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International Mobility of University Academic Staff as an Adult Learning Experience: Connecting Theory to Practice

Abstract: The study explores academic mobility experiences of university faculty members from the perspective of learning, focusing on adult learning as a core dimension of staff mobility. Ten qualitative interviews with faculty members were conducted to gauge their perceptions of academic mobilities as meaningful learning experiences and provoke reflective thinking about their learning styles, motivation, role of prior experience, and personal and professional development as facets of the learning process embedded in a new academic, cultural, and institutional context. The interviews were approached using deductive thematic analysis, while adult learning theories shaped the theoretical framework for this exploratory research.

Keywords: adult learning, academic mobility, university faculty

Međunarodna mobilnost univerzitetskog akademskog osoblja kao iskustvo učenja odraslih: povezivanje teorije i prakse

Apstrakt: U studiji se istražuju iskustva akademske mobilnosti univerzitetskog osoblja iz perspektive učenja, sa fokusom na učenje odraslih kao ključnu dimenziju mobilnosti. Sa članovima akademskog osoblja je sprovedeno deset kvalitativnih intervjua kako bi se ispitala njihova viđenja akademskih mobilnosti kao značajnih iskustava učenja i podstaklo reflektivno razmišljanje o njihovim stilovima učenja, motivaciji, ulozi prethodnog

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iskustva te o ličnom i profesionalnom razvoju kao aspektima procesa učenja u novom akademskom, kulturnom i institucionalnom kontekstu. Intervjui su analizirani metodom deduktivne tematske analize, dok su teorije o učenju odraslih oblikovale teorijski okvir ovog istraživanja.

Ključne reči: učenje odraslih, akademska mobilnost, univerzitetsko osoblje

Introduction

Academic mobility of university students and staff has been on the cutting edge of higher education research for several decades. Mobility of the faculty is approached from various perspectives; most commonly, it is regarded as part of the universities' internationalization efforts, aimed at enriching learning and teaching practices, fostering internationalization at home, development of university staff and establishment of international cooperation between educational institutions (Knight, 2008; Vlad, 2021). The process of learning at the individual or institutional levels in the context of the faculty's academic mobility is less commonly discussed by the scholars; even when learning is considered part of mobility, greater emphasis is put on the tangible outcomes of the learning. The dominant practical approach to staff academic mobility from the institutional perspective triggers inquiry focusing on the participants' takeaways from their mobility experiences, and provoking discussion on how the faculty members' academic profiles benefit, which takeaways they can integrate into their professional portfolios back home and how, and which novel teaching and research methods, know-hows, professional knowledge, attitudes, upgraded skills and competences they bring home and adopt (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Vlad, 2021). Learning and creation of new knowledge are regarded more as an outcome of the mobility rather than as a process, so the "how" and "why" of the learning of academic mobility participants are often overlooked. Application of learning theories and, specifically, adult learning theories, can accentuate learning as a process in this context and enrich scholarly conversation on the topic of university staff academic mobility. Therefore, this study is aimed at bridging the gap between the academic mobility experiences of the university faculty they perceive as a learning process and the adult learning theories as a conceptual framework and strives to answer the following research questions: How do university faculty perceive their academic mobility experiences as a learning experience? and In which ways can adult learning theories be applied to support the learning experiences of university faculty during academic mobility?

Theoretical Framework

Internationalization as a context

Internationalization of higher education is a globally acknowledged framework for scholarly discussion on international activities of universities, including academic mobility of students and academic and administrative university staff that shapes the global context for this study (Knight, 2008; Vlad, 2021). Since the 1990s, academic mobility of university faculty has been discussed as part of university internationalization efforts that impacting on the university's reputation and rankings, promoting cross-border academic collaboration, fostering internationalization at home and contributing to quality teaching and learning (Horváth et al., 2020). Mobility of the faculty is regarded not only as their professional development, but also as contribution to global knowledge creation and transfer, cultural exchange and diversity, and it contributes to overall improvement of the quality of education and research (Alemu, 2020). A large share of the scholarly discussion on the topic is embedded in the European educational context due to well-developed and promoted EU mobility schemes and initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ program, where the impact of mobility on university internationalization, academic practices and curricula elaboration, professional development of academic staff, and social engagement of academia are constantly assessed (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Horváth, 2020; Janson et al., 2009). Only a few researchers address the issues of university internationalization and academic mobility of the faculty through the educational or pedagogic lenses (Wihlborg, 2009). Learning experiences of the teaching, non-teaching and administrative staff resulting from participation in mobilities are left behind the scenes and usually taken for granted, and only a few researchers highlight learning and educational outcomes of academic staff mobility as one of the important elements or effects of international academic mobility programs and projects (Ball, 2019; Horváth et al., 2020).

