

Decolonising and re-imagining the concept of the international academic

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This conceptual paper problematises the notion of the 'international academic', a phrase that is strongly influenced by a post-colonial legacy and based almost entirely on an academic's *de jure* race, nationality or citizenship rather than their *de facto* international scholarly reputation. It is argued that objective criteria, including impact and esteem indicators evidenced internationally, should be applied in respect to identifying 'international academics' rather than relying on nationality or citizenship. Using Merton's concept of locals and cosmopolitans, it is recommended that institutions should focus on identifying and nurturing 'cosmopolitans at home' as part of their internationalisation strategies, who can be encouraged to develop a strong international reputation, rather than over-relying on recruiting foreign born academics many of whom are, in effect, 'locals from abroad' with little or no international reputation. The implications for university reward and recognition systems are analysed.

Full paper

Introduction

The phrases 'international academic' or 'international faculty', are often used synonymously and refer to academics with a foreign passport who has emigrated temporarily or permanently (Kim, *et al*, 2024). Universities competing for ranking points are rewarded on the basis of criteria including their international faculty ratio by the QS World Ranking (5%) and in the Times Higher Education World Ranking (2.5%) incentivising them to recruit more international faculty. Yet it would be naïve to assume that all international faculty are international academics of high repute as research shows they often have limited knowledge of their receiving country and usually migrate for personal reasons, such as romantic relationships (Luczaj, 2019; Huang *et al*, 2019; Xu, *et al*, 2022:423). Understanding

of the 'international academic' may further be understood as a legacy of colonialism viewed through the lens of post-colonial theory (Said, 1978) and there is a long history of 'expatriates' from 'metropolitan' countries (Scott, 1994) making their whole careers in developing higher education systems (e.g. United Arab Emirates) or former (typically) British colonies (e.g. Hong Kong). Expatriates, enjoy 'privileged mobilities' (Kunz, 2016:89) compared to normal migrants. From a critical post-colonial perspective, the expatriate academic represents a form of continuing 'white privilege' (Bhopal, 2018)

Cosmopolitans at home, locals from abroad

A broader definition beyond nationality is clearly needed and the sociological distinction between 'locals' and 'cosmopolitans' (Merton, 1947) is highly relevant to university academics (eg Gouldner, 1957; Glaser, 1963). Cosmopolitans are 'low on loyalty to the employing organization, high on commitment to specialized role skills, and likely to use an outer reference group orientation' while locals are 'high on loyalty to the employing organization, low on commitment to specialized role skills, and likely to use an inner reference group orientation.' (Gouldner, 1957:290). Locals are unlikely to have external or international networks or be known internationally for their research. Cosmopolitans, by contrast, tend to have published more and be more research active than locals, be less inclined to advocate rule following, be more politically liberal and more academically mobile, or 'disloyal' to the institution, than locals. Those with cosmopolitan orientations, regardless of nationality, are more likely to have an international profile since they are committed to research. Objective criteria are more relevant in determining which academics are 'international' (see table 1).

Table 1: Criteria for an international academic (ABEONA)

<u>A</u> cademic qualifications	PhD or Masters' degree obtained at overseas
<u>B</u> ibliometric profile	eg Google Scholar, Scopus <i>h</i> -index, citations; Field Weighted Citation Impact, etc
<u>E</u> steem indicators	eg doctoral degrees examined in overseas universities; keynotes delivered at international academic conferences; international co-authors;

	editorial board membership, translated works, international academic prizes, etc
<u>O</u> verseas working experience	Full-time and visiting positions at overseas higher education institutions
<u>N</u> etworking internationally	Development, membership and active participation in prestigious international scholarly networks and societies
<u>A</u> dvance of the discipline internationally and creation of intellectual property	eg book translations, inventions, trademarks, patents, etc

Hence, therefore, the *de facto* international academic might be a person with either a local or foreign nationality. Applying Merton’s distinction between locals and cosmopolitans, it is possible to better represent this complexity (see figure 1).

Figure 1: International orientations

	Home faculty	Foreign faculty
Locals	<i>Locals at home</i>	<i>Locals from abroad</i>
Cosmopolitans	<i>Cosmopolitans at home</i>	<i>Cosmopolitans from abroad</i>

Conventionally, foreign faculty are assumed to be what might be described as 'cosmopolitans from abroad' while home faculty are seen as 'locals at home', but such a dichotomy over-simplifies the reality. In practice, and regardless of nationality, cosmopolitans are more likely to be international academics. This makes it perfectly feasible therefore for an academic who is born and educated in the same country in which they work might be a 'cosmopolitan at home'. This is a person who possesses a substantive international reputation judged by objective criteria (see table 1). 'Locals from abroad' usually have had no prior experience of working in a university in another country and may have studied for their doctoral degree in the host country in which they have settled.

Conclusion: institutional implication

The real internationalisation challenge for universities in their recruitment of faculty is to ensure that they identify and nurture cosmopolitans from abroad, not locals from abroad. This is essential in order to increase their ability to compete internationally. There is a need to rethink who international academics really are and base understanding on objective criteria rather than a post-colonial legacy. The difference between locals and cosmopolitans is key to understanding who is a genuinely an 'international academic' and helps to de-racialise and de-colonise the concept as well.