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There and back again: Transnational mobilities of returnee doctoral supervisors with overseas doctorates

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Academic mobility has become a phenomenon that depicts the movements of graduate students, staff and university programs in the globalised higher education characterised by knowledge exchange. Meanwhile, the scholarly discussion of academic mobility is often about the mobilities of migrant academics working in foreign universities. This paper specifically focuses on the transnational trajectories of returnee academics who obtained their doctorates overseas and are now working as doctoral supervisors in universities in their countries of origin. Drawing on an empirical project on Chinese supervisors with overseas awarded doctorates in social sciences, this paper is based on the analysis of participants' accounts of their cross-border trajectories from becoming international doctoral students to qualifying as doctoral supervisors in domestic universities. This study employed a dual interview structure. The analysis focuses on the transition from doctoral student subject to returnee subject and investigates how return move introduces incoherence within the ideal academic mobility pattern.

Full paper

Introduction

Academic mobility as a phenomenon in higher education depicts the movements of students, scholars, programs and universities in the current global knowledge economy (Guruz, 2011). At the same time, it is identified that the scholarly discussion of academic mobility is often about the mobilities of migrant academics working in foreign universities (Larbi & Ashraf, 2020). In terms of the mobilities of academics, there exist some normative construct in terms of a global academic career prospect which potentially shapes the global hierarchies of knowledge production in the area of HE (Kim, 2017). The 'ideal pattern' of international academic mobility imposes that one should move around the world for academic career rather than move back. This paper contextualises academic mobility in returnee supervisors' academic and explains how a journey as such contradicts with an ideal career trajectory for internationally recognised mobile academics.

Literature Review

The term academic mobility is often associated with various 'patterns' of academic mobility (Hoffman, 2009), including length of stay in different places, major sectors of their employment and work, frequency of mobility, stages of life and career. Meanwhile, Literature on academic mobility reveals that some mobility patterns are legitimised, especially from the periphery to the core of the global higher education system (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018). Academics whose mobilities are against the ideal pattern appear to report a feeling of 'stuckness' and conceive their mobility to the Global North to the South as 'backwards' (Burford et al., 2021).

The project

This paper draws upon findings of an empirical project investigating returnee doctoral supervisor subjectivity and pedagogical style in Chinese research universities. The study recruited 21 academics who obtained their own doctorates in universities based in different countries and returned to China working as doctoral supervisors. This study used a dual-interview design, where all participants narrated their transnational mobilities experiences in the context of doctoral education in the first interview. 8 participants engaged in the second interview discussing a recorded supervision meeting of their own. This paper focuses on the first interview and specifically on how

supervisors made sense of their academic mobility and identities as returnee supervisors.

Trajectories constructed by opposing directions

This section presents two patterns of participants' return trajectory, each pattern depicting several themes that emerged in the interviews.

Pattern 1 - Immediate returnees: moving out for doctoral programmes and returning to China upon graduation. Of the 21 participants, 8 chose to return to China to work upon the graduation of the doctoral program. Participants' status as international students made their doctoral study 'doubly difficult' due to the challenge of fitting in some assumed national and disciplinary styles in the host country. On the other hand, the mobile status made the participants recognise themselves as international academics and set up them for an international academic path. In this sense, the return move was represented as less desirable by the participants as the move seemed to cut across the international trajectory as well as the possibility of international migration. Therefore, many participants struggled to account the transition stage in a coherent manner, seen from their hesitation and even reluctance to talk through the return decision.

Pattern 2 - Inbetweeners: taking a temporary stay before returning to China. 13 participants undertook temporary in-between stays (post-doctoral position or employment) in different countries from where they attained their doctorates. This period, described by some participants as 'a springboard for progress' did not always bring progress. Some participants got stuck in this period, such as working outside academia only to extend the stay in the host country, moving between universities based in different English-speaking countries. For these participants, the return move finally became the choice for various personal and career concerns. The in-between stage, as a particular transitional stage between doctoral education and academic career, exemplifies the complex patterns of global academic mobility. The stage demonstrates participants' effort of pursuing a global academic career, showing the nonlinearity of academic mobility (Morley et al, 2018).

Discussion

Whereas academic mobility as a term involves much conceptual complexity, the pattern of an international career prospect is often seen as ideal. This paper demonstrates how the perception of an ideal academic mobility pattern shaped participants' trajectories and how they represented the return decision to the home country as less desirable. The two patterns of return move showcase that academic mobility is not always a linear and smooth process about progression, but also engages interruptions (Fahey & Kenway, 2010). The transnational mobilities of returnees constitute a trajectory including the formation and transformation of transnational identity.

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