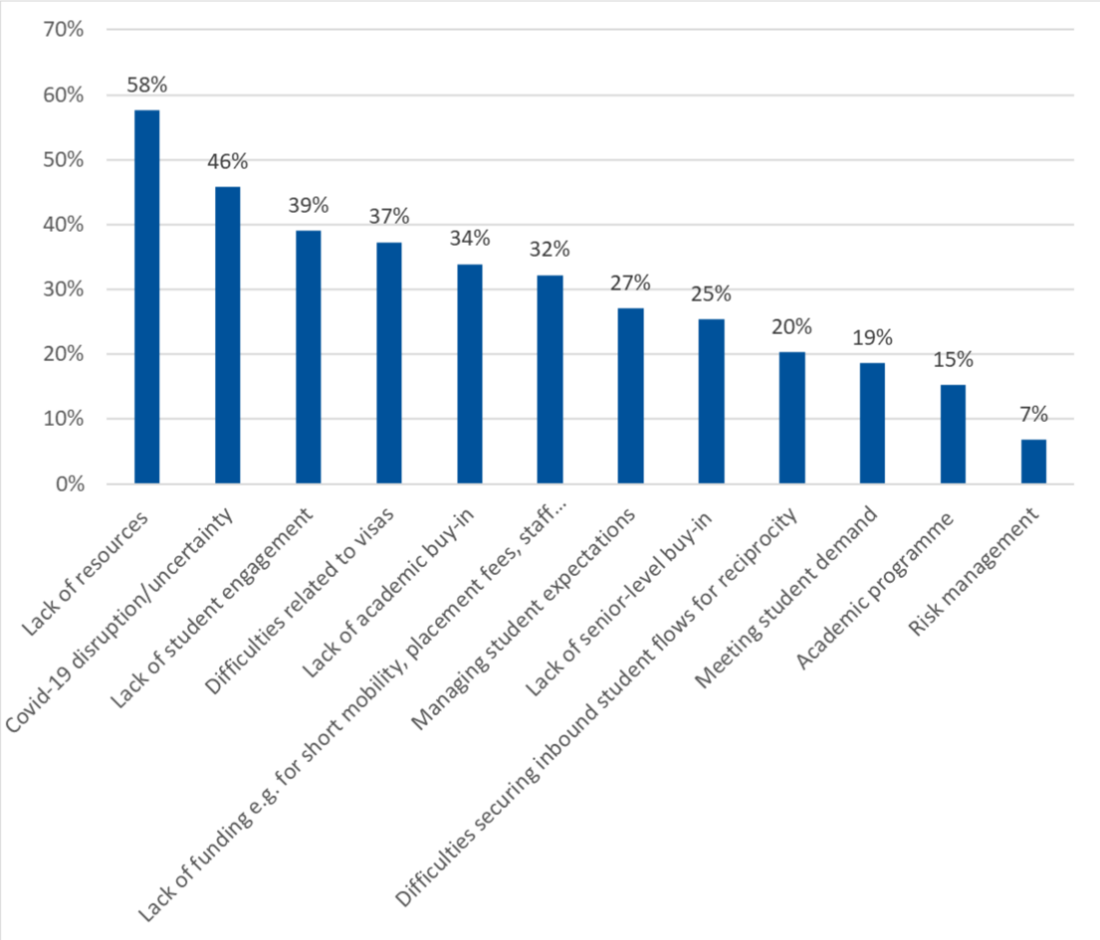
FIGURE 6: WHAT ARE THE MAIN PRIORITIES FOR YOUR OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY TEAM THIS ACADEMIC YEAR? PLEASE SELECT UP TO THREE



When asked to expand on their priorities, respondents shared their intent to maximise utilisation of Turing funding, broaden the geographical diversity of options for students, improve internal systems and processes for managing and promoting mobility, expand teams and recruit staff with specialist experience, and conduct thorough evaluations of existing partnerships with an eye toward rationalisation and creation of deeper, more strategic partnerships.

Barriers faced by institutions have, with the exception of some significant new additions, stayed relatively consistent from 2018 to 2022. Lack of resources continues to be the barrier flagged by the highest percentage of institutions at 58%, up from 48%. Lack of funding for example for short mobilities, placement fees, or staff mobility was also flagged by 32% of institutions.

FIGURE 7: WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST BARRIERS YOUR INSTITUTION IS FACING WITH RESPECT TO INCREASING THE LEVEL OF OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY? PLEASE SELECT UP TO THREE



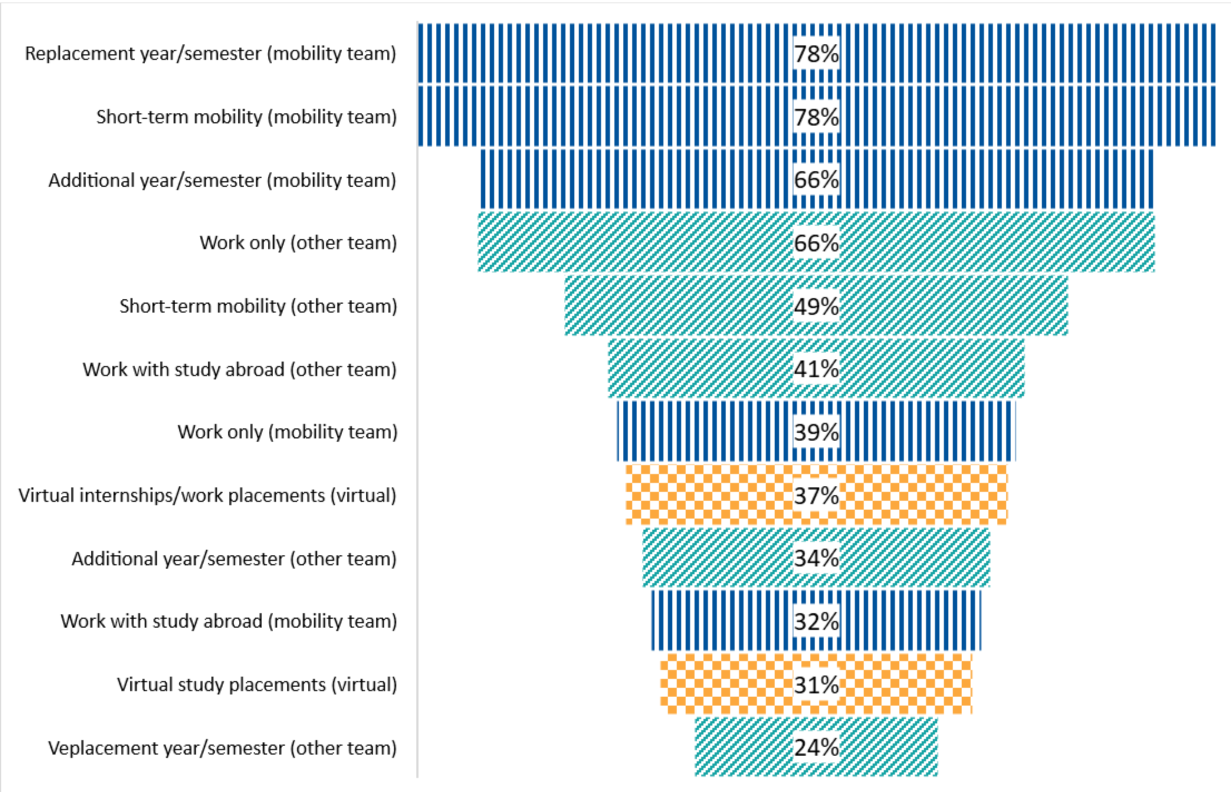
Lack of student engagement was noted by 39%, down from 46% in 2018, however managing student expectations (27%), and meeting student demand (19%) were also concerning to several institutions. Lack of academic buy-in (34%) and lack of senior level buy-in (25%) also remain high on the list.

Newly added barriers including Covid-19 disruption and uncertainty (46%), difficulties related to visas (37%), and difficulties securing inbound student flows for reciprocity (20%) have also clearly been a disruptive influence. Several institutions flagged that UK visa requirements have presented a challenge in continuing to attract inbound students for placements between six to 12 months.

Programmes

The range of overseas programmes, placements and other experiences on offer to students remains extremely varied across the sector. Students can opt for a ‘traditional’ year or semester abroad, either by extending their degree programme with an additional or ‘sandwich’ year/semester abroad or by ‘replacing’ a year/semester that would otherwise have been spent at their home campus with an equivalent period studying at an overseas partner. Other opportunities include short-term programmes, dual degrees, internships, volunteering opportunities, field trips and work placements.

FIGURE 8: WHAT TYPE OF OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY/INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMES DO YOU OFFER?

