Academic mobility and collaboration across the Atlantic: experiences in the humanities and the social sciences

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What Factors impact the Internationalization of Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences?

Arbeits- und Diskussionspapier 3/2005
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Academic Mobility and Collaboration across the Atlantic: Experiences in the Humanities and the Social Sciences

By Heike Jöns

Introduction

In times of what is assumed to be a growing international ‘knowledge economy,’ international circulation of scientists and scholars is of topical interest to modern nation states and individual academic institutions. This has been true for European countries and institutions in particular which increasingly have to compete for highly qualified researchers, academic reputation, research funds, and infrastructure on an international level. All of these play a key role in the long-term development of international relations, economic competitiveness, and social development (see, e.g., Altbach 1989, OECD 1996, Jöns 2003a).

International competition for academic resources is currently shaped by powerful academic centres in the USA and a growing number of scientifically successful institutions in east and southeast Asia (see, e.g., Blumenthal et al. 1996, Woodward 2002, Kantrowitz 2003, Lepenies 2003, King 2004, Leydesdorf und Zhou 2004). Bearing this global perspective of academic exchanges in mind, this paper aims at providing insights into recent developments in transatlantic academic mobility and collaboration by addressing five topics:

- Contemporary and historical patterns of scholarly interaction;
- Motivations for circular transatlantic academic mobility;
- The nature of subject-related travel and collaborative cultures;
- Experiences with circular transatlantic academic mobility;
- Follow-up mobility and other outcomes of a research stay abroad.

The paper compares circular or transient academic mobility in the humanities and the social sciences with the one in the natural sciences. Its main aim is to challenge the idea that social scientists and scholars of the humanities are less ‘successful’ in terms of international collaboration than natural scientists. Although the following statistics present striking differences between disciplines in regard to international mobility and collaboration, I argue that these discrepancies are related to profound dissimilarities in researchers’ needs and chances to collaborate on national and international levels. These differences can even be detected within broad disciplines such as the natural sciences because they depend on the object, type, and stage of one’s work.

In the following, I will present some of the underlying reasons. I will suggest that these reasons are of particular importance for recent evaluations of international contacts in higher education and research as well as for policy measures that foster international mobility and collaboration in different academic fields.

Building upon recent statistics and studies on international academic mobility and collaboration in Germany and elsewhere (see, e.g., Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft 2002, Teichler 2002, DAAD 2003, Enders and Mugabushaka 2004), the paper discusses the empirical results of two research projects conducted at the
Department of Geography at the University of Heidelberg between 1999 and 2004. Both projects examined the nature and results of state-sponsored academic mobility to Germany in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The first project studied the research stays of about 2,000 U.S. senior scientists who had been granted Humboldt Research Awards in the period between 1972 and 1996 (Jöns 2002a, 2003a). The second project examined the experiences of Humboldt Research Fellows, mainly post-docs, assistant and associate professors, from different countries; all of them spent a sabbatical year in Germany over the past fifty years. Every tenth fellow came from the USA (Jöns 2002b, 2003b, 2004, Jansen 2004, Jöns and Meusburger 2005).

The empirical results are based on the Humboldt Foundation’s database as well as on three surveys conducted among former visiting researchers and their German hosts (over 4,000 questionnaires in total). The study comprises the responses of about two thirds of all Humboldt Awardees from the USA from 1972 to 1996; every ninth Humboldt Research Fellow during the past 50 years; and every tenth of their academic hosts in Germany. This paper is also based on the results of 85 semi-structured interviews conducted with former Humboldt Award Winners and Humboldt Research Fellows at Harvard University, M.I.T. (Cambridge, MA), Boston University, the University of Chicago, I.I.T. (Chicago) and the University of California at Berkeley. For the discussion of broad patterns, the following analysis concentrates on the statistical findings rather than individual biographies (for in-depths views of researchers working in different academic fields, see Jöns 2003a).

**Comparative patterns of scholarly interaction**

Due to a lack of statistical data on the international flow of visiting researchers, empirical studies have mainly to rely on the analysis of sponsorship programmes. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Hochschul-Informations-System GmbH (HIS) have published a data report series since 2001 that provides a comprehensive overview on the exchange of researchers sponsored by Germany-based institutions. While such a compilation of data from different sponsorship programmes can never provide a ‘complete’ picture, it nevertheless offers striking evidence for the main directions and characteristics of international academic exchanges (DAAD 2001, 2003).

