

The Mobility Imperative in Academia: Global Trend or Local Custom?

Marie Sautier



Mobility is a cornerstone of academic excellence and career progression. But is it a universal one? This article outlines some features specific to Swiss mobility and the limitations of its use as a criterion in selection processes.

The move away from one's alma mater, international collaboration, and mobility are valued components of contemporary research careers. In Switzerland, leaving one's home university to complete a postdoc abroad is seen as an essential part of a trajectory of scientific excellence. However, studies have also questioned the universality, efficiency, and neutrality of the "mobility criterion" in academic careers. First, the scale and importance of mobility largely depend on national and disciplinary contexts.¹ Second, the links between geographical mobility and scientific collaboration, academic performance, and career progress are far from

evident.² Third, mobility is sometimes identified as a factor contributing to career inequality and a loss of talent.³ Understanding the importance of mobility in Swiss academia, its specific features, and the way that gender and other social characteristics are involved in shaping mobile careers is essential in order to reflect on the current role of mobility in hiring processes and career management.

Switzerland leads European higher education systems in internationalization, both in terms of outbound mobility, with the highest percentage of postdoctoral researchers going abroad, and inbound mobility, with more than half of its workforce being non-Swiss. In line with European initiatives of the late 20th and early 21th century, Swiss authorities and public research funders have advocated for mobility, viewing it as an essential tool for fostering collaboration, research quality, and career advancement. However, the assumption of a relationship between mobility and research performance often relies more on perception than empirical evidence.⁴ Thus far there is no consensus in the literature that these links exist.

1 Franzoni, Chiara, Giuseppe Scellato, and Paula Stephan (2012): Foreign-Born Scientists: Mobility Patterns for 16 Countries. *Nature Biotechnology* 30 (12): 1250–53. doi:10.1038/nbt.2449

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- 2 Abramo, Giovanni, Ciriaco Andrea D'Angelo, and Flavia Di Costa (2022): The Effect of Academic Mobility on Research Performance: The Case of Italy. *Quantitative Science Studies* 3 (2): 345–62. doi:10.1162/qss_a_00192
 - Seeber, Marco, Noëmi Debacker, Michele Meoli, and Karen Vandeveld (2023): Exploring the Effects of Mobility and Foreign Nationality on Internal Career Progression in Universities. *Higher Education* 85 (5): 1041–81. doi:10.1007/s10734-022-00878-w
 - Fernández-Zubieta, Ana, Aldo Geuna, and Cornelia Lawson (2016): Productivity Pay-Offs From Academic Mobility: Should I Stay or Should I Go? *Industrial and Corporate Change* 25 (1): 91–114. doi:10.1093/icc/dtv034
 - 3 Ackers, Louise, Alex Balch, Sam Scott, Samantha Currie, and Debbie Millard (2009): The Gender Dimension of Geographic Labour Mobility in the European Union. European Parliament. [www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-FEMM_ET\(2009\)419617](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2009)419617)
 - 4 Cañibano, Carolina, Pablo D'Este, F. Javier Otamendi, and Richard Woolley (2020): Scientific Careers and the Mobility of European Researchers: An Analysis of International Mobility by Career Stage. *Higher Education* 80 (6): 1175–93. doi:10.1007/s10734-020-00536-z

A study in the United Kingdom, for example, found no evidence that faculty mobility per se increased academic performance but, in fact, found that it is normally associated with a short-term decrease in performance, which is attributed to adjustment costs.⁵ In the Netherlands, nationals and non-mobile applicants for faculty positions have better chances of getting hired than foreign international scholars or mobile peers.⁶ In Switzerland, highly mobile academics do not have more academic transnational ties than do less mobile academics,⁷ and the Swiss workforce's rate of collaboration with foreign colleagues is among the lowest in Europe.⁸ Mobility patterns vary not only across national contexts, but also across disciplines. In the Netherlands and Germany, being mobile and being international are strongly valued in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields but are hardly a requirement in the social sciences and humanities (SHS) disciplines.⁹ The decision to take a post-doctoral position abroad after earning a PhD in Germany is closely linked to epistemic practices of knowledge production, such as gaining access to specific equipment, methods, and resources abroad for research in biology and physics. In other fields, such as history, PhD holders tend not to move to another country for their postdoc, in some cases, taking short trips for data collection.¹⁰

In Switzerland, in contrast, mobile research trajectories have become largely decoupled from epistemic considerations. Similar to their peers in STEM, SHS and Law PhDs are intensively socialized to a more standardized, narrowly defined mobility requirement: it generally involves going abroad at a specific time (ideally for a postdoc), for a specific duration (no less than one year), and in a specific format (in the form of a research contract or grant at a foreign university). This type of mobility can be described as a “career script,”¹¹ which is to say a collective representation of what “needs to be done” in order to have a successful career. The solidity of the script and its circulation in a multiplicity of

academic spaces helps explain why the mobility imperative appears to influence career decisions among Swiss PhDs. In the absence of alternative scripts, PhD candidates who see mobility expectations as conflicting with their private situation may end up leaving the career track altogether. This has consequences in terms of talent management, as competitive researchers of any social characteristics may leave the research field for non-academic reasons. This also favors career inequalities, as women and underrepresented groups are less likely to have the resources necessary to facilitate or secure a move: for example, a “portable” spouse¹² enabling the smooth combination of mobility aspirations with dual career situations, a social network, or Swiss citizenship, which facilitates the subsequent return, et cetera.

