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Academic expatriation: An investigation into the importance of connections when entering expatriate life

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This study investigates the issues academics face when they accept positions which label them as 'expatriate'. It looks at the many challenges they face from a social perspective (Richardson, 2000; Schermerhorn, 1999) and focuses on these in relation to connections; their past and to their present. The aim is to establish whether these connections have a significant bearing on their ability to settle in their new environment. A group of twenty academics based in the United Arab Emirates participated in the study describing their introduction to life in the UAE through semi structured interviews. The findings of the research identify that the strength of connections to the academics' past existence and how they manage these are shown to have a direct link to their ability to establish themselves in the new country. Equally, in order to embrace the culture a desire and confidence to make these new connections was shown to be vital. Not all of the academics interviewed successfully made these connections. For this group, it was found that the inability to make connections impacted greatly on the description they gave of their relocation experience. The study’s findings are an important addition to the higher education establishments in the UAE and wider Gulf region; however they are also of use to universities worldwide hiring staff who would be classed as expatriate. Equally the findings will be of interest to academics considering a move to a new position outside of their current ‘home’ country.

Keywords: Expatriate academic, relocation, social integration, connections

Background

Academics have considered travel as part of their job function since the earliest days of educators (Welch, 1997). This view can be traced back over two and a half thousand years to the Greek Sophists (Ehrenberg, 1973). Significantly, when Pope Gregory IX decreed that masters of the University of Paris in 1231 had the right to teach anywhere in the Christian world in return for a pledge of obedience, academic mobility became a significant attribute. The development of new universities in this period of history was also assisted by the migration of academic talent and was used as a political tool as a way of strengthening a kingdoms (Le Goff, 1993). Today, travel still remains a significant aspect of an academic’s work expectation. This may be through exchanges, periods of sabbatical or the delivery of papers at conferences. For others, employment may lead to becoming titled ‘an expatriate’, uprooting and moving to live for an extended period of time in another country and another culture. This trend is identified by the executive heads of key universities in the UK in their publication ‘Talent wars – the international market for academic staff’ as one which will continue to develop in importance.

International competition for academic talent is likely to increase further over the next few years….Developing higher education systems are seeking to retain or recruit academic talent (Universities UK, 2007, p. 5).
Local context

This study is focused on the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE came into being on 2nd December 1971, created from the union of seven Sheikdoms previously under the protectorate of the United Kingdom. Since then, the drive to transform the country into a high profile destination for commerce and tourism, supported through the substantial oil wealth, has led to many developments in internal infrastructure. One of these key developments was the establishment of higher education. This has been approached from two fronts. Firstly, there has been a drive to develop a quality higher educational infrastructure for the local Emirati population. The alternative higher educational development has been the establishment of private university campuses for students of any nationality to attend. The wider population in the UAE is from many countries and includes families with university age children. As a result, a number of university campuses have been set up as branches of a main university campus or as a partnership within an existing organisation. The origins of these campuses range from Australia to India, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Examples include Herriot Watt University, Middlesex University and the British University in Dubai, which is an association of UK institutions including The University of Birmingham. All are staffed with academics from across the globe, all using English as the teaching medium. Often the academic staff are not from the origin of the home campus, but from a wider range of countries.

Literature

Culture shock is the effect that immersion in a strange culture has on the unprepared visitor... It is what happens when the familiar psychological cues that can help an individual function in society are suddenly withdrawn and replaced by new ones that are strange or incomprehensible. (Toffler, 1970, p. 19)

For any traveller there is the expectation to be challenged by the new experiences which they will face entering a new culture. There is, however, the knowledge that it will be a short term experience and there will be a return to the familiar after a short period. For the expatriate, the experience of being away from ‘home’ will last for a much longer period, possibly years. How the academic rationalizes this is of interest and in particular the possibility of connections which are made to integrate into a community. From a socio-cultural theory perspective, actions and cognition are examined from within the social and cultural contexts in which they occur. This was work first explored by Vygotsky (1978) and leads the view that culture shapes cognitive development (Cole, 1985). This can be linked to the work of Eraut (2004) who discusses the notion of learning being grounded in the social situation in which it takes place. Eraut postulates that transfer from one locality to another is difficult and implies that a long period of time is required for new learning or adjustment in order to achieve integration into a new social situation. Eraut’s suggestions are relevant to the movement of academics from one socially constructed context into a new and potentially very different one. Urry (2010) identifies this learning as an endless tide, ebbing back and forth between the global and the local, developing irreversible relationships through each interaction. This process of learning has the potential to profoundly affect the professional and personal life of the academic.

