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How to cope with mobility expectations in academia: Individual travel strategies of tenured academics at Ghent University, Flanders

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ABSTRACT

The production and exchange of knowledge are inextricably linked to different compulsions to corporeal proximity and therefore travel. As primary producers and transferors of knowledge, academics are no exception to this rule, and their compulsions seem to be further propelled by institutional discourses regarding the alleged virtues of "internationalization." Tenured academics, moreover, have a high degree of independence and can therefore easily choose how to cope with compulsions and constraints to internationalize. However, the business-travel literature has paid scant attention to academics and their individual contexts. In an effort to rectify this situation, this paper explores a travel dataset of tenure-track academics (N = 870) working at Ghent University. The insights emerging from this analysis are contextualized by means of in-depth interviews of tenured academics (N = 23) at the same institution. This paper argues, first, that varying compulsions and constraints at home and abroad lead to distinct non-travel and travel-intensive academic roles. And second, that academics who have difficulties coping, try to rationalize their corporeal travel behaviour and their mobility behaviour to meet the needs and expectations to internationalize. These strategies give an indication of how travel-related working practises can become more efficient and sustainable in the future.

1. Introduction

During the last two decades, our society has been shaped by ever-increasing and spatially extended travel, enabled, amongst others, by a wide array of efficient and affordable modes of transportation and communication (Urry, 2007). Extensive physical travel has thus burgeoned and evolved "from a luxury form of mobility for the wealthy few into a contemporary form of hypermobility" (Gössling & Peeters, 2007, p.402). Although business travel may constitute only a limited part of all corporeal mobility, being able to travel frequently has proven to be a very important asset for workers in today's globalizing economy (see Aguiléra, 2008; Beaverstock, Derudder, Faulconbridge, & Witlox, 2009; Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder, & Witlox, 2009; Gustafson, 2006; Millar & Salt, 2008; Wickham & Vecchi, 2009, 2010). Many have argued that despite the various possibilities of "virtual travel" (i.e., the use of information and communication technologies), certain work practises, especially those that are informal and tacit, simply require corporeal proximity (Aguiléra, 2008; Beaverstock et al., 2009; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Lassen, Laugen, & Næss, 2006; Urry, 2007), which Urry (2007) referred to as the "mobility burden." Therefore, employees are increasingly undertaking work outside the formal workplace (Beaverstock et al., 2009).

The compulsions to physical proximity are also evident in the knowledge-intensive academic sector, and, more specifically, in order to produce and exchange scientific knowledge (Cantwell, 2011; Edler, Fier, & Grimpe, 2011; Jöns, 2008; Julsrud, Denstadli, & Hjorthol, 2012). And although more "conventional" businesses can benefit from the creation of distance, for instance, to exploit labour-cost advantages (see Millar & Salt, 2008), the emphasis in knowledge-generating institutions, by contrast, is believed to rest largely on seamless knowledge diffusion and, therefore, the creation of proximity. Moreover, since the end of the 1990s, European institutional discourses are favouring "internationalization" of the higher-education sector and, as a consequence, championing the mobility of students and staff (Ackers, 2008). Thus, the propensity and expectations to travel seem to be greater than ever for academics.

However, according to many authors, regular work-related travel is considered to be unsustainable, as it is "cursed" with high economic, ecological, and social costs (for an overview, see Beaverstock et al., 2009). Short-term academic travel is particularly undertaken by tenured staff who are embedded locally at a specific institution and are obliged to seek a suitable balance between their duties at the home institution and abroad. Moreover, a particular feature of tenure-track academics is their high degree of freedom and low degree of control (Enders, 2001; Lassen, 2006). This implies that they can, with relative ease, trade off the benefits and costs of trips and cope with changing contexts, which can lead to diverse "internationalization" strategies.

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Apart from the work of Lassen (2006), Lassen, Smink, & Smidt-Jensen (2009) and Ackers (2010), short-term academic travel has not yet been the subject of much scholarly attention. A better understanding of academic travel and alternative coping strategies can, however, benefit both travellers and travel management across other sectors seeking to increase their level of internationalization, while retaining sustainability both from a social and environmental point of view.

In the heat of the institutionalized internationalization fury, this paper tries to contribute to this research hiatus by addressing the following questions: (i) How many academics actually engage in regular short-term travel? (ii) How great is the compulsion to internationalize and, hence, travel? Which travel constraints exist, and which incentives necessitate travel? (iii) How do "self-dependent" academics cope with compulsions and constraints when they are "off balance"? This paper tries to answer these questions by analysing the travel-application data of lecturers and professors (N = 870) at Ghent University (UGent), one of the largest Flemish institutions of higher education and research. Patterns emerging from this dataset are then contextualized by complementing this information with qualitative data from 23 semi-structured interviews with tenured academic staff at the same institution.

