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Academic Brexodus? Brexit and the dynamics of mobility and immobility among the precarious research workforce

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ABSTRACT

The article contributes to the emerging literature on the intersection of academic mobility and precarity by examining the impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum result on the mobility and immobility projects of migrant academics on temporary contracts. We draw on 22 interviews conducted with early-career researchers in the UK and Switzerland. We examine how the Brexit process threatened participants' sense of citizenship and belonging, heightening their sense of vulnerability both as migrants and as temporary workers, sometimes making immobility the only viable option. We show how it made visible hidden hierarchies and fault lines, prompting unequal strategies as researchers struggled to maintain their prerogatives as members of their communities. Passport privilege and the 'good migrant' figure emerged as central to these individualised strategies. The article challenges the framing of academic mobility as a natural and beneficial career move for early-career researchers grappling with the added uncertainties caused by Brexit.

Introduction

In June 2016, the results of the UK's referendum on EU membership were announced with a victory for the Leave campaign. The impact of the country's exit from the EU – a process known as 'Brexit' – was a matter of concern for its higher education (HE) sector, due to its reliance on EU funding and international students and staff (Courtois and Veiga 2020). At the time, a flurry of media articles emphasised the risk of an 'academic Brexodus' – a mass exodus of European academics leaving the UK for greener pastures.[1] Often peppered with phrases like 'science talent', 'brightest minds' or 'young and brightest', sometimes showcasing the achievements of departing 'star' researchers, by and large these articles resonated with the 'good migrant' discourse (Cranston 2017) and conjured up the image of the successful, internationally recognised academic, who is free to relocate at will. By suggesting academics can pick and choose jobs and move freely across borders, the 'academic Brexodus' discourse also ignored the congestion of the academic job market, and the fact that some EU countries have traditionally exported, rather than imported academics (Musselin 2004), with no sign

of this changing post-Brexit. While at the time of the referendum, half of research-only staff in UK HE were foreign nationals (UUK 2018, 19), their fate post-Brexit drew relatively little media or scholarly attention. Similarly, little was written about how Brexit would affect UK-passport holders working as contract researchers abroad. How were migrant academics on temporary contracts affected by the Brexit announcement? In what ways does Brexit reconfigure the intersection between precarity and mobility?

The paper is based on two sets of semi-directed interviews with migrant academics on short-term research contracts: one set with mainly EU, non-UK citizens in the UK, and one set with UK citizens working in Switzerland. We draw on the concepts of probationary citizenship and non-citizenship (Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier 2020; O'Keefe and Courtois 2019) as a useful framework to capture the precarious positions of those excluded from full academic membership, at a time when these positions are further destabilised by the Brexit announcement. We examine how Brexit affects their geographical and professional imaginaries and disrupts the fragile economy of hope that underpins their (im)mobility decisions. In particular, we argue that by threatening the privileges associated with EU membership and citizenship, Brexit weakens the foundations of their (probationary) academic citizenship; reveals hidden hierarchies and fault lines; prompts strategies of re-composition of positional advantage that rely on using or re-creating a form of passport privilege; and sometimes makes immobility the safer, or only viable option.

Locating the study within two national settings (rather than in an abstract transnational space) allows us to take into consideration the notions of space, home and belonging; it also emphasises the impact of Brexit both within and beyond the UK academic labour market. The article thus contributes to the burgeoning literature on the intersection of precarity and mobility in academia (e.g. Ivancheva 2015; Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins 2019; Schaer 2021; Sautier 2021) with particular reference to the impact of Brexit on (im)mobility projects. Now that the sector faces another crisis in the shape of the Covid-19 pandemic – with many workers on insecure contracts losing their jobs and facing diminished employment prospects (Kınıkoğlu and Can 2021) – it is even more urgent to question the framing of international mobility as fluid and as an inherent component of early academic careers; and to resist its normalisation as a way to manage employment precarity in academia.

The first section examines relevant themes in the literature on international academic mobility and how it intersects with academic precarity; before introducing the research. Next, we present the different themes that emerged from our analysis: Firstly, the (uneven) emergence of new borders and the questioning of a privileged relationship to mobility; secondly, its imbrication with employment precarity in academia and researchers' emerging strategies; and lastly, the shrinking of space and paralysing – as opposed to catalysing – effect of Brexit on mobility and career projects.

Academic mobility: between career progression and precarity

In EU policy, the mobility of researchers is framed as central to skill development and regional economic competitiveness (European Commission 2012). It is routinely conflated with the idea of 'excellence' (Ackers 2008) and generally considered an 'unconditional good' (Morley et al. 2018), believed to strengthen international collaborations and the overall quality of scientific production – itself understood as borderless and universal. In some European countries and disciplinary fields, international experience appears as an explicit

criterion to formally evaluate applicants (Sautier 2021). Across Europe, early career researchers (ERCs) are increasingly encouraged to engage in international mobility as a strategy of capital accumulation, with the UK among the most beneficial destinations (Pásztor 2015).

