

# “Knowledge migrants” or “economic migrants”? Patterns of academic mobility and migration from Southern Europe to Mexico

Cristóbal Mendoza<sup>1</sup>  | Barbara Staniscia<sup>2</sup> | Anna Ortiz<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Iztapalapa, Mexico City, Mexico

<sup>2</sup>Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies, Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy

<sup>3</sup>Department of Geography, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

## Correspondence

Cristóbal Mendoza, Department of Sociology, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Iztapalapa, Mexico City, Mexico.  
Email: cmp@xanum.uam.mx

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## Abstract

Because mobility has been described as a key element of the academic habitus and a well-established norm in scientific life, people moving within academia have been generally considered to be “knowledge migrants” and “talent migrants.” Indeed, the literature rarely takes a labour market perspective when analysing academic mobility. However, Southern European academia is largely characterised by challenging working conditions, low wages, and a lack of fair competition for positions, all of which negatively affecting job prospects. Based on 25 in-depth interviews, this paper explores the reasons behind the migration of a group of Spanish and Italian academics in Mexico with a view to bringing into focus the role of economic/labour and career-related reasons in migration decisions. We find that their experiences fall along three main academic trajectories, which are distinguished by the stage in the participants' careers at which they decided to migrate and the channels by which they entered Mexican academia. Common to all three groups is the identification of the economic crisis and a lack of institutional support as strong motivating factors in their decision. Underlying this is the question of whether the studied group is best viewed as “knowledge”/“talent” migrants who have followed certain institutional channels or “economic migrants” who are somehow pushed to work abroad by the lack of good employment in their countries of origin. The paper also challenges mainstream ideas about academic mobility, in the sense that the literature has not considered the attractive power of universities/research centres located in the Global South.

## KEYWORDS

academic mobility, talent mobility, brain drain, Mexico, international labour migration, Southern Europe

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Mobility has been described as a key element of the academic habitus (Bauder, 2015), an integral part of research work (Auriol, 2010), a well-established norm in scientific life (Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2008), and something expected in the academic milieu (Rothwell, 2002). Academic mobility is generally seen as positive and capable of generating

favourable synergies (Meyer, 2001). Certainly, academic careers are increasingly associated with international mobility (Beaverstock, 2010), to the extent that it is actually a necessary step if an academic is to make meaningful progress in his or her career (Ackers, 2005; Morano-Foadi, 2005).

The concept of “academic mobility” has been applied to the movement of students and academic staff in research and higher education

since the 1990s (Jöns, 2015). Yet the literature has paid relatively little attention to the international mobility of researchers and university professionals (Czaika & Toma, 2017; Pásztor, 2015), compared with the large number of studies looking at international mobility among students (e.g., King, 2012; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). In this respect, this article fills a gap in the literature by researching mobility and migration patterns in a group of academics from Southern Europe (Italy and Spain) who migrated to Mexico. In doing so, it attends to the need to give greater attention to the international movement of researchers and academics (Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2006; Jöns, 2015). It also considers the question of mobility among academics and researchers from a long-term perspective, something that is virtually unprecedented in a literature dominated by studies on temporary arrangements and circular patterns (Jöns, 2007). Indeed, the concept “academic mobility” stresses the temporary aspect of such relocations. Despite their initial intentions in relation to the duration of their stay, the experiences of the members of our non-representative sample group suggest that a sizeable part of the academic flows end up being permanent.

In conceptual terms, the article introduces some new nuance to the “brain drain/brain gain” debate underlying the discussion of academic mobility. The brain drain model has generally been used to analyse the flow of skilled workers from less developed countries to those with a better standard of living (Chiswick, 2011; Favell et al., 2006). The term has increasingly been used in a development context, in which it implies the permanent loss of highly skilled professionals with negative results for their countries of origin (Cervantes & Guellec, 2002). As far as the academic sector is concerned, however, Varma (2007) and Ackers and Gill (2008) argue that the unidirectional flow suggested by proponents of the brain drain model is not a good fit with the inherent nature of academic activity. A wide variety of alternative concepts have been proposed, such as “brain circulation,” “brain gain,” and “talent circulation,” which refers to higher levels of mobility (as opposed to migration) and multidirectional flows among academics in a more integrated world (Fratesi, 2014; Ganga et al., 2016; Jöns, 2015). In this article, we challenge these ideas in two ways. First, the movement we focus on is permanent in nature: The academics on whose experiences this paper is based have made Mexico their permanent home; second, we analyse international migration to the Global South, something that has received relatively little consideration in the academic debate on “the movement of brains.”

With some exceptions, Mexican universities and research institutes are not ranked among the most competitive centres internationally. However, Mexico has a well-established institutional framework (CONACyT), which oversees a vast network of research centres in the country and is responsible for promoting research through specific programmes (Izquierdo, 2015; Pedone & Izquierdo, 2018). Institutional frameworks have been identified as an important factor in understanding mobility within academia (Hedberg, Hermelin, & Westermarck, 2014). From this perspective, the institutional environment (i.e., the formal character of the academic sector, including the regulatory framework and norms and standards) is seen as being distinct from informal arrangements (e.g., personal acquaintances, Martin, 2000). This duality is reflected in this paper, particularly in its analysis of

the formal and informal channels through which members of the sample group of academics arrived in Mexico.

