The Effects of Attending Annual Professional Conferences on the Personal Development of International Faculty

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Abstract: Especially given the current emphasis on internationalization and globalization, international faculty members constitute an important part of the overall faculty of higher education in the US and abroad. Personal as well as professional well-being is important in retaining international faculty. While annual professional conferences, by design, support and enhance professional development, little information exists as to the effect they have on personal development of international faculty members. This qualitative study was designed to provide foundational information on which to build further research as to the impact attending professional conferences have on the personal development and well-being of international higher education faculty members. Results indicate positive effects and support the notion that conferences are essential in fostering personal growth and development.

Keywords: international faculty, personal development, personal relationships, transformation, faculty retention

Academicians grow professionally through teaching, scholarship, service and other related activities and achievements within their institutions and fields. International academicians constitute an important part of any country's composition of higher education with respect to promoting concepts of internationalization and globalization (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017; Huang et al., 2017). Of course, these professionals face additional challenges to their academic success compared to their more local counterparts (Museus, 2008; Varma, 2010); they also face unique challenges concerning personal growth and development, which is important to healthy social functioning, and ultimately affects, and determines, professional attainment, continuity and stability (Ahmed, 2012; Kuster et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2009; Pherali, 2012). This qualitative study was undertaken to determine whether attending professional conferences has a role in, or effect on, the personal growth and development of international faculty members living and practicing in the US.

Background

Although a lack of consensus exists in minutiae (Rumbley & Wit, 2017), international faculty members are typically, generally defined as those who are born, grow up and receive undergraduate (or equivalent) degrees in one country and then are hired in teaching positions in another (graduate degrees can be attained in either home or foreign countries. Thus, international faculty are academicians in foreign countries and cultures (Kim et al., 2011). In the US, internationalization of higher education curricula and the overall educational experience has become of paramount importance to meet the needs of globalization (Altbach et al., 2016; Gahungu, 2011; Munene, 2014). One important strategy in this endeavor is the recruitment of international faculty members (Gahungu, 2011; Munene, 2014). International faculty experience

additional challenges to stability and success compared to their native counterparts (Lawrence et al., 2014; Munene, 2014). Such challenges include visa and naturalization issues, a lack of cultural understanding, sensitivity, and support within the work environment and the broader community, being stereotyped and suffering careerism, and, ultimately, professional and social isolation (Gahungu, 2011; Munene, 2014). Studies that treat these issues tend to focus on professional aspects of what employing institutions can do to retain international faculty in their positions (Campbell et al., 2018; Gahungu, 2011; Lee et al., 2017). Despite that professionals experience stressors from personal as well as professional life (Bjorklund, 2015; Carver 1997), that notable adult educators have emphasized the importance of personal development for nearly a century (Dewey, 1938; Lindeman, 1926; Mezirow, 1991), that seeking (social) emotional support is one of the most effective coping mechanisms for professional and personal stress (Carver, 1997; Bjorklund, 2015), and that things such as mentoring can increase socialization growth and development (Alberts, 2008; Bryant-Shanklin & Brumage, 2011) which ultimately increases job satisfaction, and in turn stability and retainment (Lee & del carmen Montiel, 2011), little research concerning international faculty personal development is evident in the literature.

This research project frames itself on the theories that numerous behaviors used to cope with professional and personal stress, directly rely on, or are strongly related to, social interaction. For instance, using Carver's (1997) 14 styles of coping (of which four--denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame--are detrimental), four--use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, venting, and humor--directly invoke personal or professional social exchange. Four others--active coping, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance--bear a strong connection to such interactions. Moreover, various levels of professional and personal mentoring, which depend on more developed social interaction and relationships, can enhance the effects of such mechanisms (Livingstone & Naismith, 2018; Nolan-Arañez, 2020); and critical reflection, an essential element in transformative learning, requires critical reflection, which is fed by reflective discourse that seeks out and utilizes other perspectives and opinions to develop, test and refine new perceptions (Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1978). Using this theoretical framework, the researchers attempted to gather data to better understand the role attending professional conferences (which necessarily includes and requires social interactions and relationships) might play in the personal development and growth of international faculty members, or, more precisely to answer the following question: How do international faculty members perceive the role of attending annual professional conferences in their personal development?