Torbirn (1982) suggests there are four stages of this process of integration: a tourist phase, a period of culture shock, a conformist phase and finally assimilation. At each stage, due to the different stimulation and sensory feedback, an expatriate can fail to cope. Berry (1997) suggests that by adopting an integrative acculturation strategy, valuing the community they
have come from and also embracing the new culture, expatriates will experience lower levels of adjustment stress and have a greater chance of integration. By moving out of one of these communities and into another, the individual is then met with potentially different behavioural norms which they have to learn and use in order to be accepted within the new community (Engestrom, Engestrom, & Karkkainen, 1995). This then entails an investigation into the culture of current communities and the possible differences which may be experienced in communities in international institutions. In some way this also then moves our research into the theory of boundary crossing. The academic will move from one community to the next and as such will have to develop new learning to cross a new boundary as the practices in the new community may well be very different to those previously experienced. Kramsch (1993), describing the important learning that takes place as people from different cultures meet, uses the concept of a ‘contact zone’: a buffer of interaction until a consensus is reached and integration is either completed or avoided.

The challenge appears to be that when the cultural difference is great, the level of stress will be equally great (Ward et al., 2001). Trowler (1998), in his studies of the values and beliefs of academics who are in the midst of major structural change, identifies that ideologies of the individual play an important role in their attitude towards the changes they face. The more at odds an individual’s ideologies are with the changes being acted out around them, the more challenged they feel. Harrington (2005) identifies ‘washout’ as a significant challenge: when the difficulty of understanding the nuances of daily living in the new environment, such as getting around, medical concerns and local customs, grind down the relocated academic and wear them out.

These stresses may well contribute to the decision to leave the challenge altogether and begin a quest to regain the environment which fits their ideology, that is, a return from where they came. Noom et al. (1999), studying students integrating into university life, found that a greater success rate was related to high-self esteem and, importantly, social and academic competence. The identification of social competence is relevant here when considering an academic’s successful transition into a new location. Having the social skills to bridge across to a new social circle will be a major part of the challenge in the relocation. Dodd (1998) describes the expatriate experience as a period of initial euphoria, followed by a longer episode of depression or disillusionment driven by the realisation of greater difficulties of living in the new location than was previously imagined.

This conceptualisation echoes the first two stages of the expatriate experience proposed by Torbiorn (1982), the tourist phase and culture shock, but then suggests a possible additional stage, that of an assessment of reality. Do I want to be a part of this new experience? Do I want to move into conformism and assimilation or do I want to leave? This reassessment will recall the factors driving the relocation in the first place. Altbach and Lewis (1996) describe a pull or push factor influencing decisions to take up overseas contracts. Pull factors are those perceived to be attractive in the new position, and push factors are those which are deemed as negative factors within the current context prior to leaving.

The identification of Push – Pull triggers (Zikic & Klehe, 2007) can be a powerful influence on academics, encouraging them to consider their current position and possible future open to them. The notion of why academics expatriate is core to the research of Richardson (2000, 2006) and perhaps one of the most interesting. Richardson (2000) explores this through the use of metaphors and follows on from the management research of Osland (1990, as cited in Richardson & McKenna, 2000, 1995) in that the suggestion is made that the move has little
to do with career, but rather personal fulfilment. If this is so, how powerful are these reasons? Can they be powerful enough to drive the academic to seek ways to reduce the stress factors Harrington (2005) and Jandt (2004) identify?

