



# Sticky and slippery destinations for academic mobility: the case of Singapore

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## Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on academic mobility in two ways. First, it brings together insights on academic mobility (aspirations, desperations) and higher education internationalisation to show how we may analytically organise these insights to shed light on the shifting global higher education landscape from an experiential perspective. Second, it provides fresh data on the ‘lived experiences’ of mobile faculty members based in an attractive academic destination outside of the traditional knowledge cores—Singapore. As a city state without any natural resources, Singapore has successfully transformed its economy into one that is knowledge-intensive based on combined efforts from grooming locals to recruiting foreign talents to shore up skilled manpower needs. These efforts are reflected in the university sector where Singapore’s comprehensive universities have consistently ranked high across many global university rankings. Using survey and interview data, I show how the mobility and immobility experiences of faculty based in Singapore have contributed to its making as a ‘sticky’ and ‘slippery’ academic destination. My contributions point to the need to integrate individual-level factors underpinning academic mobility decisions with systemic developments to better understand the changing global higher education landscape today.

**Keywords** Foreign academics · Higher education · Immobility · Internationalisation · Mobility · Singapore · Universities

## Introduction

One familiar narrative associated with academia today is one of constant motion. This narrative stems from the hard-to-ignore presence of massive infrastructures of, inter alia, scholarly networks, bilateral and multilateral memoranda of understanding, changing practices

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of scientific collaboration, and fast-track visa regimes (Cerna and Chou 2014; Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Müller and de Rijcke 2017). At the heart of these infrastructures lies a set of tangled ambitions—from individuals, higher education institutions, countries, and regions—to be globally competitive and relevant. The prominence of this narrative in the policy imaginary and academic discourse (Erkkilä and Piironen 2018) has contributed to a binary assumption about mobility in contemporary academe: active members practise it, and non-members are immobile. Correspondingly, the professional statuses and experiences of members and non-members are assumed, with the latter generally depicted in disadvantageous light. This special issue challenges this binary simplification and this article lends support to its aim by demonstrating how today's mobility is highly dynamic and academic destinations could be simultaneously 'sticky' and 'slippery' for academics, especially those with mobility aspirations.

This article seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on academic mobility in two ways. First, it brings together insights on academic mobility (aspirations, desperations) and higher education internationalisation to show how we may analytically organise these insights to shed light on the shifting global higher education landscape; specifically, to go beyond the binary of mobility as a positive experience and immobility as a negative development. In so doing, I intend to highlight the ways in which a revised approach towards the 'mobility-immobility' binary could be usefully applied to make sense of changing academic lives today, and how these changes in turn affect the emergence of new knowledge cores and decline of existing ones. Second, it provides fresh data on the 'lived experiences' of mobile faculty members based in an attractive academic destination outside of the traditional knowledge cores—Singapore. As others have noted, mobility data on faculty members are scarce in comparison with data on international students (see Scott 2015: S57–S58 on the data challenge for determining global academic mobility trends; Morley et al. 2018). My contributions point to the need of integrating individual-level considerations underpinning academic mobility decisions with system developments (migration and higher education policies, institutional practices) into discussions about academic destinations around the world today. Similar to other forms of migration (e.g. forced migration), understanding how individual-level factors interact with systemic-level policies and practices would better inform considerations about managing individual, organisational, and systemic expectations concerning global migration.

Using the case of Singapore, a country with a globally competitive university system and a population of 5.64 million (Department of Statistics Singapore 2019), I draw out multiple narratives of mobility and immobility, which show the city state as a 'sticky' and 'slippery' academic destination that attracts foreign faculty and returning Singaporeans, but also makes them consider becoming mobile again. Singapore has a reputation of 'punching above its weight' in a variety of fields, including international university rankings. In the Times Higher Education (2019a, 2019b) 2020 World and 2019 Asia editions of University Rankings, Singapore's flagship universities were ranked highly: National University of Singapore (NUS) was named the world's 25th and Asia's 2nd, and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) was ranked 48th in the world and 6th in Asia. While the phenomenal performance of Singaporean universities has drawn considerable attention from policymakers and university administrators around the world seeking to unleash their very own sectoral transformation, the city state is an interesting case for the following additional features. Unlike other Asian countries such as China and Japan, the majority of the faculty members in Singaporean universities are foreign born (Chia and Kang 2014). While this may be the result of the government's overall liberal immigration policy for meeting its domestic manpower needs

(Yeoh and Lam 2016), Singapore's geographical location outside the traditional centres of knowledge (the 'West', see Ortiga et al. 2017) makes it a particularly interesting case for studying academic flows *away* from known centres. Indeed, examining the case of Singapore is a study into the changing global higher education landscape and new emergent academic destinations.

