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Mobility, networks and excellence

In order for investments in Swedish researchers’ international academic mobility to be effective, the investments need to be for the long term and targeted at foreign elite universities.

Better knowledge of what influences researchers’ mobility and how this mobility affects the research community is pivotal, particularly in the globalised society of today. One indicator of the universities’ high degree of globalisation is the fact that three of the five universities that supply most doctoral students to American PhD programmes are now in countries other than the US.1 We are seeing an analogous trend in research organisation. Research groups are increasingly global in composition, and co-authored articles are increasingly written by people located at different universities and in different countries.2

In this globalised world, it is more and more important for Swedish research institutions to establish stable and close relationships with the leading research universities in the world. This does not happen spontaneously; it requires purposeful and long-term efforts. Researchers’ mobility is a crucial ingredient in this. When a researcher moves from one department to another, a network link between the two departments is created. Such network links are used to establish research collaboration, spread information about suitable and recruitable researchers and so forth. To enhance the Swedish research community’s productivity and creativity, providing financial support for mobility in general is not enough. There must be support focusing on the most productive and creative environments in the world, and a high degree of permanence in the links set up (more on this below).

The type of mobility I focus on here is, first, temporary visits at universities and research institutes outside Sweden — postdoctoral visits,
sabbatical terms, etc. — and, second, more permanent mobility that involves researchers at Swedish universities moving to universities abroad or vice versa. Another type of mobility, not focused upon here, is domestic — from one Swedish university to another. The reason for not considering this type of mobility is not that the level of internal mobility is unproblematic. The fact that, for example, 75% of professors and more than 80% of senior lecturers at Lund University took their doctoral degrees at the same university is anything but a sign of good health.Boosting mobility between Swedish universities partly calls for measures other than those needed to improve Sweden’s international position, however, and these issues are therefore not dealt with here.

This chapter is organised as follows. I open with a brief discussion of researchers’ international mobility and its effects. I then touch on the importance of establishing stable long-term relationships with the leading universities worldwide. Finally, the implications this has for research foundations like RJ are briefly discussed.

The chapter should not be seen as a report on the latest research findings in the field, but as a series of personal reflections based on my own, perhaps slightly idiosyncratic, experiences. I have not personally done research on researchers’ mobility and its effects, but I have extensive experience of research and teaching at various universities and institutes in Europe, the US and Asia, that are relevant in this context.

Mobility and its effects

Most people agree that mobility is important for researchers’ productivity, creativity and ability to be at the international research frontier. My own experience underlines this. In the early 1980s I had the opportunity of staying at Harvard, first as an exchange student and then for my PhD studies, and this period had a decisive impact on my career path. At Harvard, I became aware that research can be not only an occupation but a vocation. The professors and doctoral students alike did not see their work as nine-to-five jobs — an attitude that was common among Swedish sociology PhD students and lecturers at that time. Instead, they often worked evenings and weekends, not because they had to but out of passion for their subjects. This attitude rubbed off on me, and my years at Harvard came to shape my professional identity and attitude towards my academic work. What is more, my time at Harvard and, later, Chicago
and Oxford generated a large number of personal contacts that have been immensely useful to me as well as to the departments I have been associated with.

Existing research on these issues, however, affords no unequivocal support for the view that mobility and research visits abroad have any marked effect on individuals’ productivity and creativity. The lack of such effects is likely, however, to be due to the studies being based on small and inadequate datasets rather than on mobility and contacts with leading research environments having no impact. Above all, it is important to note that the effects of mobility vary strikingly from one individual to another. A postdoctoral stay at a foreign university leaves no trace on some people; for others, it has a crucial impact on their future careers and research specialisations. To obtain an accurate picture of how periods of residence at universities outside Sweden affect the researchers concerned, taking such factors into account is essential. Otherwise, we are likely to grossly underestimate the potential of mobility.

Another obvious key factor is the quality of the foreign university visited. Universities’ productivity and creativity are extremely skewed, and at least in the social sciences outstanding talent is strongly concentrated in the world’s 15–20 foremost universities. If a postdoctoral researcher is given the opportunity to spend an extended period at any of

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these top universities, there is a substantial likelihood of creative influence. The probability of such influence declines rapidly, however, as we move towards the lower levels in the hierarchy of universities. Family situation permitting, the chance to visit a university abroad is, of course, appreciated by most researchers; but for the above-mentioned reasons I believe that it is in the research community’s best interest to be restrictive in funding research stays at relatively undistinguished universities (at least, if the funding for such purposes is limited).

