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To cite this article: Rachel Brooks & Johanna Waters (2025) Global Britain and cosmopolitan nationalism, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 46:1, 8-24, DOI: [10.1080/01596306.2024.2436334](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2024.2436334)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2024.2436334>



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Published online: 30 Dec 2024.



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Global Britain and cosmopolitan nationalism

Rachel Brooks ^{a*} and Johanna Waters ^b

^aDepartment of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; ^bDepartment of Geography, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The term ‘Global Britain’ was widely used by the UK government between 2016 and 2021 to signal its ambition to reorient the nation’s foreign policy on departure from the European Union. There was, however, considerable uncertainty about what the term meant beyond this, with some commentators suggesting that it denoted a de-prioritising of relations with European nations, others arguing that it represented a reassertion of colonial perspectives, and yet others contending it was largely an empty concept, devoid of meaning. In this article, we draw on a range of policy documents to consider whether it can be considered a form of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ – i.e. a policy agenda that promoted both a sense of nationalism and a global outlook. In developing our analysis, we focus on education – not least because this was one of the few policy domains where the language of ‘Global Britain’ was, until recently, still used (in the promotion of the Turing Scheme). We argue that while, *prima facie*, the term seems a plausible case of cosmopolitan nationalism, the significant limitations to the ‘global outlook’ that is deployed suggest that it was far from ‘cosmopolitan’ in its reach and ambition.

KEYWORDS

Global Britain; cosmopolitan nationalism; higher education; policy

Introduction

For a relatively brief period, between approximately 2016 and 2021, the term ‘Global Britain’ found prominence within policy documents, government ministerial speeches and media stories within the UK. It became a ‘mantra’ for a post-Brexit Britain during a time of political and social uncertainty and instability. By 2022, the UK had had an unprecedented five prime ministers in the preceding six years. During this time, the UK (and the world) had also experienced a pandemic (COVID-19). Global Britain was an attempt, at that time, to provide the country with some surety, whilst also (and as we will discuss, below) projecting a ‘strong’ image to the outside world. As Adams (2021) wrote in *The Guardian* of Boris Johnson’s famous speech: ‘delivered in the grand surroundings of Christopher Wren’s Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich on 3 February 2020, [the speech] set out his vision for a buccaneering global Britain, high on union flags and free trade.’ Here

CONTACT Johanna Waters  johanna.waters@ucl.ac.uk

*Present address: Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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we ask, to what extent could this ‘buccaneering’ approach to rebuilding national security, prosperity and confidence be seen to chime with other debates, being had elsewhere in the world, around cosmopolitan forms of nationalism?

As we will discuss in more detail later in the paper, ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ is understood as a perspective that combines a ‘global outlook’ with a nationalist agenda. On the face of it, ‘Global Britain’ appears a plausible case of such a perspective. Our aim in this article, however, is to go beyond surface approaches to consider in some detail what was explicit, implicit or absent altogether in discussions of ‘Global Britain’, by examining a wide range of documents written by policy actors within and outside government. We focus primarily on education – because this is one area where ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ has been discussed in some detail (within the academic literature – see, for example, Maxwell, Yemini, Engel, & Lee, 2020 and Yemini, Maxwell, Wright, Engel, & Lee, 2023) and also because the term has, until recently, continued to be used with respect to education (notably in relation to the Turing Scheme¹) despite having been dropped in most other policy areas.

Background

The concept of ‘Global Britain’

While the academic literature on ‘Global Britain’ is relatively limited, the colonial undertones of the concept have been explored in several studies. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Global Britain is a means of establishing ‘Empire 2.0’ (Boussebaa, 2020; Kleibert, 2023). Based on his analysis of the various ‘spatial imaginaries’ brought into play by Brexit, Sykes (2018) contends that an imaginary called ‘Global Britain vs Little England’ was established during the campaign leading up to the Brexit vote in June 2016, and was sustained afterwards. It was used to imply that ‘Remain’-supporting internationalists were insular in their thinking because their focus was Europe rather than the wider world, and to make Brexit ‘more palatable to a wider ‘liberal/globalist’ constituency’ (p.142). It emphasised the ease and value of global free trade, and typically propounded ‘an ultraliberal view of society and regulation’ (p.143). Sykes (2018) suggests that this spatial imaginary persisted after the Brexit referendum, but became less forward looking – stressing, instead, Britain’s ‘lost greatness’ and advocating the establishment of ‘Empire 2.0’ (although with greater emphasis on former colonies in the Global North rather than in Africa):

In performative/political terms, this historically oriented imaginary of Britain’s place in the world, subtly cultivated a nostalgic sense of loss which connected elite post-imperial narratives of Britain’s declining historical global power with the real material degradations of those suffering from the ravages of the neo-liberal economy. (p.152)