This article is structured as follows. First, I show how the literature on academic mobility depicts mobility in binary terms (mobility as a positive experience, and immobility as a negative development) before elaborating how this basic understanding of academic mobility could be expanded to shed light on the transformation of the global academic system. I then introduce the research design, methods, and data used. In the findings section, I first describe the professional and personal factors that attracted academics to Singapore and to ultimately stay (i.e. factors that make the city state a 'sticky' academic destination) before discussing their mobility aspirations together with respondents' professional and personal satisfaction (factors that make them become 'embedded' in or 'slip' away from Singapore). I conclude with the findings' broader implications for those interested in conceptualising the complexity of contemporary academic mobility, as well as those who seek to manage it.

## **Academic mobility and destinations: expanding the mobility-immobility binary**

Studies of academic mobility are not confined to a single discipline nor a specific field of research. This is hardly surprising given that academic mobility is a phenomenon that concerns multiple issues (e.g. questions concerning access, equity, and excellence), involves multiple (governance) levels (household, departmental, university, state, regional, international), encompasses multiple actors (junior, mid-career, senior, and 'star' faculties, funders, research administrators, migration officials), and is multi-sited or multi-destination (north-south-east-west, centre-periphery) (see Chou et al. 2017). Indeed, while we find a concentration of research interests on academic mobility among higher education scholars (Abramo et al. 2019; Kim 2009, 2017; Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018; Robertson 2010; Morley et al. 2018), migration scholars (Cerna and Chou 2014; Bauder 2015), historians (Pietsch 2010; Tourmès and Scott-Smith 2018), sociologists (Musselin 2004; Saint-Blancat 2018; Zhan and Zhou 2019), geographers (Jöns 2009; Leung 2017), those interested in talent management (Wang et al. 2019; Tremblay 2005), and others also examine this phenomenon and engage with debates within their specific fields and disciplines.

This article intends to make a focussed and modest contribution to the literature on academic mobility by first demonstrating how academic mobility came to be depicted in strict binary terms before elaborating how we may conceptually widen this binary to include other expressions of mobility and immobility. This discussion shows how studying academic mobility requires examining how factors at the individual level (e.g. scholars' professional and personal preferences) interact with those at the systemic level (e.g. open or less supportive policies and conditions, practices). It is in the interactions that we observe specific outcomes and features concerning academic mobility (inflow, outflow) and destinations (appealing, unattractive, cores, peripheries). Indeed, only when focussing on the interactions could we begin to shed light on the emergence or decline of academic destinations around the world.

My starting point is one of the most enduring imaginaries of academic mobility: the Medieval Wandering Scholar. This Wandering Scholar is a man who possesses deep and

unique knowledge in his field of learning. He is perennially on the move, trekking from one centre of learning to another in the known world, sharing his latest inventions and discoveries with learned colleagues while spreading his doctrines to eager disciples. A visual that emerges is one of the free flow of knowledge even though the actual practices of scholarly mobility—especially in Medieval times—are rarely unhindered or without conflicts (Cobban 1971, 1975; de Ridder-Symoens 1991). For contemporary policymakers at the university, national, and regional levels, this image is ever present because a mobile scholar generates seemingly untold benefits in both economic and scientific terms. Indeed, historians and social scientists have meticulously documented the contributions of the ‘Hitler émigrés’ (Cosser 1984), their breakthroughs in countries of settlement and transit, as well as the intellectual vacuum their departure created (Derman 2015; Fleming and Bailyn 1969; Medawar and Pyke 2001). Highlighting the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors common in migration studies, the ‘brain drain’ (from Nazi Germany) and the corresponding ‘brain gain’ (in Allied countries) are key topics in studies of academic mobility (Cattaneo et al. 2019).

Analytically, the notions of ‘brain drain’ and ‘brain gain’ conjure up a zero-sum game in which there are clear winners and losers—a familiar theme also in studies of highly skilled and talent migration (Cerna and Chou 2019; Cerna 2016), and university rankings (Erkkilä and Piironen 2018). In the main, the winners are the mobile individuals (because they left behind a less supportive, or even unsupportive, academic environment) and their academic destinations—the receiving higher education institutions and systems, and the host states and regions (because they gained competitive advantage by attracting talented scholars). Bauder (2015: 83) writes that the received wisdom in the literature on transnational academic mobility today is the way ‘migration exposes academics to new contexts and unleashes creative forces that propel scientific knowledge production’. By attracting and retaining highly mobile academics, it is suggested that academic destinations are likely to profit from their labour. Here, academic mobility is depicted in a positive light. By contrast, the losers are the immobile ‘stayers’ (stuck in the same environment made less internationally attractive by the departure of their talented colleagues), and the sending academic institutions and countries—the home higher education institutions and systems, and the sending states and regions (especially if public funding paid for the education and training of departed individuals). In these instances, immobility and failure to retain mobile academics are depicted negatively.

