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Empowered or disempowered by mobility? Experience of international academics in China

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

There is a noticeable reverse flow of academics from the Global North to the Global South in the recent decade. The study examines the emerging mobility trend by investigating three institutions in China. Based on case studies of traditional universities and Sino-foreign universities, the study argues that international academics in Chinese universities have experienced individual empowerment in terms of expanded academic networks and enhanced professional development. But they might face collective disempowerment due to the different professional values and protocols such as 'routinised improvisation,' and a lacking of bargaining power. The findings suggest that the construction of international academics' experience is a process shaped and re-shaped by the interplay across individual interpretation, institutional configuration and national context, and reveal the complexities of higher education internationalisation in countries at the periphery of the global higher education landscape.

Full paper

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS[1]

The globalised higher education landscape has been shaped and re-shaped by the power dynamics among nation-states. In recent years, there is a noticeable reverse flow of academics from the Global North to the Global South. However, the newly-emerged mobility trend has

not been extensively examined by scholars (Wang and Chen 2020). Especially in Asian countries, there is an increasing emphasis among higher education institutions on 'importing' international students and faculty to push for internationalisation and drive up their global university rankings. Although academic mobility is associated with a range of advantages, international academics are often positioned in an ambiguous power hierarchy within their host institutions (Whitsed and Volet 2011), leading to their often-unsatisfactory working and emotional conditions (Romanowski and Nasser 2015) and even mass departure from the host countries to home countries (Kim 2016). There is therefore great necessity and importance to understand, explore and explain those mobile academics' constructions of experience, especially those migrate from the Global North to the South. The study takes a comparative lens to investigate international academics in China in three different cases featuring traditional HEIs and Sino-foreign universities by investigating the following research questions: (1) What are the opportunities and challenges experienced by international faculty in terms of professional development? (2) How might different institutional configurations influence their constructions of experience?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Taking a comparative perspective, the study selected three institutions in China as case studies. Case A is an elite research university with a proactive global outlook. Case B and Case C are joint international campuses co-established respectively by an elite Chinese university with a British university, and with an American university. In each case, the international college administratively belongs to its host Chinese university, but it primarily functions as an independent entity. In a sense, each case can serve as an example of the emerging Sino-foreign universities with different types of western influence. Altogether the three cases allow a comparative scope to analyse the experiences of those transnational mobile academics and the institutional power dynamics co-opted by those HEIs' configurations and the national context.

The study employed primarily a qualitative approach following an interpretivist tradition. It conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with international academics. Serious ethical considerations were given throughout the research process, including informed consent,

confidentiality and anonymity. This study took a hybrid approach combining both deductive coding and inductive coding in data analysis following the 'code-to-theory' model (Saldana 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Opportunities that lead to individual empowerment

Findings from all cases have showed a certain degree of individual empowerment. On the one hand, interviewees reported quite positively in building collaborations within and across Chinese HEIs and establishing research networks for the accumulation of academic capitals. On the other hand, academics have showed a high degree of satisfaction in terms of professional development, particularly in Case B and Case C. A number of interviewees mentioned how being in a new higher education establishment had opened up possibilities for them that were not available at other places. It could provide accelerated professional development opportunities for those transnational mobile academics and therefore contribute to individual empowerment. Such experience and the associated expanded networks could enhance one's social capitals that lead to more career opportunities, such as more updated information, interpersonal skills and career resources.

Challenges resulting in collective disempowerment

Two less examined challenges are identified. One is the different professional standards, procedures and values established and practised in the Chinese system vis a vis the non-Chinese systems, and international academics' slow adjustment to such differences. For example, in all cases, foreign faculty described their experiences in which they had been informed of a certain decision or assigned a certain task with a very short notice. Such 'routinised improvisation' could cause contentions among international academics who are not familiar with the 'on-the-move' professional style in Chinese HEIs. Moreover, it might create a constant sense of interruption of academics' daily routine as they have to be prepared for unexpected notices. It is further fuelled by lack of bargaining power of those foreign academics working in China due to their positions, the often-inexplicit institutional power dynamics and a hierarchical approach to management in Chinese universities, leading to a certain degree of

collective disempowerment of international academics, despite their varying degrees of individual empowerment.

[1] * The submission is a condensed version of a published paper. See [details redacted to preserve anonymity] *Studies in Higher Education*.

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