

Final Report for SRHE Newer Researcher's Prize 2015

Being an international academic: an exploration of the experiences of international academics in UK's Higher Education

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1. Executive Summary

This study aimed for an understanding of the phenomenon of being an international academic in the UK Higher Education (HE). Drawing on a phenomenological approach, twenty international academics recounted personal experiences in relation to their challenges and opportunities of being and working in the UK. The study focused on foreign-born academics, who had finished their terminal degrees and are pursuing academic careers in three different Universities of the North-West of England. Interviews were analysed using phenomenological thematic analysis (Giorgi, 1997), which identified a structure of constituents based on the participants' experiences. The themes concur with previous frameworks of cultural shock and change within the fields of anthropology and social psychology (e.g. Oberg, 1960; Hopson and Adams, 1976). The findings highlighted the challenges faced by foreign academics and how they were resolved over time - albeit at a particularly heavy emotional toll, and the resilience and strength needed to adapt to their new working environments. Participants also described prideful events in terms of succeeding in their workplace and of developing their academic competencies. The value of the study is that it provides knowledge about behavioural patterns and perceptions of what the pursuit of internationalisation means for foreign academics specifically in the UK, which is not widely available in the education literature and discusses implications for individuals and for institutions.

2. Context, Aim and Objectives

Academic staff mobility has become an area of increasing importance, spurred by initiatives such as the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). Specifically in the UK, indications show escalating inflows of international academic staff, with the average number of academic vacancies being

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filled by non-UK citizens rising from 14% over the years of 2005/08 to 27.2% during 2013/14 (UCEA, 2009; Universities UK, 2015). Yet, as the transnational movement continues to increase, the challenges faced by international academics together with their experiences and perceptions about working in the UK remain largely under-explored (Jones and Brown, 2007).

With a few exceptions (e.g. Dewey and Duff 2009; Tange 2010; Svetlik and Lalić, 2016), there is a dearth of research into the experiences of international academic staff. Research reports a range of challenges faced by international academics when migrating, such as language and cultural differences barriers, financial hardship, and difficulty to navigate to new approaches to teaching and academic standards. Dealing with such difficulties, may result to their own sense of inadequacy and to disorientation (Trowler, 1998; Foote et al., 2008; Collins, 2008; Lund et al., 2007). The limited studies on the experiences of international academics, however, have almost entirely focused on the negatively perceived aspects of their experiences (e.g. Hsieh, 2011), with very few reporting the themes of determination, flexibility and coping strategies that characterise the international experience (Richardson and Zikic, 2007).

Many attempts have been made from a social psychology perspective to capture the process of transition as not a fixed state in which individuals remain and suffer, but as a process in which they are active agents and multiple changes in self-esteem may occur. Hopson and Adams (1976) suggest that individuals may experience similar patterns of feelings within the process of adjustment during relocation, such as shock, denial, depression, acceptance, testing, searching for meanings, and internalisation. Early research on the adjustment to new cultural environments offer comprehensive theoretical formulations on predicting culture shock. For example, a number of psychological reactions to situational stress outlined Oberg's (1960) description of culture shock, namely honeymoon, crisis, recovery, adjustment.

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With internationalisation becoming one of the core elements of the HE landscape (1994 Group, 2007) it is timely to focus not only on numbers, but on the quality of the socio-emotional and educational experiences of this large group of people to ensure that quality of teaching, student learning and research remain in high standards. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to describe the experiences that international academics go through from the time of their preparation to arrive in the UK and start working in HE to the time they are able to be a fully functioning and contributing part of their institution. To achieve this understanding, the main objectives were to explore: (i) the process of adaptation that foreign academics experience in UK's HE, (ii) the problems and opportunities associated with international academics of the UK, and (iii) the emotional reactions towards change, transition and being in the UK academia.

3. Methodology and project timetable

Consistent with the study's aim, to explore the phenomenon of being an international academic in the UK, a phenomenological approach was employed. Data were generated through phenomenological interviews with international academics from three North-West universities of England. Utilising this approach, the interest was in the meaning that participants attributed to their experiences of reality, of their world and of their relationships (Sandberg, 2000). Twenty participants, ten females and ten males, from 13 cultural backgrounds, with age ranging from 33 to 57 years, and diverse academic discipline recounted personal experiences associated with their transition, adjustment, challenges and opportunities of working in the UK. No effort was made to control gender, age, academic position, or marital status. At the point of saturation, when new informants did not reveal new findings, sampling stopped (Benner, 1994).

Ethical approval was provided by the author's University ethics committee and all necessary procedures were followed to ensure that participants were fully briefed about the purpose of the study and their rights to anonymity and withdrawal at any time. Interviews lasted from one to

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two and a half hours and were all audio-recorded, with the participants' consent. Then, they were fully transcribed and analysed using phenomenological thematic analysis (Giorgi, 1997).

