

International careers

The Costs of Mobility

In January 2000, the European Commission launched the concept of a European Research Area with the aim of enhancing the free movement of researchers, knowledge and technology in Europe. Nearly ten years later, internationally mobile scientists are still facing bureaucratic, financial and career issues.

Lab Times consulted national and local service offices for mobile researchers, the Marie Curie Fellows Association (MCFA) and the RINDICATE study of the European Commission to highlight the common problems that internationally mobile scientists are confronted with. It is undisputed that professional training abroad promotes scientific and language skills and potentially enhances international networking and collaborations. However, the practicalities of working and living in several European countries make mobility less appealing.

Extra costs and taxation

When scientists move to another country, they are faced with extra costs like visa and car registration fees. They have to pay for relocation services and rent deposits, for language courses, for new furniture and household items, for international travel and for phone calls to their family and friends at home.

Whereas international companies give their employees financial support when relocating them to another country, this is not the rule for scientists. However, national and pan-European funding agencies increasingly recognise the extra costs of mobility. Beneficiaries of Marie Curie Fellowships, for example, are entitled to a supplementary mobility allowance of €500 to €800 per month and to a travel allowance of €250 to €2,500 per year.

Earning less than their local colleagues

Supplementary mobility-related allowances are reimbursements for expenses and not part of the salary. Despite this, they are considered as taxable income in several European Member States such as Germany,

Italy, Ireland and the UK. In this way, mobile researchers earn the same or even less than their local colleagues, the MCFA told *Lab Times*.

Social security

In the RINDICATE study "Evidence on the main factors inhibiting mobility and career development of researchers", transferring pensions and social security benefits across borders in the European Union (EU), and the complex nature of organising this bureaucracy have emerged as clear problems for internationally mobile scientists. One survey respondent advocated a European social security, salary and pension scheme for researchers.

Researchers are in a particularly unfavourable situation with regard to pension entitlements. Their professional training comprises a long, unpaid qualification phase. Thus, they start to contribute to pension schemes relatively late in life. Since permanent positions are scarce, scientists often work on several discontinuous, short fixed-term contracts during their career. If they work in different countries, they may be additionally disadvantaged by pension schemes with fixed minimal membership periods of several years or with non-transferable pensions. Mobility periods are also often funded by grants, fellowships or stipends, which do not necessarily confer employee status on researchers and which may not come with pension provisions or social security rights.

Despite many years of hard work, the financial perspective of mobile researchers after retirement can be dismal. In the RINDICATE study, a survey respondent wrote, "I'm currently employed on a fellowship with no social security, no health care,

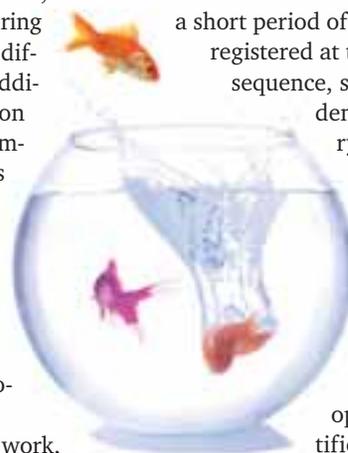
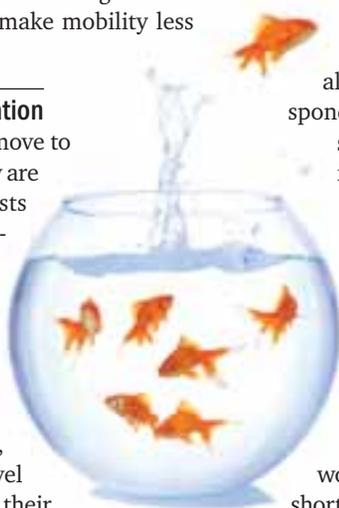
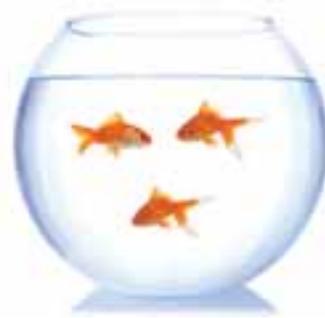
no pension, which means that I can simply not afford to continue on a similar basis for a longer period (more than 3 years)...Pension plans seem not generally transferable and in any event future planning is difficult. After 11 years of work plus four years PhD, I have two years pension contributions in Britain (probably worthless) and so far 1 year in Germany." However, in Germany the minimal membership period in pension schemes is usually five years.

