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Can “virtual exchange” foster the inclusiveness of international academic mobility?

Evidence from an interview study

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Abstract

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In view of the positive impacts of academic mobility, this paper is questioning its inclusiveness, giving a special focus to socio-economic mobility barriers. With a qualitative interview study of 50 participants of Austrian mobility programmes from 27 countries worldwide, this paper aspires to gain deeper knowledge of how mobile academics from different countries experience mobility barriers, and how they estimate virtual mobility as alternative mobility type. The findings suggest that financial and logistic barriers are a major burden. Results turn out moderate with a view to the potential ascribed to virtual exchange as alternative mobility type.

Presentation

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1. Introduction

The profession of the researcher has become particularly reliant on international mobility in the past decades, which has been having tremendous impacts on individual career pathways (Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021). Leung (2017) points out that researcher mobility is perceived as key to “academic excellence, career advancement and upward social mobility”. More insistingly, Ackers (2008, p. 413) highlights that oftentimes, a direct relationship is assumed between participating in international mobilities and “individual excellence or quality”, implying that “excellence is mobile”, and that “excellent scientists are footloose”. As Mahroum (2000) puts it, there is the common assertion that mobility and excellence are “reciprocally constitutive”. Both the attribute of “excellence” as well as the strong dependence on international mobility among (especially early career stage) researchers start are viewed increasingly critically due to their exclusionary nature of those researchers who cannot participate in these practices or comply with any other of the measurements of “excellence” (which, at the same time, vary across disciplines).

In particular, the excessive dependence on physical mobility in academic careers inherently disadvantages individuals that are facing mobility barriers and therefore have less capacities to travel. These barriers can be of different nature and comprise physical or mental disabilities, obstacles emerging from (higher) education systems as such, cultural differences, geographical origin, but also social and economic barriers as well as barriers in connection with discrimination (European Commission, 2021). In this context, it must also be noted that entire countries – mainly those from the global South – have significantly less possibilities to be included in academic mobility, because it is dominated by a set of countries – mainly counting to the global North. Individuals in developing countries face a combination of (individual and systemic) mobility barriers which limit their possibilities to participate. This is unfortunate, however, since, according to findings by Trechsel et al. (2021), the positive effects of international academic mobility turn out particularly strong for researchers from the global South, who experience a “significant, immediate career boost” from their mobilities abroad. Oftentimes, these individual positive impacts spill over to and even beyond the institutional level of the respective HEI (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). If developing countries are involved in academic mobility, then most often in the role of the sending country: As Meyer et al. (2001) highlight, mobility flows have the tendency to go from the less developed to more competitive regions, which also links the debate to the problematic of brain drain.

While mobility barriers related to disabilities already find consideration in a set of pertinent research studies (see e.g. Ablueva, 2012, Heirweg et al., 2020) as well as in academic mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ (European Commission, 2021), research on aspects such as socio-economic, cultural, geographical or systemic barriers is rare. The paper at hand shall contribute to this debate. It comprises, in particular, a focus on individuals from the global South, which are often confronted with a combination of these barriers. As a recent study by the British Council indicates, particularly countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also North African (e.g. Egypt), Latin and South American (e.g. Chile, Mexico), Asian (e.g. Bangladesh) and Middle East (e.g. Iran) countries only enjoy weak coordinated government support for international student mobility and international research engagement (Ilieva et al., 2017). A study by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) on the international student and researcher mobility underlines the weak role that most countries of the global South play in international academic mobility, both as countries of destination as well as host countries of mobile academics (DAAD, 2019). However, also academics from the global North face mobility barriers of social and economic nature, which shall not be ignored in this paper. These are, in particular, people with personal travel restrictions such as care responsibilities (which are still, in the first place, taken over by women), especially if they are linked to financial constraints of being mobile with an entire

family.

The paper at hand aims at contributing to the question of inclusiveness the concept of researcher mobility, tying in with critical literature questioning the dependence of international mobility in this profession. This paper pursues to answer two research questions: 1) How inclusive are research mobility programmes with a view to individuals facing socio-economic mobility barriers, and 2) Can “virtual exchange” provide a valuable alternative? For doing so, the paper counts on an interview study with 50 former and current participants of mobility programmes funded by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF).

