

Broadening Our Understanding of “International Academic Staff”: Nationality as a New Marker of Diversity

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International academic staff in higher education are considered *per se* a signal of attractiveness and success. The more a system attracts them, the better that system is. The United Kingdom is one of those countries attracting many international academics.

Success and Its Drawback

The percentage of international academic staff in the United Kingdom rose consistently in the past years, reaching 23.4 percent of all academic staff in terms of full-time equivalent by 2020–2021. This growth is continuing despite Brexit casting doubts about the country’s attractiveness. There have been less EU academics in the past years, but the number of non-EU staff hired in the United Kingdom have more than compensated that deadlock. The percentage of international staff is also likely to grow in the coming years, as faculties from abroad are on average younger than their British colleagues. For instance, international staff within the 31–35-year-old band—a typical entry age in the academic system—represent above 35 percent of the international staff population.

Literature has often highlighted the extent to which higher education systems benefit from having more international staff. Attracting international faculty has *per se* become a key issue. It is not only a matter of valuable labor supply. Employing a large and ever increasing number of international staff is also a sign of high demand on the employer’s side. Nowadays, UK universities need international staff to run them.

Another stream of research about international academic staff highlights the issue of adaptation, which deals with cultural differences. Within this stream, international staff are often referred to as a token minority. However, this is no longer the reality for higher education systems that have been highly successful in attracting international employees. When international staff make up a significant proportion of the workforce, they are no longer a token minority.

In this article, we discuss the findings of a recent study on international staff working in the United Kingdom. The study explored their careers, assuming that when international staff move from being a small, elite minority to becoming a significant proportion of the workforce, something may change. For instance, international staff at UK universities are not only “talents” assessed according to research criteria. They also extensively cover the essential teaching functions of these global providers. International staff do not populate only the postdoctoral subset of faculties. International teaching-only staff (a recently established academic career track) represent around 23 percent of all teaching-only staff. Thus, the elite international minority committed mostly to research is a thing of the past. International staff are now fully immersed in all academic functions and involved in wider organizational constraints. Advanced metrics in teaching and specific organizational solutions engender the rationale for this research: the issue of adaptation.

Dimensions of Adaptation

Much of the existing literature and practice on adaptation fails to account for the implications deriving from the fact that international staff are not native to the system. As such, they may struggle to understand norms and expectations—many of which are never made explicit to them during staff training, probation, mentorship, or the like.

Abstract

International academic staff in higher education are considered *per se* a signal of attractiveness and success. In this article, we discuss the findings of a recent study on international staff working in the United Kingdom. International staff are now fully immersed in all academic functions in their institutions and involved in wider organizational constraints, which raises the issue of their adaptation. Nationality appears to be an important and different marker of diversity.

National identity might represent a more overarching different type of diversity—one dealing with culture.

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Recent longitudinal qualitative research identified some frictions between international staff's assumptions and their context. Over time, there is a process of assimilation, as international staff come to understand through their own experience what is important and relevant, the rationale behind certain regulations and practices, and how to communicate the actions that they plan to perform. These patterns of adaptation are also a by-product of an expanding system and the way it is organized and regulated, making the issue more pressing.

In this regard, it is useful to list some dimensions of adaptation categorized via qualitative methods. First, novel or increased standardizing procedures result in much tighter managerial practices. Second, compared to many other countries, metrics receive more attention in the United Kingdom, especially in teaching. Third, metrics are in turn coupled with practices, which are often tacit and at first incomprehensible for newly arrived international staff. Other dimensions deal with rationales about research grants; different collegial and managerial styles, and the relationship between nonacademic and academic authorities; different expectations regarding accountability; and different quality assurance practices.

A Different Diversity

One possible implication is that highly internationalized systems of higher education, such as in the United Kingdom, would benefit from explicitly recognizing that nationality is an important and different marker of diversity in the system. Diversity by nationality is arguably different from other forms of diversity. The current discourse about antidiscriminatory policies by, say, sexual orientation or ethnicity are typically framed within a country. National identity might represent a more overarching different type of diversity—one dealing with culture. Empirical evidence confirms that this type of diversity is relevant when discussing one's attempts at moving up the academic ladder, especially during one's first years of professional experience in the United Kingdom.

Simmel's notion of "strangers" might help to conceptualize how this dimension of diversity should be understood. For Simmel, "strangers" are individuals who are in a place to stay and remain, but are viewed by locals as outliers. They are both close and distant, at the same time an exogenous and new, but familiar, presence.

Despite the fact that it is common sense to believe that faculty are open-minded, cosmopolitan, polyglot, adaptable, and prone to change, issues of adaptation driven by nationality probably occur more often than expected. Mertonian norms would suggest that there are common values that any faculty would agree upon. Nevertheless, higher education systems are different from each other and these differences frame the way that faculties understand their roles in them. This research might thus have glimpsed only a part of this problem.

International faculty bring, often implicitly, different tacit assumptions in terms of practices and expectations. This recent research about adaptation issues gives an interpretation to occasional and unnecessary frustrations that form an obstacle to unleashing international staff's potential. Implications of this research are relevant for any global provider of higher education that needs to balance cultural differences, expectations of global openness, and increasingly tightening governance practices. ▲