

Column Wiskundigen in den vreemde: How bureaucracy can destroy a peaceful mathematical journey in the UK

Stijn Cambie*

June 11, 2024

In deze rubriek doen wiskundigen verslag van hun ervaringen als wetenschapper in den vreemde. Nu de Belg Stijn Cambie terug aan de slag is in zijn geboorteland, werd gevraagd om ervaringen te delen na passages in de UK en Zuid-Korea. Terwijl er meer culturele verschillen en leuke weetjes over Zuid-Korea te vertellen zijn, koos hij in deze episode om de ervaringen te delen over de UK.

One can learn, conclude or be warned the most by hearing extreme cases (but it turns out that those special cases are more common than should be), and thus the invitation to write about experiences abroad will be taken to inform young colleagues about all that may come and should be thought about.

Academia has changed over the years. While 60 years ago, people could immediately start as a professor, or choose a postdoctoral position as the intended follower of an academic spot, nowadays young academicians are expected to have worked abroad. A few years ago, I chose to go for an adventure towards the UK, and hereby share part of the story.

Before that, I enjoyed my PhD, balanced with social and sports activities, between 2017 and 2021 in Nijmegen. It was a wonderful and carefree time. When the end of the PhD at the Radboud University was coming nearer, I considered a postdoc in the UK. In June 2021, after sending an application and doing an interview, I got an offer for 9 months at Warwick University with **Start date** 1 – 11 – 21.

I started to arrange the necessities (documents) for the paperwork. On August 25, my dedication to research may have saved my life. While working at the office till 22:30, an unfortunate situation happened at my home. Not going into details, but in that period, the focus was not on the arrangements to go to the UK. It took a while before there was a spot for the official language test (the final piece for the visa procedure) available. A 250-page thesis written in English was no valid proof for the authorities. In September the English proficiency test could finally take place and I passed easily with 49/50 (33/50 is the threshold). When early October housing was arranged for one year in the UK, I got warned that the visa would not be processed by 1 – 11 – 21 and a new starting date for the postdoc was set: **start date** 10 – 01 – 22. So I would be unpaid for a while. Every week, HR has to change the starting date of some international employee. This was far from ideal, but the university did not want to accept better dates. No employer in the UK will let a contract start on a holiday (e.g. a Sunday or New Year), as HR do not expect you to work then. On the other hand they expect us, due to our role (e.g. professors and those wanting to become professor), to work outside office hours¹

While being unemployed, I could start a new collaboration (advice not to have academic gaps) and moved back in at my parents' place in Belgium. The administration for unemployment benefits did not happen within time. Different organisations in Belgium and the Netherlands pinpointed to each other, making it complex; forms had to be filled in and rejections were made afterwards, while none wanted to listen to the situation such that I could know how to handle it correctly.

*Department of Computer Science, KU Leuven Campus Kulak-Kortrijk, 8500 Kortrijk, Belgium. E-mail: stijn.cambie@hotmail.com

¹For example, two years later, a review invitation from a Warwick hosted journal came, which was finished on the first of January

On the day the visa for the UK was obtained :), the professor in Warwick mentioned he would move to South-Korea. This led to an unclear situation for a while. Since the postdoc was financed by a personal grant of the professor and the university does not earn money by employing postdocs, they changed the (end date of the) contract in the UK to the moment the grant funding would terminate; **End date 31 – 03 – 22.**

Early 2022, the covid regulation forced some rules. I took a covid test in Belgium, bought covid tests (multiple times as it depends on the way one gets in the country) and worked a period in quarantine on possible projects. A “Right to Work Check” was executed, but only once I had arrived in the UK. It turned out I was registered as a tourist or visitor when entering the UK. So while the skilled workers visa was processed on 17 – 11 – 21, it would only be valid if I entered the UK after the 10th of January. During a meeting, it was mentioned that I was forced to leave the UK and come back again to be able to be paid for my work. Contact with the Home Office, did not lead to anything: “Thank you for contacting the Home Office. We aim to provide a response within 20 working days.”. Giving me no option, a trip to Dublin was booked, to visit a new city while resolving the visa problem. It turned out that this was not OK. Due to the common travel area (CTA), an agreement related to Ireland and Northern-Ireland, returning to the UK would not change my setting. Something that was not mentioned during the meeting with the administrative staff. All they told me about this communication error was “We did not expect you to go to Ireland.”. As such, after a flight to Madrid and immediately one back to the UK, a stamp was received, once having asked (as it is not necessary according to the border control). During the flight, the final ideas resolving a conjecture by Frankl were found as well. After all these bureaucratic flights (which due to the covid pandemic and the climate change should be avoided by common sense), I was officially employed at Warwick University between the **Start date 20 – 1 – 22 and End date 31 – 3 – 22.**