2. Research careers and international mobility

At the latest since the introduction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), internationalisation has become an essential part of European higher education institutions’ (HEIs’) strategies, oftentimes realised through the international mobility of HEI researchers and students. An “open labour market for researchers (...)” is a key priority of the ERA (European Commission, 2007), supported by European and national policies and accompanied by measures such as job matching (“EURAXESS portal”).

Researchers can be considered a particular group of highly skilled workers that exhibits a great extent of international job mobility. In contrast to most other highly skilled professionals, whose job mobility has also seen a rise in the past years, researchers have a significant number of opportunities to change their location without changing their employers (Børing et al., 2015). Much rather, their international mobility is often linked to a change in positions right through or after their mobility (Ackers, 2008). The OECD (2015) sees an ever-increasing scale in international mobility among researchers, more strongly than in other highly skilled professionals, with more and more economies to participate.

Researcher mobility is often driven by the “need to access research collaborators, acquire new skills or techniques, gain access to materials or samples, or to specialised research equipment” (Børing et al, 2015). Researcher mobility can either be project-/event-related (e.g. conference trips), qualification-related (e.g. completion of a PhD or post-doc project abroad) or workplace-related (temporary or permanent research assignments) (DAAD, 2019). Oftentimes, it is supported by national or supranational research funding, but also through institutional support from sending or receiving institutions (Heffernan, Jöns, 2013). Funded mobilities use to be limited in time, even though the duration – or the frequency, in case of multiple mobilities – can vary considerably (Børing et al, 2015).

The decisions for researchers to be mobile are well researched. It is particularly noteworthy, as indicated in Børing et al. (2015), that international mobilities prior to the occupation as researchers (e.g. in shape of student mobilities), are associated with a greater likelihood of mobility at later research career stages. This also explains the rapid rise in researcher mobilities, which is (partly) driven by a rise in student mobilities. At the same time, the decision for an international mobility is linked to expectations with a view to positive impacts on the personal academic career, which are found to spill over to the level of the involved institutions (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018) – unsurprising that they promote, incentivise and expect a certain degree of international mobility from their academic staff. Payumo et al. (2018) and Khattab & Fenton (2016) found that HEIs benefit from researcher mobility both in increased outputs and financial sustainability. Ackers and Gill (2008) even detect a “pressure on institutions to appear international”, which they pass on to their scientific staff: As Ackers (2008) states, the practice of international academic mobility has become deeply “embedded in career structures” and now therefore has turned to an “expectation” – this is particularly true for the natural sciences, which are associated with high levels of geographical mobility.

Several studies confirm that international mobility is linked to academic career advances. Cañibano et al. (2020) found that international mobility allows researchers to take part in professional activities that are important for their personal career development. Particularly early-stage career researchers consider international mobility a vital strategy for their personal career advancement (Musselin, 2004) – they use it to get access to key postdoctoral positions (Melin, 2004) or to suitable conditions for

developing their own research projects (Laudel & Bieleck, 2019). Regardless of career stages, international mobility can provide access to promotions, income increases, better working conditions and gains in prestige (Stephan, 2015). As Ackers (2008) points out, however, international mobility increasingly becomes an end in itself, and academic career advances without mobility are no longer possible to that extent. This makes it a constraint for the researchers, much rather than a choice, and hinders individuals with mobility barriers to progress in their academic career.

3. Evidence of socio-economic mobility barriers

Using the MORE2¹ dataset to examine the linkages between research career stage and international mobilities among mobile researchers, Cañibano et al. (2020) found that international mobility profiles vary across research career stage. In earlier career stages, international mobility is most likely linked to job changes. In contrast, more established researchers are motivated by higher research autonomy and the possibility to work with leading experts. The authors also found that the career stage timing of international mobility is gendered. Overall, women made up close to 33 % of the overall mobile researcher target group from the MORE2 dataset and made up close to 32 % of all reported international mobilities². Notably, at the R2-stage³, women undertook close 37 % of all mobilities, at the R3 stage 31,4 %, at the R4-stage only 15 %. Thus, with rising career stages, women are less often participating in mobilities⁴ (Cañibano et al., 2020).