Academia in Southern Europe is largely characterised by challenging working conditions, low wages, low public investment in research, and a lack of fair competition for positions, all of which negatively affecting job prospects especially for those at early stages in their academic career (Brandi, Avveduto, & Cerbara, 2011; Galán & Agasisti, 2014 for Italy; Ganga et al., 2016 for Portugal). These working conditions are shared with young, high-skilled professionals outside of the academic setting for whom migration has become a valid option in pursuing a career (Mendoza, 2018). It is possible that academic migration responds less to specific conditions in the sector and more to wider trends in labour conditions resulting from a greater precariousness in jobs in Southern Europe, especially among young people (e.g., Montanari & Staniscia, 2017; Pugliese, 2018). Yet, rather than “economic migrants,” people moving within academia have been generally considered to be “knowledge migrants” and “talent migrants” (Ackers & Gill, 2008; Ganga et al., 2016), to the extent that the literature rarely takes a labour market perspective when analysing academic mobility (Bauder, 2015). When this perspective has been adopted, the dominant approach has been to describe the phenomenon in terms of “brain drain” and the loss of human capital in less developed countries as a result of international migration (e.g., Rhode, 1993; Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2008). Understood in this way, scholars would move in search of higher wages and better career prospects and to make the most of whatever human capital they already possess. Yet academic mobility is also an opportunity to acquire social, cultural, and symbolic capital (e.g., through the creation of new networks or gains in terms of reputation; Bahna, 2018; Bauder, Hannan, & Lujan, 2017; Prazeres, 2018). This paper explores the reasons behind the migration of a group of Spanish and Italian academics now living and working in Mexico with a view to bringing into focus the role of economic/labour and career-related reasons in migration decisions. In doing so, it offers a first step towards filling a gap in the literature, particularly in terms of analysing the different types of capital that can be acquired through migration.

By studying the migration of a group of academics from Southern Europe to Mexico, this paper challenges mainstream ideas about academic mobility. First, in contrast to the existing literature, it focuses on permanent migration. Second, the academic literature has not considered the attractive power of universities/research centres located in the Global South. By analysing a group of academics who have chosen Mexico, this paper challenges prevailing approaches and throws light on a type of skilled migration that has previously only been examined from rigid (potentially ethnocentric) perspectives. Underlying this discussion is the question of whether the studied group is best viewed as “knowledge”/“talent” migrants who have followed certain institutional channels in their migration or “economic migrants” who are somehow pushed to work abroad for various reasons, in particular the relative availability of job opportunities.

With these objectives in mind, we begin the paper with an analytical review of the principal lines of discussion found in the literature in relation to the mobility and migration of academics and scientists. There is then a methodology section describing the fieldwork on

which the paper is based. In brief, this fieldwork comprises 129 semi-structured interviews with high-skilled immigrants, from which we selected the interviews with professionals working in higher education. These amount to 25 interviewees. The description of the methodology is followed by two sections analysing the results of the fieldwork. The first offers a review of the reasons and motivations that led the academics in this group to migrate to Mexico. We find that their experiences tend to fall along one of three main academic trajectories, which are distinguished by the stage in the participants' careers at which they decided to migrate and the channels by which they entered Mexican academia from Spain and Italy. The second section of analysis considers the manner in which the participants became integrated into the academic set-up in Mexico. We find that the interviewees have a very positive opinion of their work environment, colleagues, the relationship with students, and the flexibility and research opportunities they are afforded. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

## 2 | ACADEMIC MOBILITY VERSUS THE MIGRATION OF ACADEMICS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in the Higher Education Sector are a distinct group of highly skilled professionals (Børing, Flanagan, Gagliardi, Kaloudis, & Karakasidou, 2015). Compared with other high-skilled workers, they have distinctive characteristics that can be summarised by the concept of "taste for science" (Pellens, 2012; Sauermann & Cohen, 2010). In this regard, Montanari and Staniscia (2016)—in reconstructing the history of the academic debate on high-skilled migration—argue that migration of high-skilled personnel became an issue of academic debate after the Second World War, when the U.S. companies and institutions increasingly began to attract expats. The academic debate on the "brain drain" focused, initially, on the risks carried by the migration of qualified professionals in terms of loss of human capital in the countries of origin and the availability of opportunities in the countries of destination (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Watanabe, 1969). Concerns were also raised in terms of imbalance and inequality in developmental terms between different geographical areas (Czaika & Orazbayev, 2018; Koser & Salt, 1997).

Adding a further layer to the argument, Baldwin (1970) introduced the idea of "brain overflow", which is based on the assumption that in some cases, the domestic labour market cannot absorb all of the available qualified workers. In order to reach equilibrium, these markets "expel" the excess of qualified labour. "Brain overflow" has been a prominent feature of certain areas of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe (Breinbauer, 2007). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the profound transformations that affected Eastern Europe, the concept of "brain waste" also began to feature in the debate (Baláz & Williams, 2002; Rhode, 1993).