Table 1: Study's time-plan

Month	Activity
November-December 2015	Literature review. Identifying suitable participants.
December 2015-August 2016	Data collection via interviews in three North-West Universities of England. Transcription of interviews. Preliminary findings for SRHE NECR conference paper.
September 2016-November 2016	Intensive data analysis and report writing. Initial preparation for journal article writing.
December 2016-onwards	SRHE NECR conference. Submission of full-report. Journal article writing/submission & Dissemination of findings.

4. Findings

Themes extracted six phases that describe the emotional reactions of international academics of being and working in the UK. These are labelled as (1) being in euphoria; (2) being in shock; (3) being in disillusion; (4) being willing to let go; (5) being in consolidation; (6) being deep-rooted.

1) *Being in euphoria*

As a way of getting the interviews started, international academics were asked to think back to their first days in the UK and at their university. All participants referred to a period of euphoria, satisfaction and optimism during their preparation and first days of arriving in the country, which others have reported (Richardson and Zikic, 2007). They described a high degree of desirability of moving to the UK's HE, as an 'academic heaven' for people who want to succeed and progress in their careers. None of the participants referred to salary as a motivational factor to move to the UK, instead referring to intrinsic factors. Improved research funding, research opportunities, working in prestigious universities with highly cited academics and enhancing their global

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academic profile were the main factors that attracted them to accept an academic position in the UK. Once participants recognised the opportunity to work in the UK (e.g. applying and accepting a position in the UK), the pre-arrival and first days of the arrival period were characterised by moments of enthusiasm, enchantment and admiration for the country. Without awareness of barriers that might stand in the way, they chased and competed for a job in the UK, as an ideal career pathway.

2) *Being in shock*

The euphoria of preparation for the move was soon overshadowed by shock, caused by the turmoil of cultural and professional difficulties and mismatches between expectations and reality. For the majority of these international academics, starting their new job was haphazard. Their shock was shaped by the financial and logistical challenges of relocation, work permits and visa application processes and, for many, finding a house proved particularly arduous. The emotional and physical upheavals of the first days were still fresh in the participants' memories, which undermined their ability to work. Many were handed full workloads from day one. However, the biggest shock related to the institution's poor transition management.

Significant difficulties also stemmed from institutional shortcomings. High demands from students, overreliance on student evaluations and on research league tables that dominate management thinking, cultural differences (e.g. language and accent, social relationships and rules) and even trivial activities such as increased paperwork, overwhelming large-class teaching, difficulties in familiarising themselves with the grading system and with curriculum design led to feelings of panic and anxiety.

While most of the participants claimed to receive little or no acknowledgement of their arrival, there were some examples from participants who experienced a positively-perceived shock, as they were impressed by the supportive working environment and good team morale. This was

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assisted by well-organised transition support, such as briefings, practical support, confidential counselling and freedom for new ideas. A few participants mentioned that their department assigned them an on-site mentor to help their adjustment. Others, however, said that their mentor was 'simply a name' with no solid help been given by them.

3) *Being in disillusion*

Even in cases when participants were initially warmly welcomed by their institution, practical difficulties were soon encountered that lead to a state of disillusion, characterised by anger, confusion and temporary withdrawal. In some cases, academics experienced a hostile working environment from certain xenophobic colleagues. Participants referred to discrimination incidents that led to further thoughts of leaving the UK and returning to their home country at an early stage. Demoralising experiences were accompanied by the official routines of their University, such as how and when the setting and marking of examination papers takes place, the procedures for the efficient administration of courses, the design of curricula, establishing learning outcomes for the various courses they teach, who to ask and who not to ask for help, and how to cope with securing appropriate venues and equipment for their lectures.

The reactions elicited in these high-pressure situations often took a long time to resolve because of the participants' reluctance to ask for help. They felt that they wanted to prove to themselves that they could manage self-reliantly and that, as foreigners, they did not want to appear to be ignorant or helpless. The events described in this phase were extremely stressful for the international academics and created fears of being ridiculed as 'cowardly academics'.

4) *Being willing to let go*

Ultimately, participants began to speak less about the exhausting efforts to adopt and mimic the cultural and institutional norms of their workplace, and more about acceptance of the new reality. This phase brought a more realistic self-assessment. Once participants felt their teaching and

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research suffered from the new routines and processes, they decided to engage in coping strategies. The downward move in competence and confidence stopped when the participants accepted the reality and started to get used to the multiple changes. The phase involved letting go of attitudes and behaviours, which were comfortable and effective only for their old institutions.