A recent body of research has questioned this understanding of academic mobility as a free, individual choice and as an equal and universally beneficial phenomenon. These studies tend to depart from a view of academic mobility as a dimension of HE internationalisation to consider it instead from the perspective of labour and migration processes (Bauder 2015). As conceptualised through the figure of the 'geoccasional worker' (Sautier 2021), the international mobility of ERCs can be analysed as a consequence of degraded employment conditions, forcing precarious academics to hop from one short-term contract to another within and across national borders.

The casualisation of academic labour under neoliberal regimes has led to a proliferation of temporary posts, some of which are extremely precarious (e.g. low-pay, zero-hour contracts), while permanent positions have become scarce in most countries (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015). Post-doctoral positions are relatively privileged when compared to zero-hour teaching work for instance; a number of them are full-time, salaried, and paid a living wage. However, they are commonly characterised by discontinuous employment and diminishing prospects, with the risk of getting trapped in long-term employment precarity. These trends and their impact on well-being and material security have been documented in both the UK (e.g. Loveday 2018) and Switzerland (Bataille and Sautier 2019).

In this context, Musselin (2004) characterises academic mobility as 'accidental' rather than strategic, and prompted by the specificities of local labour markets. For Ackers (2008), it is 'forced' on workers by employment precarity as well as the normative expectation of international experience. Recent initiatives, like the Critical Academic Mobilities Approach (CAMA) (Henderson 2019), offer to consolidate critical analyses of academic mobility by focusing on mobile subjectivities, individual experiences and power; and an emerging body of literature highlights the subjective experiences of migrant academics, showing how the demand to be mobile ignores notions of local attachment, investment and relationships and adds further layers of instability to ERCs' experience of precarious employment (e.g. Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins 2019).

Further, the career benefits of international mobility are unequally distributed. In some contexts, migrant academics are likely to remain stuck in short-term research positions (Khattab and Fenton 2016). They may find themselves marginalised socially and professionally in their new country (Kim 2017) or side-lined in their countries of origin where their international experience may not be valued (Wang 2020). Not all origins and destinations are equal: Scholars from 'dominant' systems, such as the US, UK or Germany, enjoy better prospects than those from peripheral countries (Bauder, Lujan, and Hannan 2018). Some national origins are particularly stigmatised within the academy (Morley et al. 2018) and there is ample evidence of discrimination against non-white academics, with black women particularly underrepresented and marginalised in the sector (Stockfelt 2018). Thus, the intersection of race, gender, and citizenship/migrant status is problematic (Bhopal and Chapman 2019; Sukarieh and Tannock 2019); and academic migration tends to amplify the privilege of senior, white, Anglo-Saxon male academics while reproducing gendered and racialised patterns of inequality (Sang and Calvard 2019).

Academic mobility is further problematised by works that focus on 'stickiness' (e.g. Chou 2021). Pustelnikovaite (2021) shows how migrant academics get 'stuck' in the UK, not only

because of children's schooling, mortgages and pensions, but also because their experience and achievements in the UK are not exportable to other HE systems. Thinking in terms of structural hierarchies also makes evident how mobility is shaped and constrained by classed (Crew 2020; Xu 2020), racialised (Abdellatif 2021) and gendered obstacles (Schaer, Dahinden, and Toader 2017; Sautier 2021). In addition, academia produces its own status hierarchies – which largely mirror these structural inequalities. Paye (2015) notes that only those in the top tier of the UK academic workforce (the 'stars') are able to negotiate higher salaries and relocate at will nationally or internationally. The middle tier (non-star permanent staff) and in particular, the lower tier (precarious academics), do not have access to this privileged form of mobility and face additional obstacles to extract themselves from unsatisfactory working or living conditions.

The emerging literature on the impact of Brexit further underscores the relative vulnerability of migrant academics and the complexity of mobility decisions in this context. On the one hand, as migrant workers, their ability to maintain a family unit and relationships of care post-Brexit is uncertain (Kilkey 2017). They may become more acutely aware of, or suffer directly from racism and xenophobia in the UK (Benson and Lewis 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019). Bulgarian and Romanian citizens, already discriminated against in the labour market, may feel particularly vulnerable (Bejan 2019). On the other hand, decisions to leave depend on complex factors including awareness of one's rights, eligibility for settled status or naturalisation, in addition to specific family and professional circumstances. For example, those with stable jobs and relationships may seek to formalise their ties to the UK; while others in more precarious circumstances may accelerate a departure that they had already been considering (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017; Lulle et al. 2019). Similarly, British citizens living in other European countries may feel threatened or at least unsettled in their sense of 'home' (Miller 2019), experience feelings of dislocation and shame as a result of Brexit (Higgins 2019), and strive to reposition themselves as European citizens (Benson 2020).

Conceptual framework

Our focus is on the impact of the Brexit announcement on migrant academics on temporary contracts in the UK and Switzerland. In the same way as Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins (2019), we see migrant academics as more than 'heads-on-a-stick' and seek to explore the multiple dimensions of their experiences as migrants, scientists, and individuals embedded in places and relationships. Following Sang and Calvard (2019), we use the terms 'migrant academics' rather than 'internationally mobile academics' to reflect this emphasis. We also include doctoral candidates under this label, acknowledging their role as research workers and producers of knowledge.