A similar argument, about the close entanglement of ideas about Empire with the concept of ‘Global Britain’, is made by Turner (2019). He asserts that the narrative of Global Britain was largely autobiographical, ‘crafted to reassure, with a familiar, soothing story about the UK as a nation with truly global attributes and aspirations, and networks of allies and partners, to ease an expected shock ... from ... the loss of EU membership’ (p.729). It complemented, Turner argues, earlier, long-running discourses about the extensive influence and ‘global presence’ of Britain, grounded in favourable or, at worst, ambivalent views of Empire held by much of the British population. Nevertheless,

Turner also contends that, as a foreign policy narrative, 'Global Britain' has been largely ineffective – because of its orientation to a domestic rather than international audience; its regressive worldview (failing to recognise that most Commonwealth members now prioritise relationships with their neighbouring states, and the US, China and European Union, rather than the UK); and its misunderstanding of how the UK is understood internationally (as a facilitator or broker, rather than a powerful player in its own right). While Saunders (2020) disputes that 'Global Britain' was underpinned by imperial desires, specifically, he contends that it was informed by a particular view of Britain's history, 'centring on trade, enterprise and the gravity-defying achievements of a small island' (p.1160) – that needs only liberation from the European Union to be able to flourish again.

Beyond the literature discussed above, most research that has focused on the concept of Global Britain has related it to foreign policy and defence – largely because this is the area in which it has been used most by politicians (e.g. Glencross & McCourt, 2018). An important exception to this is the work of Kleibert (2023), who has examined the ways in which the concept has been deployed and/or understood by a variety of higher education actors in the UK. She notes that it has been used by both those responsible for internationalisation within higher education institutions and representatives of sector-wide organisations working in this space (such as Universities UK International and the British Council)

Respondents ... invoke it when explaining location choice strategies, for instance, through the search for new 'frontier markets', the establishment of 'gateways', 'bridgeheads' and 'foot-holds', and the generally pervasive use of military language by internationalization strategists, above all with reference to expansion into Africa and Asia. (p.198)

In this way, respondents' views reflected some of the discussion above about the resurfacing of colonial ties and the fostering of stronger Commonwealth relations. However, Kleibert maintains that such perspectives were held alongside others that gave equal, or even greater, weight to strengthening *European* partnerships – as a means of mitigating the risk of leaving the European Research Area and/or the European Higher Education Area. We return to this theme when discussing our own data.

Cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan nationalism

The concept of cosmopolitanism has a long lineage, traceable to Ancient Greece. Initially, it signified 'an aspiration to transcend the traditional boundaries of state (and therefore of identity) imposed by the polis and affirms the early stage of an egalitarian conception of humankind based on principles of wisdom and goodness' (Busetto, 2017, p. 306). Much more recently, the concept has often been linked to globalisation (Beck & Sznaider, 2006). Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has written prolifically on cosmopolitanism in the modern sense of the term (which retains similarities with its older usage), and his 1990 essay on the topic has proved, subsequently, very influential. Therefore, in this paper we draw heavily upon Hannerz's articulation of cosmopolitanism.

According to Hannerz (1990), cosmopolitanism involves embracing a plurality of cultures ('the more the better'). It represents a 'stance towards diversity' that includes the belief that individuals within society should experience the coexistence of different cultures and a 'willingness to engage with the Other' (p. 239). It is 'an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts

rather than uniformity' (p. 239). Furthermore, it can also be considered a 'skill' – an ability to make one's way competently within and through 'other' cultural contexts. As Hannerz (2007) observes in a later paper, this is very much a cultural perspective on cosmopolitanism. But it has a political side, too: representing a way of organising society; not in relation to markets and global capitalism, but as citizens of something bigger than the nation-state. He writes: 'this meant that cosmopolitanism might become a critique of at least certain qualities of global capitalism, as well as a search for ways to constrain it' (p. 71); a pertinent observation in relation to some of the points we make in relation to Global Britain, below.

In this paper, we are primarily concerned with a related but different term – 'cosmopolitan nationalism' – and how this may or may not chime with the mantra of Global Britain. The origins of the term cosmopolitan nationalism are unclear – whilst Maxwell et al. develop it in their 2020 paper, Eckersley (2007) has attributed its use to Neilson in 1999, as part of a 'quasi-communitarian turn in cosmopolitan political thought' (p. 676). In any case, it would appear to be a fairly 'old' idea that has been reinvigorated and applied much more recently in an attempt to understand ostensibly competing tendencies. We are interested, here, in how the idea has been deployed to understand education systems in particular – i.e. that national education systems are at once endeavouring to promote a sense of nationalism *and* a 'global outlook' amongst students. Maxwell et al. (2020) and Yemini et al. (2023) have recently applied the concept to contemporary education policy. According to the former, schools are no longer being tasked with preparing students to enter the local labour market, but instead are expected to produce workers capable of securing employment internationally. They provide the following useful definition:

We understand this concept [cosmopolitan nationalism] as sitting at the heart of concurrent and at times conflicting pressures within national education structures to promote internationalisation and a global gaze, while also seeking to remain locally relevant and a primary contributor to national projects of economic development, social cohesion and creating the 'right kinds' of citizens. (p. 846)

