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**INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE CLASS MIGRATION AND MOBILITY:  
FRENCH NATIONALS WORKING IN THE UK**

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**The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not represent the collective view of ISET.**

## **ABSTRACT**

Studies on international migration have generally focused on either high-level managers and specialists transferred by multinational corporations, or laborers/blue collar workers who move from developing to developed countries. However, international migration patterns are clearly more diverse in composition and structure. One under-researched group consists of middle class job seekers. This paper looks at the estimated 500,000 French men and women, mostly under the age of 35, who are currently living and working in the United Kingdom. London alone is now home to an estimated 250,000-300,000 French citizens, making it the world's fourth largest French city after Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles. I will examine the mechanisms that are facilitating the significant migration of French middle class workers to the UK (especially to the world city of London), what kinds of jobs they perform, and how their migration fits in with their long-term employment plans. Both macro (national and international political, economic, and social structures) and micro (individual) approaches are appropriated in this research. My motivations are to add to the literature on middling transnationalism, and to explore why EU migration from non-EU countries still exceeds intra-EU migration.

## **KEY WORDS**

Self-initiated expatriates, Highly skilled migrants, Middle class migration, UK, French, London

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## INTRODUCTION

International migration research has generally focused on either high-level managers and specialists transferred by multinational corporations, or laborers/blue collar workers who move from developing to developed countries. Similarly, urban study researchers have noted that global cities are focal points of polarized international migration (Sassen 1991). However, as Conradson and Latham (2005) observe, international migration patterns are clearly more diverse in composition and structure. One under-researched group consists of well-educated middle class job seekers. Many national economies, especially those in more developed countries, offer more broadly distributed opportunities for middle class individuals to migrate across international borders (Favell et al. 2006).

Moreover, even though many organizations place a premium on international competencies in their staffing decisions, they generally do a poor job of helping their employees develop such skills. For this reason, a growing number of individuals are accepting personal responsibility to build international experience in order to maintain boundary-less rather than corporate careers (Carr et al. 2005; Inkson 2006; Inkson et al. 1997; Suutari and Brewster 2000). These workers are referred to in the literature as *self-initiated expatriates*, as opposed to *company assigned expatriates* (Banai and Harry 2004; Howe-Walsh and Schyns 2010; Jokinen et al. 2008; Stahl et al. 2002; Vance 2005). Since 1993, the European Union (EU) has given its citizens the freedom to migrate across the borders of its member states to compete for jobs on equal terms with native residents, thus making international mobility outside of transnational corporations much more accessible for the middle class. Many researchers have reported that well educated and single young Europeans, especially students, are the most mobile among all EU citizens (Favell 2008; Fouarge and Ester 2009; Zimmermann 2009).

London, a global city and financial center, is often described as a prime example of a polarized city characterized by predominantly service-based industries at both the top and bottom of its economy (Sassen 1991). It still continues to attract large numbers of young, educated middle class migrants from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and more developed EU states (Conradson and Latham 2005; Favell 2008). Here I will argue that researchers have generally neglected the impacts of different national institutions such as economic systems and cultural norms on their middle class citizens' international experience intentions. In this paper I will examine the mechanisms that facilitate the specific migration of middle class French citizens to the UK (especially London), and review past studies in an effort to explain how different national institutions encourage different types of international migration. I will also discuss why EU migration from outside the union exceeds intra-EU migration. I will use data gathered from in-depth interviews with French nationals and the heads of French social organizations in London in 2009, plus secondary data.

## **LONDON CALLING**

According to Herm (2008), the number of EU citizens migrating to other member states increased an average of 10% per year between 2002 and 2006. However, if counting all immigrants inside the EU, the number of non-EU citizens immigrating to EU countries exceeded the number of EU citizens migrating across EU borders. Geographic and cultural proximity and shared language are important factors in international migration. This explains the considerable movement of citizens between Ireland and Britain, Finland and Sweden, and Germany and Austria (ibid.). The present study is unique in that it addresses the movement of citizens between two EU countries that, despite their geographic proximity, are distinctly different in language and culture, as well as in economic and political institutions.

