

Navigating Academic Mobility within the EU: The Case of German Academics in the UK

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Introduction

The EU has a long tradition of supporting scientific mobility by establishing programs and initiatives to promote scientific exchange and by putting mobility and cooperation of researchers as a key issue within the European Research Area (Marimon, Lietaert, and Grigolo 2009; Ivancheva and Gourova 2011; Leemann 2018). Operating within the legal framework of the EU, and in particular the Freedom of Movement and recognition of qualifications (Heinz and Ward-Warmedinger 2006; Favell 2008, 2013; Koikkalainen 2014; Young, Humphrey, and Rafferty, 2014; Recchi 2015) contributes to academic mobility within the EU and to the internationalization of higher education.

With mobility becoming a more common experience among academics, scholars put forward questions regarding motivations, migratory experiences, and outcomes of such mobility. According to empirical research, career development is one of the main reasons for pursuing academic mobility (Guthrie et al. 2017; Kim 2017). A common narrative portrays academic mobility as a marker of career success, an integral part in obtaining permanent and tenure track positions, and – in some cases – a precondition for an academic career (Ackers 2005; Kim 2009; Guthrie et al. 2017; Herschberg, Benschop, and van den Brink 2018, Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2020). Other research shows that such mobility provides an opportunity to gain new knowledge and experience (Enders and Musselin 2008; Bauder, Hannan, and Lujan 2017; Cañibano et al. 2020) or to work for a specific institution or research team (Ivancheva and Gourova 2011; Gargiulo and Carletti, 2014). However, in addition to career-related factors, academic mobility might be facilitated by personal motivations or preferences. Richardson (2012) found that for some academics, mobility is associated with the desire to experience a new culture, or to have their children exposed to new cultures.

Critical research suggests examining academic mobility within the wider context of academic labor market. Accordingly, due to the neoliberalization of universities, reliance on external funding, and a growing number of project-based research, academics find themselves in precarious situations, such as lack of financial support, the prevalence of fixed-term contacts, and limited opportunities for promotion (Åkerlind 2005; Cantwell 2009, 2011; Ylijoki 2016; Herschberg et al. 2018). As a result, academic mobility can be viewed not as a personal preference, but rather as a way to manage these structural shortfalls of the academic labor

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market. Shortage of permanent positions in the country of origin has been long identified as one of the facilitators of mobility (Musselin 2004; Ackers 2005, 2008). EU-level research shows that the number of post-docs that are employed in temporary contracts without prospects for permanent positions is only increasing (Åkerlind 2005; Cantwell 2009). Taking into account these developments, Ackers (2005) and Karaulova (2016) suggest using the term “forced mobility” to highlight the imposed nature of mobility among academics. I seek to contribute to this literature through further examination of academic mobility within the spectrum of voluntary (personal-preference) and involuntary (necessary) mobility in the context of the specific case of German academics in the UK.

When examining the overall experience of mobile academics, scholars demonstrate how gender and marital status may present additional challenges (Ackers 2004; Vohlídalová 2014; Başak and Van Mol 2017; Toader and Dahinden 2018; Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2020). In her research, Henderson and Moreau (2020) found that “family responsibility” — namely, providing care to family members — has a crucial impact on migratory experiences of academics. She suggests that using the framework of care helps us explain gender inequality in the mobility of academics and highlight the challenges associated with it. In a similar manner, in their empirical research, Leemann (2018) and Toader and Dahinden (2018) demonstrate the challenges in combining academic mobility with responsibilities of family life, and how mobility can lead to a financial and psychological burden. In this paper, I seek to add to this discussion and document the mechanisms through which family obligations impact experiences of mobile academics.

The review of the literature brings to light the importance of emotions in migration. In their book *Mobility Turn*, Elliott and Urry (2010) tackle some of the myths of mobility, suggesting that a mobile lifestyle entails high levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional hardship. Indeed, migration literature has long demonstrated that migration can be a destabilizing endeavor (Svašek, and Skrbiš 2007; Skrbiš 2008; Svašek 2010). Accordingly, relocating to a new country, adjusting to a new culture, reorganizing family life, and providing transnational care to the family left behind all contribute to emotional challenges (Ryan 2008; Butcher 2010; Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh 2008; Ryan and Sales 2013; Baldassar et al. 2014). By incorporating emotions into a discussion on mobile academics, I seek to contribute to our understating of the factors that are particularly emotionally challenging.

