

Exploring the Effects of Migration for Social and Humanity Researchers (Research in Progress)

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Abstract

The international mobility of researchers is a central topic in global academic discourse due to its complex and multifaceted consequences. While mobility can provide opportunities for knowledge acquisition, professional growth, and access to advanced resources, it also introduces challenges such as career instability, loss of social networks, and barriers to integration into host academic environments. This study examines these dynamics with a focus on researchers in the humanities and social sciences, employing the theory of three researcher careers (Gläser & Laudel, 2015) as a conceptual framework. The model highlights three dimensions of career development—cognitive, organizational, and community—which are uniquely affected by mobility. Based on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with humanities and social science researchers who experienced long-term international mobility, the findings underscore the dual nature of mobility. While it offers professional growth and access to global resources, it also disrupts career trajectories, particularly in disciplines with less international standardization or commercial applicability.

Preliminary results show that language plays a pivotal role in determining migration destinations. Researchers frequently select countries where they can work in their native or familiar languages. Others adapt by taking roles outside their research fields, such as teaching Russian as a foreign language or similar positions in high demand internationally. However, such roles often limit their ability to advance their cognitive careers.

The study also highlights the emotional and professional toll of constant migration. Researchers report exhaustion from navigating unstable employment conditions and the challenges of rebuilding professional networks in host countries. This disruption diminishes their community career standing, as they lose the professional connections that previously facilitated access to resources and opportunities. Some respondents expressed frustration with this instability, with a few opting to leave academia altogether. The study concludes that providing funding, and supporting network-building initiatives are critical for mitigating mobility's negative effects. Institutional policies fostering inclusiveness and career stability are essential to ensuring that international mobility benefits researchers across different disciplines.

Introduction and research relevance

The international mobility of highly productive researchers has emerged as one of the most widely discussed and debated topics within the global scientific community, primarily due to the multifaceted consequences of long-term mobility. Researchers have differing views on the advantages and disadvantages associated with long-term academic mobility. On one hand, long-term mobility is often associated with risks, career uncertainties, and the potential loss of vital social connections (Courtois & Sautier, 2022). On the other hand, it can offer significant opportunities for knowledge acquisition, enhance access to state-of-the-art equipment and new data,

as well as foster professional development and the expansion of research potential (Borini et al., 2018). The long-term mobility of researchers is thus a double-edged sword, offering both considerable benefits and noteworthy challenges.

Long-term mobility presents challenges for researchers in the social sciences and humanities. First and foremost, scholars in these fields often face the issue of lacking a universal language for international communication. Unlike in the natural sciences, where English predominates as the global language of communication, social scientists and humanists are often deeply connected to the symbolic and conceptual systems of the local communities where they conduct their research and publish their work. This disconnection from a global *lingua franca* presents significant barriers to cross-border academic exchange. For instance, the debate surrounding the use of national languages in academic publications is a point of contention in many countries. This issue is especially apparent in the tension between the use of Chinese and English. Despite a growing trend towards postcolonial discourse and efforts to “give voice to the oppressed” (Spivak, 2022), English remains “undoubtedly the preferred language in the social sciences and humanities” globally (Ammon, 2001, p. 10). The choice of publication language is influenced by a range of factors, including institutional constraints, established academic norms, the practices and ethics of the research community, and, importantly, the linguistic competencies of the researchers themselves (Canagarajah, 2002; Curry & Lillis, 2004). A further layer of complexity arises from the deeply contextual nature of social science and humanities research. The need to account for local cultural and stylistic nuances in language and adhere to the specific rules of the “language game” (Wittgenstein, 1985; Petersen & Shaw, 2002) creates a barrier for researchers attempting to disseminate their findings on an international scale. Failure to navigate these complex linguistic and cultural dynamics can undermine a scholar's professional credibility and hinder their career progression.

In addition to the challenges posed by language barriers, researchers in these fields also face the issue of cultural proximity, which imposes both formal and informal limitations on their ability to engage in international publication networks. A study of bibliographic networks among social scientists in Eastern Europe (Pajić, 2015) illustrates how national policy goals, such as integrating local research into international academic databases, drive the desire to publish in international journals. However, despite the increasing internationalization of communication channels, the processes of academic communication remain predominantly national and regional in nature. As a result, many Eastern European sociologists continue to rely heavily on national and regional journals for their publications, limiting their ability to engage with global academic networks. This trend creates a significant barrier to the globalization of research and hampers the integration of scholars in the humanities and social sciences into broader international research networks.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that international research organizations tend to show greater interest from the natural sciences (Latova & Savinkov, 2012), while

those in the humanities and social sciences experience fewer tangible benefits from academic mobility. The discomfort many social scientists and humanists feel when encountering radically different approaches to disciplines such as history and sociology often diminishes the impact of international mobility on enhancing their research competencies or advancing their careers (Dyachenko & Nefedova, 2024). As a result, social science and humanities researchers often remain isolated within their local academic communities, thereby forming more insular networks that limit their engagement with professionals from other countries and regions. This situation presents additional barriers to scholars emigrating from Russia, as they are further distanced from global academic discourse.

