

Researchers' mobility in the enlarging EU

# Science for Export

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## The magnitude of emigration from Poland seen since EU accession has rekindled discussion about the "brain-drain" and the exodus of highly qualified individuals

The post-accession wave of emigration from Poland has included scientific researchers, yet a lack of statistics

makes it hard to tell just how many of them have left, or ultimately for how long. However, the scale of the phenomenon can be gauged via qualitative studies focusing on the nature of researchers' mobility.

As one of the central planks of the European Research Area concept, greater mobility was intended to boost the scientific potential of the EU - which according to the European Commission requires "more abundant and more mobile human resources in science." The Commission has on the one hand concentrated on overcoming administrative and legal obstacles to researchers' mobility (such as by issuing the European Researchers' Charter), and on



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Since wealthy countries offer much better conditions for research work than Poland, scientists, especially young researchers, are strongly tempted to move abroad temporarily or for good

the other launched large-scale programs directly assisting mobility (such as the Marie Curie program, mobility portals and the ERA-MORE network of mobility centers).

### Caste of globetrotters

International researcher mobility is a phenomenon that starts with short, one-day or even several-hour visits paid to foreign research establishments, and scaling up through several-day visits, visiting lectures, training courses, and several-month grants, it can lead to several-year stays and even contracts to stay abroad permanently. Because this blurs the traditional concept of "migration" in the case of researchers, studying the phenomenon requires us to move beyond the customary definitions and concepts.

Mobility has been an inseparable part of scientific work for centuries, and neophyte researchers are expected to travel abroad to varying extents depending on their field of science, career stage, or country. Such requisite mobility sheds a new light on the traditional classification of migratory movement as either "voluntary" or "compulsory."

In the expanding EU, despite a range of measures aimed at gradually eliminating obstacles to the free flow of individuals, many such obstacles remain in place. Transition periods that still restrict access for citizens from the new member states accepted in 2004 (as well as Romania and Bulgaria accepted in 2007) to the job markets in the old EU countries have further complicated the legal issues involved in researcher mobility.

### Return ticket?

The issue that concerns the general public most is whether researchers will return to their home country. According to a questionnaire-based study, 26% of Polish researchers currently residing in Germany and 34% in the United Kingdom reported that they desired or strongly desired to return and obtain research positions in Poland. A desire to remain abroad, in turn, was reported by 27% of Polish researchers in Germany and 14% in the United Kingdom. It is noteworthy that the largest segment of both groups remains undecided, responding "I don't know" when asked about their plans to return to Poland. Only a small group of those who have gone abroad are specifically planning never to return, and so there is great potential for policies to encourage researchers to return to Poland.

Polish researchers vary somewhat in terms of their overall plans for further mobility: 60% of those abroad vs. 54% of those working in Poland plan to take future moves for research purposes, with the most frequently mentioned target countries being the UK, the US, and Germany. On the other hand, it is interesting that as many as one in four Polish researchers who have already worked abroad state that they were definitely not planning any more such moves.

Such mobility plans were also correlated to researchers' type of employment, age, and degree of profes-

sional advancement. The likelihood of departing abroad is smallest among older individuals and among those who have a permanent employment contract, and greatest among young individuals employed on the basis of various temporary contracts. This bears out the common beliefs that those leaving the country are chiefly young researchers, and that Poland does not face the danger of an exodus of professors.

### Making a better start

Those surveyed in the United Kingdom stressed the better conditions they enjoy abroad and the equal opportunities they have gained from EU enlargement. One of the female Polish researchers surveyed said: "Now if you are the same - have the same knowledge and experience - then you have equal chances; before you had to be better." Respondents also noted the lower fees for doctorate studies, less red tape, and a general improvement in their quality of life. These survey results show that Polish

### Research shows that 27% of Polish researchers in Germany and 14% in the UK report they have no wish to return to Poland

researchers consider the United Kingdom to be an increasingly more attractive place to pursue their research.

In Germany, where transition periods still prevent citizens of new member states from seeking employment on equal-access terms, respondents were more divided as to the impact of EU enlargement on researchers' mobility. While they did note fewer formalities and a change in the attitude of German society, the prevailing view was that EU expansion had had little impact on researchers since their mobility was always greater than that of society at large.

Despite the observed differences, administrative and legal barriers usually do not play any great role in researchers' decisions to migrate or in their choice of destination country. This extraordinary group of "globetrotters" generally treats such obstacles as hoops that simply need to be jumped through. The fact that having open regulations is not the whole story is best attested by Poland's case as well: despite the country's liberal regulations for the employment of foreigners at research institutions, barriers of a financial and institutional nature prevent us from attracting sufficient foreigners to fill the places Polish researchers are leaving behind. ■

#### Further reading:

- Ackers L. (2005). *Moving People and Knowledge: Scientific Mobility in the European Union*, International Migration, vol. 43(5).  
 Morano-Foadi S. (2005). *Scientific Mobility, Career Progression, and Excellence in the European Research Area*, International Migration, vol. 43(5).  
 Stalford H. (2005). *Parenting, Care and Mobility in the EU. Issues facing migrant scientists*. Innovation, vol. 18(3).