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Transnational academic mobility and the academic profession

Terri Kim⁹ and William Locke¹⁰

Introduction

The combined impacts of expansion and globalisation on higher education are usually discussed primarily in relation to students and their mobility, funding, higher education institutions as organisations, research and knowledge flows and graduate labour markets. Little attention has so far been paid, however, to the constituency that is central to many of these developments and, perhaps, at least equally affected by them: the academic profession. As a result, assumptions about, for example, the international migration of academics, the conditions favouring and inhibiting mobility, the nature of international academics' experiences in their host institutions and countries and the broader impact of academic mobility on styles of scholarship and intellectual traditions, remain largely unexamined. As Roger King asks in a more general way elsewhere in this report, is there global convergence or are there enduring national variations in academic mobility?

The international study of the *Changing Academic Profession* (CAP) – the United Kingdom part of which is led by CHERI – sheds some light on these issues, but further research is needed to fully illuminate the impact of transnational academic mobility on the academic profession (and vice versa) globally and in the UK. Here we draw on initial analyses of the CAP study findings, together with national and international data on academic mobility, in order to sketch out a research agenda on transnational academic migration and UK higher education.

International patterns of academic mobility

Initial analysis of the CAP survey findings suggests that we can summarise the characteristics of academic flows between (and within) national higher education systems in the following terms (Bennion and Locke, 2010):

- a) 'Study abroad' describes the movement of individuals out of a national higher education system to undertake doctoral training abroad before re-entering the system for post-doctoral study and/or employment.
- b) 'Magnetic' refers to the flow of academics to a national higher education system for study, work or both.

The international study of the *Changing Academic Profession* is examining the nature and extent of the changes experienced by the academic profession in recent years, the reasons for these changes and their consequences. The core of the research is a survey of academics in over 20 countries worldwide. The UK study was conducted by CHERI and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Universities UK, the Higher Education Academy and the Universities and Colleges Union.

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c) 'Self-contained' portrays the internal movement of academic staff from study to employment within a national higher education system or even within a single institution.

It appears that countries can display one or more of these characteristics. For example, the United States and UK higher education systems attract individuals to study and work whilst also exhibiting a strong self-contained domestic labour market. The influence of US universities in attracting scholars is well documented. These institutions are open and flexible, provide generous scholarships and salaries and are thus extraordinary global attractors of talent. US research relies on foreign doctoral assistants and the country is the main destination for short-term academic visits as well as for later career migration. Yet, there is also a large majority of US academics who complete their training and remain employed within the national system for their entire careers.

In other countries one characteristic tends to predominate. In the case of Korea and Mexico, for example, this is 'study abroad'. It appears that significant proportions of Korean and Mexican academics study for their doctorates outside of these countries (mainly in the US) and then return to take up academic employment and, in the case of Korea, post-doctoral study. This situation has been driven by the limited educational choices and a strong public demand for the best education possible which has not been satisfied domestically. In Mexico, barely 1,000 students were enrolled in Mexico's own PhD programmes in 2001 compared with 45,000 in the US (Casanova-Cardiel, 2005).

The international recruitment of staff in Hong Kong makes it a major importer of talent and the dominant academic flow can be characterised as 'magnetic'. However, the high proportion of doctorates obtained outside the territory is a significant reduction from previous surveys. Nevertheless, the majority of Hong Kong academics who originated in mainland China obtained their doctorates in the US or elsewhere. Lastly, Japan, China and Italy are examples of 'self-contained' systems with the majority of academics stating they completed their studies in the country in which they are now working. These countries are either more ethnically homogeneous, do not use English as a language of instruction, and/or have a relatively small range of other countries to draw upon which speak their language.

A quantitative survey like the CAP study can begin to map the flows of academics from country to country, but more qualitative approaches will be needed to explore the impact of these movements on the quality and nature of research, for example. Such investigations could also assess the extent to which the intellectual traditions in the host countries are being influenced by new styles of scholarship and the impact of transnational flows on disciplinary differentiation and interdisciplinary knowledge.

