



Understanding Researcher Mobility

The international mobility of people is an important part of any research system. Researchers often move countries to take advantage of training and job opportunities, and to work in excellent research environments. The UK is no exception and benefits from the skills and expertise of international researchers.

For a relatively small country the UK has a strong research system that exceeds other much larger countries in terms of scientific excellence. In a global research environment, collaboration and mobility are needed beyond national borders: international mobility has shaped the UK research landscape.

The UK's decision in 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) has made international mobility an even higher priority issue. The UK's relationship with the EU is integral to international researchers based in the UK, UK-nationals looking to move abroad and the many UK institutions and organisations that employ international researchers. It is therefore crucial to have an up-to-date picture of international researcher mobility in the UK. A solid evidence base is needed to identify the factors that influence mobility, such as what makes the UK an attractive place to conduct research and how international mobility benefits the UK.

The research

The Royal Society, the UK's national academy of science, commissioned RAND Europe to improve understanding of researcher mobility patterns and drivers, with a particular focus on mobility to and from the UK.

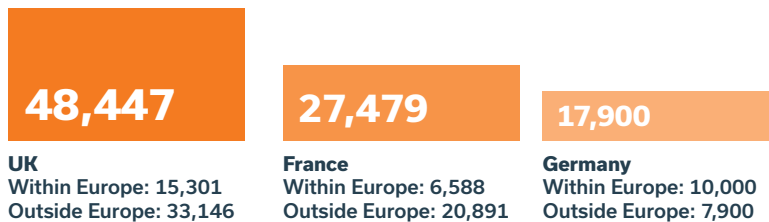
To help identify these patterns and drivers, RAND Europe conducted a survey of nearly 1,300 researchers working in higher education institutions, public sector research establishments and research institutes in the UK. The 2017 survey was accompanied by a literature review on what is currently known about the mobility of researchers in the UK and Europe. These elements informed the findings.

The flow of researchers to and from the UK

Based on the different flows of researchers, the UK is a popular destination for international researchers and one of the leading research destinations globally.

The inflow of researchers from elsewhere in the EU to the UK was 3,600 from 2007 to 2013. In comparison, the outflow of UK researchers leaving the UK to work elsewhere in the EU was 600.

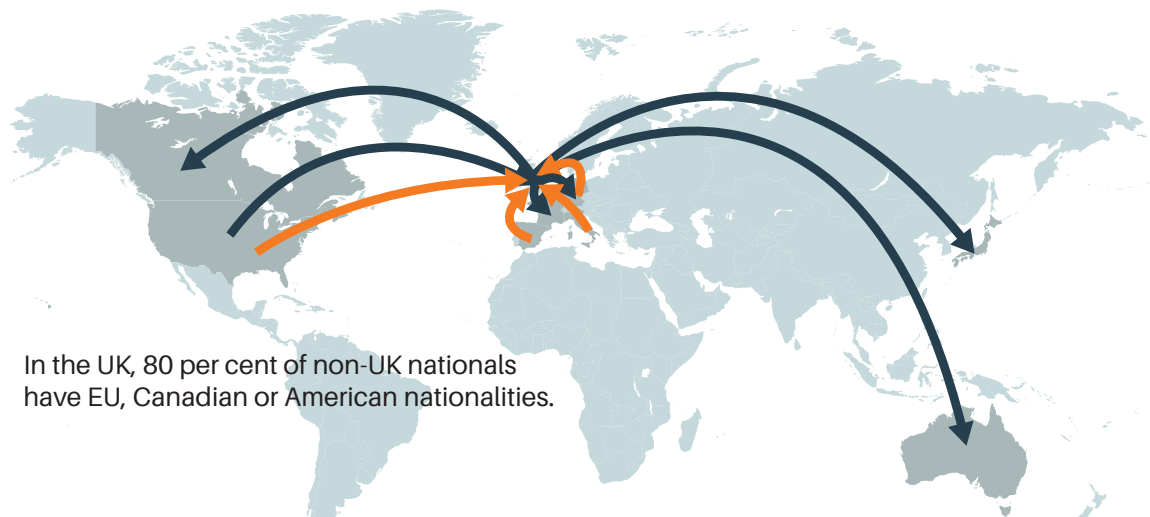
Across the EU, the UK has been the top training ground for PhD candidates from both within and outside the EU. For participants in the EU's popular Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions research fellowship programme, the UK was the most attractive destination



Most of the researcher mobility to and from the UK is within a small set of western countries, in particular the US and Germany.