These ideas resemble, in part, the earlier arguments proffered by Mitchell (2003), who documented a shift in education policy in England, Canada and the United States, away from what she called a 'spirit of multiculturalism' towards 'a more strategic use of diversity for competitive advantage in a global market place' (p. 387). According to Mitchell (2003), cosmopolitanism denotes the latest stage of global capitalism, wherein the 'strategic cosmopolitan' becomes a 'nodal agent in the expanding networks of the global economy' (p. 400). However, for Mitchell, 'nationalism' in this context was less about remaining 'locally relevant' with a concern around 'social cohesion' and more about nation-states attempting to insert themselves, through their citizens, into a global economic system. Evidently, these ideas sit uneasily alongside Hannerz's (1990) conception of cosmopolitanism as a 'skill' – for Hannerz, 'skill' was about cultural appreciation and not about potential economic gain. As noted above, it was seen as offering a potential critique of global capitalism. Instead, it now seems to be used, largely, in support of 'the global economy'. Before discussing these ideas in more depth in relation to our data set, in what immediately follows we briefly outline our research methods.

Methods

This paper is based on an analysis of 25 UK policy documents that reference ‘Global Britain’ and that were published between 2016 and 2023: nine that relate specially to higher education, and 16 that are more general in focus. Documents were identified through an online search, and included in the sample if they met two key criteria: (i) they made reference to ‘Global Britain’ (even if in only a relatively small part of the document); and (ii) they were written by a relevant policy actor for a public audience. As can be seen from [Table 1](#), the sample included: government strategy papers; speeches by politicians; commentaries and newspaper articles; press releases; and policy/position papers written by non-governmental policy actors.

All documents were read closely by the two article authors.² Although we paid attention to the frequency with which the term ‘Global Britain’ was used within each document, our primary interest was in the meaning attached to it. Detailed notes about the discursive construction of the term (i.e. the various ways in which it was being constructed – or conceptualised – through the relevant document’s language), plus a note about frequency of use, were recorded in an analytical grid. These notes then provided the basis for a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), in which we sought to understand the meanings ascribed to ‘Global Britain’ and the extent to which they were consistent with the tenets of cosmopolitan nationalism.

The following section takes a largely inductive approach, exploring the various ways in which the term was used in the analysed documents. The section that follows adopts a more deductive position, examining the extent to which the dominant conceptualisations of ‘Global Britain’ map on to central ideas of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ discussed above. In both sections, we examine key ways in which the term has been deployed rather than assess the impact of these for education policy and practice.

The use and meaning of ‘Global Britain’

In this section, we draw on the analysed documents to discuss how the concept of ‘Global Britain’ has been understood within them, before going on to examine the extent to which it can be considered an example of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ in the section that follows. Our analysis contributes to the extant literature by placing particular emphasis on documents relating to higher education, not just those that have considered ‘Global Britain’ from the perspective of foreign affairs and defence.

Lack of clear meaning

In many ways the concept of ‘Global Britain’ can be regarded as a ‘floating signifier’ (Laclau, 2007). It is rarely defined in any of the documents, and has often been used to promote the document author’s own agenda. For example, in the programme handbook for the Turing Scheme (2023–2024, Document 4), ‘Global Britain’ is specified as one of four objectives for the scheme and one of three qualitative criteria for assessing applications for funding, and yet very little detail is provided about what activity, specifically, is desired. Indeed, the text explaining the objective is short and vague:

Table 1. Analysed documents.