Berry’s (1997) notion of the importance of the links to previous culture and the creation of links in the new asks for our attention in this study. In particular, the aim of this study is to investigate the importance of the connections the academics maintain with their ‘own culture’. Do academics strive to create definite links to integrate with a new local culture or do the links they maintain from their own culture/previous experience obstruct this development? Are there behaviours which negate Dodd’s (1998) model, enabling an academic to break from the known connections and an embrace the new?

Methodology

This study focuses on twenty academics who made the journey and began work in the UAE at a variety of academic institutions. Some were newly arrived in their first year of employment; some had been resident in the UAE for multiple years. All were asked to ‘cast their minds back’ to their arrival in the UAE and to recollect the sights, sounds and feelings of those early days, specifically to identify how they made connections to integrate into the new environment, or how previous connections proved very difficult to change or break in order to settle in a new country.

All participants were working in higher educational institutes within the UAE and were volunteers for the study and from a range of institutional types. These included private university branch campuses from Australia and the UK, private independent universities or research centres or government funded universities catering for the local Emirati population. I felt that in order to gain a wide variety of views around the research question I wanted to gather data from the wide range of institutions described, otherwise the research may have become very situational and possibly polarized if all the data came from one institution.

The participants were from many parts of the world, both northern and southern hemispheres. In this way, a wide range of personal and cultural influences were also considered in the research. Fifty percent of the candidates interviewed were in their first international position. Some of those interviewed arrived in the UAE from other countries in which they had already held a contract and were continuing their expatriate journey. This enabled responses from those who were taking their first international position to be contrasted to those taking a second or third international post. The candidates also worked in a range of disciplines and spanned a range of ages from mid twenties through to mid sixties. In this way this study provides a wide ranging snapshot of expatriate academics working in institutions in the United Arab Emirates.

Semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2005) were conducted at the volunteer’s place of work and consisted of a question template (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) to act as a guide. I wanted to understand the world the participants had experienced and in particular the experiences they had during their period of relocation. These types of interview enable the researcher to explore the reality of their situation through a two person conversation (Jones, 1985). This guided conversational approach allows for the flexibility to explore particular areas of interest related to the focus much further than a questionnaire would allow. It enables the researcher to really explore how the volunteers had constructed their new reality (Jones, 1985). These interviews were recorded (Sacks, 1984) and transcribed for analysis. Participants’ names were replaced with a single letter code, to maintain confidentiality.
Philosophical framework

An interpretative approach was adopted in which to conduct this research. This supports the philosophical framework for this study which is within the non-positivist paradigm. Interpretivism is probably the most important non-positivist approach because the heart of the interpretivist position is an ontological position which views reality as a social construct (Stahl, 2008). The reality of the academics is accessed through the language they use to construct their perception. Therefore the framework for the analysis in this study is interpretive and as such we must be aware that the data is not yielding a literal representation of the reality, but that the reality is being constructed from the interpretation of verbal recollections. This position is very much rooted in the design of qualitative study, which is “grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced” (Mason, 1996, p.4).

As the researcher, I must be able to access these constructs in a neutral, but meaningful way in which rich data can be generated to explore, in this case, the phenomenon of expatriation amongst academics. Their descriptions and recollections, even stories surrounding their experiences are the essence which needs to be collected and analysed to be able to make sense of the decisions they have made and the journeys they have completed so far. Their transfer of learned skills can be framed within the context of socially situated activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I am also therefore not studying individuals in isolation but within the context of their situation or activity system (Engestrom, 2001).

The key to this piece of research was my ability as the researcher to gain the trust of a group of individuals who are connected by their circumstances, in order to gain ‘front of mind’ insights into their reality (Knight & Saunders, 1999). From these insights, I, the researcher, was able to identify key features of their ‘social reality’. Once this was summarised, it adds to the bank of knowledge on the subject of expatriation and academics working outside of their country of birth.