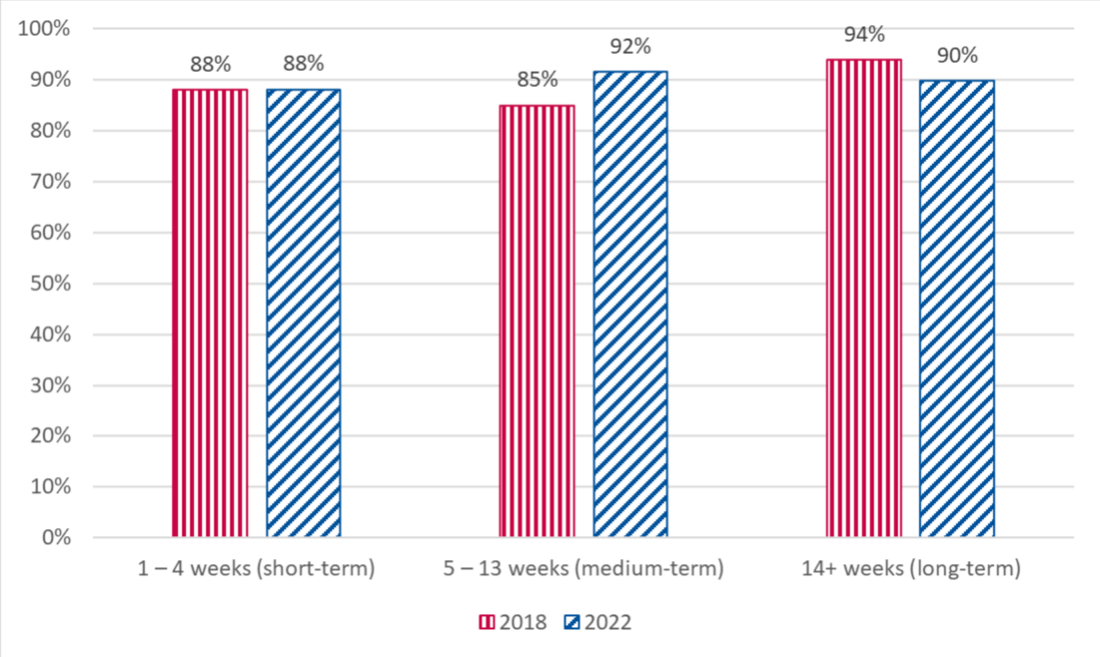


The most widely offered types of programme were a replacement year or semester abroad delivered by the institution’s mobility team, and short-term mobility (less than a semester, including summer schools), also delivered by the mobility team (both 78%). Additional year or semester abroad, such as sandwich years, were more likely to be delivered by the mobility team (66%) than by another team at the university (34%). Conversely, work placements/internships were more likely to be delivered by another team (66%) than by the mobility team (39%).

Virtual internships and work placements (37%) were slightly more widely offered than virtual study placements (31%).

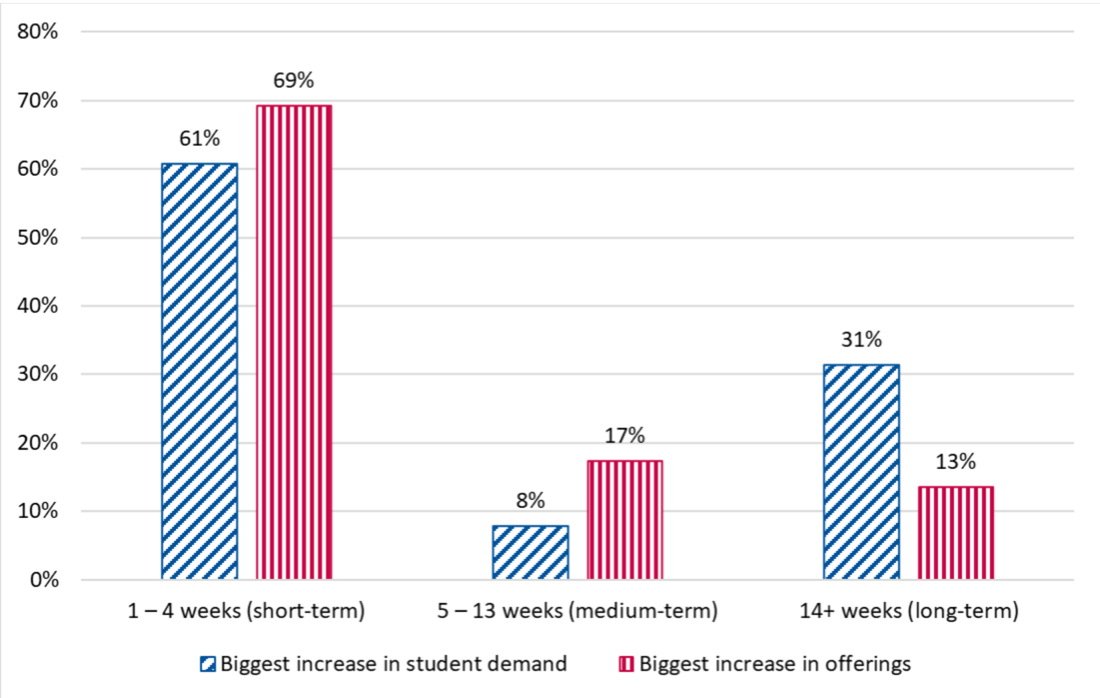
Most universities across the UK offer a wide range of duration options for student mobility programmes. Medium term mobilities are now the most widely offered, available at 92% of universities up from 85%. Long term mobilities of a term or longer are offered by 90% of universities, down from 94%. And short term mobilities are offered by 88% of institutions, the same rate as in 2018.

FIGURE 9: WHAT DURATION OF OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES does YOUR INSTITUTION OFFER DURING THE 2021-22 ACADEMIC YEAR?



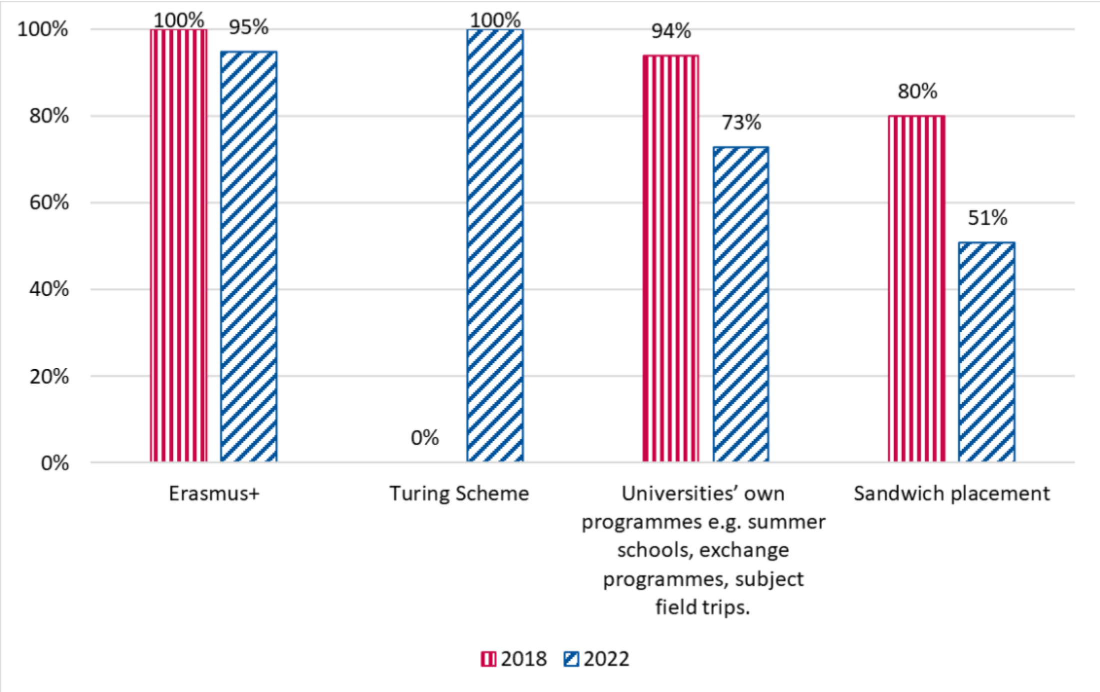
For most UK universities increases in demand for, and supply of, short-term mobility programmes has been the dominant trend over the last three academic years. Long term mobility constituted the next largest growth area with 31% of institutions reporting that they had seen the biggest increase in student demand for long term programmes, and 13% the biggest increase in offerings for this duration. For only 8% of institutions was demand for medium term programmes the largest growth area, and for 17% the area of greatest increase in supply.