Stepping back, we may further understand the significance of academic mobility if we situate it in the broader literature on higher education internationalisation and the global academic system: universities and countries that attract and retain mobile academics are seen and refer to as the ‘centres’ and ‘cores’ (Gerhards et al. 2018; Marginson 2008; Schott 1998). By contrast, those unable or less able to attract and retain are said to occupy the ‘peripheries’ and ‘margins’ and discussed in less favourable terms or not at all. This commonplace association between academic mobility and destinations has led Scott (2015: S55) to question: ‘is the internationalisation of the academic labour force not true internationalisation at all but an aspect of global inequality and the struggle for hegemony?’. He cautions against adopting this ‘hegemonic internationalisation’ perspective and advocates for considering the dynamics of academic mobility and the configuration of academic destinations as one of ‘fluid globalisation’ in which ‘flows of students and staff [should] now be seen in the wider context of fluid and contested forms of globalisation that can no longer be regarded as simply an expression of the existing global order’ (Scott 2015: S55–56). In the context of discussing academic mobility-immobility in binary terms, adopting a ‘fluid globalisation’ perspective means exploring the possibility that academic mobility can also be a negative experience for the

individual scholars, and immobility a positive one. These different experiences in turn could tell us about how the global academic system is transforming to reveal new ‘cores’ and possible ‘peripheries’.

Mobility as a negative experience has become a prominent topic in studies of higher education today (Fahey and Kenway 2010; Robertson 2010). Existing literature highlights employment precarity in the university sector due to, inter alia, overproduction of PhDs worldwide (Geiger 1997), reduction of permanent positions (Huisman et al. 2002; Rubin 1977), continual cuts in university operational budgets, opening of international borders (or removal of internal borders within a geographical region; see Chou and Gornitzka 2014) leading to greater competition for fewer positions, and increased purposeful international recruitment of faculty members as part of the higher education internationalisation agenda (Horta 2009). In these instances, academics are forced to become mobile (geographically, sectorally) in order to secure better working conditions or, simply, a job. Institutions and countries aiming to become academic destinations may capitalise from the casualisation of academic work, erosion of the tenure systems, and the emergence of ‘permanent postdocs’ and the ‘low-paid highly skilled’ around the world (Bauder 2015; Courtois and O’Keefe 2015; Manzi et al. 2019; Morgan and Wood 2017) by offering more favourable conditions and even employment stability. In these instances, universities and countries may become academic destinations by appealing to scholars’ professional and personal preferences. For those already considered academic destinations in the global academic system, mobility as a negative experience points to how and why scholars may be ‘slipping’ away from the existing ‘cores’ to elsewhere.

Immobility as a positive experience is a less explored topic in studies of academic mobility. In the main, the literature has identified professional and family circumstances as powerful anchoring mechanisms leading to immobility. Professionally, the propensity to be mobile, especially for long(er)-term mobility, decreases at later career stages when academics are expected to be more established and in permanent positions (Ackers 2005; Bauder 2015; Nerdrum and Sarpebakken 2006). It should be pointed out that not all higher education systems reward mobility; indeed, those who are away for extended periods may lose the contacts and academic social relations that are so important in promotion in certain systems. For these scholars, mobility could become a negative experience and hence immobility may be preferred. Turning to the family situation, Ackers (2005: 114) writes, ‘The tendency for mobility to become more “sticky” over the life course might thus restrict subsequent mobility (and the propensity to return) for those scientists who establish partnerships and families’. Bauder (2015: 91) supports this perspective: ‘Even as mobility improves the positions of academic workers, personal relationships may suffer, and accompanying spouses and family members may experience distress’, thus leading to less mobility or immobility. In these instances, by choosing to be immobile, academics opt to become ‘embedded’ in particular institutions and research cultures. Immobility as a positive experience confirms the overall success of higher education institutions and countries seeking to become or are academic destinations in retaining scholars.

