

Unpacking the ‘international’ in international academic mobility

Vera Spangler¹, Lene Møller Madsen¹, Hanne Kirstine Adriansen²

¹University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark. ²Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Academic mobility is often perceived as an important part of the internationalisation of higher education. Universities increasingly put effort into attracting international academics as part of their internationalisation strategies. Yet, research within internationalisation has largely focused on international student mobility, internationalisation of the curriculum, and internationalisation as a policy field. International academics’ experiences of working and living in foreign countries are still under-researched. Drawing on qualitative interview data with 20 globally mobile academics, we aim to understand what and who the ‘international’ represents and how it is constructed in international academic mobility. Herein, we question and unravel the critical and challenging use of the terminology ‘international’. Our findings show how globally mobile scholars understand what it means to be an ‘international academic’ in different places. The empirical accounts bring to the forefront aspects of who counts as international and what it takes to be recognised as ‘being international’.

Full paper

Background

Internationalisation has developed as one of the key goals and policy

strategies in a majority of higher education institutions' strategic plans (Altbach, 2013). Mobility and internationalisation are tightly connected; mobility forms one of the key mechanisms through which internationalisation occurs (Morley et al., 2018). Academic mobility is often perceived as an important part of the internationalisation of higher education (Pherali, 2012). Being geographically mobile and 'international' has become important for academics in higher education.

Yet, international academics' experiences of working and living in foreign countries are still under-researched (Kim, 2010; Rao et al., 2018), and there are no accurate statistics capturing the numbers of mobile academics across the globe (Yudkevich et al., 2017). There are several challenges in defining the group of international academics. Their motives, modes of mobility and lengths of stay vary (Yudkevich et al., 2017), mirrored also in the various names across the literature referring to this group, such as foreign academics, transnational academics, migrant, or immigrant academics (Rao et al., 2018).

This work in progress explores how individual scholars describe what it means to be an 'international' academic. Herein, we question and unravel the critical and challenging use of the terminology 'international', and thereby aim to understand what and who the 'international' represents and how it is constructed in international academic mobility.

Method and aim of the study

We draw on qualitative interview data with 20 globally mobile academics (post-docs, assistant, associate, and full professors) involved in teaching and researching at three universities in Denmark. The interviews were carried out either in-person or online. The in-person interviews involved a timeline approach (Adriansen, 2012), which allows to situate the participants' narratives in time and space. The online interviews were 'conventional, semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996).

Based on the empirical material, we seek to explore how the individual interviewees ascribe and make meaning of what it means to be an 'international' academic in Denmark, including reflections

on their experiences of living and working in other places. As research has focused primarily on movement to English-speaking countries (Uusimaki & Garvis, 2016), Denmark forms an interesting case as a non-English speaking country at the periphery of the hegemonic Anglo-American academy, while it is at the same time part of the affluent Global North (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021).

Findings

Across the interviews, we can see that the 'international' carries institutionalised notions, coloured by the increasing efforts of universities to profile themselves with having international faculty. However, some of our participants responded rather critical and repellent towards the term, reporting feelings of "being used" strategically as the 'international', stating also that they felt more like a foreigner rather than international.

One German scholar reported that she did not necessarily feel international as she just moved across the border. At the same time, she felt she was expected by her colleagues to learn the language more easily and adapt to the similar culture smoothly, whereas she said that it was still "daily hard work" to live and work in a foreign country. In line with this is also some of the participants' perception of the 'international' as someone/something outside of Europe. One academic said, for instance, that he sees himself as a European academic, while someone else mentioned that he would consider himself as international because he was "easily labelled to be non-European".

The narratives of the participants also show that they have different experiences in Danish academia in relation to the places where they come from, highlighting (implicit) uneven geographies and hierarchies among the international academics. One scholar said, for example, that she felt native English speaker were "looked upon in a more positive way", whereas she felt that if you spoke English with an accent, you were perceived as "a different kind of international", and she felt it was more problematic to be integrated.

Conclusion and outlook

Our findings show how globally mobile scholars understand what it

means to be an 'international academic'. In a further analysis, we aim to link these perceptions to how the 'international academic' is constructed in policy and strategy documents, and how this aligns with or differs from the individual academic negotiations and experiences in their everyday academic world. Herein, we also seek to attend to the raised aspects within the empirical accounts of who counts as international and what it takes to be recognised as 'being international'. The rich material of the life history accounts invites also for a further analysis of what the 'international' is and becomes beyond the institution and everyday university context.

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