Towards a more active, embedded and professional approach to the internationalisation of academia

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In this reflection, we explore the issue of internationalisation with respect to the academic staff. We argue that universities are employing international academic staff to meet their internationalisation agenda without considering actively how to use their pedagogical knowledge and expertise to create and internationalised environment.

Keywords: international academics, internationalisation

# Introduction

Increasingly, universities are strategically evidencing their international outlook by quoting the proportions of international staff and students in their faculties, as these are key measures on international league tables, such as the Times Higher Education (Hawawini, 2016). Universities may be in danger of promoting superficial internationalization if they concentrate only on increasing these “inward looking” quantitative measures for demonstrating their impact (Hawawini, 2016). Such an instrumental or passive approach may well meet the performativity measures of international rankings. However, without a qualitative global strategy (such as from MIT) which imbues an internationalised philosophy and values, it is unlikely that students and staff will gain the intercultural intelligence, develop a global outlook, generate the competence to solve global problems, or take advantage of the opportunities offered that a truly internationalised university can provide (Knight, 2013).

# International academic staff – left out?

Whilst many universities and exchange programmes have policies, induction programmes and websites to support successful integration of international students, there is limited or no knowledge designed specifically for international academics to acculturate to their university practice (see for example ERASMUS and Fulbright websites). Instead, international academics ad hocly adapt and negotiate their new work environment’s teaching and research expectations and approaches (see for example international personal narratives in Hosein, Rao, Yeh, & Kinchin, 2018). Therefore, international staff rarely get an opportunity to formally understand how to implement their international knowledge and expertise. Equally, little effort is invested in preparing host academics to work effectively and productively in these diverse environments alongside the incoming international academics. The current approach adopted puts the onus on the individuals, be it the international or host staff, or other stakeholders such as the students to find ways to engage productively in these diverse contexts/spaces created as a consequence of recruitment of the international staff and students (Kinchin, Rao, Hosein, & Mace, 2018).

# Active not passive

For universities to capitalise on the benefits of the academic diversity of their workforce and to achieve meaningful or authentic internationalisation, *active internationalisation approaches* are imperative. Thus instead of focusing on quantitative measures, an institution’s philosophy and values should underpin an active internationalisation strategy which engages in an authentic partnership approach (Peters, 2016) where all stakeholders collectively “explore each other’s and their own culture, conceptual systems and values; and to reflect critically on the relationship between culture, knowledge and action within the discipline” (Leask, 2005, p. 122). *Active internationalisation* *approaches* may involve creating enabling social and professional spaces for formal and informal dialogue (Rienties & Hosein, 2015; K. Thomson, 2015; K. E. Thomson & Trigwell, 2018) through authentic partnerships that encourages the development of mutual respect for and understanding of the cultural differences, which inform their academic practices in learning and teaching, research, and other aspects of their work.

# An approach to active internationalisation

We suggest a three-prong approach for *active internationalisation* for international academic staff.

## Pre-arrival preparedness

Just as a good university engages with their prospective students following recruitment by providing them appropriate advice, guidance and information both via their website and induction packs, the prospective international academics should have a pedagogy of preparedness where they engaged in information sharing to prepare them to work in their new contexts (Hosein & Rao, 2018; Mizzi, 2017) such as those already available for pre-service language teachers (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014). Equally, just like the academics engaged in understanding their prospective students via their personal statements or their student information dashboards, universities should develop awareness amongst the host academics of the culture and values of countries from where their prospective colleagues are due to arrive. This may take the shape of staff briefing sessions on intercultural awareness, an online module or arranging virtual meetings with the academic mentors of these prospective colleagues (Hosein & Rao, 2018).

## On arrival preparedness and engagement

Whilst universities do offer generic induction workshops for all new staff often these do not cover the international nuances that may be specific to the discipline. Thus, departmental academic practice philosophy should be about encouraging formal and informal dialogue between and by international and host academics to draw out the rich tacit knowledge of the evolving internationalised environments (Kinchin, et al., 2018). For example, departmental learning and teaching meetings and appraisals should be used as an opportunity for individuals to share their strengths and expertise such that both host and international academics can consider meaningful ways of capitalising on the unique perspective that international academics can offer. By bringing such conversations to the core of the academic work, a more planned professional approach to institutional internationalisation can be adopted (Hosein & Rao, 2018).

## Preparedness of the institutional environment

For active internationalisation, a significant onus rests on the human resources department, the academic development unit and the senior management teams to prepare both international and the host academics to engage productively in these culturally diverse work environments and harness their respective professional uniqueness. However, the process of internationalisation of the institutional environment needs as much attention as does the recruitment of international staff hence careful attention also needs to be given for preparedness of the various stakeholders involved and influenced during this process of internationalisation. These stakeholders may include students, current international and host academic staff and professional support staff such as from libraries, quality assurance, information and technology. A partnership of these stakeholders can co-create the active internationalisation approaches which underpins a philosophy that recognises “diversity is a strength because it brings together a vast range of experience, knowledge and understanding from which we can learn ... there has to be a sense of collective purpose and of pooling our ideas” (Peters, 2016, p. 9).

# A Way Forward

We are, therefore, challenging the academic development community to work in partnership with university stakeholders to shape an active internationalisation strategy that values the creation of appropriate spaces for informal and formal dialogues that allows the building and sharing of (internationalised) pedagogical knowledge and approaches.

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