FIGURE 10: WHICH MOBILITY LENGTH HAS SEEN THE BIGGEST INCREASE IN OFFERINGS AND IN STUDENT DEMAND OVER THE LAST THREE ACADEMIC YEARS?



100% of respondents offered mobility programmes through the Turing Scheme in the 2021-22 academic year. The drops in the percentages of universities who reported providing their own programmes such as summer schools or exchange programmes (73% down from 94% in 2018) or sandwich placements (51% down from 80%) may be related to the introduction of the Turing Scheme as institutions may now be using Turing funding to support these activities and therefore no longer identified them as a separate ‘type’ of programme when responding to this question.

FIGURE 11: DID YOU OFFER THE FOLLOWING MOBILITY PROGRAMMES DURING THE 2021-22 ACADEMIC YEAR? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

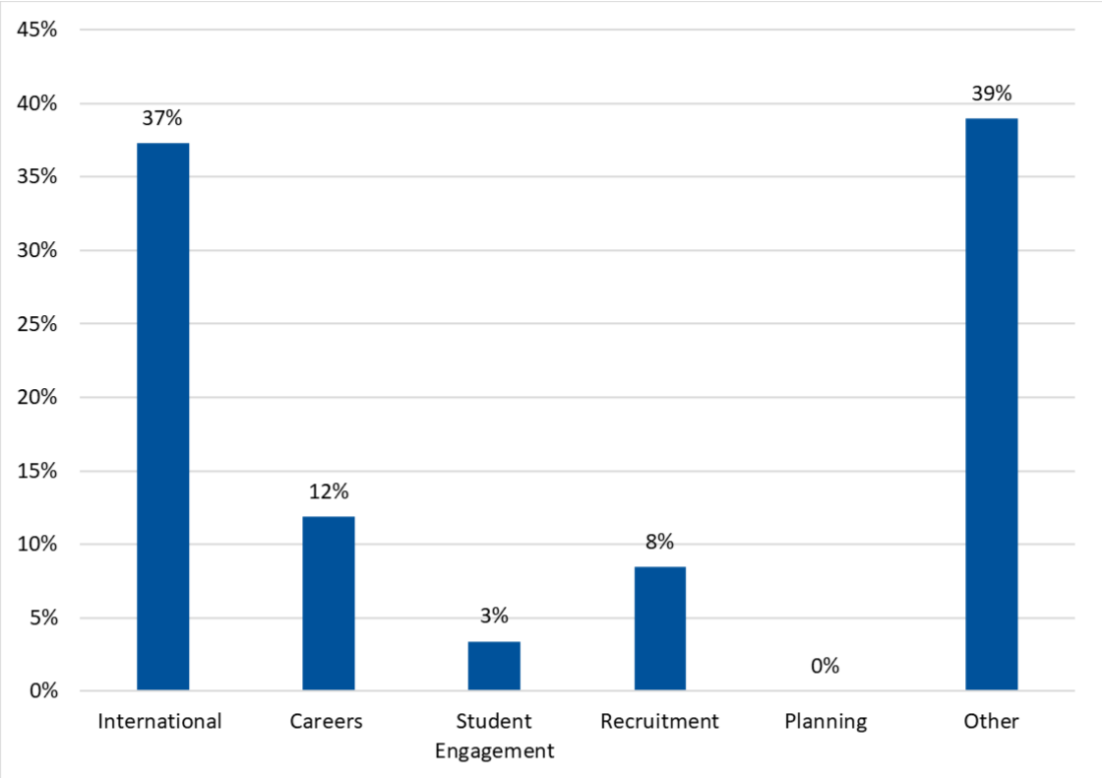


Erasmus+ programmes were offered by 95% of institutions, down from 100% in 2018 as some universities will have already utilised their 2014-2020 allocations. The percentage of institutions offering Erasmus+ programmes is likely to drop to nearly zero after the 2022/23 academic year as the UK has not associated to the new funding cycle. Examples of programmes flagged using the ‘other’ option include virtual programmes, conferences with partners, funded internships, and externally funded initiatives including UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) and Santander funded programmes.

Resourcing

Outward student mobility teams were most likely to sit within the International team (37%) at their university, and many of the 39% who reported in the 'Other' category sat within variations on the international theme such as 'Global Engagement' and 'International Operations and Recruitment'. Other areas where responsibility for mobility sits include Careers (12%), Recruitment (8%), and Student engagement (3%).

FIGURE 12: WHAT SERVICE OR DIRECTORATE DOES THE OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY PROGRAMME SIT UNDER AT YOUR INSTITUTION?



Several of the 'Other' responses indicated that responsibility for mobility sits between two or more of the directorates listed above.

Other examples provided include:

International Operations and Recruitment

Student and Academic Services

Academic Partnerships Research and Enterprise

Registry and Academic Affairs

Vice Chancellor's Office External Relations

Students & Education Directorate

Student Support and Wellbeing

Global Development and Partnerships Academic School

Centre for International Training and Education within the External Relations Division