German institutions support three times more visiting researchers to Germany than they support German researchers going abroad. A comparison of the countries of origins of sponsored visiting researchers to Germany with the destinations for German visiting researchers going abroad reveals the country’s intermediary position in a worldwide hierarchy of scientific centres. The results show a huge interest by visiting researchers from Asian countries in Germany, while a quarter of sponsored German researchers abroad prefer as their destination the USA (25\%), followed by the United Kingdom (13\%, see figure 1).
Looking at the career stage of researchers going from the USA to Germany and vice versa reveals a completely different picture: Among visiting academics from the USA to Germany, established researchers account for the strongest group. Among German academics going to the USA are primarily graduates and post docs (figure 2). The fact that 40% of all sponsored German post-docs chose the USA, underlines the country’s significant role for further education of young researchers. In turn, the USA’s large research universities and their laboratories strongly benefit from the influx of highly motivated and well-educated German and other foreign post-docs.

In combination with other results this situation indicates a high quality of research on both sides of the Atlantic and the existence of functioning sponsorship programmes in most segments of transatlantic academic mobility. However, it also reveals that international academic mobility of senior German researchers could be considerably improved (see below).
**Historical perspectives on scholarly interaction**

Transatlantic mobility and collaboration underwent dramatic changes in the course of 20th century (see, e.g., Littmann 1996, Jöns 2003a, 211-223). These developments are important to consider when evaluating contemporary patterns of transatlantic exchange. Main features of the post-war history of German-American relations can be illustrated by the development of the Humboldt Fellowship programme. It is the most important sponsorship programme for long-term research visits for foreign academics to Germany, and the most prestigious programme for visiting scholars below 40 years of age. During the past five decades the foundation has received more than 50,000 applications. Of those approximately 20,000 fellows from more than 130 countries received Humboldt sponsorship in Germany – among them 2,000 from the USA.

Germany's rebuilding of scientific resources after WWII is reflected by several factors: steadily growing numbers of applications for Humboldt Fellowships; an increasing number of countries participating in the program; Germany's gradual reintegration into the international scientific community, and a significant increase in the quality of higher education and research (figure 3a).

By the seventies the interest shown by researchers from the USA was a clear indication that Germany had been completely reintegrated in the international academic community. In both absolute and relative terms, the numbers of applications and fellows from the USA reached its zenith in the third decade of sponsorship (1974-83). The favourable job situation in the expanding U.S. system of higher education was one of the factors that encouraged post-docs and young professors to spend a period of time abroad. The growing education market offered enough jobs to choose from on their return.

Huge state investments in German higher education and the establishment of Humboldt Research Awards in 1972 made it possible to bring more international academic excellence to Germany. For the first ten years the Award Program only applied to distinguished scientists and engineers from the USA (figure 3b). Later it was opened to other disciplines and countries.

On the initiative of former Humboldt fellows and awardees another important link in the transatlantic exchange network was established in 1979. The Feodor Lynen Research Fellowships opened German post-docs the way for a research stay at the home institutions of former Humboldt Fellows and Humboldt Award Winners. By 2002, approximately 2,500 post-docs had taken advantage of this opportunity. They went to more than 60 different countries of the world. More than half of all Feodor Lynen Research Fellows, however, chose the USA (figure 3c).
These figures highlight the existence of close academic ties across the Atlantic. In the mid- and late-nineties, however, a decline of applications was observed in various sponsorship programmes. This development has been discussed intensively in broad public debates as a possible indicator for a decreasing international attractiveness of German higher education and research (see, e.g., Bode 1997, Gries 1997, Lepenies 2003). I would like to suggest that these fluctuations are the result of a complex bundle of international and domestic developments that are not primarily linked to the quality of research. On the contrary – the quality of German researchers seem to be very competitive. From 1991 to 1995, for example, German scientists shared a top position alongside British and Canadian scientists as international co-authors of U.S. scientists and engineers. This was a clear improvement over their position from 1981 to 1985 (NSF 1998). According to this statistics every tenth international co-author of U.S. scientists and engineers comes from Germany, while every fifth international co-author of German researchers comes from the U.S. (1991-95).