To sum up, the existing literature highlights four possible categories of academic mobility-immobility from an experiential perspective. Academic mobility can be a *positive* and *transformative* experience for the individual scholars and their destinations. By bringing their talents and knowledge to the receiving higher education systems and countries, mobile academics contribute to the latter’s emergence or position as cores in the global academic system. When mobile academics then become *embedded* in these systems and countries

(academic immobility as a *positive* experience), they play a part in the latter's consolidation of their position in the centres. The literature also tells us that there is a dark side to mobility and immobility. Academic mobility as a *negative* experience points to the *exploitative* features of contemporary academe where scholars are forced to become mobile to secure new positions in another institution, country, or industry. As these scholars 'slip' away, this development may also contribute to the configuration of the global academic system, especially if these scholars are moving away from the traditional knowledge centres. Academic immobility as a *negative* experience, with scholars expressing their situation as being *stuck*, could also generate dynamics shifting the global higher education landscape. Together, these four categories allow us to discuss the distinct features of academic mobility as one phenomenon and the implications for countries and higher education institutions seeking to become attractive academic destinations. In the next section, I will introduce this study's research design.

## Research design, case selection, methods, and data

This article draws from a rich dataset gathered for a mixed-methods study completed in December 2017 on Singapore and the global competition for talent in the university sector. Singapore is an interesting case for examining contemporary academic mobility, especially mobility *to* an emergent knowledge centre. The phenomenal performance of its two comprehensive universities in global university rankings, the capacity of its universities to continually attract scholars from around the world to join their faculty, English as an official language in a multi-lingual environment (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are the other three official languages), and a highly stable political system all contribute to making Singapore a revealing case for identifying factors that matter in actual academic mobility decisions.

The analyses presented below rely on two datasets from this study: (1) a large-scale survey of tenured and tenure-track faculty at NUS, NTU, and SMU and (2) 98 qualitative interviews with faculty at these three universities. NUS, NTU, and SMU were selected as university cases because they were the largest universities in Singapore with the highest number of full-time undergraduate students enrolled. The survey consisted of ten sets of questions addressing the following study-specific themes: status of respondents, demographic information, mobility history, employment history, research activities, professional network and collaboration, motivations to move to Singapore (personal and professional), evaluation of experience in Singapore (personal and professional), and aspirations for the future. An open-ended question was also added, asking the respondents to provide any general comments about their experience in Singapore or any other general feedback.

The survey was launched via *Qualtrics* in November 2015 to 2691 tenured and tenure-track faculty members at NUS, NTU, and SMU. This sample population included foreign faculty and returning Singaporeans because their mobility decisions to come to and return to the city state tell us about what makes Singapore an attractive academic destination. As a country traditionally seen to be occupying the peripheries (or semi-peripheries) of the global academic system, Singapore, along with other Asian countries such as China, has invested heavily in attracting its citizens to return and thus the research design decision to include both sample populations. A total of 707 faculty members (26%) responded to the survey: 616 completed and 91 partially completed. For the analyses below, I use the respondents' motivations to relocate to Singapore, assessment of their experience in the city state, mobility aspirations, and responses to the open question (199 responses received).

Using the ‘snowball sampling’ method with a small pool of faculty members from four major fields (STEM, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Professional Schools), the study carried out 98 in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from the three universities to draw out the rich narratives that quantitative data do not provide. Specifically, interviewees (foreigners and Singaporeans) were asked three sets of questions concerning how they made their mobility decisions (e.g. ‘How did you end up coming to Singapore?’), their experiences thus far (‘What were your expectations about Singapore? How have these expectations been met or not been met?’), and their career and mobility aspirations (‘Can you tell me about your career plans in the next five years? Do you plan to stay on in Singapore?’). The questions initiated the conversation, and interviewees were encouraged to express themselves freely, offering their perspectives on academic mobility to Singapore. The interviewees were given anonymity so as to create a comfortable environment, which was important for raising and answering personal questions concerning their mobility decisions and experiences since arrival. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and were carried out by two team members from June 2015 to June 2016; most interviews were taped after receiving consent and all were transcribed. In the next section, I use these interviews to tease out the narratives concerning Singapore as a ‘sticky’ and ‘slippery’ destination of academic mobility.

## Findings: Singapore as a ‘sticky’ and ‘slippery’ academic destination

Two distinct narratives emerged from the data about academic mobility and immobility in the case of Singapore. Both narratives began with mobility to Singapore as a *positive* experience, signalling the respondents’ overall attractiveness to the city state as an academic destination. The divergence in the narrative was only visible when sampled mobile academics were asked about their future mobility aspirations. Those who decided to stay in the country (to be immobile) expressed their embeddedness in the city state, confirming the overall and increasing ‘stickiness’ of Singapore as an academic destination. Those with intentions to leave Singapore (to become mobile again) pointed to the challenges of living and working in the city state, portraying Singapore as another ‘slippery’ academic destination. Overall, what these narratives have in common are the ways in which they pointed to both positive and negative expressions—pleasures, joy, and dissatisfaction and frustration—about the academic mobility experience beyond the binary of mobility as purely a positive experience and immobility as only a negative development.