The core role of learning

There are only a few studies that focused on, acknowledged, and explored the central role of learning in international trainings and mobility programs. For instance, the Evaluation and Impact Studies reported by the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2024) tried to identify the educational impact of mobility, namely the effect of the international training programs that were regarded as a step towards individual, organizational and social change, where learning was conceptualized as an important transformative process. The overseas fellowship

programs were addressed with the adapted Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation applied to assess the effectiveness of individual academic experience (Kirkpatrick, 1976). The applicability of the Kirkpatrick model for assessing learning outcomes in different contexts, including higher education, has been discussed in literature (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009; Praslova, 2010). The model incorporates 4 main phases (Fig. 1).

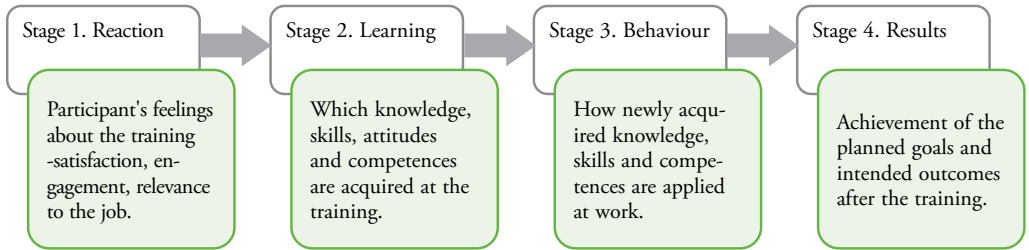


Figure 1. Adapted Kirkpatrick 4-stage model of training evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1976)

Along with other elements, the model outlines the central position of knowledge acquisition and application as a part of learning and internalizing the newly gained knowledge in a training program that relates to teacher training (Alsalamah & Callinan, 2021) and faculty academic mobility. However, although this model acknowledges the core role of learning in the international training experience, it cannot be used as a comprehensive tool for exploring learning during academic mobility as a process, as it was constructed to measure the outcomes of training experiences as the main indicator, while the aim of this study is to shed more light on the learning process *per se*. Furthermore, it does not consider informal learning, which is one of the core learning dimensions in academic mobility experiences.

Stier (2004) offers another conceptual approach for addressing the ambiguity of internationalization in higher education and academic mobility. He introduces three so-called ideologies, three principally different lenses for underpinning university internationalization practices such as instrumentalism, idealism and educationalism – which are generally aligned with the classical epistemic approaches but fitted into the internationalization context. Unlike the former two, educationalism does not approach university international activities either as a pragmatic tool for standardization and revenue-gaining or as a commitment to social prosperity, but with particular focus on learning and development as a core process, and stresses “lifelong learning, beyond organized education, strongly emphasizing the value of *learning itself*” (p. 343), prioritizing intercultural competences, sensitivity and respect for cultural diversity among the main objectives of international activities,

which is very relevant to university academic mobility. It provides further evidence of the importance of more systematic research of learning as an intrinsic part of mobility in light of the fact that the available studies are vague and fragmented.

Learning theories

It is reasonable to start a discussion of the mobility experiences through the lens of the adult learning theories with the epistemological conceptualization of learning and reference to learning theories. Although there is no generally agreed definition of learning as a concept in educational sciences and psychology, many researchers agree that learning is a process of transformation connected to gaining knowledge and experience that result in changing of understandings, skills, behaviors, beliefs and attitudes (Carlile & Jordan, 2005; De Houwer et al., 2013; Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). Ambrose et al. (2010) define learning as “a process that leads to change, which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning” (p. 3), emphasizing the importance of understanding learning as a process where learners interpret their explicit and implicit experiences enabling change as a response. Fenwick and Tennant (2020) study adult learning and approach it from four different perspectives – as acquisition of particular knowledge, as something tangible like skills and competences; as a personal reflective and transformative process of constructing own meanings and senses instead of appropriating already existing knowledge; as a practice-based social process built on active worthwhile engagement in the communities of practice rather than individual knowledge construction; and as an even more complex “embodied co-emergent process” (p. 56), emphasizing the contextual nature of learning grounded in the interaction of people, environments, spatial and temporal contexts (Fig. 2).

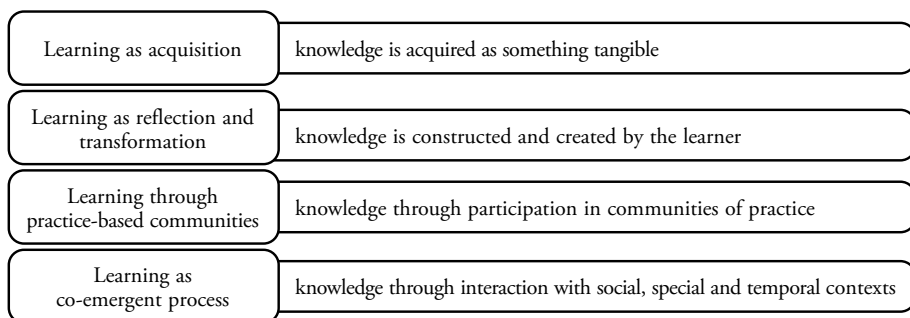


Figure 2. Four perspectives of adult learning, adapted from Fenwick and Tennant (2020)

Each of the perspectives highlights one of the dimensions of learning, and all four allow for deeper understanding of adult learning occurring through the mobility as “the context of a person’s life with its unique cultural, political, physical and social dynamics influences what learning experiences are encountered and how they are engaged” (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020, p. 55). We understand international academic mobility as a complex process that can be described as movement of university staff to a different educational institution situated in a different national and social context for a specific period of time, which means that learning is preconditioned by personal, environmental, spatial, temporal and social factors and their combination at the individual and institutional levels.