This is also confirmed by results of an interview study conducted by Ackers (2008). As she points out, there are researchers "(...) who engage in calculated, repeated international mobility in order to invest in their human and social capital", however these are, according to the author, in the first place those who have limited personal (caring) responsibilities. Caring responsibilities, be it for children or adults, restrict the ability to exercise mobility and thus has negative effects on career progression. In particular, the presence of children has effects on mobility behaviour: In women, it often delays the commencement of a research career at the very basis. In men and women alike, children can cause a reluctance to be mobile due to concerns about childcare, the impact on children's education, as well as the partner's employment (Ackers, Stalford, 2007). Ackers (2008) also found financial concerns linked to moving abroad (or forth and back) with an entire family, which is usually not covered by research funding. Thus, the mobility behaviour is strongly determined by the personal financial background.

Financial means are also a fundamental question for researchers in developing countries: Here, international mobility is often limited to individuals with the necessary socio-economic conditions. As Maldonado-Maldonado et al. (2021) show for international mobility among Mexican students, the possibility to participate in mobility increases with the students' parents' level of education, the size of the family, the family income, number of properties and the parents' overall cultural capital. In the same study, students reported that funding programmes were the key to mobility, however the selection mechanisms into these programmes favour individuals in an advanced socio-economic situation. At the same time, many developing countries and their institutions are lacking pertinent funding schemes at all, and accessing funding schemes from the global North proves to be difficult – the reasons for this are manifold and comprise different approaches to the measurement of excellence, but also the lacking (relevant) international experience among researchers from the global South, due to fewer prior participation in international mobility programmes (Maldonado et al., 2021; Bedenlier, 2018).

1 „Mobility Patterns and Career Paths of Researchers” project funded by the European Commission.

2 The numbers differ because some researchers indicated multiple mobilities

3 The authors distinguish between recognised researchers (R2), established researchers (R3) and leading researchers (R4)

4 This also reflects the fact that women are also underrepresented at the highest levels of academic careers

If developing countries are involved in academic mobility, then most often in the role of the sending country: As Meyer et al. (2001) highlight, mobility flows have the tendency to go from the less developed to more competitive regions. Even though it is not in the focus of this paper, the threat of talent outflows and “brain drain” must be highlighted in this regard (Lovakov et al., 2022, Mahroum, 2003). The dominance of certain geographical regions as mobility destination is backed by the findings in Macháček et al. (2022), who use the term “insiders” to describe researchers that continue to be linked to their original HEI – a high share of “insiders” being a sign of “institutional inbreeding”, e.g. due to HEIs’ practice of employing their own graduates, bringing about negative effects such as lower (publication) outputs. A high share of “insiders” can be due to endogenous reasons, e.g. hiring practices, but also exogenous reasons, e.g. the lack of attractiveness for foreign candidates. Consequently, there are considerable differences between geographical areas: Areas with the highest shares of “insiders” are concentrated in the global South and East, while the lowest shares are to be found in North America, Oceania and Western and Northern Europe (Macháček et al., 2021).

4. Virtual exchange as alternative?

As noted in the chapters above, critical voices against the excessive dependence on international mobility have been raised, particularly by proponents of an inclusive approach. In view of the situation in developing countries, already back in 2018, Bedenlier (2018) proposed – next to ongoing physical mobility – the use of virtual mobility and “internationalisation at home” in order to increase the number of individuals and HEIs that benefit from international mobility in the global South (Bedenlier, 2018). Meanwhile, due to the COVID19-pandemic and the increasing awareness of the contribution of all types of physical mobility to global warming, virtual mobility has been practiced through the past two years and has received growing acceptance as mobility type and serious alternative to physical mobility (DAAD, 2021, Arsenault, 2019).

Even though physical mobility has been taken up as soon as travel restrictions were lifted, the alternative of virtual mobility is resonating and continues to be practiced, e.g. in hybrid international conferences or virtual international project collaboration. In line with a more critical discourse on academic mobility initiated by Ackers (2008) and emphasised by Henderson (2019) or Burford et al. (2021), this trend has favoured “reconfigurations in the im-/mobility-binary” (Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021): Virtual academic mobility that has emerged under the initial pressure of the pandemic is increasingly considered a mobility type in its own right, or as complementation to physical types of mobility.