Results

The participants were very open in their description of their experiences relocating to the UAE; they wanted to share. As a result, a rich picture of realities and integration emerged. The notion of connections began to become clear, both in terms of connections to their previous locale and to the new. The academics identified connections which were important to them in many ways and these were expressed consciously and also subconsciously. For many, this was done through the describing of thoughts or actions, which when analysed revealed connections. Many cited examples of things which were important to them or that they had to do to settle in which can be directly identified as an action to make a connection.

The development of social links, to find others to share experiences, was a key marker in the identification of these important connections. I will identify the key themes which came out of the findings by using the words of the academics interviewed.

Direct links to familiar social practices and artefacts can be identified from the literal words of the academics. Academics speak of the familiarity of their new life to their old life in terms of activities and people. They have rediscovered and re-connected in the new location, the previous cultural and social norms they enjoyed, as seen below:
S: I have everything here I have at home. Nothing I sort of have missed or anything. In fact you probably have more than you would have at home. I never seem bored, so it obviously fulfils me.

Other academics commented that they had found activities they pursued previously and identity local connections they have made as a result.

B: Well, I have an interest in sailing, so since I have arrived I just went to the local sailing club and I’ve been sailing every week, so I’ve met people through that. I’ve done that before in other places. The sailing crowd seems to be pretty much the same everywhere… so that’s been a major way of meeting people outside.

However, finding social connections proved to be difficult for others, with a significant group describing challenges or differences to what they were used to. This indicated the connection to the previous life was still very strong and was being missed.

A: I’m sure you’ve heard a lot of people coming here ended up being quite miserable and not doing anything and there were a couple of days like that, I have to say, where I thought gosh you know you really have to do something here to get out and get to meet people.

There are comments that challenged these comments.

H: Yes, it’s much more restrictive. I don’t mean restrictive in the sense that there are lots of rules that you must obey and things like that, but there are fewer opportunities for social interaction.

Are there really fewer opportunities, or has the academic simply failed to attempt to make connections for themselves. Have they remained reclusive or have they been active in seeking out places to meet others? The challenge, of course, is where to go to find connections and who to find? Social clubs or sporting activities are considered a good source of other people to mix with. In this particular academic’s case they found an outlet to make connections, but other challenges were then mentioned.

H: I belong to one club here,…, but I rarely go there because it’s quite a distance away, whereas in Australia I belonged to all sorts of different societies and all sorts of activities…

In this case, they are still very much connected to their previous home, and this strong connection is actually producing a negative connotation which can cloud the social opportunities available as they are being compared – in this case unfavourably. This comparison is common, and expected.

L: I am not very happy about it, I mean I am happier that Ski Dubai has opened, because that is what we used to do a lot in Poland a lot, go skiing. We go to more concerts here than we did in Australia, but I still miss theatre here, this is something I really miss. So I guess it’s mainly the outdoors and cultural aspects.

The different climate and cultural norms clearly had an impact on the lifestyle for L. They enjoyed an outside lifestyle in Poland and will consequently have to adapt this view. Having to ski inside has already been accepted as a compromise to ensure a previously enjoyed activity is continued. Other activities will have to be substituted. Local conditions will affect this. The climate has a significant effect on how people socialize in Dubai as further identified by T.
T: In the UK you would just go to a small café and meet someone, here you can’t just go and sit outside in the Summer, because it’s 62 degrees, so it already becomes more of an inside culture…people are more located inside than outside.

R: I miss the gardening, I miss going out in the boat fishing, so it’s a lot of lifestyle things that I do miss, but that’s then replaced with other things I’ve enjoyed here.

This is clearly an important aspect of the expatriate academic: the ability to be adventurous enough to try new things, make connections with new experiences, rather than hanker after the old ones. However, a connection to local residents was not seen to be an easy connection to make.

C: …socialization in terms of very small communities, closed socialization among expatriates and very little with locals, almost nothing with locals.

In fact, making connections with the local Emirati population is very challenging. This lack of a link into local culture can be seen as a negative aspect of living in the UAE and expatriates can tend to gravitate to social groups of similar nationality/culture, possibly defeating a reason for making the move in the first place. In this way, connections with the local community are difficult to make.