Mobile researchers might be paid a much lower salary abroad than in their home country. Their monthly salary might also be affected by currency fluctuations in countries that have not introduced the euro, such as when working in the UK.

Career setbacks

Almost all mobile researchers work on fixed-term contracts in the host institution. A postdoc from a non-European country at a Dutch university told *Lab Times*, how nightmarish bureaucratic entanglements can become. The researcher had a Marie Curie Fellowship contract for 18 months, which was extended for another month. Since she could not find accommodation for such a short period of time, she could not get registered at the town hall. As a consequence, she could not get a residence permit and her salary. Short fixed-term contracts may additionally make it impossible to register with the social security system or to obtain bank cards or credit cards.

Although scientific work abroad develops a researcher's scientific potential, the hoped for career boost might never materialise. Mobile researchers have to spend a considerable amount of time learning languages, dealing with new administrative procedures, integrating into a new



scientific community and learning new techniques. This might negatively influence their scientific productivity and career progress in comparison to colleagues who always stay in the same familiar research environment. In the RINDICATE study, scientists complained that their international experience was not recognised in terms of career development. Additionally, their working stay abroad weakened their professional network at home and made it difficult to return to academia in their home country. Reintegration is therefore a very urgent issue for mobile researchers in the EU.

The dual career problem

An experienced researcher wrote, "Looking back, I'm afraid becoming a mobile researcher has been my most important career error. Recognition of mobility and international experience is practically zero, even though 'officially' (e.g. in advertisements) such things are often stated as requirements for scientific staff positions. In reality though, scientific jobs (in particular in Europe) are distributed almost exclusively through favouritism and old boys' networks. Mobility in that sense is a major handicap, because as a mobile researcher your 'local network'... is inevitably less strong than that of others who never moved an inch..."

"When researchers become mobile, they are taking a risk, which strongly affects their spouse or partner as well. In the worst case, a phase of mobility can negatively affect the career of both," representatives of the MCFA told *Lab Times*. Few institutions have adopted mechanisms to help the spouses and partners of internationally mobile postdocs and doctoral candidates to find a job in the same place and to develop their career. Some highly mobile researchers found that mobility made family life extremely difficult. The problem of having to 'choose' between a research career and family or relationship was frequently mentioned, according to the RINDICATE study. A survey respondent wrote, "Being mobile at the beginning of the career is important to extend your knowledge and contacts, but after this time it makes it extremely hard to have a partner/family, mostly when your partner is a scientist as well and needs to move every 2-3 years. Having to find a position in the same country... several times during a few years is extremely hard and depressing..." Another survey respondent criticised

that "support currently available is structured so as to attract only two types of researchers: 1. young/ unmarried/ without children; or 2. in a traditional relationship with one 'bread-winner' and one flexible partner. I do not think that this represents a large share of researchers".

Also everyday life is more difficult to organise, if one does not speak the local language or if qualified local advice is not available. Finding reasonably priced accommodation, getting a social security number, having the car registered, arrangements for child care or schooling, applications for child benefits and job applications of the spouse or partner can be quite challenging tasks for foreigners.

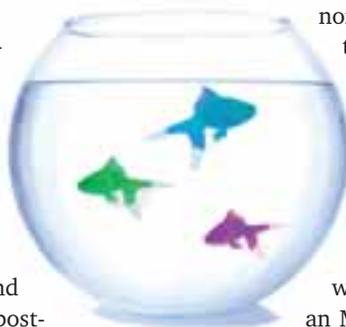
EMBO supports mobile postdocs

In the EU, international mobility is already a mass phenomenon and affects thousands of researchers in the life sciences. According to a report by the European Commission Joint Research Centre, 25% of the estimated 37,000 life sciences doctoral candidates in the EU are of foreign origin (9% from other EU countries, 16% from a non-European country). Of the estimated 22,000 to 25,000 postdoctoral researchers in the life sciences in the EU, 42% are of foreign origin (18% from other EU

countries, 24% from non-European countries). Some solutions to remedy mobility problems have already been achieved.