It is sometimes said that those who have held postdoctoral positions outside Sweden find it difficult to get recognition for the value of these stays when they return to Sweden, and that this may act as a deterrent. As far as longer stays at leading international universities are concerned, my experience is the opposite. Such visits often have considerable impact because they raise the researchers’ ambition levels and establish ties to leading researchers that in turn tend to make the researchers more productive and sought-after. In addition, the impact of such visits often is amplified by the type of mechanism on which the leading sociologist of science, Robert K. Merton, based his famous article about the ‘Matthew Effect’ in science. People who cannot themselves assess the value of a person’s research often fall back on which university (s)he comes from instead. The university’s excellence can thus ‘rub off’ on even temporary visitors, opening doors that would otherwise have been shut. The opposite dynamic may, of course, be expected for stays at less prominent universities.

Stable relationships
with international elite universities

For a range of reasons seeking to establish stable relationships with international elite universities is likely to be of great benefit to the Swedish research community. Let me discuss a concrete example to clarify my reasons. In the mid-1990s, the then Swedish Government announced funding for ‘long-term, continuous research collaboration with elite universities abroad’. The Department of Sociology at Stockholm University received one of these government grants to develop collaboration with Harvard and Oxford, and a few years later the Department also obtained a grant from the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT) that enabled Columbia to be included in the network as well. Over a ten-year period, there
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was a constant flow of professors from these universities presenting their research at the Department’s seminars and teaching short, intensive PhD courses. Many of the students and recent PhDs in Stockholm also spent a term or two at these universities. During those years an annual conference for doctoral students was also established that still exists, with a hosting rota among the universities. These annual conferences have been extremely valuable for the PhD students in Stockholm, not only exposing them to interesting research and spurring them to produce articles of the same quality as the doctoral students at Harvard, Oxford and Columbia, but also by establishing valuable social networks that could not otherwise have been created.

Until the early 1990s, Stockholm University’s Department of Sociology was a serious but slightly sleepy institution dominated by lecturers who no longer had any interest in research. The stable relationships established with Harvard, Oxford and Columbia resulted in a complete change in the nature of the department and a new generation of PhD students were trained who had a considerably more international outlook than previous generations. The most outstanding doctoral students began publishing articles in the foremost sociology journals worldwide, and are now themselves professors in Stockholm, Lund, Barcelona and Uppsala. The Department still holds its own very well. Doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers are often recruited internationally, and the department is among the best in Europe and at least among the top 25–50 in the world.9 This would have been inconceivable if the Department had not become part of a network offering close, long-term relationships with some of the most distinguished universities in the world.

What can and should the research funders do?
The example of the Department of Sociology in Stockholm shows the great transforming force that stable relationships with leading universities may exert. With relatively modest investments the Department’s inner life was transformed, as was the type of research conducted there. Can these results be generalised and corresponding measures be expected to have similar effects at other departments? I am convinced that they can, but it is vital to stress two crucial conditions for success: (1) the initiative must be long-term and (2) it must be based on, and strengthen, existing relationships.
What is needed is special research funds for collaboration with departments at foreign elite universities (an ‘elite university’ may, for example, be operationalised as one that, on any of the established ranking lists, ranks among the foremost 15 worldwide). The funds should be used to support postdoctoral stays at these elite departments, guest professorships for these departments’ researchers, joint workshops and more.

Achieving the type of transformative effect referred to above calls for long-term initiatives. My guess is that a period of eight to ten years would be appropriate, since the relationship with the foreign universities can then exert influence on the internal culture of the department, as well as on numerous doctoral students.

For collaboration on this scale to be arranged and to work as intended, there must already be established ties between senior researchers at the Swedish departments and researchers at the departments abroad. Without such ties, the foreign researchers’ requisite motivation will be lacking and the programme will probably either fail or be very costly. With a long-term initiative involving leading Swedish researchers who are already engaged in some collaboration with elite foreign departments, on the other hand, a substantial impact is attainable.

4. By comparison, internal recruitment levels at the universities where I took my PhD (Harvard) and where I started my academic career (University of Chicago) are considerably more reasonable: only 24% of the full professors at the Harvard and Chicago Departments of Sociology are PhD graduates of the same university.
5. My undergraduate education was obtained at Stockholm University and my research training at Harvard. I started my academic career at the University of Chicago and then became a professor at Stockholm University. After that I was a professor at Oxford, Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University, Director of the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm, and I am now Professor and Director of the Institute for Analytic Sociology at Linköping University.


9. According to the 2013 QS-ranking of university departments it was ranked as number 28 in the world and according to the 2014 ranking it was number 49. See [www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2013/sociology](http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2013/sociology), accessed on 9 February 2015.

10. Singapore, where I worked briefly as a university dean, has shown that the universities’ status can be boosted rapidly without necessarily building on existing networks, but the costs are then on a completely different scale from the relatively modest investments referred to here.