Social life

Once I would be settled, it was the idea to immediately spend a nice weekend in South-England with a girl visiting me from the Netherlands, together with common friends living in the UK. Due to the virus, these bright plans turned out different. As a result, that time was not pleasant for either of us, and she later concluded that further meetings were not worth it.

By joining Internations and Meetup, I prepared to do activities within the UK with locals. But only mid March it worked out to do a first (and also last) citytrip, with two other expats from the platform. A 360° view from Snowdon’s summit was captured by video. A picture cannot fully show the beauty seen that weekend.



Figure 1: Walk in Snowdonia

The UK has more Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but only a few have been explored (a period of 9 months would have been sufficient to do all of them).

Also a local running club was joined, where I was the new guy up to the moment leaving was unavoidable again.

Working in the UK

Due to the consequences of covid, I was unlucky and have only been able to work 5 days together physically with others in the UK (not even all during the employment period). Some other expats had already been at the university for over a year without collaborating physically together. In that regard, once things were settled out, the way of working did not change much. One can work virtually with people anywhere in the world. It is as such also a pity that the only project which started in the UK was a few days before the end of the contract. The latter being finished in a next period of unpaid unemployment. Other decisions turned out unfortunate and implied that the contract in South Korea could only start mid May. With the moving between the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, there was no hope on any kind of stipend for the intermediate period. The contrast of the outcome of working hard was very clear during a visit to a friend working in IT, who earned 20000 euros a month at that moment.

While the university of Warwick would consider a (partial) refund on relocation costs and costs related to the visarun, they never answered on that.

Related to this, an international begging for money in London mentioned that the employer had taken her documents and did not pay for the work of two months. Without documents, someone has no rights in the UK.

Looking back to the employment at the UK

One can understand the situation the best after all has passed. Someone asked me back then “How would you see yourself happy?”, on which I responded that working on the mathematical problems intriguing me, while being able to travel a bit in a new country, without other concerns, seemed great.

While moving and mathematics was a big part of the journey, it was not the way intended at all.

It is surprising how far in the future an international move can have administrative consequences. Taxes and especially insurance still depend on the status from a few years before. Hereby, it was even not surprising that the transfer of information on taxes from South-Korea happened more fluently than with the UK as ex-EU state.

Two years after the whole situation, finally an answer from UKVI (UK Visa instance) came

“Whilst our team issue usually 2 weeks prior to cos work start dates and 2 weeks after I can see from the visa application form that you put down your travel date as 10/1/2022 (the same date you were due to start work) and so the case worker issued correctly in line with your chosen travel date.

Whilst you have noted that the government at the time imposed a quarantine period due to covid, this is not controlled by UKVI.

We did have a covid hotline in place at the time you came into the UK, and this was set up for refund requests/queries but from what I can see, you did not raise this at the time.”

In a system which has many institutions and instances, there are conflicting governmental decisions, and no one will feel responsible for bad endings or will even apology for real. It seems issues are resolved for them by letting it expire, while we should be aware of everything.

Of course, with the combination of a pandemic, Brexit, a resignation and an unfortunate home situation, this story is extreme. But knowing that already in just one university, every week contract dates of expats change, it is better to be aware of worst-case scenarios. And also under different circumstances, many people who were in academia, can relate to big chunks of the bad experiences, having experienced it themselves.

One can wonder about special arrangements for academics, giving them a special status, as similar rules have been applied before e.g. for sports people.

During times were international collaborations are easily held online as well, one can especially wonder about rules around mobility requirements, as was e.g. the case for <https://web.archive.org/web/20220925232019/https://www.thenetworkcenter.nl/Open-Positions/openpositio>

n/30/8-Postdoctoral-fellows-in-Stochastics-and-Algorithmics-COFUND- and why people knowing how the administration and other practical aspects work in a country, are excluded. Does the government also realise or care about the created difficulties on e.g. social life?

Additional info

The dean of Warwick University was glad to see the consequences of some of these policies described clearly and objectively. He does not expect a sudden or dramatic improvement, but proper documentation of the problems to be the first step on the long road.