Are Women Less Mobile After Receiving PhDs?

EU data suggests that mobility is lower among female post-docs than it is among their male peers in a majority of European countries. However, in the Swiss context, women leave the country at comparable or even higher rates than their male colleagues. This may be indicative of the necessity to comply with the mobility script in a highly competitive environment rather than be a sign of gender equality. Indeed, the mobility imperative results in somewhat differentiated experiences across gender: women show specific mobility patterns, for example, in the form of “living apart together” (LAT) arrangements in which one partner lives abroad while the other lives in Switzerland. This often involves frequent long-distance commuting and additional organizational, financial, or health costs.¹³ Other women describe adjusting the choice of their host country as a result of family-related constraints, meaning that they chose a closer destination based on dual career decisions or care responsibilities

Mobility trajectories are shaped in part by gender but also by the way that mobility intersects with employment conditions and other social characteristics, such as national origin, race or class. In Switzerland, postdoctoral mobility primarily takes the form of fixed-term positions or grants that offer little to no access to social protections such as unemployment or retirement benefits. Precarious employment conditions weigh unevenly across individuals, and disadvantaged groups are more likely to experience mobility as “geoccasional work” rather than as an experience of discovery and scientific fulfillment.¹⁴ Academic bodies and institutions, mentors, and research or funding institutions participate in

5 Fernández-Zubieta, Geuna, and Lawson (2016): Op. cit.

6 Seeber et al. (2023): Op. cit.

7 Schaer, Martine (2021): *Early-Career Academics' Cross-Border Mobilities. Gender Relationships Within and Beyond a Transnational Workplace*. Doctoral thesis, Neuchatel University.

8 Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission), IDEA Consult, PPMI, and WIFO (2021): *MORE4: Support Data Collection and Analysis Concerning Mobility Patterns and Career Paths of Researchers: Survey on Researchers in European Higher Education Institutions*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/132356>

9 Herschberg, Channah, Yvonne Benschop, and Marieke van den Brink (2018): *Selecting Early-Career Researchers: The Influence of Discourses of Internationalisation and Excellence on Formal and Applied Selection Criteria in Academia*. *Higher Education* 76 (5): 807–25. doi:10.1007/s10734-018-0237-2

10 Ibid.

11 Laudel, Grit, and Jana Bielick (2019): *How Do Field-Specific Research Practices Affect Mobility Decisions of Early Career Researchers?* *Research Policy* 48 (9): 103800. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2019.05.009

12 Zippel, Kathrin (2017): *Women in Global Science: Advancing Academic Careers Through International Collaboration*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press. doi.org/10.1515/9781503601505

13 Sautier, Marie (2021): *Move or Perish? Sticky Mobilities in the Swiss Academic Context*. *Higher Education* 82 (May): 799–822. doi:10.1007/s10734-021-00722-7

14 Ibid.

co-producing¹⁵ the mobility imperative. For example, some universities, funding agencies, and foundations have included fulfilment of formal mobility requirements among the prerequisites for mid-career positions or grants. Paradoxically, the influence of the mobility script on career decisions, both within and outside of academia, and the strength of the script at the postdoctoral level renders mobility an ineffective criterion when recruiting for professorial positions. Hiring committees rarely use mobility concretely as a criterion in assessing excellence at this advanced career stage, where compliance with the script is very high or, as in STEM fields, nearly complete. The mobility criterion is more often used at this stage as an exclusion criterion rather than a criterion of excellence per se. Furthermore, the informal nature of the mobility criterion in connection with professorship recruitment – it never appears in job advertisements and only rarely in evaluation grids – means that it is open to interpretation by the committee during deliberations. This informal nature of mobility as a criterion raises issues of equity and transparency.

The specific features of mobility in the Swiss system as a transdisciplinary, mandatory career script within a format of precarious – often repeated – employment helps to shape career trajectories through mechanisms reaching beyond the individual’s scientific qualities and academic achievements. These results invite reflection on two questions: The first is how sustainable academic collaboration can be supported across borders in more inclusive, equitable formats. The second is whether mobility is an appropriate tool for assessing excellence in funding and hiring procedures in Swiss academia.

“décodage” - SAGW blog

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About the author

Marie Sautier is a sociologist and PhD candidate at the University of Lausanne (NCCR-LIVES, LACCUS) and Sciences Po Paris (CSO, CNRS). Her research focuses on the transformation of contemporary academic careers, particularly phenomena related to recruitment practices and internationalization.



¹⁵ Ed.: Sometimes transforming, for example with the SNF 2020 reform and attempts at redefining mobility and mobility requirements.