Document number	Name, date and author of document	Type of document
Education-related documents		
1	Ansell, M. (2022) A truly global Britain needs more people with a global outlook, <i>HEPI blog</i> , 30 November	Written by Director of Education at British Council
2	Baty (2016) UK universities are among the flag-bearers for Global Britain, <i>Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office 'Outreach' blog</i>	Blog by editor of <i>Times Higher World University Rankings</i>
3	British Council (n.d.) <i>Global Britain: the UK's soft power advantage</i>	Policy Insight report
4	Capita (n.d.) <i>The Turing Scheme Programme Guide 2023 to 2024. Version 1.3</i>	Programme handbook for Turing Scheme
5	Department for Education and Department for Trade (2021) <i>International Education Strategy: 2021 update. Supporting recovery, driving growth</i>	Government strategy document
6	Donelan, M. (2021) <i>Universities Minister at British Council's 'Going Global' Conference</i> , 15 June 2021	Speech by Universities Minister
7	Gyimah, S. (2019) UK universities can help Global Britain be more than a bumper sticker, <i>FT</i> , 11 May 2018	Opinion piece (by former higher education minister)
8	Johnson, J. (2020) <i>Universities Open to the World. How to put the bounce back in Global Britain</i> , Harvard Kennedy School and The Policy Institute, KCL.	Personal manifesto for change (by former higher education minister)
9	Richardson, L. and Toope, S. (2021) Slashing research funding is a blow to Global Britain, <i>Daily Telegraph</i> , 19 March 2021.	Newspaper article (by vice-chancellors of Universities of Oxford and Cambridge)
General documents		
10	Foreign Secretary (Dominic Raab), Statement, 13 January 2020	Oral statement to parliament (transcript)
11	PM Speech (Boris Johnson) Greenwich, 3 Feb. 2020	Speech
12	Raab, D. (2019) Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good, <i>Sunday Telegraph</i> , 23 September 2019	Newspaper article by the Foreign Secretary
13	'Global Britain: Delivering on our International Ambition' – a collection of documents pertaining to Global Britain: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/global-britain-delivering-on-our-international-ambition	Web page by UK government
14	Foreign Secretary's introduction to the Queen's Speech debate (Dominic Raab), 13 January, 2020	Speech delivered to the House of Commons
15	Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, 2021	Policy Report
16	PM Speech (Theresa May) at Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2018	Speech
17	National security capability review (NSCR), 28 March, 2018	Policy report
18	PM Speech (Theresa May) The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU, 17 January, 2018	Speech
19	Lord Mayor's Banquet 2019: Foreign Secretary's Speech (Jeremy Hunt), 14 May, 2019	Speech
20	Britain and Germany: an alliance of values Speech by the Foreign Secretary to the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Berlin, 20 February, 2019	Speech
21	Foreign Secretary Hunt: Britain's role in a post-Brexit world Foreign Secretary (Jeremy Hunt). At the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore and announced the Partnership for the Future, 2 January, 2019	Speech
22	An Invisible Chain: speech by the Foreign Secretary (Jeremy Hunt) gave a speech at Policy Exchange about Britain's role in the world after Brexit. 31 October, 2018	Speech
23	Foreign Secretary (Boris Johnson) expands UK Commonwealth diplomatic network. 19 April, 2018	News story
24	Foreign Secretary (Boris Johnson) announces 250 new diplomatic roles and ten new sovereign missions overseas. 21 March, 2018	Press release
25	House of Commons Debate Pack on Global Britain. 11 January, 2021	Parliamentary Debate Pack.

In line with the UK Government's vision of a Global Britain, Turing Scheme Projects support high quality placements, enhance existing partnerships, and encourage the forging of new relationships across the world. (p.9)

This reflects points that have been made with respect to other policy areas. For example, Breslin and Burnham (2023) have argued that, within foreign policy, the idea of 'Global Britain' was not clearly defined, and its usage was riven with contradictions. Nevertheless, given that the text above closely informed one of only a small number of assessment criteria for funding a significant area of educational activity, its lack of specificity is particularly notable.

The vagueness of the term has enabled a variety of education actors to use it for their own ends. This is notable in the newspaper article written by the vice-chancellors of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Document 9) in which they deploy the term to critique government policy with respect to research funding. While noting that 'like the Government, we are committed to ... growing a 'Global Britain', and to a country which is levelled-up', they go on to argue that:

the scale, immediacy and impact of the announced and potential cuts to UK research budgets, amounting to over £1 billion, will undermine years of investment in our universities and put our research base at risk, not to mention our international reputation. Indeed, there is a real likelihood of the Government's claims of 'Global Britain' ringing hollow. (n.p.)

Similarly, the former UK universities minister, Jo Johnson, used the concept (in 2020) to put forward his own agenda, comprised of eight recommendations, to 'enable universities to compete more effectively in global market for international education' and to 'play their full part in putting the bounce back in Global Britain' (Document 8, p.6). Johnson acknowledged that the term has not been clearly defined – noting that 'the Government at Westminster seeks to ... give meaning to its Global Britain slogan' (p.42) – but this did not stop him from using the term (without definition) throughout much of his manifesto for change:

Remaining the second most popular destination for international students is a great mark of prestige for the UK and an asset for Global Britain. (p.18)

In its post-Brexit vision for Global Britain, simply continuing as a member of Erasmus is unlikely to appeal to this government. If universities are to be central to a Global Britain, they must be open to the world, providing truly global inward and outward mobility opportunities. (p.42)

Indeed, he outlined a range of quite specific policy recommendations including developing a student mobility scheme to replace Erasmus (with both inward and outward opportunities), doubling the number of international students coming to the UK from India, and reducing the bureaucracy associated with student visa applications.

Signifying implicit lack of confidence

Despite this absence of clarity about the meaning of 'Global Britain', the ways in which the concept was deployed in the various documents do convey some specific messages (for example, the theme of imperialism has been identified by several researchers, as discussed previously). One such message, not considered in the extant literature, is

the implicit lack of confidence about the UK's role in the world, post-Brexit, that statements about Global Britain have suggested. This is evident in the excerpt below, for example.

The UK has always taken a leading role in responding to global challenges and in making the most of opportunities for our country. However, information and influence are dispersed and contested amongst many more actors, both state and non-state. This, and the pace of change in an ever more challenging global environment, inevitably have a significant impact on how the UK government projects influence and protects its national interests.

The shifting global context, a new relationship with Europe, and the need to deliver more with finite resources, requires us to evolve and enhance how we achieve our goals. We need to use government assets more cohesively and efficiently to maintain our global standing. Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage. (Document 13)

Despite this being the opening text on the main government website that brings together key documents about 'Global Britain', reference to the contestation of information and influence, 'an ever more challenging global environment', and 'finite resources' suggest that 'Global Britain' was part of a defensive, reactive approach to the world, rather than coming from a place of 'confidence' as the last sentence would suggest.

