

## ***Interactive comment on “Mobile talent or privileged sites? Making sense of biotech knowledge worker mobility and performance in Sweden” by H. Mattsson***

### **Anonymous Referee #2**

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#### General comments:

As has been pointed out also in the first referee’s report, the paper has its merits by drawing on an excellent and comprehensive database (the availability of information on personal incomes in connection with private and professional localization and other personal features is truly amazing when considering the strict protection of personal data in many European countries!). This base allows for addressing several interesting research issues relating to social geography, notably the geography of qualification, mobility and career trajectories. In the present case it reveals, for instance, remarkable correlations between mobility and income increases, and hints at peculiar ‘career

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jump' qualities of certain localities (which deserves further exploration). The chosen conceptual approach of discussing an (alleged) 'mobile talent versus privileged sites' dichotomy, however, is neither convincingly connected with the type of data used and its interpretation, nor is it sufficiently grounded in scientific literature. I fully agree with the first referee: the contrast between both positions is far overstated and should rather be understood in terms of a 'both' and 'or' relationship instead of an 'either' or 'or' one. There is too little reference provided for several conceptual statements. Although the combination of considerations on regional innovativeness - a topic originating in economic geography - with attributes of social life addresses an important field of discussion, the paper does not successfully meet the challenge or produce viable conclusions. Although it claims to do so, it does not contribute to the question how regional innovativeness and cluster advantages may best be achieved, and how talented people can be stimulated to support that. Nevertheless the paper offers some potential for being further developed into an inspiring contribution to scientific debates. In order to sufficiently improve the paper, the author should take the insights which he derived from the database as a point of departure. Yet, the statistical findings should be reflected against previous research and conceptual frameworks relating to the mobility of qualified labour, sector specific aspects of career paths and implications of relevant processes for people and places. The following specific comments mainly focus on aspects which have not yet been elaborated by referee #1 (basically, I very much agree with her/his remarks).

#### Specific comments:

1. Reasons why the author should abandon the 'talent against sites' debate when interpreting his data have already persuasively been outlined by the first referee. Adding to that I would like to note that, anyway, the author's explanation of notions and assumptions relating to that debate has been too superficial in order to be convincing, and insufficient reference has been provided in order to support the reasoning. The author ignores, for instance, significant amalgamations of both views in relevant litera-

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ture, such as explicit connotations of the 'milieu' term with social embeddedness and informal interaction of talented people and key agents. The idea of 'privileged sites' and their characteristics remains vague.

2. Due to the logical gap between conceptual orientation and data interpretation, the author has also had his problems to convincingly operationalize data analysis relating to the stated theoretical background. The paper hardly formulates a structured analytical concept which would directly link general assumptions to ways of data interpretation. When reconsidering and reformulating the conceptual base, this link should explicitly be established, also better clarifying causal relationships between observable processes. In line with referee #1, I recommend not to confuse wage increases with knowledge productivity or innovativeness. Sometimes the relationship may just be the opposite: Someone gets promoted to a better paid management position, but then has to devote more time to administrative and coordinative tasks, which restricts actual knowledge productivity. Similarly, co-location should not automatically be associated with collaboration and knowledge spillovers. Communities of practice, where people work together and learn from each other, mainly depend on organizational or cultural proximity often not going in line with spatial proximity.

3. As biotech regions and respective dynamics are at the heart of the analysis, it is strongly recommended that the author engages in better exploring the body of literature on regional developments in this field. Just a small selection of existing seminal works (for instance by Cooke) are cited, and contents have obviously not been fully perceived by the author. Accordingly, the paper does not draw on available insights into locational prerequisites (like specific infrastructure or regulative frameworks), patterns of local interaction, and corporate or work project structures that specify this sector.

4. In line with that, it is recommended that the author includes more information on the labour market situation, corporate structures and working routines that signify the Swedish biotech business. Talented people move between places because employment opportunities allow them to do so (which also restricts mobility, as data shows,

due to a limited availability of new well-paid posts which are offered only to the best people in respective fields), and they move because employers make them do so. People work in companies that follow specific locational strategies, often rendering the mobility of biotech experts a reactive rather than an active endeavour. In some cases, people get delegated to other places by their employers, maybe in the framework of (temporary) collaborative R&D projects or because they are sent to take over management responsibilities at a branch location of the same company. Especially in biotech, collaborative work and the internal labour markets of large firms could play major roles for the mobility of talent (for instance, in the pharmaceutical industry). These dynamics may be very place-specific, which requires to take a closer look at whether a BIO-location is made up of mainly academic activities or those of some large (multinational) companies, whether headquarters are present or corporate branch locations. These structures seem to be highly relevant for interpreting the available data.

5. It seems worthwhile to take a closer look at some biotech locations with outstanding dynamics. The author mentions specific income-increasing qualities of Uppsala. It would substantially enrich the paper if the author tried to unveil some possible reasons for that, maybe referring to corporate backgrounds. Anyway, the provision of basic information about corporate and institutional structures at the BIO6 locations would help readers to get a better picture of the setting (especially those not familiar with the biotech scene and economic regions in Sweden).

6. The indicator of ‘side income’ appears to be a particularly interesting one (and we can definitely be thankful for having this information available). Assuming that the analysed population of biotech scientists hardly earns this extra money by serving bar drinks or taxi driving, but by selling their specific expertise and professional competence, this indicator by itself may in fact serve as a proxy for knowledge production, surely for knowledge exploitation. Hence, it would be worthwhile to invest more time into reasoning about possible interpretations and implications.

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