The intellectual diversity within the social sciences and humanities, due to the creative and transformative nature of these fields, exacerbates this issue. According to the theory of scientific change, the lack of a unified research network contributes to intellectual and social fragmentation, with new data and innovative concepts being unevenly distributed across different regions (Fuchs, 1993). This fragmentation further complicates the career prospects of Russian scholars in the humanities, especially those who relocate abroad. In many cases, these researchers face significant challenges in securing relevant academic employment opportunities that align with their qualifications or professional standing. They are often offered positions that do not match their expertise or status, reflecting the limited recognition of humanities scholars on the international job market (Naumova, 2023).

The absence of universally recognized frameworks and symbols within the humanities and social sciences thus creates considerable obstacles for maintaining a successful academic career after emigration. For many scholars, gaining recognition in the global academic community is a more labor-intensive and challenging endeavor than it is for their colleagues in fields like engineering and natural sciences. For instance, Chinese scholars in the social sciences and humanities are far less visible in the international job market compared to their peers in the natural sciences (Flowerdew & Li, 2009).

Another significant challenge faced by researchers in the social sciences and humanities abroad is the increasing commercialization of academic fields. The growing focus on the potential for commercialization has profound implications for the career development of researchers in these disciplines, leading to several adverse consequences for both individual careers and the broader academic environment. This trend often exacerbates difficulties in securing research funding, with social scientists and humanists competing for limited resources within highly competitive institutional settings. The increased commercialization of academic work ultimately disrupts the academic climate, weakening scholarly connections and hindering collaborative efforts on joint projects (Leslie & Slaughter, 1997). This environment of intense competition, paired with a lack of sufficient funding and institutional support, can stifle the long-term growth and success of researchers in the social sciences and humanities.

Methodology

As a conceptual framework, this study employs the theory of three researcher careers (Gläser & Laudel, 2015). This theoretical model identifies three interconnected dimensions of career development that researchers navigate throughout their professional lives: the cognitive career, which pertains to their expertise, research competencies, and active engagement in scientific processes; the organizational career, encompassing their position, status, and career advancement within institutions; and the community career, which relates to their role and standing within the broader scientific community, including their professional networks and affiliations.

Despite its potential benefits, international mobility is not without challenges. A key issue lies in the lack of guarantees for long-term organizational stability. Temporary international assignments or fellowships often do not translate into permanent positions within research institutions, leaving scholars uncertain about their career trajectories. Moreover, during extended periods abroad, researchers may lose critical social connections within their home country's academic community. Upon returning, they often face the challenge of rebuilding their networks and readapting to local scientific environments. This readaptation process can weaken their standing within the community dimension, as they may struggle to reintegrate into professional networks and reestablish their influence. Consequently, these challenges often motivate researchers to seek further opportunities abroad, contributing to a brain drain phenomenon, where highly skilled individuals leave their home countries in search of more favorable conditions elsewhere.

To examine these dynamics, the study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on data collected between January 11 and May 3, 2024. The final dataset comprises 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with researchers who met specific criteria. Participants were selected based on the following conditions: 1) Active involvement in research within the humanities and social sciences; 2) A history of long-term academic mobility, defined as sustained overseas academic engagement lasting more than one year. The qualitative approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the interplay between the cognitive, organizational, and community dimensions in the context of international mobility. The interviews provided rich insights into how researchers navigate the complexities of career development, particularly the ways in which mobility influences their professional trajectories.

Preliminary Results

Due to the aforementioned challenges related to the mobility of social and humanities researchers, several scenarios of the outcome of mobility were reviled. Most of them, with rare exceptions, were related to losses in all three dimensions.

Rebuilding networks and professional identity

Because of the need to interact with the structures of everyday life and the social context, they feel the need to reconstruct their network of contacts and legitimise

their expertise in the new country. Reconstructing networks of contacts can be achieved through active engagement in social life in the new country. For example, one young researcher, who had many contacts thanks to conferences, admitted that his strategy was to attend various events that were not even indirectly related to his work:

“And I thought that overall I already had some groundwork that could be realised, that could be useful to somebody here. On the other hand, during that time I got to know and understand some people in the local context, through whom I was able to settle down here. Although in the end it was not quite like that, because the local context is seen very differently from Russia, especially through the people who gave me access to the field, to the local context”.

