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Expanding Horizons: The Impact of International Mobility Programs on Faculty Development and Student Learning

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ABSTRACT: *International mobility programs provide transformative opportunities for faculty, enriching their pedagogical practices and ultimately benefiting students. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in faculty narratives related to professional development, pedagogical change, and student impact. Through a combination of qualitative interviews with American and European faculty and personal reflections from Fulbright and other international collaborations, this study explores how global experiences shape teaching, learning, and cross-cultural engagement. Against the backdrop of recent funding freezes and policy shifts that threaten international exchanges, this article argues that global academic mobility remains vital to fostering innovation, resilience, and inclusivity within higher education. Recommendations for sustaining and strengthening international collaboration are offered to promote interconnected academic environments in an increasingly uncertain global landscape.*

Keywords: faculty, global, higher education, international, mobility

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INTRODUCTION

International mobility programs, participation including faculty exchanges, global research collaborations, and international conferences, have long played a vital role in enriching the academic experience. Faculty members who engage in these programs not only broaden their scholarly perspectives but also bring invaluable intercultural insights into their classrooms, shaping students' global awareness and critical thinking skills (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Zhou, Samad, & Perinpasingam, 2024).

However, recent political shifts have endangered this exchange of knowledge. Under the new United States administration, funding for several major international collaboration programs, including mobility grants and research partnerships, has been frozen or significantly reduced (Department of Education, 2024). Currently, higher education must reaffirm the distinctive value of international experiences, not only for faculty enrichment but also as a critical lever for student learning, institutional innovation, and global citizenship.

This article examines how international mobility programs enhance teaching and learning, drawing on interviews with American and European faculty across multiple regions, personal Fulbright engagement experiences, and current scholarship. It also advocates protecting and expanding these opportunities amidst growing political and financial uncertainty. This study investigates the following research questions:

- 1) How do faculty participants perceive the impact of international mobility programs on their professional development and pedagogical practices?
- 2) In what ways do these experiences influence institutional practices and student learning outcomes?
- 3) What barriers exist to sustaining international engagement, and how can institutions better support faculty mobility?

While the study primarily focuses on faculty, its findings also highlight important, indirect benefits for international students. Faculty who engage globally often adopt more inclusive pedagogical approaches, such as integrating comparative perspectives, diversifying assessment methods, and validating multiple cultural viewpoints, which can enhance international students' sense of belonging and academic engagement. These benefits, although secondary in this research design, are supported by participants' accounts of how global experiences informed classroom practices that specifically resonated with international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Faculty Development through Mobility

Faculty international mobility has long been recognized as a catalyst for professional growth, intercultural competence, and scholarly innovation (Eden, Chisom, & Adeniyi, 2024; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2016). These experiences broaden faculty perspectives, strengthen international research networks, and

improve adaptability in both pedagogy and academic collaboration (Montgomery, 2020; Paige et al., 2009). Knight (2003) emphasized that international engagement contributes to professional identity formation by encouraging critical reflection and the ability to navigate diverse educational settings. Faculty often return from these programs with increased confidence, enhanced classroom strategies, and a deeper understanding of how sociocultural contexts shape learning.

Student Learning and Global Competence

The pedagogical benefits of faculty mobility extend to students through curriculum internationalization and intercultural dialog. Zhao (2024) and Sanderson (2011) reported that globally engaged faculty help students develop global competence—a set of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills necessary for understanding and acting on issues of global significance. Heffron and Maresco (2014) reported in a study of U.S. business students that international learning contexts promote adaptability and cross-cultural communication. Levine and Garland (2015) reported that short-term faculty-led study abroad programs significantly improved student intercultural communication and critical thinking. These findings support the notion that when faculty return from international experiences, they are better equipped to help students develop global mindsets, even in domestic classrooms.

