

Transnational Academics and the Internationalization of Higher Education: What does the Literature tell us?

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Introduction

Universities around the globe, particularly those in the industrialized world, claim internationalization of their institutions as a key element of their mission statements, including my own institution (University of New Brunswick, 2010). Internationalization initiatives include increasing international student recruitment, study abroad programs, and international development projects. Beyond increased student enrolment, many institutions view internationalization as a way to engage with other cultures, to develop teaching and research relationships internationally, and to develop global citizens.

National and international level education agencies and organizations actively support the internationalization of higher education. The Association of Canadian Deans of Education published the Accord on the Internationalization of Education which “seeks to stimulate discussion of critical issues and institutional responsibilities in the internationalization of education, and to give careful consideration to representations of marginalized individuals, groups and communities” (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014, p. 1). The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, now Universities Canada (2014), examined internationalization at 75 Canadian Universities and found that 84% listed internationalization as a top priority for strategic planning.

In 2009, UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education identified internationalization as one of its 3 key themes (UNESCO, 2009). Many governments have also emphasized internationalization as part of their policies around higher education. Until recently, there has been a lack of policy interest with regard to internationalization at provincial and federal levels of government in Canada (Jones, 2009). In January 2014, the Canadian federal government launched the International Education Strategy, part of which addressed the notion of encouraging and enhancing internationalization within higher education institutions (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2014). Thus, while historically internationalization has been somewhat piecemeal at many institutions, there now appears to be an opportunity to move forward with regard to internationalization as a structured, pan-Canadian process.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) reports that Canada is the seventh most popular destination for international students and that the number of international students at Canadian institutions increased by 84% between 2003 and 2013 (CBIE, 2014). Increasing numbers of institutions are establishing satellite campuses, particularly in newly developed and developing nations, and there has been some progress towards internationalizing the home campus with increased services for international students and their families.

Internationalization

Universities now operate in a competitive international environment. Selmer and Luring (2009) note that higher education institutions are increasingly searching globally for new talent and that more and more academics are employed abroad.

Despite this, Marginson (2008) notes there is little data on permanent or longer-term migration for academics. Desjardins and King (2011) report that 1/5 of doctoral graduates in Canada planned to move internationally for academic work and 55% of those surveyed indicated their wish to eventually return to Canada to continue their career.

The existing literature predominantly centres on curriculum development, student recruitment, retention, mobility and experience, the export of higher education (particularly from Western institutions), and the potential hegemonic effects of globalization for higher education (Rostan & Höhle, 2014; Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013; Kim & Brooks, 2012; Pherali, 2012; Kim & Locke, 2010; Kim, 2010; Harman, 2005). In contrast to the prevailing dearth of research, the Changing Academics Profession survey (Huang, Finkelstein, & Rostan, 2014) includes a focus on faculty experience. This research, however, is on the impact of internationalization on faculty generally and is not specific to transnational academics or the potential role they may play in the internationalization of higher education (Rostan & Höhle, 2014; Vabø, Padilla-González, Waagene, & Naess, 2014; Finkelstein & Sethi, 2014). Thus, the experiences of transnational academics professionally and personally as well as the potential contribution they can make to the process of internationalization remain largely overlooked. Indeed, the need for more research on the experience of transnational academics is echoed in much of the literature. (See for example, Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013; Kim & Brooks, 2012; Pherali, 2012; Kim, 2010; Kim & Locke, 2010;).

Transnational Academics

Academic mobility and transnational migration for academic work has become increasingly common (Kim & Brooks, 2012, Marginson, 2000). Research on the issue is beginning to emerge in countries such as the United Kingdom (Walker, 2015) and Australia (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013). Still, the lived experiences of academics working transnationally and the experiences and contributions of transnational faculty remain unexamined (Kim, 2009), especially in Canada. Discussions of university-based internationalization predominantly centre on curriculum development, student recruitment and retention, and the potential hegemonic effects of globalization for higher education. One significant element of the internationalization process that has been consistently over-looked is the faculty. Very little has been written about the lived experiences of academics working transnationally and what has been written is largely a presentation of statistics used in support of a broader discussion on higher education generally. Transnational faculty face a variety of challenges including differences between higher education systems, organizational culture, and social norms. Another challenge faced by transnational academics is professional development. In leaving behind the professional networks developed in one's home country and institution, transnational academics must cultivate new professional networks. Despite the global nature of academic and professional associations, geographic location continues to impact one's networks. Notwithstanding the extensive work that has been done around internationalization across many jurisdictions, very little work has been done around the potential role of transnational faculty and the challenges they face.

