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'Go away and make a big thing of yourself somewhere else': precarious mobilities and the uses of international capital in Irish academia

Aline Courtois[1] · **Theresa O'Keefe**[2]

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Abstract
The article interrogates the 'mobility imperative' and its impact on precarious academics. Drawing on 40 biographic interviews with academics with experience of long-term precarity in Irish higher education, and using a Bourdieusian framework, we identify the specific conditions, uses and impacts of international mobility for these workers. This method offers a unique retrospective advantage for an analysis of the utility of international capital for a cohort of workers typically excluded from studies of international mobility. Among the specific obstacles we identify which are faced by precarious academics in the accumulation and conversion of international capital are the lack of or compromised initial social capital; the dubious value of international capital in Irish academia, especially when associated with precarity; and the difficulty for workers to construct acceptable career scripts when both precarity and mobility have led them off-script. We suggest that the ability to accumulate and convert usable forms of international capital while working abroad is in part predetermined by prior struggles in the national field.

Keywords Academic precarity · Academic mobility · International capital · Bourdieu · Career scripts

Introduction

International mobility is typically understood as a beneficial and necessary feature of academic life, especially for those known as 'early-career' academics (ECAs). These are often advised to go abroad for a period in exchange for an improved CV and better career chances upon return. While the mobility discourse is normalised, and multiple international relocations are naturalised as part and parcel of academic life, the scholarly literature has begun to draw attention to the inequalities, uncertainties and significant personal costs associated with international academic mobility (Bauder et al, 2018;

✉ Aline Courtois
Ac2630@bath.ac.uk

[1] Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK

[2] Department of Sociology and Criminology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Manzi et al., 2019; Sang & Calvard, 2019). Yet, the notion that mobility is a potential solution to precarious employment endures and is less frequently challenged.

Universities typically produce many more PhD graduates than they hire as fulltime staff. In the same way as the 'industry' discourse, that of mobility makes this kind of discrepancy seem less problematic. It makes it possible to imagine that new PhD graduates might naturally seek work abroad before gravitating 'back home', or to industry, or to a hypothetical country particularly in need of PhD holders. The real or imagined mobility of 'ECAs' helps invisibilise and rationalise the pervasive issue of academic precarity.

Problematically, studies examining the impact of international mobility on careers rarely include the stories of those pushed to the margins of the sector or forced out of it by precarity. The impact of mobility on their careers and experiences is therefore largely undocumented, despite its potential to complicate our understanding of international academic mobility. What can biographic accounts of long-term precarious academics tell us about the intersection of academic mobility and precarity? To what extent is international mobility protective of precarity? Are there specific circumstances that make it a good or a poor investment of time and resources? We draw on our research on long-term academic precarity to explore these questions. We interviewed 40 academics from various disciplines (with a majority from Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) who had experienced long-term employment precarity (namely, qualified individuals who had tried and failed to secure a permanent academic post for a minimum of 5 years) in the Irish higher education (HE) sector. Twenty-two of these had at least one form of long-term (over 6 months) mobility experience. These mobilities were undertaken for various reasons, mainly to take up funding or work opportunities abroad, but rarely as part of specific scientific mobility programmes. Most participants had not secured stable work at the time of interview. Their experiences are therefore useful to better understand the challenges in converting resources acquired through international mobility into resources deemed valuable in the academic labour market.

We employ Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital and especially recent critical scholarship on cosmopolitan capital (Wagner, 2020) to suggest that contrary to the dominant discourse, internationality and mobility have no intrinsic value in the field of academia and that they may, under specific circumstances, act as multipliers of initial resources, rather than as resources per se. We show that precarious academics' ability to use international mobility in a strategic manner, and to weave it in their 'stories', is restricted by their lack of initial social and economic capital, as well as by the difficulty they have, as precarious workers in situations of professional vulnerability, in building narratives of agency and control over their own scientific and career development. We also briefly engage with the concepts of 'career scripts' and 'boundaryless careers' (Dany et al., 2011) borrowed from organisational studies and suggest that enduring 'career scripts' stigmatise precarious mobilities and, far from rewarding independence and originality, penalise those who go 'off-script'.

The article thus contributes to the critical literature on academic mobility, 'sticky mobilities' (Ackers, 2008; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021) and the intersection of mobility and precarity (Courtois & Sautier, 2022; Manzi et al, 2019). Our findings resonate with studies of performativity, career scripts and the codification of success in academia (McFarlane 2020; Nästesjö, 2022; Robson, 2023) and go further by suggesting that academic precarity (understood not just as an individual experience, but as a management strategy in HE) renders meaningless, and even 'cruel' (Meade et al., 2023) the criteria, norms and imperatives shaping ECAs' mobility decisions.

