OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Volume 16, Issue 5 (2024), pp. 145-157
Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education
DOI: 10.32674/qkfw6c18 | https://ojed.org/jcihe

Passing the Whiteness Threshold: The Lived Experiences of UK-based Turkish Academics

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Abstract

This paper examines the underexplored implications of long-term international academic mobility on the lives of Turkish academics in the United Kingdom (UK). Within this international context, the study probes how ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to shape these migrant academics' experiences while working at UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Grounded in social constructivism and employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the methodology entails 50 semi-structured interviews analyzed through NVivo to uncover thematic insights into the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics. This paper discusses the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics across two distinct yet interconnected spheres: the professional and the social. The professional sphere centers on the opportunities and challenges associated with an academic career in the UK, while the social sphere critically examines the societal dimensions of this career path. Here, intersecting identities emerge as pivotal forces, shaping these academics' experiences in profound and nuanced ways. The main finding reveals a "Whiteness threshold" impacting the integration and success of Turkish academics. Those who pass this threshold experience professional recognition and inclusion, while others face discrimination, isolation, and estrangement. This study contributes to comparative and international higher education by offering fresh insights into the diversity of migrant academic experiences, which are intricately shaped by various intersecting characteristics and identities. Consequently, the study advocates for nuanced policy considerations that recognize and address these diverse experiences.

Keywords: experiences, internationalization, mobility, UK, Turkish academics, Whiteness

Introduction

The benefits of international academic mobility, including career advancement, prestige, and capital accumulation, are well-documented (Ackers, 2005, 2008; Bauder et al., 2017), particularly for short-term mobility. However, the consequences of long-term mobility, i.e., migration, have received less attention and have complicated implications. Scholars have begun critically exploring the profound consequences of long-term mobility, including loss of stability, deterritorialization, and diminished national identity (Morley et al., 2018). These aspects are associated with job instability and precarity (Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Turculet, 2022) and discrimination against ethnic-minority migrant academics (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Ramadan, 2021). Comparatively, through international

Received 12/1/23; Revised 2/7/24; Revised 8/1/24; Accepted 9/2/24

academic mobility, social class and prestige may be (re)produced in which masculinity and whiteness play a key role (Sang & Clavard, 2019). Nonetheless, discussions often overlook how factors like migrant status, race/ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to shape international academics' diverse experiences, particularly in the UK.

Considering the UK accommodates more than 70,000 international academic staff, accounting for nearly one-third of its total academic workforce (HESA, 2024), there is a pressing need to understand the diverse experiences of these international academics. This study focuses on academics from Turkey, a country uniquely positioned at the crossroads of East/West and Global North/South resulting in diverse characteristics among its scholars concerning educational background, skin color, religious affiliation, and gender. Such intersecting traits distinctly influence their experiences within the UK higher education sector.

The emerging body of literature has examined the experiences of international academics in the UK (Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite and Chillas, 2022). Some studies have specifically considered the role of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion in shaping these experiences. For example, Fernando and Cohen's (2016) study on Indian academics, Hsieh's (2012) research on Chinese academics, Ramadan's (2021) study on Muslim academics, and Sang et al.'s (2013) research on woman migrant academics have all contributed to this body of scholarship. Despite the growing presence of Turkish scholars in the UK, from 390 in 2017 to 945 in 2023 (HESA, 2024), their experiences remain underexplored. By examining the experiences of Turkish academics in the UK through the lenses of ethnicity, gender, and religiosity, this study aims to enrich our understanding of the varied experiences of international scholars and their integration into local academic cultures.

Adopting a qualitative methodology grounded in social constructivism and employing intersectionality as a theoretical lens, this study seeks to understand how Turkish academics in the UK interpret and perceive their experiences. Through 50 semi-structured interviews, this research explores Turkish academics' professional and social trajectories in the UK, their triumphs, and challenges, and how their social identities influence their experiences. This approach allows for a thorough examination of how ethnicity, gender, class, and other social identities intersect to create unique experiences for (Turkish) migrant academics in the UK.

Literature Review

International academic mobility encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences marked by potential advantages and considerable difficulties. This review examines the experiences of migrant academics, underlining the complex nature of their professional journey.

The extant academic literature suggests that international academic mobility offers various benefits to international scholars. These benefits include opportunities to collaborate with world-renowned scientists, work at prestigious institutions with access to extensive social networks, and foster global connections (Ackers, 2005, 2008) Additionally, mobile academics can accumulate intellectual capital, acquire enriching scientific perspectives, experience diverse working environments and scientific practices inherent to a new academic culture, enhance intercultural competencies, cultivate a sense of global citizenship, and ultimately broaden their professional and personal horizons (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Bauder, 2015; Bauder et al., 2017; Morley et al., 2018).

