

# Teaching across cultures: highlights from a study of academic mobility in higher education

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## Introduction

The global mobility of the professoriate has become an important trend in the global academic system (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). Hence the importance of studying the effects of contexts and attitudes on teaching activities abroad and the implications of these specificities at individual and institutional level.

## Purpose

The intent of this research project is to understand the nature of the academic mobility experience of the Bulgarian scholars who taught at educational institutions in the United States under the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program.

## Objectives

- What contextual factors and personal characteristics played a role in the scholars' teaching activities in the United States?
- How did the scholars' culturally conditioned assumptions and orientations affect their actions and reactions in the foreign academic context?

## Method and data

The study used the approach to grounded theory advocated by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998). The method is inherently emergent: the concepts, patterns and themes are implicit in the data.

The research process follows a systematic procedure: collect data, code, categorise, theoretically sample, develop a core category, generate theory (conceptual framework).

Data in this research project comprised twenty one in-depth interviews.

## Results

Contextual factors that played a role:

- preferences for teaching and learning approach
- teaching and learning goals
- the roles of teacher and student
- teacher-student interaction

Personal features that played a role:

- prior theoretical awareness of and/or practical experience in host academic setting
- proactiveness and willingness to adapt pedagogical practice

## Results

The results highlighted the understanding that one's approach and interpretation of an intercultural situation is affected by the ideas and behaviours one has internalised in one's own socialisation experience.

The Bulgarian scholars' experience in the United States academic context elucidated differences in perceptions of hierarchy, attitudes to egalitarianism, proactiveness and assertiveness, rules.

The ethnocentric perspective of the scholars, that is, their inability to identify culturally conditioned differences, recognise underlying contextual influences, fully accept alternative ethical frameworks and their manifestation in intercultural interaction, caused bewilderment and psychological discomfort.

The scholars' insufficient intercultural competence led to a number of instances where their inaccurate interpretation of intentions produced feelings and reactions which made their functioning in the multicultural host context challenging.

## Conclusion

The findings underscore the necessity to approach one's international teaching mobility with the awareness that teaching practices and social interaction behaviours are not universal and should not be directly transferred from one academic context to another.

Scholars should:

- understand the manifestations of the socio-cultural background of learners in the educational setting
- understand how their own cultural perspective determines their behaviour and attitudes
- and demonstrate culturally aware teaching by adapting their pedagogical approach and behaviour in response to the expectations and demands of the context.

## References

- Altbach, P., Reisberg, L. and Rumbley, L. (2009). Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution. A Report Prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.