

# Who Is an (Im)Mobile Academic? Thinking Within and Beyond the Nation-State in Times of Geopolitical Turmoil



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# **(Im)Mobile Academics Working at Centres of Excellence: Their Contrasting Experiences of Local and International Research Collaborations**

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## Our **purpose** for today...

1. Why does the **question** of 'who an Im/mobile subject' matter?
2. How to **reconceptualise** Im/Mobility?: **Critical Mobilities Heuristic**
3. How to make this work? An empirical case: (Im)Mobile Academics in Centres of Excellence.
4. Concluding remarks

- This presentation is about academic mobility (one form of migration of the highly skilled & privileged)
- But underpinned by a reflection of what our understanding of migration is and what it means to be a member of a democratic society – or not.

# Underpinning narratives on Academic Mobility

- Voluntary or forceful academic mobility has always existed, but the scope and underpinning logics have changed.
- Last decades academic mobility has been driven by the narrative of the **knowledge society** and the **human capital approach**.
  - Academics ‘carry’ knowledge and skills: transferred into research centres or academic communities (Kim 2010; Marginson 2019)).
  - Beneficial for individuals, institutions and nations
- It has become an epitome of excellence, in the practice, in policy discourses, & research on mobility (Fahey and Kenway 2010a; Morley et al. 2018; Robertson 2010).
- On the contrary, ‘immobility’ is bad: it ‘ossifies’ knowledge, parochialism (Gorelova and Yudkevich 2015, 25; Horta 2022; Tavares et al. 2022)
- Resulting in a **binary and dichotomous** rendering of im/mobility (Robertson 2010; Salazar 2021; Tzanakou and Henderson 2021).
  - **Normatively**: mobility = good / immobility = bad

## Underpinning narratives on Academic Mobility

- **Critical approaches to mobility** have highlighted the difficulties experienced by mobile academics and questioned the human capital approach
- ....But also focus almost exclusively on mobile academics (Henderson 2019; Fahey and Kenway 2010a; Morley et al. 2018/2020)
- with the exception of Tzanakou 2021 & Tzanakou et al 2021; Curtois et al.
- The binary distinction remains

## However...

- The rise of far-right parties, governments, and ideologies is reinforce the violent, binary & exclusionary thinking: **‘us’ (the ethno-national community) versus ‘them’ (the foreigners)**
- Growing ‘understanding that higher education is undergoing critical transformations as a result of changing geopolitical dynamics’ (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva 2023, 153).
- Migratory movements, and academic mobility, as we knew it, appears to be heading towards radical transformations – if not to an abrupt end.
  - Alongside threats to academic autonomy, freedom, equity initiatives, etc.
  - And a threat to liberal democracy

# The problem with the 'Methodological Nationalism' (NM)

- The different narratives share an understanding of mobility/migration that is binary/dichotomous/exclusionary
- ....rooted in the **Methodological Nationalism**:
  - Takes the **nation-state as the natural social and political order** through which researchers make sense of the subjects and phenomena they investigate (Shahjahan and Kezar 2013; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).
- Example of definition of academic mobility:
  - 'as the **cross-border** movements of **people** [...] coupled with **materials** (such as infrastructures, resources, equipment) and **immaterialities** (such as ideas, information, knowledge, skills, emotions, imaginations) in higher education contexts' (Shen et al. 2022. 1321).



... I don't want to be misunderstood

- The narratives share the (explicit & implicit) binary understanding of im/mobility, although **normatively** they have very different points of departure !!
- I'm NOT saying, e.g., that critical studies on academic mobilities or the 'human capital approach' are the same than far-right discourses...
- ...but was 'neoliberalism' ever about free movement of people, freedom of thought, participation, and democracy?

