

Academics' International Teaching Journeys: Personal Narratives of Transition in Higher Education

Anesa Hosein, Namrata Rao, Chloe Shu-Hua Yeh, Ian M. Kinchin (Editors)

Bloomsbury (2018)

Review by Maria Kukhareva

Contact: maria.kukhareva@beds.ac.uk

In the context of the changing Higher Education landscape in the UK, this book offers a valuable insight into how diverse, and vividly complex are the lives, expectations and negotiated realities of international academics. These arguably less visible realities serve as an undercurrent, and as context, which interacts in a dynamic way with the authors' roles as academics in the British Higher Education system. The stories shed light on the complexities of the process and the state of transition, adaptation and negotiation; as well as the associated sense of vulnerability and otherness in relation to the expectations and drivers of their institutions, and of course, the HE sector.

Within these stories, very human and authentic but also effectively theorised, we get to walk part of the authors' journey of changing continents, countries, cultures and roles – which provides us with a needed perspective on internationalisation from the subjects' point of view, as opposed to the 'local' perspective, which is more frequently available. The narratives remind us of the rarely obvious complexity of navigating change – something we as scholars, and our institutions, are perhaps more sensitive to with regards to international students and their needs. Yet, just as in the case of students who leave home to study in the UK, the professional and personal journeys are impossible to separate: adaptation and acculturation take place on all levels simultaneously: we do not just have to adjust to a different culture; we have to be very fast learners when it comes to the new education system as well as education culture – despite being experts in education – but in 'other' education, as it turns out. Moreover, UK universities are far from being a homogenous group, and, therefore, starting in a Russell group university would potentially look and feel very different from settling at a post-1994 institution.

It must be said, however, that this adaptation and reframing (giving something up, challenging oneself, recalibrating) features both frustration (for example, feeling unsupported), but also opportunity to grow (for example entering the learner-centred paradigm, and as a result becoming a more engaging and insightful academic).

Therefore, these are not only stories of struggle and alienation, but also of dynamic negotiation and resilience. The stories clearly point to the richness of the human capital, brought by the international academics: the new insights, the comparative stance, a fresh 'lens' through which UK HE can be both critiqued and appreciated. If captured, this rich experience of transition, critique, appreciation and reflection can provide a powerful underpinning for our colleagues' pedagogical practice, which can encourage transformation in students' learning, as well as wider academic community. If 'pedagogy and ways of knowing are shaped by the kinds of places and moves which we experience', as one of the contributors suggests (Enriquez-Gibson, 2018, p.137), then we clearly need to capture, preserve, and embed the potential of personal and academic transitions.

It may be worth mentioning that I am reviewing this book while wearing two ‘hats’: an international academic – a ‘white other’ (Enriquez-Gibson, 2018), who moved to the UK from Russia seventeen years ago; and as an Educational Developer – whose role it is to support academic staff in their settling in and career development. I could see my own experiences echoed in these narratives, and the duality (or even, multiplicity?) of being an international academic, whose approach to scholarly and pedagogical practice comes from at least two places: ‘home’ academic culture, and the academic culture that I am operating in right now. At the same time, I could not but apply a searching and critical approach to the ways that departments, institutions and the sector can best respond to, and build on, the growing internalisation of Higher Education in the UK, supporting non-UK academics in both getting to know the new academic culture, and sharing the knowledge and experience that they bring with them to their new role.

With this in mind, the book will be of interest to readers who have gone, or are going through a process of settling into an academic career at a UK institution. At the same time, ‘local’ academics may find this book helpful in terms of understanding the factors and experiences that could be shaping their peers’ approach to academic activity. Parallels may be drawn here with the body of literature that focuses on experiences of international students: questions could be posed here as to whether institutions, and the whole sector, should be considering more structured and tangible approaches to supporting non-UK academics and both settling in, and sharing their human capital with the scholarly community through constructive tensions and dialogue.

Equally, these personal narratives offer helpful insights to organisational and educational development units, for example, in terms of reviewing and enhancing existing structures and processes to accommodate the needs of the early career international staff (such as induction, mentoring and Postgraduate certificate in Higher Education). In parallel, we need to explore new and existing opportunities, which invite more experienced non-UK staff to share their expertise and promote knowledge transfer around scholarship and pedagogy. Considering that around a third of academic staff in the British Higher Education is from outside the UK, and this number is growing (Hristov and Minocha, 2017), addressing this gap in the sector is becoming increasingly important, at the level of policy and practice.

References

Enriquez-Gibson, J. (2018) Pedagogy of academic mobility. In: Hosein, A., Rao, N, Shu-Hua, C., Kinchin, I.M. (Eds) *Academics’ international teaching journeys: Personal narratives of transition in Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 125-141

Hristov, D. and Minocha, S. (2017) The role of international academic community in shaping global campuses and classrooms [online] *Universities UK* [viewed 1 October 2018] Available from: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Pages/the-role-of-the-international-academic-community-in-shaping-global-campuses-and-classrooms.aspx>