Internationalisation and Partnerships

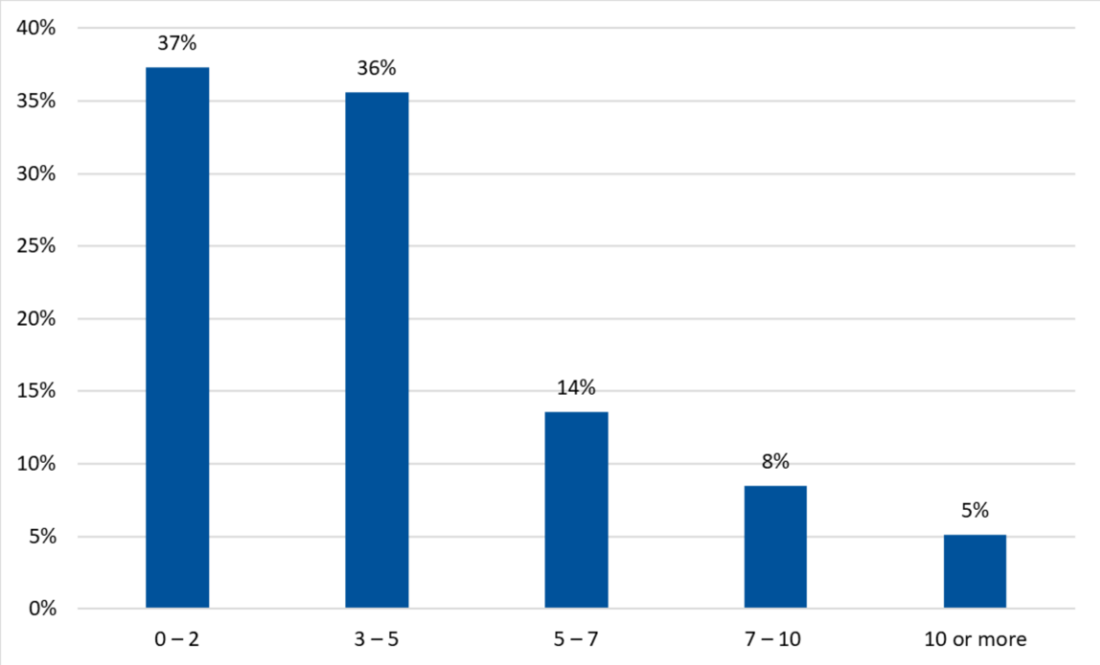
Professional Services

Academic and Corporate Governance Directorate

Global Engagement

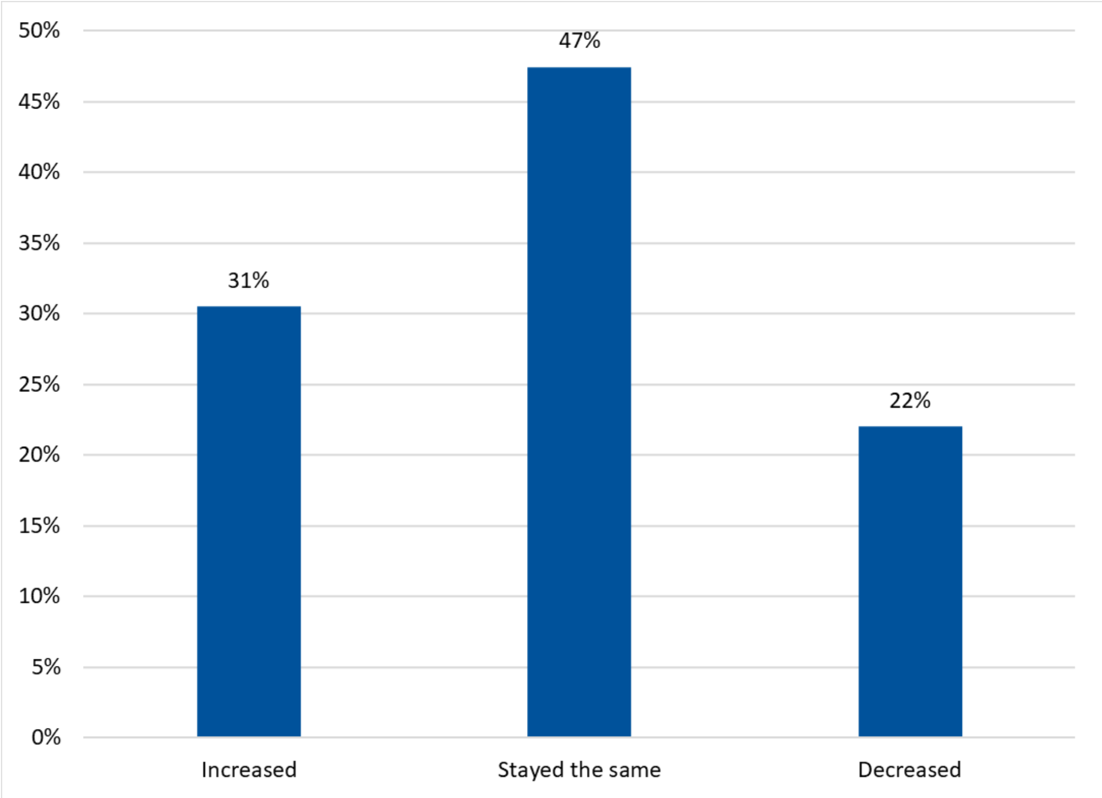
A large majority of mobility teams across the UK operate as relatively small teams, with 37% reporting headcounts of 0-2 FTE (up from 26% in 2018), and 36% reporting teams of 3-5 FTE (down from 38%). Results indicate that team sizes have become smaller since 2018, potentially as a result of the global pandemic or the impending end of Erasmus+ organisational support funding. Only 5% of universities operate with a mobility team of 10 or larger.

FIGURE 13: HOW MANY STAFF MEMBERS (FTE) WORK FOR THE OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY/INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE TEAM?



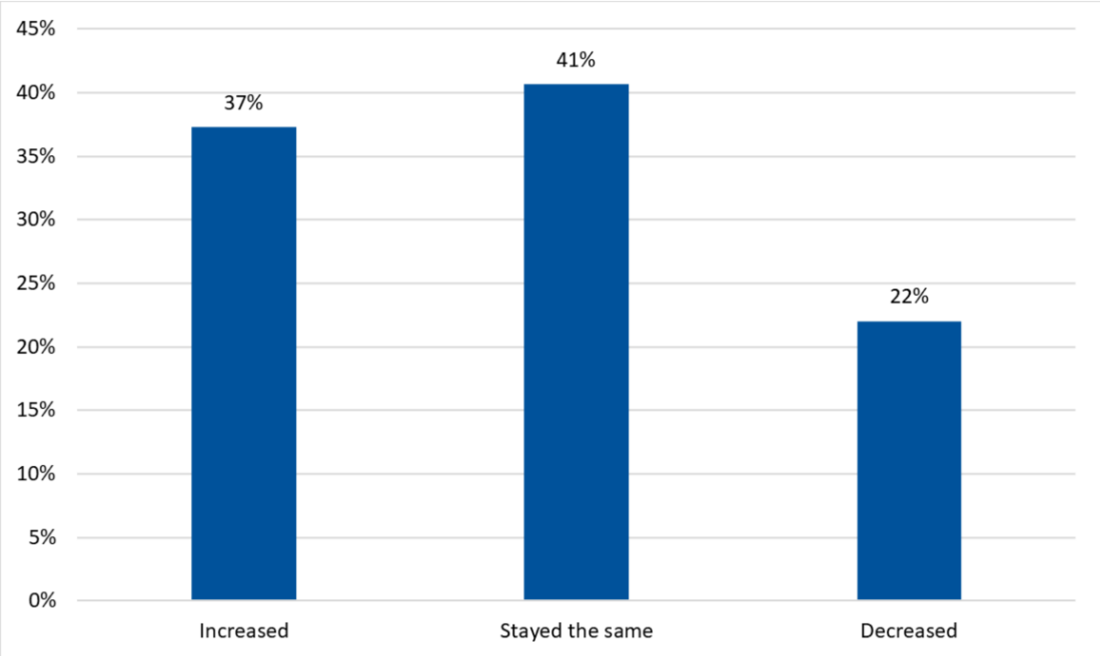
Responses to the survey indicate that the rate of expansion of university budget allocations for mobility appears to have slowed from 2018 to now. 31% of universities reported an increase in budget for mobility, down from 49% in 2018. 22% reported decreasing budgets, up from only 8% in 2018. As seen earlier in the report, 58% of universities report a lack of resources as one of the key barriers to increasing rates of student mobility. Mobility budgets are still largely staying the same or increasing, but decreasing budgets at more than a fifth of responding universities is cause for concern.

FIGURE 14: HOW HAS THE BUDGET FOR OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY AT YOUR INSTITUTION CHANGED OVER THE LAST THREE ACADEMIC YEARS?


50%
45%
40%
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
31%
47%
22%
Increased
Stayed the same
Decreased

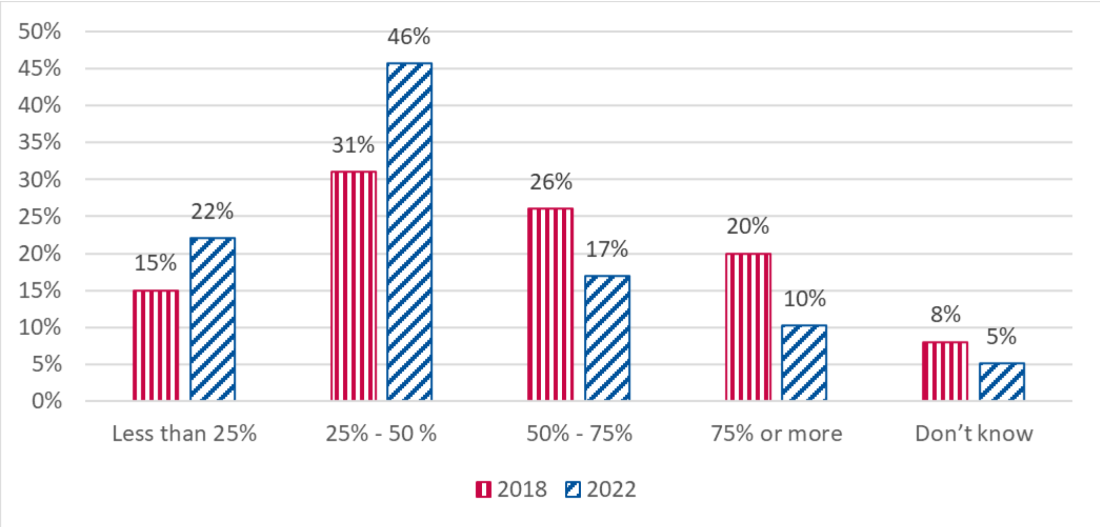
Funding allocated to scholarships, bursaries and grants for mobility has increased at a slightly higher proportion of universities (37%) than overall budget for mobility (31%). However, funding for these scholarships also decreased at just over a fifth of universities (22%). This is in sharp contrast to 2018 when 60% of universities reported that funding for scholarships, bursaries and grants had increased and only 5% reported that they had decreased.

FIGURE 15: HOW HAS THE FUNDING ALLOCATED TO STUDENT MOBILITY SCHOLARSHIPS, BURSARIES AND GRANTS AT YOUR INSTITUTION CHANGED OVER THE LAST THREE ACADEMIC YEARS?