Comparatively, international scholars encounter challenges when transitioning into new academic environments, especially when long-term mobility is considered. While temporary adaptation issues include securing accommodation, integrating into social contexts, and adjusting to different educational methodologies, curriculum preparation, and student supervision (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Kreber & Hounsell, 2014; Pherali, 2012), more enduring challenges such as casualization can continue to influence their experiences in complex ways.

The casualization of academic employment, characterized by short-term contracts within increasingly corporatized higher education systems, presents a dual-edged sword of opportunity and insecurity. This precarity is especially pronounced among early-career and international academics (Kim, 2010; Turculet, 2022). It has been identified as a contributor to the challenge of forming stable professional relationships and long-term planning (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). International academics are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation, as in many countries, permanent contracts are predominantly reserved for local academics (Turculet, 2022), and they face challenges in comprehending and meeting the often implicit and informal requirements associated with academic positions in different countries (Bauder, 2015; Musselin, 2004). In the UK, for instance, while only 17 per cent of UK academic staff work on temporary contracts in full-time positions, this percentage rises to almost double for international academics (AdvanceHE, 2023).

Ethnic marginalization in international academia has complex repercussions. While some individuals may utilize international mobility to acquire cosmopolitan capital and transnational esteem (Morley et al., 2018), they are not immune to stereotypes and discrimination. This is evident in the experiences of Roma academics and the broader Black and Minority

Ethnic (BAME) community within the UK, who face both overt scrutiny and subtle marginalization (Bhopal, 2016; Morley et al., 2018; Pilkington, 2013). Nevertheless, not all narratives are of discrimination; some East Asian academics in the UK attribute their professional advancements to merit rather than ethnicity (Kim & Ng, 2019). Despite these varied experiences, there is a pervasive sentiment among BAME academics of covert discrimination and undervaluation, particularly in contexts that privilege whiteness (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019).

Additionally, the academic trajectories of migrant women are characterized by resilience and agency, as evidenced by Sang et al. (2013), who found that first-generation immigrant female professors in the UK often utilize diaspora networks and research niches to achieve success. However, religious identity introduces another layer of complexity, as seen in the experiences of hijabed Muslim academics, who contend with additional visibility and exclusion (Ramadan, 2021). Such intersectionality exposes the layered challenges and opportunities for migrant women in academia.

In conclusion, the international mobility of academic staff represents a dynamic interplay of opportunities and vulnerabilities. Factors such as language, employment conditions, and social capital play significant roles in the adaptation processes of migrant academics. Furthermore, the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and religion adds complexity to their experiences, underscoring the intricate navigation required through international academia.

Theoretical Framework

To interpret the nuanced experiences of UK-based Turkish academics, this study incorporates the intersectionality framework as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991). Intersectionality acknowledges that social identities such as race, gender, and class converge to create unique meanings and experiences (Warner, 2008). Critical to this concept is the understanding that individuals' identities are not merely a cumulative result of their social group affiliations. Instead, each identity category interacts in complex ways to produce experiences that cannot be solely attributed to a single group (Warner, 2008). Özbilgin et al. (2011) advocate for intersectionality as an insightful perspective for examining the impact of diverse social identity categories on the lived experiences of migrant academics. Within this perspective, intersectionality provides a crucial framework for understanding the multiple forms of privilege and disadvantage (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

Whiteness, as both privilege and property, is essential for understanding how intersecting characteristics influence the experiences of migrant academics. Initially established as a racial identity, whiteness later evolved into a form of property (Bhopal, 2022). According to Leonardo (2002), whiteness functions as a racial discourse, while the category "white people" represents a socially constructed identity, typically based on skin color. This racial perspective is globally supported by material practices and institutions that grant certain privileges exclusively to white individuals, making whiteness valuable and a form of property (Harris, 1993). In the UK higher education sector, universities remain predominantly "white" administratively, normatively, habitually, and intellectually (Runnymede Trust, 2015). Within this context, "whiteness" functions as a valuable source of privilege in British academia (Ahmed, 2012).

Following Crenshaw's (1991) arguments, which highlight the unique experiences of Black women, the term is often applied to understanding multiple forms of disadvantage. For instance, to comprehend the lived experiences of BAME women academics (Stockfelt, 2018), BAME academics (Bhopal, 2022), international minority ethnic academics (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019), and Muslim women academics (Ramadan, 2021), intersectionality offers insights into the complex disadvantages these academics face. Conversely, emerging scholarship has identified intersectional privilege (re)generated through migration. For example, Sang et al. (2013) argued that migrant women academics, contrary to expectations, navigate disadvantage by leveraging aspects of identity, performance, and career strategy inherent to their status as outsiders. Furthermore, Sang and Calvard (2019) identified whiteness as a form of privilege in international academic mobility, noting that white international academics experience relatively more straightforward transitions, better treatment, and higher positional value.