### The making of Singapore as a ‘sticky’ academic destination

Three sets of factors emerged as significant in making Singapore a ‘sticky’ academic destination: a competitive remuneration package and access to research funding; use of English at work and also in everyday life; and, for academics from Asia (East, Southeast, and South), moving closer to parents. In Singapore, a remuneration package generally includes aspects of the following: a relocation package to and from the city state, a highly competitive monthly salary comparable or exceeding those offered in the ‘West’, possibility of annual bonuses and increased salary, tax incentives (for non-Singaporeans), time-limited housing subsidies and educational subsidies for children (primarily for non-Singaporeans). Approximately 70% of survey respondents indicated remuneration package as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in their

decisions to move to Singapore. For instance, comparing Singapore with the USA and Australia, an associate professor from Thailand highlighted Singapore's appeal:

'[S]omething in Australia that I don't like. First, the tax, the income tax is very high, about 50%, 48 something, 48.5. And you hit that grade very fast [...] So you take in pocket only 60 or 50 something. That's one thing [...] But another factor is most faculty member don't send their children to local school! They send to the private school [...] Third, I check around the day care. Wow, the day care is extremely expensive! The price per day is—in the US—the price per month! [...] Fourth, housing expensive! It's not cheap at all! [...] Dollar wise, over here still slightly more [laughs]' (A10).

For an associate professor from Taiwan whose Singaporean husband was also an academic, working in Singapore was financially necessary:

'Okay, at the time, we did think about [relocating to Taiwan]. My husband went to Taiwan and [...] [did a] four months exchange programme [...] But at the end [...] the problem is because my parents-in-law. I still have to support them. So our salary over there will not be able to cover anything like medical bill. Nothing. We cannot do anything' (C13).

Survey participants emphasised the importance of access to research funding as significant in their decision to take up a faculty position in Singapore: 80% who received PhDs during 2013–2015 and 65% who obtained their doctorates before 2000 cited this as 'important' or 'very important'. Describing the difference in research support between Singapore and the USA, particularly for STEM labs, an assistant professor from China elaborated:

'[I]n the US, it's like if you don't get funding you, you don't have students right. So anyway they will be actively looking for funding whereas here, the school is very supportive of PhD students and also [funding] support for like visiting students [...] I think in the US, from what I heard from my friends, they will need to spend all their time writing proposals to get funding' (B9).

When asked about the difference between working in Singapore and elsewhere, an associate professor from France clarified:

'[W]hen I talk to my friend[s] who are in France and who do a similar job, I know that I am privileged. So basically [the] size of my lab is much bigger than what I could expect to have in France or probably in the US as well. The reason why my group is big is because my PhD students are [...] all on scholarships and I don't pay their scholarships. The system really allows you to have a lot of students as long as you can manage them' (C14).

The growth of degree programmes taught in English across the world has normalised its usage in university settings, even though the dominance of English usage in academia remains controversial (Woolston and Osório 2019). Respondents confirmed that Singapore's policy of 'English-knowing bilingualism' had transformed the city state into an attractive and 'sticky' destination for foreign academics (Goh 2017; Ng 2016; Pakir 1991). For instance, participants



born in non-English (i.e. France, Italy, Japan, and Germany) or English speaking countries (UK, USA, Singapore, Canada, and Australia) all indicated ‘English is used in work environment’ as an important factor in their mobility decision. As a professor from the USA succinctly puts it when choosing between Singapore and a Francophone university in Canada, ‘Well I don’t speak French, so that was one issue’ (B1).

Fifty-six percent of the respondents also cited ‘able to communicate in English’ outside of the working environment as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in their decisions to move to Singapore. For one associate professor from Thailand, he wanted his children to go to school in an English environment, which would not have been possible in Thailand on a Thai academic salary (A10). Singapore’s linguistic diversity was also important for several interviewees. For another associate professor from China, it was the combination of English and Chinese that made Singapore a ‘sticky’ destination for his family (A14). An assistant professor also from China elaborated, ‘Because as a Chinese, I feel—I don’t feel the cultural difference between Singapore and my hometown’ (A8). Another assistant professor from the Philippines had this to say about her easy integration in Singapore:

‘Well, I guess it also helps that I’m ethnic Chinese so I can speak, yeah this is one of the things many people felt that was difficult because most of the people here speak Mandarin—but I learned Mandarin in school when I was in Manila, but I don’t speak Mandarin with my parents or my grandparents. I speak dialect with them (Hokkien) but there are some Hokkien people here as well, so I can speak with them using Hokkien’ (A11).

