CES eBriefing

The Experience of Academic Mobility

by Irina Isaakyan

No. 01, October 2009

Throughout the world, universities try to attract the best academic scholars and students in order to compete effectively in the knowledge economy. In Europe, the European Commission is creating the European Research Area (ERA) in order to compete with the United States, as part of its strategy to create the most successful knowledge economy and knowledge society in the world. Within Europe, the UK government claims 'world class status' for some of its leading universities, while in Scotland the Scottish Government tries to retain the 'fresh talent' of international students and scholars. At all levels, policy for mobility tends to assume that people and ideas move without problems, but the research reported in this briefing suggests that mobility is not straightforward.

- The UK, including Scotland, attracts many mobile scholars – students and researchers - many of whom build academic careers here;
- Academic mobility is now promoted in policy texts in terms of economic benefits for mobile academics, but the less tangible benefits of living abroad and experiencing different cultures are not discussed;
- The experiences that academics and scholars from other countries have in a new situation are very important in their decision whether to stay or leave;
- Mobility brings gains and losses. People may gain in career terms, but they sometimes lose friendships or connections to cultural values that attracted them to academic work in the first place. Their lives involve a trade-off between their economic 'gains' and cultural 'losses';
- Economic benefits are important for more established academic migrants in Scotland, but younger academics are strongly influenced by the culture and social resources of their new environments, and mobility policy does not take sufficient account of this.

CENTRE *for* EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

A Research Centre within the COLLEGE *of* HUMANITIES *and* SOCIAL SCIENCE

Introduction: ERA and Mobility

One of the current policy aims of the European Commission is the creation of the European Research Area/ERA, attracting highly skilled and highly qualified people from all over the world (Musselin 2004). In this context academic, mobility is promoted as a positive development, and scholars and students are encouraged, through various programmes, to move from their own country to another to study or teach and research for a substantial period of time (Marginson & Sawir 2005: 297). Europe seeks to attract talented people from all over the globe, for example 17% of all doctoral candidates in the EU16 are citizens of third countries, the majority from China, Morocco and Algeria (Commission 2007).

The UK attracts more overseas students at doctoral level than any other country except the USA, and outnumbers other European countries such as Germany and France (HESA 2008). Within the UK Scotland seeks to attract and retain mobile scholars and students through its Fresh Talent Initiative (Cavanagh & Eirich 2008). Thus in 2006-2007, there were 15,870 overseas post-graduate students in Scotland. Their experiences here are obviously important in determining whether they stay. So too is any sense they may have of entering and participating in a shared space, that is open and welcoming to them, and that supports a reciprocal relationship between the mobile academic and the 'host' institution and society.

Policy Analysis: Economy and Culture

The Bologna Declaration originally stressed the idea of building a shared culture, saying that mobile academics should 'belong to common cultural spaces.' In this connection, the European Commission aims to attract researchers from the rest of the world to Europe through making Europe attractive for researchers who will be able to 'move and interact seamlessly, benefit from world-class infrastructures, work with excellent networks, and share, teach, value and use knowledge effectively for social, business and policy purposes' (Commission 2000: 8).

More recent policy texts stress economic objectives: there is an emphasis on increasing numbers and on infrastructure rather than discussion of the creation of a shared cultural space. Following the financial crisis of 2008, the Leuven Communiqué defines academic mobility as a means of economic recovery, outlining a number of new measures for improving the 'quality of mobility' but with a strong emphasis on the economic benefits (Commission 2009). This emphasis on economic recovery may rely too heavily on economic motivation as the key factor in academic mobility. Do mobile academics go 'where the economic gravity pulls them?' (Marginson & Sawir 2005: 297).

Questions and Data

The research summarized in this *Briefing* aimed to investigate the extent to which academic mobility is driven by different factors-cultural, social and economic. The questions explored included: (1) What factors facilitate mobile scholars' decisions to stay or to leave a particular context? (2) What do they feel that they gain and/or lose from their mobility? (3) To what extent do their 'gains' outweigh their 'losses'? (4) Are there differences in such perceptions among different groups of academic travellers?