In this study, academic mobility is examined as a process of learning and the objects are faculty members, both teaching and research, who are approached as adult learners engaged in the mobility, whose learning is connected, but not limited to academic activities and practices during the mobility experience. Given that faculty members are adults professionally engaged in higher education, their academic mobility experience can be analyzed through the theories of adult learning incorporating principles of andragogy, motivation to learn, experiential learning, transformative learning, and self-directed learning embedded in the social constructivist paradigm. These theories are rooted in the traditional theories of learning that apply to the learning process of diverse adults in dynamic contexts (Bierema, 2019; Fenwick & Tennant, 2020; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Russ-Eft, 2011), and strive to explain non-formal and informal learning in international settings that applies to faculty mobility experiences. Adult learning theories provide a framework for underpinning and enhancing the learning process and outcomes, as well as professional development of university academic staff engaged in academic mobility (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020; Houle, 1961; Knowles et al., 2005; Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Mezirow, 2006). These conceptual frameworks complement each other by focusing on different dimensions of learning and contribute to a holistic and complex exploration of adult learning practices and experiences that are often overlooked in the faculty mobility process (Bierema, 2019; Knowles, 1950; Knowles et al., 2005; Mezirow, 1997; Tough, 1979).

Methodological Framework

To address the research questions on university faculty members’ perception of academic mobility experiences as learning by and connecting it to adult learning theories, the study included qualitative interviews followed by a thematic analysis as a robust method of qualitative inquiry for studying the individuals’ lived

experiences, including their learning. The qualitative semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of the experiences the faculty gained during their mobilities as teachers and researchers, and nuanced individual perceptions through posterior reflection during the conversation, where the interview method provided an opportunity to delve into these intricacies. It offered a way to discover the lifeworld of the university faculty members, including different perspectives and important issues around the topic under discussion (Kvale, 2007), and contextualize their learning experiences in diverse institutional, academic and cultural settings of academic mobility. The interviews helped to capture the context-specific factors like motivations, aspirations, and perceived outcomes that influenced the learning process, providing a richer understanding of adult learning facilitated by the mobility.

The data for the study was collected during online interviews with ten faculty members of Russian universities in 2021...2022, before the war resulting in emergent limitations of international academic cooperation, which negatively affected faculty academic mobility as well. The study applied non-probability sampling that included academics from regional universities holding full-time faculty positions, with different levels of experience, engaged in teaching and research activities, who had at least one experience of international academic mobility participation. Nine of the interviewees were females and one was male, although gender, age, and other demographic characteristics were not considered as substantial factors affecting the learning process during the mobility experience.

The interview protocol included 14 questions about various aspects of academic mobility, including motivation factors, institutional support, perceivable success and the effect of mobility experience on academic practices. Although the interview scenario was developed to answer research questions focused on capturing motivations, expectations and personally perceived outcomes of the faculty's academic mobility experience within the context of university internationalization, the data revealed a new perspective on academic staff mobility due to the selected research strategy. The interview method provided the data collection process with flexibility and dynamics, as the questions could be reorganized and adapted in response to the interviewee's reactions, insights and reflections, so the topic of learning emerged spontaneously in the interview conversations, while the academics' lived experiences were discussed and elaborated. Moreover, the interviews were a reflective process in which the interviewees themselves discovered new meanings, non-evident perspectives, and were encouraged to talk about the emotional aspect of their experience, the transformation of their mindsets and identities, which provided deeper insights and unfolded a new dimension of the study (Kvale, 2007).

The research design incorporated thematic analysis as a well-suited method for identifying themes and patterns from the qualitative data obtained in the interviews. For instance, it encompassed learning as a transformative process, personal and professional motivations to learn, the learners' self-directedness, learning by doing and by immersing into new cultural and institutional contexts. These themes helped to organize, structure and make meaning of diverse and rich information and rationalize the academic staff's learning experiences through the adult learning perspective. The newly identified themes revealed the academic staff's personal learning experiences and their self-perception as learners, as part of their journeys in international academic mobility. Consequently, this study on the learning experiences of mobile faculty members embedded in the adult learning theories was data-driven and aimed at offering a fresh perspective on research into academic staff mobility. Its findings contribute to a deeper understanding and improvement of faculty learning practices during mobility and help to make their mobility experiences more meaningful at the individual level, whereas, from the institutional perspective, the research enhances the value of staff mobility initiatives.

