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Mobility in academia – international experience at any cost?

Years of apprenticeship and travels, as in Goethe's stories of Wilhelm Meister, are common in many career fields. Young researchers must also go on travels, even though they are already experts in their subject area. Stays abroad are demanded of them if they would like to successfully acquire research funds or have the prospect of a professorship. This change of location often takes place in the context of a short-term contract and a modest salary; oftentimes also during a time when many are starting a family. Junior researchers nevertheless take on this challenge.

Academia thrives on the exchange of results beyond borders. Many researchers go abroad multiple times and for longer stays abroad during their career. Especially at the start of an academic career track it is essentially expected that junior researchers go abroad. Gaining international experience is considered to be a part of a career, significant in shaping character, and is perceived as a criteria for excellence. One leaves a familiar academic setting, establishes professional contacts, gains intercultural competencies and generally expands one's horizon. A frequent change in location of junior researchers furthermore helps institutions of higher learning to circulate knowledge. Thus only those with extensive stays abroad on their résumé have a chance when applying for prestigious research funds, among others of the European Research Council.

This requirement to be active in the international academic arena exerts considerable pressure on junior researchers – and yet so far it is seldom questioned. Helmut Schwarz, President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, summarized it on the occasion of the New Year's reception of the foundation in 2016: "Young talents are extremely mobile today. They are often exceptionally well trained, perhaps better than ever before. Also, presumably no generation before this one has had such opportunities or was at the same time subject to such high pressure".

In recent years limited and poorly paid work contracts as well as a lack of long-term perspectives have regularly been subject to discussion at institutions of higher learning and in the media. The fact that one also has to organize longer stays abroad despite these difficult circumstances has so far only been addressed cautiously.

Affected postdocs voice their criticism, among other places, on academic platforms such as euroscientist.com or in student newspapers. They talk about uncertain prospects, frequent changes of location, social fragmentation and financial sacrifices. Researchers with children complain that combining an academic career and parenthood is made even more difficult through the demand for mobility. Finding a good solution for every family member, such as a career option for one's partner or a suitable school for the children, can be a consuming task. And then one still has to find a new home and organize the move. The stress from these demands together with unclear prospects for the future force many to abandon their academic career track. The dream job as a researcher may be in danger.

Occasionally it is argued that mobility should be seen as a part of academic life. If one does not like it, then one should consider a different career path. One can however argue: certain weaknesses of our academic system are being cemented in that mobility is rigorously demanded of everyone. Mobility is a contributor to the so-called leaky pipeline – meant is the ever-decreasing percentage of women in higher career levels of academia.

Certain research on labor market needs of mobility (Andrea S. Dauber, "Arbeitsmarkterfordernis Mobilität", 2012) indicates that the career pressure to be mobile has a traditionalizing effect on the division of labor among couples. If the man is mobile, then the couple is thereby going back to a traditional division of labor whereby the man works close to full time and is responsible for earning the main income. The woman puts her career aspirations aside in order to make a job-based change in location compatible with family life. Conversely, however, it has not been observed that men reduce their workload in order to compensate for more stress and extra effort in the case that a woman must be mobile in her career. Academics often marry a partner with a similar vocation. Unfavorable situations as above are likely in such circumstances. The leaky pipeline can thus also be explained through the inequalities arising from mobility which hinder the academic careers of women.

Do the contacts and insights gained through going abroad generally outweigh a certain amount of stress and extra effort? How is the effect of longer stays abroad evaluated by junior researchers in light of their own careers? A 2005 study (Göran Melin: The dark side of mobility) states that the surveyed Swedish postdocs gave an overall positive evaluation of mobility in hindsight of their own experiences. Yet one fifth of junior researchers felt they had been set back in their career. These negative judgments were particularly associated with the difficulty of connecting with the old network upon return from abroad and the sharing of gained knowledge.

The years of apprenticeship and travels of young researchers seem to be an indispensable element of the research world. There are however good reasons to think about alternatives. The living environment of our school children and students is already much more international today in comparison to past generations, thanks also to student exchanges and Erasmus grants. Perhaps the duration of academic exchange on the doctoral and postdoctoral level can be made shorter and thereby also more socially compatible? And institutions of higher learning should do more to help researchers with integration before and after a research stay abroad. In this way, to once again quote Helmut Schwarz, children can continue to choose being an astronaut, doctor or inventor as their dream job – and thereby dream of a career as a junior researcher. They will then enjoy going on travels for their dream job, and pass on the newly gained insights on their return.

Mobilität um jeden Preis? / Mobility – a meaningful end in its own right?
What skills does one acquire through a stay abroad? Which skills are gained through working in another academic institution? Which of these competencies are indispensable for various disciplines? And: Are there reasonable alternatives to an individual research stay of multiple months?

The University of Zurich Graduate Campus, which is devoted to the promotion of junior researchers, will address these questions at the Graduate Campus Annual Ceremony on **6 October 2016** (in English language). Further information can be found on our website:
www.grc.uzh.ch/en/events/annual-events/Jahresveranstaltung2016.html