What is striking about faculty members who indicated ‘moving closer to parents’ was significant in their decision to relocate to Singapore is the variation between their countries of birth. For instance, ‘moving closer to parents’ is more important for faculty born in Malaysia, India, and Singapore (more than 70% of respondents) than those who were born in China (40%) and Hong Kong (30%); for respondents born in Japan, ‘moving closer to parents’ was simply not a motivating personal factor in their migration to Singapore. More than 80% of respondents who cited ‘moving closer to parents’ as important or very important obtained their degrees outside of Asia; more than 60% acquired their PhDs in the USA and the UK. An assistant professor from India who completed his PhD in the USA explained that Singapore’s proximity to India was significant in his family’s mobility decision, ‘my wife’s mother had a heart-attack while we were in the US and it was very difficult to manage from a distance’ (A9).

Explaining why she and her fiancé, also Singaporean, returned, another Singaporean assistant professor said, ‘Right, so I think we always knew that we would come back [from the US] eventually. For me, my family is here. For him, it’s just that, you know, he loves the food here? [laughs] He loves the lifestyle here. We’re both brought up, born and bred in Singapore’ (RA2). Similarly, a Singaporean associate professor echoed this expression, ‘my family is important to me and I love living in Singapore. Food is good. Well, overseas is attractive but Singapore I think is my home’ (RC6). Another Singaporean associate professor chimed in, ‘I lived in the US for a long time [...] Umm, but it was not home for me, and I don’t see myself living there forever [...] so at some point, I had to come back. My parents back then were old [...] So they also wanted me to come back’ (RB1).

Having examined opportunities in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere in Asia, an associate professor from Malaysia was also attracted to Singapore to be closer to his ageing parents, ‘At

that point they were like old and ail[ing], and frail [...] I like that Singapore is closer to Malaysia' (A5). Explaining how Singapore became increasingly 'sticky' for him, an assistant professor from the Philippines who had also applied for faculty positions in Hong Kong and Macau said, 'In the end, whatever offer you get, you still have to go home and talk to your wife about where we can raise the family. What can the kids do? Where will they go to school?' (A6).

To sum up, through a combination of several factors—attractive pay package, generous access to research funding, English in and outside of the work environment, and proximity to ageing parents—Singapore emerged as a 'sticky' academic destination for foreign and Singaporean academics. Below, I discuss findings that illuminate how Singapore is also becoming a 'slippery' academic destination over time for those who have long resided in the city state with initial intentions to remain.

### **'Slipping' away from Singapore**

Two sets of factors surfaced as significant in making Singapore a 'slippery' academic destination: rising cost of living and the lack of work-life balance. Indeed, Singapore's living expenses emerged as a serious issue, regardless of the respondents' future mobility aspirations. For example, among those respondents who intended to stay in Singapore, 39% reported that they were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with the cost of living. For those who intended to leave Singapore, 60% of these respondents indicated that they were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with existing cost of living. Interestingly, for those who indicated 'I don't know' concerning their future mobility decision, dissatisfaction level was the highest among the three cohorts: 66% of respondents stated that they were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with living expenses.

For survey respondents, Singapore's cost of living became increasingly prohibitive the longer they remained in the country. Forty-seven responses (24%) to the survey's open question explicitly discussed or focussed on the living expenses in Singapore, with the following statement representative of the overall sentiments expressed:

'The biggest barrier/reason to leave Singapore BY FAR, is the cost of education which requires that, as foreigner, I have limited access to local schools and must pay over \$65,000 [€42,500] a year to educate my children at international school. I believe this should be subsidised. I also believe that academics (particularly senior academics) should be paid enough to have a choice to live off campus, rather than in giant box style apartments on campus. At the moment, the cost of education and (in my case) car and rent (things that are considered basic in any Western country but a luxury here) means that Singapore is not a sustainable long term option as a tenured academic'.

An assistant professor from India added her perspective:

'Singapore is starting to be quite expensive for us because the first kid is going to international school. Then, [my university] stopped giving subsidies [...] I was not keen on sending them to local schools. And after nine years we have to move out of faculty housing and we have to find money to buy our own place so it's getting to be expensive.

I found that the insurance coverage, like my pregnancy, I had to pay from my pocket' (C6).

