Learning from Poland
First Reflections
Learning from Poland?
The implications of Polish migration to Ireland for contemporary Irish emigration
http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/research/migration_LearningfromPoland.php

Learning from Poland: First reflections

During the 2000s there was mass immigration to Ireland, especially from Poland; during the current decade there has been a mass exodus from Ireland. What can one teach us about the other? For academics, immigration and emigration usually live in separate conceptual boxes, while immigrants and emigrants are always the concern of different groups of policy makers. This report presents the first results from our project ‘Learning from Poland?’ which tries to bridge that gap.

In ‘Learning from Poland?’, an Employment Research Centre study, located in the Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin, we sought to compare the strategies of Irish graduates in overseas labour markets with those of high-skilled Polish migrants entering the Irish labour market in the 2000s.

The research comprised four elements:

- A Qualitative Panel Study (QPS) with a panel of 22 purposively selected Polish migrants which ran from 2007-2013 inclusive. In all, 153 interviews were conducted during the life of the project.
- An Irish graduate study with 37 participants located in the UK and Australia.
- Employer and recruiter interviews in Ireland, the UK and Australia (2007-2013).

The Qualitative Panel Study commenced in 2007 with 22 participants, who back then were predominantly in their mid-twenties and early thirties. 10 females and 12 males participated, all living in the Greater Dublin Area. They were employed in four sectors of the Irish labour market: construction, hospitality, the financial sector and IT. In following our Polish group over a six-year period, we were in a position to observe how individuals’ biographies, understandings and aspirations changed over time.

The Irish graduates study interviewed 20 males and 17 females whose ages ranged from 22 to 37. In line with the overall project interests, we concentrated on the same sectors as for our Polish sample. However, we devised an ‘other’ category when we failed to locate Irish graduates working within hospitality.

Finally, the online graduate survey targeted graduates in overseas employment. It was an attempt to contextualise the qualitative research through identifying recent graduates’ main destinations and motivations to migrate.

This preliminary report foregrounds three key themes: new forms of mobility; a prior culture of mobility (mobility habitus); self-realisation or career centred mobility. Finally, we reflect on the life-course strategies and future plans of participants.

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New forms of mobility

Our Polish sample was mobile at a time when economic opportunities were limited ‘at home’. With 2004 EU Enlargement, the unemployment rate was 19% in Poland, while unemployment in Ireland was 4.5% at that time, see Table 1.

Table 1: Unemployment in Poland-Ireland 2004-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat

Importantly, many of these post-accession movers were keen to explore new employment possibilities within an expanded Europe. We know from the first round of interviews that Polish migration to Ireland in the 2000s had an economic character. Yet, we found that there was something more written in to the desire to travel. More recently, and in the context of boom and bust economic cycles, the assumption that migrants would leave Ireland if the labour market condition worsened was not realised. Following our latest round of interviews, 13 of the original 22 remained in Ireland, four had followed partners overseas and the remainder returned to Poland.

For the Polish group, within the six years of our study, we observed significant mobility back and forth between Poland and Ireland and for a certain few, we observed movement onward from Ireland. People returned ‘home’ in the initial years for dental and medical services, although this tendency waned with time. Most participants visited Poland for family reasons several times during the year. For this group, a movement to Ireland was something well within their sights; the reality of cheap air travel within Europe meant that moving to a country previously unfamiliar was mitigated by such other factors as improved wages.

Looking at our Irish graduate sample, since the 1980s Irish emigration has been changing. For some time now, whether in boom or in slump, it has been the better educated that have been more likely to leave. So as Irish emigration began to accelerate with the crisis, we wanted to know more about Irish graduate emigration. In terms of the current destinations of these graduates, the results from our online survey show that the UK and Australia have had the biggest draw for this group. This corresponds with the latest CSO data on population and migration estimates for the general population. Thus our online survey gave the following result, at Fig. 1.

Fig 1: Current Residence of Irish Graduates 2013

While the CSO revealed the following, at Fig. 2.

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The story of movement for work overseas, lifestyle opportunity and to enhance professional prospects is familiar amongst this cohort, but there has been a dramatic increase in graduate emigration which is part of the hidden message of the latest CSO data. The number of people who migrated in the 25-44 age-group in 2012 is at 46.1% and importantly, this age-group corresponds with the age profile of our graduate cohort. However, annual statistics on emigration from Ireland belie the nature of contemporary movement, which is distinctive because of the variety of mobility patterns involved. While we know that a number of Irish people are said to have moved home in 2012, the statistics tell us little about broader mobility patterns amongst this group.

In terms of characterising mobility amongst the graduates, we saw pronounced evidence of circular movement. Visits home were common for our London based interviewees and although the distance factor is significant for graduates in Australia, even amongst this cohort, people travelled home for family occasions. Furthermore, several cited the Australian experience as part of a career/lifestyle experience but not necessarily as an end point. They spoke of other potential destinations. A number also saw London as a place to gain valuable experience, but not necessarily a final destination.

