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Forum

On international scholars' experiences in Finnish higher education: A research note

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Introduction

Internationalization has become a trend in modern universities, being closely associated with academic excellence in both research and education. One of its key drivers is international mobility, with higher education institutions increasingly competing for the best employees on the global labor market. At the same time, research literature on the subject highlights several challenges associated with internationalization, specifically, when it is achieved through the recruitment of staff from abroad. First, internationalization as a concept often lacks clear definition, and the contribution of internationalization to academic excellence is not consistently explained (Herschberg et al., 2018). Second, internationalization is not necessarily beneficial for individual academics. Scholars of foreign background often experience inequalities predominantly occupying temporary positions and frequently facing a glass ceiling in their career development (Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019). Third, inequalities related to being an international scholar intersect with and amplify other types of inequalities, such as gender and racial disparities (Herschberg et al., 2018; Morley et al., 2018). This latter thesis is particularly pronounced in critical studies, which highlight the complexity and fluidity of international scholars' positionalities, shaped by their interactions with diverse socio-political contexts (Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020).

In this research note, I build on the discussion about the controversies of internationalization and reflect upon my experience of interviewing foreign-born academics at one of the Finnish universities. I adopt an

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institutional lens to question the figure of “international scholar” as the prime “carrier” of internationalization. More specifically, I do this by exploring how the diversity among academics labelled "international” is conditioned by their different positions within the organization, as well as by the complexity of organizational environment itself.

Among the Nordic countries, Finland is characterized by a relatively small proportion of international staff in higher education and the under-representation of foreign-born women in prestigious academic positions (Pietilä et al., 2021; Siekkinen et al., 2024). Researchers attribute this pattern to Finnish universities only recently prioritizing internationalization, as well as to an academic job market in which inbred recruitment practices are widespread. While presenting the broad "quantitative" picture, these studies also point out the need for a more nuanced understanding of how foreign-born academics experience Finnish universities, particularly as organizational changes are made in pursuit of internationalization (Pietilä et al., 2021; Siekkinen et al., 2024). Drawing on earlier research that notes the lack of homogeneity among “international scholars” in Finland (Hoffman, 2007), this research note responds to this call.

This text considers how the global trend of internationalization takes shape and gains meaning locally, influencing the teaching and research trajectories of foreign-born scholars in Finnish higher education. The conclusions presented below might be valuable to readers interested in a more nuanced understanding of internationalization in Nordic universities, particularly to those involved in developing internationalization policies and initiatives in educational organizations.

Materials

In December 2024 to February 2025, I conducted qualitative interviews with international scholars affiliated with the social science department at one of the Finnish universities. The project was guided by administrative reasoning. It aimed to explore (and improve) international scholars’ experiences within the department. After the completion of the internal report, both the department administration and the research participants suggested sharing the findings with a broader audience. However, since the interviews were not originally collected for research purposes, the insights from the project are presented in the form of a research note rather than a full-fledged research article.

The ideas discussed below are based on interviews with 15 scholars of non-Finnish origin holding PhD degrees. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, allowing interlocutors the opportunity to discuss what was deemed important to them rather than just responding to a predefined set of questions. The research sample comprised scholars from various disciplines—such as history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and others—and represented different career stages. The sample

incorporated scholars with both permanent contracts and fixed-term contracts, including grant recipients. The sample also reflected a range of the informants' countries of origin and residency statuses in Finland. Language proficiency varied, from those with no knowledge of Finnish to those teaching in Finnish. Of the study participants, seven identified as men, and eight identified as women; seven interviewees reported having childcare responsibilities.

The recruitment of the informants was organized as follows. First, I used information publicly available on the university's webpages to identify (presumably) all international scholars working at the department. After that, I contacted individuals from the resulting list and interviewed those who expressed interest in participating. Being a researcher of non-Finnish origin myself, I could relate in many respects to the interviewees' experiences; this played a role in facilitating the conversations and contributed to a more interactive dialogue. While the interviews provided very rich material regarding the diversity of scholars' perspectives, I cannot develop all the identified themes in sufficient depth here and thus concentrate on my informants' relations with their organizational environment.

Who is an "international scholar"?

