

Career planning among self-initiated expatriate engineering academics in the UK during Brexit

Inês Direito¹, Shannon Chance^{2,1}

¹UCL, London, United Kingdom. ²TU Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper describes the design and preliminary analysis of interviews conducted with 15 academic staff members who came to the UK from other European countries to work in the field of engineering education and/or research. The study aims to contribute critical, new understanding regarding motivations to expatriate, limitations experienced, and changes anticipated. Issues of mobility, funding, skills development, and career prospects were explored. The analyses reported explore the impact of contextual influences, particularly the UK's decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) – a political process that was underway at the time of the interviews, in November 2019. The study contributes to the literature on the careers of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) using a conceptual framework developed by Andresen, Pattie, and Thomas (2020). This framework considers the role of personal initiative in becoming an SIE, in planning for and responding to shifting contents, and in overcoming barriers.

Full paper

The UK higher education sector attracts a high number of international academics from all over the world, who teach and do research; at a quantity exceeding all other countries in Europe except Switzerland (ETER, 2019). Because engineering is considered a global field, this sub-field of higher education relies on international

mobility more than most academic disciplines.

The impact of the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum of June 2016, commonly referenced as the Brexit referendum, is still unfolding. It is important to benchmark and study changes that occur following Brexit, particularly within engineering. Initial analyses have been reported (Direito & Fowler, 2018; Direito, Williams, & Chance, 2020; Fowler, Direito, Mitchell, & Rich, 2018) and this article provides a benchmark of perspectives and experiences described by engineering stakeholders, specifically third-level engineering students, lecturers, and researchers who were non-UK nationals living and working in engineering in the UK just prior to the UK's exit from the European Union. At that point, it was understood that Brexit would likely result in losses to the HE sector. Envisioned setbacks included: lower access to EU networks and funding sources for researchers; declining numbers of EU staff and students relocating to the UK; lower levels of access for UK students wanting to study in the EU (Mayhew, 2017). All these factors were likely to negatively affect education, research, and innovation in the UK.

This paper draws from the results of interviews conducted with 15 academics within the field of engineering education to investigate participants' lived experiences regarding emerging Brexit policies and legislation. A diverse sample of European academic staff members then working in UK Engineering higher education institutions were interviewed to explore their experiences, concerns, and future expectations following the Brexit referendum.

In the interviews, academics were asked about: factors they considered when choosing to work in the UK; their experience in the UK overall; what impacts they had felt because of Brexit; what their career plans entail; and their preferences regarding leaving or remaining the UK. Answers provided by each interviewee were followed-up with probing questions to yield further insight. The interviewer (this paper's lead author) raised the topics of mobility, funding (e.g., research grants), international research collaborations, career development, institutional support, and legal advice.

After approval was granted from the UCL Research Ethics Committee, participation calls and participation information sheets

were circulated via the Engineering Professors' Council newsletters and relevant social media (Twitter and LinkedIn). All interviews were conducted before the UK General Election occurred (on the 12th of December 2019), and before the COVID crisis, both of which would have influenced the narratives provided. Online interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and then checked by the research team for accuracy.

Preliminary analysis of interviews was conducted, used to develop a survey to help confirm and extend results, and shared with the funding organization in the form of an industry report. We now take the opportunity to explore the interviews more fully, given the shifts that have occurred over time and the relevance of these authentic interview data to answering questions raised by researchers in the field of SIE research.

The frameworks provided by Andresen, Pattie, and Hippler (2020) and Selmer and Lauring (2013) are both highly relevant for analysing the interview data we previously collected. As per Selmer and Lauring (2013), there are four primary motivators for becoming an SIE. SIEs usually put a lot of effort into proactive planning and monitoring the horizon.

Our sample group reflected a high level of similarity based on motivators as well as self-initiative. Overall, they needed less self-initiative to make the move to the UK from other EU countries than for SIEs who make more radical moves. But this group also had very high cultural and professional capital and mobility prospects. Because the perception of loss, or losing ground, is a significant motivator for people in general, and especially for people who carefully cultivate their professional profiles and career records, the sets backs imposed by Brexit (specifically regarding more limited prospects for research/grant funding) was a definite factor of consideration. New structural and cultural barriers were being put into place and, because members of this sample were highly motivated for professional success (who had completed multiple degrees in engineering, considered a highly rigorous subject), the likely career setback represented a significant barrier.

The self-initiative framework provides focus for our current work. The other (motivation) framework is important in establishing that our

sample group is homogeneous when compared to the widener group of SIEs.

References

Andresen, M., Pattie, M. W., & Hippler, T. (2020). What does it mean to be a 'self-initiated' expatriate in different contexts? A conceptual analysis and suggestions for future research. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 31(1), 174-201.

Direito, I., Williams, B., & Chance, S. (2020). Exploring the impact of Brexit on UK's engineering education sector from the perspective of European students and staff. In J. van der Veen, N. van Hattum-Janssen, H. Järvinen, T. de Laet, & I. ten Dam (Eds.) *48th SEFI Annual Conference: Engaging Engineering Education* (pp. 169–178). Twente, Netherlands: SEFI. ISBN: 978-2-87352-020-5. Retrieved from <https://www.sefi.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Proceedings-2020-web.pdf>

Direito, I., & Fowler, S. (2018). Portuguese academic staff and students in UK's engineering higher education. *3rd International Conference of the Portuguese Society for Engineering Education (CISPEE)*. Aveiro, Portugal: IEEE. doi: 10.1109/CISPEE.2018.8593453

ETER (2019). *Internationalisation of Academic Staff in European Higher Education*. European Tertiary Education Register. Retrieved from: https://www.eter-project.com/uploads/analytical-reports/ETER_AnalyticalReport_01_final.pdf

Fay, D., & Frese, M. (2000). Self-starting behavior at work: Towards a theory of personal initiative. In J. Heckhausen (Ed.), *Motivational psychology of human development: Developing motivation and motivating development* (pp. 307–324). New York, NY: Elsevier.

Fowler, S., Direito, I., Mitchell, J., & Rich, J. (2018, October). Initial impact of Brexit on European students and academic staff in UK's engineering higher education. In *Proceedings of the 46th SEFI Annual Conference 2018. Creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship for engineering education excellence*. (Vol. 46, pp. 190-197). Societe Europeenne pour la Formation des Ingenieurs (SEFI).

Mayhew, K. (2017). UK higher education and Brexit. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 33(suppl_1), S155-S161.

Selmer, J., & Luring, J. (2013). Cognitive and affective reasons to expatriate and work adjustment of expatriate academics. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 13(2), 175-191.