From January 2010 onwards, the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO)

will offer an internationally portable pension plan for beneficiaries of EMBO Long-Term Fellowships. This is the first time that a European science organisation has established a pension plan for its fellows. It was developed and will be administered by the German consulting company MLP. Funds invested in the plan will be managed by global insurance company Allianz. A survey conducted by the EMBO Fellowship office revealed that, so far, less than ten per cent of fellows contributed to a pension scheme, while nearly all of them were insured against health risks and accidents. EMBO fellows who enroll in the new pension plan will receive an employer-provided match to their retirement contributions of up to €100 per



month. Participation in the pension plan is voluntary and contributions of €100 per month are recommended. It is hoped that the fellows will continue to contribute to the pension scheme after their term as an EMBO fellow is finished. Funds can be transferred later on to a different scheme if desired by the fellow.

Burning issues

According to the RINDICATE study, there are difficulties for third-country researchers with regard to visa and residence issues. The European Council directive on scientific visas of 2005 aims to facilitate the access of non-European researchers to the EU and to allow them to work on a scientific research project in several EU countries. The legally binding directive intends to accelerate the administrative procedures for residence permits for researchers and to facilitate family unity. Researchers need a hosting agreement signed with a research organisation to be admitted. So far 25 countries in Europe have implemented scientific visas.

In 2005, the European Commission also adopted a European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. The Charter describes the rights and obligations of researchers and their employers or funding organisations. The Code aims to ensure equal treatment of researchers in Europe and increases transparency in their recruitment. In 2008, the documents were signed by around 200 research organisations from 23 countries. The overall take-up of the voluntary Charter and Code has been relatively limited, as the European Commission states in its "Science, Technology and Competitiveness key figures report 2008/2009".

Demands to be fulfilled

The MCFA demands better taxation guidelines, which exclude mobility and

travel allowances from income tax and which do not penalise mobile researchers. Spouses and partners should be allowed to work abroad under the mobile researcher's visa. Additionally, local researcher organisations and unions should enforce the adop-

Representatives of Euraxess Services in Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK told *Lab Times* that a pan-European pension scheme and better social insurance cover are needed for mobile researchers. Stipends and grants should include payments for a portable pension scheme. A pan-European register should be set up, where mobile researchers can find at a glance all the pension, invalidity and other social security rights they have built up in several countries over the years. Entitlements to unemployment and other social security benefits should be better transferable between countries. Generally, national legislation in European countries should be adjusted, if it hampers international mobility and existing regulations should be used to make life easier for mobile scientists.

An elite with few rights and little money?

Representatives of Euraxess Services also stated that the integration of mobile researchers into national schemes for career progression has to be facilitated. European research should rely less on grants because the resulting job insecurity makes many scientists leave research.

Mobile researchers should receive steady assistance by Euraxess and more job vacancies should be posted on the Euraxess website. Additionally, all European universities should sign and comply with the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.

Despite all these problems, scientists still appreciate international work experience. However, continuous professional mobility does not seem to be a desirable way of life in the EU, considering the consequences it entails personally, financially and professionally. Action is not only required for future re-

searcher generations but also for those scientists who have worked abroad in the past. Otherwise, internationally mobile researchers will remain a poor elite with few rights.

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Advice for mobile researchers



(Post-)Doctors without borders

Euraxess (<http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/>) gives information on job vacancies, funding opportunities and fellowships in Europe. Euraxess is an information website of the European Commission and of those countries participating in the EU Framework Programme for Research. It was launched in June 2008. Euraxess Services, a network of 200 service centres in 35 European countries, gives free assistance to researchers to relocate to another country. The service centres give advice on accommodation, visas, work permits, recognition of qualifications, social security, pension rights, healthcare, salaries and taxation, day care, schooling and language courses. Universities may join the Euraxess network to become local contact points.

The **Marie Curie Fellows Association** (<http://www.mcfa.eu>) is an association of scientists who have been awarded a mobility research training grant by the European Community. The Association gives advice on social security, taxation, contractual issues, career and project management and useful addresses. Currently, it represents more than 4,000 past and present Marie Curie Fellows. Requests concerning mobility issues can also be made by non-members at <http://mcfa.eu/site/public/yourQuestions.php>

Specialised university offices can be consulted by internationally mobile researchers starting out at individual universities. Examples are the "Welcome Center" at University of Bern, the "International Office" at University of Duisburg-Essen, "International Advice and Support" at University of Bristol and "Visiting Researcher Services" at Karolinska Institutet Stockholm.

tion of more mobility friendly regulations. The MCFA is currently looking for recent and current Marie Curie Fellows to participate in the updating of their country-specific mobility guides.