This implicit lack of confidence was also evident in several of the speeches by the prime minister and foreign secretary in which considerable emphasis is placed on risks and challenges. For example, in a speech given on 3 February 2020 (Document 11), the then prime minister, Boris Johnson, spent a substantial amount of time arguing that the 'beneficial magic' associated with promotion of free trade was 'fading':

Free trade is being choked and that is no fault of the people, that's no fault of individual consumers, I am afraid it is the politicians who are failing to lead. The mercantilists are everywhere, the protectionists are gaining ground. From Brussels to China to Washington tariffs are being waved around like cudgels even in debates on foreign policy where frankly they have no place – and there is an ever growing proliferation of non-tariff barriers and the resulting tensions are letting the air out of the tyres of the world economy. World trading volumes are lagging behind global growth. Trade used to grow at roughly double global GDP – from 1987 to 2007. Now it barely keeps pace and global growth is itself anaemic and the decline in global poverty is beginning to slow.

He goes on to assert that the UK will, in the future, champion free trade – to help correct some of these problems – presumably as part of its 'Global Britain' agenda (Document 11).

Thus, while some scholars have argued that 'Global Britain' was a rhetorical strategy aimed to ease the shock of leaving the European Union (Turner, 2019), it appears that the specific ways in which the term has been deployed may have had the effect of reinforcing insecurities rather than provide a 'familiar, soothing story' about the UK's 'truly global attributes and aspirations' (Turner, 2019, p. 729).

Disconnect between government and education actors

The analysed documents also reveal a significant disconnect between texts produced by the government, on the one hand, and education actors, on the other hand. This is notable, first, with respect to the discussion of higher education in the context of Global Britain and, second, in relation to how Europe was addressed.

None of the documents brought together in the government's collection of 'main documents that set out [its] vision for Global Britain' (Document 11) are related to education, and education was notably absent in the general policy documents we analysed (listed in Table 1). For example, within what is often seen as the government's key strategy document on Global Britain – *Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (Document 15) – education is mentioned rarely and, when it is, primarily in relation to improving girls' access to schooling worldwide. The few references to higher education are all under the heading 'Soft Power Strengths' – noting merely the attractiveness of the UK to international students, the number of heads of state educated in the UK, and the scholarship schemes available to international students. Higher education is thus not presented as part of strategic policy change. Furthermore, the connection between education and Global Britain was also rarely made by education actors within government. Indeed, the only government documents that refer to Global Britain are a speech by the then universities minister, Michelle Donelan (Document 6) and the 2021 update to the government's *International Education Strategy* (Document 5). Moreover, in the latter document, the term is mentioned just twice in the 64-page publication – both occurrences in the foreword written by the relevant secretaries of state (education and trade), not in the main body of the text.

It is interesting, therefore, that the concept was, until recently, engaged with and linked to higher education by a variety of stakeholders outside central government including two former universities ministers (Jo Johnson and Sam Gyimah), the British Council, university leaders and the editor of the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (see Table 1). While it could be argued that such actors were just making the most of a vague and poorly defined term to advance their own agenda (as we have alluded to above), a close reading of the texts indicates that many document authors did also consider higher education to play a key role in the UK's international activities and thus was highly relevant to discussions of 'Global Britain', however it is defined. Implicit in some of these documents is a criticism of the government for failing to include education more closely in its strategy. Sam Gyimah (Document 7), for example, notes:

If we want Global Britain to be more than a bumper sticker, we have to match our ambition with action. Ministers need to look decades ahead because that is what other countries are doing. A piecemeal, reactive approach will not do – we need a confident and considered long-term plan. This means a strategy that brings together migration policy with export opportunities, the potential for young Britons to live and study abroad and moves to make it easier for our universities to expand overseas.

A second area of difference is in relation to the treatment of Europe. As the extant literature has suggested, 'Global Britain' can be understood as a response to Brexit, and an attempt to strengthen the UK's connections with nations outside of Europe (Saunders, 2020; Sykes, 2018; Turner, 2019). This is evident in many of the government documents we analysed. The documents from education actors, in contrast, placed more emphasis on sustaining European links. Even the speech by Michelle Donelan (Document 6), the then universities minister, made explicit reference to various European nations in the context of 'Global Britain':

This pioneering scheme [Turing Scheme] represents a landmark step in achieving our vision of a truly Global Britain. I have been engaging extensively with potential partners around the world to discuss the opportunities that the scheme provides. This includes international government organisations and institutions, in the US, Canada, Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland, Australia, India, and amongst many more throughout the Commonwealth.