The reasons for a decline in the number of applications for fellowships in recent years rather lay in an exceptionally strong interest in Germany during the unique historical
situation of reunification, the decentralisation of international academic contacts after
the fall of the Iron Curtain, and various country-specific developments. The new
situation contributed to an increasing international competition for highly qualified
visiting researchers in the late nineties. Among those factors that have influenced the
transatlantic relationship between Germany and the USA considerably, are the
following:

- Greater range of fellowships on offer worldwide.
- Consequences of a decreasing birth-rate lead to fewer young academics available
  for postdoctoral research.
- Many graduates prefer financially more attractive jobs in industry over those in
  academia.
- Due to a growing competition in the U.S. among post-docs for jobs in academia
  they have to be available for job interviews and cannot afford to leave the country
  for one or two years. In addition the prestige connected to postdoctoral positions in
  the U.S., specifically at the large research universities, outshines working
  experience in most places in Europe.
- The number of researchers in higher education has been stagnating in both
  Germany and the USA during the nineties. Therefore, the potential for academic
  mobility is at least temporarily much less than in times of expansion as witnessed,
  for example, in the late sixties and seventies.
- In Germany, investments in new large research facilities which characterised
  German science in the eighties, stagnated in the first half of the nineties due to a
  temporary priority shift from scientific policy towards Aufbau Ost, i.e. the
  restructuring of higher education and research in the new Länder.
- Finally, decreasing biographical connections to Germany and Central Europe are
  responsible for a further decline in interest in longer-term research stays in
  Germany. This seems to be of particular importance in those fields of the
  humanities and the social sciences in which language and cultural heritage play a
  crucial role.

Motivations for circular transatlantic academic mobility

The empirical findings show that close personal contacts to the academic host and
biographical connections to the host country are among the most important influencing
motivations for a research stay abroad. Among U.S. Humboldt Awardees are ten times
more people born in Germany than one can find among the faculty of U.S. universities.
My personal interviews revealed that almost every second interviewee was
biographically connected to Germany in one way or the other; by German ancestors,
parents who emigrated in the Nazi period, a partner of German origin, or relatives living
in Germany (Jöns 2003a, 269-270).

Among the Humboldt Research Fellows from the USA every second respondent
considered close personal contacts to the academic host as an important motivation for
his or her research stay in Germany. Approximately every third respondent identified
friendships and family contacts as influencing factors.
Figure 4: German-born populations in the USA, 1870-1997


The development of the German-born population in the USA between 1870 and 1997, however, indicates that the number of people who have biographical bonds to Germany or neighbouring countries are declining sharply for historical reasons (figure 4a). A comparison of the percentage of German-born researchers in different fields reveals that the social sciences and the humanities may be particularly affected by these developments (figure 4b). However, based on my interview experience it is important to stress that the effect of this development should not be underestimated for research stays in the natural sciences and in engineering either. In the nineties, for
example, about 20% of the U.S. faculty in engineering was born in Asia (NSF 1998). Interviews disclose that Asian-born faculty spend at least one or two of their sabbaticals back home in Asia, close to their families, friends, and long-term collaborators; thus proving the hypothesis that cultural bonds play an important role.

Based on these findings it becomes evident that the various ways in which cultural and historical relations mould academic exchanges are calling for policy measures that go far beyond research itself. In the future new scientific, programme-related, cultural incentives, the strengthening of personal relationships through exchange programmes at early career stages, and Germany’s presence in the media will become ever more important to consolidate the current level of transatlantic academic mobility.

Altogether, the motivation for visiting academics to spend a year in Germany comprises a multitude of factors. More than three quarters of the U.S. Humboldt Research Fellows, for example, were attracted to their hosts by specific research topics or projects at the host institution. In relative terms these are more researchers than in any other region. The same number of researchers looked forward to a time without administrative or teaching responsibilities in which to do research and to publish academic works. The meaning of other research-related incentives such as attractive research infrastructure, highly qualified researchers, and multinational collaborations varied considerably among different fields and types of work.