Finally, using a specific case of German academics in the UK allows interrogating the impact of a particular national context on migration experience. The complex historical relationship between Germany and the UK is what makes this case particularly intriguing. The two countries have a rich history strengthened by trade, migration, and intermarriage of royals, and weakened by conflicting political agendas and wars (Panayi 1995; Manz, Beerbühl and Davis 2007; Steinert and Weber-Newth 2008; Duxbury-Neumann 2017). Most recently, and until Brexit, the two countries operated within the framework of the EU, which allowed visa-free migration of Germans to the UK. Despite being one of the top destinations for German academics (BMF 2015, 2019) and their large number within the British academia, motivations and migratory experiences of German academics in the UK remain under-researched. I seek to address this gap and contribute to the growing body of literature on the experiences of foreign academics in the UK (Åkerlind 2005; Cantwell 2009, 2011; Kim 2009, 2017; Antoschuk 2019; Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2020; Pustelnikovaite 2021).

Data and Methods

The paper draws on data from a qualitative study of 35 in-depth interviews with German academics in the UK conducted during 2015-2016. In this study, a “German” refers to a national who spent most socialization years and obtained a degree in Germany and relocated following a job offer. To reach the target population, I posted adverts on university mailing lists and German societies’ sites, contacted individuals directly, and attended German society meetings. Using a variety of points of entry, I was able to interview 35 participants, of whom 14 were female and 21 were male. The group varies in the field of expertise and consists of five language tutors, nine post-docs, seven lecturers, eight associate professors, and six professors. At the time of relocation, the average age of participants was the mid-30s, 20 of the participants were married and ten in a relationship, five were single. They had spent five years on average in the country.

Interviews were organized around the following topics: life before the relocation, reasons to leave and relocate to the UK, relocation practices, current situation, and future plans. Such a discussion examined migration not as an isolated event, but as a project in the context of the life course. I have conducted, coded, and analyzed all the interviews, and used Nvivo to simplify the organization of the data. Coding the interviews involved re-reading each transcript several times. The first reading was based on a preliminary coding scheme informed by the literature; themes that did not fit were coded separately. This flexible strategy helped to identify themes that were not considered at the beginning of the project, such as the role of transnational care. During the second and third cycles of reading, preliminary codes were subdivided into more specific codes, while new codes were organized into code clusters and themes. Reconstructing the data helped to examine the relationship between and within codes, and identify themes and subthemes. Each cycle was complemented with a literature review which was extended to include new themes uncovered in the analysis and helped to identify unique aspects and contributions of this research to the existing body of knowledge.

Between Voluntary and Necessary Move

“Because of the EU, it was easy to move here. It felt so natural.” Such accounts were mentioned time and again during the interviews and were oftentimes the opening sentence to the discussion of how participants came to the UK. Such storylines portrayed migratory decisions as a personal preference, voluntary decision, and depicted mobility as cost-free, frictionless, natural and un-bureaucratic. The legal framework of the EU, and in particular the Freedom of Movement were mentioned as the main factors in simplifying mobility and employability in the UK. However, incorporating the wider historical approach, and in particular, the role of Germany within the EU, can add to our understanding. Germany was one of the core countries that contributed to the development of contemporary EU institutions, and one of the first countries to participate in the Freedom of Movement. Furthermore, German citizens, especially the highly skilled, are among the most mobile EU citizens within the EU (Eurobarometer 2018). Growing up in such an environment may have led some of my participants to internalize intra-EU mobility and hence view it as a voluntary, cost-free, natural, and rewarding experience.

All the participants in the sample relocated following a job offer from in the UK, which reflected their career stage and did not need to undergo additional training. Andreas, a researcher in his late-30s, was typical of many participants, who portrayed his relocation as an easy decision. While he did not intend to leave Germany, he accidentally came across an advert for the position

and because the job had matched his profile and research interest so well, he decided to apply. Once offered the position, he terminated his contract in Germany and moved to the UK:

I came across this job posting for this project here. It matched my profile so well that I basically had to try and apply. I got the job and I could postpone the starting date a little bit (Andreas).