The concept of "brain drain" was mirrored by the concept of "brain gain", and some studies have even indicated possible positive effects on places of origin, in part in the form of migrants' remittances, and

also in terms of the acquisition of new knowledge and the human capital returns that migration can generate (Koser & Salt, 1997; Lowell & Findlay, 2002). In a similar vein, the concepts of "brain exchange" and "brain circulation" were developed to explain a more equitable exchange of "brains" between developed countries (Gaillard & Gaillard, 1997; Johnson & Regets, 1998; Salt, 1997). "Brain circulation" stresses that highly qualified mobility flows are neither unidirectional nor permanent, and the possibility of returning is also envisaged. A very preliminary idea of this concept can be found in Ladame (1970), which discussed the phenomenon of elite circulation (*circulation des élites*). "Brain circulation" generates and favours the circulation of ideas, expertise, and know-how. This concept can be coupled with that of "brain training" (Lowell & Findlay, 2002), with both being understood as having a positive impact at the level of both the individual and the countries or regions concerned. Appelt, van Beuzekom, Galindo-Rueda, and Pinho (2015) frame the contemporary mobility of scientific researchers in terms of "brain circulation" rather than "brain drain", within a broader landscape of highly qualified migration.

The reality is that there are several forms of international mobility involving academics and diverse motivations that can lead to it, ranging from the need to leave one's own country permanently in search of better career opportunities to the desire for a short-term experience abroad to cultivate one's own knowledge and expertise in a given field of study. Independent of the length of time spent outside the country of origin, we find two main lines of enquiry in the literature regarding the factors that most drive the mobility and migration of academics and researchers, one focusing on socio-economic factors and the other on more intangible factors. We shall be analysing them separately.

The main theoretical approaches that stress socio-economic factors in the mobility of science researchers are summarised by Børing et al. (2015): (a) The first emphasises the role of macrolevel factors linked to the contexts of origin and destination: economic conditions, wages differentials, organisational structures, societal characteristics, public policies, and legislation; (b) the second revolves around the role of microlevel factors, which can be associated with personal aspirations, career aspirations, personal preferences, and so forth; and (c) the third approach highlights the role of the labour markets: dynamic labour markets with higher wages and availability of job opportunities. In mature economies, there is a surplus of PhD holders and postdocs, which creates a very competitive academic environment. There is the possibility of the individual feeling dissatisfied with his or her role and working environment in the country of origin, for instance, due to high teaching loads or an unstimulating or provincial environment (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018).

Among the less tangible factors, the literature on academic mobility has stressed: the individual's preference for adventure and intercultural exposure and a greater than average appetite for life change among academics (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018); the possibility of improving performance, visibility, and credibility through mobility and, also, the development of more fruitful patterns of collaboration (Fernandez-Zubieta, Geuna, & Lawson, 2015); the positive symbolic capital—a sort of prestige—associated with international mobility (Bauder et al., 2017); the opportunity to acquire social, cultural, and



symbolic capital through the acquisition of new skills and competences, the creation of new networks, and gains in terms of reputation (aka “mobility capital”; Bauder et al., 2017); increased access to international research networks and funding (Cañibano, Otamendi, & Andújar, 2008); “intrinsic rewards”: greater work satisfaction, particularly in relation to the working environment, the possibility of collaborating with “star scientists,” the possibility of being funded, the freedom in choosing research topics (Pellens, 2012); the institutional framework that eases access to visas, residence permits, and even acquisition of citizenship (Bauder, Lujan, & Hannan, 2018; Komatsu & Staniscia, 2005).

In the specific case of Southern Europe, the debate on high-skilled migration flows—and their determinants—encompasses different theoretical positions, even if there are two key factors that we can highlight in particular (Staniscia, 2018). The first concerns imbalances in labour markets and high unemployment rates, which have actually worsened due to the economic crisis. Countries in Southern Europe typically see an excess on the supply side and are unable to create sufficient jobs. As a consequence, high-skilled workers are “expelled” from their home countries and “attracted” by countries that are performing better economically (Labrianidis, 2014). The same applies in academia where imbalances in the labour market, and difficulty in obtaining permanent positions and making headway in career terms are among the most significant factors behind the decision to migrate (Brandt et al., 2011). A second determinant identified in the literature is a new form of “brain drain” (Becker, Ichino, & Peri, 2004; Labrianidis & Vogiatzis, 2013) that can be attributed to systemic conditions—such as corruption, gerontocracy, and the absence of meritocracy in academic institutions (Hadjimichalis, 2011)—which drive talents to “flee” to countries where their abilities are better recognised, used and valued (King, Lulle, Conti, Mueller, & Scotto, 2014; Labrianidis, 2014). These conditions emerge both because, in many cases, the recruitment methods in Southern Europe are based on non-meritocratic criteria (King & Conti, 2013) and because these countries typically see lower levels of research and development investment as a proportion of gross domestic product (Morano-Foadi, 2005).