One way is to learn the local language – something which featured in the responses.

Q: I’ve just started to learning Arabic…

However, the challenge in the UAE is the widespread use of English:

Q: you know I have resisted because we don’t have a big opportunity to speak Arabic since all of our instruction and interaction is in English.

They described that it was important to be able to make the connection with the local culture through the use of language and believed the little they may pick up would help them by not making them appear arrogant.

Friendships were important to almost every academic interviewed. Again a range of responses were garnered considering the ease with which friendships were made or not and the tension of past friendships. Participants described making or breaking these connections:

S: Back home in Australia where my friends are there, living in the same suburb where they grew up, that’s where they hang out and that’s where they will always be, whereas here it’s a bit different.

R: Friends used to be on the phone everyday just about…and of course you can’t keep doing that because of the cost and because of the time difference, so although they still keep in touch and I with them, especially on birthdays and Christmas… the frequency is a lot less. So you feel a bit distant.

So there is a difficulty in maintaining the connection with existing friends. There appears to be a mixed response regarding making new friends. Some found it was easy to do so, others found it very much more difficult. As previously alluded, getting involved in activities outside of the workplace was one way in which academics found new friendships.

L: …I have tended to make new friends through sport and other activities.
Continuing religious worship was another way of developing strong connections with new people, as long as the religion is allowed to be practiced openly in the country. In the UAE, they are very tolerant of religious diversity and a variety of churches are established for worshippers.

P:…mainly we socialize with the prayer groups and this isn’t much different to what we would do in India.

However these friendships are often not described as the friendships the academics maintained from ‘home’, often for good reason.

L: Its tricky it takes a few years to establish friendships and make new friends.

K:….it’s hard for me to build relationships here for the simple reason that just when you know you’ve settled and you do a lot of really nice things together they leave. It’s very traumatic, up to the point now where I purposefully keep people at a distance…because I will probably never see them again.

These quotes are interesting as they highlight the difficulty in making new social connections outside of the physical; they are describing the emotional. This notion of keeping people at a distance to avoid the pain of separation would leave them in a sort of limbo state, with friends but not: a semi-connection. What is consistent is that a strong friendship connection is maintained by the academics with a select few from outside the country, often from ‘home’ countries, and weaker bonds are made with friends in the UAE due to the understanding that at some point in the future they will have to move on. This is due to the unique situation in the Gulf region. Expatriates cannot become resident and retire in the UAE. They are on a contract to work and at the end of this they are forced to leave. Even owning property in the UAE does not guarantee a residence visa in the future. This understanding, coupled with the multicultural nature of the workplace and social space, make personal interaction in the future possibly quite difficult.

K: I will possibly never see them (friends) again, because they don’t necessarily go back to South Africa.

The interviews with the academics were extremely valuable when considering their words as metaphors for connections. Expatriation is seen as a difficult move (Richardson, 2000; Schermerhorn, 1999) especially when relocating into a culture and climate which is different to their own. Relocating into academic institutions in the Middle East is often very different in both of these areas from where academics have previously been living. How academics describe embracing these challenges or not provides us with a fascinating insight into the preparation which needs to be considered before entering into such a contract. This is especially evident when we consider the notion of connections within different situations, particularly in the social sphere, and look to see how these are made or broken.

Discussion

Berry (1997) identified that, for expatriates, old links need to be maintained to be able to keep a sense of personal being, but that there needs to be an appreciation and acceptance of new opportunities in the new location to be truly settled. The danger is that the academic focuses more on the previous and familiar than the new. These previous links then manifest themselves as desires which have to be fulfilled – either an activity which needs to be replicated in the new situation or a communication or physical contact being mirrored. Here these academics are focusing on the familiar for comfort (Church, 1982), not looking for the new experience to
help with integration. An example is participant B, the sailor: he found a social circle he could also relate to easily. He did not break the bond attaching him to the activity, he was able to simply transfer the bond to a new location and continue as before. His noting that the ‘sailing crowd tend to be the same’ acknowledged that others had been able to do exactly the same as himself. Therefore, once this connection had been established a sense of ‘calm in the melee’ of relocation could be found and they could draw strength from this.