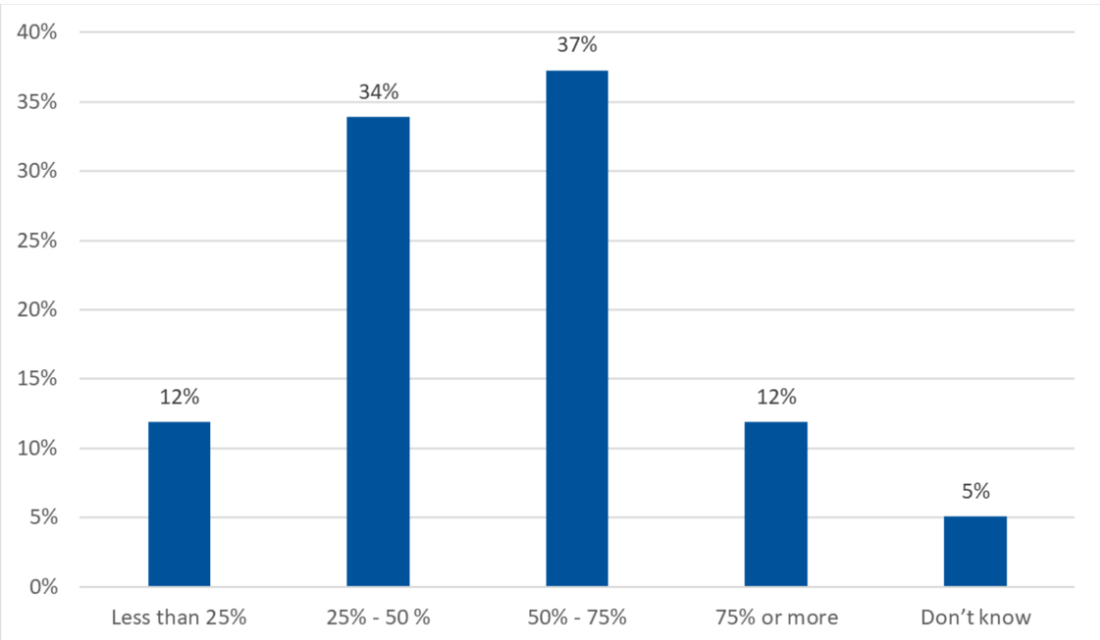
In 2018, the Erasmus+ programme funded more than 50% of all mobility at 46% of universities – in 2022 this was the case at only 27% of universities. In 2022, the E+ programme is most likely to fund between 25-50% of all mobility, as is the case at 46% of institutions. Significant flexibility was introduced by Erasmus+ in the face of Covid disruption, with funding utilisation deadlines extended, and beneficiaries given the ability to postpone, provide extra funding, or provide recognition to affected students. The Erasmus+ programme still evidently provides valuable support to universities and students across the UK, but many will already be making adjustments for when the funding utilisation deadline arrives in May 2023.

FIGURE 16: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF ALL OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY ACTIVITY AT YOUR INSTITUTION IS FUNDED VIA THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME?



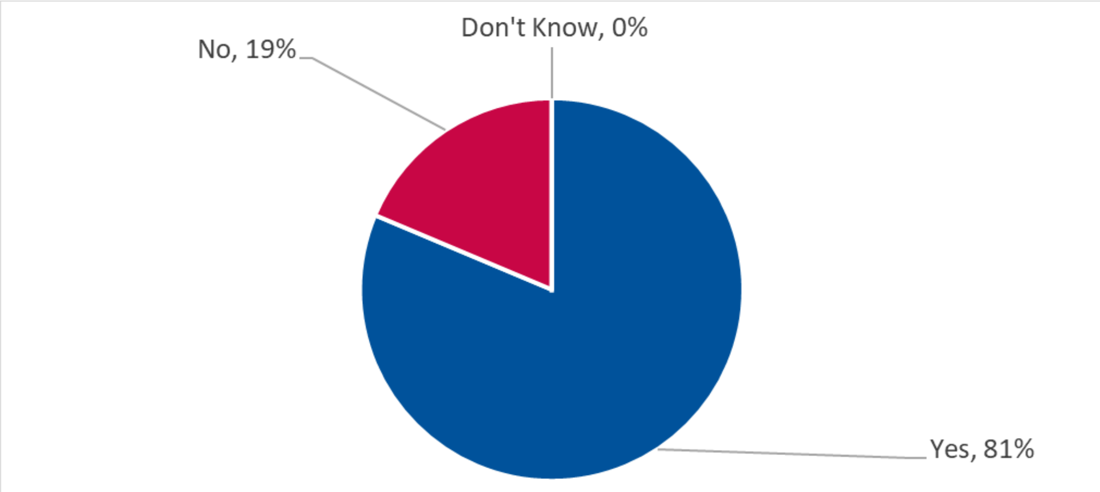
In its first year of operation, the Turing scheme is already proving an important pillar for funding mobility activities across the UK. Turing makes up more than 50% of the funding at 49% of universities. It funds 25-50% of mobility at 34% of institutions and less than 25% of mobility activity at 12% of institutions. The Turing Scheme has also implemented flexibility in the face of Covid disruption, introducing additional funding to support institutions, and reducing the minimum duration of eligible mobilities from four weeks to two. The percentage reliance on Turing funding is likely to increase in coming years as Erasmus funding expires.

FIGURE 17: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF ALL OUTWARD STUDENT MOBILITY ACTIVITY AT YOUR INSTITUTION IS FUNDED VIA THE TURING SCHEME PROGRAMME? (2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR)



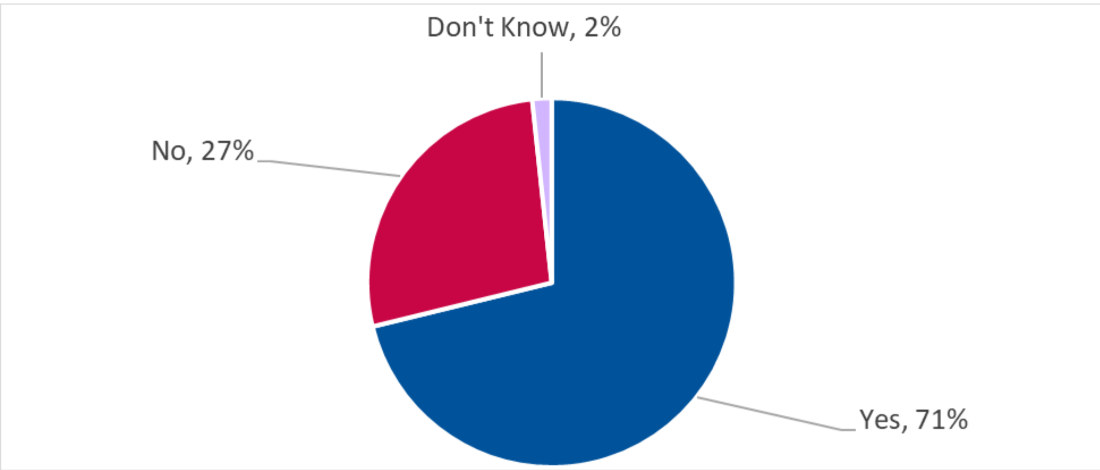
Reflecting on how the introduction of Turing has impacted the management of mobility at their institution, the most widespread comments from respondents focused on an increase in workload associated with the administration of getting a new major funding mechanism up and running. Some but not all have received additional FTE to assist with the new programme, while others noted an increase in awareness of mobility activities among senior management.

FIGURE 18: DO YOU OFFER A TUITION FEE WAIVER/LIMIT FOR YEAR ABROAD (OR ANY OTHER PERIOD ABROAD)?



The majority of universities offer a tuition fee waiver or limit for year abroad programmes (81%, up from 75% in 2018).

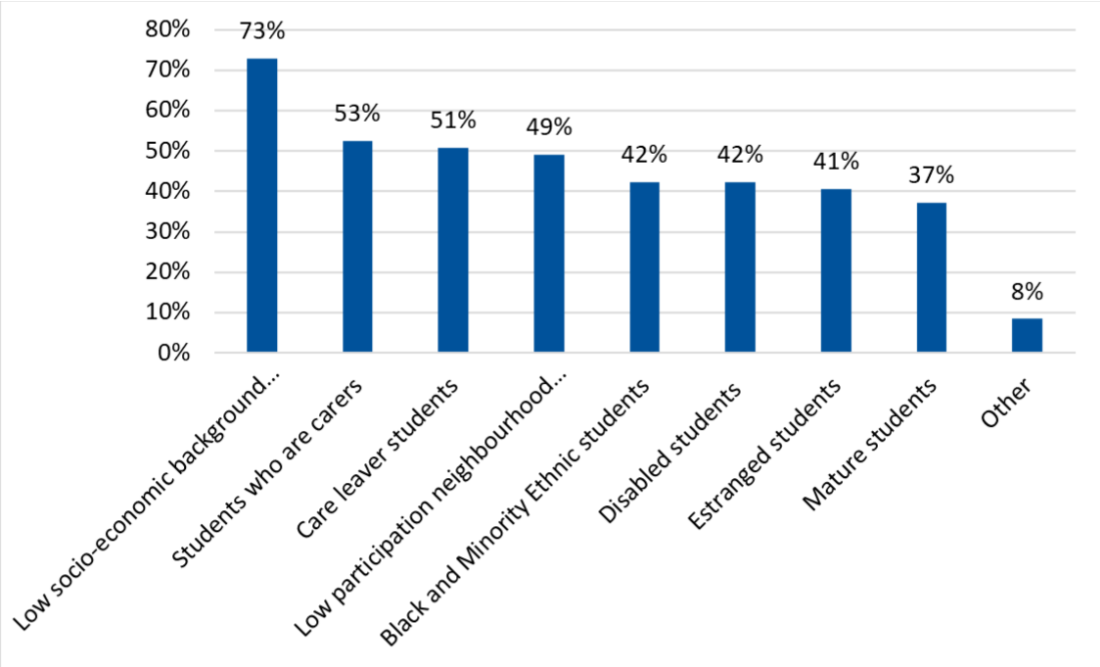
FIGURE 19: DOES YOUR INSTITUTION OFFER ANY SPECIFIC MOBILITY SCHOLARSHIPS OR FUNDING PACKAGES THAT TARGET DISADVANTAGED OR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS?