The research reported here draws on the author's doctoral thesis which used narrative biographic methods to design and conduct in-depth interviews with 13 former Soviet academics aged between 45-70 who are now living and working in Scotland. These academics had also lived in various European countries during the past 20 years. These data are supplemented with recent material from semi-structured interviews with 13 doctoral students at an established University in Scotland. These students are aged between 26- and 35 and came to Scotland in 2006-2008 from China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Pakistan. They were asked about their reasons for moving to Scotland, issues related to their doctoral mobility, and future plans.

Gains

Having established themselves in Europe, the Soviet academic migrants have a very strong sense of 'gaining' competitive advantage as a result of their academic mobility. They undoubtedly appreciate their European salaries, the equipment provided (of paramount importance for physicists and biologists), working conditions (separate offices, personal computers and respect from the university administration), and the ability to plan their own careers (in terms of publications and conference contacts).

I had never before had any chance to work like this in Russia: to earn decent money for just doing academic work, without any jobs on the side. My salary in Germany and now in Scotland cannot even be compared with what I had been earning in Russia. Here academics can live like normal people and work in normal working conditions.

Here I feel like a god in my laser physics lab because I have everything a physicist needs: ultra-modern laser equipment, my own working space and complete isolation from the university administration. It is much easier to create here. And you don't have to pay anything special for this because this is not a luxury – this is the norm of European academic life.

Three to four times a year I go to the most prestigious conferences around Europe, where everyone knows me. There are no conference travel funding problems and no barriers to publication. It is all equally accessible to every scholar here.

It works like Murphy's Law: every new contact or publication increases your chances of another one. That is why here I feel more and more competitive every year, which never happened to me in Russia. In this sense, my European/Scottish life is a big economic gain.

The more recent arrivals – the doctoral students from non-European countries – also suggest that economic motives for mobility are important. They welcome the variety of opportunities for academic employment throughout the UK and Europe; the recent UK work permit initiatives; and the working conditions mentioned above. They also strongly emphasise the value of productive and highly professional relationships with their PhD supervisors.

Losses

At the same time, the informants' reflections on the cultural/social aspects of their academic lives in Scotland are not so positive. The ways in which the former Soviet respondents refer to the quality of their teaching and the communication of their research results are very strongly shaped by their experiences of a particular 'home' culture. So too is the way they think about their western colleagues and students:

My colleagues here are very nice people. But they are not my kindred spirits..

My everyday culture is completely Russian, and I think it affects my teaching style here.

I often want to say, 'This is a really bad essay'; whereas what they expect to hear is, 'This essay could be better'.

Harsh criticism of students and intolerance of their sloppy work are not allowed here. Yet without this, productive teaching and good, responsive learning are impossible.

I don't think I would ever become really European, British, or Scottish in this sense…because being European is more than just working in or moving around Europe. It is also about feeling it with your heart.

The former Soviet academics' perception of their mobility in Europe reveals strong tensions between its economic benefits and its cultural losses. They are mobile academics, at home in Europe, but certain elements of their identities as academics are rooted in their past. Their formation has shaped their cultural preferences and the ways in which they think about learning and teaching. That is why they continue to identify themselves as 'a Soviet scholar from Edinburgh' or 'a Russian academic working in Europe'. The doctoral students also provide insights into the complexity of mobility in ways that illustrate its social and knowledge-based dimensions, and their interrelation.

I am a cosmopolitan Chinese student living in Scotland. One may say that culture and everyday life are not as important as the PhD degree you are here for. But you need to settle these problems too – otherwise they affect your work.

In my opinion, it is extremely important for an intellectual to feel culturally and socially at home – that is, to be affiliated with his own people. I am not sure this is what I have found here.

Staying or Leaving?

These quotations, like much of the interview data in the study, suggest considerable tension between the economic and career benefits that accrue from mobility and the sense of accompanying social and cultural loss. In balancing these gains and losses in making the decision whether to stay or to leave, the Russian respondents are largely driven by economic concerns. They all opt to stay even though they lose their sense of being 'culturally and socially at home'. The younger respondents express this sense of loss even more strongly.