Indeed, the notion of “virtual exchange” has risen in the pertinent academic discourse, and some authors ascribe it similarly positive personal and institutional impacts as to physical mobility types (e.g. Machwate et al., 2021). However, research evidence is still weak and more differentiated insights are needed. Currently, there are hints that project- or event-related mobilities might come close to physical mobilities with a view to their positive effects, though qualification- and workplace-related mobilities are more difficult to accomplish virtually. Since several authors point to the potential of virtual exchange with a view to increasing inclusiveness in practicing mobility and reaching higher job positions as researcher (Bedenlier, 2018, Arsenault et al., 2019, Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021), it is worthwhile to gain more nuanced insights.

5. Empirical approach

In 2021, the author of the paper at hand was part of the evaluation team of the “International OeAD Grants and Cooperation Programmes” (Ecker et al., 2022) funded by the Austrian *Ministry of*

*Education, Science and Research*⁵ (BMBWF). Most of the grants and cooperation programmes⁶ under investigation aim at supporting (early career stage) researchers in conducting international mobilities⁷. The programmes under investigation provide an alternative to Erasmus+ programmes in several respects. For example, mobilities are not bound to contracts between institutions, but can be chosen freely by the researchers, allowing them for example to select an institution because of a particular supervisor or because of particular research infrastructure. Partly, the programmes are addressed to participants from (and to) particular regions, comprising the global South and East. As a consequence, there is a major share of participants from developing and emerging countries. In the frame of the evaluation, 50 beneficiaries were interviewed who had used or were using (at the moment of the interview) their grants for an international mobility. The anonymised list of interview partners can be viewed upon request. The investigated programmes are listed in table 1.

Table 1 Number of special directives and grant programmes covered through the qualitative interviews

Grant programmes	Number of interview partners¹⁾
Auslandssektorate	9
Ernst Mach-scholarship – worldwide	10
Franz Werfel-scholarship	7
Ernst Mach-scholarship: ASEA-Uninet	5
Ernst Mach-follow-up scholarship EZA	5
Richard Plaschka-scholarship	3
Ernst Mach- scholarship for studying at universities of applied sciences	2
Ernst Mach- scholarship: Eurasia-Pacific Uninet	1
Marietta Blau scholarship	2
Doctoral Research Fellowships	1
WTZ – Wissenschaftlich Technische Zusammenarbeit (Scientific technical cooperation)	3
CEEPUS (4), „Aktion Austria – Czech Republic“	2
„Aktion Austria – Slovakia“	1
TOTAL	55

Note ¹⁾ five interview partners were beneficiaries of two grants each, therefore the total number of special directives covered is 55. Source: Ecker et al. (2022)

The sample was generated through a call from the BMBWF to its former and present participants. It comprises individuals from 27 countries of origin⁸, thereof 14 countries that can be counted to the global South. 54 % of the interview partners come from Europe, 26 % from Asia, 10 % from Africa and 8 % from South America. The composition of the sample in terms of country of origin can be seen in figure 1. The interview partners' mobility durations were ranging between less than a month and close to four years. Some individuals were participating in multiple mobilities. Altogether, 27 of the interviewed beneficiaries are female; leaving aside the programme "Auslandssektorate" (a programme traditionally dominated by women), however, only 19 participants are female (in contrast to 23 male).

5 On behalf of the evaluation team, the author of this paper thanks the BMBWF for the permission to use the results for scientific publications.

6 More details on the individual grant programmes can be found at <https://grants.at/de/>

7 With the exception of "Auslandssektorate" (a programme for university graduates teaching the German/Austrian language and culture abroad)

8 These are the interview partners' countries of origin and not necessarily the countries of the HEIs the participants are originally affiliated with.