The British Council (Document 3) is even more explicit in the value it attributes to European partners:

But for all the buccaneering spirit evident in the thinking around Global Britain, there remain real challenges closer to home. The UK needs its European neighbours and they need an engaged and collaborative UK. The UK is Europe's leading military power with a pivotal role in European security. It is also a leading European economy, with the City of London especially important to the continent's continued prosperity. There is difficult but essential work needed to rebuild relations with EU states and find a mutually beneficial new normal. (p.45)

In many ways, this positioning reflects the findings of Kleibert's (2023) research, discussed above, in which she noted the importance attached to developing or strengthening European partnerships by a range of UK education actors – from national representative organisations as well as individual higher education institutions. It also mirrors our previous work in which we demonstrated how the language of 'Global Britain' was taken on by UK universities, but used in a much more expansive way than the government, to include a significant commitment to European partnerships (Brooks & Waters, 2023). This differential approach is made possible because of the lack of clear meaning attached to the term, discussed previously.

Enduring legacy in Turing Scheme?

Finally, it is important to note the date of publication of the documents we analysed. Nearly all of them were published prior to 2022. Indeed, it appears that over recent years the term 'Global Britain' has been dropped by government actors and, as a result, has lost relevance for education actors (even as a term to critique). This can be explained largely by the change of prime ministers, and Rishi Sunak's (who became UK prime minister in 2022) alleged desire to return to a 'new normal' in the UK's foreign relations, with more emphasis on delivery than rhetoric (Whitman, 2022). However, the one exception to this trend has been the Turing Scheme's programme handbook (Document 4). Despite the lack of clarity associated with the term, during 2023–2024 it remained both a key objective for the scheme and a criterion for assessment. In the most recent assessment of the scheme, published in February 2024, Global Britain still appears as a concept but has been removed from the scheme's central objectives (in what may well be a gradual phasing out of the term).

Global Britain: a form of cosmopolitan nationalism?

In this section, we evaluate the notion of Global Britain in relation to the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism. On the surface, these two terms have significant similarities – the 'Global' in Global Britain connotes an *outward-looking* perspective, which transcends insular 'national' concerns, whereas 'Britain' retains the importance of the nation-state

and its (more localised, parochial) interests. As Maxwell et al. (2020) have written, the promotion of (and engagement with) internationalisation lies at the heart of cosmopolitan nationalism. In what follows, we explore the question: do the documents suggest that Global Britain represented an archetypical form of cosmopolitan nationalism, as might be assumed at first glance, and, if not, why not?

Our response hinges on four key observations after analysing the data, which we explore further in the sections below: first, although Global Britain is concerned primarily with developing connections with the outside world, the UK government wishes to do so 'at a distance' – these relations do not extend, for example, to encouraging inward migration. Furthermore, connections are primarily economic and political in nature. No mention is made of inward flows of (cultural) diversity, nor do we see much discussion of cultural 'reciprocity', nor the embracing of difference discussed by Hannerz (1990) within these discourses. Second, Global Britain (perhaps ironically) makes no reference to *existing* cultural diversity located *within* British society. As Vertovec (2006) argued nearly two decades ago, Britain is characterised by 'super-diversity'. He noted that London has been described as 'the most cosmopolitan place on earth,' reflecting the number and diversity of transnationally connected immigrants, and recalled the rhetoric found in the 'London 2012' Olympic Games bid, which made frequent use of the phrase 'the world in one city'. So, why does Global Britain find so little resonance with this sentiment, *vis-à-vis* Britain's cultural diversity? We consider this question below. Third, and specifically in relation to the Turing Scheme, the programme funds and promotes relatively short duration forms of travel abroad, all of which are 'outward' in type (unlike the reciprocal nature of its predecessor, the Erasmus+ scheme). There is no support (financial or other), under Turing, for an inward flow of students or academics from elsewhere in the world. And finally, the geographies represented in the documents by the term Global Britain are anything but *global*. On the contrary, these geographies reinforce pre-existing political and social ties with a relatively limited number of countries whilst trying to initiate some sort of trading relationship with a small number of additional ones. In short, and as we expand on below, in many respects the findings do not support the idea that Global Britain represents a form of cosmopolitan nationalism as its conceptualisation of 'the international' remains limited and its engagement with 'the local' overlooks pre-existing forms of local cultural diversity.

An 'outward facing' Global Britain

Our review of policy documents and media stories points squarely towards the 'outward-looking' nature of Global Britain and its primarily political and economic dimensions (and the neglect, thereby, of a cultural form of cosmopolitanism).³ This point is made explicitly within the blurb on the 'home page' of the collection of government documents setting out a vision for Global Britain:

Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage. (Document 13)

The then foreign secretary Dominic Raab, in a speech to parliament in January 2020, described the contemporary period as one of 'renewal': 'the government will engage in

a thorough and careful review of the UK's place in the world' (Document 14). This 'place in the world' is very much outward-orientated, as Boris Johnson in his famous pre-COVID-19 2020 speech at the Royal Navy College in Greenwich emphatically illustrated: 'We have the opportunity, we have the newly recaptured powers, we know where we want to go, and that is out into the world' (Document 11). Given the tenor of these mentions of Global Britain, it is perhaps unsurprising that the government's collection of documents on the 'vision' of Global Britain is quite limited in scope and focussed primarily on the Foreign Secretary and national security (see Table 1). The prime minister's speeches that are included emphasised either free trade, national security or both. References to cultural diversity were notable in their absence.