Considering Turkey's unique position at the intersection of East/West and Global North/South, intersectionality serves as a powerful lens to understand the lived experiences of Turkish migrant academics with varied social identities.

Methodology

This research is inherently exploratory. Anchored in qualitative research, the study adopts a social constructivist philosophy. This philosophical stance posits that reality is not a fixed entity but is rather constructed through social interactions; it suggests the existence of multiple interpretations rather than a single, definitive reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this framework, individuals strive to comprehend the world by attributing personal meanings to their experiences. These meanings are often the result of social and historical negotiation (Creswell, 2013). Hence, a fundamental

premise of the study is the individual variability in interpreting the migration experience.

Data were gathered from 50 semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with Turkish academics working in the UK between September 2021- May 2022. Online interviewing, imposed by the COVID-19 regulations, enabled the collection of a broader range of perspectives. Participants were recruited from 33 different universities across all four UK nations, as detailed below. Conducted in Turkish to facilitate comfort and understanding between the interviewer and participants, the interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Participants responded to flexible, open-ended questions designed to prompt deep reflection. The questions covered a range of topics, including their upbringing in Turkey, academic life before their UK appointments, and the successes and obstacles they encountered in both countries. Discussions also explored how their gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and political beliefs have shaped their UK experiences.

As the author, I navigate insider and outsider roles within the research context. As a male international doctoral student from Turkey studying in the UK at the time of data collection, my academic and cultural background in both countries provided me with professional and cultural familiarity. This insider perspective was crucial for offering fresh insights into understudied communities' lived experiences and building rapport (Johansson & Śliwa, 2016). However, I also positioned myself as an outsider, as I was neither a member of the participants' institutions nor their colleagues. I remained aware of this outsider role and the potential distance it could create. Along with my supervision team (critical outsiders), I took great care to eliminate possible biases during data collection and analysis, though some influence of researcher positionality and bias may persist (May, 2014).

In addition to being mindful of my insider/outsider position, I employed several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. These strategies included member checking, keeping an audit trail of field notes, constantly consulting with my supervision team, and implementing maximum variation sampling to capture diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

After the data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to identify themes, applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This process involved an initial individual analysis of each participant's experiences, followed by comparative analyses across discipline, gender, contract type, and institutional affiliation. Further, an intersectional approach is employed to explore the influence of gender, religion, political attitudes, and ethnicity on the lived experiences of UK-based Turkish academics.

Throughout the study, we adhered to ethical guidelines set forth by the British Educational Research Association and University College London (UCL), to which UCL granted ethical permission. Further, participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms, and broad identifiers were employed to maintain confidentiality.

Participants

This study aims to examine the experiences of Turkish academic staff in UK universities, employing a methodological approach centered on collecting and analyzing data from a purposefully selected sample. The sample comprised 50 academics of Turkish nationality employed at UK universities, meeting specific inclusion criteria: Turkish nationality, born and educated in Turkey up to at least the undergraduate level, and a minimum of one year's residence in the UK coinciding with their tenure in British academia at the time of data collection.

The selection criteria ensured a diverse representation across several dimensions, including academic rank, institutional affiliation, contract type, discipline, age, length of residence in the UK, gender, and educational background. Educational qualifications among the participants' parents varied from bachelor's to doctoral degrees, highlighting the sample's high educational attainment background. Notably, two-thirds of the participants reported having at least one parent with a university degree, and 15 indicated their parents held doctoral degrees. This suggests that most of the sample belongs to Turkey's educated middle class, with educational attainment surpassing the national average. Only three participants were the first in their families to pursue higher education.

Demographically, the sample showed a slight male majority (27 men to 23 women), predominantly aged between 30 and 45. A significant proportion (38%) had resided in the UK for over 12 years, often due to their educational pursuits, illustrating the long-term engagement of many participants with the UK's academic environment.

The participants represented various academic positions and disciplines across 33 different UK universities. A considerable number were affiliated with the prestigious Russell Group (32), followed by those from pre-92 (non-Russell Group) institutions (10) and post-92 institutions (8). The academic roles ranged from professors (10), senior lecturers (14), lecturers (17), to postdoctoral researchers (9). Notably, a minority (12%) were on fixed or temporary contracts, concentrating on Russell Group universities.