Adaptation can take place in different ways, including atypical ways. For example, for one of the researchers, immersion theatre became a tool for understanding the social environment. It is interesting to note that this activity was not an attempt to compensate for stress or even an act of creative self-realisation; on the contrary, the respondent defined it as an “initial strategy”:

“When I moved, I had a clear motivation to find new acquaintances. To be among people. For this purpose I chose from my activities in Moscow what seemed interesting, promising. I went to improvisation theatre. <...> I realised that in the confusion of the collective I would get the right feeling of life. The performances have a local texture, a local life. People talk about what is happening here and now. Very quickly you get a sense of context, a sense of where you are”.

Shifting to low-skilled positions or precarious employment

The constant need to migrate in search of stable work takes a heavy emotional and professional toll on researchers. Many report feeling exhausted by the instability, leading some to accept less engaging or technical jobs to compensate for the negative effects of migration. One prominent anthropologist from Russia reflected on her decision to leave the field altogether:

“I have no energy left, my sociological curiosity is gone. I'm trying to find a more technical job that has nothing to do with academic work. This shift away from academic roles reflects the cumulative strain of navigating precarious employment conditions and the limited availability of suitable positions”.

A recurring theme among respondents was the challenge of rebuilding professional networks in their host countries, a process that significantly diminished their standing within the academic community. Many noted that migration often resulted in the loss of professional privileges once enjoyed in their home country, where established connections facilitated access to resources and opportunities. One researcher lamented:

“Yes, I have lowered my professional status, I have no administrative workload, no teaching, but I am still a sociologist. Now I do industrial sociology. Of course, I have significantly reduced my activity and my ability to do academic work. I've tried to write something, but the academic part of my life has come to nothing, I don't work

on any clear-cut projects now. I mean, I used to have this grant, that grant, another grant, and this programme and that programme in parallel”.

This loss of professional influence underlines the wider impact of migration on the community dimension of researchers' careers. The need to reestablish networks from scratch not only hinders career progression but also isolates researchers from key academic and professional ecosystems, further exacerbating the challenges of integration.

Moving to similar language contexts

Language emerged as a crucial factor influencing researchers' decisions about migration destinations. The ability to work and communicate in a familiar language often shaped their choices. For example, one respondent deliberately chose to migrate to Kazakhstan because of the opportunity to work in Russian: *“Weighing all the pros and cons, I finally chose Kazakhstan because it has the same educational programmes and I could work in Russian”*. For others, language skills and personal connections provided pathways to employment, albeit outside of research-intensive positions. One Sinologist reported securing a teaching position in Chinese through her network: *“I got a job teaching Chinese at a language school last autumn. I had to give up my research”*.

Meanwhile, researchers who were unable to find positions directly related to their expertise turned to teaching Russian as a foreign language, a field in high demand on international labour markets: *“At the end of last year I realised that I couldn't find anything in my field <...>. At the local university, some courses were left unfilled due to a professor's maternity leave, and they gave me a course for this semester - it is Russian”*.

Towards applicable science, neutral to the social context

Some of the researchers claimed that they wanted to change their specialisation to be more neutral to the reality of the social context. The most common scenario is to study some software to analyse data, for example:

“I'm upgrading my qualifications in some other related, even other fields, like data science. So what prevents me from feeling completely comfortable is the lack of universality in my professional activity. I realise that I need skills that would be useful absolutely everywhere, because so much is strangely specific, so I would like something more universal”.

“In general, I see the biggest step in my situation is to learn Python and work as a data analyst. It seems like the most logical step. And the most important thing is that I will not find it uninteresting and I will acquire skills for myself”.

Conclusion

Respondents described the positive aspects of mobility, such as opportunities to improve skills, exposure to different academic cultures and increased access to prestigious publication platforms. However, they also highlighted the significant challenges associated with their experiences. These included difficulties in maintaining long-term job security, the erosion of professional networks in their

home countries, and the emotional toll of adapting to new environments and academic cultures. The findings underline the dual nature of international mobility, highlighting both its potential to advance researchers' careers and its capacity to create significant barriers to long-term professional stability and integration. The theory of three research careers provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex dynamics of career development in academia. The interplay between the cognitive, organisational and community dimensions highlights the multifaceted nature of researchers' careers, particularly in the context of international mobility. While mobility offers valuable opportunities for professional development and access to global resources, it also poses significant challenges, including career uncertainty, loss of social ties, and difficulties in reintegration. Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of mobile researchers and the development of institutional policies that support sustainable career development in all three dimensions.

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