The first section examines the literature on the intersection of academic precarity and mobility and explains our conceptual framework. A presentation of the project follows. We then present our analysis in two sections: One focused on the circumstances and uses of international mobility in precarious careers and the next on its impact. We conclude by discussing the nature and value of international capital under the current conditions of precarity in academia.

The uncertain value of 'international capital' in precarious academic careers

The mobility imperative and the unequal benefits of mobility

International mobility is considered an important process of capital accumulation particularly for ECAs outside the Anglophone sphere (Leung, 2013). Significant scholarship is dedicated to identifying and measuring its benefits. Bibliometric studies link mobility with improved productivity (Horta et al., 2020; Kotsemir et al., 2022), and a positive impact on career progression is also reported (Bojica et al., 2022). However, these studies note that the effects vary depending on factors such as the researcher's career stage (Cañibano et al., 2020); disciplinary area, gender and the duration of the mobility (Horta et al., 2020); and whether mobility is normalised and institutionally rewarded in their country (Bojica et al., 2022). Thus, to be effective, international mobility needs to be adequately timed and aligned with cultural and disciplinary norms and expectations.

Furthermore, multiple forms of structural inequality mediate the benefits of mobility. Notably, there is a hierarchy between destinations, with the more prestigious institutions (typically in the US and UK) considered the most useful to have on one's CV (Bauder et al., 2018; Pásztor, 2015), while other destinations are considered peripheral, less prestigious and riskier investments in comparison (Burford et al., 2021; Luczaj & Holy-Luczaj, 2022; Puzo, 2022). International mobility is not equally valued everywhere (Bojica et al., 2022); and academic 'inbreeding' sometimes contributes to the exclusion of those who are not embedded in local networks—typically migrants and returning migrants (Horta et al., 2011; Seeber et al., 2022). Migrant academics may be exploited and confined to temporary posts (Khattab & Fenton, 2016; Puzo, 2022), marginalised and devalued in their workplaces (Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022) and stigmatised because of their national or ethnic backgrounds (Morley et al., 2018). This is amplified for those who are racialised (Arday, 2022; Bhopal, 2022) and intersects with gender and disability as well (Sang & Calvard, 2019).

Manzi et al. (2019) highlight not only the detrimental impact of frequent relocations on academics, but also the very inconclusive career benefits of these mobilities for researchers who remain precarious despite their accumulated international experience. The intersection of mobility/migration and precarity is also explored by Vatansever (2020) in her critical examination of the 'Scholars at Risk' programme, which confines exiled academics to precarious posts—an example of how the conditions of mobility (forced migration in this instance with limited room to be agentic or strategic) can lead to detrimental career outcomes—as is often the case for other 'highly skilled' migrants (Piętka-Nykaza, 2015). Mobility can also be 'sticky' for those with care responsibilities and even more so under conditions of contract insecurity and financial hardship (Sautier, 2021). This has serious

implications because mobility experiences, that for various reasons do not lead to useful professional networks, collaborations and publications, are not in themselves beneficial to ECAs' careers (Bauder et al. 2018; Schaer et al., 2021).

Academic mobility and international capital

Capital, according to Bourdieu (1988), is a resource that produces benefits in a given social setting. Its main forms are economic, social, cultural and symbolic, with the latter being typically derived from one or a combination of the former. What constitutes valuable capital depends on struggles within social fields between agents vying to establish specific forms of capital as the most valuable. Universities are such sites of struggle, where 'academic' and 'scholarly capital' may compete with one another (Bourdieu, 1988).

International capital—also called cosmopolitan capital—has been theorised as a form of symbolic, cultural and social capital that is typically acquired through international experiences from the earliest stages in life: frequent travel, international schooling, exposure to foreign languages and a cosmopolitan culture (Wagner, 1998). Migration scholars have explored the specific circumstances and strategies required for migrants to convert their capital into useful resources (e.g. Erel, 2010), while scholars of elites have examined the conditions under which international capital may enhance or compete with forms of national capital (Wagner, 2020). Thus, the accumulation and utilisation of international capital are typically associated with privileged strategies, but even highly educated migrants and return migrants may find their international capital devalued in certain national settings (Maxwell et al., 2022; Waddling et al., 2019). Anne-Catherine Wagner (2020) suggests that international capital has no value per se and may be no more than a multiplier of existing resources. Thus, those who do not have much economic, social and cultural capital to begin with, and who do not understand the 'rules of the game' that govern a specific field, may not be able to implement or benefit from international strategies. This is an interesting angle for the study of the mobility of precarious academics, given that they may embark in their mobility experiences without the support of mentors, research networks or other professional supports.