Results and Discussion

Academic mobility of the faculty integrates different types of engagement and professional activities in the host institution, such as teaching, participation in formal trainings, research work or a mix of them, which define the participant's learning experience. As an educational activity, mobility in higher education can be categorized as formal, non-formal or informal type of learning, where the formal one can mostly refer to the mobility of students as it implies formal academic settings, teaching and instruction, standardized educational programs and curricula provided by an educational institution. On the other hand, university staff is mostly engaged in non-formal or informal kinds of learning, where non-formal learning is usually associated with a structured training organized by the host institution, while informal learning is unstructured and contextual learning in the new settings, by which we mean the institutional, social and cultural environment and conditions. As most of the interviewees' mobility experience was not connected to participation in any structured courses or formalized trainings during their time in the host institution, we consider informal learning situated in the spatial, temporal, institutional, cultural and social contexts of the host institution as the most substantial type of learning for this study.

Learning as Development

In scholarly literature, the process of learning is not always referred to and defined as 'learning'; it is often manifested through other descriptors, such as change, development or transformation (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Knowles et al., 2005). Learning was often reflected in a similar way in the interviews ... it was not always defined as learning; rather, it was mentioned and captured as a process of development and transformation:

"Developing myself was very important for me." (Interviewee 5) or

"My experience was part of internal development." (Interviewee 7)

Personal development, as well as professional and academic development, were themes that arose in the conversations. In scholarly discussions, it is associated with diverse areas of development and learning of higher education professionals that include development in the academic role, along with personal development (Dorner & Mårtensson, 2021).

Learning, as part of the academic development process, was acknowledged by all academic staff members; both those who associated themselves more with teaching and with research roles said that they had acquired new competences, knowledge, skills, and adopted new academic practices constituting part of their professional growth:

"As a teacher, I have grown dramatically. It was very unusual, I did not expect it, but it happened." (Interviewee 1), or

"I have done a tremendous amount of work and have made a huge contribution to my doctoral thesis." (Interviewee 4)

Learning as Knowledge Acquisition

In literature, learning as knowledge acquisition is rooted in traditional behaviorist and cognitivist concepts. It is usually referred to as gaining, processing and digesting new information, understanding, or skills through various means, adoption of these cognitive constructs and their application in practice to elaborate the learner's own strategies, behaviors and knowledge applicable in new circumstances and unfamiliar life situations (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). This can involve learning from experience, studying, observation, communication with others, and utilizing resources such as books, articles and digital sources. From this perspective, knowledge is perceived as a tangible outcome of learning, and an individual comes into possession of this knowledge as a material object. This

process has in recent years been more discussed at the institutional and national levels and referred to as commodification of knowledge, which appears as a response to the development of knowledge society and becomes an important power for cross-border knowledge creation and transfer driven by teachers and researchers on mobility (Alemu, 2020). At the individual level, it does not have that economic connotation and is more related to the personal perception of explicit learning. For instance, acquisition of knowledge was mentioned as “*I brought home the idea*” (Interviewee 9) as if it were a physical object or a souvenir taken home from a trip, and then the participant elaborated and implemented this idea in practice at their home institution, where it resulted in a new study program and became an overt, tangible evidence of learning. Similar patterns can be recognized in most of the interviews where the faculty discussed new teaching methods or research outcomes that they took home. Evidently, having solid and tangible outcomes and takeaways from mobility programs helps and supports the participants’ reflections of their learning, and makes the learning process more visible in this sense at both the personal and institutional levels:

“My idea was serious, but the Vice-Rector for International Relations did not seem to appreciate it at first. Two years later, he apologized to me, said that the idea was great, and needed to be implemented.” (Interviewee 5)

Discussion and acknowledgement of the learning outcomes also supports the emotional response to the mobility experience that can be important for the faculty members’ future decisions on mobility participation, collegial support to other staff planning on taking part in the mobility and generally motivating more active engagement of the academic staff in learning through international activities.

Motivation to Learn

Adults’ motivation is generally need-based and shaped by their life context when they see the practical value of their learning and how it will satisfy their interests and needs (Knowles et al., 2005). Academic mobility as an experience involves a rich variety of contexts – cultural, educational, institutional, and social ... that can influence the participants’ motivation. It is essential to recognize that motivation to participate in a mobility program and motivation to learn during the mobility experience may not always align; learning, without thorough strategic planning, might not be the goal or driving force behind participation in the

mobility program, but rather a parallel process that unfolds alongside it. The rationales behind the decision to take part in a mobility program can be very different: the faculty can be driven personally or professionally or even have formal institutional reasons to participate that are not connected to intrinsic motivation. However, the reasons for mobility should also be considered in the context of learning as they determine the participants' priorities in the mobility and characterizes them as learners who can be goal-oriented, activity-oriented or learning-oriented (Houle, 1961). In most cases, these orientations overlap but are still helpful for identifying a learner's primary motivations. Goal-oriented learners are driven by specific, tangible objectives, which may be related to career advancement, personal development, acquiring a particular skill, or generally achieving a specific outcome. This orientation is linked to clear goal-setting prior to mobility, which is typical for more mature participants, often with prior mobility experience, whose expectations are less vague and whose participation is driven more by professional than by personal reasons. Such participants reflect on the clear connection between their learning efforts and the attainment of their goals, with the relevance of the learning content to their goals is a key factor influencing their engagement. Goal orientation is often associated with the professional engagement of the learner at their home institution and is more common among staff engaged in research, since their mobility goals are more tangible and the outcomes are more measurable, e.g. scientific articles, collaborative projects or dissertations, which positively affects the motivation:

