

Academic internationalization: Academics as marketing actors in higher education¹

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Abstract

Internationalization in the academic world has been a major research subject for the last several decades. Academic connections and collaborations between universities from different countries via joint research projects, education and training activities are very valuable. In establishing such connections, academics in staff mobility programs can play an important role in introducing their institution and carry a potential marketing element for future academic collaborations. In this respect, the aim of this study is to explore the awareness of academics on their role in academic marketing in the international higher education arena and to explore their expectations toward improving international education activities.

Keywords: *Academic internationalization, Education marketing, Academics, Higher education, Mobility*

1. Introduction

Academic internationalization is one of the major trends of higher education worldwide (Altbach, 2002; European Parliament Report, 2015; Knight, 2013). It has been a major research subject for the last several decades. Scholars and policy-makers have grown increasing attention to the subject. Universities have spared units for internationalization and strengthened their strategic planning to expand & sustain their education and research activities in the international arena (Allen & Ogilvie, 2004; OECD, 2012; Yemini & Sagie, 2016).

Cooperation between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in exchange programs is one of the many important multifaceted steps in the internationalization of higher education, which lets academia get closer in global aspects. Academic staff mobility within exchange programs is one of the most active and frequent activities that increase intercultural interaction (European Commission, 2015; Streitwieser, 2014; Yemini & Sagie, 2016). Academic staff mobility ensures that universities and academics converge and interact (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; European Parliament Report, 2015). By participating in the mobility, academics carry out teaching & training activities related to their field of specialization in various universities abroad while they have the closest and concrete informational role for the host universities and students in respect to their home institution and teaching programs. Therefore, academic staff mobility is an activity that carries a

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potential marketing element for future academic collaborations and activities, providing promotion for both the relevant academic staff and the university affiliated (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Svetlik & Lalic, 2016).

For this reason, it is believed that supporting competencies and leadership skills of the academic staff within the scope of international/intercultural teaching (e.g. in teaching, academic life, institutional processes and student leadership) before mobility would be useful both for the institution and the academics (Chang, 2007; Poole & Ewan, 2010). In this respect, the aim of this study is to explore the awareness of academics on their role in academic marketing in the international higher education arena and to explore their expectations toward improving international education activities. To do so, following research questions were asked in the study:

- In what ways do academics find academic mobility beneficial for them and for their institution?
- How do academics get prepared for their activities in the host university before mobility?
- How do academics find pre-mobility professional development activities in their institution?
- What things do academics believe to be done to improve international education and training activities in their institution?

Today, while the internationalization policies of universities accelerate, it is believed that exploring the awareness of academics toward their education marketer role and exploring their expectations toward improving international education & training would contribute to the literature and practices.

2. Methodology

In this qualitative study, interview method was used to explore the awareness of academics toward their education marketer role and their expectations & needs toward improving international education & training facilities. The gathered data were supported with document analysis and observation to examine the attitudes of academics toward internationalization within their own case (Creswell, 2012; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data. It included demographic information and 4 open-ended questions. The interview questions were designed to explore how aware the academics are of their role in academic marketing in the international higher education arena: how beneficial they find academic mobility for their professional development and for their institution; how they get prepared for their activities in the host university before mobility; how they would find pre-mobility professional development activities in their institution and what could be done to improve international education & training activities in their institution.

Document analysis was done by examining the academic teaching staff mobility policy & procedure documents and guidelines of the HEI provided on its website. The International Relations Office in the HEI which is the office of academic mobility was contacted for further inquiry and confirmation on the policy & procedure documents and guidelines. Also, the pre-mobility and post-mobility stages of some academics in the institution were observed.

Purposive sampling method was used to obtain the most information (Aziz, 2010). The reason to apply this method is that the study targeted academics with (and without) academic staff mo-

bility experience, to be able to discover from the reflections of academics concerning their lectures/courses, interaction with international academics/students, intercultural sharing, academic presentation, etc. The participants involved in the study were among from the academics working as Foreign Language Instructors in the same school in a HEI. 10 academics with academic mobility experience composed the population of the study. Additionally, data were gathered from 4 academics without academic mobility experience to explore their needs and expectations before mobility. Here the aim was to find out whether there were differences between the two groups (with or without mobility experience) in order to gain further understanding for the possible future pre-mobility professional development activities.

In the analysis of the data, content analysis technique was used for coding, categorizing the themes & sub-themes and interpreting. By examining the frequency of words/phrases and categorizing them to interpret, this technique enables a detailed contextualized interpretation (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

3. Findings and discussion

In the present study, to explore the awareness of their role and the attitudes of academics toward internationalization within their own case in a school in a HEI, the data were gathered from 10 academics with academic mobility experience. Additionally, some data were gathered from 4 academics without academic mobility experience to explore their needs and expectations before mobility with the aim to find out whether there were differences between the groups. This finding would give further understanding for the preparation of the possible future pre-mobility professional development activities. It is obtained that the data gathered from both groups showed a lot of similarities.