A common coping mechanism they developed was venting their dissatisfaction amongst fellow expatriates. Engaging in social discussion of grievances led to national generalisations, like Oberg's 'cocktail circuit' (1960:178). Encounters with people from 'home' were pleasant and awakening, as they quickly discovered how much they had adapted to UK culture, since they could see the ways in which they were now different from their 'home' culture. This helped them see progress in adapting to the local (UK) conditions and realise that they were not influencing to the degree to which they had before they left 'home'.

5) *Being in consolidation*

As the participants became socially and linguistically capable of negotiating with senior managers, a sense of autonomy developed. They were then able to reach an independence stage, in which they were able to create meaning and started to enjoy and accept the differences. Eventually, the study's participants began to form their own views on what being an international academic in the UK is all about and even experimenting with how they can contribute. Openness to new ideas, desire to learn, developing supportive relationships, patience and success experiences were dominant. Learning from their success and failure helped them to start searching for meaning in their new workplace. This stage also involved a questioning of why certain behaviours are effective, and why others, or indeed the same behaviours but in different situations, may be ineffective. This knowledge enabled them to take more control over their actions and to develop strategies for circumstances in advance. All participants claimed that they

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wanted to change and simplify some processes of their new institution, with many admitting this was a reason for participating in this study.

Whilst some participants succeeded in acculturation by actively trying out behaviours and gauging the cultural response, others spoke about using their *foreignness* to define themselves, to recreate, to establish new perceptions in order to develop as academics in the UK. Without trying to stop their efforts to 'fit in', they also used their foreignness, in their attempt to feel more powerful and influential in guiding their professional lives.

6) *Being deep-rooted*

Participants finally described the current state they live in now in their institutions. A unanimous approach was about the pride they feel in themselves that despite the difficulties and some hostility they faced, they felt deep-rooted in their workplace and made their *foreignness* a success. This stage was characterised by the academics taking ownership of their recently acquired behaviours and thereby increasing their confidence and competence to a level higher than before. Their new ways of doing things became part of their everyday activities and integrated into the academics' natural reactions.

Those participants who had only been in the UK for less than three years, claimed that their deep-rooted stage was not entirely reached yet, particularly in relation to the cultural/social aspects (rather workplace aspects). These participants still shared success stories that were valuable keystones to them and talked about their organisations as an impetus of opportunity, adventure, risk and challenge. Building relationships with colleagues and students over time was a factor that helped them re-define themselves and re-boost their confidence.

Notably, none of the study's participants would now choose to return to their home country or previous institution. The participants mentioned success stories that their international

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background helped them to create: networking, hosting conferences, working with other institutions, publication achievements, high student evaluation scores, and promotions, which they owe to their hard work, flexibility and long-term vision. All the participants of the study have been working in the UK for eighteen months or more and when asked about their current well-being at work, claimed that a sense of resolution and success had been reached as they progressively dealt with all challenges and brought new elements into their workplace.

5. Conclusions

The main outcomes from the study can be summarised as follows:

- ✚ The characteristics of the international academics' experiences are depicted in Figure 1. This figure combined elements from Oberg's (1960) early model on cultural shock and from Hopson and Adams' (1976) cycle of psychological reactions to transition, that helped to structure the experiences of international academic in UK HE. One may experience multiple stages at one time or may 'revert' to an earlier stage during a time of crisis or other activity. All participants experienced the mentioned phases, but the intensity of being in a particular phase was experienced differently for each participant, undercutting any attempt to establish universal categories. The phases identified were not necessarily subsequent and academics may have experienced the phases in different order, depending on their preparedness, personal resilience and organisational factors.
- ✚ Working in UK HE significantly contributes to an international academic's professional development, in terms of reputation, status and career progression. This was interpreted as a positively perceived impact of the internationalisation of HE on academic staff development (Svetlik and Lalic, 2016). Findings suggest that international academics are seen as major assets in universities (Foote et al., 2008), as the success stories that the participants shared illustrate their contribution to their department in bringing new ideas, hard work and diversity.