The concept of academic citizenship, borrowed from migration studies (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascarenas 2012), has been used to describe the marginality, downgraded working conditions and lack of rights of the 'probationary', 'second-class' or even 'non-citizens' of the academy (O'Keefe and Courtois 2019; Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier 2020). For example, Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier (2020) argue that postdoctoral positions used to be understood as probation periods allowing researchers to prove themselves before receiving full membership of the academy. However, given the scarcity of permanent positions, today these workers are likely to remain permanently excluded from the benefits of full

membership. Exclusion, or non-citizenship, can mean continuing to perform academic work but without the legal entitlements, status and recognition associated with full citizenship (O'Keefe and Courtois 2019), or exiting the sector. The context of Brexit is fruitful to explore the intersection between *academic citizenship*, in the sense described above, and *legal citizenship* in a more traditional sense – associated with freedom of movement and equal access to local labour markets. This allows deeper insights into the intersecting patterns of inequalities and the hierarchies that shape migrant academics' experiences of 'probationary citizenship'.

Methods

The interviews were conducted in the context of a broader collaborative research project exploring the consequences of Brexit on HE systems.[2] We chose to focus specifically on migrant academics on temporary contracts. Our position as migrants and as doctoral (Marie Sautier) and postdoctoral (Aline Courtois) researchers at the time appeared to facilitate the recruitment of participants and the conduct of the interviews. We examined the case of two groups rarely taken into consideration despite their statistical significance in the research workforce: first a group of non-UK citizens working in UK academia; second, a group of British researchers working outside their country. Interviews for the second group were conducted in Switzerland. While our study does not follow a comparative design, the UK and Switzerland are interesting settings to examine jointly. Both have high rates of incoming academic mobility: around 53 percent of the academic workforce in Switzerland (Office Federal de la Statistique 2020) and 28 percent in the UK are non-nationals. Based on the share of researchers with international experience, the UK and Switzerland had the most internationalised academic workforces in the EU single market (Royal Society 2016).

We conducted 22 semi-structured interviews, from April to November 2017, lasting from 45 minutes to over 3 hours, in person and online (one over the phone). Aline Courtois interviewed 11 UK-based participants and Marie Sautier interviewed 11 UK citizens working or having recently worked in Swiss academia. In the UK, participants were recruited from two HE institutions with high proportions of international staff. A local contact circulated a call for participants in one university, while personal contacts and social media were used to recruit participants in the other. Two participants were UK citizens with international mobility experience; seven were non-UK EU citizens, one was from a non-EU, EAA country (Norway), and finally one was from Asia. In Switzerland, British participants were recruited across four different academic institutions, through institutional and personal contacts, followed by snowballing. All 11 participants originated from the UK and held at least a UK passport at the time of the interviews. While we were interested in all forms of precarious academic work, our respondents were mainly doctoral and post-doctoral researchers. In the UK, eight held a temporary full-time research contract, one combined a research post with a doctoral contract, another was hourly paid, and one was between jobs. In Switzerland, six participants were doctoral candidates (including two unfunded), five were post-doctoral researchers (including one who had recently started a tenure-track position). Both samples included a mix of STEM and Humanities and Social Sciences researchers (respectively seven and four in the UK and six and five in Switzerland). Seventeen respondents earned a living wage at the time of the interviews. With one exception, all

respondents were white: arguably our sample is therefore relatively privileged compared to other migrant and/or more precarious academics.

We privileged a biographical approach, seeking to understand participants' trajectories and mobility choices, and to gain in-depth insights into the impact of the Brexit referendum campaign and its result on their professional and personal lives, although due to participants' availability a small number of interviews were shorter and more focused on the researchers' present situation and concerns. We positioned ourselves explicitly as migrant researchers on temporary contracts, which we believe encouraged participants to share not only their experiences but also their sense of vulnerability. All interviews were transcribed and we conducted thematic data analysis, identifying patterns and developing and refining themes as part of a collaborative process. Ethical clearance was secured from Aline Courtois's institution[3] and we followed the principles of ethical and professional conduct for socio-logical research as outlined for example by the BSA. Given our participants' precarious employment situations, anonymity and confidentiality were of paramount importance. All participants were carefully de-identified and we use pseudonyms throughout this article.

The materialisation of borders and the end of a privileged relationship to mobility

New borders and a disrupted sense of home

Participants had relocated to their current country at different points in their lives and for different reasons, principally for work or study opportunities; but in some cases for extra-professional reasons as well, such as to follow their partners. They showed various levels of attachment to their country of residence – from feeling settled and buying a home, to wishing to move elsewhere in the medium/long term. While only one had taken concrete steps to relocate, the Brexit announcement had an impact on all respondents' sense of 'home' and space. Borders that were so far invisible or inconsequential suddenly came into being. Thus, several UK citizens located in Switzerland expressed the fear of losing the legal benefits of EU citizenship in Europe (including membership of European scientific networks) as well as in Switzerland – where EU citizens enjoyed preferential treatment despite Switzerland not being a member country. For those in the UK, new borders also emerged in the shape of future administrative and legal boundaries, with potential adverse consequences for their ability to move freely for research or to maintain relationships. Tobias, for example, who spent his time between the UK and his native Austria, expressed his fear of losing health coverage when sojourning outside the UK. Ludovic, a parent, was particularly concerned about the possibility that EU citizens would be denied access to healthcare and child's benefit. Annalisa and Alexandru worried about the future care needs of their ageing parents and the prospect of losing the right to bring them to the UK, while Signe wondered if she would be allowed back in after the extended periods of fieldwork abroad that her research required. Like EU workers in other sectors (Kilkey 2017), our participants anticipated that significant barriers would hinder cross-border mobilities and care relationships that had so far seemed relatively fluid and unproblematic.