Two key arguments are made in this paper. First, we show that the increased travel incentives lead to specific non-travel and travel-intensive roles in academia. Two travel-intensive roles stand out increasingly nowadays: (i) the role of the "project manager," managing (several) foreign research projects from project scope to evaluation, which requires regular face-to-place and face-to-time proximity (see Urry, 2007); and (ii) the role of the "research team manager," with a particular emphasis on face-to-face proximity. These managers accumulate "network capital" (Elliott & Urry, 2010) by putting together a network of widespread contacts. They do so not only for themselves but also for the entire research group. Travel for this latter category of academics is deemed necessary to seek research funding, to set up international collaboration, to scout for talent, etc. on a global scale. Second, we argue that those academics who have difficulties in coping with the compulsion to corporeal travel seem to rationalize their corporeal travel behaviour, and simultaneously their mobility behaviour, by a more-efficient choice between travel modes for distinct purposes.

2. Internationalization and travel at Ghent University

The empirical focus of this research is the approximately 5500 academics working at Ghent University (UGent). This Flemish institution of higher education and research actively positions itself in the global higher-education arena: UGent was positioned 148th in the 2012 QS World University Ranking (http://www.topuniversities.com) and 89th on the 2012 Academic Ranking of World Universities (www.shanghairanking.com). Furthermore, according to its mission statement, UGent defines itself in a broad international perspective. This stems, amongst other causes, from bilateral collaboration agreements with partner countries such as China, Russia, Vietnam, and Argentina and, more recently, from opening a branch campus in Songdo, South Korea, where it offers educational programmes to students in the wider region.

Ghent University and the main government-sponsored research funding agency in Flanders (FWO) have oriented their "internationalization" strategy to the policy guidelines and directives of the European Commission towards the European Higher Education Area, where mobility "in and by itself" is heavily supported (Ackers, 2008). The main consequence of these strategies is perhaps best captured by the recent FWO action plan for 2012–2016: "a researcher can no longer afford himself to be immobile" (FWO, 2011). The line of reasoning behind this stimulation of mobility is that international collaboration and competition amongst academics are believed to lead to higher quality in research (see Ackers, 2008, 2010; Leemann, 2010) and to avoid scientific provinciality (Kyvik, Karseth, Remme, & Blume, 1999). As a corollary, mobility is being funded intensely through the Erasmus Exchange Programme and Erasmus Mundus, amongst others, of which UGent claims to be one of the forerunning participators.

Not unlike other institutions of higher education and research, there is no central office in charge of the travel management of UGent academics (see also Lassen, 2006). This implies that international travel is not covered by official policies or even general rules, which leaves senior academics at UGent a high degree of freedom and flexibility. Aspects of international mobility can be shaped at the level of the department and research group but are mostly determined at the individual level. We are aware that the focus on the UGent example engenders some specificity, as the institution has a particular profile in terms of travel budgets, employment structure, and workforce characteristics, but we nonetheless believe our case study allows us to tease out some more general patterns about other medium-sized European institutions of higher education and research.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Quantitative data analysis

Travel data are increasingly tracked and stored (Urry, 2007). This holds true for academic staff at Ghent University as well. Since 2009, all employees are required to register work-related journeys with at least one overnight stay in an online central-management database, mainly for reimbursement purposes. The information we have at our disposal from this dataset relates to the time period and country of destination of journeys over a two-year time span (2009–2010). Academic travel in this dataset is highly comparable to "short-term business travel," which is the shortest corporeal mobility type in the mobility portfolio of organisations, according to Millar and Salt (2008). Those journeys involve at least one overnight stay but may last up to one month (see Millar & Salt, 2008). Of all registered trips, 97.5% met these criteria, while 2.5% of trips lasted longer than one month.

For the purpose of this paper, we extracted the travel applications (N = 7.388) of the lecturers and professors (N = 870) because this group of senior academics share many job characteristics (i.e., relatively high levels of job security, autonomy, authority, income, etc.). Travel differences in the analyses are then expected to be independent from these job aspects. The results of the analyses will be less relevant for younger, doctoral academics, who lack a tenured position and are therefore expected to have fewer options of choice when seeking to advance up the career ladder; for them, travel may to a large extent be insurmountable. Although lecturers and professors represent only 21.8% of all academics in the dataset, they account for approximately 42% of all travel applications. Approximately 10% of all lecturers and professors at UGent are not represented in the dataset. Their exclusion can be understood in two ways: either they did not travel during the two years under study, or they did not register their journeys because no reimbursement by the financial department of Ghent University was needed. Statements about the travel pattern of academics in this dataset may in the first case lead to overestimation, but they are expected to have some level of underestimation in the latter case as well.

This trip dataset was transformed into a dataset of "travelling academics." For each individual academic, we measured different aspects of travel by calculating the following, easily interpretable "travel variables": (i) total time spent abroad during the two years (in days); (ii) average time spent abroad during one trip (in days); (iii) total number of trips in a two-year period, a measurement of travel frequency; and (iv) average distance travelled for a trip (in km).[1] These

[1] Because of a lack of more detailed data, distances were measured from Ghent to the destination country's centre. These are rather crude estimations, especially to large countries such as the US or China, but they still allow distinguishing between academics with a rather "local" or "global" orientation. Distances are two-way and calculated "as the crow flies" via the Google distance calculator (see http://www.daftlogic.com/projects-google-maps-distance-calculator.htm).