The majority of universities also offer mobility scholarships or funding packages that target students who are disadvantaged or underrepresented in outward mobility (71%, unchanged from 2018).

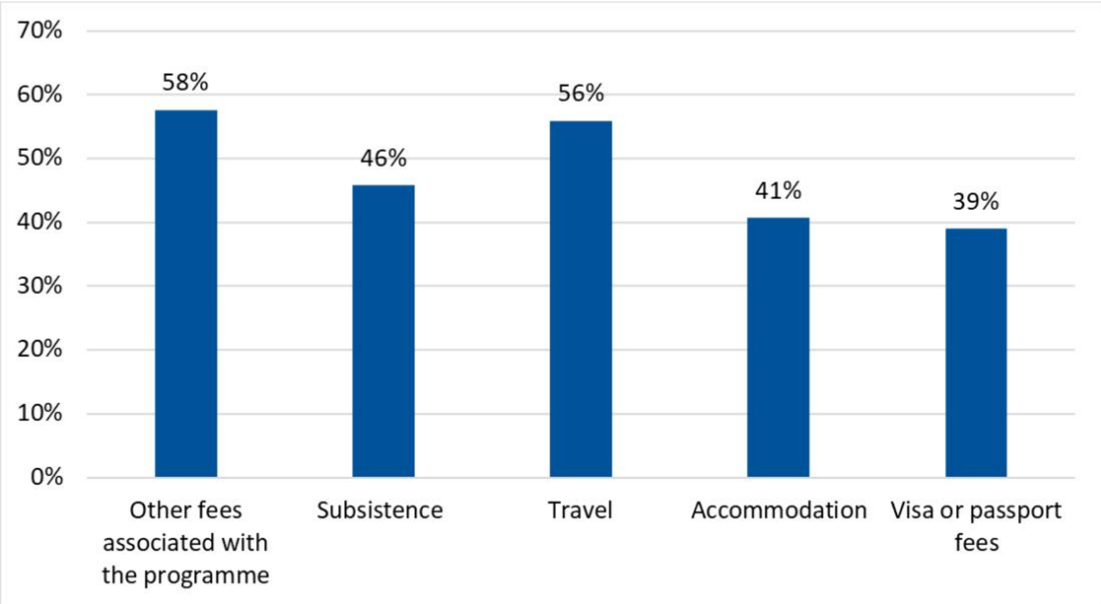
Of those universities that provide specific targeted funding, 73% provide it for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Around half of institutions provide funding for students who are carers (53%), for those students who are care leavers (51%), and for students from low participation neighbourhoods (49%). Around two fifths provide targeted funding for BME students (42%), for disabled students (42%), for estranged students (41%), and for mature students (37%). 8% of universities flagged alternative groups including Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) students, and students who are asylum seekers, refugees, or forced migrants.

FIGURE 20: IF YES, WHICH GROUPS DO YOU PROVIDE TARGETED FUNDING FOR? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY



Apart from tuition fee support, universities also provide a wide range of other financial support including for other fees associated with the programme (58%), travel (56%), subsistence (46%), accommodation (41%), and visa or passport fees (39%).

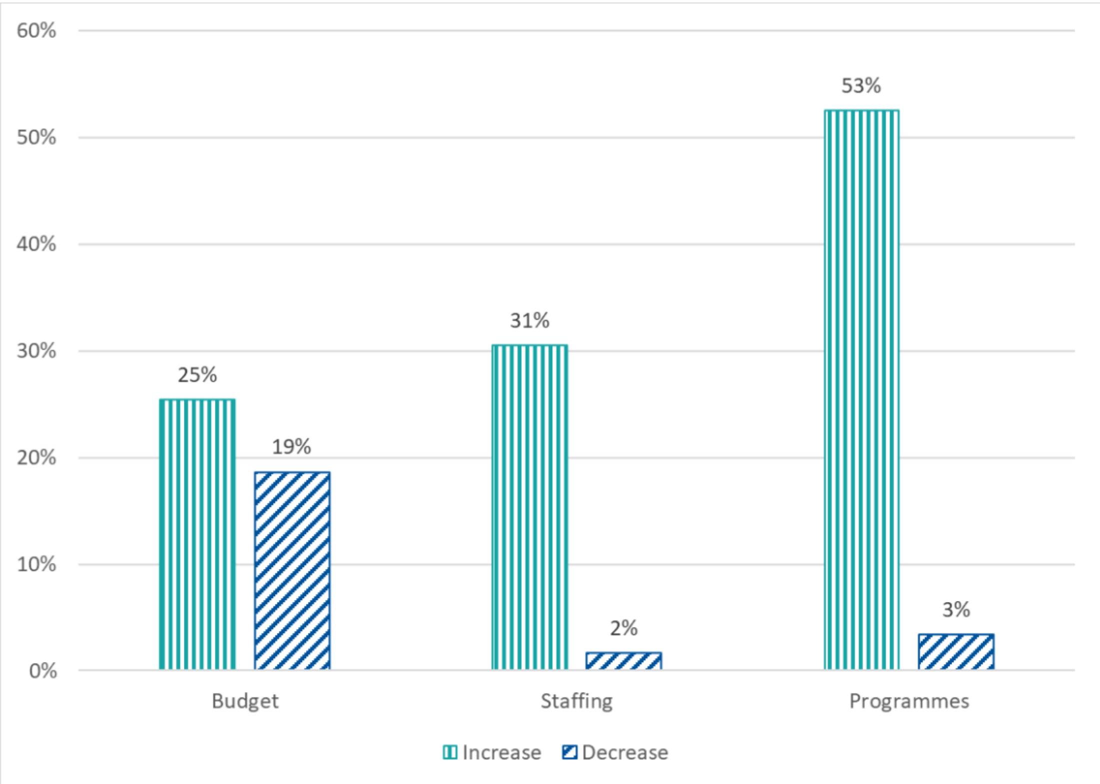
FIGURE 21: DOES YOUR INSTITUTION OFFER FUNDING TO STUDENTS TO SUPPORT THEIR MOBILITY OUTSIDE OF TUITION FEES?



Looking forward

When asked about their anticipated levels of resourcing for mobility over the next 12 months, the picture presented was largely positive. More institutions anticipate increases in budget, staffing, and programmes, than those who anticipate decreases in these areas. A quarter of institutions (25%) anticipate an increase in budget while 19% anticipate a decrease. Respondents were much more likely to anticipate an increase rather than a decrease in staffing (31% vs 2%) and in programmes (53% vs 3%).

FIGURE 22: HOW DO YOU ANTICIPATE THAT RESOURCING FOR OUTWARD MOBILITY AT YOUR UNIVERSITY WILL BE CHANGED OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?

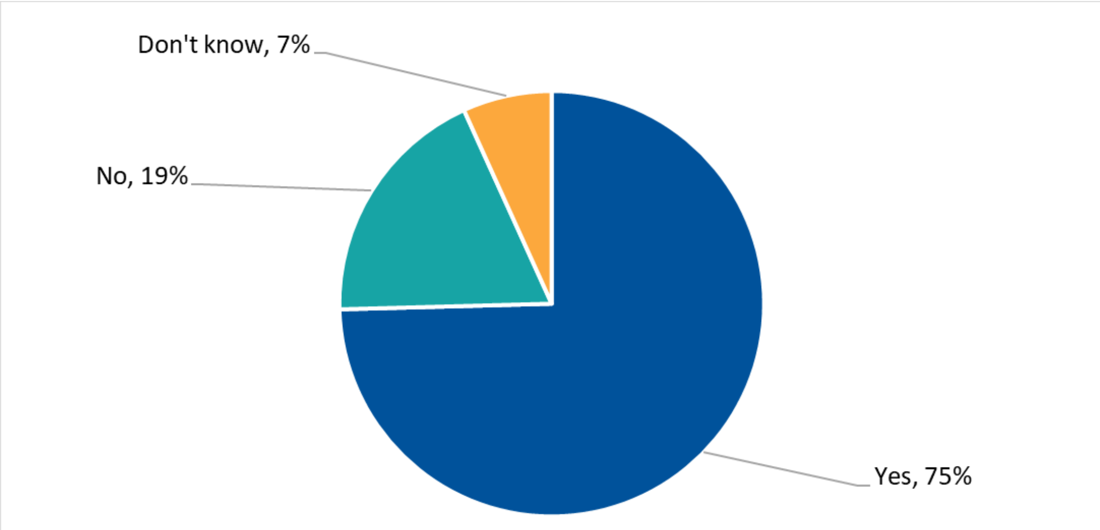


10% of institutions used the 'other' option to indicate they anticipated no change. Other 'other' responses indicated that any changes would be dependent on the level of funding they may potentially receive as a result of their Turing Scheme or Taith applications.

