

Mobility of the professoriate: motivations of Bulgarian scholars to pursue a Fulbright fellowship

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Abstract: Drawing on a qualitative study which explored the experience of Bulgarian academics who conducted research and taught in the United States under the Fulbright Program, this paper looks closely at the motivations behind the scholars’ choice to undertake transnational mobility. The scholars see the Fulbright award as a unique opportunity to overcome their scientific isolation, self-actualize professionally, attain academic excellence, enhance the value and visibility of their research, increase their career prospects, contribute to the common good, experience a different culture. Analysis of the factors underlying the motivations for mobility leads to a notable contradiction. The Fulbright award, which is an epitome of success and scientific excellence, becomes an epitome of the Bulgarian scholars’ scientific lag. Participation in the Fulbright mobility serves as an instrument in their battle against their local institutional environment.

Key words: academic mobility, scholars, Fulbright, internationalisation of academia.

Introduction

The recent advancements in transportation and communication have made the movement of ideas, goods, information, capital and people across borders faster and easier [1]. The new technological realities have set the ground for a growing global interconnectedness within all the key domains of social activity [2]. These trends toward a “global unicity” and a “global consciousness” [3] have profoundly influenced the world of education and science too [4]. In response to the demands of a global academic environment, academic systems have come forward with a strategy – internationalisation [5]. The process of internationalisation entails the integration of an “international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” [6]. At the national level the strategy for internationalisation is seen in terms of providing funded programs that facilitate institutions and individuals to engage in international activities such as mobility, research, and academic linkages [7]. At the institutional level the strategy for internationalisation is seen mainly, but not exclusively, in terms of: a) academic programs that promote faculty/staff mobility, visiting lectures and scholars, student exchange, internationalisation of the curricula, cross-cultural training; b) research and scholarly collaboration in the form of joint research projects, international conferences and seminars, published articles and papers, research exchange programs, international research partners [8].

We see that academic mobility is a prominent feature in the strategy for internationalisation at both national and institutional levels. In the meantime, extensive search in the literature revealed that while the student experience of international mobility has been widely explored, the mobility of scholars has remained under-researched. Review of the existing studies of scholar mobility showed that they had primarily focused on understanding the experience of expatriate academics. Circular transnational academic mobility, however, was examined in only one qualitative study - Oliveira and Freitas’ research project which sought to understand the perspective of Brazilian professors who pursued studies abroad as part of their academic and professional formation [9].

Bearing in mind that academic mobility is a potent underlying factor in the process of creation

of knowledge networks [10] [11] [12], substantive research on the experiences of mobile scholars would be relevant and meaningful for understanding the specifics of the phenomenon of internationalisation in academia, and eventually, for its management at individual and at institutional level.

Current study

The purpose of the current qualitative study is to explore the experience of Bulgarian scholars who conducted research or undertook combined teaching and research projects at educational institutions in the United States under the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program. In particular, this article looks closely at the motivations underlying the choice of the Bulgarian academics to pursue a transnational academic mobility.

Method and data

This paper draws on data from twenty-one in-depth interviews with Bulgarian academics who pursued research and/or taught at educational institutions in the United States under the Fulbright Program. Data collection and analysis in the present study were guided by the version of Grounded Theory advocated by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin [13]. Strauss and Corbin's approach is a well-delineated *coding paradigm* which looks systematically for *causal conditions, phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action strategies* and *consequences* in the data [14]. Regardless of the approach to developing grounded theory, however, the fundamental tenets of the methodology remain unchanged: the constant comparative analysis where the researcher conceptualizes the data gradually moving from the descriptive level to higher order theoretical categories; the use of theoretical sampling or searching for sources of information that maximize the opportunities to discover variations among concepts and densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions; the use of theoretical memos to record theoretical insights and aid in the interpretation of data; and saturation of the data or this state of the inquiry and analysis when new data appear to add little to the understanding of the phenomenon [15]. This method of simultaneous data collection and analysis was deemed particularly suitable for the current project as it allows the researcher to go beyond the seemingly obvious by not only denominating the motivations for mobility but also understanding the motivations as part of the scholars' personal scientific biographies as well as of the structural context of the Bulgarian society. To this end, it was very important to remain open about the structure and direction of the interviews and allow concepts to emerge rather than force them into predefined categories.