As Benson (2020) and Higgins (2019) explore in their work, Britons abroad were also impacted by the Brexit announcement. In our Swiss sample, two UK researchers had voted for Brexit. These shared a feeling of being stigmatised in their academic workplaces as a

result of their vote. Other UK citizens working in Switzerland reported feelings of 'shame', 'disgust', and 'isolation' following the Brexit announcement. Several shared a disrupted sense of home and belonging, which in turn unsettled their career plans:

> I realised how xenophobic my own culture is . . . And it kind of made me fall out of love with my own country a bit. And I did feel ashamed of my own country for this, for Brexit (Travis, British, Switzerland).

> I don't really want to go back to the UK anymore, or at least that's what I decided when [the referendum] happened, that I can't go back. As a kind of petulant response. I thought, perhaps, this is not my home (Rory, British, Switzerland).

In the UK sample in particular, several participants used the language of social exclusion or marginalisation, such as the analogy of the unwanted guest:

> That's like being at some person's house and knowing you are not actually welcome. I mean some people would probably still stay on the couch but I wouldn't want to be there. And that's one of the impacts the whole Brexit thing had on me personally . . . I know that fifty percent don't want to have me here (Tobias, Austrian, UK).

For Angelo, who had studied and worked in the UK for 10 years, the vote was a betrayal of the positive values that he associated with the EU:

> I consider Brexit a very selfish choice and I don't believe in this idea of selfishness within Europe. I feel very European and without thinking that the European Union is great . . . I cannot stay in a country that chooses to quit on the rest of what represents me and the rest of what I am (Angelo, Italian, UK).

Angelo's feeling of being no longer 'at home' extended to the professional sphere:

> The difference is, it used to be we are among scholars and friends, now it's only the scholars part . . . Academia is supposed to be international and borderless but this thing has created some borders that did not exist before (Angelo, Italian, UK).

These new borders suddenly divided what Angelo had perceived as a 'borderless' international scientific community. Further in the interview, he spoke about becoming conscious of sitting among 'an ocean of British people' in a campus restaurant, as if nationalities, so far invisible, had suddenly become tangible and oppressive.

Hierarchies of belonging and unequal positioning in relation to future risk

The feeling of exclusion and the anticipation of future risks appeared to be shaped to some extent by individuals' national origins. For example, Linnea articulated a feeling of not being directly targeted by Brexit with a sense of being privileged as a white, Northern European:

> I don't know how much it helps that I come from a Scandinavian country and you are generally not considered an annoying immigrant basically . . . I don't feel personally insulted by [Brexit], I don't feel like they want to kick me out, but I don't know, maybe they do (Linnea, Swedish, UK).

Kirsten similarly emphasized her privilege and low risk of losing her right to stay in the UK:

> I'm in a good position, and my partner being English and we are both having good jobs, that I think I'll be fine I think staying, it might come to a point when that changes, when we wouldn't necessarily want to stay but I think it would be a choice of enough is enough and then leaving rather than a . . . 'we have to leave' (Kirsten, Norwegian, UK).

Kirsten uses her relationship and employment status to justify her sense of security, echoing stereotypical representations of the 'good migrant' (Cranston 2017): a highly skilled individual, unlikely to seek welfare support, culturally close to the UK and willing to assimilate. In this line of thought, staying or leaving is understood as a personal choice rather than a matter for immigration services to decide.

Expressions of relative assuredness in relation to future freedom of movement also surfaced in the Swiss sample, with discernible imperialistic undertones. Travis implicitly relied on the perpetuation of a hierarchized system that would maintain his prerogatives as an English traveller:

> As an English person, I'm very used to not worrying about this stuff because we can typically go anywhere in the world. Having an English passport probably makes it easier to go anywhere in the world than almost any other passport in the world. So I normally don't ever think about these things (Travis, British, Switzerland).

Similarly, George was confident that UK scientists would still retain a form of passport privilege (and, as suggested by his choice of examples, white privilege) compared to other non-EU citizens:

> There were scientific exchanges before the EU. And they are scientific exchanges between the EU and other countries. I really don't think that it's going to be the same for a British person to come to an EU country that it is for . . . Say . . . a Venezuelan where they require quite a formal visa application procedure. I imagine it to be more like Norway, Iceland or Switzerland (George, British, Switzerland).