This maximum variation approach to sample selection and characterization provides a robust foundation for

understanding the nuanced experiences of Turkish academics in the UK, facilitating a detailed analysis that considers a wide range of personal and professional backgrounds.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores the experiences of Turkish academics within the UK's academic and social environment, painting a portrait of professional life that is both complex and compelling. Through the narratives of UK-based Turkish scholars, we uncover a landscape where opportunities abound, challenges persist, and personal triumphs are interlaced with systemic intricacies. The voices of these academics—resonant with the joys of freedom, the pride of accomplishment, and the nuanced tones of cultural adaptation—offer invaluable insights into the dynamics of international academic mobility. They navigate a realm where generous research funding, elite international networks, and the freedom to explore sensitive topics create a fertile ground for professional success, starkly contrasting the constraints they may have encountered in their homeland. Simultaneously, their stories reflect a nuanced interplay of identity, belonging, and the subtle yet pervasive forces of politics and perception. This section, therefore, serves as a critical examination of the professional and social spheres, where the individual and the structure intersect, shaping the academic journeys of Turkish scholars in the UK.

Experiences in the Professional Sphere

Overall, participants reported having had positive experiences in the professional sphere in the UK. Most participants indicated that being an academic in the UK afforded them numerous opportunities, such as generous research funding, an extended international network, and the ability to study sensitive topics otherwise impossible in Turkey. Therefore, academic life in the UK paved the way for participants' professional success. For example, Elif, working at a research-intensive university as a female senior lecturer in education studies, shared her happiness about living and working in the UK.

> "I am very happy to live and work in the UK. I'm glad I came. If I had stayed in Turkey, I would not have achieved many things that I have accomplished here. If I had stayed in Turkey, I wouldn't have been able to research the topics I'm working on now, and I wouldn't have had this much funding, I wouldn't have had such a wide network, and I wouldn't have been able to get such big projects. In short, I couldn't be that successful."

The migration of Turkish academics to the UK, as evidenced by the experiences of Elif and several other respondents, affords significant career opportunities. These include the autonomy to pursue research without restrictions, the availability of expansive networks, and access to generous research funding, echoing the relevant literature (Ackers, 2005, 2008; Bauder et al., 2017).

Similarly, Ali, a male political scientist at a Russell Group university, praised UK universities' academic freedom and research capability, as detailed in the following excerpt.

> "The first thing is that you have quality students here. Second, you are free. While working here, I don't pass my writing through any filters. I can freely say what I think. Since I am a political scientist, I must express opinions on some issues, and I can tell them comfortably here. Third, of course, is financial support. I have a research budget of 2500 pounds per year. I can attend any conference I want. I don't have to search for money. I can get any book when I need it. And the university's prestige facilitates my relations on international platforms as a catalyst."

Political freedom and protective security, exemplified in the form of academic freedom, are pivotal for producing scholarly work without the fear of job loss or other repercussions (Hart, 2013; Sen, 1999). The declining academic freedom and institutional autonomy in Turkey, cited by numerous interlocutors aligning with international statistics (Kinzelbach, Lindberg, & Lott, 2024), stand out as one of the primary reasons for their decision to leave Turkey or opt against returning. In contrast, UK academia allows academic staff to research sensitive issues while getting funded. Consequently, academic life in the UK has provided many interlocutors with a life-enriching academic experience.

Additionally, the perceived efficacy of the UK higher education system, particularly in terms of transparency in promotions and hirings, fosters trust. This sentiment is encapsulated by Ahmet, a male professor in STEM fields at a post-92 university, who articulated the well-functioning nature of the system. Having received his PhD from a Canadian university, Professor Ahmet opted to return to Europe and pursue an academic career. Subsequently, he applied for positions

in the UK. Within a brief timeframe, he secured a position as a lecturer and, shortly after that, was promoted to a professorship at the same university.

> "Everything is clear and transparent. For example, what you should do as a reader, what you need to achieve and what is expected from you when you apply for a readership position are written. When you become a professor, what is expected of you and the conditions you need to meet and reach to become a professor are clearly defined. Everything is systematic, and things proceed through the system, not people. I liked that transparency."

Transparency guarantees assume profound significance within the academic profession since they embody the capacity to trust individuals and institutions, ensuring the reliability and integrity of provided information (Sen, 1999). Moreover, transparency extends to the equitable evaluation of promotions and funding applications, as Hart (2013) posits. Therefore, the perceived transparency and meritocracy prevalent in the UK higher education sector, as highlighted by numerous interlocutors, foster a sense of trust in the UK HE system, a sentiment elaborated above. Further, in alignment with the existing literature (Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022), this trust in the system may be partially attributed to standardized performance metrics in the UK, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), as this standardization inherent in these metrics contributes to transparency and a perception of meritocratic selection.