Researchers have identified various forms of international capital associated with academic mobility: 'reputational capital', associated with prestigious institutions (Ackers, 2008); 'mobility capital' as a form of symbolic capital that signals competitiveness (Leung, 2013); and 'professional social capital' as profitable international networks (Schaer et al., 2021). Adel Pasztor, focusing more specifically on mobile doctoral students, argues that the forms of capital acquired through strategic mobility are multiple and mutually reinforce each other (2015). But mobility does not automatically produce capital: It needs to be 'contextualised' and explicitly framed as a 'high-quality scientific experience', for example, an important role in a prestigious lab leading to tangible outputs (Bauder et al., 2017). Using a Bourdieusian rather than a human capital approach to international capital sheds light on the intricacies of capital accumulation and the conditions of its conversion in academia. Thus, Rossier and Bühlmann (2018) show that the symbolic power of cosmopolitan capital in Economics in Switzerland owes to historical practices and dynamics specific to this field and not necessarily found in other disciplines. Maggi Leung shows that mobility entails a detrimental trade-off between international and national social capital (2013), while Sidhu et al. (2015) note that forms of international capital associated with the North and embodied by white researchers are specifically sought after in Singaporean academia.

International capital thus emerges as an elusive form of symbolic capital that requires specific conditions for both its accumulation and successful conversion.

Precarious work and academic 'career scripts'

Bauder et al.'s (2017) mention of contextualisation is important: As Macfarlane (2020) writes, 'hyper-performativity' and 'self-laudatory' language pervade the way academics present themselves through their CVs. Laudel and Bielick (2019) describe career scripts as 'collectively shared interpretive schemes that describe successful careers' (2019: 932). These influence career decisions and career narratives, as workers try to present as successful and deserving of rewards. ECAs need to perform significant 'identity labour' to demonstrate that they adhere to these established career scripts (Nästesjö, 2022). Instead of becoming 'boundaryless' as once claimed, academic careers are still very much governed by specific 'career scripts' (Dany et al., 2011), leaving little room for atypical trajectories. Precarious academics often have little control over their professional trajectories or even their own research agendas, as they may have no option but to take up one short-term job after another (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). They often describe themselves as out of control and unable to exercise agency over where or what they will be working on next (Loveday, 2018) but are expected to present as independent, strategic and driven researchers in job interviews. Protracted experiences of low-status temporary work do not fit in career scripts and those who endure them must hide them to avoid being stigmatised as unsuccessful (Robson, 2023). Thus, academics with experience of long-term precarity face specific challenges when it comes to constructing coherent and compelling narratives of their own careers to aid the conversion of their accumulated capital—including that derived from mobility—into career benefits.

A note on the Irish case

Irish universities strive to achieve 'world-class' status by cultivating prestigious partnerships and broadcasting an international image (Courtois, 2018). Yet, there is little emphasis on staff and student outgoing mobility in the national strategy for HE internationalisation, with a strong focus on incoming student mobility instead (Clarke et al., 2018; Courtois, 2018). Contrary to the Swiss situation for example (Sautier, 2021), the 'mobility imperative' is not institutionalised in doctoral or postdoctoral training, although Irish researchers have access to prestigious, competitive mobility grants under EU programmes. It is yet unclear what forms of international mobility, if any, feature in the 'career scripts' guiding hiring decisions in Irish universities. At present, no comprehensive data is available on the national and ethnic backgrounds of academics in Ireland. This makes it difficult to identify possible differences in the make-up of permanent vs non-permanent staff. However, we know that wage discrimination against high-skilled migrant workers is significantly worse in Ireland compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2021; see also Joseph, 2018) and recent research suggests that many academics of colour experience discrimination and racism in Irish academia (Kempny & Michael, 2021).

There is an unquantified but well documented problem of precarity in Irish academia, which predates the ban on new hires (implemented in 2008 in the wake of the financial crisis and still not revoked) but was exacerbated by it and amplified again by the COVID-19 crisis (Fitzsimons et al., 2022). Ireland spends less than the OECD average on HE (OECD,

2021), and Irish universities rely on casual staffing not only for temporary research posts but also for core teaching. Hourly paid work is commonplace and particularly punitive for workers in terms of pay, basic rights and dignity in the workplace (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Ivancheva et al., 2019; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). There is a long tradition of Irish emigration to the UK, and academia is no exception: For the past 15 years at least, Ireland has been among the top five countries of nationalities for foreign academics in the UK. Ireland provides an interesting terrain to examine the intersection of academic precarity and academic mobility.