By contrast, Alexandru, based on his experience at the margins of the EU as a Romanian citizen, and remembering the humiliations of UK border control, anticipated a more drastic loss of rights. He raised the concern that Romanians and Bulgarians, in contrast to more privileged EU citizens, might be required to hold visas post-Brexit. This illustrates his different positioning, as a Romanian citizen, compared to Western Europeans more hopeful of their continued membership rights regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations.

Intersection of precarity and loss of citizenship

Increased vulnerability for temporary workers

Conditional legal rights exacerbate the uncertainty related to precarious employment status. Fazal, a UK-based researcher from Pakistan, explained that under the terms of his visa, he would have to leave the UK and uproot his young family if his employment was terminated – a distinct possibility as the funding for his centre was likely to be discontinued post-Brexit. Unlike Fazal, the other UK-based participants had no direct experience of such vulnerability. Yet they also discussed the risk of losing their freedom of movement while in insecure employment:

What do you do in the event, say, that you get sick and you need to leave because of the sickness? . . . What happens if all of a sudden your grant doesn't get renewed, and you are unemployed for two months' time, would that affect your situation? (Kirsten, Norwegian, UK).

Several participants gave a sense that they were resigned to the temporary and precarious nature of academic employment. For example, Signe considered 'bits of unemployment' as 'ingrained' and inevitable in early research careers – which is how she explained not applying for unemployment benefit when previously out of work. Annalisa's words suggest a similar acceptance of employment precarity and discontinuity; but with the emergence as a new risk with Brexit:

> I think it's mostly just the anxiety, . . . just the fact that I know that you've got like X amount of months, I think it's three months, basically to find another job before you are asked to go. And in my sort of line of work that I'm coming into after I finish my PhD, it's not about permanent positions, it's about temping, so I'm basically looking at contracts that are probably not gonna go for three years . . . So at the moment I know that if I do get one and then I'm out of work for a couple of months, . . . I can stay here, whereas in that situation it would be the added anxiety of I need to find another job, plus if I don't find another job they are gonna kick me out . . . you are already working in an environment where you don't have security, and then you are adding extra pressure of I really need to find a job (Annalisa, Italian, UK).

At that point, not much was known about the post-Brexit status of EU citizens in the UK. But the stringent immigration rules affecting non-EU workers cast a long enough shadow to worry several participants. Annalisa's mention of 'X months' refers to the Tier 2 visa regime that ties legal rights to employment. In a way, Annalisa, Kirsten and others had the privilege of EU citizenship, protecting them from the risk of being forced to leave if unemployed, in addition to the – unspoken but real – economic privilege allowing them to stay afloat financially between jobs. Combined, both these forms of privilege make extended periods of 'probationary citizenship' of UK academia more viable. The possibility of losing their legal citizenship rights made participants feel vulnerable both as migrants and as workers, framing employment insecurity as a serious risk.

Among the Swiss sample, most interviewees spontaneously shared, to various extent, their sense of precarity as temporary workers in search for a stable position. Jane, for instance, regretted the lack of prospects and despaired about being 'up against hundreds of people, literally, hundreds of people in a job search'. Robert described the imperative of mobility as dehumanising and unrealistic, taking over people's lives with little chance of reward:

> Mobility is shit. The mobility requirement, I hate that . . . it's completely 'anti.' Anti-society, anti-family, I think. It is in many of the grants . . . It's implicit; it's good to show that you are not tied to a particular place, that you are constantly kind of searching for the next, the greatest, and the best, and moving around like an executive science robot . . . It's a general thing to show that you are committed and that science comes first above all else (Robert, British, Switzerland).

In addition, as a non-Swiss, and a non-French-speaker (seemingly of the view that not speaking the local language should not be an issue, in rather Anglocentric fashion), Robert saw himself at a disadvantage in the race for scarce positions in his host country:

> I have a chance but it's a long shot. These positions come out very rarely. Typically, the people who fill the position are very often people who have been in the department, very much

networking, and who, you know . . . I think at the post-doc level it's very international but when it comes to permanent positions, professorships, it becomes more homophilic, more. . . you know, frankly, I think it helps if you are Swiss, it helps if you know the way things are done, it helps if you speak French well, it helps if you . . . like climbing and go hiking and all this stuff . . . I mean if you look at the PI list in this department, they are almost uniformly Swiss.

The prospect of being further marginalised by Brexit heightened British participants' sense of vulnerability both as short-term contractors and as non-nationals. As non-Swiss and soon to be non-EU citizen, Emily felt she would lose her positional advantage over non-EU applicants in Switzerland as well as across the EU academic space:

> I know in Switzerland, jobs go to the Swiss first, then EU, then everybody else. If the UK is not in the EU anymore, that would be a big concern of mine, but because my husband is Swiss, that would be an incentive for me to consider applying for Swiss citizenship earlier rather than later . . . To not be at the bottom of the queue basically (Emily, British, Switzerland).

Emily's fear of losing her positional advantage in an extremely competitive job market echoed Annalisa's in the UK:

> I feel like even on a discriminatory level that, you know, someone is gonna employ someone that can stay here, and someone that might not require a visa or someone that might not require extra stuff, you know. I know that especially in academia you want the person that's right and you want the person that's gonna do the best job, but if you've got an option, especially for an early-career person like me, if you've got an option of four people, and we all pretty much have the same skills, that's probably something you are gonna keep in mind (Annalisa, Italian, UK).