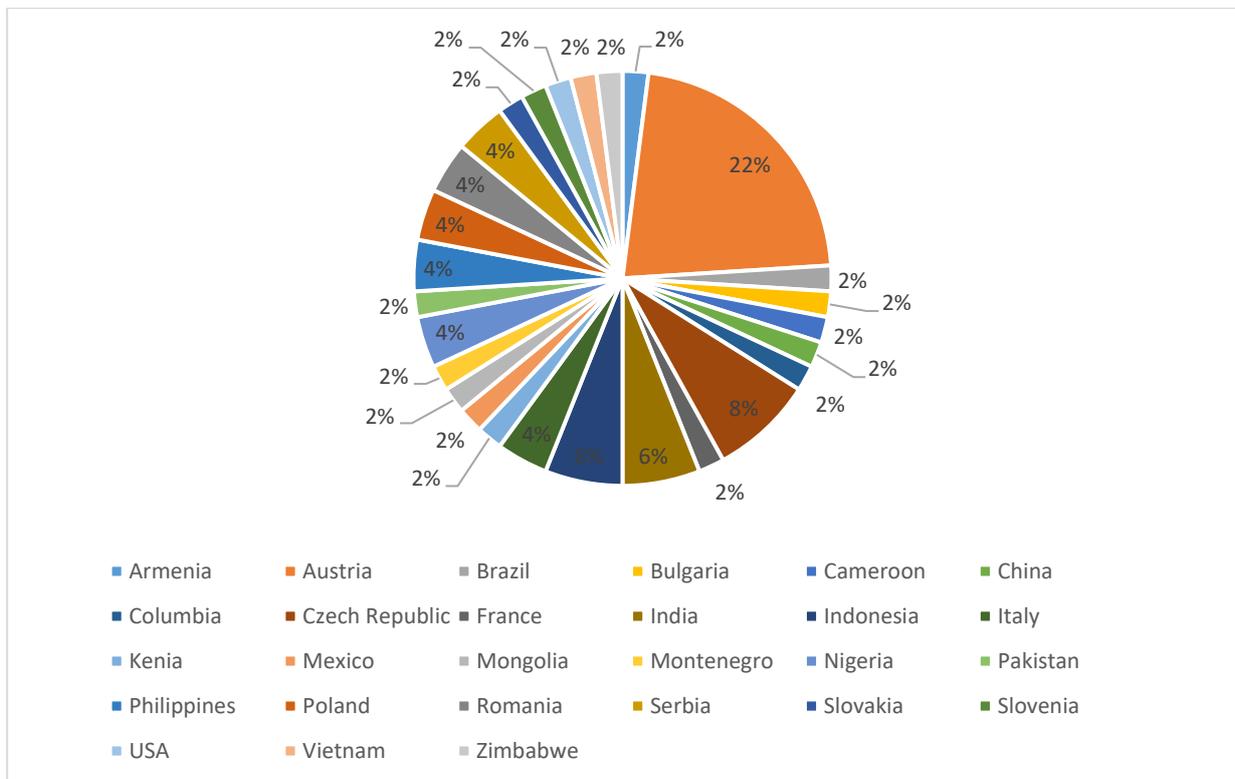


Figure 1 Countries of origin represented in the sample of interview partners (n = 50) Source: Own illustration based on data in Ecker et al. (2022)

The interviews were held in a semi-structured way following an interview guide with a strong narrative character (“episodic interviews”, see e.g. Flick, 2000). The interview guide was developed based on prior fundings from an online survey in the frame of the evaluation. They were conducted virtually via the electronic meeting software “Zoom” in December 2021 and took between 20 and 40 minutes each. Interviews were held in German and English language, depending on the interview partners’ preferences. The interviews were analysed with a qualitative data analysis technique (2-cycled coding according to Saldana, 2016) with the data analysis software NVivo.

6. Results

The results of the interview study will be presented divided in the three sub-sections aspects of inclusiveness, career progression and virtual exchange as an alternative. For reasons of privacy among this rather small sample of interviewees, the statements are not referenced to individual interview partners.

Aspects of inclusiveness

As mentioned above, the programmes under investigation differ from pertinent mobility grants in several respects. The interview partners highlighted most of these differences positively. In particular, two aspects were raised that are relevant for the question of inclusiveness: On the one hand, interview partners appreciated that age is not a limiting criterion in any of these programmes. “The flexible dealing of the criterion of age is a great advantage of the programme that distinguishes it from the European programmes”, as one interview partner stated, referring to the Ernst Mach grant.

Secondly, the interview partners noted that especially the incoming programmes were more or less explicitly addressing researchers from developing countries. “We would not get this possibility to move to Austria through the regular grant programmes” as one interview partner from Africa pointed out, stating that the chances for African researchers to undertake such mobility with a European grant were rather low.

In this regard, however, differences between the observed programmes appeared – while the Ernst Mach grant was considered highly inclusive for researchers from the global South, they considered the Franz Werfel programme to be “designed for researchers from Eastern Europe”. Whilst these remarks seem to be a detail on the individual programmes, the core reasoning behind them gives an important insight into the limitations that researchers from developing countries face, as one of them formulated in the following way:

“Candidates from poorer world regions experience facing major difficulties. Travel costs are much higher to farther regions, and we need to travel forth and back once in a while to keep up with family, friends and colleagues. I want to keep my colleagues updated about the knowledge that I gather in Europe. (...) Also, it must be considered that we need some time to adapt to the host culture”.

