

250

Displaced academics as mobile academics?: Lived experiences and positionalities in exile

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Academic mobility is often conceptualised within neoliberal, market-oriented and human capital terminology which acclaims academic mobility as a universal advantage. However, such an understanding of mobility is deeply lacking. Drawing on data obtained via semi-structured in-depth interviews, this paper explores the lived experiences of five displaced Syrian scholars in Europe and the Middle considering their positioning processes and positions that shape their varying forms of academic identities and belonging. The paper challenges the conceptualisation of mobility as 'universal good'. By offering a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of displaced scholars as occupying different positionalities, the limits and extensions of academic mobility and knowledge production are explored, and lessons are learned from within displaced academics' shifting positionalities to advance more responsive and equitable higher education institutions.

Full paper

Introduction

Academic mobility is commonly acclaimed as beneficial for career advancement and development (Leemann, 2010; Teichler, 2015; Leung, 2017) and for "academic recognition and credibility" (Leemann, 2010, p. 612) for those involved in it. At the same time,

multiple downsides and “hidden injuries” (Morley et al., 2018) can be associated with academic mobility (Robertson, 2010). This paper explores the limits and extensions of academic mobility for displaced academics mobility by examining the lived experiences of displaced Syrian academics in Europe and the Middle East.

Literature Review

Mobility of academics is often conceptualised as an imperative to contribute to personal and professional growth, economic development, and knowledge production (Ackers, 2003; Richardson, 2009). It is via academic mobility that new networks and forms of cooperation and collaboration are made as well (Ackers, 2003; Kim, 2010). On the other hand, academic mobility may involve various types of detriments for those involved in it that may include discrimination, otherness, and marginalisation as “mobility tariff” (Morley et al., 2018, p. 545). When it comes to displaced academics, a gap can be identified in the literature on displaced academics’ mobility experiences in exile as both academics and displaced subjects.

The study

This study explored over six months the professional and personal lived experiences of displaced Syrian academics (DSAs) resulting from their mobility in Europe and the Middle East, considering contextual factors in their host countries and the circumstances in Syria. For this paper, from 20 participants, five have been chosen for analysis. The study utilised an interview-diary-interview design, a modified version of Zimmerman and Wieder’s (1977) diary-interview, to investigate displaced Syrian academics’ lived experiences and positionalities (Anthias, 2008) to understand their academic identity and belonging to their host society and home country resulting from their mobility as scholars and as displaced individuals.

Findings

Downward mobility: Fading away academically

Fading away as academics in their host countries was caused by institutional exclusion, constant temporariness of opportunities, and

lack of funding and support while attempting to transition into academia in exile. They have been subjected to a constrained environment, because of different factors such as: the lack of academic production caused by their mobility restrictions set by immigration laws and policies towards displaced populations; losing academic status and being treated as displaced persons only; having shifting plans as an outcome of changing life experiences as displaced subjects. Their aspirations to transition into academia in exile were constrained by various institutional and group stressors.

Privileged positionalities and academic re-existence

DSAs have found also their mobility as a channel for personal development and growth via developing personal skills and traits such as becoming more critical and having the ability to learn and achieve goals. For them, their mobility has been a channel for recovery following the conflict experiences in Syria, which aligns with accounts of South-North academic mobility. On the academic level, their experiences included academic skills development and the ability to achieve academic goals, such as being more dynamic and collaborative as academics, developing research skills, developing soft skills, and becoming more interdisciplinary in research.

Fluctuating sense of belonging: Varying forms of belonging

DSAs' sense of belonging has been shifting in nature as an outcome of changing events and experiences in different situations, contexts, and various periods of time. DSAs described their belonging as both personal and academic, which were in conflict at times. For their personal-academic sense of belonging, DSAs have had dynamic and conflicting accounts such as belonging personally to the home country but not academically or belonging academically to the host country but not personally. Hasan in the UK, for instance, stated: "I have a strong belonging to my university here [in the UK], but this belonging does not exceed the university fences".

Discussion

The findings present a more complex picture than that which is often understood in normative assumptions on academic mobility as either universal good for those involved, or as detrimental to the lives and

aspirations of mobile academics. While the experiences of DSAs were similar to those that apply to international academics at large, there were specific aspects that are peculiar to DSAs. DSAs occupied shifting positionalities as an outcome of the interplay between their positions as displaced and academics and the surrounding structures, processes, and practices that resulted in having their current positionalities, and in identity collision for some participants. These experiences not only have shaped DSAs' academic identities, but also the boundaries and degrees of their sense of personal and academic belonging to their host countries and Syria.

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