

Leave to Enter

Visas and Academic Mobility from the Global South

Saba Sharma

As the day for her departure to Oxford drew nearer, it became clear the UK visa would not be processed, leaving her to hurriedly reroute her journey from the UK to Poland, an expensive and stressful endeavour. A last-minute cancellation of her flight to Poland days before her trip left her scrambling to change plans yet again. She would present at the Oxford conference virtually from a stopover in Dubai (where her Indian passport allows her visa on arrival), before going onwards to Poland, where she was scheduled to present on the first day of the conference. Between visa application fees, multiple flight changes, and unexpected accommodation costs, Arundhati spent thousands of euros on attending three international conferences, only two of them in person. While some costs were reimbursed by conference organisers (one of whom has yet to pay her back) and her public university in India, she shouldered most of the expenses herself. In addition, she estimated that the time and effort spent on various visa and flight-related changes cost her between 30 to 40 working days. In the midst of trying to travel to Europe, she was also attempting to prepare for three presentations, in anticipation of feedback on her research which was critical to write her PhD draft. To add insult to injury, the UK embassy ended up processing her visa four days after her presentation at Oxford. It was dated to start a week earlier.

For many academics with passports from the Global South, such experiences with visa bureaucracies are standard. Visa-related barriers to academic mobility are common, particularly when the mobility is towards the Global North.² Concurrently, international academic mobility in the form of conference attendance, research stays, and experience working in multiple university systems has become the norm for the advancement of academic careers, particularly among early career academics.³ This article examines

In July 2022, Arundhati,¹ a PhD student based in India, was attending a conference at the University of Oxford from a hotel room in Dubai. Although she meant to attend in person, and applied 11 weeks in advance for a visa to the United Kingdom, it did not arrive in time for her flight. In an effort to make the most of an expensive trip to Europe, she had decided to attend three back-to-back conferences: in the UK, Poland, and Portugal. Despite multiple emails and phone calls to the visa application centre, the British High Commission, and government officials in India, there was no news on her visa. The only way to check its status was through a paid service, which gave no information about the stage of the application or how much longer it could take. As she waited, the separate Schengen visa she needed for conferences in Poland and Portugal did come through, though not before some back and forth to determine which of the two countries' visa authorities she needed to approach: the first port of entry, or the one where she would spend the most number of days.

the experiences of four academics from the Global South as they navigate the increasing expectations of internationalisation and mobility, using visa applications as a lens. While internationalisation is beneficial to universities and career academics alike, the logistical and emotional burden of maintaining this mobility is often placed on academics who cannot move as freely through the various inter-connected academic networks of the Global North. Moreover, these experiences reveal themselves to be but one layer of an increasingly unequal system of access to international academic institutions, raising the question of whether mobility enhances or inhibits academic freedom.

Visas as a necessary burden

As a conference organiser based at a university in Western Europe, Shubham encountered visa bureaucracy from the other end of the spectrum. In attempting

to invite colleagues from East Africa to join a week-long research seminar, she and her team struggled to help get their visas in time, despite their applying weeks in advance, with one participant only picking up her passport from the embassy on the way to the airport. While part of the delay was caused by a misunderstanding around what documents were required for the application, she found that there was an expectation on the part of her European team that the East African colleagues should have just "known" which documents to provide for their visas. Concurrently, there was an assumption that visas were a transparent and fair system if the rules were followed and the right documents were presented, often based on the generally fewer requirements when traveling from the Global North to the Global South. As someone who held a South Asian passport herself until recently, Shubham recognised that an understanding of visa "savvy" was a skill developed over time and through multiple applications, rather than



Fig. 2: "Your documentation is incomplete ... I don't see your grandfather's birth certificate." Illustration by Xiaolan Lin (@xiaolanlan65).

an inherent ability. This is an aspect that remains invisible to those with European passports. In addition, it was finally only after direct intervention from the European colleagues in the embassy that the visas were eventually processed.