For an associate professor from Europe who adopted a child while in Singapore, cost of living was a concern. Indeed, having lived on campus housing for nine years (the lease duration), she regretted not purchasing her own property because the prices were now too high for her budget. To avoid paying high rents outside the university, this faculty became the resident advisor at one of the campus dormitories. However, this was like having 'one and a half job', and she was not able to do much research since assuming this position (C11). Another associate professor from Europe was also very concerned about the financial costs of raising his two children, both attending international schools, in Singapore. He explained how the cost of their education doubled in six years, with his university only willing to subsidise for a limited period. Comparing educational costs in another Asian country where he was previously based with that in Singapore, he said, 'the price of international schools [there] remain stable. Not like here where it has really gone up. When I came, [...] tuition [there] was as much as Singapore, now it is only half of what we have to pay here' (A12). Sending his children to local schools was not an option because, he believed, 'they might not survive' (A12).

Singaporean returnees also expressed similar concerns about Singapore's living expenses since their return. For instance, according to one survey respondent:

'Singaporeans have to negotiate for campus housing even though as academics, we do not earn enough to afford down payment on housing, including HDBs [government subsidized housing]. Singaporean academics also earn just a little bit too much to qualify for HDB grants that would make a difference in housing. As a result, many [...] are forced to rent or take personal loans to purchase housing, increasing the debt burden. [...] A similar situation seems to exist for education. Singaporeans do not get education subsidies, based on the expectation that their children can easily get spaces within the public education system. Firstly, getting spaces in public schools in Singapore near a family's home may not be that easy. Secondly, there are Singaporeans who have spent many years abroad and their children may have difficulties adjusting to the Singapore public education system, which is among the most challenging in the world'.

A returning Singaporean associate professor offered more details about why housing can also be too costly for returnees:

'I think during my time when I came back, the whole family earn[s] less than 8000 [SGD] or something, then you can buy. But if you go more than that then you are not allowed [...] So I mean, then we have to fork out money to buy private. So what I'm saying is actually, we face similar situation in terms of housing as like the foreigners' (RC6).

Turning to work-life balance, 36% of survey respondents who had worked in Singapore for less than nine years indicated that they were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with work-life balance. Variation is visible when examining responses according to their intentions for future mobility. For 'stayers', satisfaction with work-life balance was, as expected, the highest: 43% expressed satisfaction or strong satisfaction, 30% were neutral, and 27% were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. For the 'undecided', 49% were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very

dissatisfied' with their work-life balance, 32% were neutral, and 19% expressed some or strong satisfaction. For 'leavers', dissatisfaction with regard to work-life balance was the highest: 56% of these respondents expressed some or strong dissatisfaction, 26% were neutral, and 18% were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'.

Survey respondents elaborated the challenges of work-life balance in the open question as follows. For one respondent, 'Overall a safe and good experience. But the lifestyle (work) is too hectic and it is hard to draw a line between work and home!'. 'I feel like I am living here for a job—a good job indeed', another respondent explained, 'but I do not feel that I am living a life here'. For a respondent with elderly parents outside of Singapore, 'It is hard for me to balance my work and my responsibility to take care of my aging parents'. Another respondent added, '[The] 24/7 365 work culture makes it difficult to get away and think'.

To sum up, the rising cost of living in Singapore and the challenge of striking a balance between work and life are two key factors contributing to making the city state a 'slippery' academic destination for foreign faculty and returning Singaporeans. While increased living expenses may drive academics to move away to new academic destinations, thus contributing to ongoing shifts in the global academic landscape, the challenge of work-life balance may suggest mobility of another kind: mobility out of the academy. In the next section, I discuss what these findings reveal about academic mobility and immobility in contemporary academe.

## Discussion and future research

Mobility is a familiar narrative in contemporary academe often expressed in positive terms and immobility, in turn, is discussed negatively. In this article, I set out to challenge this simplistic binary by introducing four possible categories of academic mobility from an experiential perspective: mobility as a *positive* experience, mobility as a *negative* experience, immobility as a *positive* experience, and immobility as a *negative* experience for academics. This differentiation is important because it allows us to conceptually capture how individual-level factors could interact with system policies that would determine whether a country becomes a 'sticky' academic destination in the global higher education landscape. Policies signal and could steer actor behaviour, but mobility decisions are made at the actor level. In this section, I first draw out how individual considerations and system developments interact to transform the global landscape using findings from the Singapore case. I then describe the implications of these findings for those interested in managing contemporary academic mobility before concluding with some avenues for further research.

What the Singapore case shows us is that it has emerged as a 'sticky' academic destination for foreign faculty and returnees seeking competitive remuneration package, easier access to research funding, the use of English at work and in everyday life, and, for those originating from the region, moving closer to parents. For the surveyed and interviewed faculty, mobility to Singapore was a very *positive* experience. Professionally, many pointed to an improvement in their statuses such as having higher incomes or well-staffed labs. Personally, they indicated high personal satisfaction with being able to better provide for their families, whether it was taking care of ageing parents or giving their children an English education in a multi-ethnic society.