"I wanted to engage in the work of the host department, to gain insight in how the teaching and, more importantly, the research process is conducted there. I was interested personally, and even more professionally." (Interviewee 4) or

"I was lucky – it was that particular innovative research environment that I always wanted to familiarize myself with." (Interviewee 3)

Activity-oriented adult learners are more driven by the social aspect of the process itself, than by achieving learning goals; they enjoy learning activities that they engage in while acquiring knowledge or skills (Houle, 1961). This orientation is more typical for young academics eager to discover the world and acting out of curiosity, deriving pleasure from activities associated with learning through communication. They engage in multiple endeavors in the host institutions and might be interested in experiential learning, hands-on activities, and exploration of various topics without a particular emphasis on achieving specific outcomes. This approach to learning during mobility discloses, on the one hand, the social dimension of learning as social interaction plays a core role for activity-oriented

mobility participants. On the other hand, it can be also explained by environmental and other factors not related to learning. For instance, limited opportunities for professional and leisure travelling may be a robust incentive for mobility participation among faculty from peripheral institutions:

“It was difficult for me to afford trips abroad, and academic mobility provided me with such an opportunity.” (Interviewee 1)

However, activity-oriented mobility participants, who were not so professionally driven, conceptualized themselves as cultural ambassadors of their country more than others and were more likely to engage in various cultural events and enjoy sharing their culture with others and learning about new cultures. Their openness to other cultures and attitudes toward people, which in the context of academic mobility refers to the ability to appreciate and accept diversity, understanding that different cultures may have unique perspectives, values, and practices are developed through learning and gaining new knowledge (Alemu, 2020). More than participants with other motivations, they associated their learning experience with development of intercultural competence and cultural sensitivity that brings into the foreground the cultural dimension of learning as part of the international mobility experience.

“Whenever my host institution organized some international events or activities, I always tried to prove myself as a representative of my country’s culture.” (Interviewee 10)

Activity orientation was also strongly related to the participants’ language competence as the language barrier was a strong hindering factor for engagement in additional activities beyond the mandatory aspects of the mobility program. And vice versa, the faculty members described their interest in participating in various activities during their mobility as a strong impulse to learn the foreign language and develop their language capacity:

“Maybe I would dare to repeat the mobility experience, but I am still critical to my language abilities, my English is perfectly unperfect that makes me feel shy.” (Interviewee 10), or

“My expectations were very much connected to improving my language skills. That is, practicing live speech communication – and it just soared.” (Interviewee 1)

Learning-oriented adult learners are focused on the learning process, which is their primary focus and the main driving force. Such learners are driven by an inner desire to know things and usually have a habit of learning, so the need to

acquire knowledge moves them forward and motivates them to engage in learning activities (Houle, 1961). Learning of a foreign language can often be related to this type of orientation and motivation to learn, as can acquisition of cultural knowledge that overlaps and cannot be clearly distinguished from the learners' activity-based orientation. When they talked about their lived experiences, the interviewees interested in learning the language and culture often mentioned that their orientation to learning was associated with the curiosity that was driving them, and that satisfaction of this curiosity formed their learning-oriented motivation.

“One of my reasons was trivial ... human curiosity. I wanted to see what is over there, and what it's like over there, and what is being done there.” (Interviewee 4)

Evidently, orientations play an important role in forming the particular motivation of the participants; these orientations are not mutually exclusive and individual learners can exhibit combinations of their traits. Mobility experience can accommodate and leverage all orientations, incorporating clear goal-setting for more goal-oriented participants, diversity of activities for more sociable and activity-oriented individuals, and offering cognitive challenges and meeting the demand for knowledge among those oriented to learning as a process. When properly acknowledged and duly addressed, these orientations can help create and support a meaningful learning experience for faculty participating in academic mobility at both the individual and institutional levels.

Self-Directed Learning

Motivation to learn is directly connected to self-directedness of learning of adult professionals. Academic mobility requires faculty to take charge of their own learning and adapt to new environments independently, which is in line with the theory of self-directed learning, where adults take responsibility for identifying their learning needs, setting goals, and pursuing knowledge and skills relevant to their context, personal objectives and professional development goals (Knowles, 1975). Self-directedness of learning is not something set by default; rather, it is achieved through the effort of the learner (Tough, 1979). Proactive behavior and enthusiasm of the learner are among the requirements for successful learning, while reactive behavior inhibits learning (Knowles, 1975). Engaged in academic mobility, faculty members develop self-directed learning skills by navigating unfamiliar territories, seeking out resources, and engaging in independent inquiry.