Known for its history of immigration and asylum, London has long been a hub

for the movement of foreign nationals. Early records of French citizens moving to London go back to the 1550s, when French Huguenots escaped from persecution by the Catholic Church. Four centuries later (during the latter half of the 1990s), London's labor market for foreigners expanded dramatically in comparison to stagnant economies in other countries. Considered Europe's most international city, London is also viewed as Europe's capital in terms of finance, information technology, and media (Favell 2008). With a strong economy, a long list of cultural attractions, and an open social environment, London continues to attract immigrants from all over the world, and its economic success is increasingly dependent on foreign-born labor (Wills et al. 2009). Whereas the proportion of foreign-born workers throughout the UK increased from 7% to 13% between 1993 and 2008, the increase in London during the same period was 25% to 38%.

London also continues to attract young Europeans interested in learning or polishing their skills in English (Favell 2006), thereby enhancing their long-term career prospects (Kennedy 2010). Many Europeans with university educations are willing to take low-level service sector jobs, especially in the hospitality industry, just to be able to live in London (Bellion 2005; Favell 2008). Note the following text from the website of Pret, a fast food chain in the UK: "We employ many different nationalities, and value the cosmopolitan feel this gives the company." Model's (2002) assertion that employers in global cities prefer hiring foreign-born Caucasians among all immigrants is supported by London employers' preferences for Western Europeans. By working in the food service sector, young Europeans receive modest wages in return for London residency and its associated social benefits. In return, employers benefit from a workforce with significant human, social, and economic capital (Favell 2008).

After Ireland, France is the source of the largest number of west European foreigners living in the UK and London (Table 1). The number of Polish nationals living in the UK significantly exceeds the number of French nationals, echoing Braun and Recchi's (2009) argument that the addition of eastern

European countries to the EU since 2004 triggered a revival of traditional blue collar migration due to extreme wage differences between Eastern and Western Europe. This can also be viewed as further evidence that the UK economy is by far the most dynamic in Europe. The official unemployment rate hovered around 5% throughout the 2000s, down from approximately 10% in the early 1990s (Table 2). In contrast, France is known for having one of the highest unemployment rates among more developed EU countries; in the 1990s it reached 12% (Table 2). In spite of the higher (and increasing) cost of living in the UK, many French citizens are attracted by its dynamic economy and labor market flexibility, which supports worker-initiated changes in careers and individual jobs (Bellion 2005; Fevell 2008; Hall and Soskice 2001). In comparison, France's management selection system and bureaucratic workplace organization reduces opportunities for job movement (Hancké 2006). Moreover, the UK's relatively low start-up costs and more open regulatory environment have encouraged French companies or individuals to set up subsidiaries or independent companies (Pissarides 2006), thus creating jobs for French citizens living in the UK.

## **FRENCH CITIZENS IN LONDON**

According to the UK Office for National Statistics, the number of French nationals living in London in 2009 was approximately 72,000 and in the UK approximately 125,000; neither figure includes almost 13,000 university students. However, several of my informants suggested that the actual numbers are about 500,000 in the UK and 250,000-300,000 in London—with most French residents under the age of 35. Thus, the *London Macadam* media company describes itself as “targeting 300,000 French people in London.” This explains Favell's (2008) assertion that London may be the world's fourth largest French city after Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles.

Challenges to accurately measure French populations in London and the UK are similar to those for recording all intra-EU mobility (Braun and Recchi 2009;

Favell and Recchi 2009; Zimmermann 2009). One is a shortage of transnational surveys. Accordingly, macro-data on EU migration are incomplete and contradictory due to inconsistencies across statistics-gathering procedures, differences in national residence registration systems, and reluctance to report migration figures to other EU member states. Zimmermann (2009) therefore claims that EU migration can only be observed in micro-level segments. Favell (2008) further points out that many French migrants only stay in London temporarily. According to Bellion (2005), two-thirds of French expatriates in the UK at any time fail to register with their consulates because they are simply there for short-term international job experience or to learn English.