The logics of citizenship-based discrimination disrupted Annalisa's imaginary of academia as an otherwise equal playing field based on a supposedly neutral quest for talent. Thus, for both sets of participants, the Brexit process was understood as a possible reordering of hierarchies – with their own nationality emerging as a barrier where it had been experienced as neutral – and a loss of a privileged relationship to mobility and citizenship.

In the UK-based group, the Brexit process also amplified the perceived divide between migrant academics on temporary contracts and those in secure positions and/or those who had been in the UK long enough to claim UK citizenship. Some of our respondents implied there was no sense of a shared experience or solidarity with colleagues who enjoyed full academic citizenship (in the form of permanent contracts) and/or UK citizenship (or supposed entitlement to citizenship based on being a long-term resident or having UK-born children):

> The ones who have permanent contracts, they are the ones who didn't seem that concerned . . . not as concerned as the precariat (Alexandru, Romanian, UK)

> I met only a few Europeans who told me that they just think that nothing much will change, but usually the ones who said so are the ones who are married with family, so at any rate they will stay in the UK, and also often they already have citizenship and they moved twenty years ago (Angelo, Italian, UK).

In this sense as well, participants linked their status as 'probationary citizens' of UK academia to an increased sense of uncertainty, vulnerability and isolation – including from colleagues and fellow non-nationals in the UK.

Strategies to retain privileged access to national labour markets

Respondents were considering various strategies to manage the additional uncertainty they faced. For many of them, this meant consolidating their right to live in their host country and/or preserving their mobility. For example, Annalisa planned to seek UK citizenship mainly to avoid further discrimination in the job market – rather than to assert a feeling of national or symbolic belonging:

> I would consider applying for British citizenship, but just because it would help me with my job, not because I want to be British, I feel like that's been stripped away from me since all of this happened (Annalisa, Italian, UK)

Yet, while a few of the UK-based participants were considering applying for British citizenship, they had not started that process at the time of the interviews. Several explained that it was due to the lack of reliable guidance and the difficulty in understanding their options in this context.

In Switzerland, we saw that Emily, cited in a previous section, was considering applying for Swiss citizenship through her husband so that she would not end up 'at the end of the queue'. Other interviewees also mentioned considering applying for residency – an easier option than citizenship – in order to facilitate future hiring. Five respondents had already taken steps to apply for an EU passport or were planning to acquire one through their family situation or their ancestry:

> After the Brexit vote, there was a huge spike in applications, people were running to be Irish embassy the next day . . . I would do that, because . . . it would just cure my immigration status, make it the same as it is now . . . I mean, at least it won't get any worse [LAUGHS] (Jane, English, Switzerland).

> I don't think I run the risk of losing my contract as a UK person working in Switzerland … If there is any trouble, I'm gonna turn myself into a Belgian researcher. I have that. I mean that I would use my Belgian passport to assert my rights. I don't think people will not want to hire me because I'm British, that they will discriminate against me. I think the only problem will be a contractual, administrative one. And if it happens, I would go with the Belgian passport. If I didn't have it, I would probably be more afraid because I think there will be a period of uncertainty, of instability. And this is never good for the administrators (Eliot, British, Switzerland; our own translation from French)

Similarly, Jack mentioned his eligibility for Irish citizenship through his grand-father, 'like half of the UK'. Yet, unlike his peers, Jack seemed confident that Brexit would not jeopardize his situation, even administratively. Having recently secured a tenure-track position in Switzerland, he directly linked his confidence in the support he would get from his institution to his stable, non-precarious employment situation:

> If I get a promotion I am looking to stay longer, [institution] has a good track record with securing the permission to work for people from many different backgrounds, and if legally the situation would change for me as a British citizen, I think I can be reasonably hopeful that would still be within the possibilities of [institution] (Jack, British, Switzerland).

Jack thus articulates a double privilege: that of Irish ancestry (exaggerating how common it is in the UK) and that of being a valued, permanent employee (alluding to unspecified resources that his employer would mobilise if his legal situation changed) – a 'good migrant', or even a research 'star', whose fate contrasts starkly with that of less fortunate migrant workers.

Precarity and immobility

Shrinking professional and hospitable space

Several respondents were concerned that Brexit would lead to a funding crisis in UK HE, with fewer job and research funding opportunities for ECRs and the deterioration of working conditions:

> It was a very clear kind of launch against intellectuals, against reason and arguments, thinking, against research … I find that frightening, actually. And totalitarian regimes around the world are not known for tolerance toward academics, are they? They're known for precisely this kind of attitude taken a lot further [LAUGHS]. I mean universities are probably gonna lose money, they're gonna lose research funding from the EU, they're gonna lose the right to do [international research] projects, that kind of thing (Jane, British, Switzerland)

As a result, for several respondents based in Switzerland, a temporary position in the UK was no longer the next logical step in their careers:

> The last thing I want to do is go back to England and balance from one-year contract to one-year contract to one-year contract or something like this. So if we were to do that, I would probably leave academia and do another job somewhere in England. But we can just as easily do that here, so if I was gonna leave academia I could do that here, and get paid a lot more money and have a much nicer way of life (Travis, British, Switzerland)

In Travis's 'geoscientific imagination' (Bauder, Lujan, and Hannan 2018), the UK was no longer associated with possible career progression but instead with never-ending precarity.