This means that 1) a certain amount of mobility between the home and the host regions is necessary in order to provide for knowledge transfer and alleviate the risk of brain drain. This can be achieved by supporting mobile researchers to keep up personal and professional contacts during their sojourns abroad and enable cyclic or circulating mobilities⁹. And 2), the duration of the sojourn is also essential. For individuals from geographic and cultural regions that are far away from the host regions, a phase of “cultural acclimatisation” must be taken into account.

While the investigated programmes were recognised to be partly addressed to researchers from developing countries, many interview partners reported about difficulties in receiving information about the programmes in their home countries. In almost all cases of incoming researchers, the participants indicated that they found out about the respective grant programme upon a personal recommendation, e.g. through a supervisor or colleague, or because of already existing ties to Austria, e.g. through previous or existing research cooperation. They all recommended a better promotion of the programmes in order to make them better accessible for individuals without prior connections – this being a complex undertaking, given that participation in these programmes is not bound to any contractual relationships between home and host institutions.

There were also further factors that were raised in the interviews that limit the inclusiveness of these mobility programmes. On the one hand, the application procedure was mentioned to “discourage researchers from the North”, as one interview partner stated, because it was considered “very different from what is usually asked in research grant application forms”, “usually” meaning in comparable selection procedures in the North American setting. This was also criticised with a view to gender equality, in particular because first names had to be fully spelt instead of being abbreviated with the initial.

Further aspects that were raised by close to all participants, regardless of their countries of origin, was the grant amount as well as the conditions of the placement. One interview partner stated: “For me it is ok, because I do not have a family to feed and I can use my savings” – a statement that was expressed in similar ways by other interview partners. Many reported, however, that researchers from more disadvantaged backgrounds could not afford a mobility abroad with only little financial support, especially if they have family. Among the 50 interview partners, only two conducted their mobility with children. One of them stated that not only the financial support was marginal, but also the housing conditions – beneficiaries use to be placed in student dormitories, regardless of their family situation – were suboptimal. She considered this as a “downgrade”. Others stated that researchers with childcare obligations were generally discouraged from mobilities.

Career progression

In total, it is notable that close to all interview partners considered their sojourn abroad as “great experience”, “personal enrichment” and an “important step in their career”. “Perspectives opened up and doors opened up”, as one interview partner formulated it. Especially beneficiaries whose mobilities already dated back several years or even decades from the moment of the interview

9 In line with the terms of cyclic or circulating migration, see e.g. Han (2016)

reported that their professional career paths were shaped significantly by their mobilities and follow-up activities and projects. Those interview partners whose mobilities date back to the shorter past described immediate positive effects (e.g. they received a job position because of their mobility, partly because of the established contacts, partly because of the host institution's or host professors' reputation). This is particularly true for incoming beneficiaries whose research is related to Austria (e.g. Austrian history, Austrian literature studies or similar): They reported to be "a lot more reputable and respected" at their home institutions and to have received positive resonance from their colleagues and their entire institution.

Regardless of the research focus, many interviewees highlighted the access to research infrastructure (e.g. libraries, archives, laboratories) as well as to researchers' networks as essential for career progression. Here, researchers from developing countries benefit in a particular way, as one interview partner explained:

„At home we do not have the equipment to do these tests. I would have to send my samples to a lab in Europe and beg that the tests were done for me, with all the shipping delay and stuff. Here I can do them by myself and learn so much, and when I'm back home I and my colleagues have the contacts to send our samples directly”.

Thus, the beneficiaries gather both experience and contacts which they can use for their further work, at the benefits of their research groups or even beyond: As one interview partner explained, she would use her knowledge for building up the infrastructure at her home university and teach her colleagues how to use it. Also, the interviewees reported about research cooperation of a long-lasting character that were established during or after their mobility (e.g. co-authored publications, joint proposal submission, organisation of a summer school, etc.). Finally, institutional ties between home and host institution were also generated by former beneficiaries, who – considering themselves "alumni" or "alumnae" of their programmes – recommend them to their own doctorate students and co-workers and pass on their contacts from the former host institution.