Go International campaign

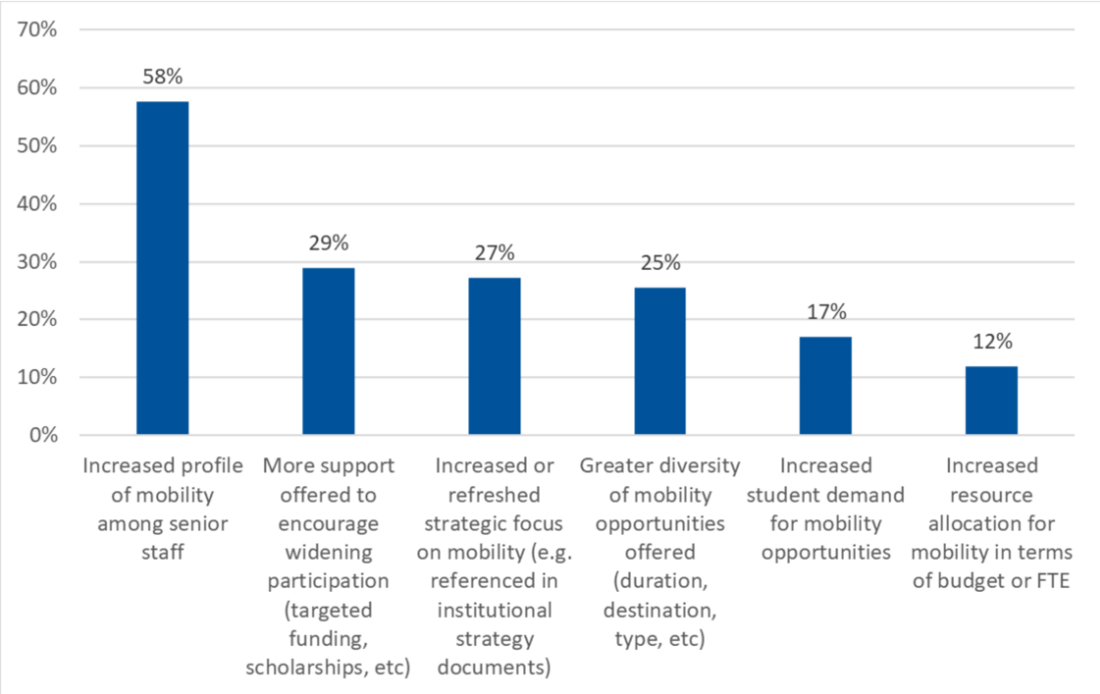
Three quarters of respondents participated in the UUKi Go International: Stand Out campaign.

FIGURE 23: DID YOUR INSTITUTION SIGN UP TO THE UUKI GO INTERNATIONAL STAND OUT CAMPAIGN?



Reflecting on the impact of the campaign, respondents noted a wide range of positive contributions. The campaign clearly contributed to raising the profile of mobility work by increasing the profile of mobility among senior staff (58%), and increasing or refreshing the strategic focus on mobility within institutions (27%). 29% of universities reflected that the campaign led to more support towards widening participation in mobility, while 25% noted its contribution towards greater diversity of mobility opportunities offered in terms of duration, destination, type, and other factors. Slightly less widespread impacts included 17% indicating that the campaign increased student demand for mobility opportunities, and 12% indicating that the campaign had led to increased resource allocation towards the mobility programme in terms of budget or staffing.

FIGURE 24: DID THE GO INTERNATIONAL STAND OUT CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTE POSITIVELY TO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING AT YOUR INSTITUTION? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.

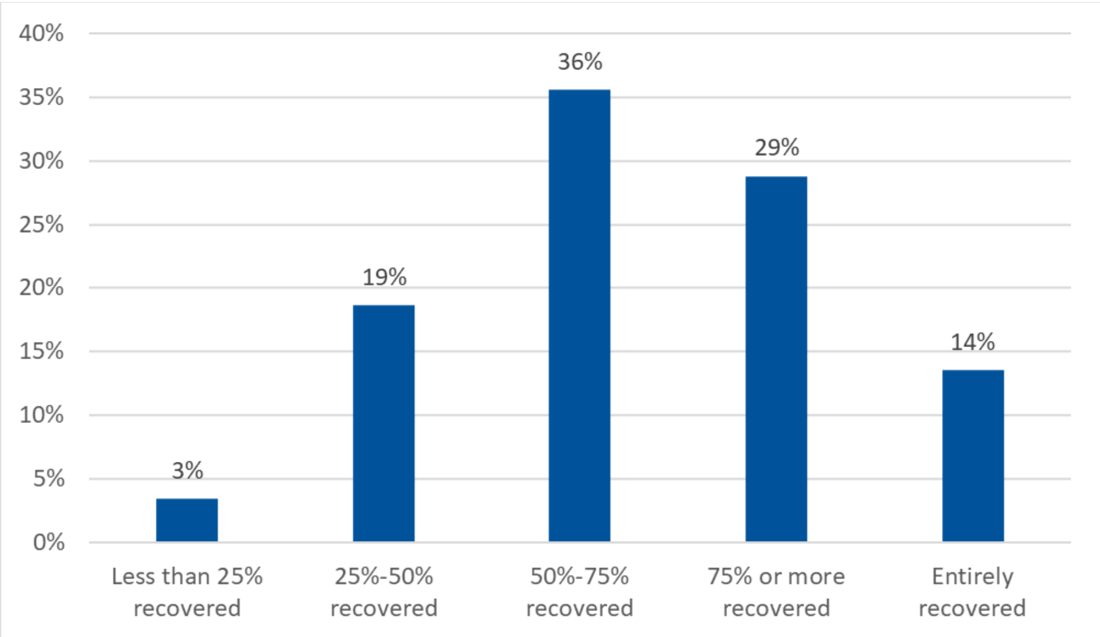


In comments, some respondents noted the campaign provided the impetus to develop mobility strategies, or to develop high level committees to monitor progress towards mobility targets. Others complimented the campaign's branding and its usefulness in providing a sectoral voice for engaging with the government and other stakeholders on policy priorities. Regret was voiced by some universities that the momentum built by the campaign was stalled by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Covid-19 recovery

The Covid-19 pandemic had a damaging impact on international student mobility as lockdowns and travel restrictions prevented or severely disrupted international travel for two years. As international travel has gradually opened back up, universities have begun to resume their mobility programmes. In the 2021-22 academic year, 78% of universities estimate that mobilities from their institutions have recovered to at least 50% of pre-pandemic levels, with 14% stating that mobility has entirely recovered. A smaller proportion of institutions reported a slower recovery, with 19% estimating that mobility had recovered to between 25-50% and only 3% estimating that it was less than 25% recovered.

FIGURE 25: BY ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE OF STUDENT MOBILITIES, TO WHAT EXTENT HAS MOBILITY FROM YOUR INSTITUTION RECOVERED TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS IN THE 2021-22 ACADEMIC YEAR?