Inhabitable space also shrank in the minds of several UK-based participants as they discussed their future career steps. Alexandru described London, Oxford and Cambridge as his only possible UK destinations:

> Basically in the UK only Oxford and Cambridge and London, and the reason is because I cannot see – I mean a year ago I would have applied to Leicester or Edinburgh or whatever … I don't want to live in places where there's not much diversity, which I can find a saving grace, because in London again you don't feel yet, I don't know what it's gonna be in ten years, but right now we can live very comfortably without having to be, to feel any form of uneasiness, discrimination etc. (Alexandru, Romanian, UK).

Rather paradoxically given the demographics of UK HE (and similarly to Alexandru, who cited Oxford and Cambridge as examples of diverse cities, hinting to a possible conflation of predominantly white, privileged cosmopolitanism and diversity), other participants described their universities as protective, diverse bubbles in the midst of a hostile environment ('a little islet of Europe in a vastly anti-European area' for Angelo). Thus, under the effect of the Brexit announcement – and no doubt, the xenophobic campaign that preceded it, participants' mental maps changed; and the space considered hospitable shrank, with the removal of most if not all of the UK.

Immobility as the pragmatic choice

Angelo was the only participant who had made concrete plans to leave the UK at the time of the interviews. The other UK-based participants had either decided to stay, or expressed the wish to leave, but had not made plans to do so. Some of them were held back by personal

circumstances. Annalisa and Kirsten lived with monolingual British partners unlikely to be able to find work elsewhere. Signe had just signed a mortgage for a home. While they were disillusioned with the UK and generally despondent about their long-term prospects in UK academia, they felt it made more sense to stay and, in Kirsten's words, 'try and make it work where I am' before trying to relocate.

The lack of professional opportunities abroad and especially in participants' countries of origin was also a factor in favour of maintaining the status quo. Most participants were pessimistic about their chances in the academic labour markets in their home countries. The Italians mentioned the lack of investment in science, and the discrimination against those considered outsiders. In addition, Annalisa felt unsure about her ability to work in her native language. Ludovic also felt disconnected from French academia and had little knowledge of the workings of its centralised recruitment platform. Alexandru, despite having worked in many different countries, and despite his ambivalence about living in the UK since the Brexit referendum, felt he had few prospects outside UK academia:

> …the only news I get about jobs are from the UK, so I have no idea what's happening in France or Germany, I don't even know if I would be hired there, but I don't have access to their work, job markets, as they call it … I just know jobs.ac.uk …So I keep applying to the jobs even though … part of me's thinking I don't know if I want to get it because it means I have to go back to the UK … coming back in this situation of uncertainty, what does that mean? (Alexandru, Romanian, UK)

For reasons not dissimilar to those evoked in Pustelnikovaite's study (2020), but with the added pressure of employment uncertainty, several participants found themselves despondent about their career prospects but still 'stuck' in the UK.

Mobility and the precarity trap

Far from being considered by the participants as a beneficial or salutary step to manage the consequences of Brexit, academic mobility was associated with the risk of entrenching precarity. In particular, participants who mentioned mobility as a viable option considered it in conjunction with leaving academia. Angelo, who at the time of the interview was organising his move out of the UK, was moving outside academia at the same time. Tobias and Ludovic, both in STEM, were considering seeking work in the private sector outside the UK. Thus, those who felt able to be internationally mobile as scientists were those who had realistic prospects outside academia. Those who did not, or who had a strong preference for an academic career, were more likely to feel stuck both professionally and geographically. For Kirsten, who had resolved to stay in the UK, the possibility of leaving academia brought a sense of control over her mobility or settlement choices:

> I am not ruling out going into industry given that it's becoming even more imperative these days to have an income …. We'll have a mortgage to pay down so in two years' time if it doesn't work out then industry, you know, I have no problem with that, I've got colleagues here who have been in industry and come back, so I'll be quite happy to be flexible about it (Kirsten, Norwegian, UK).

In Switzerland, Mark, who was already in a precarious position as an unfunded PhD researcher, felt destabilised by the Brexit announcement. He was unsure whether his PhD activities would allow him to retain his visa status after he lost his EU citizenship. In this

context of increased uncertainty, he opted for a short-term contract in a primary school, which allowed him to secure a 5-year residency permit:

> I was frustrated generally, but I think Brexit definitely pushed me towards the edge. It defi-nitely motivated my decision to stop. I didn't like the idea that my future in terms of being able to stay here or whatever would no longer be in my hands … Because I was on a student permit which renews every year. . . . And if [the UK] crashed out without a deal and I was on a student permit – year to year – that could suddenly change my long-term prospects of being able to stay here or being able to move around here. I didn't like the idea of that. And I had the oppor-tunity to get more hours at work and so I was able to move onto a five-year work permit, which, sort of, solves that problem (Mark, British, Switzerland).