Institutions possess far more power to influence and support visa application systems than individuals. When they do step in to facilitate Global South academic mobilities, the experiences can become easier. During his doctoral studies in Switzerland, Biren, an early career South Asian academic, was able to get a two-year visa to conduct archival research in the UK only with the support of his faculty. They helped sponsor this expensive application, which costs a minimum of 500 GBP as of 2022 (including service and processing fees). Unlike his other colleagues at the department, who had European or North American passports and could easily choose to travel for work in the UK archives at short notice during teaching breaks, his travels required a great deal of advance planning and money. Receiving support from his department was also not straightforward – as a rule they did not sponsor visa applications, and only the intervention of senior faculty allowed for an exception to be made, on the grounds that Biren's passport put him at a professional disadvantage compared to his colleagues. After applying again for a UK visa for a research stay in 2022 from another European country, Biren's visa was delayed, pushing back his trip and causing him to incur costs associated with changes in travel plans. Moreover, because of his one-year UK research stay, he became ineligible to apply for a South Korean visa to attend a conference, as visa rules there required him to apply from an OECD country where he had been resident for at least two years, a criteria he now met in neither place. Alternatively, he was given the option of applying from his home country, which would mean another expensive flight, and additional waiting time. Like Arundhati, he found himself attending an important conference virtually, presenting from home at 3:00 in the morning.

While many of the details in these stories seem specific to individual cases and are hard to generalise, they reveal a complex web of visa bureaucracy that appears to hinder rather than facilitate academic mobility, and that places the burden of navigating this system entirely on the individuals. As Biren testified, having been left stranded by delayed visas over the years has enabled him to learn a few tricks of the system. These included how far in advance one must apply, how to keep track of new visa categories, and how to refrain from booking tickets until the documents are secured. Such strategies to make visa applications smoother and more predictable effectively become an extra set of skills required for scholars from the Global South and also impose an emotional toll. While the stories often appear as funny anecdotes in conversations, their treatment as inherently suspicious can be humiliating, and conversely, getting a visa can feel like an achievement, rather than a mere necessity. For Arundhati, the experience



Fig. 1: "All passports, please keep passport ready." Illustration by Xiaolan Lin (@xiaolanlan65).

with academic travel led her to reconsider a conference in South Africa entirely. Given the financial and mental stress it triggered, she decided to restrict her academic mobility only to specific kinds of conferences or workshops that felt indispensable, and avoid any others, despite the impact on her international exposure.

Mobility and career-building

Visa hurdles are not confined to early career academics and affect those in senior positions as well. Even for tenured academics who are able to turn down travel opportunities more often, it eventually becomes an imperative to reconnect with international networks, to show up and be counted.⁴ For Kamal, a South Asian academic currently based in the United States, an academic collaboration with a prestigious British research institute was delayed as his visa to attend the initial meeting never arrived. With the support of the research institution, he applied for a priority visa – more expensive, but with the (ultimately unrealised) guarantee of receiving the document within a specified time frame. Not only was he unable to travel, but his emails to withdraw his passport and application were answered in what he termed “standard bureaucratise,” insisting that his “case was being reviewed.” It was only after friends and family connected to the diplomatic services intervened on his behalf that he was able to collect his passport. While he waited at the visa centre to finally retrieve his documents, he encountered an elderly Indian woman in tears, unable to locate her passport, which had been mailed to an unknown address and could not be traced. As he left the centre, he discovered that he had finally been given a visa, but in haste, the visa authorities had given him one in the wrong category: as an accompanied minor.

Earlier in 2022, Kamal nearly missed two back-to-back conferences organised by a Swiss institution, as he struggled to convey to visa authorities why he was applying for a Swiss visa when the first conference was in Germany (both conferences were organised by the same Swiss institute, and were part of a series). As it happened, one of the conference venues was just on the other side of the Swiss border in Germany, a trip convenient to make if one was already located in Switzerland, but one that proved challenging to explain to a suspicious visa officer. These experiences highlight the importance of growing calls from within the academy to organise conferences and other networking events in places with more accommodating visa regimes, ones that do not place undue logistical burdens on academics from the Global South.⁵

For Kamal, missing the event in the UK was not a major setback. As he put it, it was primarily the research institution that was benefitting from his expertise. Due to the many international opportunities for collaboration he received throughout his career, he could now afford to travel when and where he was interested, rather than depend on them to build his career. In contrast, Arundhati and Biren saw international academic experience as pivotal to career advancement and testing their ideas in an international context. An “internationality imperative” has become the norm among scholars, increasingly constructed as an academic virtue, with greater international exposure synonymous with prestigious positions and distinguished careers.⁶ As scholars have noted, international mobility is now essential not simply to facilitate upward mobility among early career academics, but rather stave off the downward mobility associated with not participating in such networks.⁷



Fig. 3: “We welcome our international participants, who have traveled so far to be here.” Illustration by Xiaolan Lin (@xiaolanlan65).

