

## **Internationalization of Academic Labor: Considering Postdocs**

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Internationalization of academic staff has occurred more slowly than other aspects of internationalization in higher education. In most countries, substantial majorities of all academics are nationals, and significant barriers remain in establishing cross-national academic careers. Internationalization of the postdoctorate, however, may be a sign of growing cross-border mobility of academic labor, at least at early career stages. Currently, large numbers of early career scientists and scholars cross borders to take postdoctoral positions outside of their country of citizenship or permanent residence. Yet, postdoc mobility does not demonstrate a “flattening” of the global academic labor market. This movement is almost exclusively South to North and East to West. In assessing postdoc internationalization, it is important to consider the factors that are driving this phenomenon as well as its implications.

### **DEFINING POSTDOCTORAL INTERNATIONALIZATION**

The postdoctorate is heterogeneous across academic disciplines, countries, and individual institutions. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some generalizations. Postdocs are typically early-career scholars, who are employed on fixed-term

contracts subsequent to completing a terminal degree. Postdocs are primarily devoted to research and can be understood as advanced trainees in the final stages of preparation for an academic career. However, it is possible to overemphasize the training aspect of postdoctoral work. Postdocs are the front line of academic labor and make substantial contributions to the research enterprise.

An international postdoc is an early-career academic working outside of her or his country of citizenship or permanent residence. International postdocs typically require work visa as a condition of employment, with the exception of intra-European Union postdoc mobility. Increased internationalization of the postdoc has occurred in many Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, but perhaps most prominently in the United States, where a majority of the nearly 60,000 postdocs working there are temporary visa holders.

#### **EXPLAINING POSTDOC INTERNATIONALIZATION**

One factor driving internationalization of the postdoctorate is globalization of science. Internet-mediated scientific communication and broader access to journals online has led to a wider diffusion of scientific knowledge. Increasingly, students from research universities in many countries graduate, with comparable levels of base knowledge and technical capabilities. The rapid expansion and development of higher education in many countries, and most notably in China, have dramatically increased the pool of potential postdocs worldwide. Additionally, significant asymmetries remain in resources to support research. Simply put, more opportunities exist for postdoctoral work in western Europe

and North America, and qualified graduates from around the world compete for these jobs.

Another factor, likely contributing to internationalization of the postdoctorate, is the growing value of international experience in academic careers. Studying and working abroad is now seen as an important component to intellectual and professional development in academic work. International mobility at the early career stage may be highly valued, because international work presumably singles “world-class” knowledge and skills. This is especially true in Europe where mobility is highly encouraged at the early career stage. The United States, where junior academics are not generally encouraged to work abroad, remains an exception to the growing mobility norm.

Professors and lead investigators are also keen to compete globally. Hiring the “best and brightest” postdocs for a research project now implies drawing from a global labor market. Professors in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries regularly recruit postdocs on a global basis. Few early career academics from these countries work as postdocs in developing countries.

Many higher education systems around the world are experiencing an ongoing shift from direct state support to quasi-market funding models. Examples include financing schemes based on research productivity, excellence initiatives, as well as other competitive funding mechanisms, which are growing relative to (sometimes declining) block-grant support. The relative short-time horizons and uncertainty of these funding models are more conducive for hiring temporary staff like postdocs than permanent academics. Moreover, worldwide there seem to be more terminally trained academics than permanent jobs are

available. Many early career researchers complete a series of postdocs, not because they wish to but since these are the only opportunities available to them in the market for academic jobs.

Reforms to national immigration policies may also explain, in part, growing internationalization of the postdoctorate. Many Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries have refocused their immigration laws to reflect a priority of attracting highly skilled workers as visitors and immigrants. In some cases, this means that legal barriers to hiring international academic staff have been lowered. Member countries of the European Union have formed a single labor market. Countries including Australia and Canada prioritize individuals with advanced qualifications, when issuing work visas. Even policy in the United States, which has been viewed as hostile to immigrant workers in recent years, makes a special exemption for universities.

Immigration policies that favor skilled migrants appear to be an incentive for some early career academics to seek a postdoc abroad. Some early career academics, especially from developing countries, see working as a postdoc in an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development country as first step toward longer-term migration. European scholars who work as postdocs in North America or another European country also sometimes immigrate. Most often, these cases likely reflect “accidental” migration, which occurs as a result of chance and opportunity rather than an original strategy to emigrate. While assessing academic mobility and migration in zero-sum terms is probably too simplistic, it is clear that the United States is the greatest net beneficiary of the international flow of talent.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Internationalization of the postdoctorate presents an important opportunity for higher education worldwide. Transnational mobility of early career academics can promote the exchange of ideas, diffusion of knowledge, and cross-cultural and cross-national understanding. All of this is desirable itself and could lead indirectly to other positive outcomes—such as, research that is more responsive to scientific and societal problems that are salient to more regions of the world.

Some serious challenges relate to postdoc internationalization. While no comprehensive global data exist on postdoc flows, it is evident there is no parity in these flows. Asymmetrical flows of early career academics may contribute to a brain drain. Moreover, while international mobility for early career academics can be good, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Academics who move across borders from one postdoc to the next run the risk of becoming “perpetual postdocs.” This might conform to contemporary ideals of academic research occurring in flexible, project, and problem-oriented teams and networks, but it is not a model especially well-suited for the development of a stable academic career. Finally, a real concern is based on international postdoc exploitation. My own research into the experiences of international postdocs working in American and British universities found that these individuals are too-often overworked and undersupported.

## CONCLUSION

The postdoc may be a leading indicator of a trend toward the internationalization of academic staff. Policymakers, institutional leaders, and

higher education researchers will continue to assess postdoc mobility, as well as the mobility of other academic staff. Thus, they will surely attend to the virtues of cross-border academic work. Clearly, an important issue is the extent to which current and future patterns of academic mobility reproduce global asymmetries, as well as to the outcomes of individual international postdocs.