Methods

We conducted 40 biographical interviews with academics with experience of long-term (over 5 years) precarity in Irish HE. Using social media, we explicitly invited those working on the margins of academia (e.g. in further education, private colleges), and those who had left the sector including those unemployed. After 30 interviews, we issued a further call targeting those from minoritised backgrounds who were—and remained—underrepresented in our sample. Our respondents came mainly from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) with some from STEM and Health Science as well. We conducted these interviews online over a 2-year period, as the project was unfunded, the COVID-19 pandemic started and one of us went on parental leave during this time. In addition to following ethical guidelines as defined by professional associations (BSA, SAI) and securing ethical approval from our respective institutions, we were mindful of our positions as permanent academics and the resulting power imbalance. Our personal experiences of precarity and work as activists organising against precarity in Ireland helped us establish rapport across this divide, although it did cause moments of discomfort for us (O'Keefe and Courtois, forthcoming).

We conducted thematic analysis of the data and for the current paper, focused on the im/mobility decisions and experiences of our respondents while taking care to consider them in relation to their broader professional and biographic trajectories. The distinctive feature of our research is its use of what we call an 'academic life-course' approach to develop career timelines of participants to map out their routes in and out of precarious work. This approach lends itself well to an analysis of the utility of international capital because it gives insight on how mobility is packaged by respondents and their understanding of how it impacted their career trajectories.

Types of im/mobile academics

We focus on longer-term mobility/migration (periods of over 6 months) and borrow Delval and Bühlmann's (2020) typology of international hospitality students to differentiate between the 'locals', who completed their undergraduate studies in Ireland (all of whom were born in Ireland and/or were Irish nationals), and the 'transnationals', namely, those who have migrated into Ireland (all of whom were born abroad and came to Ireland as foreign nationals). We further differentiate between the 'rooted' and the 'mobile'. Thus, the 'rooted transnationals' are those who moved to Ireland for or prior to their first academic job (including doctoral contract) and whose whole career to date has been in Ireland, while the 'mobile locals' and 'mobile transnationals' have had at least one experience of working

Table 1 Types of im/mobile academics

Category	Description	Men	Women	Total
Rooted locals	From Ireland; career in Ireland	3	15	18
Rooted transnationals	From abroad; career in Ireland	0	9	9
Mobile locals	From Ireland, internationally mobile	4	6	10
Mobile transnationals	From abroad, internationally mobile	2	1	3
Total		9	31	40

abroad (including in Northern Ireland). Table 1 shows the breakdown between these four categories as well as by gender.

The majority of mobilities from Ireland (multiple for some individuals) have been to the UK (including Northern Ireland), with 3 participants travelling outside Europe. Transnationals included a wide range of EU and non-EU origins including Northern and South America and South Asia. As is often the case in research on academic precarity, more women than men came forward. They were more likely to be 'rooted' than men, although our sample is too small to draw any conclusion from this, Finally, our participants were aged from their late 20s to early 60s, with 30 concentrated in the 35–50 age bracket—not enough of a variation to observe potential generational differences.

Circumstances and uses of international mobility in precarious careers

The 'mobility imperative' in Irish academia

Many of our respondents perceived that the 'mobility imperative' existed in academia. Several rooted locals suggested that their immobility perhaps played a part in their lack of progression. For example, Donnacha, who had exited the sector at the point of the interview:

> *Like there was numerous conversations as we were going on with my family about the prospect of moving ... and I suppose like ultimately I - there were international opportunities or stuff that I didn't apply for and maybe I'm not - not to castigate myself or to do that, but I suppose it's just an important caveat that I was looking primarily in the Irish or at a push UK market.* (Donnacha, AHSS, rooted local, exited)

After a promising start, Donnacha's career stalled. He suggests that his immobility might have been the reason for this. Other participants also felt that their immobility put them at a disadvantage by signalling a lack of dedication or compliance with the 'rules of the game', thus blaming themselves for their supposed failure to internationalise. Liz, a rooted local, suggested that those who stayed local, and especially those doing precarious work, risked being perceived as 'too familiar' and therefore less desirable than the exotic 'shiny stranger from far away':

> *... I think it may be particularly acute in Irish universities that there's a real sense that if you're too familiar and also kind of if you're local that you're just like seen as a bit crap, whereas the shiny stranger from far away... (trails off) … they would*

rather someone came back from England, looked all fancy, calls themselves a Reader because those hierarchies in England move much faster than they do here, and you're just, you're familiar, you're taking those slightly crappy roles and so maybe you'll never get that extra leap. (Liz, AHSS, rooted local, hourly paid teaching)

This 'shiny stranger' can be an Irish person who has accumulated symbolic capital abroad (a 'Reader' title) and whose rapid progression through the ranks is aligned with a 'career script' of achievement and recognition. By contract, Liz felt she was stuck in 'crappy' roles and unable to progress or establish a research profile outside her institution as a result. Brendan, a mobile local, precarious for over 10 years, recalled being advised to go abroad, to break a pattern of precarious roles and reinvent himself as a more successful academic:

And he [senior academic] said: 'what you should do is go to Harvard or Princeton for a year and teach' and I thought, 'wow. Yeah, that'll solve it' (sarcastic). … but the thing I think he was actually getting at was a lot of people say is - if you want, if you're Irish especially, I think it especially applies to Ireland … if you're Irish and you want a permanent job in Ireland, 'go away, and make a big thing of yourself somewhere else and come back'. (Brendan, AHSS, mobile local, semi-exited)

Brendan had in fact already gone abroad, for a PhD in a department renowned in his specialised field of study, but apparently not prestigious enough to allow him to make 'a big thing' of himself: a mobility that he presented in our interview as motivated by his keen interest in his disciplinary sub-field—a form of traditional scholarly capital perhaps, but one that he suggested was not recognised in an Irish academic labour market governed by different indicators of success and prestige—and that failed to translate into usable symbolic capital in this context.

Escaping and disguising precarious work

For many—although not all—in our sample, going abroad was an economic imperative rather than a move that aligned with a specific scientific project, career script or strategy. This was especially the case for the mobile locals, eight of whom migrated for temporary positions abroad primarily because they could not find any decent work in Irish academia. Unemployment, underemployment but also workplace conflict emerged as the most common engines for both inward and outward mobility in our sample, with return mobility sometimes prompted by relationship breakdown or care responsibilities (partner's illness; elder care)—affecting men and women alike in our sample—events hardly compatible with 'career scripts' or the expected narratives of scientific excellence.

As suggested by Liz cited above, protracted periods of low-status, patchy temporary work are stigmatised in academia (see also Robson, 2023). They are also harder to hide in a small country:

I think it was obvious to anyone in Irish academia that I've been around a long time. They'd know about me. And they'd know my stuff and I often thought would their reaction be 'well he's around a long time, why isn't he somewhere else?' People always assume, well, Jesus, if he wasn't, he wasn't kept on there, something must have been wrong... (Peter, AHSS, mobile local, temporary teaching role)

Peter's multiple periods abroad were necessary respites, and each provided the hope of a 'fresh start' in a place where he was not stigmatised as a precarious worker. Even when

mobility was triggered by unemployment, and the job abroad was precarious, our participants hoped that their mobility experience would help them build a positive narrative. Precarious work can more easily be hidden, or refashioned into something more acceptable when it takes place abroad, far away from the small, interconnected Irish academic scene. Laura, who was stuck doing repetitive, undervalued part-time work for a private college, took an hourly paid lecturing 'gig' at a well-known foreign university. She supplemented her meagre income with English teaching, something she never included in her CV:

> *No I never mention this. I pretend that I just taught Philosophy in La Scuola Normale (exaggerated pompous tone) and that that was enough to live on [laughs]. Joke.* (Laura, AHSS, mobile transnational)

Without a staff card or a contract, each week, she had to convince the same security guard to let her in the building to teach—another indication of the low status of her position. The stigma of precarious work can more easily be hidden when such work is done out of sight. Similarly, Nick, a mobile local in his 40s, spent several years working in Asia but was eventually deported. At the time of the interview, he was very precariously employed in Ireland.

> *I had to leave Thailand in March but I just had on the CV that I was there until the end of the semester … and I can't remember when I started in [Irish University] but I have it just as [whole academic year] though it was probably one semester's work. So you're just trying to bridge things out like that even though there was probably four or five months here and there where I was doing nothing … Oh and when I did go to Thailand initially I did do some brief English teaching before I got the university job, but I don't bother including that on it. I just push the University teaching back a few months. I know they're not going to contact anyone in Thailand because none of them could speak English to them anyway, so it doesn't really matter.* (Nick, AHSS, mobile local, hourly paid teaching)

International mobility makes it possible to hide unemployment and work that is stigmatised and to construct a better narrative. Nick's account also suggests that his mobility was not aligned with, or supported by, an existing international scientific collaboration, or network. There were no communication channels, no shared research community between the university in Asia and the one in Ireland, making it impossible for him to build the type of professional social capital that would be recognised and valued outside this country.