Systemic issues in academic mobility

Internationalisation is also an outcome of the increasingly market-like behaviours of universities, for whom it is a way to remain competitive in a globalised, increasingly privatised system of education, by attracting both international faculty as well as fee-paying students.⁸ In this system, universities stand to benefit as much as – if not more than – academics from increasing internationalisation. Yet, as the experiences of the academics interviewed for this piece show, the onus of facilitating this mobility is on individual academics. For those from the Global South, this implies dealing with hostile visa bureaucracies, largely out of sight of both academic departments and their colleagues, and with only sporadic institutional support.

Moreover, the experiences of hindered academic mobility depicted here reflect only one layer of the interconnected inequalities associated with mobility. They do not fully capture, for instance, the socioeconomic positions of mobile academics.⁹ Arundhati was aware that despite the stressful experience she had, she was one of the few scholars in her PhD cohort even able to consider international conference

attendance, largely due to being from a more well-to-do and already internationally connected background than the others, many of whom were either unable to access or unaware of such opportunities. Her public university in India could not have borne the full costs of sending her or any of her colleagues to an international conference. This form of “mobility capital” tends to accrue to those who already possess it, and reproduces and amplifies existing inequalities within national and international contexts.¹⁰ Those who gain international exposure are more likely to be internationally mobile in the future, including through becoming adept at navigating visas.

Relatedly, Shubham and her colleague’s experience of visa bureaucracy also made her consider the underlying economic and political mechanisms of the partnership that enabled the workshop in the first place. As is the case with many funding bodies, the grant funding that their project received in Europe required partnership with Global South colleagues and universities, a condition levied by many such funding bodies. Thus, while there was an underlying narrative that her colleague’s visa entanglements were reflective of Global South academics needing too much support and failing to show gratitude for the help they received, from another perspective

it was the European university that benefitted from funding received due at least in part to their Global South partners.

I conclude this reflection on academic mobility and passports with an anecdote from Amartya Sen, which I was reminded of by Kamal.¹¹ When the Nobel-prize winning economist Sen, then Master of Trinity College at Cambridge University, arrived at Heathrow airport, he was questioned (as all without UK/EU passports are) at the immigration desk. “Where will you be staying?” asked the immigration officer. “At the Master’s Lodge in Trinity College,” replied Sen. “I see,” said the officer, “And is the Master a close friend of yours?”

Saba Sharma is a postdoctoral research fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies, working on citizenship and local politics in Bodoland, Assam.

Notes

- All respondent names have been anonymised.
- Priya Dixit, ‘Encounters with Borders: A Migrant Academic’s Experiences of the Visa Regime in the Global North’, *Learning and Teaching*, 14.2 (2021), 55–75 <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2021.14.0204>; The Lancet Global Health, ‘Passports and Privilege: Access Denied’, *The Lancet Global Health*, 7.9 (2019), e1147 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(19\)30337-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(19)30337-7).
- Martine Schaer, Cédric Jacot, and Janine Dahinden, ‘Transnational Mobility Networks and Academic Social Capital among Early-career Academics: Beyond Common-sense Assumptions’, *Global Networks*, 21.3 (2021), 585–607 <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12304>.
- Tom Storme and others, ‘How to Cope with Mobility Expectations in Academia: Individual Travel Strategies of Tenured Academics at Ghent University, Flanders’, *Research in Transportation Business & Management*, 9 (2013), 12–20 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rtbm.2013.05.004>.
- Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir, ‘The Hidden Costs of Being a Scholar from the Global South’, *LSE Higher Education Blog*, 2020 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/highereducation/2020/02/20/the-hidden-costs-of-being-a-scholar-from-the-global-south/>; Omid V. Ebrahimi, ‘Why Scientific Conferences Must Mitigate Structural Barriers’, *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6.8 (2022), 1032–33 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01417-4>.
- Julian Hamann and Lena M. Zimmer, ‘The Internationality Imperative in Academia. The Ascent of Internationality as an Academic Virtue’, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36.7 (2017), 1418–32 <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1325849>.
- Marianne Larsen, ‘Transnational Academic Mobility: A Case Study of Fifteen Academics’, *Comparative and International Education*, 49.1 (2020), 1–13 <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v49i1.13433>.
- Susan Appe, ‘Internationalization in the Context of Academic Capitalism’, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15.1 (2020), 62–68 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920901949>.
- Başak Bilecen and Christof Van Mol, ‘Introduction: International Academic Mobility and Inequalities’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43.8 (2017), 1241–55 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1300225>.
- Gregor Schäfer, ‘Spatial Mobility and the Perception of Career Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Doctoral Candidates’, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 44.1 (2022), 119–34 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2020.1826919>.
- Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).



Fig. 4: “You got it!” Illustration by Xiaolan Lin (@xiaolanlan65).