In a similar manner to Andreas, some participants articulated their mobility in terms of accidental opportunity, namely responding to a job advert or a job offer circulated via professional networks. Access to these professional networks was oftentimes associated with previous academic mobility and seemed to simplify the transition between labor markets. All of the participants had some experience of short-term academic mobility such as conferences and research visits. Consider the case of Bernhard, a lecturer in his early-30s. During his Ph.D., he attended a conference in Britain and here he met his future employer:

I met people from this university at conferences, they contacted me about whether I wanted to apply for a post-doc. That was in February, and in October I started (Bernhard).

Such accounts were typical among both male and female participants, and are exemplary in regard to how previous mobility, and established professional networks facilitated academic mobility. Such data stands in line with what was observed by other scholars (Richardson, McKenna, and Dickie 2014; Herschberg et al. 2018; Antoschyuk 2019) who have long noticed the impact of social networks on job seeking and career attainment abroad.

Mobility of academics, as such, can be viewed as normalization of professional life (Ackers 2005; Kim 2009; Cantwell 2011). However, a deeper examination of participants' motivations showed that many of the stories were more complex moving on the spectrum from a voluntary accidental decision towards a necessity. In some cases, mobility was a necessity, imposed by employment structure and prerequisite for career success. Angelika was one of those participants who linked academic mobility to career development. A researcher in her late-20s, Angelika was intentionally searching for a post-doc abroad even though it meant she would be leaving her partner in Germany and engaging in a long-distance relationship for a while. She moved to Oxbridge following a three-year post-doc:

First of all, I wanted to go abroad. Going abroad means broaden your horizons. But the second reason is if you want to develop a career in academia you should have international experience. You want to be good in your system, in your field, but also need to understand how it compares to other systems (Angelika).

This rich quote highlights the complex web of factors that impact academic mobility: desire for international experience as well as career development tactics. For Angelika and a few others, mobility was not an accidental event, but a thought-through, rational decision, necessary for an academic career both in Germany and elsewhere. Several studies in Germany found that the desire for international experience was the main motivator for academic mobility (Stahl, Miller, and Tung 2002; Ognyanova et al. 2014; Bauder et al. 2017). In their comparative study, Bauder

and colleagues (2017) found that academics in Germany or academics of German origin put a higher value on international experience than their colleagues from other countries. While this evidence is anecdotal, the benefit of temporary mobility for academics has some empirical support from the German national data. Accordingly, highly skilled, including academics, who have worked abroad for several years comprise the largest group of returnees and enjoy higher returns in the labor market (Ette and Sauer 2010; Seidler, Mau and Verwiebe 2010; Pantenburg et al. 2018; BMF 2019).

While participants like Angelica considered academic mobility as an investment, others perceived it as a way to escape the unfavorable conditions of the German academic labor market. Alex, a lecturer in his mid-30s put it this way: “Everybody knows that the academic job market in Germany is an absolute catastrophe.” The main dissatisfaction stems from the hierarchical nature of German academia and the impact of interpersonal relations on professorial appointments. Those who did not have a strong personal affiliation or those who were uninterested in participating in the complex webs of intradepartmental relationships, saw academic mobility as a necessity, the only way of becoming a team leader or a professor. While Remhof (2008) identified the “road to professorship” among the main reasons for the emigration of German academics back in 2008, I find that this aspect is still relevant and may partially explain why some German academics pursue academic mobility.

For early-career academics, dissatisfaction with the German system was associated with an absence of early-career positions, high teaching load, lack of autonomy, and prevalence of fixed-term contracts. For those participants in my sample, academic mobility was seen as a necessity, a way to bypass fixed-term contracts imposed by the system. Echoing these remarks is Mathias, a lecturer in his mid-30s. While he initially wanted to stay in Germany, the lack of permanent positions has led him to seek employment elsewhere. As a result, he moved to the UK:

In Germany, between PhD and full professor position there are no permanent positions. Basically, you do a PhD with 27 and you do not have any guarantee that you will have a permanent position before you are 40. I decided I would try the UK. The UK system is different, as an academic you can start at a lower level as a lecturer; this position is already permanent and quite independent (Mathias).

