

Policy encourages researcher mobility, but it can be career dead end

*European research policies and national research systems encourage researchers, especially PhD and post PhD, to relocate and change institutions. However, discussing new research, **Marco Seeber** identifies a broken pipeline between those moving institutions and those going on to achieve senior positions that has serious implications for early career researchers. Exploring the reasons for this gap, he suggests how mobile early career researchers and institutions can be better integrated.*

Several studies revealed that researchers that changed institutional affiliation during their career, i.e., “mobile researchers”, produce more scientific output and receive more citations, and that mobility has positive effects on individual and institutional scientific productivity and creativity by favouring knowledge exchange and network creation. For this reasons, policies and funding schemes have been promoting mobility and today, [20 to 50%](#) of the PhD students and postdocs in most Western European universities have a foreign nationality. However, the proportion of professors with a foreign nationality is usually much smaller, ranging between 2 and 10%, while those who never changed institutional affiliation, so-called “inbred” faculty, constitute the great majority.

If mobility is positively linked to better academic performance, why then do so few become professors?

In a [recent co-authored article](#) we explored the impact of mobility and foreign nationality on internal career progression. Academic career progression depends on the performance in research, teaching, and administrative/management tasks, and the way academic tasks are carried out is partly affected by the specific national and organizational contexts in which they take place. First, in most cases, professors must teach in the official language of the country or region where the university is located. Therefore, postdocs that are not native speakers of the local language have fewer chances than native speakers to progress to a teaching position in their university of affiliation, namely, to become an assistant professor. Second, researchers must conform to expectations about research standards and outcomes, which are influenced by national evaluation processes and institutional traditions. Because of the relevance of national and local criteria affecting the definition of research quality, we expected that postdocs and professors coming from other systems and institutions will be disadvantaged compared to non-mobile staff. Finally, the capability to collaborate with colleagues is a key criterion for promotion and hiring, and people typically prefer to collaborate with others perceived to be similar — a mechanism known as homophily. The homophily mechanism is particularly relevant to reach the most powerful academic positions, since oligarchies tend to perpetuate themselves by appointing new members based on value congruity and social similarities, and a high degree of coordination is required for the management of an academic unit. Thus, the homophily mechanism will reduce the chances of promotion of mobile and foreign staff, particularly at the full professor level, because these are more likely to display different values, language, cultural, and social traits when compared to the existing body of full professors.



The study examined Flanders, which is exemplary of the majority of European research systems, where there are no rules or norms that prevent universities hiring from their own pool of graduates and/or where the law constrains the use of English for teaching, two traits that reduce the chances of progression for foreign and mobile researchers. It also examined all career steps, using used data between 1991 and 2017 for all post-doctoral and professorial staff, for a total of 14,135 academics.

In the considered period, just 1.2% of internationally mobile postdocs with foreign nationality became professor (56 in 4,503) compared to 21.9% of the non-mobile Belgian postdocs (1,457 in 6,659). Foreign nationality and mobility have both a strong negative effect on internal career progression. Foreign nationality reduced the chances of a postdoc to become assistant professor by 67% and of an associate professor to become full professor by 41%. Both mobility between Flemish universities and international mobility reduced the chances of promotion from postdoc to assistant professor (-41% and -64%) and from associate to full professor (-28% and -48%). Also return mobility was very rare: among those who left the university after graduation, only one in 67 later returned as professor, compared to one in five of those who stayed. Interestingly, Dutch researchers have similar chances of progression to assistant professor position as locals – arguably because Dutch is the language of teaching – but have even lower chances of progression to full professor position than foreign researchers.

Robust tests revealed that the quality and productivity of foreign researchers is comparable to locals and that the greater the proportion of local and non-mobile full professors in a particular environment, the fewer the chances of promotion of foreign and mobile postdocs. Fewer chances for internal career progression do not exclude the possibility that those who left have been promoted elsewhere. This, however, should not be taken for granted. The chances of mobile, foreign, and external candidates to obtain a tenured position are low in many university systems, and strong challenges are also faced by return researchers who move abroad and later try to come back to their institution of origin.

In turn, while several studies and policy statements show and promote the positive effects of mobility for what [Gläser and Laudel](#) define “cognitive” and “community” careers, our results suggest that taking on an appointment in another country can imply great challenges for “organizational” career progression, especially for early career researchers and when the local language is compulsory for teaching. In order to avoid the potential negative effects of mobility in terms of career progression, we recommend researchers to preserve a link to their home country, ascertain whether in the host country and institution there are rules or norms preventing the hire of their own graduates and linking career progression to mobility, become proficient in the local language and move only to tenured positions. Universities and universities systems aiming to attract and retain talent, could provide better support for mobile researchers by hiring and promoting on merit, providing free language courses for international PhDs and postdocs, communicating performance criteria and career statistics transparently to aspiring academics, and introducing rules that limit hiring of own graduates and reward mobility.

Since Europe includes systems with very different rules regarding internal career, very different compositions in terms of mobile and non-mobile, as well as the role that mobility plays for career progression, this has important implications also for the development of a European Research Area (ERA) and more in general for the capability of European countries to attract and retain talent. Deeper integration between national policies is warranted in this regard. Instead, promoting mobility without considering – and harmonising – key aspects regulating academic careers in different systems, may endanger the career prospects of mobile researchers, researchers from less affluent countries and from countries which discourage internal career progression, with a significant loss of talent.

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