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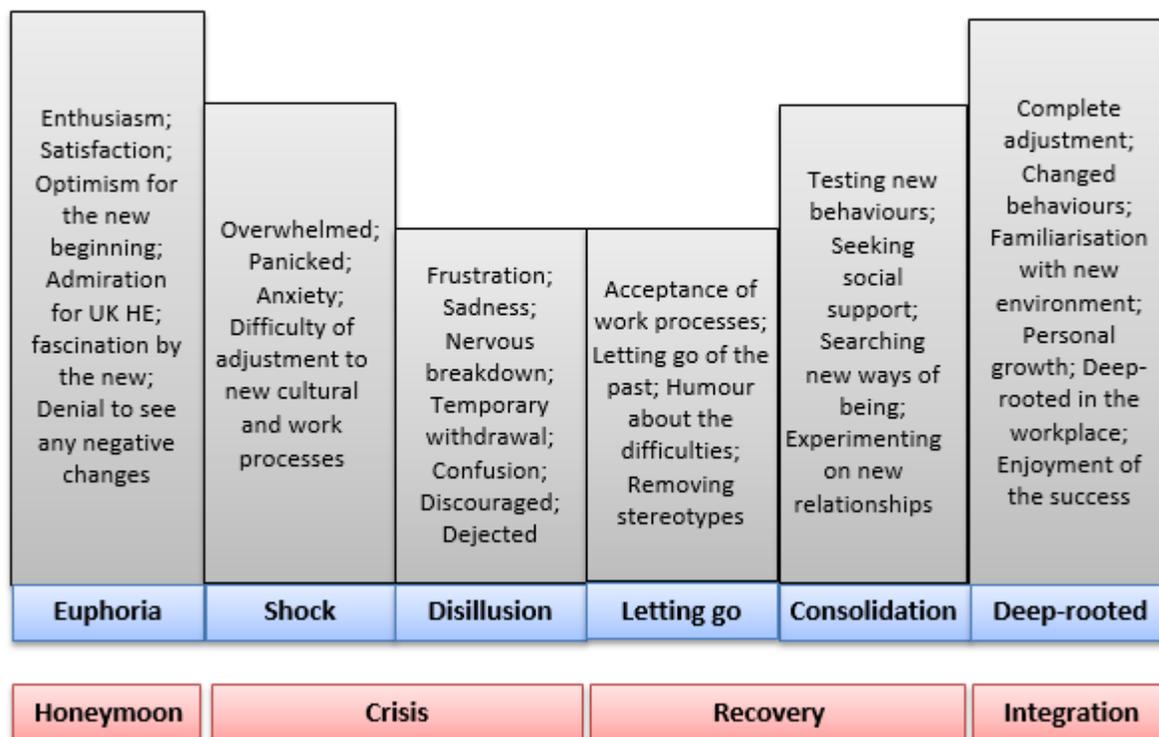
- ✚ Some challenges emerging from the transition were the logistics of relocation and the language barriers. Most participants agreed that the linguistic change from their native language into English (including accent), affected their confidence and the quality of classroom communication. However, the most common challenge was their own cultural differences from the UK culture, which participants characterised as an obstacle in their transition and professional being (Tange, 2010). Institutional-level issues made the participants unable to easily adjust to their new workplace with teaching being more difficult to accomplish than research (Foote et al., 2008).
- ✚ In many cases, the lack of or rare support from managers, as well as the xenophobic attitudes of some colleagues resulted in frustration and temporary withdrawal, putting the participants in a *surviving mode*. A worrying finding was that in some cases, participants were silent, after feeling embarrassed to speak or ask for support. These findings highlight an absence of comprehensive and systematic institutional transition support for international academics and reveal a climate that erodes collegiality.
- ✚ Academics claimed to have used their *foreignness* as a resource to develop resilient coping strategies and become authentically involved in their workplace. Their resilience lies within their '*being in the UK for a reason*' attitude. Their self-determination to succeed in a foreign workplace helped them to introduce ways of practice in HE that helped them move to a *thriving mode*.

Recommendations aimed at Universities who are charged with orienting international academics include: an organised plan for preparing academics for their transfer in the UK (e.g. paid pre-visit to the country, pre-arranged and pre-paid temporary accommodation, language training, explicit provision of counselling facilities on arrival); revision of workload models more frequently than nationals; general and pedagogically-specific induction workshops; and the establishment of support groups for academics and their families.

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Although a few participants mentioned mentoring as a helpful element in their adaptation, the majority of participants commented on the informality, ad-hoc basis of this initiative. Instead, mentoring could occur as a systematic process, having a formal practice in order to contribute to both work-related and sociocultural adjustment.

Figure 1: The experience of international academics in UK HE



Dissemination of the study’s findings will contribute in the following areas:

- ✚ To help international academics of the UK in their current career stage to identify underlying issues, view coping strategies and find new ways of recovering from potential crisis.

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- ✚ To re-evaluate transition management processes in UK Universities which may undermine current confidence and competence of international academics.
- ✚ To prepare future international academics moving to the UK for potential career changes, including changes affecting their family or colleagues.
- ✚ To inform educational managers about transition related issues, performance or relationship problems, and to develop transition management skills for members of staff.

6. Presentation of work

- Invited talk to the British Psychological Society, hosted by the Manchester Metropolitan University on the 25th January 2017.
- A 500-word article for www.jobs.ac.uk has been published in January 2017, entitled 'Working in the UK: Strategies for International Readers'. Link here: <http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/working-overseas/2547/working-in-the-uk-strategies-for-international-readers>
- A journal paper is in draft version, with anticipated submission in autumn 2017. Targeted Journals: *Studies in Higher Education* or *British Educational Research Journal*.
- Presentation of work at an SRHE event in 2017.

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