From the beginning, my interlocutors—reflexive social scientists themselves—problematized the lack of homogeneity among "international scholars". There was an apparent difference in perspectives and agendas between permanently employed staff and those affiliated with the university through short-term contracts, in particular grant researchers. Scholars from the first group were usually confident in navigating the university and Finnish academia in general and, when asked about possible improvements, often adopted a structurally informed and strategic perspective. Interviewees from the second group, on the contrary, approached the institutional environment in a tactical manner, focusing on immediate tasks. For instance, scholars in more senior and secure positions understood "administrative issues" as matters of representation in the university governance and participation in decision-making. In contrast, those on short-term contracts associated the same topic with practical concerns such as the visa application process or navigating the university's information systems. Similarly, while permanent employees argued that the university should introduce institutional incentives to encourage "international scholars" to teach in Finnish, fixed-term employees were reluctant to invest significant effort in learning the language due to their temporary status in the country.

These contract-dependent differences intersected with the differences in the interviewees' residency statuses and corresponding access to welfare. Most informants identified Finland's strong social security system as a major reason for relocating to the country. However, non-EU citizens holding temporary

residence permits and affiliated with the university through grant agreements were particularly concerned about the continuation of their stay in Finland and perceived their access to welfare as somewhat limited. This insecurity additionally constrained respondents' planning horizons, which was especially worrisome for those with childcare responsibilities.

Alongside the differences in their organizational positions and residency statuses, interviewees varied in how they identified with—or distanced themselves from—the category of "international scholar". For some, similar to what was described in previous studies (Musselin, 2004), being an "international scholar" was an inherently temporary stage—a brief experience useful for academic networking and developing their careers in the countries of origin. Others – those well-integrated into Finnish academia through long-term work, Finnish doctoral degrees, teaching in Finnish, and locally relevant research – doubted if they should be called "international scholars" simply because of their foreign-sounding names. They saw themselves as "Finnish scholars" instead. Yet others had professional trajectories with high cross-border mobility and multi-country appointments. For some, this pathway reflected the privilege of being established scientists in demand internationally (see Kim, 2017). For many, however, frequent relocations were not a choice but a disturbing reality of the academic job market, where funding opportunities are scarce, and competition is ever-intensifying. Quite a few informants pondered the precarity of their position and underscored its similarity to that of early-career Finnish-born academics, who also hunt for (stable) employment. Connecting "internationalization" with neoliberal framing and the figure of a highly successful, grant-winning "international scholar", several interviewees wondered if they actually "qualified" for this heroic image.

Thus, the very term "international scholar" appeared in the interviews as ambiguous and somewhat illusive. Differences in the respondents' institutional positions and identities put in question the very attempt to group them under a single umbrella category based solely on their country of origin. Notably, this diversity among scholars manifested itself even before accounting for other interpretations of "internationalization", such as being actively involved in international research without migrating (Larsen, 2020). This finding suggests that one should be extra cautious when defining the category of "international scholar" in the frame of university internationalization policies. Any definition is likely to reflect the interests and experiences of certain individuals within the heterogeneous group of "international" academics, while sidelining the others.

In what academic environment are scholars integrating?

My study dealt with a rather compact organizational setting of a single social science department.

However, it showed that even such an environment does not provide a uniform ground for international scholars' integration. First, echoing the results of other studies on academic mobility (Herschberg et al, 2018), differences between disciplines and related differences between the department's units played a role. Scholars in predominantly "quantitative" fields such as epidemiology or those with technical expertise in areas like experimental psychology found their skills easily transferable between national contexts. In contrast, interviewees from disciplines such as history or sociology described their work as tightly connected to specific sociocultural and linguistic environments. In their new workplace, they sometimes found it difficult to engage in research and teaching activities, because these were often centered on the Finnish context. While many saw the development of a Finland-relevant expertise as beneficial for their careers, they simultaneously questioned if that might diminish their value as "international scholars" who bring fresh perspectives to their host institution.

Second, my materials show that the population of "international scholars" was distributed across the department unevenly. While some subdivisions hosted just a few foreign-born employees, others served as institutional pockets of internationalization. These latter entities usually mainstreamed the international agenda from the outset, addressing global issues in their studies (e.g., global health) and attracting foreign students to their English-language programs. It was easier for my interviewees to adapt to these environments due to the transferability of their research and teaching interests. They also found it easier to participate in community life, which involved more employees and students of foreign background and relied on English as a lingua franca. As a result, some of my respondents "migrated" within the department to these spaces. Notably, this dynamic affected not only foreign-born academics. My interlocutors reported that "pockets of internationalization" contributed to making everyone's teaching and research more international, regardless of their country of origin.

In sum, my project highlights not only the absence of a single empirical designation for an "international scholar", but also the multifaceted nature of the workplace setting in which such scholars function. Even within the confines of a single department, foreign-born academics encounter varying sets of opportunities and challenges. This suggests that, for the purpose of internationalization policies, it may be more efficient to direct efforts towards the organizational environment instead of targeting "international scholars" as individuals.

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