**The nature of subject-related travel and collaborative cultures**

The disciplinary profile of visiting researchers to Germany between 1954 and 2001 is characterised by a significant shift in subject emphasis (figure 5). In the fifties, most Fellows came to Germany from disciplines in which research required comparatively few human and material resources. Since the research infrastructure was still being built, it was difficult to find adequate or well-equipped work-places for natural scientists. Therefore, the humanities accounted for about 40% of all Humboldt Fellows from 1954 to 1963.

![Figure 5: Visiting researchers by academic field / Data source: Humboldt Foundation.](image-url)
During the sixties and seventies, research visits to Germany from scientists and engineers increased. The major reasons for this were a growing economic importance of these fields, and the development of scientific and engineering research institutions, among them the Max-Planck-Institutes and other specialized research institutions. In the humanities, growing interest in recent German events and increasing access to archives led to a research boom, particularly in history at home and abroad. However, taking all disciplines of the humanities into account, sponsorship figures hardly doubled so that their proportion of Fellows as a whole declined.

The establishment of a new research infrastructure in the natural sciences, which generally operate with relatively standardized communication and interaction – characterized, for example, by laboratories and by the use of technical English –, can massively raise the interest in Germany. The mobilisation of new visiting researchers in the humanities and social sciences, however, remains difficult for basically two reasons. First, most research projects are tied to specific sites and local sources such as archival material, interview partner, or particular cultural settings. While these topics often can not be detached from field sites and taken away to actual places of analysis or be converted into movable representations, research travel is often less concentrated on leading research centres than in more infrastructure-dependent types of academic work (Jöns and Meusburger, in print). Second, language skills and cultural knowledge are often necessary for conducting research projects in the social sciences and humanities. But the number of foreign scholars with German language skills is not only restricted but, as outlined above, declining, (figure 4).

Therefore, the long-term shift in subject emphasis among Humboldt Research Fellows, as displayed in figure 5, cannot be simply attributed to the international attractiveness of different national academic communities. To a considerable extent it is the result of varying travel and collaborative cultures in different academic fields. Most natural scientists have more opportunities to collaborate internationally because they often share complex research infrastructure and operate with much more standardized communication than scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. This enables them to engage in relatively unproblematic exchanges of ideas, methods, and materials between a few comparable sites of experimentation. An analysis of host countries German visiting researchers chose for their stay abroad in different subjects reveals that in medicine more than two thirds of German visiting researchers concentrate on the USA, whereas researchers working in area-, language- and cultural-studies are distributed across various countries (DAAD 2003, Jöns and Meusburger in print).

In this context case studies have shown that researchers’ needs and opportunities to reach out from a place of knowledge production in order to communicate and to interact, to work and to mobilize new resources in different places vary considerably according to the significance of the geographical context for different types of research work (Jöns 2003a, 420-428): The more a researcher deals with physically embedded, place-specific, and hardly standardized research objects, such as archival material, field sites, landscapes, technical equipment, people and events, the stronger he or she is dependent on a particular local research context. This hinders researchers to do certain parts of their work elsewhere. Theories and thoughts, in turn, are as mobile as
their physical vehicles allow them to be (e.g., researchers, computers, books, etc.). In between these extremes of lowly and strongly context-dependent types of work, there are various other practices. Typical travel and collaborative cultures can be best systemized along the lines of different subjects (e.g. natural sciences, engineering, humanities), types of work (e.g. theoretical, experimental and interpretative research) and areas of work (e.g. basic and applied work).

These subject-related patterns of academic mobility and collaboration are also intimately related to systematically varying results of research stays abroad. Publications resulting from Humboldt research stays in Germany, for example, show that co-authorship with German colleagues is dominating in the natural sciences, while in mathematics, the humanities, and the social sciences publishing is much more characterized by single authorship. This is particularly true for work that involves more thinking and interpretation of specific ideas (figure 6).
Experiences with circular transatlantic academic mobility

Based on their experiences with the German academic system, the former visiting Humboldt Research Fellows were asked to evaluate certain characteristics in comparison to the working environment in their home countries. In a questionnaire they were able to choose from five categories, namely "significantly worse", "worse", "similar", "better" and "significantly better". In striking contrast to researchers from other countries, U.S. fellows evaluated none of the aspects in question on average as being better than in the U.S. Instead they regarded the following characteristics of the academic system as being equally good:

- Level of education of doctoral students and post docs;
- Level of research;
- Scientific infrastructure standards;
- Integration of foreign guests and work atmosphere;
- Size of a professor's research group;
- Non-scientific staff in a professor’s research group;
- Opportunities to conduct basic research and research projects with long-term perspectives.
In comparison, former Humboldt Research Fellows from Australia evaluated the following aspects as being better in Germany than in Australia:

- Availability of research funds at universities;
- Scientific infrastructure standards;
- Level of research;
- Level of education of doctoral students and post docs;
- Library standards (stock of books/magazines);
- Size of a professor's research group;
- Opportunities to conduct basic research and research projects with long-term perspectives.

