

EU Insights Hub

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# Academic Career Choices in UK Higher Education: The Impacts of Pre-career Mobility

A British Council commissioned study conducted by



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# 1 Executive summary

- EU students and academics contribute significantly to all aspects of United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE), firstly during their studies, and later, as they cement their academic careers. EU academics make up around 17 per cent of all academic staff in UK HEIs and 19 per cent of staff on research contracts.
- When asked about international pre-career mobility, academic researchers interviewed for this study are certain of its impact on their decision to remain abroad and pursue an academic career in the UK.
- Half of the senior EU academics interviewed with pre-career mobility in the UK remained in their *alma mater* to pursue their academic career.
- None of the interviewed academics left the UK after their postgraduate studies at a UK HE institution for an academic career overseas before returning to the UK.
- International mobility experiences at PhD and Postdoctoral levels are more likely to result in a UK-based academic career compared to undergraduate and master's studies, as those that advance to higher levels of study are more likely to pursue an academic career in the UK.
- Other mobility-related factors for choosing an academic career in UK HE include: the reputation and superior quality of UK HE institutions, greater availability of funding, the use of English as a universal language, and London as a science hub.
- Greater opportunity for academic advancement compared to the country of origin also had an impact, specifically for Polish and Portuguese academics. This includes access to better and more modern equipment, a more heterogeneous environment, career progression based on merit and broader networking of researchers within HE institutions.
- The job market is also an important factor considered by interviewees, with the UK presenting more opportunities for early-career researchers than the country of origin. In UK HE institutions, the recruitment process is seen as more flexible and transparent when recruiting from overseas.
- Academic interviewees perceive threats and opportunities to UK HE institutions. The quality of institutions, greater career progression, international atmosphere, international collaborations, and availability of funding are pointed out as the principal opportunities in UK HE. The main threats they perceive to the UK HE system are a general drop in research funding available, and a perceived lack of clarity on the Government's policy changes, as well as mitigation measures, in the context of Brexit. This is already resulting in a lower number of study applicants from the EU.

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- The effects of Brexit are manifested in issues such as tuition fee costs, difficulty with visa applications, access to EU research funding, and the struggle in maintaining international collaborations. In the long term, it is broadly felt that without intervention, UK HE institutions will continuously feel more isolated from the EU academic environment, and from the benefits that the relationship carries.
  - Future lines of research include 1) a comparative study to determine the differences in impact between short-term and long-term pre-career mobility on the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK; 2) more extensive and detailed research on the impact that an early mobility experience in the UK has on a subsequent transition to an academic career; 3) exploration of the factors that have led highly recognised academic staff to leave the UK and join HE institutions in other countries, to help unravel solutions to retain the best researchers, as well as the funding and postgraduate students they attract; 4) research on the influence of having international perspectives in research projects, and how this might have influenced funding gathered by EU academics in the UK HE.

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## 2 Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) is world-leading in science and higher education, and this contributes directly to the UK economy. Events such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic represent a new challenge for the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. This research project contributes to the UK Government's Global Britain strategy, with higher education an important element to be considered in terms of the UK's future place in the world.

The "Global Britain Integrated Review"<sup>1</sup> of foreign policy, published in March 2021, states the UK's vision abroad for the next ten years. The review highlights the importance of sustained progress in science and technology. The UK has the potential and resources to grow even further as a powerhouse in science and technology worldwide. In that quest, it will require the right tools to attract global talent. This study provides valuable insights into the achievement of these goals. Our research findings reflect on the Government's "Graduate Route" scheme which aims to "make it easier for some of the best young international graduates to secure skilled jobs in the UK and continue making a valuable contribution to our economy and society".<sup>2</sup>

In 2020/21, with 152,905 EU students enrolled at all levels of higher education at UK institutions – representing 25% of all international students<sup>3</sup> – and 38,230 EU academic staff – 53% of all international academic staff or 17% of all academic staff<sup>4</sup> – EU students and academics contribute significantly to the UK's higher education sector. This contribution occurs not only in the short term during their studies and academic research but also in the medium to long term after they graduate and/or cement their careers. The principal aim of this study is to understand how those who opt to take up an academic career in the UK may have been influenced in their decision by earlier, pre-career student mobility experiences.

Given the importance of EU students and academic staff as an important source of intellect, revenue, and funding, we have gathered the testimony of selected academic researchers on their experiences, as well as their opinions on the current state of the higher education sector in the UK. This study focuses on the most recent data available, the academic year of 2020/2021, although also includes an analysis of provisional data for student mobility in 2021/2022.

Our research follows a mixed-methods approach, based on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data. These include data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Universities UK (UUK) reports, among others, and primary data, in the form of interviews with key EU academics in the UK. We hypothesise that international

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<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office. 2021. "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy". GovUK Policy Paper CP403, 16 March, 2021 accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy> : 35.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office. 2021.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in the academic year 2020/21, there were 605 130 international students in UK HE institutions. Higher Education Statistics Agency: UK, 2022, HESA.

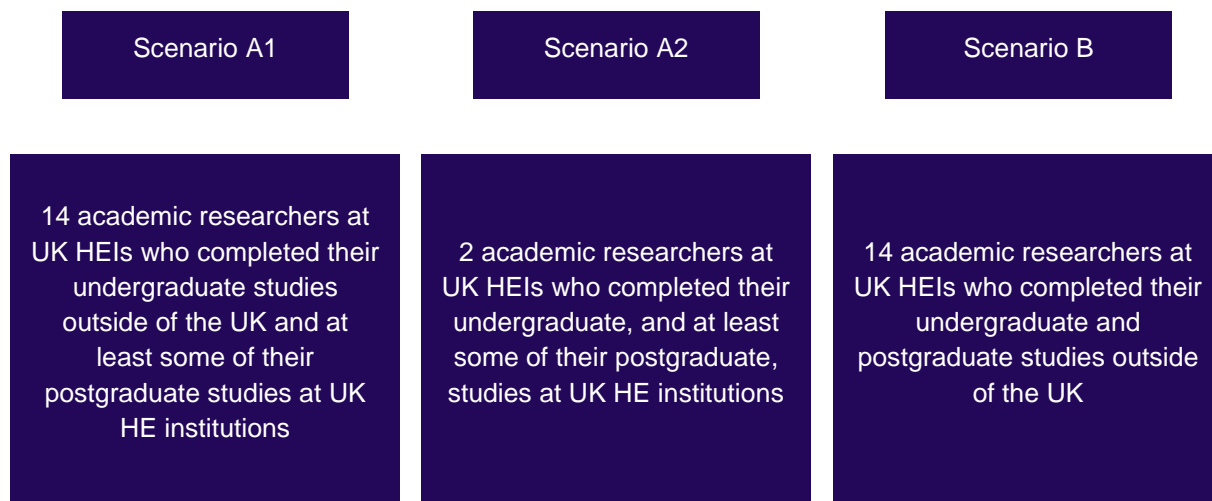
<sup>4</sup> According to HESA, in the academic year 2020/21, there were 53 575 international academic staff in UK HE institutions. Higher Education Statistics Agency: UK, 2022, HESA.

mobility is a critical factor in EU academics' future career decisions to remain in higher education in the UK. For this study, we divide the concept of international mobility into two premises: short-term mobility and long-term mobility experiences.

- Short-term mobility is defined as any educational experience abroad that is shorter than a full degree programme – typically lasting no more than one academic term, which includes the Erasmus+ programme, summer residencies, international fieldwork, and conferences.
- Long-term mobility is considered an educational experience abroad that covers the duration of a full academic degree (undergraduate or postgraduate).

**This study focuses on long-term mobility, which includes entire undergraduate and/or postgraduate programmes**, as they likely have more impact on future academic career choices. **Figure 1** displays the 3 Scenarios in which the sample of interviewees in this study are divided – Scenarios **A1**, **A2** and **B**.

**Figure 1** - Scenarios between which the 30 interviewed academic researchers are distributed.<sup>5</sup>



While the literature addresses the general impact of international education on career choices and other benefits of exchange programmes (Erasmus+) and international study, and while other studies exist that look at the benefits and challenges of researcher mobility, we identified a gap in the existing literature looking specifically at the link between pre-career mobility experiences and subsequent academic careers. For that reason, this study fills an existing gap in the UK HE literature in that it will attempt to understand why these EU students and academic staff come to the UK in the first instance and, more importantly, why they have decided to stay. This is important mainly during a critical time when post-Brexit and post-pandemic effects on UK HEIs are under assessment. These sea-changes will significantly change the higher education panorama but will

<sup>5</sup> While Scenario B includes mostly academic researchers who had a long-term pre-career mobility experience, it also includes academic researchers who did not have any pre-career mobility (2), as we deemed important to also include their perspective on the issue.

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also open a window of opportunity to keep the UK at the top of the wish list of EU students and academics.

## 2.1 Objectives

This research has three main objectives:

1. To assess potential links between key individuals' past experiences of undergraduate or postgraduate mobility to a UK HE institution and subsequent academic career choices. Study subjects are selected from each of the following three EU countries: France, Poland, and Portugal.
2. To assess the factors that attracted these academic talents from their respective EU countries to choose a UK-based academic career path, including but not limited to the effect of any previous study in the UK, and to consider the sustainability of those factors.
3. To suggest lines of future study regarding the long-term benefits to the UK economy and/or to specific institutions, of undergraduate and/or post-graduate mobility, including the impact on academic career choices as well as other value-added by EU *alumni*.

## 3 UK Higher Education, mobility and career choices: literature assessment

The main aim of this study is to understand the relationship between undergraduate and/or postgraduate student mobility experiences and the later decision to pursue an academic career in a UK HE institution. There are three main strands of scientific literature that were considered. Firstly, we investigate studies on the context of mobility in higher education institutions in the UK. Secondly, we investigate the academic mobility experiences, focusing on international students and the economic impact on UK HE. Thirdly, we look at impact studies of Brexit on UK HE, since the UK's exit from the EU represented an important shift with not only economic consequences but also structural changes in the international mobility of students from the EU. After understanding the studies that give a contextualisation of UKHE and academic mobility experiences, we focus on the academic career choices studies. This research intends to explain the link between international mobility and academic career choices.



## 3.1 Data on the context of mobility in UK Higher Education Institutions

According to a Universities UK International (UUKi) report of 2021, the UK remains the second most popular study destination for international students, only behind the United States.<sup>6</sup> In 2019/2020, 538,615 international students were studying at a UK HE institution, representing 27.5% of the total student population in the UK.<sup>7</sup> Of these, 143,000 were students arriving from an EU country (26%).<sup>8</sup> The top sending countries and territories for international students were from outside the EU – China (and Hong Kong), India, and the U.S, followed by Italy, the top EU country on that list.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1** shows the number of international students at UK HE institutions in 2019/20, and how they varied from 2018/19, from the 3 case study countries – **France, Poland** and **Portugal**, and two other sending countries – Italy and Germany. Along with **France**, these constitute the top three EU sending countries of international students to UK HE. Despite growing numbers from **Portugal** and **Poland**, the table displays a drop in the number of incoming students from **France**, Italy and Germany. It should be noted that these figures represent trends which pre-date the alteration in home-fee status for EU nationals, whose effects will be analysed later in this study.

**Table 1** - Number of international students in UK HE in 2019/20 and variation compared to 2018/19.<sup>10</sup>

EU Sending Countries	France	Poland	Portugal	Italy	Germany
Number of international students in UK HE, 2019/20	13 430	9 125	6 990	13 605	12 400
Variation, compared to 2018/19	-1.8%	8.9%	17.7%	-2.6%	-8.0%

International collaborations proved to be important, as between 2015 and 2018, 236,842 UK co-authored papers were published with European authors. In 2019/20, the UK's most frequent collaborative partners were the United States, Germany, and **France**. **France's** research output includes 57.2% of publications featuring one or more UK co-authors.<sup>11</sup> In general, academics who participate in international collaborations tend to be the most productive in terms of peer-reviewed publications.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Universities UK International. 2021. *Universities UK International*. London: Universities UK.

<sup>7</sup> Updated data on the number of international students in UK HE institutions, for the academic year 2020/21, will be presented in Section 7.

<sup>8</sup> Hubble, Sue, Paul Bolton. 2021. "International and EU students in higher education in the UK FAQs". *House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 7976*.

<sup>9</sup> UUKi., 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Universities UK International. 2020. *Universities UK International*. London: Universities UK.

<sup>11</sup> UUKi International Facts and Figures. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, William, Giulio Marini. 2021. "The Rapid Increase in Faculty from the European Union in UK Higher Education Institutions and the Possible Impact of Brexit". *International Faculty in Asia in Comparative Global Perspective*, 21: 185-202.

The UUKi report<sup>13</sup> also reveals that in 2019/2020, of all international staff in UK HE institutions, 57.2% were EU nationals, with a small decrease of 1.4% of EU native staff from the previous year.<sup>14</sup> Of all EU-natives, academic staff amounted to 38.400 and non-academic 14.455.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 2** displays the number of staff from 3 EU countries in UK HE institutions in 2019/20 and its variation from the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

EU Sending Countries	France	Poland	Portugal
Number of staff in UK HE	4 215	3 725	1 985
Variation, compared to 2018/19	+7.3%	+10.4%	+25.2%

In the period from 2004/05 to 2017/18, the number of EU academics in UK HE institutions almost trebled, and their proportion of the total academic population almost doubled. **These numbers show how reliant many UK institutions are on EU academics for a significant part of their research, teaching, and other academic activities.**<sup>17</sup>

From the figures presented we can identify the influence of international mobility on UK HE institutions, specifically, **EU natives, who account for 1/4 of the student population and more than 1/2 of international staff in UK HE institutions.** In addition, international research collaborations remain a popular approach in UK HE with more than half of UK HE publications having been authored with at least one international co-author. In summary, the latest figures show that the mobility of international students and academics to the UK, particularly from EU countries, has a substantial impact on the HE sector in the UK.

## 3.2 The literature on the effects of mobility in higher education

In the European context, academic mobility has been one of the European Higher Education Area's key pillars.<sup>18</sup> From the UK perspective, the country has a long traditional history and worldwide reputation in international HE, as one of the top destinations for international mobility.<sup>19</sup> **International students improve the diversity of the student body and bring social and**

<sup>13</sup> UUKi. 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Updated data on the number of international staff in UK HE institutions, for the academic year 2020/21, will be presented on Section 7.

<sup>15</sup> Adding EU-native academic to non-academic staff, the total amounts to 52.855 EU staff in UK HE, in 2019/20.

<sup>16</sup> UUK. 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Marini, Giulio. 2018. "Higher education staff and Brexit. Is the UK losing the youngest and brightest from other EU countries?". *Tertiary Education and Management: Springer*, 24: 409-421.

<sup>18</sup> Zoti, Stefan. 2021. "Academic mobility after Brexit: Erasmus and the UK post-2020". *European Journal of English Studies*, 25 (1): 19-33.

<sup>19</sup> Li, Jian. 2018. Globalization of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. In: *Conceptualizing Soft Power of Higher Education. Perspectives on Rethinking and Reforming Education*. Springer.

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**intellectual benefits to the UK, as well as creating a more global perspective.** Students from overseas have improved the academic debate. Without international participants, courses would be more limited, and discussions would be overly monocultural, as sharing and spreading knowledge from different countries and cultures presents a great benefit to those involved.<sup>20</sup> UK HE institutions benefit from recruiting international students, who enrich the cultural and intellectual diversity of the academic community. In addition, that success in attracting large numbers of international students, particularly at the postgraduate level, can also intensify an institution's world-class prestige, which will attract even more international students as a result.<sup>21</sup>

The English language is also noted as an important factor. English is by far the most studied second language in the EU, with Eurostat figures showing 96% of upper secondary students in the EU studying English as a Second Language in 2019<sup>22</sup>. English is also increasingly seen as the common language of academia, presenting a clear benefit for UK HE institutions and incoming students and academics due to its universality.<sup>23</sup>

These sections underline the importance of international mobility for both higher education institutions and their students in the UK. We will also draw attention to a crucial aspect that determines the importance of mobility in UK HE, the economic impact, focusing on the economic benefits of incoming international students to the UK economy, but also on the negative effects that policy changes might have on UK HE institutions in the long-term.

### 3.2.1 The economic impact of international students

While incoming international students expand cultural diversity in UK HE institutions, there are other areas where their contribution to progress is clear, such as scientific advancement, innovation, and the impact on the UK's economy.<sup>24</sup> As a host country, the UK benefits from exporting its higher education services to international students through "financial effects, employment and spillover effects, and economic growth effects".<sup>25</sup> This improves the UK's trade position by attracting foreign students, as well as its balance of payments. The income that is generated from international students can ease financial pressures on HE institutions, arising from occasional government HE budget cuts and other funding shortages. International students can also generate employment opportunities in HE directly, and in other sectors such as the property, trade, and tourism industries, as an indirect effect.<sup>26</sup> It is essential to emphasise the benefits of a long-term perspective, where the immigration of international graduate students can promote the

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<sup>20</sup> Hubble, Sue, Paul Bolton. 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Zheng, Lucy. 2021. "The Determinants of International Student Mobility in United Kingdom Higher Education", in: Branch, J.D., Christiansen, B. (eds) *The Marketisation of Higher Education. Marketing and Communication in Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>22</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign\\_language\\_learning\\_statistics&oldid=542152](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign_language_learning_statistics&oldid=542152)

<sup>23</sup> Veitch, Ann. 2021, *English in higher education—English medium Part 2: A British Council perspective*, [https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/HE\\_EME\\_Perspective\\_part\\_2v1.pdf](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/HE_EME_Perspective_part_2v1.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> London Economics. 2021. "The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy. HEPI, UUKi

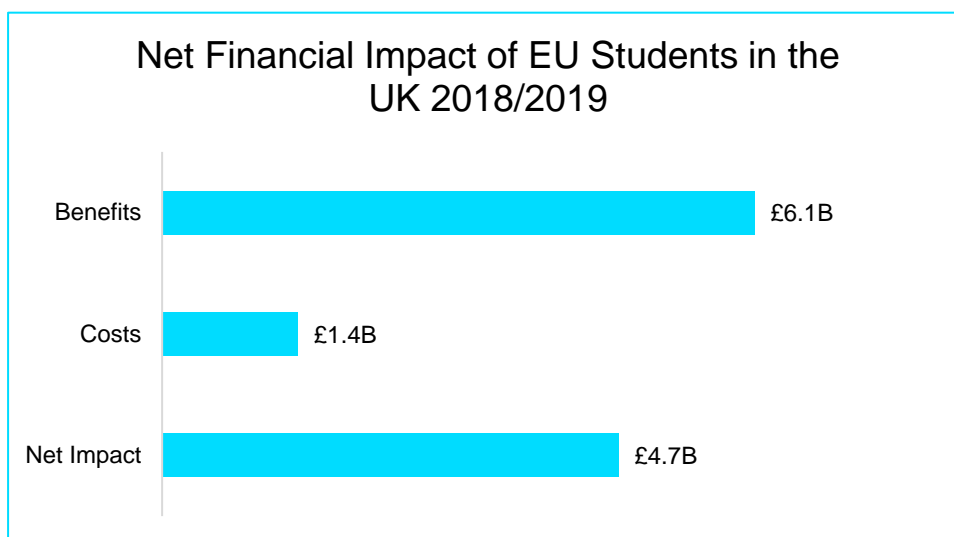
<sup>25</sup> Zheng, Lucy. 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Zheng, Lucy. 2021.

economic value of a worker’s experience and skills in the UK, as a clear positive impact on the country’s innovation, productivity, and economic growth.<sup>27</sup>

**In the academic year of 2018/19, incoming international students were associated with total economic benefits to the UK economy of approximately £28.8 billion<sup>28</sup>, of which £6.1 billion is generated by EU students.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, “combining the direct, indirect, and induced economic benefit of the tuition fee, non-fee and visitor income, associated with international students in the 2018/19 cohort, the total benefit to the UK economy associated with a typical EU domiciled student, was approximately £94,000”.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the “net economic impact per student, estimated to be £71,000<sup>31</sup> per ‘typical’ EU domiciled student in the 2018/19 cohort”<sup>32</sup> (£31,000 lower than non-EU students), and a total of “approximately £4.7 billion of the net impact associated to EU domiciled students” (Figure 1), increases when compared to the previous year analysed, 2015/16.<sup>33</sup> We can observe that the benefits of hosting international students significantly outweigh the costs of international students in UK HE institutions.<sup>34</sup>**

**Figure 2 - The net impact of EU students associated with the 2018/19 cohort.<sup>35</sup>**



In February 2021, the UK Government presented an updated International Education Strategy – which stated: “an ambition to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to increase the number of international higher education students hosted in the UK to

<sup>27</sup> Zheng, Lucy. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Types of economic benefits include fee income, non-fee income and visitor income (HEPI Report).

<sup>29</sup> London Economics. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> London Economics. 2021.

<sup>31</sup> According to this report, the total cost per EU student associated with the 2018/19 cohort was around £22,000, representing the difference between £94,000 of total benefit and of net economic impact, £71,000.

<sup>32</sup> London Economics. 2021.

<sup>33</sup> London Economics. 2021.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/09/09/the-costs-and-benefits-of-international-higher-education-students-to-the-uk-economy/>, accessed on April 19th 2022.

<sup>35</sup> London Economics. 2021.

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600,000 per year, both by 2030”.<sup>36</sup> It has also announced a two-year Graduate Route post-study work visa and a three-year visa for PhD graduates.<sup>37</sup>

**The economic benefits of mobility have been great for the UK economy, as the revenue of hosting international students far outweighs the costs**, including both EU and non-EU natives. However, more recent policy changes, namely **Brexit, may have negative effects on the UK’s economy, mostly related to UK-EU relations**. This might also impact non-EU international students, who may, like EU students, choose an EU HE institution rather than a UK institution, due to Brexit.<sup>38</sup> As this is a crucial determinant, the next section will focus on the consequences of Brexit on UK HE.

### 3.2.2 The consequences of Brexit on UK Higher Education

While in the previous sections the context of mobility along with its economic impact on UK HE institutions was explored, this section will approach the effects that Brexit has had to date and will likely have on mobility in higher education in the UK in the future. It is important to note that even though the referendum was in 2016, Brexit only came into effect in 2020. As it might be early to make conclusions on the long-term effects of Brexit on UK HE, this section focuses on the already visible short-term effects that have been studied.

Although the UK remains part of many European institutions, particularly the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Brexit has “radically altered the landscape of UK universities” and the number and nature of European students in these institutions.<sup>39</sup> Despite a transition period, the complexity of Brexit negotiations and the difficulty of aligning key stakeholders on both sides mean that even more recently, considerable uncertainty remains, and much is still to be agreed upon.

Brexit marks one of the biggest changes to international student recruitment, particularly affecting EU students, with its triple impact policy of “change in visa regime to points-based; change in fee from domestic to international and withdrawal of the UK student loan scheme”.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the UK’s decision to withdraw from the Erasmus+ programme, adopting its international mobility programme (the Turing Scheme), signifies a big change in UK-EU higher education relationships, particularly since 2021, the last year of the programme, at which point the UK was the most popular Erasmus destination (approximately 24% of the total).<sup>41</sup>

Many UK HE institutions are implementing measures to soften the impact of the abrupt fee changes and loss of loan facilities that EU students will face. As European students evaluate their options, competition is increasing and students who would have chosen the UK are now choosing

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<sup>36</sup> Department of Education and Department for International Trade. 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Hubble, Sue, Paul Bolton. 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Gore, Tim. 2021. “The effects of UK leaving the EU on higher education”. Regionalism and bilateralism post-Brexit.” In *The Evolution of Transnational Education: Pathways, Globalisation and Emerging Trends*. edited by: C. Hill, J. Lamie and T. Gore. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>39</sup> Gore, Tim. 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Gore, Tim. 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Gore, Tim. 2021.

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alternative destinations with good quality English language-medium courses, increasingly available across the EU.<sup>42</sup>

Part of the attraction for EU students and academics has been that UK HE institutions were, until Brexit, the largest recipients of EU research funding (the Horizon programme was a source of £1 billion entering the UK from the EU). With the changes after Brexit, for some EU academics in the UK, HE institutions in the EU might seem more attractive. Students and academics can participate in international academic collaborations, without travel regulations, and where there is less uncertainty on research funding through EU programmes.<sup>43</sup> As some UK-based EU academics have already noted, the UK's "withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programme to support the education and training of young people in Europe, and its new immigration system, could further damage its international research enterprise".<sup>44</sup>

Given the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, it was expected that many international students who had been accepted for autumn 2020 in UK HE institutions would decide to defer or withdraw.<sup>45</sup> There is currently a lack of comprehensive data to support or reject this hypothesis. Although the percentage of international students deferring did rise, it was only slightly more than in the previous year, with the biggest increase coming from non-EU countries.<sup>46</sup> One explanation could be that EU students wanted to make the most of EU fees status before international student rates were applied for those entering in 2021. The most concerning development are the current applications and enrolments from the EU. January deadline figures from UCAS show that applications from EU countries more than halved between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022, with the fall being particularly noticeable in applicants from Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>47</sup> With this, "a combination of Covid and departure from the EU leaves universities worried about EU entrants in 2021 and beyond".<sup>48</sup> The entry of EU students to the UK held up well in the post-referendum years, but undergraduate application numbers for 2021 and 2022 have fallen dramatically.<sup>49</sup>

**EU academic staff in UK HE institutions have also been affected by changes since the Brexit referendum.** In 2016, many EU citizens were already contemplating leaving, as they were worried about their legal status and that of their families when their freedom of movement ended. Furthermore, the possible implications of Brexit for collaborations with colleagues in EU

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<sup>42</sup> Gore, Tim. 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Killwick, Peter, Vanessa Cuddeford. 2016. "How Universities can continue to attract the best minds post Brexit". *Verita*, white paper.

<sup>44</sup> Sánchez Cañizares, Carmen, Milou P.M. van Poppel, Agata Nyga, Diogo Martins and Paolo Radaelli. 2022. Brexit: delays worry diaspora researchers. *Nature*. 604, 425

<sup>45</sup> Mayhew, Ken. 2022. "Brexit and UK higher education." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38 (1): 179-187.

<sup>46</sup> Mayhew, Ken. 2022.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2022-cycle/2022-cycle-applicant-figures-26-january-deadline>

<sup>48</sup> Mayhew, Ken. 2022.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2022-cycle/2022-cycle-applicant-figures-26-january-deadline>

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universities, access to EU funding, and problems in recruiting staff, have also escalated that apprehension.<sup>50</sup>

Brexit's policy changes encompass a direct impact on all aspects of HE in the country, due to a reduction in the number of EU students and staff and the number of international collaborations. Section 5 will give an extended overview of the consequences of Brexit in UK HE, through the lens of EU academic researchers based in the UK.

### 3.2.3 The link between mobility and career choices

Previous research has shown that overseas study is associated with a higher likelihood of both going on to further study and of working internationally in the future.<sup>51</sup> However, it is difficult to determine the direction of cause and effect from quantitative research – research on the drivers of international student mobility often identifies an intention to work in the host country as a major reason for students to want to study abroad.<sup>52</sup>

Research looking specifically at the effect of international mobility on a career in academic research is more limited. From a statistical point of view, the proportion of international PhD graduates staying in their country of study after graduation is high – in the United States, roughly 77 per cent of the more than 178,000 international STEM students that earned PhDs in the country between 2000 and 2015 were still living in the country as of February 2017.<sup>53</sup>

Research into Chinese students' career choices after studying abroad confirms that students obtaining higher levels of HE qualification are less likely to return to the country, and that top Chinese students overseas are driven to stay abroad by higher levels of research funding and by an academic culture that places less weight on personal relationships and has less short-term pressure to produce immediate results compared to the domestic higher education system.<sup>54</sup>

International comparisons of researcher mobility more broadly show that the top reason why researchers go abroad to take up postdoctoral research, scientific work or an academic position is to improve their future career prospects, while the second and third most cited reasons are the

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<sup>50</sup> Mayhew, Ken. 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Norris & Gillespie, 2008, *How Study Abroad Shapes Global Careers*, Institute for the International Education of Students [https://www.iesabroad.org/system/files/2008%20JSIE\\_How%20SA%20Shapes%20Global%20Careers%20\(Norris,%20Gillespie\).pdf](https://www.iesabroad.org/system/files/2008%20JSIE_How%20SA%20Shapes%20Global%20Careers%20(Norris,%20Gillespie).pdf)

<sup>52</sup> King & Sondhi, 2018, *International Student Migration: a Comparison of UK and Indian Students' Motivations for Studying Abroad*, *Globalisation, Societies and Education* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14767724.2017.1405244?journalCode=cgse20>

<sup>53</sup> Corrigan et al, 2022, *The Long-Term Stay Rates of International STEM PhD Graduates*, Center for Security and Emerging Technology <https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSET-The-Long-Term-Stay-Rates-of-International-STEM-PhD-Graduates.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Rui Yang, 2019, *Benefits and challenges of the international mobility of researchers: the Chinese experience*, *Globalisation, Societies and Education* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14767724.2019.1690730?journalCode=cgse20>

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opportunity to work with “outstanding faculty, colleagues or research team[s]” and the “excellence/prestige of the foreign institution in my area of research” respectively.<sup>55</sup>

A large-scale survey on the impact of international student mobility on subsequent career choices among Polish participants in the Erasmus scheme was conducted by Bryła (2015) to determine which factors within the participants’ mobility experience had the most impact on their professional path.<sup>56</sup> This research determined that most of the former internationally mobile students who participated in the study were engaged in international organisations (53.6%), which may suggest a connection between international student mobility and a later professional global range career, although the control group figure of 48.1% working in international organizations was also high.

In **Poland’s** case, over  $\frac{2}{3}$  of former Erasmus students who participated in Bryła’s survey (67.1%) believed the most appropriate education level for their job was a postgraduate degree. When questioned about their field of studies connecting to their jobs, 52.6% felt their studies corresponded to their job.<sup>57</sup> For those surveyed, regarding determining factors in their career choices and progression, having higher education and foreign language proficiency were deemed as very important by a majority, while  $\frac{1}{3}$  considered international experience to have a very important influence, and  $\frac{1}{5}$  specifically mentioned their Erasmus mobility studies as a key factor in this regard. As concluded by the author, mobility experiences contribute not only to the enhancement of various abilities which employers might value but also instigate social and cultural transformation, which together have an impact on graduates’ current professional situation.<sup>58</sup> From this study, we can deduce that having an international mobility experience can have a crucial effect on later career progression.

### 3.2.4 Contribution to the literature

While there are several studies which look at the impact of studying abroad on graduates’ career choices in general, and while some of those studies touch on academic careers, our research has not found any studies that focus on the specific link between pre-career long-term mobility experiences and academic career choices. Existing studies that mentioned academic staff are generally limited to presenting the current context and quantitative snapshot data of the UK HE panorama.

This study has high pertinence in the context of the current research and actively contributes to filling gaps in the literature in its focus on academic staff and whether their past mobility experiences influenced their choice of whether and where to pursue an academic career. We will focus on understanding the impact of these mobility experiences on the professional paths of

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<sup>55</sup> Franzoni et al, 2012, *Foreign-born scientists: mobility patterns for 16 countries*, Nature Biotechnology <https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.2449>

<sup>56</sup> Bryła, Pawel. 2015. “The Impact of International Student Mobility on Subsequent Employment and Professional Career: A Large-scale Survey among Polish Former Erasmus Students”. *Procedia - Social, and Behavioral Sciences*, 176: 633-641.

<sup>57</sup> Bryła, Pawel. 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Bryła, Pawel. 2015.



academic staff that integrate into the UK HE system. The emphasis is on the perceptions of current senior academic staff and not on students.

## 4 Academic researchers based in the UK: the case study of France, Poland, and Portugal

Data from HESA shows that around 62,395 non-UK citizens were working in UK higher education institutions in academic roles in the 2020/21 academic year, counted on a full-time equivalent basis (**Table 3**<sup>59</sup>). 31,560 were citizens of an EU country, corresponding to 51% of all international academic staff in UK HE institutions and 17% of total academic staff.

**Table 3** - International academic staff, including EU, in UK HE, 2020/21.

	Portugal	Poland	France	EU Total	Non-UK Total	Total Academic Staff
Number of staff (FTE)	1,105	1,190	2,675	31,560	62,395	183,345
% of Total Academic staff	0.6%	0.7%	1.5%	17.2%	34.0%	
% of Total International Staff	1.8%	1.9%	4.3%	50.6%		

This proportion is even greater at higher ranking universities. At the top ten UK Universities, in accordance with the Times Education Supplement University rankings for 2022<sup>60</sup>, the proportion of international staff is substantially higher than average while EU citizens represent a slightly higher percentage of all international academic staff, meaning that EU staff make up more than a quarter of all academics, as can be seen in **Table 4**.

<sup>59</sup> British Council analysis of HESA data. Note that figures in this section refer to full-time equivalent staff, in contrast with figures in the introduction which refer to all international staff.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk>

**Table 4** - International academic staff in UK HE Top-ten Universities, 2020/21.

	Portugal	Poland	France	EU Total	Non-UK Total	Total Academic Staff
Number of staff (FTE)	445	410	1,090	11,075	21,675	44,855
% of Total Academic staff	1.0%	0.9%	2.5%	25.2%	48.3%	
% of Total International Staff	2.1%	1.9%	5.0%	51.1%		

As academics from three EU countries are the main participants of our study, their insights will determine our main findings on the impact of pre-career mobility on academic career choices. Accordingly, it is important to determine the proportion of academic researchers, by country, in UK HE institutions (**Table 3**), as academics largely join those institutions in research positions. All the following data until the end of this section, for the academic year 2020/21, was provided by HESA.<sup>61</sup>

**Table 5** - Proportion of current academic faculty staff, in positions that include research (including research-only contracts and contracts covering both teaching and research), in UK HE institutions.<sup>62</sup>

	Portugal	Poland	France	EU Total	Non-UK Total	Total Academic Staff
Staff on research contracts* (FTE)	925	950	2,250	26,435	52,935	138,775
Proportion of staff on research contracts	83.7%	79.8%	84.1%	83.8%	84.0%	75.7%
Country/region as % of total research staff	0.7%	0.7%	1.6%	19.0%	38.1%	
Country/region as % of total international research staff	1.7%	1.8%	4.3%	49.9%		

The data show that a high majority of EU faculty are employed to conduct research. Both EU and non-EU international staff are more likely to be engaged in research than their UK counterparts, and correspondingly less likely to be employed on teaching-only contracts. Presenting the same data in a different way, EU academics make up 19 per cent of research-active staff, in comparison to 17 per cent of total academic staff.

<sup>61</sup> HESA, Staff record 2020/21.

<sup>62</sup> HESA, Staff record 2020/21.

In top-ten universities, as determined by the Times Educational Supplement 2022 rankings<sup>63</sup>, EU staff are even more likely to be engaged in research. They also make up a higher proportion of all research-active staff compared to the average UK university; however, this gap is much smaller than EU academics' over-representation in total staff numbers, as a higher proportion of UK staff at these institutions is also engaged in research.

**Table 6-** Proportion of current academic faculty staff, in positions that include research, in Top-ten UK HE institutions.<sup>64</sup>

	<b>Portugal</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>EU Total</b>	<b>Non-UK Total</b>	<b>Total Academic Staff</b>
Staff on research contracts* (FTE)	385	350	960	9,825	19,405	38,595
Proportion of staff on research contracts	86.5%	85.4%	88.1%	88.7%	89.5%	86.0%
Country/region as % of total research staff	1.0%	0.9%	2.5%	25.5%	50.3%	
Country/region as % of total international research staff	2.0%	1.8%	4.9%	50.6%		

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk>

<sup>64</sup> HESA, Staff record 2020/21.

# 5 Factors influencing academic career choices

Figure 3 - Factors impacting the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK HE.

Factors impacting the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK				
Mobility Experience in the UK				
Funding Opportunities	Heterogeneous Environment	English Language	Quality of Facilities and Equipment	Job Market of the country of origin
Reputation of Institutions	Networking	Teaching Opportunities	Research Collaborations	Personal Reasons (Family)

## 5.1 Mobility experience as a factor in later academic career choices

As the impact of pre-career mobility on academic career choices is at the centre of this study, this section focuses on presenting the insights of interviewed academic researchers on this matter. What follows will describe an assessment of their early exposure to undergraduate and postgraduate studies abroad and its impact on the decision to stay abroad, and to pursue an academic career at a UK HE institution.

According to the interviewees, there was a consensus that an early international mobility experience is a decisive factor in the decision to pursue an academic career in UK HE institutions. **From deeming the academic environment to be international in nature, to experiencing different ways of operating in their specific fields of expertise, to finding access to better research facilities and greater opportunities, an early international mobility experience categorically opened borders for most interviewees in our study.**

First, concerning those who completed either undergraduate, post-graduate studies, or both, at a UK HEI (scenarios A1 and A2), we will look at how academic researchers weigh the impact of their early international mobility experience on their academic career choices. Second, on the topic of international mobility experiences outside the UK, we introduce insights into the possible influence of doing at least some of their studies overseas, and the impact (positive or negative) it had on their opportunities in UK HE institutions. Their thoughts on whether UK HE institutions were ever considered as the first option for international mobility are also presented.

### 5.1.1 Academic researchers who studied at the post-graduate level in the UK

For academic researchers who had a previous international mobility experience through the completion of at least some of their postgraduate studies in a UK HE institution, the mobility

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experience has had an overall positive influence on their decision to remain in the UK and pursue an academic career. Some of the key arguments stated by interviewees include the high quality of research performed during postgraduate studies, openness to a more international research community, great relationships with supervisors and other colleagues, and the security of a job lined up, in some cases, even before the completion of their studies. It was also stated that UK HE's promotion of interdisciplinarity, through the diversification of scientific components, was a big incentive to remain in the UK as an academic. For these interviewees, being in the UK for postgraduate studies created a familiarity with culture and language, and even personal relationships, which had a considerable impact on the decision to remain and pursue an academic career after studies.

### 5.1.2 Academic researchers who completed their undergraduate degree and studied at the post-graduate level in the UK

For interviewed academic researchers who completed their undergraduate and at least some of their postgraduate studies in the UK, the mobility experience had a considerable impact on their decision to remain and pursue an academic career. A common factor was the perception that to follow an academic career, joining a UK HE institution at an early stage would increase their chances of success in that pursuit. In addition, having established their lives in the UK during their studies, a positive life experience combined with their academic involvement made the decision to stay in the UK much easier. As with those who completed post-graduate studies in the UK, early exposure to both the UK and its HE institutions helped them develop a familiarity with the culture and language and to build personal relationships, increasing the motives to remain and pursue an academic career in the UK.<sup>65</sup>

### 5.1.3 Academic researchers who studied outside their country of origin but not in the UK

For interviewees whose previous international mobility experiences were outside the UK, these experiences generally had an impact on their decision to remain abroad and even to come to the UK. Of the selected 14 interviewees, only 2 did not have an international mobility experience before their academic career at a UK HE institution, while the other 12 had at least one international mobility experience<sup>66</sup>, mainly in EU countries, but also in non-EU countries (including the United States).

Of the 12 academic researchers, with mobility experiences in this scenario, **10 agree that an early international mobility experience impacted their decision to pursue an academic career in the UK.** They cited reasons such as their mobility experience being a great adaptability

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<sup>65</sup> It is important to note that the number of academic researchers in Scenario A2 is small (2), and even though mobility has been a decisive factor for both, we cannot make definitive conclusions from this sample.

<sup>66</sup> Includes short-term and long-term mobility experiences.

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journey, culturally opening you up to different perspectives, as an opportunity to learn different methods of doing science, to understand what models work best in different circumstances, to talk to people about UK HE and exchange ideas (persuading to come) and to realise the importance of connecting HE academia of different countries. One interviewee emphasised that even short-term international mobility experiences can have a big impact on the decision to pursue an academic career abroad.

#### Case Study 1 | Interviewee 10

After concluding an undergraduate degree and an MSc in Poland in 2010, moved to Portugal in 2011, to start a PhD at NOVA University and at the Instituto Gulbenkian Ciência, in Lisbon, which concluded in 2016. In 2017, moved to the UK to take up a position as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Oxford.

“As I was going from country to country and seeing different ways of doing science, and hearing and talking to people about the level of science in the UK, there is clearly a link between my mobility and my decision to come. I think mobility and all those experiences are part of the decision-making because being exposed helps understand what is out there and what can be the best move.”

## 5.2 Other considerations of the 3 scenarios

It is also important to note that a considerable number of the academic researchers interviewed are now senior academics, meaning their academic career in the UK HE is extensive. As such, during their time as students, international mobility experiences through internships or exchange programs were uncommon then, with very few HE institution exchange protocols and funding, so fewer opportunities for pre-career mobility were available then.

Considering the **possible influence** (positive and/or negative) **of studying outside of the UK on their academic career opportunities in UK HE**, interviewed academic researchers have provided different perspectives. On the one hand, some affirm that initially there were struggles with language barriers (particularly with advanced English), adjusting to a different culture, different weather conditions, different academic methods and demands, and previous publications in the country of origin not accounted for due to native language, and some even admitted struggling to adapt to a more “Western” environment in the UK. On the other hand, some consider their academic experience outside of UK HE institutions as beneficial to their opportunities, particularly when bringing a different and sometimes more advantageous educational background, when performing in UK HE institutions.

When asked about the **UK as an option for a first international mobility experience**, the opinions are **diverse from all interviewees**. While two of the interviewees’ answers are not applicable because they already had their first international mobility experience at UK HE institutions, 11 considered UK HE institutions as an option for their first international mobility experience, and 17 did not consider UK HE institutions as an option for their first international

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mobility experience, either short or long-term, citing motives such as the relatively high cost of living (financial burden on relatives), language barriers, and in more specific cases the country of origin not yet being part of EU academic protocols.<sup>67</sup>

Lastly, on pre-career mobility as a decisive factor in academic career choices, and particularly to what extent an early exposure to undergraduate and/or postgraduate mobility experiences in the UK impacted the decision to remain and pursue an academic career, for the **16** academic researchers who underwent UK mobility experiences – Scenarios A1 and A2 – we determined 2 important points. First, **no academic left after their postgraduate studies at a UK HE institution for an academic career overseas** before returning to the UK (however, one left for a post-doctorate in the United States, before returning, to establish a senior academic career); and second, that **after their postgraduate studies, half of the interviewed academics who had an early experience in the UK stayed in their *alma mater* for an academic career after they completed their studies**, and of these, **5 have never left since**. From this, we can conclude that **mobility not only influenced their decision to pursue an academic career in the UK but also on remaining in the longer term, even if at a different UK HE institution.**

#### Case Study 2 | Interviewee 18

With an undergraduate degree and MSc concluded in France by 1987, moved to the US to complete a PhD at Harvard University (1993). Returned to France soon after, working in Research (first as Officer and then as Director) at Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, until starting a position as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Glasgow.

“I think if I had done my PhD in France I would not have moved abroad so easily. [...] Moving to another country was not such a big deal, so I think it had a big influence in my personal case.”

In Scenario B, 3 of the 11 academic researchers in this scenario, with international mobility experiences, had academic positions in UK HE, either as post-doctorate or research associate, before returning to the UK permanently, for their current position, each over 10 years ago. In addition, only 1 of the 11 academic researchers has changed HE institution since beginning an academic career in the UK. While we determined pre-career mobility as a key factor, other mobility-related factors have emerged as determinants in the decision of interviewed academics to pursue an academic career in the UK. The next section will address those factors.

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<sup>67</sup> Poland was not a member of the European Union until 2004, so for some interviewees, EU academic protocols and access to free tuition fee programs were not accessible.

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## 5.3 Mobility-related factors for academic career choices

As an effect of mobility, other factors emerge that without the former would not be acknowledged. Their recognition depends largely on the positive involvement that students and academics have during their mobility experiences. **With a globally recognised HE sector, the UK congregates multiple mobility-related factors that also impact on a later academic career decision** (see Figure 3). Accordingly, **interviewed academic researchers acknowledge the existence of mobility-related factors, as important in their decision to pursue an academic career in UK HE institutions.**

### 5.3.1 Academic researchers who studied at the post-graduate level in the UK

For interviewed academic researchers who completed their undergraduate studies outside the UK and at least some postgraduate studies in UK HE institutions, mobility-related factors were essential in that decision. For some, an academic career was always an ambition, and choosing the UK was connected to its HE institutions' reputation. Additionally, some were encouraged by relatives, teachers and supervisors to leave their homes in the pursuit of better education, as circumstances were not ideal in their countries of origin, and UK HE institutions offered more attractive conditions. In one case, an interviewee stated that after finishing undergraduate studies, the country of origin developed funding programs for students to enrol in postgraduate degrees abroad, meaning there was a big drive to leave for higher education.

**Early exposure to greater academic advancements<sup>68</sup> at UK HE institutions**, compared to countries of origin, **was also an important factor in the decision to stay in the UK and pursue an academic career**, with more advanced research, and greater access to resources, particularly funding, and more advanced technology and equipment. Some of the advantages of UK HE institutions compared to those in countries of origin include less pressure to leave academia to pursue a career in industry, more dynamic, more openness and attractiveness to overseas due to the universality of the English language, and a more multidisciplinary environment with closer ties between different fields of study.

The **job market** in the country of origin was a relevant factor when deciding to pursue an academic career. Nevertheless, the job market in the UK specifically is not viewed as an important factor when deciding to move to the UK, rather it was the situation in the country of origin, and its job market, that impacted the decision to move to the UK. However, our data shows that participants consider the UK's academic job market to be more advantageous in comparison to the other countries in the analysis (**France, Poland, and Portugal**). The high salary and financial stability are one of the reasons mentioned by the researchers. In contrast to UK HE institutions, European institutions can have very hierarchical structures which make it difficult for academics to get promoted in their country of origin. Some of the participants

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<sup>68</sup> For the purpose of this study, by academic advancement we mean an improvement relating to a particular activity or area of knowledge in HE.



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indicated that there is, in their country of origin, an unhealthy atmosphere and feelings of resentment among faculty members.

### 5.3.2 Academic researchers who completed their undergraduate degree and studied at the post-graduate level in the UK

For interviewed academic researchers who completed both undergraduate and postgraduate studies in UK HE institutions, aside from the weight of international mobility experience in their decision to pursue an academic career at UK HE, other mobility-related factors were central.

UK HE institutions were considered a great target for students from countries of origin because of the quality of education, prestige, and the opportunity to learn/improve the ability to speak the English language. During studies in the UK, some created a personal connection with the country, as well as valuable networking in their field of expertise. Others also considered the English language as an important factor, along with personal motives and greater opportunities for teaching in UK HE institutions. For both cases, **early exposure to greater academic advancements at UK HE institutions**, compared to the country of origin, **was also a key element**, with more access to funding, and more attractive programmes. In terms of advantages of UK HE institutions compared to HE institutions in the country of origin, interviewees identify greater support for early career researchers, as well as more opportunities for teaching at an early stage, providing the ability to choose their path in a less hierarchical system.

The UK's **job market** reflects more opportunities for the interviewees who studied at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the UK, despite the recent negative developments. Brexit is mentioned as a factor that has influenced the job market, making British salaries less competitive. The recent cuts and changes in the pension scheme are also highlighted as having a negative impact. This context has made European academics in the UK rethink their position and career. It is important to note that participants recognise that progression in higher education careers exists, in contrast to their country of origin. Lastly, according to participants, it is easier in the UK to pursue career opportunities and reach better academic positions. These were crucial factors in their decision to remain in the UK and pursue an academic career.

### 5.3.3 Academic researchers who studied outside their country of origin but not in the UK

For interviewed academic researchers who completed both undergraduate and postgraduate outside of the UK, aside from the impact of their international mobility experience in their choice to pursue an academic career at UK HE institutions, mobility-related factors were decisive in that decision.

For some, the **quality of facilities in UK HE institutions is greater than those in the country of origin**, underlining the existence of top research facilities and funding (financial reasons), confirmed by better investment and more grants in particular fields of expertise in UK HE

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institutions. Others considered personal factors, including the enjoyment of previous time spent in the UK (familiarity with culture), the desire to learn/improve the ability to speak the English language, and other more personal reasons (family). Also, an interviewee mentioned the UK's free healthcare system, in comparison to the previous country of residence (US), as a determinant in the decision to move and pursue an academic career in the UK.

**Fewer teaching hours in UK HE institutions, meaning more time for research endeavours, compared to the country of origin, was also considered a crucial factor** by those interviewed. **London is also seen by many interviewees as an important factor, considered “a hub for science”**, with its institutions as a centre of scientific knowledge, which facilitates inter-university collaborations and a more flexible transfer of academic researchers.

For the selected interviewees, UK HE institutions being more academically evolved compared to the country of origin was an important factor in pursuing a career choice in the UK. These academic advancements include access to better equipment, more modern research facilities and greater funding opportunities. Some of the advantages of UK institutions compared to institutions in the country of origin include more opportunities (academic job openings), diversity and internationalisation of academic staff (more heterogeneous), more established institutions, greater career stability and progression more based on merit, and further international collaborations, with bigger and better networking of researchers in UK HE institutions, including close ties with the industry (start-up companies).

Interviewees in this group mentioned that the job market might be a very important factor considered by researchers at an early stage of their career. The UK presents greater opportunities for early career researchers, mainly after the completion of their PhD, to acquire a first academic position (research exclusively or research and teaching contract). Some mention that in other European job markets, the same academic position would require a Postdoctoral qualification. UK institutions have a different posture to work. The academic environment and the recruitment process are much more flexible, and the UK have the advantage of being a strong recruiter internationally.

### 5.3.4 Overview of the 3 scenarios

According to the general perception of interviewees, pre-career mobility has an impact on academic career choices, as the international component of experiencing other cultures, practices and environments have been a determinant factor in their decision to pursue an academic career at a UK HE institution. Mobility-related factors such as personal relations, career and financial aspects, and the reputation of HE institutions, have also been key elements in the decision-making process to pursue an academic career in a UK HE institution. The next section will focus on the insight of interviewees on the current state of UK HE, to assess which opportunities and threats they observe.

## 6 The current state of UK Higher Education Institutions

This section addresses the current state of UK HE institutions by displaying updated data on HE in the UK, introducing more objective information, and through the insight of interviewed academic researchers on the current state of UK HE institutions, enabling us to also present a more subjective but first-hand perspective on the issue.

### 6.1 Data on the current state of UK higher education

According to recent data (**Table 7<sup>69</sup>**), the total number of EU students at UK HE institutions increased overall from 2016/17 to 2020/21. However, **the total number of EU postgraduate students in 2020/21 fell within that same period** (despite a nominal rise from 2019/20 to 2020/21). This decline is observed in postgraduate research, specifically, at the doctorate level.<sup>70</sup>

**Table 7<sup>71</sup>** - EU HE student enrolments by level of study in UK HE, 2016/17 to 2020/21.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Postgraduate</b>					
Doctorate research	13,490	13,265	12,825	12,160	11,830
Total postgraduate research	14,985	14,600	14,085	13,100	12,720
Total postgraduate taught	31,320	31,250	30,955	30,575	31,045
Total postgraduate	46,305	45,845	45,040	43,675	43,765
<b>Undergraduate</b>					
First degree	87,000	92,285	97,275	100,890	106,500
Total undergraduate	91,735	96,995	101,525	104,125	109,145
<b>Total</b>	<b>138,040</b>	<b>142,840</b>	<b>146,565</b>	<b>147,800</b>	<b>152,905</b>

<sup>69</sup> The data presented is by country of domicile and not by nationality.

<sup>70</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency: UK, 2022, HESA.

<sup>71</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency: UK, 2022, HESA.

Concerning international students (including EU total and from the 3 EU countries) at different levels of higher education in the UK, **Table 8**<sup>72</sup> presents data from the academic year 2020/21. As the table illustrates, **EU students make up a considerable proportion of international students enrolled in UK HE: 26.2%**, including 36.3% of international students enrolled at a first-degree level, and 27.4% of all international postgraduate research students. As a note, the available data from January 2022 deadline applicants, by domicile, shows a decreasing trend of **French** students applying to UK HE institutions, which has been consistent since 2020.<sup>73</sup>

**Table 8**<sup>74</sup> - International students in UK HE, by the level of study, 2020/21.

Level of study	France	Poland	Portugal	EU Total	Total Non-UK
First Degree	9 055	9 115	6 930	106 405	293 150
Other Undergraduate	2 815	245	140	9 010	25 205
Postgraduate taught	4 255	1 135	1 075	32 370	248 300
Postgraduate research	1 525	520	535	18 395	67 255
<b>Total</b>	<b>17 645</b>	<b>11 015</b>	<b>8 685</b>	<b>166 180</b>	<b>633 910</b>

Concerning the economic impact of EU students, for the academic year of 2019/20, **Table 9** provides data on tuition fees, living expenses (for both long-term and short-term students), expected costs of student finance to the UK government, and the positive economic impact of EU students to the UK economy.

**Table 9**<sup>75</sup> - EU HE student spending in the UK, 2019/20 (data presented in £ million).

	Fees	Living expenses (non-exchange students)	Living expenses (exchange students)	RAB charge <sup>76</sup>	Total
<b>France</b>	114	211	96	-40	381
<b>Poland</b>	75	139	6	-26	193
<b>Portugal</b>	58	107	6	-20	151

<sup>72</sup> The data presented is by domicile, and not by nationality.

<sup>73</sup> 2022 cycle applicants figures - 26 January deadline, at: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2022-cycle/2022-cycle-applicant-figures-26-january-deadline>.

<sup>74</sup> HESA & British Council.

<sup>75</sup> Department of Education (DfE); British Council calculations for individual countries based on data from HESA.

<sup>76</sup> The Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) charge is the expected cost of student finance in the UK government, and it measures the proportion of student loan outlay that is expected not to be repaid within borrowers' repayment terms when future repayments are valued in present terms.

<b>Total (3 countries)</b>	246	457	108	-86	725
<b>EU Total</b>	1 200	2 230	430	-420	3 440

As the data shows, **EU students in the UK HE have a considerable economic impact on the UK economy**. As the table displays, **French** students in UK HE institutions accounted for 11% of the total value generated by EU students in the UK economy, in 2019/20. Lastly, **Table 10<sup>77</sup>**, focuses on UK HE international collaborations, particularly with 3 EU countries, from 2016 to 2020. It presents data on co-authored publications with the UK, by country, their rank in the number of publications with UK HE institutions, and the percentage of collaborations between higher education institutions of the UK and of the other 3 EU countries.

**Table 10<sup>78</sup>** - Co-authored publications and percentage of collaborations between UK HE institutions and 3 EU countries' HE institutions, 2016 to 2020.

	<b>France</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Portugal</b>
Co-authored publications with UK	61 991	15 539	15 025
Rank	5	21	22
Collaborations with a partner as % of UK output <sup>79</sup>	5.6%	1.4%	1.4%
Collaborations with the UK as % of partner output <sup>80</sup>	9.9%	6.0%	10.6%

This section expanded on the numbers presented in Section 4, displaying updated figures on important topics for this study and improving our assessment of the current state of UK HE institutions. **The numbers demonstrate the importance that EU natives, both students and academics, have on higher education in the UK, both educationally and economically.** To present a more detailed approach to this important topic on HE in the UK, the next section focuses on the insights of interviewed academic researchers on the current state of UK HE institutions, including the opportunities and threats they observe.

<sup>77</sup> The table gives the number of collaborative papers published by academics based in institutions in those countries and in the UK, from 2016 to 2020, not accounting for the nationality of researchers.

<sup>78</sup> Elsevier SciVal & British Council.

<sup>79</sup> Percentage of academics from 3 EU countries HE who collaborate on UK HE publications.

<sup>80</sup> Percentage of academics from UK HE institutions who collaborate on 3 EU countries' HE publications.

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## 6.2 Academic researchers' perceptions: opportunities and threats

According to the data retrieved from the interviews of academic researchers from the three EU countries, regarding the current state of UK HE, there are both positive and negative opinions, particularly on issues such as funding. Among the many factors that have influenced views on the current state of UK HE, the effects of Brexit on institutions and EU academic researchers working in UK HE institutions have been behind the greatest number of insights provided.

**In terms of opportunities**, there is a generally positive opinion on the quality of institutions, and of the research work that is performed in them. There is an optimistic feeling of work appreciation based on merit, job opportunities, career stability, flexibility working between different fields of expertise, and huge career progression, within a supportive and competitive environment. Some interviewees consider UK HE institutions are very good at exploring multiple partnerships and diversification, mainly due to their worldwide reputation. Others frame it as a large and tiered research-led system, with freedom of innovation.

In comparison to countries of origin, there are a lot of opportunities for funding structures, not yet affected by Brexit. For this reason, fees have not until now been an obstacle for PhD students to join UK HE. London in particular is considered a great place to work in UK HE institutions, as it comprises some of the top HE institutions in the UK, offering a great number of options for academics, and generating opportunities for work collaborations and easier transitions if the need for institutional relocation arises. It also seems that PhD students, post-doctorates and other established academic researchers will not be as affected by external effects (such as Brexit) on issues like funding, as international students at different study levels.

**Considering threats to the current state of UK HE**, there's a common concern regarding future research funding and the lower number of applicants coming from abroad, particularly from EU countries. According to interviewees, the long-term effect of Brexit is on research funding. This is seen as a problem for researchers all over the UK, accompanied by the lack of agreement with the EU, and the lack of clarity on the UK Government measures, raising uncertainty around the issue for the foreseeable future.

According to one interviewee, institutions have already lost good researchers to EU countries, particularly Germany and **France**, as they seek permanent positions and more solid pension schemes. It is becoming harder to maintain international collaborations with EU institutions and to obtain a visa, even for short-term periods of laboratory residencies.

**On incoming students and academics**, several interviewees identify a lesser number of applicants coming from abroad, and fewer people coming for scientific internships at research centres, all due to exchange program changes, visa delays, more bureaucracy, and the rise in tuition fee costs. Other concerns include delays in academic supplies and the delivery of critical equipment and products for conducting research. In addition, teaching and administrative loads on academics, less competitive salaries, and lower attractiveness of UK HE institutions than

before, are considered important threats. Nevertheless, as one interviewee acknowledges, it is hard and still too early to distinguish post-pandemic effects from post-Brexit consequences, when considering threats to the current state of UK HE institutions.

### Case Study 3 | Interviewee 2

Moved to the UK in 1995 to complete an undergraduate degree, with the help of the British Council Lisbon, immediately followed by an MPhil and a PhD, each at Cambridge University. Then, in 2008, spent six months at Harvard as a Visiting Scholar, and 5 years (2008 to 2013) as a Research Fellow and then Lecturer at the University of Manchester. Since 2013, is a Lecturer (Senior Lecturer since 2017) at the University of Cambridge.

“The main obstacle for mobility from the EU to the UK is very simple: the cost. The divergence between the higher education sector in Britain and Europe is really, really stark. In most European countries you have seen fees being reduced or being kept at very low levels. In several countries, including Germany, they have been essentially abolished whereas in Britain higher education continues to be expensive. Now, with the recent change in the fee status of EU students, it has become even more expensive. I can see that in the numbers of applicants to our degrees coming from the EU.”

While the paragraphs above gave a general overview of interviewed academic researchers' insights on the current state of UK HE, in terms of opportunities and threats observed, the following will present a more detailed view of the same, by country, to better understand how different country of origin affect the perception of academic researchers working in UK HE.

## 6.2.1 France

For French academic researchers interviewed, there is a general feeling of uncertainty about the current research funding state of UK HE institutions, the UK Government's lack of clarity and that no agreement has been reached with the EU on this issue. In addition, the withdrawal from the EU is seen as a threat to UK HE institutions. Other complaints are related to the lower number of foreign students in UK HE institutions, particularly through the Erasmus program, which some considered among the best, leading to a downgrade in student quality. Despite UK HE institutions maintaining their levels of attractiveness, French academic researchers believe the lower number of foreign students is related to the huge tuition fee costs, which they think will only attract fewer students in the future. Also, there have been reported cases where academics have had to reject collaborations with foreign HE institutions – particularly from EU HE institutions – because of new international collaboration policy changes made by the UK Government after Brexit. On a positive note, one French academic researcher regards UK HE institutions as very well-funded, with excellent science, and easily able to attract good students and post-doctorates, while other claims that HE institutions remain very competitive, and very research-active institutions in all fields of study.

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## 6.2.2 Poland

For Poland's academic researchers in UK HE, there's a general feeling of appreciation for being established at strong HE institutions, particularly due to top research facilities and funding. According to one interviewee, there are a lot of opportunities for funding structures, not yet affected by Brexit, so for now fees are not an obstacle for PhD students. Some interviewees see London as an advantage, as many UK HE institutions are established in the city, making for a more flexible transition between institutions, if a possibility for relocation arises. However, some concerns have emerged, particularly on the effects of Brexit on their future, the future of their institutions and of other Polish nationals wanting to join UK HE institutions.

The withdrawal from the EU has had a big impact, attracting fewer students and academics from abroad, due to visa delays, bureaucracy issues and tuition fee costs, the latter of which in Poland are free in public HE institutions. The payment of tuition fee costs has made the cost of living in the UK even greater, as there is also much less institutional support on critical issues such as housing and travelling. According to one interviewee, UK HE institutions have already lost capable researchers to EU countries, as they seek permanent positions. It is becoming harder to maintain collaborations with other EU HE institutions, harder to travel and to obtain a visa, even for short-term periods of laboratory internships, blocking inter-university sharing of knowledge. As a result, it is becoming more difficult for UK HE institutions to find EU staff to fulfil job positions.

Furthermore, uncertainty on EU programmes such as Horizon Europe has academic researchers concerned about future funding for research, which can hurt UK HE institutions. Also, it has become hard to share laboratory material, as there are shortages of academic supplies and reported problems with equipment and product deliveries, directly related to border controls re-established after Brexit. These identified problems are reflected in challenges to the development of international collaborations and scientific production.

## 6.2.3 Portugal

For the Portuguese academic researchers interviewed, UK HE institutions generally offer great career opportunities and stability, as well as huge career progression, particularly when compared to Portugal's higher education system (with some even feeling in a privileged position). Some consider UK HE institutions as having a vibrant and intellectual environment for all, and as an exciting place to study and work for everyone who comes from overseas. Also, there is an incentive to discuss and challenge lecturers and academia, which builds intellectual discipline, and is seen as a plus compared to other countries. Moreover, academic researchers mention that they are aware of the competitiveness of the academic career, and they have also found in the UK a supportive environment inside their HE institution.

However, some have already witnessed challenges when dealing with teaching and administrative pressure. Participants have mentioned that UK HE jobs security is not as good as before, with most researchers concerned about funding, salaries not being as competitive as



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they used to be, and the number of grants available for research has fallen substantially in the last few years. Others consider that HE institutions in the UK now feel much more like companies, always seeking funding and focusing less on the quality of research, which detracts from HE's core mission. In addition, some believe UK HE institutions are now less attractive than when they moved to the UK. The lack of funding and uncertainty about EU-funded projects, currently to be decided, and the fewer international collaborations are perceived by some of the participants as the main threats to the UK HE system.

In summary, on the current state of UK HE institutions, interviewed academic researchers have both positive and negative perceptions. The facilities, equipment, quality of research and reputation of UK HE institutions are still among the best worldwide, while career stability and progression also make these institutions very attractive. However, academic researchers also identify specific threats to HE in the UK, namely the instability of future research funding, lower number of applicants from the EU, the loss of researchers to other EU countries, and the increasing difficulty to maintain international collaborations, particularly with EU HE institutions. The common denominator of the above-mentioned concerns about the current state of HE in the UK, Brexit, and academic researchers' thoughts on its effects, will be discussed in the following section.

## 6.3 Brexit

As mentioned, Brexit has already had a considerable impact on both UK institutions and EU academic researchers working in UK HE. This section will focus on what interviewed academic researchers believe to be the main effects of Brexit on UK institutions and on international students and academics, particularly on those that are EU nationals. Brexit is still recent, and the research policies are still uncertain. The following views from academic researchers concern what they witness as the most current changes in UK HE, in addition to what they believe will alter in the short and long term.

In general, interviewees stated that Brexit has had and/or will have an impact on both UK HE institutions and EU academic researchers working in these institutions. Nonetheless, the views on the degree of impact differ. For some, the cost of higher education in the UK is much greater and tuition fees will become a discouragement for new incoming students, especially undergraduates. For others, entrance and permanence in the UK after Brexit will become more difficult, with the requirement of visas, as added bureaucracy will prevent many from applying to UK institutions, which might result, in a smaller number of job opportunities.

One issue that various academic researchers mentioned as of great concern is research funding. Interviewees also reported that it has become harder to recruit good students, with some choosing to go to other countries (Germany and France), as both tuition fee costs and the termination of exchange programs (namely Erasmus+) have resulted in fewer EU students coming to the UK. Regarding exchange programmes, some interviewees regret the absence of Erasmus students in UK HE institutions, as they feel some were among the best they have

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taught. As one interviewee stated, due to European undergraduates' tendency to stay for postgraduate studies, there is great concern that if the number of European undergraduate students in the UK drops, there will be a long-term impact on postgraduate programs.

There are also accounts that the market for the field of science is closing to other HE institutions overseas and that the UK Government's new border policies have delayed the delivery of essential products and equipment coming from abroad. One issue that various academic researchers mentioned as of great concern is the future of research funding. Many have not yet been given clarity on the position of the UK's Government and of some UK HE institutions on EU grants and the projects they fund (including Horizon Europe), which might result in a fall in incoming EU postgraduates. One interviewee stated that when contacted by other institutions from abroad inquiring about international collaborations, they had to reject due to the recent Government policies, which have made it more difficult to collaborate with EU HE researchers.

In summary, academic researchers believe, generally, that Brexit will have a considerable negative impact on UK HE institutions and academic researchers at those institutions. More policy-related restrictions will result in fewer exchange programs and higher tuition fees costs, meaning fewer EU first-degree students, fewer EU funding programmes, meaning fewer postgraduates and academics doing research in UK HE institutions, and ultimately, according to many interviewed academic researchers, more isolated HE institutions, socially, financially and educationally, particularly from those in the EU.

#### Case Study 4 | Interviewee 27

While finishing their undergraduate studies in Portugal in 1998, moved to the UK to complete, simultaneously, an MSc at UMIST. Later, in 2002, concluded a PhD at UCL. In 2007 moved back to Portugal, to the University of Porto, to assume a teaching position that still possesses. Had also positions at Cambridge University, Princeton University and Duke University (US). Returns to the UK in 2012, to become first a Senior Lecturer, and today a Professor at UCL.

“A threat to academic institutions is obviously less talent. We need to attract the best at different levels – undergraduate, master, PhD. If suddenly, for obvious reasons, it becomes more difficult to attract talent, then that is a clear threat.”

“Being able to collaborate with our colleagues abroad is extremely important for us to continue to thrive. Research and innovation are an international game, not national.”

“I ended up having an academic career in the UK because I benefited from some of these [exchange] programs. Absolutely. I can say confidently that, having spent so much time in the UK has clearly influenced my choice to eventually come back to the UK and pursue an academic career.”

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## 7 Impact of student mobility: research agenda

The main contribution of this study was the focus being on the link between mobility and academic career choices, with academic staff central to our analysis. The research is based on qualitative case studies of 30 academics and key aspects that clarify the impact of student mobility in academic careers were identified.

In the future, it would be interesting to include participants based in the UK who completed undergraduate and/or post-graduate studies outside the UK, but who had a short mobility experience in UK HE institutions. Developing this comparison would help to understand the impact differences between short- and long-term mobility.

We conclude that mobility experiences in other countries influenced the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK. This is very likely to be true in the case of academics that had a mobility experience in the UK. From the interviews with the participants in this study, it was possible to unravel how they see themselves, and other colleagues that have completed part of their studies in the UK, as having an advantage. They mention that it is easier to navigate the academic environment when compared with academics that have completed their training outside the UK. Academics educated in the UK are usually more embedded in the culture, language, and academic environment, and have more knowledge of the higher education system and funding opportunities. The fact that they were able to create a strong network during an early stage of their careers seems to be a very important aspect that was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees. As such, it would be of great interest to develop research on the impact that an early higher education experience has on a subsequent transition to a UK academic career, in comparison to an experience outside of the UK.

As it was possible to conclude that international mobility has a greater impact at the PhD and Postdoctoral levels, rather than undergraduate, it would be interesting if a study was developed with a focus on academics that have recently finished these levels of education. Subsequently, directing attention to early-career researchers that have finished their PhD and Postdoctoral in the UK, or outside, in the last 6 years (post-Brexit referendum), but that are currently established in the UK HE system should be considered.

Another research strand worth mentioning would be to understand not the factors that led academics to pursue an academic career in the UK HE but to understand the factors that led highly recognised academic staff to leave the UK and join institutions in other countries. Specifically, it would be of interest to study academics that are now joining higher education institutions in the countries that compete directly with the UK, such as the US and Germany. This would help to unravel which key factors make the difference in securing the best researchers and, consequently, research funding, teams, and essentially postgraduate students they attract.

The impact of mobility programmes on academic performance, including publications, and academic career choices should be further studied, as well as identifying indicators that could

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measure the impact of long-term mobility. Another topic that is understudied is the impact of mobility experiences and international collaborations on higher education teaching. To wit, how an academic's openness to the international academic community affects and inspires its methods and approaches to teaching in UK HE, and how that can not only attract overseas students but also improve both teaching and learning experiences. In addition, concerning research, there is a need to understand the influence of international perspectives in research projects and how this can then be translated into the political decisions made based on research. On funding, there is a need to look at the contribution of research funding gathered by EU academics and its effect on the UK HE sector, particularly by early-career researchers. It is important to evaluate this aspect since the majority of UK HE international staff is from the EU and has mainly exclusively research contracts.

Even though the focus of many studies is the students in the UK, we believe that the link between completing an English language course in the UK (during high school or undergraduate level) and the decision of staying in the UK HE are understudied. EU students usually have a better level of knowledge of English and therefore have more capabilities to enrol in UK HE and complete their course successfully. As the English language level is a challenge for students coming from China and the Middle East, for example, completing an English course in the UK can give them the skills and a cultural induction that might influence their decision to pursue their studies in the UK.

## 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Global Britain, Global Higher Education: research, mobility and international education

From the development of this study, **we have concluded that pre-career mobility is indeed an important factor in later academic career choices**, not only for those who had an early mobility experience in the UK HE but also, to a lesser extent, for those who had a mobility experience outside of the UK. For those who studied academic degrees in the UK, early exposure to UK HE's academic innovation, research funding, high quality of education and the prospect of a stable and progressive academic career were some of the key factors influencing the decision to remain in the UK.

It was possible to identify several **mobility-related factors** that emerge as determinants for later academic career choices. **Particularly in the UK context, the great variety and excellence of these factors**, such as funding opportunities, HE reputation, quality of facilities, networking, and others, **signifies the high level of UK HE institutions, differentiating them from other HE sectors overseas.**

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On **mobility experiences, we were able to determine that they are more likely to lead to an academic career in a later stage of postgraduate studies (at PhD/Post-doctorate levels) than at undergraduate and master levels.** Most of the interviewees mentioned the relevance of mobility experience for creating a network during their doctoral or postdoctoral programs. In addition to pre-career mobility, other factors have been cited as having an impact on pursuing an academic career in a UK HE: personal reasons (family), institutions and higher education sector reputation, funding opportunities, propitious environment for the establishment of national and international collaborations, career progression and the quality of facilities.

Considering this wealth of contributing factors, it was not possible in this study to find a direct causal link between undergraduate and master level mobility experiences and the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK. We did, however, identify a direct link between PhD mobility experiences and the decision to pursue an academic career in the UK.

**The mobility of international students to UK HE institutions has a huge impact on the UK economy,** with tuition fee costs and living expenses as the main sources of revenue.

Postgraduate research students, and early-career researchers, produce economic benefits to the sector specifically through research projects that include funding, which contributes to the development of their field of study and the stimuli of the institutions' research environment. It was possible to determine that investment in academia, and collaborations between UK HE institutions and start-up companies, also bring great leverage. Collaborations between academia and industry produce innovation and development, mainly with new technology and scientific findings bringing direct benefits to the UK economy.

Despite forewarning that it might be early to determine the effects of Brexit, considerable negative outcomes are already visible. **Changes affecting visa applications, tuition fees, and the end of loan schemes have had an impact on the number of incoming EU students.** In the case of short-term mobility, Brexit has also had a large negative impact on the number of incoming EU students, due to the ending of the UK's participation in the Erasmus+ programme, especially as the UK was the most popular destination for EU students.<sup>81</sup>

Interviewed EU academic researchers **perceive Brexit as a current threat to the UK HE sector.** It was possible to determine a consensus among interviewees that Brexit has already had, and will continue to have, big effects on the future of institutions, academics and students. Inspired by many statements made by the interviewed researchers, we reinforce the idea that international scientific collaborations are fundamental to producing knowledge and the development of all scientific fields and societal evolution. Political decisions must not create barriers between higher education institutions but actively encourage and facilitate cooperation with those overseas.

In response to the effects of Brexit on higher education, UK institutions are considered by the UK Government as “key vectors” of Global Britain, particularly its economic value to the UK

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<sup>81</sup> Mayhew, Ken. 2022.

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economy, ensuring its priority.<sup>82</sup> As institutions try to cover Brexit-related losses – mainly due to the considerable drop in EU students’ applications and EU funding – they attempt to appeal to students from non-EU countries, as many seem to be willing to pay very high tuition fees to study at UK HE institutions. This approach has led to the identification of China, Nigeria and Middle Eastern countries, as fast-growing education markets, undergoing big education reforms, suitable for the Government's new higher education policy ambitions.<sup>83</sup>

The UK Government’s **International Education Strategy**, designed by the joint forces of the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for International Trade (DIT), recognises the importance of the higher education sector, which represents more than half of the share of education-related exports and repatriated income from transnational education (TNE) activities. Despite this, higher education plans of action receive poor attention and do not mention the influence of academic staff in the sector. The strategy is focused on international students and the development of international relationships and institutional collaborations. The highly international academic staff at UK HE institutions is one of the most valued aspects by national and international students when choosing to study at UK institutions. If the UK HE sector is of high quality, reputation and attractiveness, that is due to the high level of research and teaching being developed by academic staff, a significant proportion of whom are from the EU.

This report contributes to a new understanding, particularly drawing on the experience of UK-based HE staff, providing guidance that can help design strategies and achieve goals. From our interviews with experienced UK-based EU academics, their key concerns regarding the future of UK higher education can be summarized as follows:

**Research funding is the main concern of the EU researchers interviewed.** Academics have expressed concerns about HE institutions in the UK focusing their **efforts on securing funding** instead of focusing on more innovative projects. Moreover, the **uncertainty regarding future EU funding** is causing a retraction of UK-based researchers that do not prepare proposals for future projects or take fewer chances in their scientific endeavours. Consequently, **HE institutions are faced with the challenge of retaining their best international academics**, particularly EU nationals, as conditions in EU HE institutions might be more enticing now after Brexit and lead them to leave the UK. Germany and France are the main European competitors to the UK, with both countries guaranteeing funding and facilities for research, along with the positive aspects of EU membership and geographical proximity with other European countries.

Even though three **visa schemes** facilitate the immigration process to the UK – the Student Visa, the Global Talent Visa (academia and research) and the Skilled Worker Visa – EU academic staff in the UK believe this is a challenge for the mobility of **students and staff to the UK HE system**. At the institutional level, the procedures for UK researchers to complete short mobility periods in other EU HE institutions, and vice-versa, also remain unclear.

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<sup>82</sup> Drake, Helen. 2017. “May’s ‘Global Britain’: the decline and fall of European Studies.” *LSE Brexit*.

<sup>83</sup> Department for Education and Department for International Trade. 2021. *International Education Strategy 2021 update: Supporting recovering, driving growth*.

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**Tuition fee costs for EU students** are also a concern for interviewed academics. They believe that EU students are better prepared, mainly due to their curricula in undergraduate studies, and for that reason, their enrolment in UK HE to complete a master's or PhD degree should be incentivized. Hence, **their absence from UK HE will be a challenge for institutions, as it risks leading to a decrease in their academic level and reputation, particularly in terms of research.**

## 9 About the authors

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### 9.1 Acknowledgements

PARSUK would like to thank the British Council for the funding that allowed the development of this study between March and April 2022. In particular, the authors highly appreciate the assistance and advice of Richard Fleming and Kevin Prest during the development of this project. Should also be mentioned the help of Joana Castro, research analyst of PARSUK, who actively contributed to the first phase of the project, for the data collection phase. Her support was decisive for the development of the research.



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The authors would like to thank the Internal Advisory Board – Diogo Martins and Patrick Rebuschat (PARSUK) – and the External Advisory Board – Katarzyna Makowska (The Polonium Foundation) and Rachel Millet (FERN-UK) for their support. Both organisations have nominated an individual to join our external advisory board for this project. Members provided strategic direction on the approach, suggested names of French and Polish researchers in the UK that were interviewed, and validated the results.



**The Polonium Foundation** is an independent non-profit NGO bringing together researchers, students, and others involved in all research & science sectors worldwide. Polonium Foundation's goal is to transform the negative phenomenon of intensive emigration of Polish scientists into a favourable two-way flow of people and ideas. The Foundation's activities focus on connecting and supporting Polish scientists working all over the world, including in the academic sector, and research development, as well as foreign scientists interested in the possibilities of research or cooperation with **Poland**.

**FERN-UK**, for French Education and Research Network, aims to bring together French or Francophile researchers and PhD students based in the UK to support Franco-British research collaborations in universities or private sectors, to provide support for the mobility of researchers and graduate students and to create a dynamic of information and discussion within the community.



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# 10 Appendix: Methodological Approach

## Research Questions

1. What research, if any, currently exists linking mobility experiences and later academic career choices?
2. What is the proportion of current academic researchers from three EU countries based in UK HE institutions?
3. To what extent is early exposure to undergraduate and postgraduate student mobility experiences in the UK a factor in later career choices among EU academic researchers based in UK HE? What other factors are important in those career choices?
4. How do these EU academic researchers currently based in UK HE institutions regard the current state of UK HE? What opportunities and threats do they observe?
5. What specific future research might help to further clarify and measure the impact of student mobility, in particular regarding academic careers?

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were implemented to ensure best research practices were always followed. Each candidate received comprehensive documentation that included the participant information, explaining the research project, the expected contribution, and the data management plan. All participants accepted to participate in the study and signed a consent form, including the title of the study, contact of the principal investigator, the purpose of the study, procedures, risks and benefits of participation, confidentiality notes, voluntary agreement note, and final consent statement accompanied by date and signature.

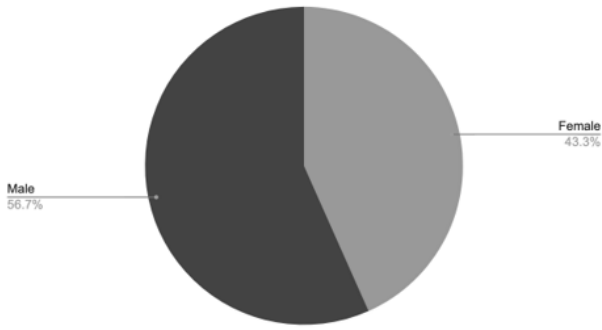
## Sample Description

The sample of this research project is composed of 30 individuals in total from **Portugal**, **France**, and **Poland** – identified via PARSUK, FERN and Polonium Foundation respectively – who are currently pursuing an academic career in the UK HE institutions. In specific, we considered academics who have completed a PhD and are already established in a higher institution in the UK. A non-probability sampling approach is particularly well-suited for this project and was taken into consideration for the selection criteria of key informants. In other words, we selected a sample for this study that can be considered representative of a diverse population<sup>84</sup> of international academic researchers in the UK and includes case studies of a variety of scenarios described in **Figure 1**.

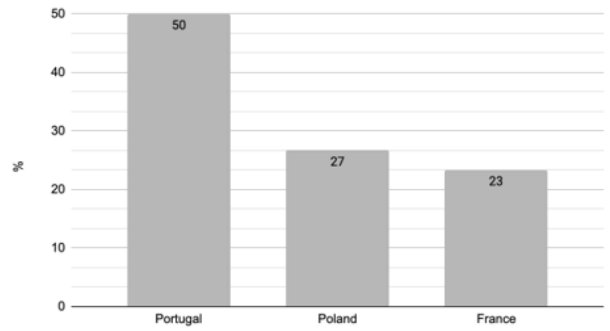
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<sup>84</sup> By diverse, we mean that the interviewed population includes people from different countries, with different cultures and values, various age groups, different academic routes and personal backgrounds, and others.

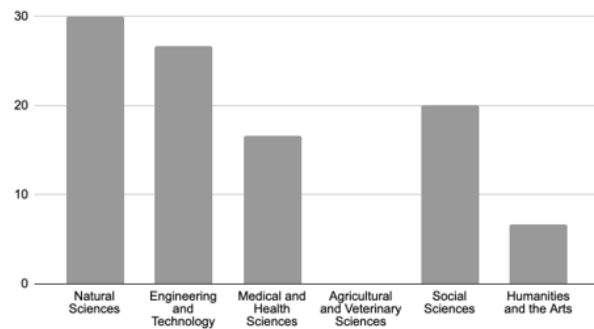
Gender Distribution



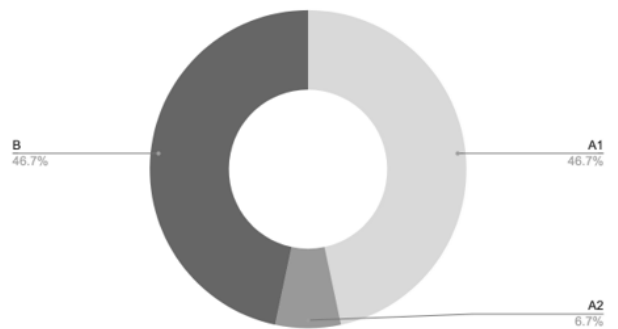
Country of Origin



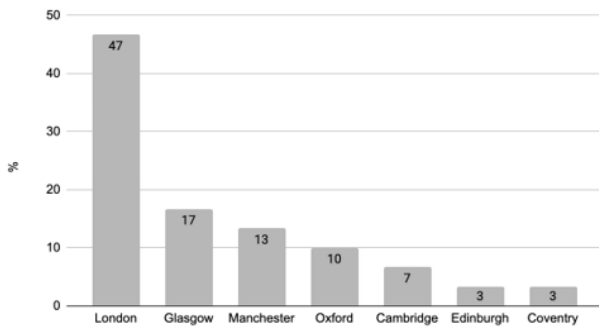
Field of Research



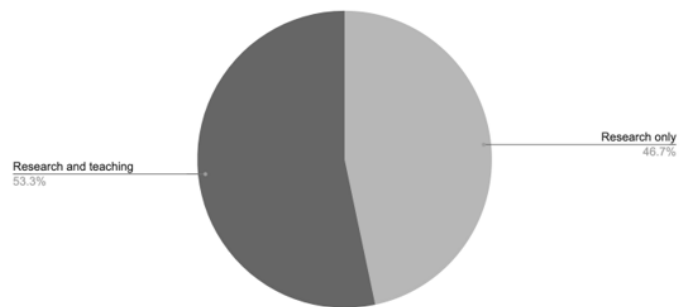
Research Scenario



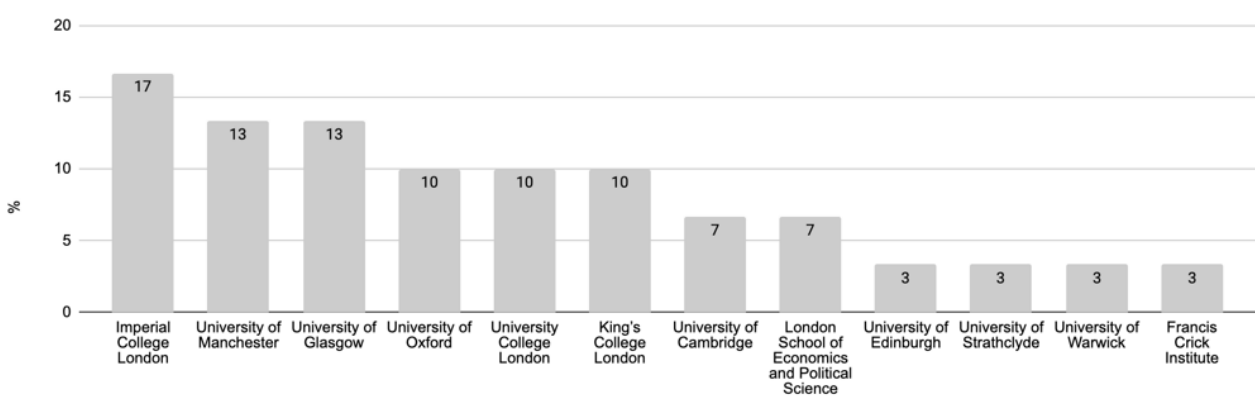
City



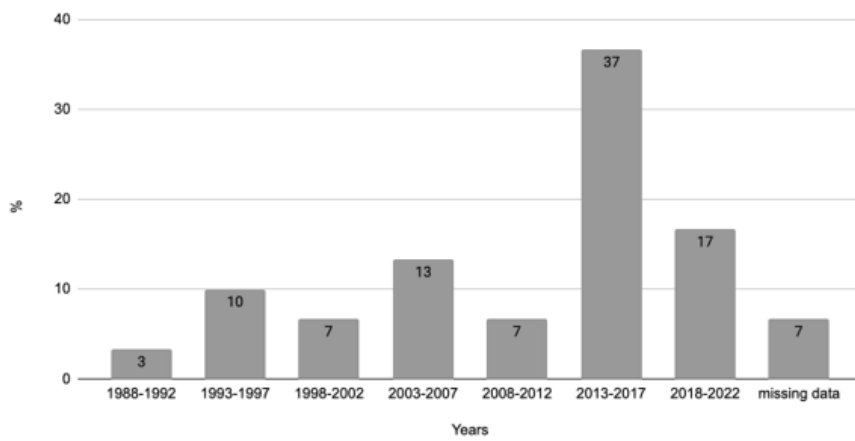
Contract Type



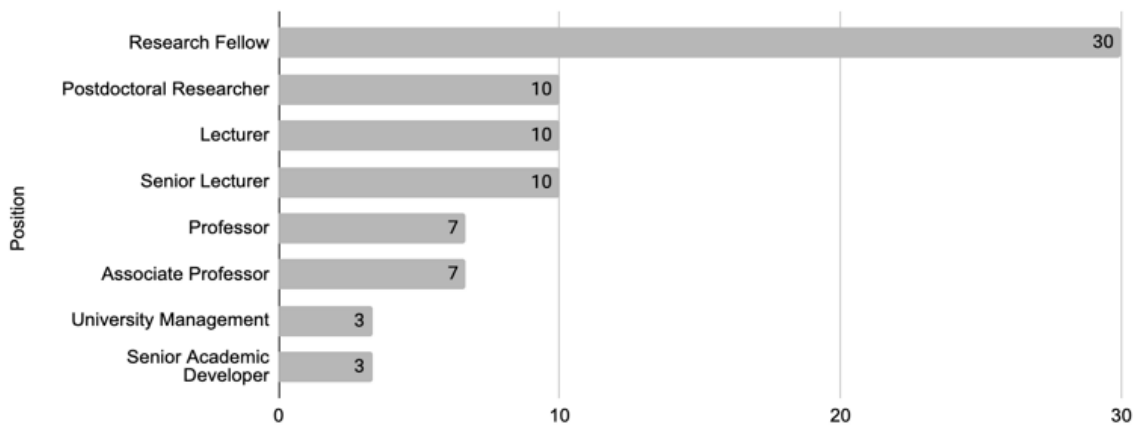
Institution



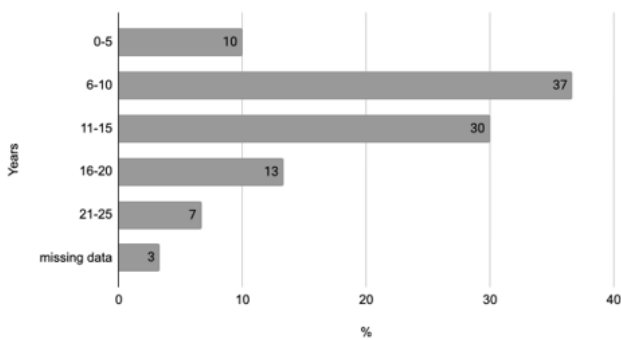
### PhD Award Period



### Academic Position



### Time in the UK



### Mobility in the UK