The most attractive countries for science researchers are those that are characterised by high investments in research and development (Hunter, Oswald, & Charlton, 2009) and thus able to attract the best resources (Williams & Baláz, 2008). During the 1970s, the most attractive areas were North America and Northern and Western Europe, which received more than two thirds of the total number of mobile academics. Over time, the relative importance of these regions decreased: In the 2000s, they were attracting below 60% of the global flows. New destinations were emerging in the Global South (e.g., Latin America and Southern Asia; Czaika & Orazbayev, 2018). The rise of emerging economies such as these has shifted the “global centre of gravity” for mobility and knowledge production in academia (Czaika & Orazbayev, 2018). It is expected that the importance of emerging economies will increase in the future given that the expanding education systems in these countries are set to account for the majority of new jobs created in the academic sector (Altbach, 2004). This is also a consequence of the process of internationalisation that affects

emerging economies and the resulting interest in attracting academics from other countries to increase competitiveness in the global arena (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018).

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

This article is based on 25 semi-structured interviews with Italian and Spanish nationals who are employed full time in academic and research roles in Mexican institutions. These interviews form part of a wider study on skilled migration in Mexico that has involved a total of 129 interviews with high-skilled Spanish and Italian immigrants (i.e., degree holders) in four Mexican cities. This was a non-representative sample stratified by type of skilled immigrant, nationality, and city of residence. Specifically, the sample was intended to encompass four types of skilled immigrant (i.e., academics, transnational corporation expatriates, employers/self-employed workers, and technical and managerial staff working for private companies who were not under expatriate arrangements), two nationalities (Italy and Spain), and four cities of residence (41 interviews were carried out in Mexico City, 31 in Guadalajara, 31 in Monterrey, and 26 in Puebla; Table 1).

Although the study did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, efforts were made to collect information from immigrants with differing backgrounds. For instance, we interviewed men and women in similar numbers and made sure to select different types of high-skilled migrants; Spanish and Italian nationals are not equally represented, because in Mexico, the former outnumber the latter (by a ratio of 4 to 1 in 2015; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2018). Comparing the subsample of academics with the interviewed group as a whole, it is notable that, on average, the academics are older and tend to have migrated prior to the 2008 economic crisis. In other words, these data would appear to indicate that the structural characteristics of Southern European academia are a major reason for migration (rather than it being a response to the effects of the financial crisis, which seems to have affected young people to a greater extent, see Table 1).

Due to the lack of reliable official statistics on immigrants in Mexico, a snowball sampling technique was used. Participants were assured that the information provided would be treated confidentially, so this paper has been written using pseudonyms. Most interviews were carried out in the interviewees' workplaces, although some were held in their homes or in cafes, at their request. The fieldwork was carried out from June 2014 to September 2015. On average, each of the 129 in-depth interviews lasted around an hour. They were structured along three lines of discussion: work, social integration, and geographical issues. The interviews propitiated discussion on reasons for migrating, intentions to stay, the labour market in Mexico (e.g., views on workmates, professionalism, and discrimination at work), everyday experiences in Mexico (e.g., living standards and everyday spaces), and links with the interviewees' home countries. Data were analysed using a content analysis method involving several phases. First, the codes were defined. Because the interviews were undertaken by the researchers behind the study, it was relatively easy to define and



**TABLE 1** Profile of the interviewees

	Academics	Academics (%)	Total sample	Total (%)
<b>Sex</b>				
Female	10	40.0	48	37.2
Male	15	60.0	81	62.8
<b>Nationality</b>				
Italian	4	16.0	26	20.2
Spanish	21	84.0	103	79.8
<b>City of residence</b>				
Mexico City	7	28.0	41	31.8
Guadalajara	9	36.0	31	24.0
Monterrey	7	28.0	31	24.0
Puebla	2	8.0	26	20.2
<b>Age at interview</b>				
30 years and less	2	8.0	26	20.2
31–49 years	21	84.0	89	69.0
50 years and more	2	8.0	14	10.9
<b>Civil status</b>				
Single	6	24.0	50	38.8
Married	13	52.0	45	34.9
Cohabitation	6	24.0	34	26.4
<b>Year of arrival</b>				
Before 2008	16	64.0	37	28.7
2008–2015	9	36.0	92	71.3
<b>Professional profile</b>				
Entrepreneurs and self-employed people			34	26.4
Transnational corporation expatriates			20	15.5
Managerial and technical staff (nonexpatriates)			42	32.6
Academics			25	19.4
Others			8	6.2
<b>Total (n)</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Fieldwork (June 2014–September 2015).

classify codes according to the interview sections. Second, using the free software MAXQDA, the interviews were labelled and extracts were grouped into different topics. Finally, systematic reading and analysis of this information enabled abstracting and the selection of relevant quotations to illustrate the main lines of analysis.

This article specifically focuses on immigrants who were working at public or private universities and research centres at the time of the interview. In contrast to the bulk of the literature on academics and scientists, which focuses on temporary and circular mobility (Jöns, 2007), this paper looks at academics who are living permanently in Mexico. This category constituted around 20% of the non-representative sample of skilled immigrants in Mexico (25 out of 129; 19.4%; Table 1). Most of the participants (16 out of 25) had finished their

PhD studies prior migration, an attainment that, in almost all cases, is reflected in the level of the permanent position that they have secured at a Mexican institution. More than half of the interviewed scholars (15 out of 25) were working at one of the most prestigious Mexican universities (Mexico City Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana; University of Guadalajara, Tecnológico de Monterrey)<sup>1</sup> Finally, a significant portion of this group (14 out of 25) had a previous international mobility experience before settling in Mexico, which suggests that, by and large, the participants interviewed have established academic careers. The characteristics of this non-representative sample are consistent with the findings presented by Brandi et al. (2011).