Most French people in London are well educated and self-initiated expatriates. According to one interviewee, "France and the UK are so close, it's not like going overseas. [London] is just two hours from Paris. Taking a train to another country is like commuting to another city." He offered this explanation for why French citizens enjoy staying in the UK:

It's a country with a long tradition, and you still have room to be different. Being different here is not a handicap. In the UK, especially in London, you've got people of all colors, coming from India, from America, from all over the world. And they're represented everywhere in society, which is less the case in France.

Three French organizations in London contribute to the sustained movement of French people to that city. The first is the French consulate, which used to maintain an Employment Office that was considered especially helpful for French citizens with some work experience and good English skills. That service was stopped in August 2009 because it was considered redundant to local job centers and EURES (European Employment Services), which French citizens have been able to access since 1993. However, two consulate employees left their jobs and immediately set up a recruitment company called French Resources. The company specializes in placing bilingual job seekers who are college graduates with relevant job experience.

The other organizations are the Centre Charles Péguy (CCP) and Centre d'Echanges Internationaux Ltd. (CEI). The CCP is a charity trust subsidized by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supervised by the CEI since 1982. Its stated objective is “to help young French people between 18 and 30 years old to find a place professionally in Great Britain and particularly in London”; it also provides assistance in finding living accommodations. CEI (a private company) performs a similar function, and also helps French students find internships in the UK. Neither organization charges employers, but both charge their clients annual membership fees. CEI provides interview coaching and guarantees its clients at least one job interview (mostly with hotels and restaurants) within two weeks of their arrival. CCP is more limited in terms of what it offers to its clients, but it does provide access to a more diverse range of job openings, including administrative and sales positions. Approximately one-half of its openings are in restaurants or hotels. According to the CCP, of the 10,000 French people who visited its offices in 2009, 1,000 signed up for its employment service. I was told that there are more job openings than qualified applicants, with English fluency an important factor in terms of filling positions.

### **Improving English While Working**

Most French citizens move to London in pursuit of “professional stays”—that is, for work or internships. Learning or improving English is often a primary motivation. French students are thought to have very low English proficiency compared to students in Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. I was told that the reason is the emphasis on traditional academic teaching approaches and cultural values over language skills, despite the fact that English instruction begins in elementary school. This may change, since many jobs in France now require English proficiency; but even for jobs that do not require English, fluency may be considered a good reason to hire or promote one job candidate over another. French companies are also increasingly interested in applicants who have overseas work experience—another motivation to spend some time in London or other parts

of the UK.

A small percentage of French students attend UK universities, which truly enhances their international qualifications. But the majority moves to the UK either during college (between the ages of 18 and 21) or following graduation (between the ages of 22 and 25). A considerable number of French schools and universities have overseas internship requirements, and many French students look for internships in English-speaking countries, with London a favored destination. Other students move to London at the end of the school year, intending to spend the summer working in restaurants, bars, or small shops before returning to university in September. Students who arrive in London in January are generally taking extended leaves from their studies, with plans on returning to school after six months. The French school system is very bureaucratic, and students cannot make any changes in their class schedules once they register, even during the early part of the semester or school year. Instead of taking classes they have little interest in, they may move to London temporarily to gain some work experience and improve their English.

Some young French people who move to the UK in September or October are new graduates interested in spending a “gap year” getting overseas experience before returning to France to continue with advanced studies or finding permanent employment. Others in this group move to the UK either because they cannot find jobs in France, or because they want to start their careers with international experience to help them find better positions in France. With the exception of bank employees, few if any French people in this group spend time in the UK with expectations of earning large amounts of money.

### **Fast career tracks**

Many French people perceive the UK as more market- and sales-oriented than their home country, and as a place that encourages entrepreneurs. Some call the country across the English Channel “U.K. PLC [Private Limited Company],”

implying that the UK resembles a large entrepreneurial enterprise, one with a labor market that emphasizes dynamism rather than stability. I was told that the character of the UK labor market is due to greater competition plus flexibility in employment contracts. One interviewee stated that French employers are much more concerned about the specifics of educational backgrounds, and that promotions are much harder to earn in France. First-time French employees must complete internships for one year, followed by a series of short contracts. In contrast, UK employers are more likely to offer permanent positions based on perceived skills and motivation, and to give young employees responsibility as a test of their abilities. I heard the opinion that in the UK, an individual without a college degree can still achieve high levels of responsibility and pay, based on a willingness to work hard. In the words of one interviewee, "Here you go to the Gap [a multinational clothing retailer], you start as a sales assistant, you prove yourself, and you can become an assistant manager within six months."

In the UK, private firm employees who do not perform well are likely to be fired. I was told that employers in France are very careful about employee selection because labor laws make it very hard to fire workers once they are hired, even if their job performance is poor. According to one interviewee, French citizens who are more concerned about job security than anything else do whatever they can to get jobs in government:

A few years ago there was a survey of young French people about what kinds of careers they wanted. The results were terrifying: 70 percent said they wanted to become civil servants because they wanted secure jobs. You don't need a business degree to be a civil servant.

Some interviewees told me that, even in a recession, the UK economy is still more dynamic than France's. I heard the opinion that during the last financial crisis, French citizens in the UK were more likely than their counterparts in France to find employment quickly if they were laid off from their current jobs.

## Language skills and jobs

The jobs performed by young French people in the UK vary according to planned length of stay and English proficiency. Those with the most basic English skills often work in behind-the-scenes food service jobs until their English is sufficient for working with the public. Other jobs that do not require strong English skills include teaching/tutoring French, serving as nannies or au pairs, and childcare services. There are many examples of young French migrants with degrees in marketable majors such as engineering who work in kitchens and spend much of their free time working on their language skills. This can cause frustration in an ambitious young person, but as a recruiting agent pointed out:

Would you prefer working as a kitchen worker in an English environment, or as a sales assistant in a French shop? Working as a *commis* waiter with French colleagues but without any contact with customers in a French restaurant is not really an efficient way to improve your languages skills. What's the best—having experience in your field but within a French environment, or finding a job not related to your studies but that allows you to improve your English?

I was told that even in large French firms operating in the UK, French language skills are downplayed. Many of these firms are hiring more British employees, especially in the banking and finance sectors. Within the past decade, a growing number of French companies with subsidiaries or branch offices in the UK have stopped paying expatriate bonuses for employees sent from France in favor of recruiting French nationals who already live there, especially those with strong English skills.

Depending on their other qualifications and credentials, French people with good English and presentation skills are eligible for jobs in British companies ranging from receptionists to administration, to sales and business

development. A prized position among bilingual French workers involves international trade—for example, import/export firms involving the UK and France, or any other countries whose first or second languages are English or French (e.g., the US and countries in West Africa). I was told that trade companies in the UK find it easier to locate native French speakers with strong business English skills than British employees with excellent French language skills.

### **Stay or Return?**

For most French migrants, the average stay in the UK is 1-5 years. A small percentage makes the UK their permanent home especially because they marry British or other nationals. Upon their first arrival in London, most French people look for jobs that will help them work on their English. After one year, they look for better jobs that help them gain experience that will impress future employers. Since most French people move to London as single individuals in their 20s and 30s, those who do marry generally face the important 'leave-or-stay' decision after 8-12 years of residency. If the spouse is a British citizen or a non-French foreigner, the couple is more likely to stay in the UK if the non-French spouse cannot speak sufficient French for employment purposes. If the spouse is French, there is a much higher probability of returning to France.

There are considerable benefits for those who do return, especially in terms of cost-of-living; the UK is far more expensive than France. The UK health care program has a notorious reputation for long waits and questionable care, which is not the case in France. Retired French workers have much better pensions than their UK counterparts. In terms of children's education, many French people believe that UK state schools are not nearly as good as those in France; I was told that many junior high school students in the UK have poor reading and maths skills. Education in France is much cheaper compared to the UK, and nursery schools in the UK are not subsidized in the same way as in France, adding a considerable expense to child raising.

Move-or-stay decisions are greatly dependent on the life stage of the decision-maker. As one interviewee told me:

When we come here we are young, twenty-something or in our early 30s, and more career-oriented. What we want is to work, earn money, enjoy ourselves—you know, 'I'm in London, it's fun!' We don't think about security until we get to 35, 40. And then we go back to France for the security when we have a family.

Another added, "It may be more secure in France in terms of job regulation, but it's harder to get a job ... I won't stay here forever, but I think it's easier to start a career here."

## **CONCLUSION**

French citizens represent the second largest group of foreigners from western European EU countries (as opposed to former eastern bloc EU nations) residing in the UK and London, after migrants from Ireland. The majority are young, college-educated members of the middle class who move to London on their own initiative. Motivations include widespread unemployment and a rigid labor market in France. In comparison, the UK labor market is viewed as dynamic and as rewarding individual merit, effort, and competitive success.

Most French migrants live in the UK for 1-5 years before returning to France in search of long-term security. Returning to work in France has multiple benefits, including a lower cost of living, greater job security, and better pensions. For young families there are the added benefits of subsidized nursery care and less expensive state education. Those French migrants who decide to stay in the UK permanently do so primarily because they are married to foreign spouses who cannot find suitable employment in France, mostly due to insufficient French language skills. Although the unemployment rate in France

decreased from 12.2% in 1996 to 7.4% in 2008, the rigid labor market and strict regulatory market still encourages many young French people to move to the UK to improve their English and gain overseas work experience. Also, it is generally accepted that strong English language skills and overseas experience are valued by French companies. Since most French people who migrate to the UK eventually return to France, there is little potential of “brain drain,” therefore both countries may be viewed as benefiting from this phenomenon.

Since most French people have poor command of English upon their arrival in the UK, many have to work in low-level hospitality sector jobs, even though they may have degrees in professional disciplines. In other words, they experience initial downward mobility, unlike their counterparts from English-speaking countries such as New Zealand, whose citizens can find relatively well-paid professional work after moving to London (Conradson and Latham 2005). However, as stated by other researchers of self-initiated expatriates (e.g., Thorn 2009; Tzeng 2010), in many cases young migrants are not motivated by monetary rewards. For New Zealanders, primary motivations often consist of opportunities for travel, experiencing different cultures, and enjoying a unique lifestyle before settling down into a career. Conradson and Latham (2005) describe these motivations as self-realization involving self-exploration and self-development, with career advancement a distant secondary concern. In contrast, French people are more likely to move to the UK for long-term career development purposes (e.g., language learning and overseas work experience for their resumes), with lifestyle viewed as an extra bonus. Differences in motivations generally reflect different economic structures and cultural norms. Young New Zealanders are nurtured by a low national unemployment rate, a flexible labor market, and a culture that encourages them to gain overseas work and life experience. In contrast, French citizens are more strongly motivated to find better economic opportunities, but in the form of long-term career advancement rather than immediate monetary rewards.

EU countries now allow their citizens to freely move across the borders of

member states in pursuit of economic opportunities, yet EU migration from non-EU countries still exceeds intra-EU migration. Among middle class workers, moving to another country in the interest of adventure, lifestyle change, or social distinction is still limited to a small number of EU citizens—for instance, British citizens who move to Paris (Scott 2006). In the absence of a strong mobility culture, intra-EU mobility is likely to remain low and be dominated by traditional blue collar migration, mostly as a result of high wage differences.