According to the U.S. researchers the following aspects are on average considerably worse in Germany than in the US:

- Library standards (stock of books/magazines);
- Availability of research funds at universities;
- Openness towards new research approaches (particularly in the humanities);
- Workplace equipment;
- Supervision of doctoral students (in accordance with Australians);
- Level of teaching (in accordance with Australians);
- Library organisation (opening hours, assistance).

This means that the strengths of German higher education and research lie in the quality of research work and infrastructure, including the opportunity to conduct basic research and research projects with long-term perspectives, and the level of education of young academics. The relatively weak image of teaching at German universities, however, bears the danger of diminishing interests of U.S. students in Germany. In the long-term, this situation could make it increasingly difficult to mobilize future collaborators and visiting researchers in later stages of their career. At the same time, the quality of libraries has been criticized in other studies as well (see, e.g., Teichler 2002), which makes investment in related areas a *conditio sine qua non* for creating an attractive research environment in the humanities and the social sciences:

> In the twenty years I’ve left Germany universities have been bled out and they have lost resources. Cologne was the biggest institute of musicology, the library was terrible, it had some good old sources, but it was terrible to use and they had just stopped buying books a long time ago... That was the big frustration... It was a shock to come back and it was difficult to work. [Musicologist from Chicago]

Further starting points for potential reforms result from the fact that Australian and American researchers seem to agree that there is significantly less of the following in Germany, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences:

- Team work in research and teaching;
- Communication between teams/institutes;
- Interdisciplinary collaboration;
- Contact between professors and students.
Furthermore, former visiting researchers stressed that U.S. scholars will do archival research in Germany but not necessarily teach because they assume that the German system would be closed to foreigners for teaching:

Graduate students, foreign graduate students normally don’t get a job in a German university. You have to be German and so on. [Musicologist from Chicago]

Altogether these assessments represent personal experiences of established researchers that shape the image of the German academic system abroad. While the results point to some of the issues that could be improved on both sides of the Atlantic, it is important to note that the vast majority of former Humboldt visiting researchers expressed their gratefulness for their visit in Germany for academic, personal, and cultural reasons. Researchers’ experiences varied considerably depending on different fields, countries of origin, and even age groups:

I think the American system is better for young people, the German system is better for old people, so it’s like other aspects of the society it’s more stable, secure, and here there is more uncertainty but at the same time sometimes more opportunity. [Physicist from Cambridge, MA]

**Follow-up mobility and other outcomes of a research stay abroad**

In one third of the cases, the contact between a Humboldt Award Winner and his or her Humboldt host resulted from visits by German academics in the USA. Conference travel as much as post-doctoral research stays support the great significance of sponsored research travel in both directions in order to induce sustainable transatlantic academic relations. Accordingly, research stays of visiting researchers in Germany resulted in further academic mobility (figure 7).