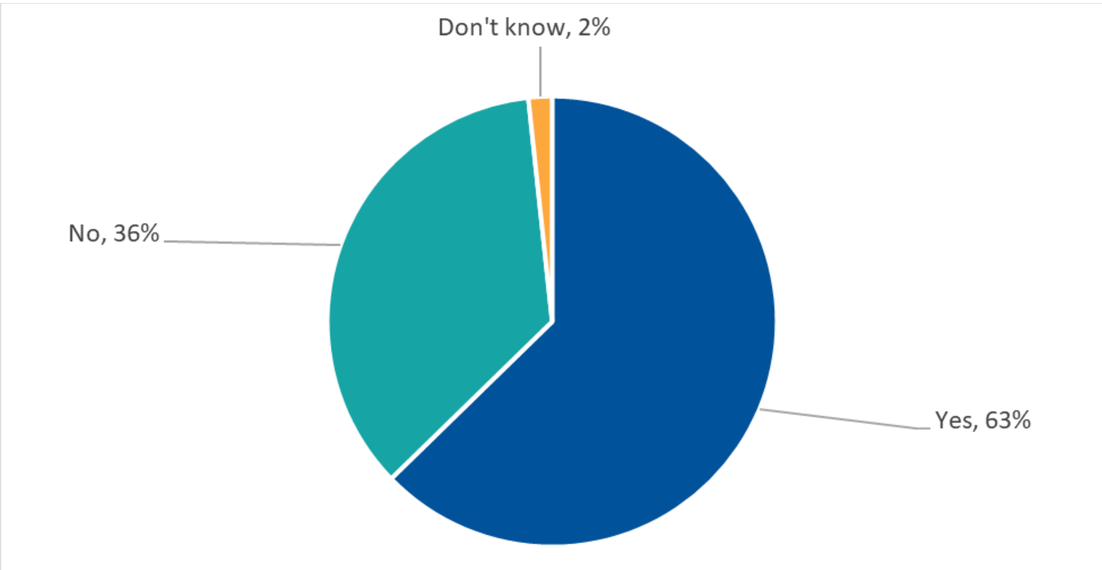


Comments from institutions whose mobility had not recovered to pre-pandemic levels indicated a range of factors as to why this was the case:

- Programmes in destinations where borders have remained closed or heavily restricted, e.g., China, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan.
- Timing of the Omicron variant disrupting momentum towards recovering mobilities at a key point in the academic year.
- Newly emerged, non-Covid barriers such as visa issues stemming from the ending of freedom of movement, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Long term planning cycles meaning students were making decisions in summer of 2021 when uncertainty was much greater.
- Increased student and parent hesitancy in regard to travel, both due to Covid but also due to financial pressures, and a desire to not miss out on the on-campus social experience after a long period of forced study online.
- Difficulty maintaining reciprocal flows of students, or partner universities continuing to not accept inbound exchange students.
- Staffing challenges due to cost, recruitment, or illness.

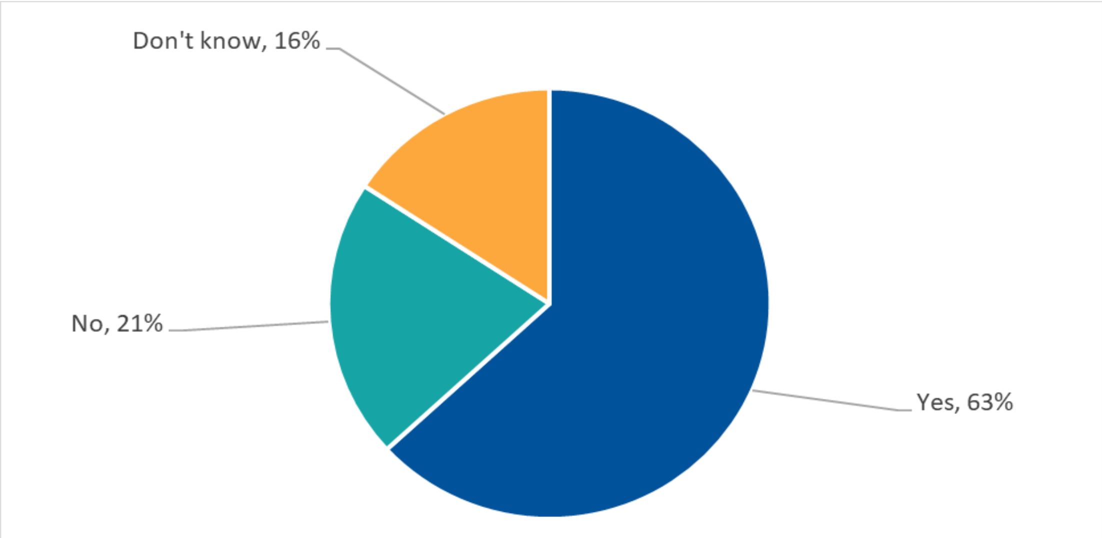
The outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020 led universities to explore various contingencies and flexible approaches to ensure students were still able to access and benefit from international experiences as part of their studies. This resulted in virtual mobility and other 'internationalisation at home' activities emerging as highly important topics as covered by the 2021 UUKi report Internationalisation at Home – Developing Global Citizens Without Travel. According to our survey results, 63% of institutions introduced or expanded virtual mobility in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

FIGURE 26: DID YOUR INSTITUTION INTRODUCE OR EXPAND VIRTUAL MOBILITY, OR OTHER ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL MOBILITY PROGRAMMES, IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?



Of those who did, 63% plan to maintain these opportunities, 21% don't plan to maintain them, and 16% don't know.

FIGURE 27: IF YES, DO YOU PLAN TO MAINTAIN THESE NEWLY INTRODUCED/EXPANDED VIRTUAL MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE ACADEMIC YEARS?



Respondents were also asked to share reflections on what the lasting impacts of the pandemic might be:

- Concerns that inflationary pressures on the costs of travel/flights might be here to stay, raising barriers to access for students.
- Universities have developed additional safety measures and risk mitigation resources and procedures that will likely stay in place in the long term. Many institutions also reflected that awareness of the importance of risk management is now much more widespread among staff and senior leadership. These changes were mostly reflected in a positive light; however some concerns were raised about the resulting increased bureaucracy for students and workload for staff.
- Increased workload for mobility staff was a common theme across responses. Some noted that the ability to engage in some of the new opportunities presented by virtual mobility and other innovations has been limited by already heavy workloads caused by increased complexity and external pressures such as visas and difficulties securing and managing external funding.
- Universities have diversified their mobility offer, bringing in new projects for short-term mobility and virtual mobilities. It was noted that virtual mobility opportunities have been especially well received by certain cohorts of students, for example mature students who have appreciated the potential for an international experience with more flexibility.
- For some institutions it has become more difficult to reach students and promote mobility opportunities to them. In some cases, this has been the result of students spending less time on campus due to online lectures, and in others as a result of there being fewer students on campus who have already had a mobility experience to provide word of mouth promotion to their peers.
- Better use of technology to support students from start to finish in their mobility journey, including enhanced pre-departure briefings. Ohers also reflected that the global adoption of video calling technology has been incredibly useful for meeting and engaging partners both new and existing.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey reflect the UK higher education sector's mobility offer emerging from a period of transition. Some results do not show the 'progress' on certain key markers, such as more widespread inclusion of mobility in institutional strategies, that might have been expected in a normal four-year period.

Some of the momentum built by the Go International: Stand Out campaign towards boosting the profile of student mobility has been slowed by the restrictions brought about by Covid-19. Fewer respondents reported mobility being included in their institutions' strategic plans in 2022 than in 2018, and fewer institutions reported having a dedicated mobility target. The direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic are still being felt – travel difficulties remain for key destinations, and respondents noted some remaining hesitancy towards mobility among students and parents. Mobility team size has also decreased on average, often with FTE being reassigned to alternative priority areas in response to the pandemic and then not always being fully restored after the fact.

The UK's exit from the European Union has also impacted the management of student mobility. The adjustment away from the Erasmus+ programme (which was responsible for more than half of all mobilities at 66% of institutions in 2018) and towards the Turing Scheme has not been without its challenges. Mobility staff reported higher workloads because of challenges faced when having to adjust to the new funding mechanism. The importance of the Turing scheme to the sector is also apparent, as it already has taken on the role of the main funding source for mobilities and has reportedly led to an increase in awareness of mobility activities among senior management. Challenges related to visas stemming from the ending of freedom of movement have also quickly risen to the top of the priority for many institutions, leading to increased workloads, disruption to planned mobilities, and difficulties securing reciprocal flows of students.

However, any disappointment should be tempered by the fact that the past four years have been anything but normal. The focus should instead be on recognising the resilience demonstrated by mobility teams across the sector and looking to the future. The mobility offer across the UK remains incredibly diverse in terms of programmes, duration, and types of activity. Innovative approaches to virtual mobility, short term opportunities, and wider understanding of the importance of widening participation to underrepresented groups have all seen greater prominence in 2022 compared to 2018. Efforts to promote mobility to students also appear to be succeeding in the 2022 context, evidenced by the mass take up of Turing funded opportunities. Many of the challenges noted across the survey results are not likely to resolve themselves in the short term and mobility teams will need increased resource and strategic support to continue delivering the life changing international experiences which are so highly valued by students. Mobility budgets have increased a just under a third of institutions, but that figure is going to need to be much higher if student demand is to be met in a sustainable way.

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Our thanks to the members of the UUKi Outward Student Mobility Network for their detailed survey responses which informed this report.

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December 2022