

*Young scientists are expected to change country and jobs every few years on average to get a chance to progress their academic career. Mobility in science stems from a long tradition. It is favoured for bringing very enriching experiences. But post docs and their scientific work do not always benefit from mobility. Here, EuroScientist looks into how being on the move every few years affects the life of researchers and looks at ways of enhancing work/life balance.*



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## **Does mobility boost early scientific careers?**



### **Scientists' personal life and career could suffer, should the challenges connected with living out-of-a suitcase become too high**

The forthcoming [Annual Ceremony](#) of the [Graduate Campus for junior researchers](#) at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, in October 2016, will be focused on researchers' mobility. "It is still a taboo to question the importance of mobility in science and we want to change that," says event organiser Birte Lembke-Ibold. In reality, the need for mobility may not be as high as previously because it is not as tricky as before for young researchers to have international exposure. "Young people gain international experiences in the course of pupil or student exchange programs today," Lembke-Ibold adds, "and there are many opportunities to gain international experiences at their home universities." In this article, [EuroScientist](#) examines whether scientists' mobility at all cost still truly

remains a necessity to develop young scientists career.

## **To stay or not to stay**

Moving country has traditionally been part of scientific practice. Living abroad--and not just visiting other countries--can be personally and scientifically enriching while enhancing scientists' ability to adapt. Research internationalisation and increased collaboration invariably make mobility the cornerstone of a successful scientific career. Relocating to new research labs means learning new approaches, acquiring new perspectives and being confronted with different research cultures. In addition, scientists have an opportunity to learn new languages, experience different team work and get used to alternative institutional organisations as well as to make contacts that may positively influence their later careers.

Many post docs love this lifestyle. "During these years of travel you carry only the most important things with you and thus you gain agility," says Raffaella Pitzurra, who is an epidemiologist at the [University of Zurich](#). Besides, "moving is the nature of research," adds Janis Liepins, board member at the [Association of Latvian Young Scientists](#), in Riga, "If you don't like it you should consider another career."

## **Tentative adjustments**

But there are also post docs who are less enthusiastic about constantly relocating. They only accept leaving their social environment because it seems to be necessary for their scientific career. In reality, many excellent postdocs also quit their scientific career due to the challenges associated with the expected mobility. "That is why politics and universities should discuss whether online collaboration tools, for example, could be better used to make international collaboration possible without moving physically," says Aart Franken, post-doctoral researcher at the department of developmental psychology at Utrecht University, in The Netherlands, who himself spent several years abroad.

More importantly, permanent positions and long-term grants, return fellowships, transparent and foreseeable career pathways could help to reduce the insecurity among postdocs. "Policy should become more flexible on the time spent at other institutes. It would be much better to have grants which allow you to visit for one semester rather than one or two years and long term contracts at one institute, allowing employees to have study visits rather than contracts at other universities," says Janis Liepins, board member at the [Association of Latvian Young Scientists](#), in Riga.

## **Families on the go**

Further complications stem from challenges associated with keeping a good work/life balance. While some travel with their families, others keep in touch with their loved ones over the internet. And mobility is often combined with very creative and individual solutions for lifestyles promoting gender equality among partners as well as in families, according to Carola Bauschke-Urban, mobility researcher and professor of sociology, gender and diversity studies at [Fulda University](#), in Germany. Some postdocs even see advantages in their modest lifestyle.

Scientists' relocation might be dependent on job perspectives for their partners. They might also think twice about taking their children away from the social environment. "It is exhausting to find solutions that fit for all of us," says Danae Perez, mother of two and postdoc at the English Department of the [University of Zurich](#), Switzerland. In addition, parents favour countries where the language is widely used so that it can be useful later in life and "the move must be compatible with school rhythms," she adds.

One of the challenge stems from the fact that many postdocs do not have children yet. But they are in age of starting a family. "This puts especially female researchers into a difficult position, as few countries offer support childcare facilities for families," says Johanna Kaakinen, vice chair of the [steering group on doctoral training of the Psykonet network linking psychology departments in Finland](#) Psykonet's at the University of Turku, adding: "This is a serious problem for gender equality in science." Still, families and women are not the only ones who suffer from the expected mobility, it also affects men.

In practical terms, moving country is expensive and leaves less time and energy for research. "Arranging housing in some cities could be very problematic, not to mention arranging all the required official documents. On top of that, you have the actual move", says Ghaith Bakdash, co-board member of [postdocnl](#), a platform for Dutch Postdocs. Clearly, postdocs would benefit from greater practical support. "Accessible and affordable guest houses, childcare facilities and job application assistance for scientists' partners would help," adds Kaakinen.

## **Precarity**

Constant relocation can bring the challenges associated with precarity to postdocs who work a lot while gaining little financial reward and missing job security. It can be stressful not to know where you will live the following year. And some people don't like the feeling to be there only for limited periods of time. Some postdocs are also struggling with social expectations: "You can only have a partnership and close friendships with people who also enjoy and tolerate this lifestyle," notes Pitzurra. And Perez adds: "My family accuses me for being egoistic because I think of my career and uproot my children".

As a result, many post docs spend most of their time with other scientists; some are even in a relationship with a colleague. This can be an advantage because they understand each others' pressures. But it can also be dangerous. "Academics tend to be very involved in their work so that they often do not spend enough time for talking about other topics and doing other things than science," says Gail Kinman, professor of occupational health psychology and director of the [Research Centre for Applied Psychology](#) at the University of Bedfordshire in Luton UK, "And as post docs are constantly on the move and thinking of the next step, they are more likely to burn out."

With the forthcoming Graduate Campus event, Birte Lembke-Ibold and her colleagues want to raise awareness for the effects job mobility can have on people's lives. Particularly on the lives of young scientists. "To enhance their work-life balance, postdoctoral researchers would benefit a lot from practical assistance concerning housing, childcare facilities and dual career Services", Birte Lembke-Ibold says. As of 2016, foreign academic staff at the University of Zurich can rely on the support of an [International Scholars Center](#) , which helps them to settle into their lives as

researchers in Switzerland.

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