However, it must be noted that personal responsibility, autonomy, intrinsic motivation and definition of the goals are the factors necessary for making meaning of the mobility experience:

“Mobility is anyways enriching; however, it is meaningful if you keep in mind why you are taking part in it.” (Interviewee 6)

In other words, to make learning deliberate, mobility participants need to develop a mindful and strategic approach to their mobility experience. Self-directed learning in the mobility context starts with intentional planning (choosing the mobility program or destination, courses, trainings and cultural events), elaborating learning content and time management (setting the balance between structured training, teaching or research, and self-study), and self-assessment of the learning outcomes (diaries, reflections, reports) (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Tough (1979) adds alternative perspectives to self-directed learning, where a learner is responsible not only for making decisions about the learning content, place, time and outcomes of learning, but also for prior assessment of their own knowledge, skills and learning needs, as well as for maintaining motivation throughout the learning process. All perspectives provide room for learners' flexibility and adjustment of their learning strategies which is important for mobility as a self-directed learning process embedded in unfamiliar, diverse and often unpredictable contexts.

In practice, the strategies of learning in the context of mobility are often inconsistent and lacking one or several elements: some of the participants do not take much effort to plan their learning, while others do not evaluate the outcomes properly. Even though they are intrinsically motivated to learn, faculty members are often not aware of the content they are supposed to learn, do not set well-defined goals, miss the opportunity to reflect on their experience during and after mobility, and do not pay much attention to the evaluation of their learning outcomes. An unfamiliar educational and institutional environment, insufficient information about the structure and content of the mobility program, and excessive dependance on guidance and support of the institutions contribute to the ambiguity of the mobility strategies and can be the factors inhibiting self-directed learning of the participating faculty members.

At the institutional level, mobility participants are not always encouraged to share their knowledge and experience back home; instead they are required to submit standardized reports that do not spotlight the faculty's learning and development and do not result in the acknowledgement of their learning. This practice negatively affects both the learning of individual mobility participants and the organizational learning culture of the educational institution that can be supported and promoted through dissemination of knowledge acquired by

the faculty during their mobilities. Knowls et al. (2005) also underline the importance of empowerment of the employees by the institution and of offering support to the staff along the learning journey, from assessing the learning needs that are often inaccurate and mixed with the learner's wants, to planning and implementing the learning strategies and assessing the results, which can enhance the faculty's learning experience during the mobility program as well.

Transformative learning and reflectivity

Academic mobility can become a transformative experience for academics, leading to personal and professional growth (Nada & Legutko, 2022). The transformative learning theory, which was developed by Mezirow (1991), suggests that adults undergo significant shifts in their perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions through critical reflection and challenging experiences. By immersing themselves in unfamiliar educational environments, international mobility participants are exposed to new ideas, perspectives, academic and non-academic practices, which can challenge their existing views and facilitate transformative learning. The transformative learning theory interprets their learning as a process of transformation of perception of the world and self-perception as well, in which the learners "come to reflect on their self-images, change their self-concepts, question their previously internalized norms, and reinterpret their current and past behaviors from a new perspective" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 213). Rooted in the learner's internal reflective process, transformative learning requires reflection on the content and process of lived experiences, followed by problem-solving reflection that facilitates meaning-making.

The mobility experience of the faculty often, but not always, yields tangible results like career advancement, publications, or adoption of new teaching methods and practices. The faculty sometimes reflects on intangible changes that can be explained by the ongoing transformations induced by their experience:

"That experience was part of internal development, that is I feel like I am two slightly different persons, that I was one person before the mobility program, and a new one, little better one after it." (Interviewee 8)

These transformations can demonstrate learning, whether it occurs unconsciously, intentionally, or as a result of the participant's self-directed efforts. They can not only expand academic horizons, but also often lead to dramatic shifts in the learner's perspective, resulting in changes in behavior, not only in

habits, traditions and practices of teaching or research, as well as beyond academic practices. For instance:

“Before I wore suits at work, and now I wear jeans and sneakers.”
(Interviewee 4)

Changes in habitual behaviors and routines signal transformative learning, extending to both the academic and non-academic life of the faculty. They also reflect changing assumptions and the adoption of features and elements of a new academic culture. This underpins the cultural dimension of learning, through which academics acquire knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and skills from the cultural environment in which they are immersed. It can be related to national and regional, as well as organizational culture, and play a crucial role in shaping the learner’s identity, worldview, and understanding of the community both in the host destination and upon returning home (Taylor, 1994).

