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Short-Term International Mobility as a Faculty Development Mechanism: Lessons from Kazakhstani higher education

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Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract: Short-term faculty mobility remains largely invisible for scholars of internationalization. There is a lack of understanding about the rationale for participation in short-term mobility, the nature of experiences, individual and institutional outcomes, and the process of domestic reintegration. The purpose of the study is to understand using interview data from Kazakhstan what happens during, after, and as a result of short-term international mobility, especially in terms of development of individual and institutional research capacity. The study is framed with Anthony Giddens (1984) Structuration theory, where social structure is viewed both the medium and the outcome of social action. The study reveals that the extent to which faculty members are strategic in planning their research experiences abroad and the amount of efforts they spend on modifying their own research and institutional research environment upon return depend on two factors: individuals' motivation and ability to conduct research and university leadership support of research activities.

Paper: Introduction

According to Rumbley and DeWitt. (2017), international faculty mobility is a very important and understudied topic within studies of internationalization. Meanwhile, short-term faculty mobility remains largely invisible for scholars of internationalization. There is a lack of understanding about the rationale for participation in short-term mobility, the nature of experiences, individual and institutional outcomes, and the process of domestic reintegration. The purpose of the study is to understand using interview data from Kazakhstan what happens during, after, and as a result of short-term international mobility, especially in terms of development of individual and institutional research capacity.

Theoretical framework

The study was theorized using Structure-Agency perspective, in particular, Anthony Giddens (1984) Structuration theory. This theory moves beyond the dualism of structure and agency, argues for the "duality of structure", where social structure is viewed both the medium and the outcome of social action". According to this theory, during the mobility program, the experience can be viewed as a product of the structure of the program, but also as a result of agency of the faculty in trying to modify the program to achieve his personal and institutional goals. After international mobility, the experience is the result of the structure of the research environment in the country, but also the

product of the agency of the returnee in attempting to change the environment to achieve their personal goals as a scholar.

Method

The data for the study was collected via 25 face-to-face open-ended interviews with Kazakhstani faculty. During the interviews, questions were asked about what happened before, during and after the trip and how the trip affected changes in research and teaching. To achieve greater variability in responses we used maximal variation sampling. The criteria of variation were (1) gender; (2) rank; (3) country of stay; (4) discipline; (5) type of university; (6) English ability; (7) type of funding. The interviews were transcribed, and the data was analyzed using qualitative thematic coding. Thematic analysis of results was guided by the theoretical framework, the literature review and emerging hypotheses.

Findings

Our study revealed that most scholars in Kazakhstan are funded by third parties with little involvement of their institution in planning and administration of the trip. The goal of most participants of such mobility is to enhance understanding of instructional approaches and academic processes. Few individuals participate in focused research visits. Most research activity during the trip is focused on independent reading. The visits are typically poorly planned by both the participant, the donor and the host organization. Host institutions provide only basic support, while frequently charging the funding agencies significant amounts of money. Participants' experiences depend largely on availability of a good formal or informal faculty mentor.

When faculty members come back to Kazakhstan they are faced with harsh reality of constrained research environment with a lack of labs, equipment, funding and leadership support. Few universities in Kazakhstan view the short-term international experience as valuable for themselves. The dominant view is that the trips benefit mostly the individual in terms of professional development. In addition, few universities treat the short-term trips as leading to research capacity enhancement. Hence, gains in research-related expertise of the returnees is neither recognized, nor capitalized on.

However, even after a short trip, the participants of short-term mobility want to make changes in themselves or in their environment. Most become motivated to learn English more and to participate in other opportunities. However, most limit their transformative efforts to their own classroom and individual teaching practices and very few significantly change the extent to which and the way in which they conduct research. If any changes happen in research, they occur in thematic orientations. sometimes the use of new techniques and equipment.

Two factors determine an individual's agency capacity. At the individual level, it is a combination of motivation and capacity to pursue research. At the institutional level it is the level of leadership support for research. Those who have low motivation and low capacity – neither engage in research during and after the trip, nor try to change the research environment regardless of leadership support. In the absence of leadership support, those who have high motivation– try to engage in research during the trip and try to change individual research strategies (pursuing collaborations, new topics, new approaches) and teaching at the graduate level upon return; these changes are small

because short trips do not lead to a significant increase in capacity. If leadership support is present, those who have both motivation and capacity also try and become empowered to produce organizational changes in research environment once they are back at their institution.