A chance to refashion oneself as independent and successful

Other participants suggested that international mobility could be used as a basis for identity work. Ed, a mobile transnational, was on a rolling 9-month teaching-only contract at the time of the interview. This meant that he had little time to write to publish, and no income for 3 months in the year, which made it difficult to afford rent in one of the most expensive cities in Europe—making him potentially homeless. On one of his self-funded research trips in Eastern Europe, he discovered a place favoured by 'digital nomads':

> *I noticed that everybody I met that was a foreigner was now a digital nomad. That's the new thing … Some of them had quite good jobs and they were just drifting around Eastern Europe and the rents in Krakow are €350 per month. I actually thought to myself quite seriously that if I didn't get my job back again in September, I would*

maybe move to Krakow and try and write a book and try and get the book done and maybe that will fix things. (Ed, AHSS, mobile transnational, temporary teaching)

This desire to take time out of precarious work to do research, without being seen as unemployed, was echoed by others in our sample who used the terms 'gap year' or 'sabbatical'. Like Ed, they tried to repackage precarious work and possible unemployment by reclaiming the language of leisure and financial independence. For Ed, international mobility is imagined as a way to manage the Dublin cost of living and housing crisis and his own risk of homelessness, to refashion his precarious working and living circumstances into a more autonomous and privileged lifestyle and, lastly, as a way to 'fix' his career by carving out some space to write a book without the stigma of unemployment. Thus, international mobility provides a space for the expression of agency through a form of identity work that aims to remove the stigma of precarity and reinvent themselves as a more successful and independent subject. Nick, for whom moving to Asia was in fact 'the only option' after his PhD, articulates it as follows:

...and then I guess, like you probably would start to try and play up that adventurer academic thing because it's slightly less stigmatised if you can pretend it was your own choice. (Nick, AHSS, mobile local, hourly paid teaching)

Nick opted for an alternative path to the traditional academic career script, one that signalled autonomy, intellectual curiosity and cosmopolitanism, which are generally understood as valuable forms of international cultural and identity capital typically rewarded in the labour market. At the time of the interview, however, this had not paid off for Nick, suggesting that his profile remained misaligned with what search committees expected. Like others who similarly reflected on how they could make their international experiences fit into a desirable script, he relied on his 'feel for the game', understanding his precarity needed to be hidden, but perhaps miscalculating the symbolic capital he could extract from his international experience in a field governed by different principles of domination.

Impact of mobility on precarious careers

Mobility without added professional social capital

The personal costs of mobility for precarious workers have been well documented: exhaustion, disruption of personal and professional relationships, increased financial hardship due to the costs of relocation, difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging, etc. (Courtois & Sautier, 2022; Manzi et al., 2019). Jenny, who moved repeatedly between institutions over 10 years and recently internationally, sees each relocation as starting from scratch both socially and professionally:

…even the trauma of changing jobs again you know…you're coming in a different role. You're trying to form new relationships. You're trying to establish yourself in different ways…I mean it's just been insane, there's been no stability in my personal life or my work life because of the nature of my employment. (Jenny, AHSS, mobile local, temporary research post)

Instead of accumulating social capital, Jenny had to rebuild it from scratch in each new workplace. As a new member of staff, she was taken advantage of by colleagues who

offloaded their unwanted tasks, which prevented her from pursuing her research and further entrenched her precarious situation. Each mobility meant taking up the most dominated position in a new field shaped by rank and seniority.

For many, being precarious in some way was the main obstacle to accessing professional social capital. For example, Laura, mobile transnational already mentioned, did not have any opportunity to network while lecturing abroad on an hourly paid basis. She was too busy preparing lectures, and too isolated, to network efficiently. Brendan's PhD abroad was self-funded, which forced him to work multiple jobs and to miss the regular evening seminars that doubled up as social events in his faculty. As a result:

> *And I worked and after a while I guess I got into the habit of being used to not networking and just pursuing my own academic ends. And I think that meant that when I came out of my PhD, like, like nobody knew me.* (Brendan, AHSS, mobile local, semi-exited)

Back in Ireland, the same pattern repeated itself for Brendan, as a long commute prevented him from socialising with his colleagues—hourly paid teaching was all he could find and he was forced to moved back to his parents. Eventually, he was asked to be more present in the department, for no additional pay, which triggered his exit from the sector. Seemingly, the form of scholarly capital he tried to cultivate independently ('pursuing my own academic ends') was rendered useless by his lack of social capital (both in Ireland, and abroad), despite his many publications and funding success.

For her part, after working in Germany for several years but unable to consolidate her career there, Vanessa spotted a visiting fellowship opportunity in Ireland. She built her case with little support and won the grant. On the surface, her mobility aligned with what looked like a prestigious professional opportunity. Unfortunately, the person who she hoped would mentor her was themselves away; and during her stay in Ireland, nobody was interested in meeting 'the flaky fellow who was visiting'. Despite her best efforts, and at least in part due to her precarious status, she could not build social capital through her mobility. The experience did not lead to further professional opportunities for Vanessa.