There is a big difference between where I would like to go after my PhD-the place where in my heart of hearts I would really like to be- and where I will actually end up for pragmatic concerns. I would like to settle somewhere in Italy or Morocco. But I think I will look for employment to the UK or Scandinavia.

There are some more strongly expressed sentiments about 'homeland', for example: *'I will not stay here. I am going to return to Pakistan to be among my people.'*

Implications

In this connection, some of the doctoral respondents complain about a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity from their host university and compare their experiences in Europe with those of their friends based in universities in the USA.

In Scotland it was very difficult for me to learn many things such as the academic skills and the academic culture that are demanded in Europe – not to mention European culture and communication, in general. That knowledge came with experience - hard experience, I must confess. It's a shame that I've been always eager to learn but it is not always clear how.

My close friend is a PhD student in the USA now. She is always telling me about how much guidance on American culture and learning requirements they can get from their International Students Office – either through International Student Advisors or through the peer support programme that every US university offers to foreign students and scholars. I envy her for having been provided with what seems to be much better access to mastering knowledge. In this sense, I feel less competitive.

Of course, this small scale study of doctoral students is not a reliable basis for suggestions for the improvement of institutional support for overseas PhD students. Indeed the context of HE in Scotland was acknowledged by the doctoral students as 'more supportive' than other European contexts or other contexts within the UK. These doctoral students, who had studied for Master's degrees in other European cities, stressed that while institutional support for international students may not be as well-developed as in America, that lack was well compensated for by the very good informal guidance about academic life and culture in Scotland that they received from their PhD supervisors.

Conclusion

Several issues arise from these findings that merit further exploration. One concerns the issue of what travels in conditions of academic mobility. People may move from place to place but not as easily as the policy texts suggest: academic migrants are shaped by their early experiences and these influence their approaches to learning and teaching in specific ways, which may not adjust easily to 'local' practices. Furthermore, it seems likely that even where academic mobility is strongly promoted by economic drivers, as in the case of the international doctoral students who are pursuing career advantage by coming to Europe or Scotland, there is still a need for attention to cultural and social aspects of mobility, so that academic cultures are more aware of their particular 'local' character, and more attentive to issues of 'translation' that help mobile students and academics to understand what is expected of them. More research is needed on what kind of knowledge travels; on the extent to which trans-national and flexible research identities are emerging; and on what can be done to support better interactions between academic migrants and their host institutions.

References

Cavanagh, L and Eirich, F. (2008) *Fresh Talent,* Edinburgh, Scottish Executive Social Research.

Commission of European Communities (2000) *Towards a European Research Area.*

Commission of European Communities (2007) *Researchers Coming into the EU.*

Commission of European Communities (2009) *The Leuven Communique.*

HESA. (2008) 'Numbers of international students at UK universities', *Guardian* (18.08.2008).

Isaakyan, I. (2008) *Russian Academic Emigrants (Unpublished PhD Thesis).* University of Edinburgh.

Marginson, S. and Sawir, E. (2005) 'Interrogating Global Flows in Higher Education', *Globalization, Societies and Education* 3(3): 281-309.

Musselin, C. (2004) 'Towards a European Academic Labour Market?', *Higher Education* 48: 55-78.

About this study

The study *'Academic Mobility and National Identity'* was funded through the ESRC Post-Doctoral Fellowship (PTA-026-27-2004). For more information, contact Dr Irina Isaakyan (Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh) at: Irina.Isaakyan@ed.ac.uk.

CES *Briefings*

CES *Briefings* are edited by Dr Cathy Howieson.

All *Briefings* can be downloaded from our website, free of charge. If hard copy or multiple copies are required please contact Carolyn Newton at the address below.

Centre *for* Educational Sociology
The University *of* Edinburgh
St John's Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ
Scotland

Telephone UK 0131 650 1000
or direct UK 0131 651 6238
Fax UK 0131 651 6239

Email CES@ed.ac.uk
http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk