

Stranded in Academic Mobility: The Isolating Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Mobility is a key criterion for assessing academic excellence. International mobility undoubtedly allows junior researchers to have essential experiences and broaden their networks. Nevertheless, the difficulties that go along with mobility – relocation of family members, administrative burdens, and informal connections with the host institution – can reduce these potential gains dramatically. The home-office obligation imposed during the global pandemic has made these pitfalls even more pronounced.

“Today is an emotional rollercoaster and I have difficulties concentrating on my work. I received an email informing me that I will only be allowed to go to the institute once a week. How will I survive yet another set of months being disconnected from colleagues, collaborators, people who help me think? I feel like I’m floating in thin air...” (Field notes, 28.08.2020).

Carole Ammann received this email while spending two years with her family in Amsterdam for a Postdoc.Mobility fellowship of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). However, contacts in Amsterdam did not turn out as fruitful as desired. She, therefore, continued to collaborate with Marina Richter and other former colleagues in Switzerland.

Still no ‘Normality’

When Carole Ammann came back to the Netherlands from a short summer vacation in Switzerland in 2020, she hoped that she might at last be able to (re)start her mobility fellowship and the associated fieldwork in a ‘normal’ way. After the first wave of the pandemic, her children would be able to go to school, she would finally get to know inspiring colleagues as well as their research, and her fieldwork would at last unfold as planned. Her hopes were rather naïve as the Covid-19 pandemic came back with a second wave and life was nothing like ‘normal’ in the Netherlands or elsewhere for that matter.

Physical Mobility as a Key Criterion for Academic Excellence

Nowadays, international mobility is considered a key criterion for academic excellence. Funding bodies, such as the SNSF and universities’ appointment commissions, put much emphasis on the researchers’ mobility when evaluating their applications, which renders mobility an imperative for junior researchers. As mentioned on the SNSF homepage: “A research stay abroad enables such researchers to acquire more in-depth knowledge, increases their scientific independence and enhances their research profile” (www.snf.ch).

Junior researchers, who apply for a mobility fellowship, adopt the above-mentioned approach, which is reflected in Carole Ammann’s application. In it, she states that: “The proposed project will enable me to gain scientific independence and academic

maturity. [...] to gain familiarity with the Dutch academic landscape and enlarge my network [...]. The weekly exchanges and feedback from the members of the research group [...] will increase my theoretical and conceptual thinking” (excerpt from Ammann’s SNSF Postdoc.Mobility application).

Theory Meets Reality and the Pandemic

Moving with one’s family to another country requires a significant amount of effort from all family members. It includes a lot of bureaucratic arrangements such as applying for permits, setting up bank accounts and buying insurance. The partner has to quit his or her job, and the family needs to find an apartment, a school for the children, learn a new language, get to know the city, make friends and adapt to the new way of life. Moreover, junior scholars often face uncertain and precarious situations due to short-term contracts, low payments and generally insecure career prospects in the highly competitive academic environment.

While the feeling of being alone is often tied to the first weeks or months in a new place, the pandemic increased this substantially. If you are forced to work from home and schools close after 2,5 months of being in the country, a sense of loneliness quickly turns into complete isolation. This situation is a heavy burden for all family members and a difficult condition for focusing on a new research project and advancing one’s academic career. Being far away from one’s usual setting, without a network to rely upon for help with the children and many other things, makes everyday life even more demanding.

Academic mobility during the pandemic, particularly the concept of home-office, has a completely different meaning when one is only in a temporal home. A lack of contacts and connections to the research institution for professional exchanges, but also of seminars, workshops, coffee breaks, or lunches to be in touch with colleagues renders the experience all the more difficult. What is more, as a Ph.D. student undertaking international mobility, regular meetings with the supervisor should be the norm, but as a postdoc, such support depends on more informal exchanges.

A further challenge was to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in an unknown field during the pandemic. Physical distance, closed institutions and the fact that everyone is busy with their own lives make it very difficult to get access to people and start ethnographic fieldwork from scratch. If one’s research cannot be done in cyberspace but is on social phenomena in the real world, then the range of methods is reduced to collecting written sources and conducting online interviews. Methods that require physical presence such as long in-depth conversations, participation and observation as well as other methods of sensory ethnography remain out of reach.

The Pandemic as a Catalyst

We wrote this text as a personal reflection of our experiences with the pandemic but we argue that the pandemic did not create these problems as such; they will persist once the pandemic is over. The pandemic rather has operated as a catalyst, making pre-existing difficulties even more poignant. The period of early postdocs is the time when junior mobility scholars should sharpen their profiles, advance their academic careers and produce innovative findings.

However, one often arrives at a time when the chosen project is almost at its end, and the researchers are finalizing their papers and busily applying for new jobs and projects. This means that the connections within the institution that occur via teaching, workshops, administrative duties and other regular meetings are close to none. As their involvement at the host institution and the so-much-praised exchange depend mostly on physical presence, one feels stranded in academic mobility. So much uncertainty, in this case reinforced by the pandemic, makes the period a personally and professionally unsettling, isolating and costly experience.