Barriers to Faculty Mobility

Despite these benefits, mobility remains uneven. Chong, Kam, and Tham (2024) identified financial constraints, visa challenges, and administrative burdens as significant barriers to international academic engagement. De Wit and Altbach (2021) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted traditional mobility while also exposing institutional overreliance on travel-dependent models. Knight (2003) emphasized that without consistent institutional support and funding, international opportunities may be inaccessible to faculty outside elite institutions or in the Global North. Borka (2024) highlighted structural inequities in access to mobility on the basis of geography, citizenship, and field of study, calling for more inclusive and hybrid approaches.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is informed by social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2016), which provides a lens through which to understand how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and learning experiences influence faculty professional development. It also draws on transformative learning theory, which posits that new and disorienting experiences, such as immersion in different academic or cultural contexts, prompt critical reflection, leading to shifts in worldviews and teaching practices. These frameworks help explain how international mobility influences faculty resilience, motivation, and the creation of inclusive, globally informed learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study included six faculty members: three based in the United States (representing the Midwest, Mountain West, and South), one based in Denmark, one based in France, and one originally from New Zealand, which is now teaching in the United States. All the participants had experience with Fulbright exchanges, international teaching assignments, global research collaborations, or cross-national institutional partnerships. Faculty represented diverse disciplines, ranks, and institutional types.

Recruitment and procedures

Participants were recruited through professional academic networks, international education listservs, and referrals from ongoing collaborations. All the interviews were conducted between February and April 2024 via semistructured protocols. Four interviews were conducted via Zoom, and two were conducted via asynchronous email exchange, on the basis of participant availability and preference. The interview questions focused on participants' international academic experiences, perceived impacts on teaching and curriculum, student engagement, institutional culture, and barriers to participation in mobility programs. In addition to interviews, the researcher incorporated personal reflections from a Fulbright Specialist engagement in France and ongoing collaboration with European faculty.

Ethical considerations

This study did not include a formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review, as the conversations occurred organically during ongoing faculty collaborations and were not initially designed as a research study. However, ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the process. The participants were informed that their insights might be used for scholarly purposes and provided verbal or written consent to include their perspectives. Each participant explicitly agreed to be quoted anonymously in this paper. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and policies of the researcher's home institution, which are consistent with broader professional guidelines for qualitative research in education. All identifying details have been anonymized, and pseudonyms are used throughout. Given the sensitivity of discussing international mobility under current political conditions, special care was taken to ensure confidentiality and minimize potential risk to participants.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts and reflective notes were analyzed via an inductive thematic analysis approach. Coding was conducted manually by the researcher and focused on identifying patterns related to professional identity, pedagogical change, institutional dynamics, and global engagement. Codes were developed iteratively and refined through multiple rounds of review. Trustworthiness was addressed through member checking, peer debriefing with a qualitative research

colleague, and attention to thematic saturation. Reflective memos were maintained throughout to monitor researcher bias and positionality.

FINDINGS

This section presents five key themes that emerged from the faculty interviews and personal reflections: (1) faculty identity transformation, (2) pedagogical shifts and curriculum innovation, (3) student engagement and global mindset development, (4) structural barriers and inequalities, and (5) faculty calls for institutional support. Participant voices are shared via pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

Faculty Identity Transformation

The participants described their international experiences as deeply formative. These engagements encouraged them to reflect on their professional assumptions and evolve as educators.

"It wasn't just about learning new methods," shared *Dr. Ellis*, a U.S.-based business faculty member. "It was about seeing myself and my work through an entirely new cultural lens."

Dr. Moreau, a faculty developer based in France, echoed this sentiment: "It challenged our assumption about what constitutes engagement. We realized how the cultural context shapes feedback and participation."

Other participants cited similar transformations. *Dr. Shah*, originally from New Zealand and now teaching in the U.S., explained, "My time abroad opened my eyes to how we assess learning outcomes. It led me to revise my course evaluations to be more inclusive."