The critical perspective is also an important element of transformative learning as it goes beyond simply acquiring information or skills; it challenges individuals to question assumptions, examine social structures, and engage in deep reflection about themselves and the world around them (Mezirow, 1991). The learners dip into the process of critically examining their existing knowledge and recognizing that some assumptions may be limiting or biased; this can be fostered by the mobility environment. Mobility participants challenge and sometimes dislodge existing paradigms and mental models, a critical perspective encourages them to question established conventional norms, professional and societal expectations, fostering a willingness to consider alternative viewpoints and appreciation of cultural diversity (Alemu, 2020). The societal context of mobility can serve as a catalyst for developing the participants’ critical perspective, which is manifested through comparisons of contexts and validation of practices such as “right and wrong” or “here and there”. Thinking about their experience, mobility participants disclose a critical stance towards their cognitive process and the reflective nature of their learning:

“In terms of science, it is very useful for us to understand where we are in the global scientific community, to see what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong.” (Interviewee 4)

Reflection as a part of transformative learning plays a pivotal role not only in assessment of the results, but throughout the whole process as well. For most of the participants, the interview for this research was the first substantial attempt of structured reflection following their mobility experience that allowed them to unveil new dimensions and perspectives of their lived experience, which is one of the features of qualitative inquiry (Kvale, 2007). After they completed

their mobility program, the faculty were expected to submit formal reports to their home universities that were mostly focused on financial information, travel documentation, the schedule and a summarized description of the mobility activities and content, usually quite short and superficial. The participants did not mention sharing knowledge with other staff members that would contribute to reflection about their own learning as a typical institutional practice after mobility completion. However, academics, who were more engaged in research than in teaching, benefited more from opportunities to reflect on their learning and development of new knowledge and perspectives owing to their job responsibilities, such as preparation of articles and conference presentations where they integrated the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed during their mobility:

“Each mobility resulted in a new article or conference presentation that I produced; all mobility experiences enriched my work with some new elements.” (Interviewee 5)

During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to reflect on both work-related knowledge and changing self-perceptions induced by learning. At the professional level, such reflexive practice can help academic staff integrate the insights into their own practices, enhancing the quality of and innovation in their teaching and research, boosting their cultural competence, and developing resilience and adaptability at the personal level. In a broader sense, academic staff may integrate the mobility experience and knowledge into their own values, teaching philosophies, and career aspirations, fostering a deeper sense of self-awareness and purpose (Mezirow, 1991). Reflecting on the mobility experience can also help connect this experience to experiential learning that, in turn, can deepen the mobility participants’ understanding of their own learning.

In order to maximize the benefits of reflection after academic mobility completion, faculty should intentionally engage in structured reflection processes as this is essential for their understanding of their learning and development of their self-concept as learners. This may involve discussions with colleagues, knowledge-sharing sessions, participation in reflective workshops, or seeking feedback from peers, which can be organized and incentivized at the institutional level.

Experiential Learning

Being at the core of adult learning, experience is grounded in an individual’s live activities in the personal, social and professional domains, followed by their reflection on such participation and making meaning of it. This view of experiential learning draws from the constructivist paradigm where existing experi-

ence is conceptualized as a base for learning and creating new knowledge. Adults constantly learn from their experiences, which are at the same time the source of learning and the impulse towards continuous learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Experiential learning is crucial for the academic mobility of faculty members as it offers a dynamic and immersive approach to professional development. Most of the learning during mobility occurs incidentally from daily life in a new social, cultural and academic environment, where faculty members continuously gain new experience and make meaning of it based on their prior experiences:

“When you teaching at one university, you get used to it and work automatically. But when you immerse yourself in a foreign academic culture, you are reimagining your professional practices.” (Interviewee 2)

This process was theorized by Dewey (1938) as continuity of experience that describes experiential learning together with the principle of interaction between the learner and the context. Kolb (1984) also modelled adult learning as a continuous process or a cycle that starts from concrete experience, followed by reflective observation that allows a critical approach to the obtained experience from different perspectives, abstract conceptualization responsible for meaning-making and, finally, active experimentation, that is, solving problems and applying new knowledge to new practical situations. The mobility not only provides the faculty members with extensive experience in the host institution; academic staff also build on their prior depth of experience to make meaning and learn from the current situation. Importantly, by engaging in academic activities at the host institution, they benefit from the opportunity to convert their prior and newly gained experiences into practice and experiment with new knowledge, which provides a valuable contribution to their successful learning. Another way to internalize the acquired knowledge and experiences and complete the learning cycle is to put them into action by making changes in habitual teaching and research practices at one's home institution. The interviewed faculty members, who felt encouraged to apply the overseas experience back at their home institutions, were more satisfied with the mobility results and likely to perceive their learning through the experience as rewarding.

Engagement of different dimensions of experiences – physical, mental and emotional ... is typical for experiential learning (Zeivots, 2016). Emotional response and relatability of the experience were highly valued by the mobility participants and highlighted in the interviews:

“I shared my emotional experience with the students, because it was not what I read in books, but what I myself had experienced.” (Interviewee 5)

Emotions often do not count in a scholarly conversation on adult learning and even less in discussions on mobility. In the context of experiential learning during mobility abroad, it makes sense to consider emotions of the participants not only as an essential part of their lived experiences and learning, but also as an important factor responsible for their active engagement in the learning process and as an outcome. Children perceive learning with great joy and excitement, while many adults gradually seem to lose their sense of intrinsic excitement to engage with learning, probably due to both personally and socially conditioned factors such as job responsibilities, social roles, and family duties (Zeivots, 2016). This corroborates the importance of collegial and institutional support that can reduce tension between duties and responsibilities of mobility participants at their home institutions and active engagement in activities and learning at the host institutions during the mobility.