The Multitude of Challenges for Transnational Academics

Transnational faculty face a variety of challenges in transitioning to a new organizational and cultural environment. For example, there are differences between higher education systems, organizational culture and social norms that can impede their professional development and personal transition. Another challenge faced by transnational academics is that of professional development. In leaving behind the professional networks they developed in their home countries, transnational academics must cultivate new professional networks. This can be particularly challenging for early career academics who may be unfamiliar with research and academic associations in their new country (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013).

Early career transnational academics must establish networks in a new research environment while also negotiating the transition from PhD student to tenure-track academic. For early career academics, the additional time needed to establish and develop these new relationships can impact the promotion process. Furthermore, the gendered division of labour and stereotypical spousal roles doubly challenge female transnational academics. Not only do female transnational academics face challenges of professional development and social and cultural adjustment, as the primary caregiver for their families they also shoulder the burden of the adjustment of their children and spouse as well. Gender, professional development, and the length of time since their initial migration add additional challenges for the female transnational academic that would not be faced by more senior, established academics who engage in short-term migration.

Until recently, research on transnationalism focused on organizational management in the context of transnational mobility. In much of this literature, the focus is on

neoliberalism and the changing nature of the academy (Davies & Bansel, 2005) and on internationalization as an overall process. Early literature on transnational academics examined expatriate academics' experiences in comparison to the experiences of expatriate business personnel (Davies & Bansel, 2005; Richardson, 2001, 2009). More recent literature acknowledges the impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education noting an increased emphasis on individuality and competitiveness, which serves to heighten the experience of isolation for transnational academics (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013). Current research reveals numerous challenges for transnational academics as they try to navigate new cultures and new higher educational systems. Thomas and Lalau-Aduli (2013) identified a few of these challenges: loss of identity, isolation, language, separation from family and sometimes spouses, unfamiliar social norms, adjusting to culturally-specific pedagogy, and perceived disparities in treatment from colleagues and institutions.

There is some discrepancy in the literature as to the extent of academic capital lost for transnational academics. Pherali (2012) writes that transnational academics have an abundance of *academic* capital but lack *cultural* capital. Here, the implication is that the transnational academics' advanced qualifications generally enhance their academic capital overall. Other research shows that while academic capital is often recognized for transnational academics at the hiring stage, the same cannot be said during the tenure and/or promotion stages of their careers (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013; Richardson, 2009b). Richardson's (2009b) findings suggest that the career development of transnational academics may be influenced by the extent to which those making tenure and/or promotion

decisions and funding bodies appreciate “geographic flexibility” (p. S167).

The teaching experience of the transnational academics can also be of value because it can facilitate “the broadening of perspectives on teaching, learning and scholarship, the incorporation of specific cultural and scientific skills not generally available in the host (institution) context, the building of tolerance and understanding among staff and students” (Welch, 2005, p. 72). However, this is often unrecognized by senior administration and colleagues (Richardson, 2009b). Thomas and Malau-Aduli (2013) found that productive contributions to teaching and research are compromised for transnational academics as they “manage these myriad challenges associated with cross-cultural transition” (p. 37). According to Pherali (2012), transnational academics must “acquire culturally sensitive teaching skills as an effort to integrate into the new academic community of practice” (p. 329). Selmer and Luring (2009) suggest transnational faculty can present challenges to institutional HR departments unaccustomed to cross-cultural experience. As McGinn, Ratkovic and Wolhunter (2013) note, “The international experience of immigrant academics may not be sufficiently recognized and valued by their institutions” (p. 56).

Conclusion

There appear to be few supports in place to aid transnational academics in their transitions both professional and personal. Studies have shown that transnational academics receive limited support both pre- and post-arrival (Thomas & Malau-Adali, 2103; Richardson, 2009b). Thomas and Malau-Aduli found that “Senior management and colleagues *assumed* that these

NIA [new international academics] would work things out for themselves and *assumed* that norms governing academic life at [institution studied] were obvious” (Thomas & Malau-Adali, 2013 p. 47, emphasis in original). The lack of cultural and academic capital creates a gap between the transnational and local academics with regard to how things work both within the higher educational system and the broader culture. Many transnational academics are left to navigate deeply embedded local customs in both higher education and the broader social environment by themselves.

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Biography

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