Methodology

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to obtain data from four international faculty members employed in the US. Three of the interviewees—two females and one male—are originally from China, while one—a female—is from Korea. Using the Carnegie classification system, all are faculty members at universities, one at a doctoral university with high research activity, and three at master's colleges and universities. Interviewees were each asked the following initial questions:
1. Do you attend annual professional conferences? If so, why?
2. Does attending annual conferences in your field mean anything to you besides improving scholarship and professional achievement? If so, what?

3. What else would you like to add regarding the role of attending conferences with respect to your life?

Three of the interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The other one was conducted via email. Phone interviews were recorded; email interviews were naturally transcribed. Responses were traditionally coded for themes. Obvious limitations of the study include the small number of interviewees and that they are all from Asian countries.

Results

In responses to the first interview question, all four interviewees indicated that they attend annual professional conferences regularly. They see such attendance and participation positively, as a necessary part of scholarship, which is required for successful maintenance of their academic employment and a good way to keep current in their fields. As one interviewee explained, "attending the conference has become something that I most look forward to each year."

Responses to question two reveal attending annual conferences, to the interviewees, means re-affirming, bolstering, and expanding feelings of being integrated into their professional fields, as well as feelings of inclusion, belonging, and community. It means catching up with existing friends and strengthening bonds of friendship. It means making new friends, expanding their existing circle of friends and the number and depth of personal relationships along with broadening and augmenting their overall social networks.

While the interviewees expressed fostering relationships with both native and international colleagues and friends at conferences, they emphasized the importance of relationships with people in similar situations--international faculty members, especially those from the same country or region--regarding coping with challenges and supporting personal growth and development. The interviewees expressed better relations with such people in obtaining emotional support--in understanding challenges unique to the group and confirming feelings of professional and personal stress. In this vein, an interviewee explained, "I have a group of friends to talk with about the struggles in work and life, and I have found that I am not alone in getting stressed and feeling frustrations. It helps me stay positive and confident; especially, it was very helpful during the years before tenure."

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study indicate the importance of conferences in the professional and personal development and well-being of international faculty members, at least in the US. They show that international faculty perceive this importance and use the conference experience to these effects. While not directly stated in the responses to the prescribed and follow-up questions (the researchers declined to ask specifically in fear of biasing the responses by presenting leading questions), the results support the notion of conferences attendance enhances personal growth through perspective transformation, by increasing opportunities for critical discourse and reflection.

Future research might expand the number of participants. They might take the methodological form of surveys, focus groups or further, more focused semi-structured interviews. Using the foundation provided by this study, future research projects might design questions or other data-gathering techniques to provide more depth as to the function of professional conferences on the processes and outcomes of personal growth, especially focusing on perspective transformation. This research can and should be conducted with respect to native and international faculty members for more informative comparisons. Taking another approach, future research might also ask questions and gather data with respect to the activities and opportunities conferences intentionally or unintentionally provide that (native and international) faculty members gravitate toward with respect to personal development.

Implications for this and future research have substantial potential. Information can be important with respect to increasing international faculty retention. It can also enhance personal understanding, and thus, more effective use, of conferences in personal development and transformative learning on the part of international faculty. It has the potential to inform program planners in developing more effective conference experiences, and native colleagues and employing institutions in developing support and collaboration with their international faculty members.

International faculty members are an important asset to institutions of higher education in the US, and elsewhere in maintaining the quality and relevance of the overall learning experiences provided. As such, fostering positive professional and personal environments for these people is essential in promoting job and life satisfaction, and, thus, retention and stability. Though rudimentary and basic, this study lays the foundation and justification of further study in this direction.

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