



Center for International Education Education Research Briefs

Faculty are humans, too: Coping with acculturation when teaching abroad at international branch campuses

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Executive Summary

Since the turn of the 20th century, the desire of US institutions to establish international branch campuses (IBC) to provide instruction in different countries has grown significantly. The phenomenon of faculty members traveling to teach in other parts of the world has also become more prevalent. This research brief unpacks the stress, competing value systems, and the impact on pedagogy faced by five instructors that spent time abroad at an IBC of a Mid-Atlantic university between 2019 and 2022. Using Barry's model of Individual Adaptation Strategies of Acculturation, common themes have emerged regarding factors and reasons for their decision to teach abroad. The instructors also articulated their physical and emotional struggles once they got to the destination – recommending more in-depth pre-departure training sessions and possible topics that should be considered in the onboarding programs moving forward.

Introduction:

Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic, higher education's internationalization and globalization phenomenon grew at a rapid pace (Dewey & Duff, 2009). The number of students going abroad has been on the rise for several decades (Altbach, 2004b; Zaremba, 2021). Concurrently, faculty traveling to teach in other parts of the world has also become more prevalent (Chen, 2022; Nevra & Calikoglu, 2021). Over the last two decades, the desire of US institutions to establish international branch campuses (IBC) to provide instruction in different countries has grown significantly (Cicchetti & Park, 2018). Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) forecasted that by the year 2025, 44% of the total demand for international education would be handled by offshore branch campuses. This prediction has been cited in more recent studies by Han (2022) and Hickey and Davies (2022) when explaining factors for running successful IBCs. Operating branch campuses certainly has been a major factor in the growth of transnational higher education (Aminu et al., 2022).

While it is common to link the concept of education abroad and the acculturation process with one particular higher education stakeholder – international students – surprisingly little research is available from the educators' point of view (Chen, 2022; Seda et al., 2021). Witkowsky (2020) refers to the expatriate work of faculty in higher education, living and working outside their culture and native country. Altbach and Yudkevich (2017) define these instructors as "international faculty" who "hold appointments in countries they were not born or where they did not receive their first post-secondary degree." They allude to

the fact that a successful education abroad experience involves all stakeholders, including the faculty members. Other contemporary scholars illuminated how educators experience similar adjustment and acculturation challenges as the students (Gress & Shin, 2020; Lee & Negrelli, 2018). However, most currently available research on faculty members is limited – as many of them are grounded in short-term study-abroad programs and are not centered around teaching at international branch campuses.

Culturally sensible faculty members fostering global citizens will undoubtedly influence how colleges expand their global presence (Cicchetti & Park, 2018) beyond the global pandemic era. Hartman (2020) noted the theoretical importance of developing the understanding of self and the world as global learning experiences continue to advance in the world of higher education. There are definite similarities and benefits in studying student and faculty transitions. Universities see value in learning more about this process – promoting the positives from the practice and furthering their global brand (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016).

Methodology and Results

Using Berry's (1992) Individual Adaptation Strategies of Acculturation, this study unpacks the stress, shifting emotions, competing value systems, and the impact on pedagogy faced by the scholars. Berry offers a two-dimensional strategy where the first dimension represents the retention or rejection of an individual's native culture. The second dimension refers to the adaptation or rejection of the host culture. The model addresses cohorts such as international students and immigrants – concentrating on four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization.

The study analyzed the acculturation process of five faculty members from a Mid-Atlantic US-based institution that spent time teaching abroad at IBC and returned home between 2019 and 2022. Each of them went through a semi-structured, one-on-one interview that lasted between 75 to 100 minutes. Interviewees were encouraged to share their teaching background and identify the top reasons why they decided to teach abroad at an offshore branch location.

Initial findings have revealed common themes when it comes to factors and reasons: standing interest in other cultures, professional development opportunities, and adding an international experience to their resume. While two of the five instructors previously spent more than a year abroad, the others were brand new to the practice. This difference had an impact on the ways in which the instructors elected to cope with their acculturation strategies – with varying degrees between assimilation and integration with the host culture. Most notably, one faculty of color argued that their experience differed vastly from a White colleague that traveled together even though both were placed in the same educational environment. Others have underlined their employment status as adjuncts (four out of five) and highlighted the difficulty of finding full-time teaching opportunities in the US. These layers added another complexity related to social justice to the education abroad practices, which need further investigation in the future.

Conclusion

Reflecting on their experience, all agreed that the realized benefits far outweighed the challenges they had to overcome. Some had mentioned that their teaching abroad experiences fundamentally changed their pedagogy and classroom management strategies (e.g., speaking slowly and choosing sensible vocabularies to communicate). However, the instructors also voiced their trepidations before traveling, as many felt ill-prepared and unsupported by the department and the institution. According to the two faculty members who went abroad for the first time, their institution currently does not have formal training or orientation sessions for departing educators. Instead, the adjustment responsibilities were assumed by the traveling faculty and handled by a handful of staff at the branch location only when needed. Instructors were puzzled as they wanted to do their due diligence ahead of time to minimize confusion and possible culture shock. One interviewee shared that he “wasted several hundred dollars during the first week figuring out how Wi-Fi and cellular phone plans worked.”

Another issue to note was the over-emphasis on recruitment between campuses and measuring success by the numbers – failing to integrate stakeholders who help realize meaningful qualitative information adequately. While the organization featured a number of faculty members that traveled from the home campus as part of the IBC’s marketing narrative, there was essentially no institutional effort to organize follow-up meetings or debrief sessions to reflect on possible areas of improvement and to lower the hesitancy of faculty members that were on the fence about traveling to the branch location in the near future.

Rumbly and De Wit (2017) underline challenges international faculty could face when deciding to teach abroad. Similar to students making the transition to a new learning environment, acculturation and logistical difficulties were pervasive and understudied as economic incentives alone are not the reasons why faculty members choose to teach abroad. For the five educators that were interviewed, perceptions of acceptance for faculty, the commitment by the destination university to diversity, and high levels of cultural adjustments are all strongly correlated with the feeling of success and satisfaction with participants' overall experience in teaching abroad. The interviewees similarly discussed the importance of having adequate faculty orientation or training sessions before departing the home campus. Some described possible topics such as basic cultural etiquette, public transportation availability, where to get groceries, and self-enrichment opportunities around the vicinity.

Implications and Recommendations

Altbach and Yudkevich (2017) most notably highlighted the experience of international faculty as a phenomenon that needs additional research. More specifically, the authors analyzed the role of international faculty in their destination institution, how they are recruited and promoted, and their role in academia in terms of global mobility. Rumbly and De Wit (2019) add that it was not until recently that the researchers began to observe cultural adjustments and logistical challenges traveling educators face in their new environment. Unlike the international student population that is often involved with multi-day orientation sessions to help them acclimate to the institution and the surrounding area, institutional support for international faculty seems to vary wildly between institutions. This inconsistency should be noted as integrating international faculty is a beneficial two-way process of acquiring equity and developing engagement on campus.

U.S. higher education institutions serve increasingly diverse student populations, and employing faculty members that are culturally sensitive to the student population is imperative (Dumulescu & Muțiu, 2021). Expanding on this study of faculty teaching abroad at IBC will authentically contribute to the ethical internationalization process of US higher education and produce genuine initiative to cultivate more culturally competent instructors. Furthering the research on this trend could lead to creating a beneficial onboarding program and yield fresh perspectives on local and national educational policies (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2021).

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