According to the findings of the study, all participants believe that academic mobility contributes to their professional development. They stated that they find academic mobility beneficial since it enhances personal and academic confidence; increases professional satisfaction; increases professional recognition; provides academic networks; updates professional knowledge; offers opportunities to vary pedagogical approaches; increases awareness toward good practices.

Almost all participants mentioned meeting academics and students in a HEI in a different country provided them with novel perspectives. They could make comparisons, and they could get to know novel things regarding teaching, pedagogies & strategies. Most of them stated that they found themselves refreshed and more innovative in school when they got back to their home institution. One participant stated that she had some bias before mobility, but she had the chance to see things in the first place herself, and things turned out positively. Bias could be the result of cultural differences and stereotypes, which is also mentioned in Poole and Ewan's study (2010), where they examined university offshore programs in Australia with the academics as part-time marketers. The participants also mentioned that they find academic mobility beneficial since it increases cultural awareness.

On the other hand, in terms of contribution to the institution, the views were not as varied from all participants compared to the ones in terms of contribution to the academics. The participants who explicitly mentioned the contribution to the institution stated that academic mobility can increase the prestige of the institution within the competence of the academic; it can provide mutual agreements/collaborations between institutions and keep them going; it can prepare for potential partnerships for projects/research; it increases the international visibility of the HEI; it

gives the opportunity to see differences in education and administration between the institutions and it increases awareness toward good practices. The other participants mentioned the benefits of academic staff mobility to the professional development and self-development of the academic. Hence, the academic would reflect what has been gained on teaching and on the work, this way it would provide an indirect benefit to the institution.

The findings show that the preparedness and competence of the academic to introduce his/her institution shapes the dimensions of academic mobility between institutions. Increasing the preparedness and competence of the academic is also emphasized in the other studies on the internationalization of higher education (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Svetlik & Lalic, 2016). Here, increasing the preparedness and competence of the academic involves a variety of topics from developing intercultural dialogues & teaching in multi-national classes to introducing their home institution with its philosophy and values.

Three participants stated that they are still in touch with the academics they met during their mobility, and they are planning to start research projects & collaborations in the near future, which is a target of mobility programs (European Commission, 2017). Two participants stated that they experienced some organizational problems regarding the dates of educational terms in the host university, which affected their experience negatively in terms of academic exchange. However, they stated that the mobility was still worthwhile in terms of socio-cultural exchange. Similarly, in Halat & Hocaoglu's study (2014), where they examined the perspectives of academic staff regarding the academic and sociocultural effectiveness of Erasmus Mobility programs, they put forth that in some aspects, socio-cultural factors had more effect on the scholars than academic collaborations in the mobility programs.

Regarding the question how academics get prepared for the mobility, all participants stated that they do comprehensive research on the department & university they are going to visit and on the students. And they get prepared with the documents & arranged subject to deliver. Nearly half of the participants stated that they bring visual/audio-visual aids, such as video-clips, brochures and leaflets to introduce their home institution in the host university. Two of those participants stated that this way it is more effective to present a more concrete image of the home HEI. Here, it is seen that a mutual understanding and implementation of an institutional presentation is needed. In this sense, all participants stated they would find pre-mobility professional development activities in their institution and institutionally-prepared tools (video-clips, brochures, etc.) helpful and necessary. In OECD's report (2012) on internationalization as a guide for higher education institutions, it is stated that HEIs should support faculty in every challenge resulting from internationalization in order to optimize the implementation of its internationalization strategies. To obtain greater achievements in the internationalization goals of the HEIs, those strategies need to be developed comprehensively by taking all stakeholders' needs and expectations into consideration (Çalkoğlu & Arslan, 2018). Thus, it is best for the institution to provide faculty with tools aligning with its strategic approach to internationalization to obtain more effective interactions.

Four participants emphasized the need for support on the document preparation and support on the arrangements with the host university to eliminate problems. Five participants stated the need for support on developing intercultural dialogue, cultural exchange, overcoming bias and designing educational activities in multi-national classes. It is obtained that since the academic acts like a "cultural ambassador" of the HEI and the home country, it would provide much more

fruitful outcomes both for the academic and the institution if some orientation activities & workshops on topics, such as developing intercultural dialogue, are provided in the institution before mobility.

