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## **Hidden Narratives of Internationalisation: Mobility and Migrant Academics**

### **Abstract**

Mobility is a major form of capital in the academic labour market. Yet questions remain about who is the ideal mobile subject and the distribution of opportunity structures across diverse geopolitical spaces. While voluntary and involuntary migration characterise the age, a further question is whose knowledge is circulating in the global academy? Drawing on interviews with 20 migrant academics from Latin America, Europe and East Asia, and theoretical framings of the new mobilities paradigm and cognitive/epistemic justice, this paper explores the hidden narratives of migrant academics' engagement with the global academy. Higher education internationalisation is presented as an ideologically neutral, coherent, disembodied, knowledge-driven policy intervention, yet lived experiences suggest that there is a potent affective economy, and epistemic hierarchy linked to geopolitical power relations. There are gains including transcultural learning, but also less romantic aspects to mobility including isolation, discrimination, misrecognition, and 'otherness' in the market-driven global academy.

## **Mobility as the New Capital in the Global Knowledge Economy**

Internationalisation in higher education, as a polyvalent discourse, is an assemblage of values linked to neoliberal rationalities of economic growth, marketisation, entrepreneurship, and prosperity but also to global citizenship and cosmopolitanism. Diverse aspirations include the deparochialisation of knowledge, the acquisition of intercultural competencies and prioritising soft power *i.e.* influence through cultural, rather than coercive means, and social cohesion (Altbach 2013; Clifford and Montgomery 2014; De Wit et al. 2015; Lomer 2016; Stier 2004). International movements, flows and networks can be perceived as valuable and calculable transnational and transferable identity capital (Kim and Brooks 2013). Fluidity metaphors are frequently used as an antidote to stasis *e.g.* flows, flux and circulations (Morley et al 2017; Urry 2007). National, institutional and disciplinary borders are more porous and multilateralism, mobility and alliance strategies are thought to widen reach, extend brands and enhance innovation and employability. Internationalisation is both a mechanism driving a shift towards a global knowledge economy and the fulfillment of personal aspirations (Hoffman 2009). Mobility is the *sine qua non* of the global academy (Sheller 2014), and through it ideas, values and practices are spread. Mobility capital, competencies and capabilities are thought to have a high exchange rate for employment in the global knowledge economy. Yet two areas, in particular, remain as policy silences: the affective economy of internationalisation, and epistemic justice or whose knowledge is circulating in the global academy?

Urry (2007:12) argues that mobilities have been a 'black box for the social sciences' and are generally regarded as a neutral set of processes. There is, he argues, often a minimisation of the significance and consequences of embodied experiences of movement. In the field of higher education studies, there is a sizeable body of literature on student mobility in the global academy (*e.g.* Krzaklewska 2008), highlighting some of the flows and challenges. Few studies explore the sociology of mobility in relation to academics (*e.g.* Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter 2015; Bonisch-Brednich 2016; Cai and Hall 2015; Fahey and Kenway 2010; Hoffman 2009; Kim 2010; Kim and Brooks 2013; Pherali 2012). Drawing upon the theoretical approaches of the new mobilities paradigm and cognitive and epistemic justice (Fricker 2007; Santos 2007), as well as personal accounts of migrant academics collected through 20 semi-structured interviews, this paper aims to highlight some of the hidden narratives of internationalisation for migrant academics.

### **Democratising the Grand Tour?**

The international marketisation of higher education, new geographies of knowledge, spatial politics and changing mobility flows have social implications (Equality Challenge Unit 2009; 2010; 2011; 2013). For example, who is perceived as the ideal mobile subject, and are opportunity structures for mobility unevenly distributed among different social groups and geopolitical spaces? Is mobility always strategic and voluntary, or coercive and contingent, as in the case with the current refugee crisis, conflicts and political upheavals? As Kim (2014) suggests, academic travels have always been regarded as important among intellectual elites. It is pertinent to

inquire whether these opportunities are opening up to more diverse social groups, and if so, is this a form of de-colonisation or, indeed, re-colonisation?

### **Affecting Change**

The policy rhetoric and semantics of globalisation depict problem-free de-territorialisation. It is assumed that individuals can be uprooted and transplanted without consideration of how traditional notions of space and place are disrupted. New spatialities and identities can also be accompanied by risks of precarity, the reproduction of social hierarchies, exclusions and closures. Internationalisation is often presented as an ideologically neutral, coherent, disembodied, knowledge-driven policy intervention- an unconditional good. Sheller (2014: 3) suggests that 'space is treated as an empty container for social processes'. However, the conceptualisation of people as resources to be displaced, dislocated and relocated around the globe, with limited consideration of identity, community, care or the affective domain (Lynch 2009) has social, ethical, financial and equity implications.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

This paper draws on data collected for the European Union Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Higher Education, Internationalisation and Mobility project (HEIM), and the CHEER Research Project *Higher Education Knowledge Exchange and Policy Learning in the Asian Century*. It is based on 20 semi-structured interviews undertaken with migrant academics, who worked currently or

recently in universities in Hong Kong, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Japan, Poland, Qatar, Spain, Turkey, UK, and the USA. Their countries of origin were Austria, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Mexico, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the Philippines, Portugal, UK, and the USA. The sample was constructed through personal and professional networking paying attention to gender, ethnicity, age and countries of origin and employment. They represented different career stages of mobility including PhD scholars, lecturers, and assistant and full professors. Interviews explored drivers, motivations, experiences, benefits and disadvantages of mobility and internationalisation; migration and mobility history, support needs, and factors that contributed to making mobility experiences positive or negative.

## **Conclusion**

Research findings suggest that internationalisation brings many social, professional and material benefits including enhanced employability, inter-cultural competencies and global citizenship, but there are encounters and engagements that are often disqualified from or silenced in official policy discourses and texts. Identity implications can be both positive and negative. For example, members of socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups can re-cast themselves as cosmopolitan global citizens. However, negative identity positionings sometimes pursue them internationally- especially when they migrate from the Global South to the Global North. Negatives could sometimes be transformed into positives by applying difference and otherness to knowledge creation itself. The 'otherness' or externality of migrant academics offered new epistemic insights and challenges to some of the

orthodoxies and hegemonies of academic life, and exemplified some of the central arguments embedded in theories of cognitive and epistemic justice, that is, that while some physical bodies might be on the move, whose knowledge is included and circulated in the global knowledge economy?

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