

Half of academics leaving UK are EU citizens

Latest data also suggest a fall in the absolute numbers of younger EU academics working in the UK

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Source: Getty

Almost half of all the academics leaving UK universities to work overseas in 2018 were European Union citizens, according to the latest data.

The figures, for the year to December 2018, show that more than 1,000 EU citizens working as academics left a UK university to go abroad, 550 of whom went to work in an institution in another country.

This means that EU nationals accounted for 48 per cent of all academics who left higher education in the UK that year to work or study abroad, a proportion that has been climbing since the 2016 EU referendum.

In total, the figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that about 2,000 academics were recorded as leaving a UK institution to go overseas in 2018, with about 1,200 going to another higher education provider abroad.

A declining proportion of those going overseas were UK academics (380 down from 450 two years before), but the number of EU leavers was up 28 per cent. The number of non-EU staff leaving was also up (by 26 per cent).

Although the figures on university staff leaving jobs feature a large amount of missing data – the destination of almost 60 per cent of those leaving UK higher education in 2018 was recorded as “not known” – the shift in the pattern among EU academics with a known destination may be a concern.

Number of academics leaving UK HE for overseas work/study

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Source: Hesa

Meanwhile, other Hesa data, on overall full-time equivalent numbers for university staff, suggest that 2018-19 saw a decline in the numbers of EU citizens aged 35 and under.

Overall, the percentage of academic staff from the EU stayed broadly stable in 2018-19, but growth in the proportion of non-EU staff working in UK universities means that there does appear to be a shift in the balance between the two.

Giulio Marini, a research associate at the UCL Institute of Education and Centre for Global Higher Education, and an expert on careers and working conditions in academia, said that he had yet to see any firm evidence for a “fleeing British university effect” from Brexit, but the shift in the balance of EU and non-EU staff “is already happening”.

He also said that the fall in FTE staff numbers for younger academics did seem to be important, because this was the first time since 2006 that these data “dropped in absolute numbers instead of growing...It could have in the mid to long term a notable impact [on the composition of staff].”

In terms of the net inflow and outflow of EU staff, Dr Marini added that it was important to remember that “Brexit *per se* has still to happen” given that trade negotiations and future mobility arrangements had yet to be hammered out.

But it was more likely that in the shorter term any changes would have more of an effect on new academics seeking to work in the UK than existing staff, as many of those had their rights protected by the government’s settled status scheme for EU citizens, he argued.

“The settled status should shield both employees and employers [from] a massive leaving flux. [But] should the settled scheme be revised in a worsening way, that could happen,” he said.

And Dr Marini added that many EU nationals could opt against coming to the UK “should a new visa system be complicated and should access to basic welfare...be an issue”.

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