It is noteworthy to include that the literature suggests that the perceived transparency and meritocracy within the UK higher education sector for academic positions appear to be higher for international academics, such as Asians (Kim & Ng, 2019) and international Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2017), in comparison to their local marginalized counterparts (Bhopal et al., 2016). This perception is rooted in complete trust in the system and the notion of building one's career based on meritocracy, which contrasts the perceived nepotistic attitudes prevalent in their home countries. Additionally, Pustelnikovaite and Chillas (2022) argue that internationally educated academics from North America and the UK are more readily accepted within British higher education. Examining the experiences of individuals like Ahmet, who obtained their PhDs from British or North American HEIs, it becomes evident that their privileged positions partly stem from their degrees and prior experiences in these countries, positioning them as "trusted members of a community of shared professional values" (Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022, p.14) within the British academic community.

Contrary to the positive perceptions about promotions and hiring in the UK higher education sector for academic positions, administrative positions are cited as being less accessible to migrant academics, including international scholars from Turkey. For instance, Mustafa, a male professor, achieved the highest administrative position among the participants by becoming a vice-dean. However, he believes that being a migrant academic from Turkey, and having a name that signals his Muslim background, despite his perceived whiteness, inhibited his chances of achieving higher managerial positions as detailed below.

> “I'm physically too white to be perceived as Middle Eastern, Arab, etc. I am not easily discriminated against until I open my mouth and say, I am Mustafa from Turkey. Mustafa is a very generic Muslim name. It is obvious that you are not English... There are very few minority academics at the dean, provost, vice-provost level, etc. In many departments, it doesn't even exist. These positions are disproportionately White English males. I also worked on administrative tasks and became vice dean and department head. If I were John Smith, I'd probably be a provost."

In most cases, the participants in the study expressed a lack of enthusiasm for taking on managerial positions. Only a few elaborated on the reasons behind this sentiment. For example, Ayşe, a hijabed female lecturer at a Russell Group university, explained that her reluctance is due to the lack of representation in upper administrative roles, as detailed below.

> “It's hard to see a woman in a leadership position. Seeing a migrant woman is even more difficult. It is even more difficult to see a visibly Muslim woman [hijabed woman].”

The existing literature (Arday, 2018; Bhopal & Jackson, 2019; Ramadan, 2017) alongside official statistics (AdvanceHE, 2023; HESA, 2024) highlight a discernible lack of diversity within senior management positions at the UK HEIs, a pattern that aligns with the findings of this study. Specifically, out of 1,320 managerial roles, only 10 per cent are held by international academics, representing over a third of the academic workforce. Additionally, these managerial positions are predominantly occupied by individuals of white ethnicity, as reported by AdvanceHE (2023). This disproportionate representation of UK nationals and white individuals in senior management roles exemplifies the whiteness of the academia (Ahmed, 2012), indicating a systemic issue within UK HEIs regarding inclusivity and diversity at the

highest levels of governance.

Lastly, high expectations, casualization, and redundancy, among other factors associated with the neoliberal dimension of the UK higher education sector, were commonly cited by Turkish academics as making their professional lives challenging. For example, Oğuz, a senior male lecturer at a post-92 university, expressed how challenging it is to meet the high expectations set by the UK HE system.

> "We are expected to be all-rounders here in academia. What is this? Article, op-ed, book chapter, conference, impact, REF, TEF… you must be successful in everything. It's very exhausting to do all of them. Also, it's very challenging considering we do all these in a second language while others do them in their mother tongue."

The existing literature suggests that migrant and BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) academics tend to overwork compared to their White British counterparts due to the fear of job insecurity (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022; Ramadan, 2021). Social scientists, in particular, face additional challenges stemming from a potential lack of language competency (Ackers, 2005), intensifying the pressure to meet the demands, as exemplified by Oğuz. This highlights how factors such as job security concerns and language proficiency can intersect, contributing to the varying work dynamics experienced by academics from different backgrounds.

In short, while an academic career in the UK offers Turkish academics a range of professional and intellectual opportunities—including expanded networks, generous research funding, institutional prestige, transparency, access to extensive resources, and the ability to explore politically sensitive topics—the challenges, such as limited access to managerial positions and demands associated with a highly competitive labor market, cannot be overlooked.

Experiences in the Social Sphere

The study further explores the societal dimensions of an academic career in the UK, particularly focusing on how the intersecting characteristics of UK-based Turkish academic staff play a crucial role in shaping their experiences within the social sphere. Firstly, the majority of participants reported that they had not experienced overt racism or discrimination, with a few exceptions. This was largely attributed to their perceived whiteness and the absence of stereotypes against Turkish people in the UK. For instance, Erdem, a male postdoctoral researcher in Wales, discussed his perspective on why Turkish academics generally have positive experiences while working in the UK.

> “As far as I see, there is no negative stereotyping towards Turkish people in and out of academia in the UK. On the contrary, I was met with sympathy when I said I was Turkish."