National and Institutional Contexts

It needs to be borne in mind that the research was conducted among faculty of medium-sized Russian universities located outside the capital. As often discussed in literature, internationalization practices of universities, including academic mobility, are deeply rooted in the national contexts and depend on public and institutional regulations, academic traditions, national and institutional cultures and other contextual factors (Knight, 2008). Another aspect to consider is the perception of mobility, which can vary depending on the context of participation. Mobility can be perceived as a privilege or as a burden, and, consequently, either as an opportunity to learn or as an extra workload, which greatly influences the participants' motivation, engagement, enthusiasm and, ultimately, the quality of learning.

Another issue connected with the national context concerns the language requirements for the mobility. Most mobility opportunities in English-speaking host institutions require proficiency in English, which many incoming academic staff believe they are lacking:

“My English is far from perfect, and of course, as any normal person, sometimes I feel shy because of that.” (Interviewee 2)

Thus, the language barrier can inhibit learning not only due to the lack of understanding of the content of trainings or written materials in the host institution, but at the level of self-perception as well, limiting effective communication between international and domestic staff and impeding learning.

Knowledge of the English language is not the only barrier to learning; so are the differences in the specific language, culture and community practices, and practice in the host institution (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). The host academic community itself can be an enormous resource of learning if the newcomers are accepted and integrated, which is not easy and depends on the mobility plan, duration, type of professional engagement and individual characteristics of the faculty member. Faculty engaged in longer mobilities and primarily in research activities during the mobility reflected on deeper involvement and more meaningful interaction with academic staff of the host institutions than the faculty that has mostly teaching duties and shorter-term mobility experiences:

“Earlier I was engaged in a mobility program under a grant, but unfortunately it was a short-term program. And for engaging in research, you need more time than 1...2 weeks to immerse in team-work.” (Interviewee 3)

Open-mindedness, cultural competency and readiness to work and collaborate in unfamiliar national, cultural and academic environments is also a strong factor fostering active engagement in learning through experience during the mobility. Cross-cultural competences are invaluable in an increasingly globalized academic landscape, where effective communication with students, colleagues, and collaborators from different cultural backgrounds is essential. Academics with prior international experience or extensive knowledge about the cultures perceive their mobility experiences more positively, and their learning contributes to the internationalization of institutions. Faculty members, who have participated in academic mobility programs, can play a vital role in promoting international collaboration, fostering a global mindset among their colleagues, and contributing to the overall internationalization goals of their institutions.

Conclusion

Approaching the academic mobility of university faculty members through the adult learning theories is an impactful way to explore learning as a significant dimension of the mobility experience. The importance of assessing the learning of the mobility participants at Russian universities is underestimated at both the institutional and personal levels, while mobility participation is generally often undervalued. The research has shown that the mobility experience is a

rich source of learning capable of making a meaningful contribution to the professional and academic development of the faculty members. At the institutional level, learning by participating in academic mobility can become a driver of the organizational learning culture, foster a more global and international mindset among university staff, and facilitate the internationalization of higher education institutions. Mobility proposals should be clearly communicated and explained by the institutions, while, at the individual level, mobility participation needs to be well prepared and understood as a learning and development process. It is important to structure learning as an intentional effort rather than as a spontaneous process. Academic mobility, which involves a significant investment of resources such as time, money and labor, requires a well elaborated strategy that drives the participants to meaningful outcomes and explicit results. Using a self-directed learning theory as a framework, administrative staff of educational institutions, as well as potential mobility participants, can plan and work out in detail the mobility process before the mobility, starting with an assessment of the learning needs, discussing and elaborating appropriate motivations, setting professional and personal goals, planning the learning trajectory and evaluation of the results. Pre-planned reflective practices during the mobility, such as learning diaries, journals or reflective letters, can become an abundant resource for learning and help to internalize and implement new knowledge by individuals, transform their habitual teaching and research practices and contribute to the development of a better academic environment and practices back at home institutions. Prior experience integrated in a new academic context and reconsidered during and after the mobility can also make an essential contribution to the academic staff's self-perception and identity. However, the mobility participant's individual effort aimed at mobility planning, implementation and evaluation does not suffice for them to fully benefit from the mobility, and institutional support and acknowledgement play a pivotal role in the learning and development of the faculty as the mobility outcome. A meaningful contribution to individual learning of the mobility participants and organizational learning in the institutions could be made by helping the faculty at all stages of the mobility process, from assessing their learning needs and providing them with full information on the mobility that would help develop their learning strategies, to supporting practical implementation and sharing the acquired knowledge and experiences with the colleagues, enabling peer assessment and collegial feedback.

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