Mark's precarious status made his legal rights in Switzerland country tenuous, which in turn jeopardized both his relationship (his partner was also doing a PhD in Switzerland) and research plans in Switzerland. The prospect of having no control over where he could live, nor over his professional future, accelerated his decision. Under the added pressure of the uncertainty caused by Brexit, Mark ended up consolidating his right to stay in Switzerland, but at the expense of his prospects in academic research.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to focus on the impact of the Brexit announcement on a segment of the UK research workforce, namely those on temporary contracts and in particular migrant academics (mainly with EU passports) working in UK academia, and UK pass-port-holders working abroad (Switzerland). Their accounts suggested that despite being dissatisfied with their academic career prospects in their host countries (and for those in the UK, by the feeling of rejection caused by the referendum result), neither return nor further mobility emerged as easy options. In this respect, our findings largely align with those of studies of the impact of Brexit on other EU workers in the UK and UK workers/ retirees in the EU. The migrant academics we spoke to shared their desire for long-term stability (echoing for example Lulle et al. 2019), disrupted sense of home and/or experiences of xenophobic hostility (Higgins 2019; Miller 2019; Benson and Lewis 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019), emerging strategies to remain in the UK, reappropriate EU citizenship by various means, or their 'wait and see' attitudes (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017, Benson 2020). Our participants' perceived vulnerability to Brexit and ability to strategize varied according to multiple factors, including the personal and family resources they could mobil-ise to maintain their legal rights (echoing Sredanovic 2020 and Benson 2020).

We found that the geographical and professional imaginaries of these researchers were profoundly affected by Brexit. Internationalised academic spaces emerged as fractured along ethno-national and contractual lines. Participants' sense of vulnerability as migrants, and as workers, contributed to feelings that the space they could inhabit professionally was shrinking. As also found by Pustelnikovaite (2021), some of our participants felt 'stuck': On the professional side, they feared a deterioration of the already scarce prospects and employ-ment conditions in UK HE and felt that Brexit would worsen their vulnerability in other national markets as well, making attempts at further professional mobility seem futile. On the personal side, and in a way that echoes the findings of Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins (2019), they grappled with a disrupted sense of home and belonging. Desires for geographic

stability seemed amplified by the threat to legal rights and, for the UK-based respondents, by the shadow of the punitive immigration regime already targeting their non-EAA colleagues.

Most were acutely aware of the fragility of their employment situations and how it made them particularly vulnerable to a change in their legal status. As 'probationary academic citizens', they did not feel they would benefit from the protection granted to full academic citizens. Thus, for some, the prospect of being forced to navigate prolonged employment precarity while also negotiating possible limitations to their freedom of movement was extremely discouraging and triggered desires to exit the sector. It did not appear as a coincidence that Mark, the most precariously employed researcher in our sample, was also the first to leave academic research soon after the Brexit referendum, in order to secure a more stable position both in terms of visa and employment.

Our qualitative data suggest that the sense of vulnerability experienced by migrant academics in the context of Brexit exists on a continuum, shaped on the one hand by their employment status, and on the other hand by the resources they could draw on to claim alternative forms of valuable legal citizenship. Thus, the UK citizens in Switzerland who were poised to secure a stable academic contract, or to reappropriate EU citizenship – and therefore avoid both scientific and legal marginalisation – felt less threatened. Among the UK-based group, while it was too soon for them to know what passport strategies would work, the implicit hierarchy of national origins was reflected in respondents' levels of confidence in their future legal rights and by extension, their professional futures. In this respect, our findings echo those of other researchers who have focused on intersecting patterns of inequality at the intersection of academic precarity, race and mobility (e.g. Paye 2015; Sang and Calvard 2019; Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins 2019; Sautier 2021).

A parallel focus on the UK and the Swiss national spaces was useful in identifying the impact of the Brexit announcement beyond the UK and how the issues and dilemmas faced in both samples overlapped. We have also found the concept of 'probationary (academic) citizenship' useful to examine the vulnerability of contract researchers at a time when their privileged access to national labour markets (compared to third-country citizens) is under threat; and the role of passport privilege and the 'good migrant' figure in highly individualised strategies of re-composition of positional advantage in an adverse labour market. The role of white privilege surfaced in our study, and certainly deserves further scholarly attention, together with the possible intersection with gender and other forms of inequality. Finally, our study suggests that the 'academic Brexodus' discourse, popular at the time, betrayed a lack of understanding of the significance of the precarity phenomenon in academia, at the same time as it participated in its invisibilisation. As the casualisation of academic work progresses elsewhere (e.g. Mitterle, Carsten, and Roland 2014; McKenzie 2021), the discourse of academic mobility as being consubstantial with and beneficial to research careers needs to be further problematised.

Notes

1. For example: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39693954; https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/nov/14/uk-risks-mass-exodus-of-eu-academics-post-brexit-finds-report
2. 'Brexit and higher education in the UK and Europe: Towards a cross-country investigation', led by Simon Marginson, Centre for Global Higher Education, UCL Institute of Education

3. University College London; Reference REC926. Marie Sautier was not required to seek additional clearance from her institution.

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