However, some Turkish academics living in the UK during Brexit had negative experiences as anti-immigration sentiment rose. Outside their university campuses, some participants encountered instances of racism, reflecting the broader societal challenges they faced during this period. For example, Oya, a female senior lecturer at a Russell Group university, shared her experiences as follows:

> “My husband and I were subjected to many racist attacks at the time of Brexit. While shopping at [names supermarket], while on the train, there were people shouting, "Here, you're an immigrant; get out of here."

Aside from the Brexit period, negative experiences were seldom reported and proved challenging to discern. This predominantly favorable representation of academic and social life in the UK was insightfully articulated by Melek, a female lecturer in social sciences at a post-92 university, who attributed her largely positive experiences to specific personal attributes and identity markers.

> “I did not experience any discrimination, but it might be because ... as I was sitting in a pub with my English friends the other day, they told me that "You can pass as white." I think this is related to being exposed to English in my early years, being educated in the UK, being a woman, having white skin, and being socialized in the UK.”

This example highlights specific physical and social attributes—such as having a lighter skin tone, leading a secular lifestyle, and receiving postgraduate education in the UK—that contribute to the smoother integration of international academics into British academia. These characteristics are colloquially referred to as "passing the whiteness threshold"

within the scope of this study, and they appear to facilitate a positive experience for Turkish academics in the UK. The Turkish academics who passed the whiteness threshold had predominantly reported positive experiences while working in the UK. This finding aligns with Sang and Calvard's (2019) study, which suggests that Whiteness can positively shape the experiences of international academics, in which intersectional privilege is (re)produced through international academic mobility.

Some participants are aware that being white is a crucial asset in shaping their experiences positively. For example, Kamile, a female senior researcher at a post-1992 university in Midwest England, articulated below her perspective on how her perceived whiteness protected her from racism while simultaneously acknowledging the prevalence of racism against ethnically marginalized communities.

> "They accept us as whiter. I think that the British people think differently towards Indians and Black people. I think they accept us as white others. That's why I didn't experience much racism."

The participants in this study like Kamile predominantly identify themselves as white. Onay and Millington (2024) argue that British Turks maintain and promote 'whiteness' as a strategy to assimilate into British society and avoid the racial stereotypes encountered by other Muslim groups. However, Turkish academics, including Kamile, predominantly embrace a secular identity. Therefore, I argue that their perceived whiteness is not solely aimed at distinguishing themselves from Muslim communities but also from ethnically marginalized groups.

However, in some cases, the perceived Whiteness of UK-based Turkish academics, which shields them from negative encounters, remains fragile and subject to challenge. The first identity marker that reveals their outsider position, despite their perceived Whiteness, is often their Muslim-sounding names, even when they have no religious affiliation. For example, Muhammed, a male professor based in London, expressed frustration over how his name often prompts others to assume he is Muslim despite his lack of religious affiliation. He shared how this perception has influenced his experiences during his time in the UK.

> “Here, everyone thinks I am a Muslim because my name is Muhammed. I was never a Muslim; I had nothing to do with Islam. Muslims want to befriend me because they think I am Muslim. When I say that I am not a Muslim, this time, they start preaching. The English people behave the way they think Muslims should be treated. For example, while we are sitting together, everyone is drinking alcoholic beverages, water is brought to me, they buy halal meat, etc. I am sure they think twice when inviting me to social gatherings."

Evidence suggests that job applications in the UK are adversely affected by names that sound Muslim (Ramadan, 2017). While I did not uncover evidence indicating that Turkish academics with Muslim-sounding names experience such negative consequences in academic job applications, they do encounter barriers in socializing, networking, and potentially in managerial positions as in the case of Mustafa exemplified in the professional sphere, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Additionally, Gholami (2021) suggests the use of the term "religification" to describe how individuals with Muslim backgrounds, even if secular or non-Muslim, have "Muslimness" imposed upon them—whether positively or negatively—by broader society, as observed in the current study. Therefore, it is argued here that Turkish academics with Muslim-sounding names undergo religification, particularly during initial encounters.

However, not every Turkish academic is physically white, brown instead. Also, if they embrace a conservative Muslim life, isolation is the common experience. For example, Osman, a male senior lecturer at a Russell Group university, shared his lived experience in the UK wittily.

> “The British man doesn't know what to think when he sees you. He looks at you, “you are brown, you are Turkish etc.”. He doesn't know how to behave towards you. He thinks, "Does this guy go to a pub or not? Will he beat me if I say let's go to the pub? Will he be offended by me?" He looks at you like he's looking at animals in a zoo, not because they're bad people, instead, they don't know you. You feel it. It diminishes over time. I should say that I am a man with a pious life. I don't drink alcohol, but the socializing places here are pubs. Not going to the bar prevents you from being a full member of the academic society and the network. I used to go to the bars at first, but I don't go anymore. I do my research and attend meetings; that's it.”