In their narratives, Mathias and others spoke about mobility as a necessity, a way to reshape employment and improve working conditions, rather than a voluntary decision associated with international experience. Observing how German researchers used academic mobility as a way to mitigate lack of professional opportunities was also found in other studies; Knerr (2007), Remhof (2008), and more recently Pantenburg and colleagues (2018), showed that dissatisfaction with overall working conditions and blocking careers in Germany was among the reasons for academics and physicians to leave the country.

According to my analysis, however, a permanent contract provided not only financial security, but also a sense of empowerment, freedom, and control, as well security for family life. For some academics in my sample, years of working under fixed-term contracts have interfered with their desire to start a family, raise children, and buy property. Theo’s account is exemplary in this regard. Before relocating to London, Theo, a professor in his mid-40s, had a six-year fixed-term

contract where he worked as a team leader. Despite having a very productive career, once his contract ran out, he had no option to renew it or stay in the same institution. The necessity to move again together with his desire to start a family had led him to prioritize a permanent contract. As he could not find a position in Germany, once he obtained it in the UK, he moved:

Because it is difficult to have this insecurity. Before you have a permanent position, you are under the pressure all the time that you might have to move to another city or to another country. This insecurity makes it very difficult to have kids. The security is for family, if you want to buy a house for example, you need a position where you can rely on a job for long-term, otherwise you don't get a loan (Theo).

Theo's account provides a complex insight into the consequences of fixed-term employment such as financial insecurity and delay in family formation and childbearing. For participants, like Theo, engaging in academic mobility not only had a clear career justification, but also a personal one as it provided a more secure environment for family life. While various bodies of literature show the negative impact of temporariness of employment on financial well-being of academics (Åkerlind 2005; Cantwell 2009, 2011; Giorgi and Raffini 2015; Carrozza, Giorgi, and Raffini 2017; Herschberg et al. 2018), my findings demonstrate the impact of short-term employment on a life course, such as postponing family formation and childbearing.

Being German in the British Academic System

Examination of the overall experiences of German academics in the British academic labor market has revealed a common trait: some participants have experienced occasional favoritism and positive stereotyping at the workplace. Claus, a post-doc researcher in his early-30s, noted the influence of his nationality on the workplace dynamics:

I think a lot of the discrimination you get is positive: when people have the prejudice that you are hardworking, honest and punctual it's kind of boring but it's actually quite good. It's better than the stereotypes of being lazy and criminal. This has happened tons and tons (Claus).

Similar accounts of systemic advantage and favoritism within British systems was also registered by Wlasny's (2020) in her study on the everyday experiences of German nationals living in England. This relatively privileged position of German academics in the British labor market was accentuated in the case of dual-career academic couples of mixed nationalities. To illustrate the topic, consider the case of Sebastian. Sebastian, a lecturer in his late-30s, was offered a position in London where he relocated together with his wife, Philippa. Although they are both early-career academics, Sebastian, received his education in Germany, while Philippa obtained her degree in Portugal. During the interview, Sebastian reflected on the effect of gender and nationality on their mobility:

It's true that a man has more opportunities, and it's also true that a German academic is better considered than a Portuguese academic. Just positive prejudice or negative, it's my feeling (Sebastian).

The topic of inequality, inclusion and exclusion of some categories of mobile academics is not new. In a wider context, scholars argue that inequality among mobile academics is due to old hierarchies of national institutions and historical systems of prejudices (Başak and Van Mol 2017; Kim 2017). Understanding such phenomenon of systemic advantage for German academics can benefit from applying national and historical lenses. Accordingly, until the 20th century, German emigrants enjoyed a relatively positive image with a specific admiration for German science and scientists (Ellis and Panayi 1994; Manz et al. 2007; Duxbury-Neumann 2017). Furthermore, despite the complex relations in the wake of the World Wars, historical analysis of official documents demonstrates a clear preference for German and Scandinavian foreign workers in the UK since the 40s (Steinert and Weber-Newth 2008; Salt 2009). Rare newspaper reports that focus explicitly on German migrants describe them as well integrated and occupying highly skilled positions. Taking into account these historical developments as well as positive media coverage of the German emigrants may partially explain the systemic advantage experienced by some of German academics in my sample.