### 3.1 | Arrival in Mexico: Diversity and complexity of academic career trajectories

The interviewees can be grouped into three categories based on the point in their academic careers at which they chose to move to Mexico (i.e., before/after obtaining their PhD) and the type of institutional contacts used in making the move. First, there was a group of six interviewees who decided to migrate to Mexico without a PhD. This form of mobility is effected through ostensibly fixed-term academic placement schemes (at least initially), with the academics subsequently choosing to extend their time in Mexico after their PhD and find a permanent place for themselves within Mexican academia. A second trajectory is represented by 12 interviewees, whose arrival was also related in some way to the education–work transition at a later stage in their career. Having finished a PhD in their country of origin, these subjects found a place at a Mexican university or research centre in the form of a postdoc fellowship. In many cases, international grants and scholarships of this sort were the only way to continue their careers, given the limited opportunities in the academic sector in their home countries. Finally, there is a third group of seven scholars who, in contrast to the previous group, found their way to Mexico via informal academic arrangements (i.e., personal contacts in academia). With all three trajectories, the lack of opportunities in the academic sector in the participants' countries of origin appears to be a key driver for an initial form of mobility that turns into migration.

The first group, then, comprises young Spanish and Italian academics and researchers who arrived in Mexico before undertaking or completing a PhD. They were presented with an opportunity to complete their studies in Mexico through predoctoral research fellowships. Caín, a lecturer at a private university in Monterrey, offers a good example of this pathway. He said that he had always wanted to live abroad, and the opportunity to work in Mexico came through a predoctoral research position. After he finished his PhD, the Mexican

<sup>1</sup>According to 2020 QS World University Rankings, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México is ranked 103rd in the world (second in Latin America), and Tecnológico de Monterrey ranks 158th (fifth in Latin America). The University of Guadalajara is in the 701–750 range, and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in the 801–1,000 range. By way of comparison, the highest placed Italian university in this ranking is Politecnica di Milano (149), and the highest Spanish institution is Universitat de Barcelona (165), <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2020>.

university offered him a job. In this particular case, the participant is of the view that “he had no real need to leave Spain.” Despite this, he opted to stay in Mexico, because “I was always attracted to Latin America.” In his words:

*I arrived in Mexico as a visiting scholar. I was at [private university in Monterrey] and I liked it very much. Even if Monterrey is a tough city, something about it drew me in and I ended up loving it. I finished my PhD at [Spanish university] and I was offered a job at the university in Monterrey. It took me a while to take the decision, because I could apply for a post-doctoral grant to go elsewhere. (Caín, 39, 9 years in Monterrey)<sup>2</sup>*

We find a similar trajectory with Ignacio, who also arrived in Monterrey before finishing his PhD. After a fixed-term post, Ignacio went back to Spain with a good impression of Mexican academia. Later on, he learned about the procedures for applying for a Mexican grant to pursue a PhD. He did so, and, like Caín, he was offered a job by a Monterrey university after finishing his doctoral studies in Mexico. Ignacio also reported feeling strong desire for “a change of scenery,” because he found his hometown a little suffocating. He summarised his academic trajectory with these words:

*As part of my degree in [name of the degree], I received a [fellowship name] grant to go to Monterrey [...]. I met several researchers at [private university], and they explained to me that CONACyT [Spanish acronym for Mexico's “National Council for Science and Technology”] also offered doctoral grants for foreign students [...]. To be honest, my year in Monterrey was fantastic, and I had friends, I knew the city, so I decided to apply for the grant and I did my PhD in Mexico. After that, I started work at the same university. I have no complaints. (Ignacio, 34, 6 years in Monterrey)*

These examples suggest two general points that arise repeatedly in the interviews. First, although it is true that a desire for change can facilitate the decision to migrate to a Latin American country, it is also true that sometimes, the choice to go to a specific country is determined by specific study or work opportunities. Second, we note that the participants' initial, fixed-term positions in Mexican academia are important in understanding their migration decisions. These positions allow them to collaborate on projects, to get to know Mexican labour dynamics and even make friends and find partners. All these factors feed into their decision to stay in Mexico following the completion of their studies. These results are consistent with Williams, Baláž, and Wallace (2004), Yu (2017), and Czaika and Orazbayev (2018), which also show that the social and cultural capital acquired in previous fixed-term positions have an impact on professional choices, especially when deciding to stay permanently in a foreign country.

The second characteristic pathway identified in our interviews is that taken by young PhD holders who chose to migrate to Mexico because they felt the opportunities to continue their careers in Spain and Italy were limited. In the case of some of the Spanish interviewees, the pathway to migration came in the form of a postdoctoral fellowship programme that was set up, primarily, to encourage the internationalisation of the Spanish academic sector. These scholarships, which in principle were to last a maximum of two years, became, in reality, a mechanism by which new doctorate holders could emigrate. This is the case with Pepe, who explains that “he came to Mexico before the crisis” insofar as his migration was not related to the 2008 financial crisis—which adversely affected the creation of public-sector jobs—but, rather, was due to the structural lack of well-paid permanent jobs in Spanish academia.