Osman believes that his isolated life will continue.

> "I feel like I'm in an aquarium. Yes, it is a very luxurious aquarium, but not the ocean. The food is good, there is heating, ventilation, etc., but it is an aquarium. If you want to go there, you can't; it's not yours. And I know it will always be like this."

Osman's comments warrant additional scrutiny, especially since he was the sole participant who explicitly self-identified as "brown". In contrast, most others identified as white, including those with darker skin tones than Osman. This suggests that, in the British context, religious identity and non-white categorization are often intertwined. This distinction is noteworthy, given Ramadan's (2017) argument that even white convert Muslims are re-raced in the UK and positioned as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) academics. In the case of Osman, being a practicing Muslim not only hinders his capacity to socialize with colleagues but also results in his reclassification as BAME individuals.

Albeit not all practicing (Muslim) male academics experience the same. For example, even though Murat, male senior lecturer in social sciences, also has a pious life, he has a relatively positive experience in the UK, partly due to his white appearance.

> "I am a Muslim, and I have not had any problems with this here. On the contrary, there is a very liberal environment. Of course, if the people go to the pub, I'll go, too and drink orange juice. I do whatever is necessary for academic settings."

Echoing Ramadan's (2017) findings, many male practicing Muslim participants in the study, like Murat, are willing to negotiate aspects of their faith identity and adeptly navigate societal expectations. In contrast, the experiences of practicing Muslim women participants in the study, who occupy the intersection of being migrant, Turkish, woman, and Muslim, were notably negative despite their comparable academic backgrounds and fairer skin tones. This is exemplified in the narrative of Ayşe, a female research fellow in social sciences at a Russell Group university and self-identified non-White.

> "In England, people know to be kind on the street even if they are racist. But here, too, racism happens at micro-levels. You can't fix them, and you can't talk about them because it's at the micro-level. My problem was not just being exposed to these microaggressions; my problem was not being able to talk about them. I was left with two options: preserving my mental health versus taking it [my hijab] off. I took off my hijab after 25 years." Ayşe

Microaggressions against BAME individuals in British academia have been extensively documented (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013), and similar documentation exists for Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2017, 2021). However, Ayşe's choice to remove her hijab somewhat diminished her othering experiences. This decision contributes to a form of "whitening" in her experiences in the UK, facilitated by her European appearance and Anglo-Saxon postgraduate education.

Moreover, as Ayşe disclosed below, removing her hijab enhanced her credibility in social science scholarship. While existing literature indicates that migrant scholars (Morley et al., 2018), Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2021), and BAME academics (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019) often encounter epistemic injustices, where their contributions to knowledge production are undervalued compared to their White counterparts, Ayşe's case underscores how removing her hijab elevates her standing in the knowledge production.

> "Also, taking the hijab off gives you the "privilege of neutrality". If you wear a hijab, people think you lack objectivity and neutrality. After taking off my hijab, I started to be noticed in the academic circles." Ayşe

Ayşe's narrative constitutes a perfect example of the *hypervisibility* dimension of the hijab. Wearing a hijab causes not only discomfort in daily life but also impedes a woman's capability to enter the inner circle and be regarded as neutral in intellectual circles. Some of the other female participants like Özen know how their secular lifestyle makes their life easier in the UK.

> "If I were a Muslim, I would have a hard time here because this is an Islamophobic place. That's why I'm glad I'm not a Muslim. If I had been here as a Muslim woman from Turkey, I think I would never have entered the inner circle. Now, I can enter the inner circle here a little. Being able to adapt to the lifestyles of the British, for example, going to the pub and having a beer with them, makes my life easier." Özen

The findings about religion and gender resonate with Ramadan's (2021) arguments that the hijab remains a rarity among Muslim women academics in the UK due to its hypervisibility dimension. This characteristic impedes career advancement and exacerbates the sense of being marginalized. Notably, scholars who wear the hijab find themselves excluded from social gatherings crucial for networking and professional growth, wherein alcohol consumption often serves as a central activity. Hence, considering Ayşe's experiences and Özen's observations, visibly Muslim Turkish women academics face intersectional disadvantages compared to their male counterparts, who navigate their faith identities with greater ease. Consequently, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and gender intersect in complex ways, shaping experiences that cannot be solely attributed to a single group (Warner, 2008).