These findings align with social cognitive career theory, which emphasizes the role of lived experiences in shaping professional self-efficacy and long-term development.

Pedagogical Shifts and Curriculum Innovation

The transformation of faculty identity naturally extended into their pedagogical practices. The faculty consistently described revising syllabi, updating learning outcomes, and diversifying course materials after international experiences. These changes reflected a deeper commitment to inclusive and globally aware pedagogy.

Dr. Carter, from the U.S. Mountain West, noted, "After my Fulbright project, I redesigned my entrepreneurship course to include cross-national comparisons. Students asked better questions and engaged more deeply."

Dr. Shah cited the value of team teaching abroad: "Watching how my Danish colleague facilitated peer critique helped me rethink my classroom dynamics. I now use collaborative assessment more regularly."

Faculty also reported integrating international frameworks and case studies. *Dr. Moreau* noted, "After our faculty exchange, I revised our teacher training program to include comparative classroom power dynamics. It transformed how our future educators think about participation and authority."

Student Engagement and Global Mindset Development

These pedagogical innovations had an observable impact on student engagement and the global mindset. Faculty members observed increased curiosity, participation, and awareness following their curriculum updates. Many described how students, particularly international students, felt more included in the classroom discourse.

"I used to struggle to get students to care about international issues," said *Dr. Reyes*, a faculty member from the Southern U.S. "However, after I embedded global comparisons in our discussions, they started asking questions I hadn't expected."

Faculty also noted a ripple effect. "After I returned from a teaching exchange in Spain, I revised my syllabus to focus on international policy models," shared *Dr. Carter*. "Several students later applied for study abroad or international internships."

These experiences contributed to more inclusive and globally minded classrooms. International students, in particular, responded positively to content that recognized diverse educational norms and validated their experiences.

Structural Barriers and Inequities

Despite these successes, the faculty also described enduring structural challenges that hinder mobility. Despite the many benefits, the participants encountered persistent obstacles. These included visa delays, misalignment with tenure expectations, limited institutional funding, and systemic inequities.

Dr. Shah recounted the declining speaking invitation in Paris due to uncertainty around U.S. border policies affecting green card holders. "Mobility is fragile," they said. "We can't assume everyone has equal access."

Dr. Moreau highlighted contrasting barriers in Europe: "Our issue is not lack of programs like Erasmus+. It's overloaded faculty schedules and a lack of administrative buy-in for global work."

Others described having to use vacation days or navigate unsupportive leadership to engage internationally. Faculty have consistently emphasized that institutional rhetoric about global engagement often is not matched by practical support.

Faculty Calls for Institutional Support

These barriers fueled a collective call among faculty for more robust institutional backing. Across all the interviews, the faculty advocated for stronger, more intentional support structures. These included recognizing international engagement in tenure and promotion, offering internal mobility grants, and creating virtual exchange options.

"We need to stop treating international work as a luxury," argued *Dr. Ellis*. "It's part of academic excellence."

Dr. Moreau described a virtual exchange with a Brazilian university that led to coauthored publications: "We reached scholars who might never have accessed an in-person exchange. The relationship was just as meaningful."

Faculty stressed that mobility, whether physical or virtual, builds long-term institutional capacity. One Southern U.S. administrator summarized it well: "Scholar mobility is not about travel. It's about perspective."

These calls reinforce the view that academic mobility is not a peripheral activity but is central to preparing students for interconnected, global futures.

DISCUSSION

This study confirms the transformative impact of international mobility on faculty identity, pedagogy, and student learning, particularly within the context of rising political and financial instability. The findings provide strong support for the relevance of social cognitive career theory, which asserts that learning experiences directly shape self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career behavior. The faculty described their international experiences as formative moments that enhanced their professional confidence and expanded their understanding of diverse educational environments.

