Looking Beyond the Façade of Academic Mobility and Migration
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A lot is being said and written about Academic Mobility in the accelerated globalisation of Higher Education that most countries and world regions are experiencing today. It has been lauded, sometimes fetishised\(^1\) but also criticized by both policymakers and scholars alike.

Figures seem to talk for themselves to describe the “success” of Academic Mobility: according to the latest statistics provided by the Unesco, the global figure of international students rose by more than 75% 2000-2009. New markets are also emerging. For example China is said to want to attract 500,000 international students in the near future, while according to BBC News (March 2011) “the entire overseas student population in China could once have travelled in a minibus. In the early 50s it consisted of 20 east Europeans\(^2\)”. The number of mobile students is expected to rise by 3.7 million by 2015\(^2\). Yet we do need to bear in mind that millions of students and staff worldwide are and will remain extremely ‘immobile’ during their studies/careers…

Often presented as having now become “systematic, dense, multiple and trans-national”\(^3\), the mobility of students, trainees, researchers, lecturers and administrative staff has led to the creation of many myths which have been identified in various institutional and individual discourses worldwide and which contribute to forming some sort of “façade” of mobility. In a volume that I co-edited with M. Byram\(^4\), Anthony Welch lists the following myths: 1. Academic Mobility is not a modern phenomenon, 2. Mobility is not limited to the “West”, 3. Mobility is not a matter of choice, 4. Mobility doesn’t mean that it is the student who does the travelling, 5. Mobility doesn’t lack a gender dimension, 6. Mobility isn’t neutral (cultural, economic and political dimensions), 7. “a brain drain of the highly skilled does not necessarily represent an unrecoverable loss to the originating country”. Many other misconceptions could be added to the list, such as “travel doesn’t systematically broaden the mind…”, if we think of the intercultural component of Academic Mobility\(^5\).

The points below represent a critical step towards gaining a better understanding of the intricacies of Academic Mobility in the 21\(^{st}\) century. Through them, I propose some potential answers to the myths listed supra.

When dealing with Academic Mobility, the basic question of what do we really mean by Academic Mobility? needs to be asked as too often mobile actors are defined in what could be considered as simple discourses – which has some impact on how we talk about mobile academics.

First of all, should we call it international, transnational, global? Besides is it still worth differentiating it from intra-national academic mobility in our times of gloCality, where the local cannot but be impacted on by the local and vice versa?

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In terms of mobile individuals I would argue that it is not enough to consider students and staff (researchers, lecturers, etc.) separately as is happening in research. Actually I would suggest comparing their experiences. In fact within these two large categories, one can identify many different subcategories. If we take students, e.g. exchange and international degree students often get put in the same box, even though their characteristics differ. Also little research is available on students’ experiences of ICT-based academic mobility or of foreign university courses in home countries (cf. the UAE), which are becoming more and more important in the Academic Mobility landscape.

For staff, “some researchers are mobile some of the time, whilst for others, travel has become a routine part of their life: going backwards and forwards they are constantly mobile around the world” (Fahey & Kenway, 2010: 568). We also need to bear in mind that some foreign researchers work in another/other country/countries and have never had any work experience in their own country. As a consequence Academic Migration should not be confused with Academic Mobility but become an accompanying mode.

Kim (2010: 579) proposes the following distinctions for staff, which is also useful. Her typology of mobile academics includes: academic intellectuals (theoretical skills), academic experts (“researchers”) and manager-academics (managements skills). This new way of looking at staff mobility/migration is important as it reflects the entrepreneurial characteristics of today’s universities (ibid.).

Another issue relates to the question Why do people move? It is impossible to answer this question without considering local or regional discourses on the need to be mobile in both sending and receiving “spaces”. Of course some individuals will move for economic reasons but in the academia this doesn’t seem to be too often the case (Kim, 2010).

In Europe the first institution that comes to mind when one talks about academic mobility (students and staff) is the European Union and its mobility programs such as ERASMUS, which has endeavored to urge academics to be mobile – but hasn’t been too successful.

Neoliberal globalization has also accompanied contemporary Academic Mobility through allowing e.g. the marketization of Higher Education (and “talent wars” Fahey & Kenway, 2010), new immigration policies (but this is changing today at least in some countries), the creation of new power relations between countries and regions. As a direct consequence, “spaces” have now become competitors. International rankings such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings also contribute to this phenomenon. Educational “brands” are thus being created (e.g. the label “UCL: The Global University” substituting University College London in the UK).

The question why do people move? also derives from why do institutions want to hire international scholars or attract international students? In the United Kingdom, Kim (2009: 396) tells us that foreign academics are recruited mostly for research, not really for teaching and even less for ‘interculturality’ in Higher Education. This is probably the case also in many other countries.

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My final point is about the impact and implications for the “spaces” involved in Academic Mobility (i.e. “sending” and “receiving” countries – sending countries may not always be mobile academics’ country of birth). A lot of discussions around financial aspects have taken place recently. In an increasing number of countries Academic Mobility is seen as a way to finance “local” education. In a recent letter to the British newspaper the Observer\(^9\) sixteen university vice-chancellors insist that “International students coming to universities contribute over £5bn each year to the UK economy through tuition fees and off-campus expenditure”. This letter was written in reaction to a recent decision to cut the number of student visas in England. While reading their letter, one might get the impression that international students are often seen as mere “cash cows”. But the letter also mentions that “International students bring extensive cultural and political benefits to the UK. When they return to their countries at the end of their studies, they become cultural and economic ambassadors for the UK”. In her research, Kim (2009\(^10\)) has noted that the second argument is never actually the main motivation for accepting students from abroad. The same goes for international staff she argues.

Now what about the sending “spaces”? Do they lose? Can they gain? Many scholars working on Academic Mobility argue that the tired old notions of “brain drain” and “brain gain” should be avoided. Quoting Kim (2009: 401; cf. Fahey & Kenway, 2010): “what is going on now is, arguably, not so much “brain drain” or “brain gain” in the society of nation states, but it is more like “brain transfer and transform” in a globalized space”. Systematic research on this aspect is urgently needed to address this issue. Researchers have too often concentrated on the receiving “spaces”...

A lot of work remains to be done to grasp the complexity and multifacetedness of Academic Mobility and Migration. Looking beyond the façade of the related phenomena should be the priority... for policymakers, researchers and staff involved in organizing Academic Mobility and Migration.

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\(^9\) [http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2011/mar/05/letters-international-student-cuts](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2011/mar/05/letters-international-student-cuts)