Inoperative international capital

In line with emerging research (Kempny & Michael, 2021), the rooted transnationals in our sample often felt excluded or discriminated against. Zoila felt her that Irish colleagues excluded her from their clique and did not take her scholarship seriously because she was not Irish, while Fazal noted dispassionately that he systematically lost jobs to white candidates. Their international experience as migrants—as well as Fazal's efforts to become further internationalised in other ways, through attending and organising international conferences—was given little positive recognition. Sharon, another rooted transnational, suggested that the form of international capital that was valued in Ireland was that best embodied by local Irish men:

> *So, I don't know if this is gonna sound horrible. Kind of like the home boys are getting the jobs. You know they keep coming back to roost, and it's the same guys. … I do kind of look at them and go gosh, these are guys who are back at their university where they have their bachelor's degree, their PhD...* (Sharon, AHSS, rooted transnational, temporary research post)

Brendan, himself Irish, referred to a similar case, noting however that the person in question had been to Oxford. Implicit in these accounts is a perception of Irish academia as parochial and easily impressed by a few 'big names'. From this perspective, international mobility appears to be little more than a formality for those already chosen, and a way to thinly disguise academic inbreeding practices without disrupting them. Bernie, for her part, returned to Ireland after years abroad under the auspices of a prestigious multiyear research grant. Despite these relatively privileged circumstances:

> *…I always felt frozen out. I always felt that I was just, you know there because I brought money, but it was made pretty clear that I would never really be part of the gang, part of the department or really respected.* (Bernie, AHSS, mobile local)

She explains this by the parochial, hostile climate in her department, a context in which her international and national achievements were not valued. She commented: 'once you're out, you're out'. Similarly, Steve, in his 50 s, who had returned to Ireland and left relatively stable employment abroad due to family circumstances, spoke of his field as 'inwardly connected and kind of nepotistic almost', in a way that did not allow himself to 'reposition' himself on his return. For both, return migration meant a return to precarity.

For many return migrants in the mobile local group, the capital that they had acquired through their mobility was not valued in Ireland. Vanessa moved back and forth between her native Ireland and Germany, and despite accumulating impressive professional experience, she could not consolidate her career in either country. Local gate-keeping mechanisms prevented her from securing a permanent position in Germany, and she could only find precarious contracts in Ireland.

> *If I had stayed in Germany and got one of the [lectureships], that probably would have been my best bet. You know in hindsight. And because there weren't very many native speakers of English in that part of Germany, and that might have given me an edge apart from the old absence of the [German qualification]. And it might have given me an edge, and it might have got me a job say, I don't know teaching English for business students or something … And in Ireland my skills and selling points are not really sought after, it appears in the realm of education at least.* (Vanessa, AHSS, mobile local, hourly paid)

Vanessa was well liked by her colleagues in Germany and trusted with important responsibilities. But she acquired a form of professional capital that was only valid in Germany and could not be converted into useful capital in Ireland—partly because her mobility also involved mobility across disciplines. Similarly, Amelia—now in a permanent position after over 15 years of precarious employment in Ireland—reflected on the time when she was unemployed and gave a sense that despite having moved borders, she had also not acquired usable international capital:

> *I was applying for jobs in Australia at the same time; I was applying for jobs everywhere like all over the shop, anything and everything that will come up. I was shortlisted when I was in my post-doc, one job in Australia at my dream University, but I didn't get it. But the way the Australian system was, I was out of it, and so there was no chance of me kind of getting back into it. And I wasn't connected into the British system; I knew nobody over there. My only chance really was the Irish system you know. So either I had to make a go of it in there, and I had just kind of given up hope just like.* (Amelia, HSS, rooted transnational, permanent)

Firstly, her mobility did not translate into international capital, namely, capital potentially valued across borders. Secondly, her *Irish* professional capital was worthless in Australia, her home country, as it was in the UK—perhaps owing in part to the precarious nature of her employment in Ireland. Thirdly, her initial *Australian* professional capital had expired because of the time she spent away in precarious jobs that she could not fit into a desirable 'career script'.

Delaying exit

An unexpected impact of international mobility was that it temporarily masked the lack of long-term prospects, delaying decisions to exit as a result. This is what happened to Peter, in his 50 s at the time of the interview. While also temporary, his jobs abroad generally provided better pay and conditions than those he found in Ireland. About his second last job abroad, he says:

> *I didn't realise I was going backwards at first. But by 2011, the one year in Bristol was kind of an illusion really, because then when I came back to Ireland, I got a one year in [Irish University] and then nothing. And then by 2015 I thought, right I'm in kind of freefall here, and I'm also kind of broken*. (Peter, AHSS, mobile local, temporary teaching post)

He persisted and got a multi-year research post in another UK university, in his specialist area. After over 15 years of temporary contracts, often exploitative and uninspiring, and periods of unemployment, he thought this was 'a great opportunity to get back into the game'—namely, another chance at a career. He negotiated to work from Ireland some weeks but ended up in a conflict over it with his line manager. As a temporary, foreign worker, he was not afforded the flexibility that supposedly characterises academic work. He resigned and was again unemployed afterwards.