The data also align with transformative learning theory, emphasizing how disorienting experiences, such as navigating new academic systems, team teaching across cultural norms, or reflecting on implicit biases, can lead to fundamental changes in worldview and instructional design. Faculty were not merely incorporating international content into their courses but were actively rethinking how to foster inclusive, equitable, and globally competent classrooms.

Although international students were not the direct focus of this study, faculty testimony reveals that mobility experiences create a cascade effect that enhances

institutional inclusion. The faculty described how their globally engaged pedagogies helped international students feel seen, respected, and empowered. For example, by diversifying assessment practices or integrating comparative policy models, faculty helped normalize international perspectives in the curriculum. These findings highlight a critical, although often overlooked, benefit of faculty mobility: it supports intercultural engagement and belonging for all students, especially those navigating education across national and cultural boundaries. The faculty described curricular changes and teaching strategies, such as embedding global policy comparisons, using examples from multiple educational systems, and adapting feedback styles to directly benefit international students in their classrooms. These changes align with the principles of social cognitive career theory and transformative learning theory, as they foster learning environments where students from diverse backgrounds can engage more fully, see their experiences reflected in the curriculum, and develop global competencies alongside their peers.

Furthermore, the persistent structural barriers described by participants underscore the fact that academic mobility remains stratified. Faculty in less resourced institutions, those with caregiving responsibilities, or those affected by restrictive immigration policies often face insurmountable hurdles. This inequity directly impacts which faculty members have the opportunity to evolve through global engagement and, in turn, which students are exposed to those transformed teaching practices.

Institutional policies must evolve in response. Supporting global mobility is not merely an HR or budgetary matter; it is a strategic investment in institutional resilience, innovation, and inclusion. The faculty interviewed in this study called for clear, embedded structures that normalize and support international engagement through internal funding, tenure guidelines, and hybrid modalities. Without such support, the potential for mobility remains unrealized, and its benefits are inaccessible to many.

Finally, the findings suggest that the future of mobility should be reframed not as something exclusive to elite faculty or global “rockstars” but as a core component of professional development for all educators. Whether through short-term exchanges, virtual collaborations, or regional partnerships, mobility must be recognized as a critical pathway to strengthening pedagogy, institutional culture, and student experience.

In sum, international faculty mobility serves as a driver of both educational innovation and social equity. It develops faculty as global educators, enriches the student experience, and offers institutions a tangible strategy for navigating complex global challenges. Protecting and expanding mobility opportunities, especially in times of political volatility, is not simply aspirational; it is essential to the mission of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that international faculty mobility is a transformative force in higher education. In addition to enhancing individual

professional development, mobility serves as a catalyst for curricular innovation, inclusive pedagogy, and institutional resilience. The interviews and reflections gathered reveal how international experiences help faculty cultivate global perspectives, reimagine student engagement, and contribute to more equitable and culturally responsive learning environments. These benefits extend far beyond the individual educator. Students, particularly those from international or underrepresented backgrounds, benefit from faculty who have developed intercultural fluency and pedagogical adaptability.

Importantly, the findings emphasize that global engagement cannot remain the privilege of a few. Structural inequities, visa restrictions, financial barriers, and institutional inertia continue to limit access to meaningful international experiences, especially among faculty at less resourced institutions. Addressing these inequities requires intentional strategies: embedding mobility into tenure and promotion frameworks, providing dedicated funding streams, and expanding hybrid and virtual exchange opportunities. Faculty voices in this study clearly articulated the need for mobility to be integrated into the institutional core, not relegated to the margins.

As higher education faces mounting global challenges, including political instability, migration, climate change, and increasing cultural polarization, international mobility offers a pathway toward empathy, adaptability, and innovation. Institutions that invest in the global competencies of their faculty not only enhance academic quality but also prepare students to navigate an interconnected and uncertain world.

Moving forward, protecting and expanding international academic mobility must be seen as both an educational imperative and a moral responsibility. By empowering faculty to engage across borders, we foster a generation of educators and learners equipped to address global challenges with insight, humility, and shared purpose.

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