Academic Mobility from a Family Context

One of the main findings of my study is documenting how participants reconciled their family responsibility and obligations with academic mobility. Indeed, migration doesn't take place in a social vacuum. It takes place within a wider social web of partners, children, core and extended family, and the impact on these relationships may be both emotionally and financially challenging. In my sample, transnational care namely addressing responsibilities towards parents in Germany was mentioned oftentimes. In her interview, Alissa, a lecturer in her late 20s, spoke at length about her experience. Alissa was offered a teaching job at Oxbridge; however, a few months after the relocation, her mother suddenly passed away. She tried to help her father and commuted between the countries weekly for a period of six months. Such travel interfered with her performance at work, and led to adverse emotional and financial consequences:

It is very difficult to talk about Oxbridge as an experience. It was connected [to the death of my mother] and my father sold the house and we sort of lost our father because he found a new partner (Alissa).

Allissa's account was not unique or uncommon both among male and female participants, as many of the participants had elderly parents and had to address family emergencies. In a few cases, managing these obligations resulted in severe emotional stress, feelings of guilt due to a gap between what they were able to do under these circumstances and what was expected of them. In a similar manner to Alissa, several participants had to engage in extensive travelling which has led to financial burdens due to relatively modest salaries. Following the analysis, I suggest that more attention needs to be given to the role of transnational care and its impact on experiences of mobile academics.

Although the relocation within the EU provided legal opportunity to relocate together with partners and ensured that partners had similar rights, the reality of post-migration was more complex. Academics who relocated together with their partners faced another set of challenges, primarily associated with reconstructing the accompanying partner's social and professional life. Irrespective of the gender and professional portfolio of the accompanying partner, finding employment was both financially and emotionally challenging. The pattern is illustrated by the

case of Samuel and Sabine, both lecturers in their mid-40s. The couple relocated to London after Samuel was offered a position. Seeing Samuel's fast and seemingly frictionless transition between the German and British academic labor markets, Sabine decided to terminate her contract in Germany. Despite having similar qualifications and employment history, it took Sabine almost two years to find a job:

We were very naïve in terms of thinking that there are so many opportunities and she is going to wander into the next office and get a job offer. But [there] were so many jobs and so much competition that she really struggled. She really did struggle (Samuel).

The experience of Samuel and Sabine brings the importance of emotions in academic mobility to light. While the majority experienced a relatively easy transition employment-wise, the impact of mobility on the wider social and family context was more complicated and problematic at times. As a result, anxiety, stress, and emotional challenges were common migratory experiences for both male and female participants. Challenges in combining academic mobility and family life have been addressed by some scholars (Vohlídalová 2014; Leemann 2018; Toader and Dahinden 2018). However, more attention should be paid to the topic in order to fully understand the emotional aspect of academic mobility.

Migratory experiences of the academics with children were even more complex. In this study, a third of participants had at least one child, predominantly toddlers and/or pre-school age, and all except one have moved together with their children. Participants with older children have inquired about the school system and have secured a place in a school of their preference prior to the move. However, those who relocated with younger children reported to have done little research before the relocation and found rearranging their child's life to be unexpectedly challenging. The most common challenges encountered were lack of familiarity with the local school systems and costs of nurseries and pre-school facilities. These concerns were echoed by Jens, a professor in his mid-40s, who moved to the UK with his wife and a child. Like many others, he attributed the lack of research on schooling to the assumed similarity between the British and German systems, common European history, and the perceived prestige of the British education system. Upon reflecting on the point, Jens acknowledged that knowing about this difference would have altered his relocation strategies and dwelling preference:

I think we should've discussed schooling. If you come from Germany, you take for granted good schools. And here, you have to make sure you're in the right neighborhood. We chose the place to live purely on logistical reasons, like how close it is to the center, and did not consider schooling. We should have. We didn't know (Jens).