Regarding the question what to be done to improve international education & training activities in their institution, most of the participants stressed the need for increasing grants to make mobility experience more frequent and this way to present a chance for more academics in the institution. In Yılmaz's study on internationalization of Turkish universities (2016), it is also stated that financial resources for internationalization need to be increased in Turkish universities. In some studies, the need among academics to improve their foreign language skills is also stated (Yılmaz, 2016). However, since the participants were instructors in the School of Foreign Languages in this study, they did not mention experiencing language problems in communication. Yet, based on their observation, they stated that for more effective academic mobility implementations, there is a need to improve foreign language skills of the academics in their HEI.

Finally, it is stated that there is a need for an online platform to share academic mobility experiences among academics, and to maintain contact & collaboration by reaching the academics in the host university through the platform. This kind of a platform would eliminate the problem of maintaining contact & collaboration among academics for future joint research projects and other joint education & training activities. In Halat & Hocaoglu's study (2014), it is also stated that the motivation level of academicians is low to do further academic works in the host university, so they need to be encouraged. With the usage of that kind of a platform, contact between academics can continue even after the mobility experience, and by sharing their reflections and works on the platform, novel joint works may arise in the long run. Moreover, that kind of a platform would increase the visibility of the institution.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In this study, it was aimed to explore the awareness of academics on their role in academic marketing in the international higher education arena, and to explore their expectations toward more developed international education and training activities. In this respect, academics were interviewed through semi-structured interviewing. Moreover, the gathered data were supported with observation and document analysis, which included the procedure and guidelines of academic staff mobility in the HEI. The interview-data were gathered from the School of Foreign Languages in the HEI to examine the attitudes of academics toward internationalization within their own case. Since the participants were language instructors, language barrier was not mentioned, which was pre-intended by the researcher to be able to explore academic mobility interactions between HEIs and comprehend communication issues thoroughly other than focusing on merely not speaking the language problem.

In the internationalization policy and standards of HEIs, it is seen that academic collaboration between universities from different countries via joint research projects, workshops, seminars, summer schools and conferences is very valuable. In order to establish such connections, it is believed that academics in staff mobility programs play an important role in introducing their home institution as being representative, which sets a potential marketing element for future academic collaborations and activities. Thus, it is believed that it would bring bigger achievements to HEIs on academic internationalization to fulfill the needs and expectations of their academic staff before mobility.

The findings show that there is a need to raise the awareness of academics on their role in academic marketing. The perception that the mobility contributes to professional gains is high whereas concerning university introduction and sustainable interactions between institutions, academics need to be supported. Firstly, they need to be supported with some institutional tools aligning with the HEI's strategic approach to internationalization. Academics are already provided with the necessary documents & guidelines to apply for academic staff mobility programs. However, the findings show that they also need to be provided with some institutional marketing tools of the HEI, such as digital packs showing how to provide information about the HEI in the host university, regarding its philosophy, values, faculties, graduates, employability statistics, international research and agreements portfolio, etc. This would eliminate the differences among academics on introducing their home HEI and optimize the outcomes of the interactions for both HEIs.

Preparing online/offline or face-to-face tutorials on how to increase the effectiveness of academic mobility both for increasing professional gains of the academics and for the institution's internationalization policy would be useful. It is obtained in the study that academics are willing to attend pre-mobility professional development activities if they are provided by the HEI on various topics to be chosen. The mentioned activities include how to develop intercultural dialogues, how to maintain academic contact and collaboration afterwards, how to teach in multi-national/trans-national classes, how to prepare educational materials before the mobility, how to lead the way for the future research/exchange agreements between the departments of the HEIs, and so on. Since that kind of a professional development activities' planning requires a huge workload and a thorough preparation, it is suggested to set up a centre/division in the HEI specifically working on professional development activities. This kind of a professional development unit would also provide academic staff and managerial staff with support on various topics from teaching pedagogies to leadership skills. Examples of that kind of units with their research & support areas could easily be seen in some HEIs in Turkey and various HEIs abroad (Karaferye, 2017).

Based on the findings, it is suggested that providing faculty with pre-mobility orientation & a digital pack, educational activities and workshops aligning with the strategic approach to internationalization at the home institution would be fruitful both for the academics and the institution.

Based on the findings of this study, it is also suggested to follow up with a quantitative data collection (a survey) with a large number of participants in parallel with contacting the International Relations Office in the institution (since there is not a Centre for Professional Development in the HEI available) to be able to pilot a pre-mobility program.

Although the study was limited to the views of a small sample, it led to an in-depth study of academics in a school on their role in academic internationalization concerning mobility. Furthermore, it is concluded that a university, in the direction of its internationalization strategies, need to do some more on the implementation level to obtain the optimum benefit from academic mobility for both itself in institutional aspects and for the academics' in professional aspects.

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