The participants in the study come from the fields of sociology, political science, philosophy, linguistics, literary studies, cultural studies, economics, engineering, computer science, medical science, art studies, agricultural studies, physics, geology, environmental studies and theology. Eleven of the interviewed scholars were female, ten were male. Nine of the scholars were in the 31-41 age range, eight in the 42-52 age range and six in the 53-63 age range at the time of their Fulbright visit. They had completed their mobility in a period of time within the years 1995 to 2015.

Findings

The study found that the Bulgarian scholars were highly motivated to pursue mobility under the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program. The motivations underlying the scholars' choice to apply for transnational mobility were: a) availability of abundant research resources in their host institutions; b) collaboration opportunities with prominent researchers in their field; c) prestige or the opportunity to reinforce their academic position; d) provision of generous financial support; e) a personal responsibility to give back to society; f) the opportunity to live the American culture. The section below presents a detailed scrutiny of the various motivation

indicators.

Availability of research resources

The overarching motivation of the Bulgarian scholars to apply for a Fulbright mobility was the opportunity to access the latest published accomplishments in their field. The scholars, with no exception, expressed their profound concern that their home universities did not provide access to scientific databases containing the most recent publications and commented that these circumstances translated in their inability to self-actualize professionally. This was perceived as leading to *“falling out of the current developments in (my) field”* (R1) and incapability to produce *“worthy research that (I) can publish at an international level”* (R2). It was also particularly noted that the most prominent figures in their discipline were positioned in the United States, that *“the publication activity in the States is much higher than that in Europe, what you can find there, you cannot find anywhere else”* (R3).

Collaboration opportunities: a short stay for long-term benefits

Another strong incentive for the Bulgarian scholars was the opportunity to collaborate with prominent researchers in their field. There was a common understanding among the scholars that they are *“part of the world scientific community and must grow professionally in collaboration with it.”* (R4). The majority of the scholars had contacted and arranged to work with colleagues who specialise in a very narrow domain of study and viewed the Fulbright fellowship as a mean to accomplishing their research goals.

“What motivated me most of all was my project at the time, very few researchers work on this topic. I was looking for opportunities to go there and work with him for some time.” (R5)

Collaboration was also perceived as an opportunity to see where one stands and how one fits in the community of people who share one’s scientific interests as well as whether one can successfully work in a new cultural setting.

“The thrilling challenge to immerse in a new academic environment. My ambition to see whether I am on par.” (R6).

Prestige or an instrument to reinforce one’s academic position

There was a common perception among the scholars that the grant was *“an extremely prestigious award”* (R7), a *“title that remains yours for life”* (R2). The data revealed that for the senior scholars the award symbolised an acknowledgment of their academic status and worthiness as accomplished researchers. Although they had already obtained their professoriates and were well established in their field at home, they expressed aspirations to achieve a higher recognition at both local and international level.

“My personal ambition to reinforce my position in the scientific community was a strong motivational driver.” (R8)

Most of the junior scholars saw the award as a means of enhancing their visibility and reputation in their home institution. They hoped to gain due recognition and support for their research or other academic projects in their departments. In the longer term, the junior scholars expected that academic experience in the American educational setting would also serve as a potent advantage in their home institution career advancement.

“I thought, and rightly so, that a grant of such prestige would lead to more respect, higher esteem by my colleagues in the department. At university level too.” (R1)

The award was also sought after for its “high CV value” (R9) and the potential opportunities to establish international contacts that would possibly open prospects for an international career.

“I’d been motivated to apply since obtaining my doctoral degree. I had aspirations to seek a position somewhere else in Europe. One needs an impressive CV to gain attention.” (R10)

Ample financial support

The “adequate financial support” (R11) the Fulbright award provided was a major reason for the scholars to apply too. They strongly emphasized that doing a meaningful academic visit is dependent on the financial comfort the researcher can afford while abroad. The scholars reported that unlike other academic programs, the Fulbright Program ensures that the grantees feel financially secure during their stay which creates a “*very sound background for doing untroubled research in one’s sphere of interest at a university of one’s choice*” (R10).