The growing research examines the influence of having children on migration (Bailey Blake, and Cooke 2004; Ryan and Sales 2013; Ryan and Mulholand 2014). However, research on the role of children in mobility of academics is still relatively scarce (Vohlídalová 2014, Henderson and Moreau 2020). My analysis contributes to this literature and shows that incorporating the wider family context of parents, partners, and children provides a better understanding of the spectrum of migratory experiences of mobile academics.

Brexit - Unexpected challenges

Although many participants have initially chosen to relocate within the EU to minimize the costs associated with legal barriers, they found themselves in the exact situation they had tried to avoid due to Brexit. Namely, insecurity over their legal and social status as well as labor rights. Unexpected events such as Brexit remind us that migration takes place within a specific national context and shows how fragile migration systems can be.

For many German participants, ensuring access to their pension deposits in the UK after they leave the country was the most common concern associated with Brexit. This was the case for both those who came for short-term employment as well as those who spent several years in the country. Steffan, a researcher in his late-30s, moved to the UK a few years ago with his girlfriend, and although both were employed, he was not sure if they would stay for longer. However, when reflecting on future mobility he expressed his concern about how Brexit and pension schemes might impact his decision to stay or leave:

Again, the conditions are what scared us the most. My pension was essentially made in the UK — we do not know how the negotiations are going to develop (Steffan).

Oftentimes, the discussion of Brexit involved an emotional response articulated in terms of frustration and feeling unwelcome. Incorporating a historical and national lens helps to understand the observed emotional response. Indeed, growing up in Germany and enjoying intra-EU mobility for years have resulted in internalization of mobility, and collision between these experiences and opinions and the anti-EU sentiments expressed in Britain has led to this response. Mark, a professor in his early-40s, was one of such participants. After having several short-term contracts in Germany, he was happy to find permanent employment in the UK. Originally, he intended to stay in the UK until retirement, and as a result, he moved together with his girlfriend and planned to start a family. However, Brexit has interfered with his plan and left him frustrated and insecure about his future:

It was really meant to be until retirement. Brexit can be frustrating for foreigners and adds to insecurities. We are not the biggest fans of the UK politics and that is why we would also accept something back in Germany or Switzerland (Mark).

Similar to Mark, other participants have contemplated returning to Germany or relocating elsewhere earlier than anticipated. Such findings stand in line with other research on Brexit (Ryan 2015; Lulle, Moroşanu, and King 2018; D'Angelo and Kofman 2018; Owen 2018; McCarthy 2019). However, according to my analysis, such an opinion was prevalent among those who arrived more recently, while those participants who spent years in the country, had enrolled children in school, or had employed partners, were more hesitant. Overall, this analysis highlights the complexities of response to Brexit. For instance, working at well-renowned universities, such as Oxbridge, and securing permanent contracts might outweigh the negative impact of Brexit for some academics. For others, however, legal preconditions and financial requirements associated with it, insecurity over pension as well as anti-EU sentiments reduce the attractiveness of the UK academic system and may redirect their migratory plans.

Conclusion

Using data from a qualitative study of German academics in the UK, I aimed to interrogate and document the motivations and migratory experience of mobile academics. According to the analysis while some participants articulated mobility as a voluntary decision, others saw it as a necessity, a way to overcome lack of professional opportunities and dissatisfaction with the German academic labor market. Following relocation, I found that many have enjoyed systemic advantages and a privileged position within the British labor market. This phenomenon can be attributed to historical relationships between the two countries and shows how the national context impacts systems of inclusion and exclusion of academics within the local labor market. However, even in the case of a seemingly frictionless transition between the two academic labor markets, participants had to manage stressful situations, family-related responsibilities and address unexpected challenges. By incorporating the wider context, I demonstrate the costs and challenges as well as the emotional burdens associated with pursuing academic mobility. For example, managing emergencies in Germany, securing employment of accompanying partners and childcare posed additional challenges for mobile academics. Finally, unexpected events like Brexit also contributed to stress and added insecurity about the future.

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