*I left Spain because I didn't see much future there. I left well ahead of the crisis, because I saw no options: all the jobs at the universities or even in companies were taken. And then the [Spanish] Ministry's mobility programme for PhD holders was launched. It was initially fixed-term, for one to two years. And I said to myself “well, it is not a bad choice. I will get to know another country, another culture, other people”. I never imagined that it would be a definitive move. I've already been in Mexico for more than 15 years. (Pepe, 45, 17 years in Mexico City)*

The case of Elena is very similar. She arrived in Mexico via a postdoctoral fellowship in 2003, well before the financial crisis. All the same, she was very clear about her reason for emigration (“The situation in Spanish universities was depressing”). Together with her husband, she came to Guadalajara for an initial 2-year fellowship, which turned into a permanent position at a private university. Elena states that “they offered me a job I could not reject. They even gave me a postdoctoral grant to pursue my research in the States. I cannot imagine something like this in Spain.”

Likewise, Jaime came to Mexico as a postdoctoral fellow. When he finished his PhD in Spain, he knew that a position at a Spanish university would entail difficult working conditions because jobs were scarce and badly paid. Spurred by this realisation, Jaime applied for a grant for a 2-year fellowship.

*I had a list of countries that attracted me, and Mexico was not on that list, but the programme I applied for was only for Mexico, for PhD-holders who wanted to work at Mexican universities. It was initially temporary, but I have been here since 2008. (Jaime, 41, 7 years in Monterrey)*

Later on in his interview, Jaime clearly cites “academic inbreeding” as being a significant barrier to finding an initial position at a Spanish university, because “it is well known that Spanish university lecturers are, overwhelmingly, former PhD students from the same university.” Jaime has no doubt: “Merit and talent are more valued in Mexico than in Spain.” Inbreeding, the lack of job opportunities and excessive

<sup>2</sup>Pseudonyms are used in this article to guarantee confidentiality. The interviewee's age, length of residence in Mexico at the time of the interview, and place of residence are also given in parentheses.

rigidity are characteristics identified by most of the interviewees when describing Italian and Spanish academia. This is line with the existing literature on academic mobility, which has demonstrated that low wages, difficult working conditions, meagre research funding, and a lack of fair competition are the rule rather than the exception in the academic sector in Southern Europe (King & Conti, 2013; Galán & Agasisti, 2014; Ganga et al., 2016). By contrast, the literature has shown that Mexican academia is relatively open to new, foreign arrivals (Castaños Rodríguez, 2011; Izquierdo, 2015). Certainly, Italy and Spain have a relatively saturated academic labour market characterised by an oversupply of academics (see also Breinbauer, 2007; Labrianidis, 2014), which seems not to be the case in Mexico.

Finally, there is a group characterised by the use of informal institutional links, founded on personal contacts, as a route into Mexican academia. There is little doubt that, when it comes to maintaining personal relationships between Spanish and Mexican academics, historical and linguistic ties are an additional factor. This was the case of Isaac, who, at the end of his master's degree, decided to return to his former public administration job in Barcelona. An acquaintance, who had taken the same master's course, was already working in Mexico. He told Isaac about a possible position on a research project at a Guadalajara university, and Isaac jumped at the opportunity.

*I had actually never had a proper job at a Spanish university. I did the master's, which involved working on a number of projects at a research centre, but when I finished, I went back to my old position in public administration [...]. Thanks to an acquaintance who had done the same master's, I learned about the opportunity to work at [name of a Guadalajara university]. I've been here for more than ten years. I have completed a PhD, I teach in the faculty as an assistant lecturer and I collaborate on research projects. (Isaac, 39, 13 years in Guadalajara)*

Similarly, Christian was invited to work at a Mexican research centre on the strength of a recommendation from the director of a research centre in Barcelona where he had studied previously. Faced with the challenging proposition of finding a job following his PhD, Christian recognised that this was a good opportunity to publish his doctoral thesis, while living in a new country and experiencing a different academic environment. His temporary Mexican "adventure" became a permanent move.

*I was about to finish my PhD at [English university] and I began to worry about my future. I contacted my former professors in Spain. The director of the research centre at which I did my master's informed me that a centre in a border city in Mexico was looking for researchers. The director contacted them and I was offered a job there. I saw it as an opportunity, as something temporary, even exotic. The truth is that I've been living in Mexico for almost twenty years. (Christian, 46, 17 years in Mexico, in Mexico City at interview)*

Informal contacts are complemented by a "streamlined" selection process, something we also see in the case of Isabella. Already drawn to the idea of spending time in another country, she recognised that Mexico offered opportunities in terms of career development. She was made aware of her eventual post at private university in Guadalajara by the head of her master's programme:

