

Boundaries and tensions: A multi-stakeholder exploration of the individual and institutional implications of global academic mobility

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Global mobility is pervasive across all activities within Higher Education, with significant emphasis on the benefit of mobility for teaching, research, individuals' careers, and institutional reputation. However, despite widespread academic engagement in global mobility across the sector, the management is largely devolved to the 'local' level with little guidance and support. As a consequence, the Human Resource implications (e.g. consequences for remuneration and tax) of global academic mobility have remained undetected. This paper draws on qualitative interview data from a range of stakeholders in a single case study organisation to critically examine the individual and institutional implications of global academic mobility. The preliminary findings demonstrate a need for broader understandings of academic mobility, tensions in supporting and monitoring academic mobility, and the challenge of competing strategic priorities. The study identifies a lack of a strategic approach and considers the implications for supporting, managing and participating in global academic mobility.

Full paper

Introduction

Global mobility is pervasive across all activities within Higher

Education, with significant emphasis on the benefit of mobility for teaching, research, individuals' careers, and institutional reputation. The academic labour market is based on the notion of academic freedom with staff frequently travelling internationally to attend conferences, carry out fieldwork, take up visiting fellowships and to take up posts in other countries (Bauder, 2015). Furthermore, there is a high level of global mobility within academic labour markets (Morley et al., 2018) and it is not unusual for academics to live in one country but commute to another to work on a regular basis – 'cross-border commuters' (Comerio et al., 2021). Whilst a significant body of research examines the experiences of individual academics engaging in global mobility (Groves et al., 2018; Han, 2021; Pustelnikovaite, 2021) the management of global academic mobility within Higher Education has received limited attention.

Devolution of recruitment, selection, and performance management to academic line managers, as in public and private sector organisations more widely, (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018) has meant that the Human Resource implications of global academic mobility (for example, remuneration and tax implications, risk assessments for personal safety) have often gone unnoticed.

The recent Covid 19 pandemic has forced employers to explicitly engage with employees about their geographic location in the context of wider restrictions to mobility –nationally and globally. Historically, given the mobility inherently embedded in academic careers, this is not something that Higher Education Institutions have always undertaken. As a result, potential concerns related to social security and tax compliance as well as employers' duty of care have emerged, in particular the significant corporation and personal tax liabilities that may accrue. The responsibility for ensuring compliance has tended to fall to individuals however, academics have not always been aware of the implications of their internationally mobile careers. This also raises questions about the nature of employment relationship and the expectations that the different groups, such as academics, line managers and HR specialists, have.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to critically examine the individual and institutional implications of global academic mobility.

Methods

This paper draws on qualitative semi-structured interview data from a range of stakeholders (HR professionals, academic line managers, academics and tax consultants) in a single case study organisation.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary analysis of the data shows that although global academic mobility was a key strategic objective for the organisation there was a **need for a broader understanding of academic mobility** to encompass short term and long term global mobility **for work** (conferences, sabbaticals, exchanges etc) and global mobility **to work** to recognise that some academics had their primary residences outside of the UK and as a consequence spent significant periods of time conducting their work outside of the UK.

Perhaps reflecting **wider tensions of supporting rather than constraining** global mobility, participants accounts highlighted an absence of an integrated approach for support and monitoring. Whilst some support and oversight of global academic mobility for work was in place through the implementation of health and safety, travel and expenses policies, mobility to work was not and consequently had remained undetected for substantial periods of time. This lack of institutional oversight of global mobility was evident when, in ensuring its duty of care to employees during the Covid-19 pandemic, the institution uncovered a number of individuals engaging in global mobility to work and did not have an easily accessible central record of where academics were.

The **tension of competing institutional priorities** was another key theme to emerge. In particular the challenge of reconciling institutional commitment to reduce carbon emissions and supporting short term international travel. There was a concern that Early Career Academics, in particular, would have less opportunities for short term mobility as a result.

Concluding thoughts and implications

A range of implications for supporting, managing and participating in global academic mobility arise from this research. Despite the strategic importance of global mobility to HEIs and the perceived value for individual academics, the data demonstrated that there is

an absence of a strategic approach for managing the different forms of global academic mobility which can have unintended consequences for different groups. The research highlights how failure to develop and implement clear guidance and support can lead to increased institutional and personal liabilities, uncertainty for line managers and academics, unequal opportunities for engaging in global mobility and the potential for failing to attract or retain academic 'talent'.

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