A further observation with regards to Global Britain's outward perspective relates to one mention, in a Cabinet Report in 2021 (Document 15), of Britain's 'large diaspora'. The mention is made almost in passing and nothing is elaborated on. We raise it here only because this serves to emphasise the absence of discussion of the number of individuals holding British passports living overseas (what could conceivably be called the 'British diaspora') and the ways in which they may be of potential importance to the UK. There is a significant literature on diaspora and how its value may be harnessed by the 'home' state in other (non-UK contexts): such as Ireland (Gilmartin, 2015), Turkey (Adamson, 2019) and China (Ho, 2018). This can include political 'value' (e.g. direct involvement in elections or, more likely, soft power strategies) and economic 'value' (e.g. remittances). Elsewhere (Brooks & Waters, 2021), we have written about the role international students may play in contemporary diaspora formation across several states (Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Singapore). It is notable, however, that academic work on the British diaspora, specifically, tends to be more *historical* in nature (e.g. in the United States, Tennenhouse, 2009, and Canada, Akenson, 1995), and less concerned with the experiences of British emigrants today. Here, a lack of academic engagement with the British diaspora overseas (although see, for example, Scott, 2006) reflects a general absence of government discourse on the diaspora (compared to other countries, some noted above, which take a great interest in their emigrant populations). The government largely fails to acknowledge that 'overseas populations' might *also be British*. In summary, the 'outward' facing nature of Global Britain is also largely limited to political and economic concerns and generally neglects (with the one, surprising exception noted) that the UK may have social or cultural interests overseas (by way of a substantial British diaspora⁴).

Acknowledging existing diversity?

Few documents acknowledge or celebrate the existing socio-cultural diversity within Great Britain. There is no sense that Global Britain denotes attempts to increase the UK's socio-cultural diversity. In an exception that stands out for being unusual, Baty (2016), in a blog for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, describes UK universities as 'flag-bearers for Global Britain'. In justifying this claim, he highlights, above all else, universities' 'international outlook', namely, high numbers of international students, international academics and international research partners and collaborations. This, he argues, is why a range of UK institutions find themselves so high up the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. This positivity – and celebration of UK

universities' welcoming of 'outsiders' and the immense value that this contributes – is generally absent from the policy documents we reviewed with respect to government statements on Global Britain. Instead, what we see is a more traditional form of nationalism, harking back to Gellner's (1983) famous *Nations and Nationalism*, wherein he describes nationalism as primarily about sharing a 'common culture'.

One exception to this was observable in Theresa May's 2018 speech at a Munich security conference. Here, within a speech concerned with national and global security, she makes an oblique reference to the UK's international diversity:

We are a global nation – enriching global prosperity through centuries of trade, through the talents of our people and by exchanging learning and culture with partners across the world. (Document 16).

Although not explicit, the reference to 'the talents of our people' and an 'exchange' of culture and learning shows a relationship of sorts between a diversely talented UK population and the vision of a 'global nation'. Like the fleeting reference to Britain's diaspora, this suggestion that the UK's 'diversity' is somehow valuable is an exception that only serves to underline that fact that the government rarely celebrates the internal multiculturalism of the nation-state.

Outward, not incoming: the Turing Scheme

One of the interesting differences between the Erasmus + and Turing mobility schemes is how they approach the question of reciprocity in relation to academic mobility. Erasmus + operated as an exchange scheme; in other words, universities would send students to institutions abroad and, in exchange, would accept (in principle) the same number of students back. Thus, Erasmus + encouraged 'cosmopolitanism' amongst both the mobile staff and students themselves but also within the receiving institutions and wider communities. Erasmus + related documents refer extensively to 'discovering' 'different cultures', developing 'intercultural dialogue' and the 'breaking down of prejudices and stereotypes': culture is mentioned repeatedly (European Commission, 2021). This would seem to reflect what Hannerz (1990) described as 'an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (p. 239).

In contrast, the Turing Scheme, launched in 2021 (Document 4), funds only outgoing mobility and is not, in principle, a programme of exchange. The flow is one-way. On one level, this supports the arguments made above; that Global Britain (of which Turing is a part) is profoundly outward facing and does nothing to recognise or increase the diversity of the population within the UK. That is not to say that the individuals embarking on study abroad through the scheme will not be building some sort of cosmopolitan sensibility. On a personal level, they most likely will. However, the lack of exchange element does suggest that Britain is not keen to engage in a 'cultural openness' (Hannerz, 1990) at a national level, characteristic of a cosmopolitan stance (in the sense that Hannerz elaborated it).