Finally, most interview partners agreed about the importance of getting to know other science and research systems, of learning a certain degree of adaptability as well as foreign languages. Thereby, reference can be made to the aspect of „transversal skills" (OECD, 2019) which are said to be fostered by international mobility (e.g. Standley, 2015). Nearly all interviewees state that "international experience is indispensable for further career steps in academia”.

Virtual exchange as alternative?

The interview partners were asked how they experienced their mobilities during the pandemic, and whether or not they thought their mobilities would have had similar effects if they were exclusively held online. Some of the interviewees had to return to their home country or could not start their physical mobility due to the pandemic, thus they established or maintained contacts with their host institution virtually. Regardless of the discipline, this first form of „virtual mobility" was not considered more than an emergency phase in which they were hindered to grasp the full potential of their actual mobility. Many interview partners stated that being in contact virtually was a valuable practice in preparation or in wrapping up or following up on the mobility, but none of them considered this an alternative to physical presence.

This is particularly true for those researchers that are counting on conducting field work or using research infrastructure at the host institution, be it a laboratory or a library. All these activities require physical presence according to the interviewees. Any delay or interruption due to the COVID19-pandemic was considered a "disturbing factor that cause a throwback in my work", as one interview partner stated. Also, the value of frequent and intense informal conversations with fellow researchers and supervisors was highlighted, which "would rather not happen online". It must be noted that these statements primarily capture the early stages of the pandemic in which both organisers and beneficiaries were surprised by the situation and an organised form of "virtual exchange" was not yet

possible. However, it still became apparent that virtual exchange cannot fully substitute the physical mobility. Most of the interview partners appreciated to be able to prepare and follow up on their sojourn virtually, but “for the essential phase you must be *sur place*” as stated by one interviewee.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the positive effects of researcher mobility, this paper takes a critical perspective with a view to inclusiveness. International mobility has become a must for an academic career, and oftentimes a mobility grant is the only possibility for a permanent position at a HEI. However, due to (a combination of) mobility barriers, some researchers are excluded from participating in international mobility and are therefore hindered in their career progression. Critical voices state, however, that academic mobility has become an end in itself, and increasingly question the linkages between the concepts of “excellence” and “mobility” due to the systematic exclusion of an entire set of (potential) researchers.

The interview study with 50 beneficiaries of mobility grant programmes funded by the Austrian BMBWF gave deeper insights into the severeness of social and economic mobility barriers that complement findings from existing literature. In particular, it became apparent through the interviews that researchers from developing countries face difficulties in accessing mobility grants. With a view to the programmes investigated in this study, which are partly directly addressing researchers from the global South, information asymmetries were highlighted; further problems concern the tight funding duration in the light of cultural acclimatisation, the grant amount as well as the lacking consideration of the need of “circular mobility”. Financial barriers and the conditions of the sojourn, particularly in terms of housing, are also problematic with a view to researchers with care responsibilities. This is in the first place (though certainly not only) a problem for female researchers and, in addition to existing findings, highlights the need to provide appropriate and family-friendly conditions at the host location.

The major aim of this paper was to elaborate on the potential of virtual exchange to provide an alternative to physical mobility and thus render the concept of mobility more inclusive. Here the interviews provide mixed results. Those interview partners who had undergone phases of virtual exchange due to the pandemic considered them as disturbing, which, however, also might be due to their suddenness. At the same time, it became clear that if fieldwork and the use of infrastructure at the host institution were involved, virtual exchange cannot fulfil the purpose. On the other hand, close to all interviewees considered preparing and following up on the sojourn via phases of virtual mobility valuable. Based on these results, a thinkable way for the future are hybrid models of mobility which contain shorter physical stays on site accompanied by phases of virtual exchange.

The interview study also confirmed the positive impacts of international mobility with a view to personal enrichment, individual career progression and institutional effects through continuing exchange. The effects are particularly strong for researchers from the global South, which was also illustrated in the interviews. Based on the statements provided in the interviews, it cannot be expected that purely virtual mobilities might yield the same effects in all cases. However, given the positive results that were detected in some studies (e.g. Machwate et al., 2021), future research will have to focus on how to make use of the entire spectrum of mobility and thus customise it to the research purposes and the personal conditions of each researcher in order to alleviate the pressure for physical mobility.

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