In summary, the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics in the social sphere present a complex picture. While their perceived Whiteness often facilitates integration into British academia and fosters positive experiences both within and outside the academic environment, this Whiteness remains fragile and susceptible to challenge by factors such as gender, religious affiliation, educational background, and ethnicity. Thus, beneath the surface of apparent success lies a nuanced narrative, interwoven with significant challenges that profoundly influence their academic trajectories.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper thoroughly examines the implications of long-term international academic mobility on the lives of Turkish academic staff based in the UK, focusing on both professional and socio-economic dimensions. It highlights the unique position of Turkish academics, who come from a country at the crossroads of East / West and the Global North/South. Their intersecting identities often result in a range of conflicting dispositions and experiences. Hence, the findings presented in the paper contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of international academics. With the increasing number of Turkish academics in the UK and the previous lack of attention due to their relatively small numbers, this paper provides novel insights that enrich the literature on international higher education.

Firstly, UK-based Turkish academics benefit from participating in international projects, engaging in global networks, and accessing cutting-edge research infrastructure in STEM fields. The relevant literature extensively documents these advantages of international academic mobility. In contrast to existing literature (Ackers, 2005; Rostan & Höhle, 2014), Turkish researchers from the social sciences exhibit greater mobility than their STEM counterparts, as indicated by HESA (2024) statistics. This mobility pattern can be partly attributed to the academic freedom offered by the UK higher education sector, which emerged in many interviews. However, the neoliberal structure of the academic sector imposes an additional workload on international academics coupled with constant pressure to strive for higher achievements to maintain their academic positions. These findings contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the broader effects of neoliberalism on higher education (Mahony & Weiner, 2019).

Secondly, Turculet (2022) posits that international academics are more vulnerable and open to exploitation. Many, including Turkish academics, accept demanding working conditions as a necessary trade-off to secure their positions in the UK. I argue that the more than 70,000 international academic staff in the UK—one of the largest international academic communities worldwide—significantly contribute to the UK's global academic standing despite demanding working conditions. This paper suggests that the UK higher education sector should not exploit the precarious position of international academics, as many international academics are avoiding criticizing the working conditions publicly.

Moreover, the findings indicated that Turkish academics in the UK generally do not face overt racism or discrimination based on their ethnicity. This can largely be attributed to the lack of stereotyping towards Turkish people and the perceived whiteness of Turkish academics. The findings significantly suggest that whiteness is contextual and not solely related to skin color but rather a combination of ethnicity, race, educational background, class, and religious affiliation. The study suggests that while Turkish academics with fair skin color, Western education, upper-class status, and secular backgrounds are perceived as white and consequently have comparatively positive experiences in the UK, others who do not meet this "whiteness" threshold face discrimination, isolation, and estrangement.

An intersectional analysis revealed how gender, class, ethnicity, and religious identity shape the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics, both inside and outside academia. These findings provide a detailed examination of how Turkish academics' intersectional identities influence their experiences positively and negatively, challenging the literature's predominant focus on multiple disadvantages (Bhopal, 2022; Ramadan, 2021; Stockfelt, 2018) by including an exploration of how perceived whiteness can confer privileges upon international academics (Sang & Calvard, 2019; Spangler et al., 2024) despite fixed national markers and migration status.

However, the perceived whiteness of Turkish academics is fragile and can be undermined by various factors such as name, gender, migration status, ethnicity, skin color, or religious affiliation. This fragility underscores the complex

dynamics of privilege and discrimination, revealing that while some Turkish academics may benefit from perceived whiteness, their experiences are still subject to the intersectional influences of other identity markers. Thus, intersectionality provided a valuable lens through which to explore the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics. Furthermore, applying intersectionality to examine their experiences across multiple intersecting characteristics extends the relevant literature in higher education, where studies predominantly focus on binary identity categories such as gender/race and gender/class, while migration status has received relatively little attention (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

Lastly, although Turkish academics in the UK are not comprehensively categorized as BAME, the experiences of some mirror those of BAME academics, particularly when they do not pass the whiteness threshold as discussed above. Thus, the data indicates that the experiences of some Turkish academics can resonate with the narratives around BAME academics in the UK (Bhopal, 2016; Ramadan, 2017; Arday, 2018). Consequently, the discourse within this paper advocates for a departure from the tendency in the literature to treat international academics as a monolithic group, arguing instead for a more differentiated and individualistic understanding of their experiences.

In the policy context, the UK government suggests against using the BAME category, recommending instead that ethnic minority groups be referred to individually rather than as a single group. Advance HE further advice that higher education institutions monitor white minority ethnic groups in more detail, acknowledging specific issues faced by staff and students who identify within the 'White other' category. Considering that Turkish academics are largely categorized and self-identify within the 'White other' category, this study elaborates on how intersecting identities, such as religion, intersect with race/ethnicity to marginalize individuals further. The findings, therefore, shed light on the complex interplay of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion, revealing how these categories intricately affect the lives of migrant academics and thereby contribute to unraveling hidden narratives at the micro-level of the internationalization of higher education.

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