Almost every second U.S. senior scientist came back to Germany for a further longer-term stay (figure 7a). About a third of them arranged visits by U.S. post-docs and doctoral students to Germany. In two thirds of all cases and thus most frequently of all, personal contacts were continued by German post-docs in the USA. An important field for action in higher-educational policy, however, are longer-term visits to the USA by established German professors. Because of fundamental differences in the organization of science and research and due to the lack of programmes on offer, this kind of extended co-operation did not occur very often. Those ten percent of German professors, for example, who spent a sabbatical in the U.S. after hosting a Humboldt Awardee, were almost all of U.S. origin. In the case of Humboldt Research Fellows from all countries and from the USA, the percentage of former Humboldt hosts participating in subsequent mobility was even less than 3% (figure 7b). The empirical findings, however, show that the more established researchers are internationally mobile, the more post-docs and other younger academics are attracted to his or her home country for a temporary research stay.
The follow-up mobility generated by Humboldt Research Fellows follows similar patterns, even if these vary considerably according to disciplines and countries of origin (figure 7). U.S. researchers in the social sciences and the humanities who spent a sabbatical year as a Humboldt Research Fellow in Germany are often working on topics related to German history, culture, or language. Therefore, they return more often for a further long-term stay to Germany than their colleagues in the natural and engineering sciences (42%, all fields: 30%). They also send more doctoral students (14%) and undergraduates (16%) to Germany, while postdoctoral positions tend to be less prominent in the humanities and social sciences (8%). Altogether, the need for U.S. scholars, working on topics related to Germany or Central Europe, to spend some time researching in Germany is much higher than for German scholars in the same field to go abroad. However, due to several international leading U.S. research centres and schools, renowned scholars and well-equipped libraries and archives, the frequency of follow-up mobility from Germany to the USA is – apart from the postdoctoral level – not much less in the social sciences and the humanities than in other fields. Since researchers working in the humanities and social sciences often travel themselves when conducting research, and do rarely send post-docs as mediators between research groups in Germany and the USA, there are even slightly more cases in which established professors from Germany (Humboldt hosts) stayed in the USA after hosting a Humboldt Research Fellow from this country (4% versus 3% in all fields).

The differences in international mobility patterns of U.S. and German researchers in similar phases of their careers mainly result from other responsibilities and tasks in different systems of higher education. These are, for example, related to differences concerning the organization of the research process within a research group (e.g. concentration on research versus management functions), and influenced by the size of the research group. Groups tend to be larger in Germany, have different modes in the allocation of academic functions, and less administration support staff at universities. In addition there is an unfavourable ratio of students per professor at German universities compared to prestigious U.S. research universities.

Finally, the relationship between a research stay abroad and various forms of follow-up mobility underlines the great importance of sponsorship programmes for international integration. In the case of the Humboldt Award-Programme, which was established in 1972 as one of several appreciation measures for the Marshall-Plan, case studies show that the related research stays of renowned U.S. scientists in Germany speeded up Germany’s final phase of reintegration into the international scientific community by encouraging personal relationships, knowledge and technology transfer as well as increasing mobility of post-docs to the USA (Jöns 2003a, 396-407). This situation sheds a different light on the understanding of ‘brain drain’ as a negative phenomenon per se, especially against the background that many of the U.S. Humboldt Award Winners emigrated from Germany to the USA either during the period of National Socialism or the post-war period. By re-building or maintaining close academic relations with German colleagues in the past fifty years, many emigrants acted as hosts for researchers from Germany and as mediators for German-American relations more generally, thereby contributing to increasing international collaborations.
Concluding Remarks

Transatlantic mobility and collaboration between Germany and the U.S. establishes links between two of the most advanced nations in higher education and research. Over the past three decades, these relations have become quite intense. However, recent political and socio-economic developments may support other regional orientations in both countries in the future. In Germany, this is due to growing academic
linkage within the enlarged European Union, while American academic relations have lately been strengthened across the Pacific.

On this background, I would like to advance two interrelated arguments. First, international academic relations are shaped by historical, political, and cultural events as much as by subject-related mobility and collaborative cultures. Second, both aspects need to be considered when evaluating international contacts in higher education and research and designing policy measures that foster international mobility and collaboration in different academic fields.

In view of diminishing biographical connections to Germany among U.S. researchers, I would like to propose four suggestions for discussion that may help to consolidate or even strengthen German-American academic exchanges in the humanities and the social sciences:

- Establishment of internationally advertised research seminars, each for 20 to 30 PhD students working in a particular field on both sides of the Atlantic, in order to discuss their work and to enable the establishment of life-long collaborative ties (different topics annually);
- Creation of a prestigious mobility programme for research stays of German professors in a different country in order to motivate them to spend a sabbatical abroad and thereby closing a gap in the current structure of sponsorship programmes;
- More encouragement and training for young German researchers to publish in internationally peer-reviewed journals at an early stage of their career in order to be better prepared for an international career;
- Introduction of intermediate academic positions with tenure track between the level of assistants and professors (e.g., lectureships) and (thereby) opening up the academic job market for foreign applicants.

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