*An Italian professor, who was my MA supervisor, knew that they [Private University in Guadalajara] were looking for new lecturers, and he asked for my CV. I've always trusted that professor. I had several interviews on Skype and then they paid for me to fly to Mexico to give a lecture and get to know Guadalajara, to find out if I liked the city [...]. I came in here, I said well, I like the idea of working in another country [...]. To be honest, I wanted to go to Australia. But in Mexico, I really appreciate the human touch, and it's a very nice country [...]. When I came here for the interview, I was offered a one-year contract as a visiting scholar, and I started work. After this, I was offered a second contract, and I decided to stay. Now I have a permanent contract. (Isabella, 36, 3 years in Guadalajara)*

In these examples, informal academic contacts are seen to be particularly significant. They are also indicative of a greater level of flexibility in the academic sector in Mexico, particularly in private universities, where a certain degree of informality and discretion is afforded in decisions about new contracts. This has certainly worked to the advantage of the individuals interviewed. Informal arrangements facilitating access to jobs/promotion are common to all categories of skilled immigrants coming to Mexico. Creating social networks that prove helpful in career terms appears to be relatively easy. In this sense, our research offers evidence of the way social capital might explain labour market outcomes in academia, something that is lacking in the existing literature: Indeed, even when the role of social networks has been discussed as a factor in understanding academic mobility, it has generally not been considered with regard to explaining permanent migration and full incorporation into academic employment in the host country. In other words, the success of migrants in developing their careers in Mexican academia is not exclusively related to their educational or work-related achievements. Rather, it may also reflect the extensive use of social networks (see also Mendoza, 2018).

### 3.2 | "I've got so much more than I could ever imagine": The integration of foreign workers in Mexican academia

Having established themselves in Mexico, the interviewees found positions as lecturers and researchers at public and private universities (only one was employed in a research centre at the time of the interview). The majority began with temporary contracts, but all of the participants eventually secured permanent positions. As we have seen above, there are various different pathways to working in higher education institutions in Mexico—a reflection of the relative flexibility of



Mexican academia—and numerous openings for new foreign academics. For a full understanding of how and why foreign nationals access and remain in Mexican academia, however, it is important to appreciate the role played by personal contacts. The case of Christian is a good example: It would be difficult to form a full picture of his access to, and mobility within, the Mexican market without recognising the importance of academic contacts. He explained in the interview that he came to Mexico because he was offered a job at a research centre in a city on the Mexico–United States border. His subsequent job changes within Mexico, culminating in a university position in Mexico City, relied on contacts he made after he arrived in the country. In other words, for promotion in Mexican academia, personal contacts can be essential. Similarly, another interviewee, Hortensia, points at the importance of networking for moving jobs:

*I work in [private university in Guadalajara]. I got the job through a person who already worked at the university who was the father of someone I knew from my dance classes. (Hortensia, 50, 15 years in Guadalajara)*

As for the participants' opinions of Mexican academia, the majority typically experience a good level of job satisfaction. They have a very positive estimation of the work environment, their colleagues, the relationship with students, and the level of flexibility and research opportunities afforded them. As one interviewee, Jorge, summarises: "I've got so much more out of it than I could ever imagine." The case of Pepe is representative in this regard. He said that he "held out" living in Mexico City because he was happy with his job, even if his wife and son lived in Spain, and they only saw each other during holidays. In his opinion, this physical separation was the price he had to pay for job satisfaction. Claudio expressed a similar level of appreciation for his job. He arrived in Monterrey in 2000, because a private university offered job openings for academics specialising in European studies. This was his first job in academia, a circumstance shared by many of the interviewees who found work in Mexico after finishing their PhD.

According to the interviewees, the experience of working in Mexico has helped them to grow on both professional and personal levels. They also believe that they are freer in Mexico than they could be in Spain and Italy, where they believe working in research is more challenging due to the scarcity of funding and rigid university systems. Indeed, comparisons between universities were a common feature in the interviews. The respondents rate the way they have been able to integrate into Mexican academia very positively, especially when they compare it with their experiences in their countries of origin. Their satisfaction is explained mainly by the fact that promotion and access to research funding and resources in general are more accessible in Mexico. Consider the following extracts from the interviews:

*If I were in Spain, my quality of life would be much lower [...] I really believe that Mexican academia is more flexible, more creative and, in general terms, better than in Spain. (Hortensia, 50, 15 years in Guadalajara)*

*Here you've got a lot of room for creation and innovation. I said this to a Spanish colleague who came here for a*

*conference. She asked me, "Would you return?" My answer was, "if a Spanish university gave me a research project, a research group, three PhD students, at my age, I would definitely go back". Yet all that is impossible. The capacity for growth in Mexico is exponential, compared to Spain. (Caín, 39, 7 years in Monterrey)*

With regard to upward mobility within academia, it is important to appreciate that Mexican universities value foreign qualifications and experience very highly. For this reason, foreign nationals might find their labour opportunities outside academia are also improved. For the respondents, the institution of the university appears to be more prestigious and highly valued in Mexico than in their countries of origin. In this regard, we note the assertion of Elena. This interviewee receives so many offers of work that she is effectively forced to turn some of them down because she cannot spare the time:

*Here I am often invited to teach courses outside my university and sometimes I have to refuse. It is no longer a matter of money; it is a matter of time. I've already got a lot on; it is hard work. (Elena, 43, 15 years in Guadalajara)*

Despite their positive evaluation of the academic work setting, all the interviewees said that they had to make an effort to adapt to the Mexican work culture. The workplace is a key space for the transmission of norms and values (Van Riemsdijk et al., 2016). In many cases, the process of adapting to Mexican society begins in the workplace due to limited prior knowledge of the country and its culture. The general impression from the interviews is that younger migrants (~25–40 years old), who are generally open to the local working norms and culture, tend to experience little in the way of culture clash, in this respect. The occasional work-related conflicts are somehow overcome with a mixture of resignation, acceptance, and a sense of humour.