1. Why does the **question** of 'who an Im/mobile subject matter?

## **2. How to re-conceptualise Im/Mobility? Critical Mobilities Heuristic.**

3. ...empirical case

# Towards alternative conceptualisations: **Critical Mobilities Heuristic (CMH)**

- Drawing on the the ‘**mobilities paradigm**’ (Sheller 2014; Urry 2007; Salazar 2021; Kalir 2013); **Meth.Nationalism** (Sutherland 2020 Shahjahan et al 2013); **Henderson’s approach** (2019)
- The heuristic provides 4 lenses to study (im)mobilities:
  - (1) Encourages a **relational** understanding: everybody is (potentially) im/mobile, neither inherently good nor bad.
  - (2) Understands im/mobile subject as **constructed**: own decisions + structural, cultural, and individual elements.
  - (3) Mobility is **fluid** and it includes **temporalities**: transitions and becoming im/mobile matter; belonging to communities (the nation?)
  - (4) **Methodological** choices should be sensitive to participants perspectives and open the path for emerging definitions.

**3. How to make this work? An empirical case: (Im)Mobile Academics in Centres of Excellence.**

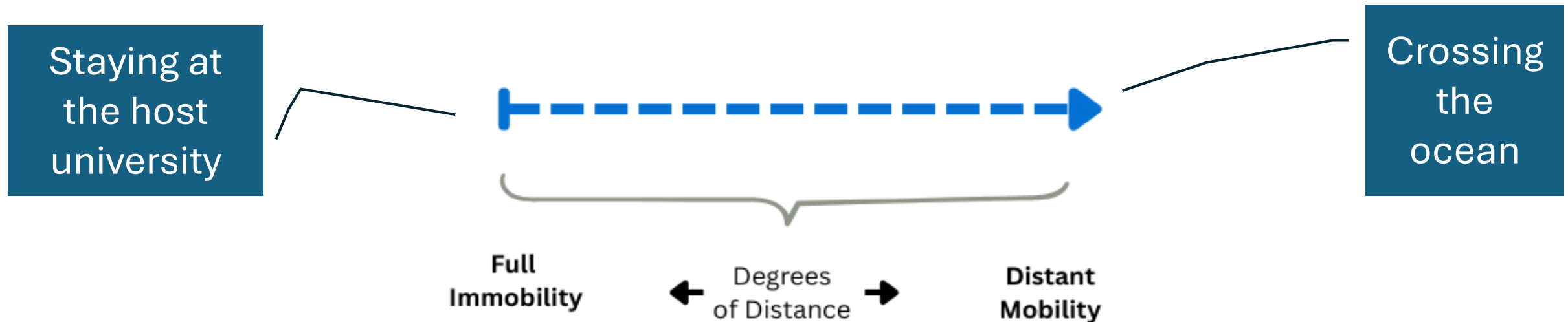
# The Empirical Case: '(Im)Mobile Academics Working at Centres of Excellence (CoE)' in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH)

- A qualitative study exploring research collaboration in CoEs – by Phds, PostDocs, Professors.
- Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz 2014, Timmermans & Tavory 2012)
- Initially the study was NOT about mobility.
  - Participant selection sought broad **disciplinary heterogeneity** across participants.
  - **Not based** on nationality, border-crossing, language, ethnicity, religion, etc. > because they are **all equal members of the CoE, who am I to judge?**
- However, the analysis showed that participants, for some unknown reason, collaborated differently.
- Scientometrics + Human capital approach show that in STEM & Big Sciences mobility leads to more research collaboration

# The (Im)Mobilities Continuum: a device for conceptualisation

Based on their **last academic affiliation**, each participant can be positioned on the continuum:

## The (Im)Mobilities Continuum



Multiple 'degrees of figurative geographic distances' are possible

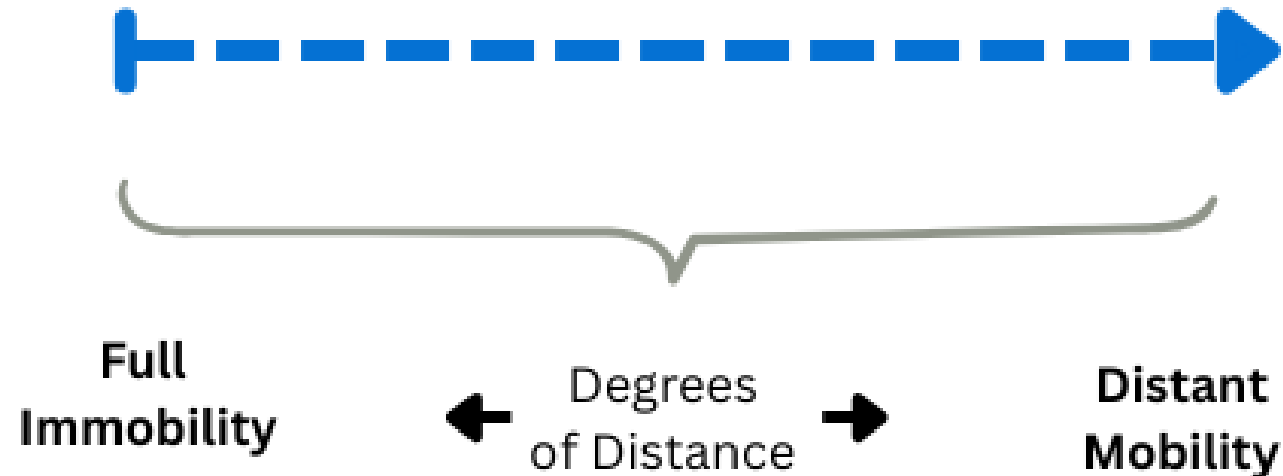
...step 2: I constructed two groups: **A definition**

**‘Immobile Academics’**

last academic affiliation is  
a university in the same  
*Bundesland*

**‘Mobile Academics’**

last academic affiliation  
outside *Bundesland*



**....They collaborate differently** (please see paper)

- The articulations of local (in the CoE) and international collaborations differ
- Intersect with different purposes and structural elements (e.g. gender, cultural aspects or schools of thought & language)



**TABLE 2** | Logics underpinning local and international collaborations and the relation to mobilities.

	Logics underpinning research collaboration	Purposes and challenges	Relation between mobilities and collaboration
Immobile academics	Local collaborations as <i>constructive</i> engagements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Implementation of the research programme</li><li>• Building bridges across disciplines</li><li>• Often a requirement for developing research projects</li></ul>	Engaging in temporal mobilities <i>stimulates</i> international collaborations
	International collaborations for <i>individual advancement</i>		
	International collaborations for <i>collective disciplinary advancement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A common and normalised practice</li></ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A transformative practice for overcoming parochialism in less internationalised CoEs</li></ul>	
Mobile academics	Local collaborations are almost absent: <i>exclusion</i> prevails	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parochialism hinders local collaborations</li></ul>	Mobility has <i>not</i> stimulated local collaborations
	International collaborations as <i>detached</i> from local collaborations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A paramount practice as their academic community is abroad</li></ul>	

## Implications of the Heuristic for the (Im)Mobilities-Research collaboration Link

- Through the Heuristic I discovered **definitions (who is an (im)mobile academic?)** & **relations** I would otherwise not have been able to see.
- Not a linear, positivistic relations betw. Mobility and collaboration
  - Not like STEM in the SSH: mobility – collaboration.
    - Immobile academics are not completely immobile and ‘ossifying’ knowledge.
    - Mobile academics do not ‘transfer’ any knowledge and skills to the CoE.
- Indeed, (Im)Mobilities intersect with other elements and (imagined) borders:
  - Gender & cultural differences
  - Schools of thought (epistemic injustice?); language (English & research agendas, geo-epistemic spaces)
  - The State creates Centres of Excellence: which is the national interest?

### **3. Concluding remarks**

## Wider implications

- The heuristic is an attempt to develop an integrative approach that understands migration as deeply ingrained in our societies: we are all members of a society.
- **Utterly imperfect and vastly insufficient:**
- Will existing conceptualisation of mobility withstand the geopolitical transformations, the attack on democracy, and migrants?
- How to build more analytical/conceptual bridges?
  - What other **definitions** are possible?
  - What do the **encounters** of mobile and immobile subjects mean?
  - E.g. how does physical mobility intersect with social mobility?