Conclusion: precarious mobilities and slippery capital

We set out to interrogate the value of international mobility in the context of long-term academic precarity in Ireland. Our findings align with the work of Bauder et al. (2017) and Schaer et al. (2021) who argued that international mobility did not always result in the accumulation of useful capital. They also align with Sautier's (2021) work on sticky mobilities in the context of precarious careers, showing how difficult it is for those without initial capital, and in precarious employment, to benefit from mobility.

Using the concept of international capital, understood in a Bourdieusian sense as the product of struggles for symbolic domination, has helped to analyse the specific challenges faced by precarious academics in their attempts to acquire and convert international capital, while the concept of 'career script', borrowed from organisational studies, is useful to explain the need for 'atypical' academics to hide their precarity and repackage themselves as successful via mobility.

The first set of challenges concerns the lack of initial social capital that often characterises precarious careers. Precarious academics are less likely to have access to institutional supports, mentorship or networks that condition access to the more valuable

professional opportunities at home or abroad and help cultivate a feel for the 'game'. In the main, our participants had no mentors and little support from professional circles.

The second set of challenges has to do with the circumstances of the mobility. Most of our participants' mobilities were also undertaken outside institutional frameworks or specific programmes. Many were triggered by unemployment or workplace conflict in conditions of precarity and vulnerability, meaning that they had little room to be strategic. Loveday (2018) noted that precarious academics felt that they had little control over their careers. Our data suggests that international mobility may only change this very temporarily, and only on the surface.

The third set of challenges has to do with the nature of the opportunity abroad. Relocating to take up another undervalued and precarious role brings relatively few career benefits, especially if the destination is peripheral and the institution not prestigious. Most mobilities were to the UK which, while a sought-after destination for CV-building (Pásztor, 2015; Khattab & Fenton, 2016), may have less symbolic value in Ireland due to its proximity and the long history of labour migration between the two countries. In addition, unfavourable initial circumstances, complicated by depleted economic capital, are likely to further jeopardise the accumulation of capital. In some cases, a subaltern status enabled various forms of workplace abuse. Instead of building their social capital, the mobility left workers feel like they had burnt bridges and had in fact fewer places to go.

The fourth set of challenges relates to packaging and narrating mobility in a way that adheres to a career script and allows a fruitful conversion of the acquired international capital. Forms of capital accumulation did take place during these mobilities: Participants experienced different academic cultures; they had teaching and/or research experience; they were sometimes given more responsibilities and more fulfilling work than they had previously. But this accumulated professional capital did not convert into career progress: Sometimes, it did not travel across borders. Our participants also rarely had access to mentorship or guidance to help them figure out how they could present their experiences positively and struggled to adequately conceal chaotic professional trajectories.

While our data does not allow us to establish where Irish academia lies in terms of 'academic inbreeding' practices relative to other systems, we have found some evidence that the resources associated with being a migrant academic do not constitute a useful form of capital in Irish academia, at least not in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences where our respondents were concentrated. Rossier and Bühlmann (2018) and Horta et al. (2020) suggest that it may vary from one discipline to another, but we had too few mobile STEM academics in our sample to examine possible disciplinary variations. Nonetheless, this finding aligns with a recent report on racism in Irish academia (Kempny & Michael, 2021) and research in the UK (Arday, 2022; Bhopal, 2022; Pustelnikovaite and Chillas, 2022) although more work is urgently needed to examine the intersection of race and precarity in Irish academia. Sidhu et al. (2015) suggested that in Singaporean HE, international capital is valued if it is embodied by a specific type of (White, western, anglophone) individual. The migrant academics in our sample felt that this individual was young, Irish and probably male, while our Irish respondents mentioned prestigious institutions as the main source of recognised international symbolic capital.

Beyond the question of parochialism and xenophobia, the nature and value of international capital accumulated (or not) in these precarious circumstances is in question. In line with Wagner's (2020) contention that international capital is a multiplier rather than a resource per se, our study suggests that international capital does not 'stick' well under conditions of precarity and that there is no room in the accepted 'career scripts' for protracted precarious work no matter where it took place. As exemplified by the case of Amelia, stuck

in precarity between her native Australia and adopted country Ireland, the uncertain international capital derived from precarious mobilities can hardly fix a situation characterised by a lack of nationally defined forms of professional capital. The accumulation and conversion of international capital may only be possible if the adequate forms of capital—in particular national social capital—were accumulated before the mobility, depending therefore on prior localised struggles. In the same way that Meade et al. (2023) characterise promotion criteria targeted at women, the 'mobility imperative', can therefore be understood as a way to cruelly entice a surplus of precarious workers to leave and not return.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interest.

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