## 4 | CONCLUSIONS

Labour markets in academia are global. Academics move around the globe in search of better options for career development, and universities and research centres announce vacancies in a more integrated world (Bauder et al., 2017). Despite this, the literature has rarely taken a labour market perspective when analysing academic mobility and migration (Bauder, 2015). Yet, academics do not seem to be much different from other groups of skilled migrants, for whom recognition of human capital (e.g., skills, knowledge, competences, abilities, and experience) and its translation into wages and social prestige is also a key factor in the processes leading to migration (see, for instance, Mendoza, 2018). However, the difference may lie in the fact that academia is highly dependent on local and national political contexts. In Southern Europe, universities and research centres are highly contingent on political frameworks and specific university regulations. Paradoxically enough in such an institutionalised milieu, informal networks are key to understanding the incorporation of Southern Europeans

into academic employment in Mexico. Once in the country, these migrants feel that their jobs are highly valued, and they carry some sort of symbolic capital that opens labour options outside academia. In explaining the different sorts of capital that have a relevant role in the way Southern European scholars are incorporated into academic employment in Mexico, this article provides evidence on a topic that is relatively unexplored in the literature.

On the other side of the equation, there is one factor that may go a long way in explaining why the academic sector in Southern Europe is not able to create enough jobs for new graduates: The academic labour market in the region is certainly saturated (Breinbauer, 2007; Labrianidis, 2014). In addition, universities and research centres in Southern Europe are characterised by low wages, difficult working conditions, and a lack of fair competition in recruitment and promotions (Brandi, Avveduto & Cerbara, 2011; King & Conti, 2013; Galán & Agasisti, 2014; Ganga et al., 2016). The fact is that, after their PhD, the subjects interviewed felt they had no access to permanent academic positions in Italy and Spain. Adding another layer of uncertainty to these structural unbalances, the 2008 economic crisis had a clear, negative impact on the availability of job openings in Italian/Spanish academia, which is heavily dependent on public funding. All these contribute to making the job prospects in Mexico more attractive. According to our interviewees, Mexican academia values foreign degrees and academic experience highly and offers a more meritocratic culture that is not overwhelmingly based on personal connections. The case of Mexico is a good example of the increasing attractiveness of emerging economies for academics and researchers, as recently highlighted by Czaika and Orazbayev (2018) and Lee and Kuzhabekova (2018).

On a more personal level, our results show—similar to Van Mol and Timmerman (2014)—that mobility and migration decisions are biographically embedded. Our interviewees were mainly young graduates when they decided to come to Mexico. It is perhaps for this reason that the desire for change (and occasionally adventure) is a common thread running through many of the interviews. Indeed, many of the interviewees had already experienced a form of migration when they were undergraduates (e.g., Erasmus), which is in keeping with the results of Yu (2017) who also stressed the relevance of “mobility capital,” because he found that student mobility is often a precursor to international academic migration. The interviewees have experienced growth on both intellectual and personal levels while in Mexico, in such a way that the question of returning to their home country is complicated by a number of personal circumstances: Over time, migrant academics create personal and professional links that can facilitate occupational mobility and social incorporation but make an eventual return to their home countries more difficult. As such, our study has shown the importance—in the migration decisions of young Southern European academics at an early phase of their careers—of both macrolevel and microlevel factors (Børing et al., 2015) linked to the economic system and the labour market, as well as intangible factors. It also has highlighted the importance of pre-existing social capital (belonging to academic networks) and the availability of human resources and infrastructure, in determining the choice of destination.

Finally, it is difficult to judge whether the academic migration from Italy and Spain to Mexico does constitute part of a new “brain drain” from Southern European countries, as some scholars have concluded (Becker et al., 2004; Labrianidis & Vogiatzis, 2013; Pugliese, 2018). What does seem clear, however, from our results, is the existence of both “brain training”—among the youngest researchers, who moved with the aim of obtaining a PhD—and “brain overflow” in the sense that there is an expulsion of the oversupply of academics (see also Breinbauer, 2007; Labrianidis, 2014). What is different from many previous studies looking at the concept of “brain overflow” is that, in our case, we find the phenomenon affecting two “mature economy” countries, Italy and Spain. Perhaps we are witnessing a different category of high-skilled workers, which can be defined as “brain opportunity seekers” who choose to move permanently from countries with mature economies to countries of the Global South in search of new opportunities to develop their potential in dynamic and promising environments.

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## ORCID

Cristóbal Mendoza  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8694-6830>

Anna Ortiz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6016-5136>

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