Circumscribed geographies of Global Britain

In this final empirical section of the paper, we reflect upon the geographies of 'Global Britain', notably their geographical reach and scope. In relation to the documents that

we have analysed, we can make a number of pertinent observations. First, there is a clear ‘clustering’ of countries when it comes to the articulation of Global Britain in relation to ‘national security’ – the government has been keen to identify ‘blocs’ and repeatedly make reference to its membership of these: NATO, the UN, the Euro-Atlantic region, and the Commonwealth (although Whitman, 2023, describes this as ‘selected’ Commonwealth countries – i.e. Australia, Canada and New Zealand – to this we would add India for the potential economic advantages such a reinvigorated relationship might garner). At the same time, individual countries are also consistently mentioned, and China is notable in this regard (viewed as both a political and economic ‘threat’ and potential trading partner). Interestingly, in terms of geography, Whitman (2023, n.p.) has made the following observations in relation to what he calls a post-Global Britain:

The contours of a post-Brexit UK foreign policy have been coming into sharper focus in the last six months under the Sunak led-government. The evidence for a ‘new normal’ in UK foreign policy practice is most marked in the move away from expansive rhetoric towards a new government narrative with a stress on serious-minded action alongside delivery of improved diplomatic relationships with neighbours.

Thus, countries within relatively close proximity (‘neighbours’) are seen to be important once again in a post-Global Britain era. What does all this imply for the notion of cosmopolitan nationalism? As we have discussed, cosmopolitan nationalism, as articulated recently by Yemini et al. (2023), is at least *in part* about creating future international workers – moulding young people to be competent actors on an international ‘global stage’ (although, as they argue, the reality is also more complicated, indicating a continuous tension between the global, national and local and between cosmopolitanism and monoculturalism). The discourse around Global Britain has had little, or nothing to say on this. It feels much more aligned to formulations of nationalism, characterised by geopolitics on the one hand, and economic prosperity (through free trade) on the other. The reference to specific countries and blocs of countries invokes a particular (and truncated) view of the ‘Global’ – the world divided into ‘rich’ nations (with whom trade should be sought) and security ‘threats’ (dealt with through hostile rhetoric and, notionally, foreign policies). This is not a Britain at ease with its place in the world, as discussed above; on the contrary, Global Britain reflected a heightened sense of uncertainty at a particular historical moment post-Brexit.

Conclusion

Global Britain has been, over the past decade, a ‘buzz word’ within UK politics. It began as a reaction to the imminent implementation of ‘Brexit’ – as a way of signalling that Britain was not, as a consequence, in danger of becoming politically isolated and economically vulnerable (as some pro-Europe commentators were suggesting). On the contrary, Global Britain was intended as a statement of strength and a vision of Britain’s future on a ‘global stage’. The reference to ‘global’ immediately implies some synergies with the increasingly popular notion of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ (Maxwell et al., 2020), and this is what we sought to explore in this paper: the extent to which Global Britain, as articulated by policy makers and within policy documents, encapsulated the essence of cosmopolitan nationalism, offering an ostensibly more positive vision for Britain’s framing of cultural difference than hitherto. We focussed primarily on the higher

education sector because it was unusual in its prolonged use of the term, even after this had ceased in other areas of policy.

We began by establishing how Global Britain has been used within policy and by policy makers. We noted a lack of clear meaning and the fact that it appeared to indicate (ironically) *flagging* confidence in areas of trade and security (in general, high level government speeches by the prime minister and foreign secretary made little or no reference to education). Furthermore, our analysis of the data suggests that Global Britain was much more akin to a more traditional notion of nationalism (after Gellner, 1983), and that most of the elements that we would associate with cosmopolitanism (the recognition of and embracing of cultural difference, for example) were simply absent from the discourses we encountered. The speeches and policy documents indicted an ‘outward facing’ notion, involving Britain ‘going out in the world’ rather than welcoming the world ‘in’. There was little recognition of the UK’s existing internal cultural diversity and the potential value of this to a ‘Global Britain’, nor the number of British citizens already living overseas (the British diaspora). Any mobility (such as with the Turing Scheme) was outward rather than incoming. And finally, we noted the limited geographies attached to the concept – where individual countries and regions were named, they were named repeatedly, suggesting a preoccupation with certain, circumscribed geographies at the expense of a truly *global* Britain.

Notes

1. The Turing Scheme funds short-term international mobility for UK students. It was introduced as a replacement for the Erasmus+ programme following the UK’s departure from the European Union. Until February 2024, when the Department for Education published new guidance for the scheme, Global Britain was highly prominent. In this new guidance, although Global Britain still features it has been dropped as a key objective.
2. We are aware that the kind of interpretative analysis that we have conducted is likely to be affected by our own positionality. We should note, therefore, that we are both scholars, based in the UK, who may bring a particular British perspective to the data. Nevertheless, in the article, we provided substantial quotations from the relevant documents, so that readers will be, in most cases, able to judge whether they agree with our analysis.
3. This does not contradict Turner’s (2019) assertion that the concept was deployed primarily to placate a domestic rather than international audience. It simply means that the discourse emphasised outward connections over inward diversity.
4. There are an estimated 5.5 million British citizens living abroad (BBC, no date).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Rachel Brooks  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8692-1673>

Johanna Waters  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4545-2495>

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