Singapore is certainly not unique in having a policy that speaks to these individual-level preferences. For instance, a generous pay package, great research support, and use of English at work are now common features in countries where English is not an official language and having a globally competitive academic system a significant national priority. Programmes targeting academic diaspora are also common in Asia. Indeed, as a region that has long seen its

nationals immigrate to the ‘West’ to study and remaining to work, governments in Asia have developed programmes to bring back their ‘best and brightest’ as part of their overall revamping of national knowledge systems.

What is distinctive about Singapore as an academic destination has been the use of English in daily life—a systemic feature resulting from its colonial history<sup>1</sup>—in addition to these above features. For foreign faculty who did not speak any of Singapore’s other official languages, being able to communicate in English was very important in easing their daily social interactions outside of work. This should not be underestimated in policy design and integration activities: academics are social actors and being able to communicate is fundamental to social processes. The ability of Singapore’s government to work together with its autonomous universities to administer a policy encompassing and highlighting these factors to potential academic hires has been instrumental in the transformative ascent of its flagship universities in the global rankings.

Continuous transformation, however, relies on sustained changes. What this means in practice is that a higher education system must be able to embed those already successfully recruited while continuing to attract talented faculty. Put differently, for an academic destination to be ‘sticky’, both mobility to the country and subsequent immobility must be *positive* lived experiences. In the main, sampled faculty from Singapore were happy to be immobile for the foreseeable future, but they also pointed to how two factors over time diminished their professional and personal statuses: rising costs of living and lack of work-life balance. As housing and educational subsidies expired, faculty members questioned whether the once attractive remuneration packages were sufficient compensation for remaining in Singapore. Negotiating an academic exit was tricky for faculty with working spouses or school-age children; their immobility in the city state became a *negative* experience as they adjusted or struggled with the now additional living expenses.

Difficulties with achieving a work-life balance is not unique to faculty based in universities in Singapore. For surveyed faculty members, as their lives in Singapore became increasingly defined by work (‘living here for a job’), they aspired to become mobile again. In these instances, their mobility out of Singapore is encouraged by their current *negative* experiences in the city state. Even as policymakers and university leaders worked towards consolidating Singapore’s position as an attractive academic destination, growing dissatisfaction concerning work-life balance among recruited faculty contributed to making the city state a ‘slippery’ one. These opposing dynamics may ultimately neutralise or even slow down the pace of consolidating rising knowledge centres in the global academic landscape. By parsing out how academic mobility can be both a positive and negative experience, and immobility the same, we are thus better able to comprehend the dynamics transforming a country into a ‘sticky’ or ‘slippery’ academic destination.

What are the implications of these findings for those interested in managing contemporary academic mobility and are tasked to transform their countries and universities into ‘sticky’ destinations? To start, excellent compensation packages—comparable or better than previous ones—and the use of English at work are *basic* components of recruitment policies seeking to attract a wider pool of academic candidates. The preference for use of English outside of work signals how important the ease of daily communication is in mobility decisions; policy and university leaders should recognise their countries’ potential and limitations as academic destinations given their overall linguistic environments. For countries and universities on the

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<sup>1</sup> While Hong Kong shares these features, and has long been a comparative case for Singapore in scholarly research (see Mok 2000; Wang 2018), developments during 2019–2020 in Hong Kong have strengthened Singapore’s overall competitive position in attracting foreign talents.

rise as academic destinations, it is useful for practitioners to review whether the lapse of any time-sensitive aspects of attractive remuneration packages is contributing to their unmaking as ‘sticky’ destinations, now increasingly ‘slippery’. Finally, policymakers and university leaders should seriously consider whether challenges revolving around achieving work-life balance for academics are indicative of change-resistant features of an exploitative academe.

A single case study is generally illustrative, but not explanatory nor confirmative. There is tremendous scope for future comparative research on academic mobility. One avenue could be comparative studies of academics based in emergent knowledge centres (e.g. Gulf countries and Malaysia), which are attracting foreign faculty seeking (rewarding) positions. Another avenue could look into comparing mobility experiences of students (particularly those at postdoctoral level) and faculty (early-career tenure track) to identify conceptual parallels between their experiences (cf. Finn and Holton 2019; Yang 2016). Finally, future mobility aspirations of PhD holders are a theme that could be further explored: do they intend to pursue a career inside or outside of academia? This question should underpin discussions today about academic mobility, especially when the Medieval Wandering Scholar remains a powerful imaginary among policymakers seeking to transform their higher education systems.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

**Disclaimer** Any opinions, interpretations of findings, and conclusions expressed in this article are mine and do not reflect the views of the National Research Foundation, Singapore.

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