**Table 1. Estimated population resident in the United Kingdom by foreign nationality**

Most common nationalities

*thousands*

Country	United Kingdom											
	July 2008 - June 2009		Oct. 2007 - Sept. 2008		July 2006 - June 2007		2006		2005			
	Rank	Estimate	Rank	Estimate	Rank	Estimate	Rank	Estimate	Rank	Estimate		
Poland	1	503	1	469	2	336	3	246	3	136		
Ireland	2	344	2	354	1	341	1	354	1	359		
India	3	310	3	286	3	273	2	263	2	222		
Pakistan	4	183	4	178	6	127	6	110	7	101		
USA	5	136	5	126	5	127	5	119	4	118		
France	6	125	6	119	4	129	4	122	5	103		
					London							
Poland	1	116	2	102	3	82	3	73	3	56		
Ireland	2	110	1	105	1	102	1	108	1	115		
India	3	93	3	94	2	101	2	86	2	74		
France	4	72	4	66	4	72	4	62	4	50		

Source: UK Office for National Statistics (2010)

**Table 2. Unemployment rates among more developed countries (% of total labor force)**

Country \ Year	%															
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
United Kingdom	10.3	9.6	8.6	8.1	7.0	6.1	5.9	5.5	4.7	5.1	4.8	4.6	4.6	5.3	5.2	5.3
France	11.1	12.3	11.6	12.0	12.2	11.8	11.7	10.0	8.8	8.9	8.5	8.8	8.8	8.8	8.0	7.4
Germany	7.9	8.4	8.1	8.9	9.8	9.2	8.4	7.7	7.8	8.6	9.3	10.3	11.1	10.3	8.6	7.5
Belgium	8.1	9.6	9.3	9.5	9.0	9.3	8.6	6.6	6.2	6.9	7.7	7.4	8.1	8.3	7.6	6.3
Netherlands	6.1	6.8	7.0	6.4	5.4	4.3	3.5	3.0	2.7	3.1	4.3	5.1	5.2	4.3	3.6	3.0
Luxembourg	2.3	3.5	2.9	3.3	2.5	2.8	2.4	2.3	1.8	2.6	3.7	5.1	4.5	4.7	3.9	5.0
Denmark	10.7	8.0	7.0	6.8	5.4	5.0	5.1	4.5	4.2	4.3	5.4	5.2	4.8	3.9	3.6	3.1
Ireland	15.8	14.8	12.2	12.0	10.3	7.8	5.7	4.3	3.7	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.6	5.2
Austria	4.2	3.5	3.6	4.1	4.2	4.2	3.7	3.5	3.6	4.0	4.3	4.9	5.2	4.7	4.4	3.8
Sweden	9.3	9.6	9.0	9.9	10.0	8.3	7.1	5.8	5.0	5.2	5.8	6.5	7.7	7.0	6.1	6.1
Finland	16.2	16.4	15.3	14.4	12.6	11.4	10.1	9.7	9.1	9.0	9.0	8.8	8.4	7.6	6.8	6.3
Australia	10.9	9.7	8.5	8.5	8.4	7.7	6.9	6.3	6.8	6.4	6.0	5.5	5.1	4.8	4.4	4.2
Canada	11.4	10.4	9.5	9.6	9.1	8.3	7.6	6.8	7.2	7.6	7.6	7.2	6.8	6.3	6.0	6.1
New Zealand	9.5	8.1	6.2	6.1	6.6	7.4	6.8	5.9	5.3	5.2	4.6	3.9	3.7	3.8	3.6	4.1
United States	6.9	6.1	5.6	5.4	4.9	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.7	5.8	6.0	5.5	5.1	4.6	4.6	5.8

Source: Data of 1993-2007 were from The World Bank (2010); Data of 2008 were from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010)

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