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Transnational academic mobility and the academic profession in the UK (0080)

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This paper (and conference presentation) investigates academic staff mobility into and out of the UK, the opportunities open to international academics and the conditions favouring and inhibiting this mobility in national, regional and international contexts. It draws on national and international data on the nationality of academics and postgraduate research students and the HE institutions and disciplines they are concentrated in. It also utilises analyses of the results of a survey (conducted by one of the authors) in 2007 of academics for the international study of the Changing Academic Profession, which included questions on 'internationalisation' as one of its themes. The paper raises questions about the nature of international academics' experiences in UK HEIs, the impact of mobility on the UK academic profession and its broader influence on styles of scholarship and intellectual traditions. Finally, it proposes a future research agenda for investigating transnational academic mobility.

Transnational academic mobility and the academic profession in the UK

Background

Scholarship has always been, in part, an international activity. But academic mobility has increased in recent years as a result of globalisation, improved communications, economic integration and the expansion of HE. Studies of academic mobility usually focus on students, the international recruitment market and the increasing international trade in higher education and research (1). There is less published evidence of the transnational flows of academics (2), their experience of working in HEIs, their impact on the academic profession in host nations and the effect of emigration on academics' own countries of origin. This paper (and conference presentation) aims to focus on academic staff mobility into and out of the UK, the opportunities open to international academics and the conditions favouring and inhibiting this mobility in national, regional and international contexts. We raise questions about the nature of international academics' experiences in UK HEIs, the impact of mobility on the UK academic profession and its broader influence on styles of scholarship and intellectual traditions.

Methodology

This paper (already drafted in extended form) draws on national and international data on the nationality of academics and postgraduate research students and the HE institutions and disciplines they are concentrated in. It also utilises analyses of the results of a survey (conducted by one of the authors) in 2007 of academics for the international study of the *Changing Academic Profession (CAP)*, which included questions on 'internationalisation' as one of its themes. Because the available sources of evidence on academics' mobility are limited, we pose questions for further research. Finally, we

sketch the possibilities for a historical sociology of transnational academic mobility, for understanding the identities of mobile academics through exploring their lived experiences and for making sense of the transformation of knowledge as it flows across borders.

Evidence and arguments

In 2007/08, 38,240 academic staff were non-UK nationals, representing 22% of the total UK academic population (3) and this proportion has increased significantly in recent years (4). 27% of full-time academic staff appointed in 2007/08 came from outside the UK (3). This is partly due to the difficulties of recruiting in certain subjects and research-intensive HEIs seeking 'star' researchers to enhance their RAE ratings. A recent survey of higher education institutions found that the most common region for the recruitment of all levels of academic staff was the EU. For professors and lecturers, the next most common region was North America, and for researchers it was East Asia (5).

Overall, there are more academics coming into the UK than going out. In fact, in the UK there is a higher turnover of non-UK academics than UK nationals. In 2002/03, 48% of academic emigrants were non-UK nationals, compared with 53% of immigrants (6). 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. The CAP surveys have confirmed that both the UK and the US attract foreign academics to study and work, whilst also exhibiting a strong self-contained indigenous academic labour market (7).

While 16% 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 (8). The most common reasons given for emigrating was 'career development' and 'intellectual opportunities' (9). On return, many UK researchers subsequently maintained their international research links which often led to visiting professorships at universities abroad (10). In the CAP survey, the UK had one of the highest proportions of respondents from the 17 countries in the study reporting that they collaborated with international colleagues on research projects (7).

Other patterns of transnational academic flows affecting the UK are becoming visible. Contract researchers with 'generic transferable skills' are increasingly mobile and being encouraged to move within policy-driven and funded research networks. Simultaneously the casualisation of academic labour is noticeable among UK universities (11). Senior manager-academics are emerging as a new type of mobile academic leader in the contemporary entrepreneurial universities and are especially prevalent in the English-speaking, neoliberal market-driven economies (12). Within contemporary corporatist university governance, academics are increasingly defined as employees, subject to management imperatives. Discourse about academic leadership is translated into discourse about successful management (11).

Implications

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 (13). 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 shift. 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. Nevertheless, there is a range of factors and issues beyond the control of UK institutions, however prestigious, the UK government and even intergovernmental organisations that can either facilitate or constrain mobility (or both at the same time).

Overall, it seems, previously sporadic, exceptional and limited international academic links have become increasingly systematic, dense, multiple and transnational, especially so in Europe. Multiple institutional affiliations have become possible for some 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 simultaneous and interlocking relations between the spontaneous movement of individuals, national and supra-national policy frameworks and institutional networks of universities (14).

The contemporaneous patterns of transnational academic mobility raise questions about the barriers and opportunities open to international academics and the nature of their experiences in UK HEIs. 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 (UK national or not); and (iv) disciplinary differentiation and interdisciplinary knowledge.

(989 words without bracketed reference footnotes)

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