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Regional and national policy frameworks for academic mobility

Academic mobility is increasingly the subject of policy initiatives. However, given the nature of academic research and the strong emphasis on partnerships, academic researchers in general have more opportunities to become mobile than those who mainly teach. For example, the European Research Council's Green Paper, 'The European Research Area: New Perspectives' (CEC, 2007) stresses the importance of transnational academic mobility for the European Research Area and highlights the necessity for realising a single labour market for 'researchers':

'A key challenge for Europe is to train, retain and attract more competent researchers. Moreover, the seamless mobility of researchers across institutions, sectors and countries is even more important than for other professions: it [transnational academic mobility] constitutes one of the most efficient vehicles for the transmission of knowledge.' (CEC, 2007: 10-11)

As a step towards this goal, the European Strategic Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) established a European 'roadmap' for new and upgraded pan-European research infrastructures, encouraging researchers to create new 'networks of excellence' through the research Framework Programme and to collaborate effectively with business and other stakeholders, both within and across borders 'in the most cost-effective manner'. Overall, the outcomes of EU research Framework Programmes have been positively appraised as having opened up new channels of communication and exchange among different disciplinary specialists to provide a new mode of research and knowledge production that can transcend the national boundaries of academic interests (Benavot *et al*, 2005).

Local, usually national, policy frameworks can sometimes assist transnational academic flows. For example, in the UK, competition for research funding and student recruitment has intensified in recent years. The changes have created both greater job insecurity and market opportunity: including significant numbers of short-term employment contracts among research-only academic staff. In 2007/08, 75 per cent of research-only staff were on fixed-term contracts, including 45 per cent of all academics in the biological, physical and mathematical sciences and 37 per cent in engineering and technology. Increasing transnational academic mobility into and out of the UK is facilitated by this propensity for short-term contracts in UK universities that are linked with specific funded research projects.

Nevertheless, there is a range of factors and issues beyond the control of institutions, however prestigious, and even inter-governmental organisations that can either facilitate or constrain mobility (or both at the same time). These include:

- similarities or differences between countries in pension schemes, national systems of social security and childcare provision (which can present barriers to female researchers in particular);

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- information or the lack of information about these arrangements, the funding and other support available to facilitate movement, the recruitment procedures used in different countries and actual vacancies;
- language and cultural differences and the ascendancy of the English language in education and research;
- differences in salaries, status, workloads, career patterns, promotion procedures and tenure tracks;
- immigration policies and legislation on highly qualified workers, covering visas and work permits and the time and costs attached to applying for and obtaining these, including arrangements for foreign doctoral graduates wishing to take up post-doctoral or other academic positions.

Twenty-seven per cent of full-time academic staff appointed in 2007/08 came from outside the UK

Mobility of academics into and out of the UK

Moving now to the UK, there is clear evidence of an inflow of international academics to the profession. In 2007/08, 38,240 academic staff were non-UK nationals, representing 22 per cent of the total UK academic population and this proportion has increased significantly in recent years. Twenty-seven per cent of full-time academic staff appointed in 2007/08 came from outside the UK (HESA, 2009). A recent survey of higher education institutions found that the most common region for the recruitment of all levels of academic staff was the European Union (EU). For professors and lecturers, the next most common region was North America, and for researchers it was East Asia (UCEA, 2008). For some subject areas, such as business and management and biological, mathematical and physical sciences, the international labour market has become critical due to difficulties of recruiting in the UK. For other areas, also with large proportions of non-UK academics, such as computing and information technology and electrical and electronic engineering, this is not so apparent. The effect of the Research Assessment Exercise on research-intensive higher education institutions seeking to improve their ratings by recruiting 'star' researchers may be one reason for this. Another may be the shortage of UK-domiciled post-doctoral students available to fill teaching posts in certain subjects.

The main countries of origin of foreign academics working in the UK are Germany, the Republic of Ireland, the United States, China, Italy, France and Greece. However, among professors, the largest non-UK national groups are from the United States, the Republic of Ireland, Germany and Australia. China provides the largest single group of non-UK nationals among researchers and this group constitutes approximately two-thirds of all Chinese staff in UK higher education institutions. Non-UK higher education staff tend to be younger than their UK counterparts, with 64 per cent of them under 40, compared with 33 per cent of UK staff (UUK, 2007). They are also highly concentrated in research-intensive universities, with four institutions

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employing 31 per cent and 50 per cent of all academic immigrants to be found in only 12 HEIs in 2002/03 (Sastry, 2005).

Students are the major source of new entrants to the academic profession. In 2007/08, students from outside the UK made up 54 per cent of all full-time postgraduates, with 42 per cent coming from outside the EU (UUK, 2007). The UK's 50,000 international postgraduate research (PGR) students represent more than 15 per cent of the global market share, but 50 per cent of these are concentrated in 18 universities and come from only ten countries. Forty per cent of international PGR students want to remain in the UK at completion of their studies, at least temporarily. The US is the main competitor for the UK, with around 40 per cent of the global market share and more than 120,000 PGR students (data from Kemp *et al*, 2008).