Since a lot can be understood from the communication with the administrative people, HR and the Home Office (representing UK Visas and Immigration, UKVI), we also include some passages in communication that has taken years.

admi:If you can confirm the travel costs incurred, I can speak to the Head to see if there is any way we can help you with that too. If you can get me the receipts/proof of the travel and I can speak to the HoD again as he is very keen to help you.

Stijn:*Sends costs incurred, in a mail with 14 attachments*

Stijn:*Sends 7+ reminders asking about the conclusion*

admi:*Answers two years later* With this being over 2 years ago I do not think our Finance Department would permit any adjustments to be made now.

HR: The Home Office require us as your sponsor to do the following:

You must check the worker entered the UK during the validity period of their visa. If they entered before the 'valid from' date on their visa, they will not have permission to work for you. If this happens, you should advise the worker to leave the Common Travel Area.

Stijn:The intended date of arrival has to be mentioned way in advance. Covid rules change the plans, then there should be flexibility. This information about the check took place only once arrived in the UK. Also I just used the (cos) date mentioned everywhere in communication.

HR: Many internationals have issues with this. Every week, we have to change the starting date of an international employee. It is always very likely that the starting date will be changed. We already mentioned that the question is not clear, but get the reply it is clear according to the instances issuing visas, despite many interpreting it wrong.

By now, we advice expats more explicitly on this and include a different date on the form.

Stijn:No one gave advice about enjoying the trip and not caring about anything, as the whole procedure was in my disadvantage anyway. Also leaving the CTA was not mentioned, only leaving the UK.

HR: It is what it is. We did not expect you would go to Ireland.

Stijn:A review request was sent out between Christmas and New Year, and finished on 1 – 1 – 24. Nevertheless, starting my contract on 1 – 1 – 22 was impossible. How come?

HR: No employer in the UK will let a contract start on a holiday (e.g. a Sunday or New Year). We (as HR) do not expect you to work then. How you work, depends on your role. From your role in academia (e.g. professors and those wanting to become professor), we expect you to work outside office hours.

Stijn:In the question form, one has to put when one intends to come, i.e. one asks for the expected date of arrival. In my case, this was 10-01-22. Due to covid policies, I came earlier, to be in quarantine before, as imposed by the government. Something that could not be known when answering the question sheet. After this, I am forced to leave the CTA, making a lot of unnecessary costs and travel.

UKVI:Whilst our team issue usually 2 weeks prior to cos work start dates and 2 weeks after I can see from the visa application form that you put down your travel date as 10/1/2022 (the same date you were due to start work) and so the case worker issued correctly in line with your chosen travel date.

Whilst you have noted that the government at the time imposed a quarantine period due to covid, this is not controlled by UKVI.

We did have a covid hotline in place at the time you came into the UK, and this was set up for refund requests/queries but from what I can see, you did not raise this at the time.

Stijn:I contacted/ mailed the Home office back then, who answered that an answer would be given in 20 working days, which did not happen. So how to solve an issue without getting a reply for an easy solution... As in this instance, it was just about the way the visa was processed and if one tells it is accepted, no additional costs/ issues were there. There are 3 instances pointing towards each other, telling that the circumstances are not according to their rules.

Stijn:The field of intended date is required.

How can one expect that intended date will be the final date as such. Even AI knows the definition;

ChatGPT: "The term "intended date" refers to the specific date on which an event or action is planned or expected to occur. It indicates the date that has been chosen or targeted for something to happen. For example, if someone is talking about their intended date for starting a new job, they are referring to the specific day they plan to begin working at the new job. It is possible that the "intended date" might change due to various circumstances, potentially moving earlier or later than originally planned. Factors such as unforeseen events, delays, or changes in plans can cause the intended date to shift in either direction."

Obviously, one would wait for booking the exact transportation till the visa is there, so some flexibility would be natural (especially related to other issues from higher up), and a slight change may be beneficial in other regards.

UKVI:I have discussed the following with the appropriate and no further action may be taken. The application was correctly issued inline with the travel date. Furthermore, the details of my previous email still stand.

A glimpse of how other perceive the situation, can also be found e.g. at <https://www.trustpilot.com/review/www.ukvisaandimmigration.co.uk> and <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/home-office-vfs-visas-profit-subcontracted-contract-outsourcing-premium-services-exploited-a9056446.html>.