What is clear is the difficulty many of those interviewed had in finding connections on a personal level, either associated with previous activities or friendship, or arising from new ties or experiences in the host country. Depending on the activity or location, these difficulties could be extremely challenging and therefore result in a feeling of loss and disappointment. This reflects the findings of Dodd (1998) where the break is traumatic when the familiar cannot be located. Particularly in the UAE, however, a huge range of activities which could be considered as familiar, but with a local twist, are available. Academics were able to identify how substitute activities, such as indoor skiing instead of outdoor or coffee inside a mall instead of at a local café, had helped their transition.

The first two phases of Torbiorn’s (1982) model of the expatriate experience were identified. The tourist phase can be identified from participants’ reports of the excitement of entering a new place. However, the current research suggests that when expatriate academics have not been able to weaken the bond or connection to previous activities or people, these ties can become a source of angst or stress.

What makes expatriate life more interesting in the UAE is that the ‘local’ culture itself is not unitary. Social interaction with the local indigenous Emirati population was rarely mentioned, indicating that the actual culture with which the academic is interacting is not necessarily that of UAE citizens. The resident UAE population is multinational, so those interviewed speak about making connections with many different cultural groups.

The many cultural influences which the academics encountered daily was, for some, a challenge. Was being in this global melting pot the issue for some because they could not find a cultural constant to adapt to – which was the local culture to integrate with? Interviewee H stated that there were fewer opportunities to make social connections in the UAE than they had experienced elsewhere. Perhaps the issue is there are too many different cultural groups and no one culture dominates for expatriates to adjust to. In this way, expatriate academics do not know to whom to adjust, so they don’t try.

However, what comes across very clearly from the interviews is that those academics who were prepared to be adventurous and to meet new people or to try new activities had developed new social circles and were enjoying what they had found in the new locale. These academics had reached out to the new cultural context and had started to be integrated in the new community as a result, thus supporting Berry’s (1997) view that effective cultural adjustment involves activity in both directions. This then counters Dodd’s (1998) model however, because these same academics also cited many familiar artefacts and activities they had also engaged with within their new locale or had not wanted to. It was not so much the inability to break the past, but more the inability to embrace the new.
Conclusion

This study has identified the importance of the connection expatriate academics have with their previous, familiar locale and how this affects their integration when moving to a new country. Understanding the reasons why certain activities or artefacts are so important to the academic prior to the move will help them assess the suitability of the new location in terms of their social integration and well being.

Academics who failed to find, in the new location, the activities which they needed to be a part of found the move stressful and unsettling. Those who found a familiar community or activity drew strength from this and were able to describe a smoother integration into the new locale. The challenge to academics is prior research to see if these important personal connections can be made in the new location.

One could argue that the UAE is actually a relatively easy community to enter as a good first posting to taste expatriate life. The development of the country has seen many international communities relocate and bring their familiar artefacts and activities. Therefore it is possible to find the familiar, as many of those interviewed identified. This can then lead to the development of confidence and stress reduction for the academic, offering opportunities to make new connections to cultures outside the community at leisure instead of need. The research of Berry (1997) is most fitting when attempting to describe the connections of those academics who were “most at home” in their new environment. These academics had connected with the previous and were then able to make new connections at their leisure.

The limitations to the study are that it is centred very much on the UAE and only uses a limited number of academic volunteers to draw its conclusions. However this study offers an insight into the manner in which the familiar is important in relocation and how it assists in academics in being able to integrate in the new locale.

The academic is the most valuable resource of an institution. These findings are relevant for those involved in hiring academic staff from outside the immediate community. It especially highlights how important being able to locate familiar cultural artefacts and practices are in their process of integration within the new community. Above all it confirms the many dynamics which interplay and which have to be considered to ensure an intercultural move is right for the academic.

References


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