Overall, there are more academics coming into the UK than going out. This is particularly the case at the more junior grades, although there is some outflow at the more senior levels, including professors. Junior researchers account for about two thirds of migration in both directions and around half of these are non-UK nationals, including post-doctoral researchers who may spend fairly short periods in the UK. The CAP survey of UK academics found that a higher proportion of senior than junior academics had obtained their doctorate in the country where they were working – a pattern that was not repeated in most of the other national surveys in the study. In fact, in the UK there is a higher turnover of non-UK academics than UK nationals. In 2002/03, 48 per cent of academic emigrants were non-UK nationals, compared with 53 per cent of recruits from overseas (Sastry, 2005). In particular, non-UK European researchers now appear to be viewing the UK as the place to establish their academic reputations and then return to their own countries (or move on elsewhere) – much as UK academics have viewed the US.

Although not conclusive, analyses commissioned by the Higher Education Policy Institute indicated that UK academics with highly-cited publications to their name were more likely to have been attracted to other English-speaking countries and especially the US, whereas those without would tend towards the EU as their destination (Bekhradnia and Sastry, 2005). Together with an analysis of publications data (Gurney and Adams, 2005), there was also evidence to suggest that, while 16 per cent of UK academics have been employed in a country other than the UK during their careers – often as postdoctoral fellows – they usually returned to the academic profession in Britain (Bekhradnia and Sastry, 2005). A related survey of academic migrants in the UK and elsewhere (WSA, 2005), found the most common reasons given for emigrating was 'career development' and 'intellectual opportunities'. On return, many UK researchers subsequently maintained their international research links which often led to visiting professorships at universities abroad (Gurney and Adams, 2005). In the CAP survey, the UK had one of the highest proportions of respondents from the 17 countries in the

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University leaders of the most prestigious UK universities are more likely to be recruited from universities abroad than the heads of other institutions. For example, the University of Oxford has been led by two foreign Vice Chancellors consecutively, from New Zealand and the United States. The heads of the Universities of Cambridge and St. Andrews have also worked in the United States (Yale and Harvard respectively) and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Manchester is from Melbourne. This raises questions about the development of an elite cadre of academic leaders circulating among the 'world class' universities as increasingly defined by the international rankings.

Developing a research agenda on transnational academic mobility and UK higher education

Overall, it seems, previously sporadic, exceptional and limited international academic links have become increasingly systematic, dense, multiple and transnational, especially so in Europe. Regional and national policies and the strength of particular institutions (as knowledge nodes) are combining with cultural and personal factors to create new patterns of transnational academic mobility. Multiple institutional affiliations have become possible for academics, through employment by two or more institutions simultaneously in transnational research projects, and with differentiated and tailored contracts. What makes contemporary patterns of academic mobility different from past trends is the simultaneity of interlocking relations of the spontaneity of mobile individuals, national and supra-national policy frameworks and institutional networks of universities in the global cyberspace of knowledge flows.

There are a few major studies of transnational migration in general, some higher education policy documents on academic labour markets and more numerous analyses of international student mobility. However, there have been no full-scale (or in-depth) investigations specifically of the international and transnational mobility of university academics in the context of recent changes in academic staffing national higher education policies on 'internationalisation'. Apart from the foreign senior academic leaders who receive media attention, little is known about international academics' lived experiences in British universities.

Transnational academic mobility has been structured by political and economic forces determining the boundaries and direction of flows, and also involves personal choices and professional networks. The patterns of transnational academic mobility in history are discontinuous. Barriers of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, religion and culture and the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion alter. Kim (2009) makes an initial attempt to sketch the possibilities for a historical sociology of transnational academic mobility. These possibilities must begin to include efforts to make sense of the

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transformation of knowledge, as it moves; and of the identity of mobile academics through exploring their lived experiences.

As a start, a future research agenda will need to explore the extent to which transnational academic mobility contributes to: (i) the quality of research and the broadening of the intellectual tradition; (ii) the introduction of new styles of scholarship to the UK; (iii) the influence of senior academic leaders from abroad (whether UK nationals or not); and (iv) disciplinary differentiation and interdisciplinary knowledge.

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