A culture of mobility
A history of mobility is an historic part of the Polish story. With an established transnational record, there was a cultural familiarity to this movement. The movement inspired by accession was however, a new part of the migration story. In that regard, a number of participants cited social and family networks established in Ireland post-accession as contributing to the decision to choose Ireland. Importantly, we found too that mobility as part of the third level education experience was present amongst the Polish graduates. In that regard, many of these individuals had already spent time as students in other European countries and other destinations including the US.

Within the Irish sample, prior mobility as part of the third level experience was a recurring theme for the graduate cohort. This was evident both in the interviews and with the online survey. Many had taken part in J1 visa programmes, internships, Erasmus and summer jobs. Adam, a software engineer based in London remarked:

I did internships in America. I did one in San Francisco and I did one in Boston. I just felt like you gain more knowledge by working abroad than you do at home.

In addition, the GAA as an organisation featured strongly for a fifth of the graduate sample. It provided a social, sporting and employment function in the UK and Australia. It also offered an orientation

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point particularly for those individuals who had already been embedded within the network at home.

Within this group too, the extent of mobility within family biographies was pronounced. There were two graduates whose entire families had relocated to Australia. Other researchers have suggested that the family or social group of many migrants provides a ‘mobility habitus’ in which mobility is a normal part of their way of life.

The experiences at third level however seem to offer a further dimension. Mobility as an undergraduate student contributed to an inclination towards mobility after graduation.

**Self-realisation or career**

In examining our Polish interviews, establishing a lifestyle seemed to be a critical goal: people invented and reinvented themselves, adapting to labour market circumstances, displaying a clear flexibility in their strategy. Some left employment in Poland to seek new opportunities following accession. They were often searching for a different quality of life and saw travel as part of a process of self-development. While these features were most pronounced amongst the more educated of our Polish migrants, they were not restricted to them. For some, maintaining a career strategy was important, but even for professionals, being adaptable and open to retraining in a changing labour market context was a clear strategy.

The Irish graduates were determinedly tied to a career focus than the Polish group. The Irish graduates were willing to work outside their area only as part of an initial or temporary strategy. Thus, Gerard, a business and IT graduate, initially worked as a labourer in Sydney while waiting for a more appropriate position to materialise:

> Actually I worked on some of the sites for the first couple of weeks. It was 2008 when I arrived so the global economic crisis had just kicked off. Most of the banks weren’t employing anyone at that stage. I think it was about a month and a half before I got my first [bank] contract.

We saw significant mobility amongst our graduates spanning both workplaces and countries. A number had left employment and relocated to either Australia or the UK and several had worked in London before transferring to Australia. The importance of self-development and quality of life was present, although informed by labour market security.

Five of the Irish graduates had previously enjoyed a working-holiday experience in Australia on a one-year basis. These graduates emphasised the adventure seeking nature of that move, though they had gone on to concentrate on career. More recently, this visa is being used as a way to access the labour market and to pursue career progression. With approximately 15,000 Irish people in Australia on working holiday visas and the potential to extend for a second year, Ireland has the fifth-highest representation of any country.

**Life course and the notion of settling down**

Importantly, as observed with the Polish sample, motivations change over time. The effect of living abroad on such migrants in terms of their own life

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trajectories and the experiences they incur can hugely determine the development of self-realisation strategies\(^9\). In that regard, one of our Polish participants Pavel (an engineer) had returned to Poland with his wife and child but was open to the idea of travelling further:

I am not so deeply rooted in Poland anyway right now. We allow my wife’s business to grow now, we give it some time. It is possible that we will leave Poland in about a year.

There was a sense amongst many of the interviewees, across the Polish and Irish groups, that potential opportunities elsewhere should not be overlooked by a fixation with what was available in the current environment. Five of the Irish group, in their mid-thirties, had built financial security and were focused on quality of life but were keenly aware of the wider economic circumstances of their current location, including cost of living. Mobility was already worked into their career and life paths.

The majority of our Irish graduates in the 25-29 age-group, had loose plans in terms of the future. There was a sense of embracing new opportunities, as Aine, based in London said:

I think it's just a broader experience of everything. I literally just hop on a Eurostar and go to France. Dublin's so microcosmic almost.

We had seen this with our Polish participants in the early interviews. They embraced the social aspects of Dublin, though these became less important with time as Marek, now back in Poland said:

I think it relates to the place but also to the lifestyle that I led there. Now I am domesticated.

For some, the distance with Australia was a reality to become reconciled to, an attempt to 'make the most of it’. The same was true for most of those people that had returned to Poland. It was largely to do with family attachment, although the distance with the initial move had been mitigated by affordable air travel.

In terms of the notion of ‘settling down’ which is associated with the emergence of children, we observed that even with children, this was not always a decisive factor that inhibited on-going mobility, as Pavel indicated. In that regard, amongst nine parents across the two samples, three of these had further mobility plans or intentions. Participants were influenced by economic circumstances and opportunities, though moving closer to family was a driver for some.

The Polish and Irish groups interviewed here are a new generation of mobile Europeans who exhibit a capacity to be mobile across national borders and across transnational labour markets. Whatever paths our Polish and Irish participants may pursue, we anticipate that these new mobility trends will continue to develop.

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