While it is clear that the UK is a popular research destination, 72 per cent of active UK researchers have trained or worked as researchers abroad, demonstrating the importance of mobility to researchers in the UK and beyond.



The benefits to mobility

Researcher mobility has a range of benefits to the UK, the source country and the researchers themselves.

The UK

The UK benefits from researcher mobility through two main ways:



Having access to a wider supply of highly qualified researchers with a mix of skills and expertise.



Being able to develop international networks. Forty per cent of foreign-born researchers report ongoing research collaborations with researchers in their countries of origin, which help to develop these networks.

The source country



The country where the researchers come from benefit, as researchers tend to retain productive links with their source countries and bring additional skills and expertise when they return home.

The researcher



Researchers that are willing to move tend to perform better academically in terms of the number and quality of their research publications, and the scope and size of their professional networks.

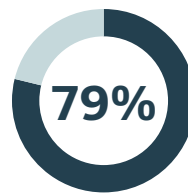
Why researchers are mobile

Professional factors, such as career development and the research environment, featured highly as reasons why researchers moved abroad.

Career development



Career development was the most commonly cited reason for international researchers to move to the UK and for UK researchers to move overseas. Even for those returning to the UK, it is the most frequently selected driver.



Seventy nine per cent of those surveyed reported to feel that to be a good researcher you must be willing to move. There is a professional expectation for researchers to be internationally mobile.



The postdoctoral period is important for researcher mobility, as 38 per cent of UK researchers move to take a postdoctoral position in another country following their PhD studies. A key driver is career progression.

Research excellence

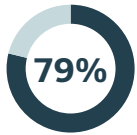


Elite scientists are drawn to be move abroad due to research excellence, such as strong institutions with excellent researchers. The US and UK are key destinations for elite scientists in this regard.

Why researchers are not mobile

Family and personal factors, such as having children and/or a long-term partner, were the main reasons why researchers do not move abroad.

Children



Of the respondents, 79 per cent said that having children made them less likely to move between countries.

Long-term partner



Having a long-term partner made 60 per cent of respondents less likely to move between countries. Finding suitable employment for a partner is the most frequently cited barrier to mobility among researchers with a partner.

Gender



Women are less internationally mobile than men – 28 per cent of male researchers are mobile in comparison to 21 per cent of female researchers.

The impact of Brexit

Although not a focus of the survey, Brexit emerged as an area of concern for researchers:



Professionally, international researchers based in the UK expressed uncertainty about the future of research and their profession post-Brexit, including their financial security in the long term.



Personally, international researchers reported feeling unwelcome in the UK through the perceived increase in xenophobia and uncertainty around the rights of EU nationals to remain in the UK.

However, not all survey respondents expected Brexit to be detrimental to the UK research system. Both the survey data and literature review show that the UK hosts a large number of researchers from outside the EU, who would be less directly impacted by Brexit. The survey data suggested that obtaining a visa does not pose a significant barrier to researcher mobility.

Conclusions

Researchers usually move to the UK to advance their career, work with expert colleagues and pursue interesting research topics. If the UK wants to maintain its reputation as a host for some of the best international researchers, it needs to remain an attractive destination in terms of the calibre and variety of its research. However, the UK should also think about how to best address some of the practical barriers identified in the study, such as helping international researchers settle into the country with regards to a good standard of living and employment for partners. These are likely to be the deciding factors that determine whether the UK remains an enticing destination for the best and brightest – whether inside or outside the EU.

This summary describes work done by RAND Europe documented in *International mobility of researchers: A survey of researchers in the UK* by Susan Guthrie, Catherine Lichten, Emma Harte, Sarah Parks and Steven Wooding, RR-1991-RS, 2017 (available at www.rand.org/t/rr1991). To view this summary online, visit www.rand.org/t/rb9968. RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research organisation that helps to improve policy and decision making through research and analysis. RAND Europe's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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