A mission to give

A personal responsibility to share knowledge and experience also appeared as a motivator to pursue participation in the Fulbright mobility. There was the understanding that a true scholar has “*a mission to give*” (R2), that benefit should be steered into both an inbound and outbound direction. These scholars had purposefully applied for a combined research and teaching grant as “*(I thought) it would be fair for both sides that way. I am no longer interested in my personal benefit only.*” (R12).

Living the American culture

In addition to the professional focus in the motivation to apply for a Fulbright mobility grant, there commonly appeared the theme of experiencing “*the American life and culture*” (R12). Several of the older generation scholars had dreamed of visiting the United States since their youth. They reminisced of the subcultural movements of that time, of the influences of the values and the music of these movements on their personal development and social positioning. They hoped to observe the legacy of these movements in contemporary American culture and life.

“*I was eager to see my idea of America materialise. I wanted to see it in reality. I knew, of course, that it had changed immensely in the recent decades but still there was this curiosity.*” (R2)

The dominant personal motif in the younger scholars’ accounts was the opportunity to broaden their horizons “*beyond the European culture and life*” (R13). They were eager to explore the lifestyle, the urban and the natural settings they had seen portrayed in the American media. There were also reports that the Fulbright Program was an opportunity to fulfil, in a way, a dream to “study in an American university” (R9), which they had not been able to afford because of financial or other constraints.

“*The States epitomise so many things to me. Freedom to express who you are and what you think and believe in, a successful multicultural society, a democracy in action. I wanted to see and live that.*” (R14)

Comment of findings

The data in the present study revealed that the Bulgarian scholars perceived the Fulbright award as a unique opportunity to overcome their scientific isolation, self-actualize professionally, attain academic excellence, enhance the value and visibility of their research, increase their career prospects, contribute to the common good, experience a different culture.

Reference to the literature which discusses the global trends of internationalization in academia further highlights the findings in the present study. In their UNESCO report on trends in global higher education, Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley assert that “English-speaking institutions and academic systems tend to produce the largest amount of research and influence the knowledge-communications system” [16]. Moreover, the presence of research facilities and leading researchers in the United States is a strong pull factor for visiting scholars, particularly for those scholars who come from the periphery, that is, from institutions in non-English speaking and developing countries [17]. In addition, short-term academic experience in central universities

is seen as a leverage point in one's academic career that would assist in securing career advancement and promotion on return to the home institution [18].

The primary motivations for transnational scholar mobility identified in the present study converge with the main conclusions in Oliveira and Freitas' study. Oliveira and Freitas found that undertaking transnational mobility constituted an important symbolic capital for members of the professoriate in Brazil as it expanded the scholars' social and human capital by providing opportunities to form research networks, develop an international standard of doing science as well as experience another culture. However, both the present research project and Oliveira and Freitas' study explored the motivations of scholars who belong to peripheral academic systems. It would be meaningful to also examine the attitudes of scholars from the academic centres, which set the standards for the international science system, in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of what drives academics to pursue circular mobility.

Analysis of the motivation factors identified in this project pointed to a notable contradiction. On the one hand, the halo of excellence of the Fulbright fellowship and, on the other hand, the scholars' questioning of the value of their own scientific reputation. The Fulbright award, which is an epitome of success and scientific excellence, becomes an epitome of the Bulgarian scholars' scientific lag. They are the leaders in their local scientific community, still they embark on their transnational academic mobility with a sense of scientific gap that they need to resolve. The Fulbright award is not just a one-off act of spending time in an educational institution in the United States. It also poses a risk for the scholars as it provides a ground for self-assessment and is a measure of their scientific capabilities. Furthermore, we could argue that although the Fulbright award is an opportunity to engage with scholarship abroad, its impact is larger in the home country context. Participation in the Fulbright mobility becomes an instrument in their battle against their local institutional environment. The Bulgarian scholars use it as a mean to reinforce their academic position in their home institutions as well as an instrument to change their home academic environment.

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