Comparing higher education cultural contexts: International recruits' insights on induction experiences (0314)

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Introduction and context

Pierre Bourdieu's ([1972] 1977; [1980] 1990) work on social reproduction provides a useful way of conceptualizing the higher education cultural context. In this paper, we will consider the international academic's induction experiences as a struggle for legitimation in the 'field' of higher education where cultural differences could be conceptualized as clashes of 'habitus' or 'capital'.

This conference highlights global trends that are increasing stratification within the higher education (HE) sector, thereby differentiating 'elite' research institutions, privately-funded teaching-focussed institutions, and other groupings. As a result, higher education institutions (HEIs) within one stratum become more similar to their international counterparts, while becoming increasingly differentiated from certain of their national neighbours (Hazelkorn, 2015). Global competition drives HEIs to recruit international academic staff (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013) since (amongst other reasons) the ratio of international to national staff may serve as 'a proxy for reputation and quality' (Hazelkorn, 2015, p. 124) in some league tables. Research into the experiences of international staff recruited by HEIs suggests that transnational mobility is a process of inequality production and reproduction (Bilecen & van Mol, 2017). Thus, we will argue in this paper that at every level, from nation to HEI to individual international recruit, the stratification of inequality is reproduced.

According to Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley (2017, p. 1) 'growing numbers of academics are working outside of their home countries…though the global percentage of international academics is small … this group is quite important'. However, an international literature suggests that overseas staff recruited by HEIs often experience difficulties in transitioning into their new job role (for example, Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010; Walker, 2015). In the UK, the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) (2013) report, *Improving the Experiences of International Staff in UK Higher Education Research*, confirms the need for better support and integration of international recruits. We report on a project which evaluated one UK HEI's novel response to this issue which other institutions may find valuable. Our institution is located in three separate UK locations, including central London. In the UK, we employ 90 different nationalities, with 11% of our staff self-identifying as 'international'. Globally, we have 70 academic partner institutions in 32 different countries.

Methodological Framework and Preliminary Findings

Responding to the ECU (2013, p. 77) call to 'provide accessible IAG [information, advice and guidance] to international staff', this institution commissioned an external consultancy to run workshops specifically designed for international recruits called '*Surviving and Thriving in a New Cultural Environment*'. Although course evaluations were positive, they provided only limited insight on the benefits of this initiative. Research was therefore scoped into the cultural perspectives of staff who had attended the workshop compared with other international staff who had not had such an opportunity.

The aim of the research we will report on in this paper was to explore the strengths and shortcomings of the induction process as perceived by international staff. The objectives were, firstly, to contribute to the enhancement of current induction practice both in our own and other HEIs; and

secondly, to assess the need for subsequent, wider-ranging research – for example, to interview colleagues at some of our institution's overseas partner locations, and/or to undertake longitudinal studies of international staff experiences.

Since the project employed a qualitative approach, our own positionality is significant. The project team included one researcher self-identifying as international, one with significant international academic development experience, a specialist in international business, and a member of an intercultural research centre who had a particular interest in academic induction.

A review of literature on international academic induction and scholarly migration underpinned the entire project. Once our ethical clearance application for a pilot study had been approved, we were able to recruit a purposive sample of participants (Denscombe, 2014) and undertake a series of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

The interviews and focus groups centred on four key areas of participants' induction experience: background and motivations, first impressions, perceived support from the institution, and the benefits of hindsight. We undertook thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the verbatim-transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups. Given the project team's strong interests in the induction and multicultural academic experience, this analysis was inevitably reflexive (Kim, 2015) as we identified experiences and responses that we had either encountered ourselves or had observed in international colleagues. Three overarching themes emerged which provide a structure for this paper, namely: assumed knowledge (capital), isolation and cultural differences (habitus), benefits of transition to the UK (field). Our recommendations centre on extending formal induction, and capitalizing on unofficial support mechanisms.

Those who took part in the *New Cultural Environment* workshop were enthusiastic about its efficacy; however, some would have liked to have understood the stratification of UK HE better *before* making the potentially life-changing career decision of moving to the UK. Furthermore, our preliminary analysis indicates that this HEI fails to take full advantage of the cultural diversity that international recruits embody, thereby reproducing existing inequalities.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Inadequacies are reported in the induction of academic staff internationally (see for example, Billot & King, 2016). Hence, it is unsurprising that the induction of subsets of academics, such as international staff, are similarly reported as inadequate (for example, Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010; Walker, 2015). The use of a workshop to help new international recruits adapt to the UK HE cultural context has proven effective. Nonetheless, other interventions are needed to support these recruits, alongside a recognition of their cultural diversity. Helms, Rumbley, Brajkovic, and Mihut (2015) suggest that policies to ensure that international scholars feel welcomed are increasingly important, citing examples from Germany and the United States. Universities, including our own, are coming to recognise the importance of providing individualized support for new staff. This project underlines the necessity of tailoring induction to the diverse needs and aspirations of individual international recruits.

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