AOSIS

Expatriate academics' adjustment experience at a higher education institution in South Africa

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Annelize Van Niekerk[1] ⓘ
Moleen Mhlanga[1] ⓘ

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, College of Economic and Management Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Annelize van Niekerk, vnieka2@unisa.ac.za

Orientation: Expatriate academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) face several socio-cultural and integration challenges that significantly influence their adjustment. Insufficient support and a non-conducive environment hamper their well-being.

Research purpose: This study aims to describe the adjustment experiences of expatriate academics at a HEI in South Africa. Recommendations are made towards creating an enabling environment in which expatriate academics can better facilitate adjustment.

Motivation for the study: This study aimed to compete globally, HEIs appoint international academics with scarce skills to enhance their teaching, learning, and research. Expatriate academics are driven by push and pull factors when accepting international opportunities. Entering an unfamiliar environment, implies disruption on a psychosocial, socio-economic and job adjustment level, and if not well-supported results in maladjustment affecting expatriate well-being and job performance.

Research design, approach and method: An interpretive, qualitative approach was adopted. Five purposively selected expatriate academics partook in semi-structured interviews and the data were analysed through content analysis.

Main findings: A lack of employer support and cultural diversity factors impede participants' ability to adjust at work and in the community. Having grit and being resourceful in overcoming challenges resulted in better adjustment.

Practical/managerial implications: Facilitating collaborative relationships between expatriates and host country nationals, and using supportive services and resources will enable better adjustment.

Contribution/value-add: Expatriate academics share their lived experiences of what hindered their adjustment and several recommendations are made to HEIs and foreign academics towards creating an enabling environment promoting adjustment.

Keywords: expatriate academics; adjustment; cultural-diversity; higher education institution; socialisation; job demands-resources; host country nationals; interpretivism.

Introduction

Academics have always moved across borders to work in other countries (Wilkins & Selina 2019:452). For decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have scouted and hired experienced expatriate academics to compete globally through their research outputs and to attract students (Tanova & Ajayi 2016). Universities further attract expatriate academics as it enables them to improve their rankings, as the inclusion of internationalisation is one of the criteria applied (Ramalu & Subramaniam 2019). Also, non-English-speaking institutions have hired English-speaking academics to gain official English HEI status (Schartner, Young & Snodin 2022:3). According to Alemu (2020:83), expatriate academics are explorers by nature and are likely to embark on research in new areas of interest to increase their research efficiency and quality and surpass the tenured local academics. It is believed that expatriate academics strengthen research and knowledge production, modernise teaching and learning practices, and enhance interculturalism in HEIs (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:71).

Academics move to other countries for various reasons, but mainly because of push and pull factors. Pull factors attract academics whereas push factors make them leave their current institutions. Pull factors include financial benefits, better career opportunities, religious reasons, and economic and political stability (Schartner et al. 2022:2; Sehoole et al. 2019). Push factors entail poor working conditions, a lack of academic support or opportunities, and political violence

and economic instability (Schartner et al. 2022:2; Sehoole et al. 2019). But academics face a wide range of challenges when they try to adapt in a foreign country, such as losing their own cultural identity (Alemu 2020:88). In addition, they must come to grips with local students' learning styles and behaviours, different personal and professional attitudes, and a new culture (Alemu 2020:88).

Expatriate academics in Africa are expected to contribute to developing intellectual capacity and research outputs within the African context (Sehoole et al. 2019:220). African expatriate academics are appointed to match the ratio of black and disabled students and enhance the changing institutional culture (Sehoole et al. 2019:220). Expatriate academics know that South African HEIs offer more professional job opportunities and have better access to funding than the HEIs in their countries of origin (Sehoole et al. 2019:222). Expatriate academics are recruited to teach in areas where skills are in short supply, such as agriculture, mathematics, health and medical sciences, and education (Ngonyama-Ndou 2020:251; Sehoole et al. 2019:218).

The job demands the expatriate academics must meet and the resources they need to meet them and to adjust fully, are illustrated by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model developed by Bakker and Demerouti (Taris & Schaufeli 2014). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) define job demands as the negative physical, psychological, social and organisational aspects of a job that require sustained physical and psychological effort and have physical and psychological costs. If not managed properly, they can result in exhaustion and stress, and eventually, burnout, anxiety and depression (Tummers & Bakker 2021:2). Job resources, on the other hand, are the positive physical, psychological, social, and organisational factors of a job that assist in achieving goals. This includes a work environment with access to not only physical resources such as technology and funding but also emotional resources such as socialisation, and a healthy organisational culture and relationships (Dowling, Festing & Engle 2017). Access to physical job resources reduces job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs. In addition, it enhances personal growth, learning and development (Bakker & Demerouti 2007:312).

Academics, in general, encounter several job demands. These include a huge and unrealistic workload, uncertainty about their work responsibilities, unfair treatment, and unrealistic deadlines for their outputs (Badri 2024:135; Van Rensburg, Rothmann & Diedericks 2018:292). To enhance their well-being, work engagement and, ultimately, their job performance, job resources should include job opportunities with a clear job description and reasonable responsibilities, access to resources, and support from colleagues and management (Badri 2024:135; Van Rensburg et al. 2018:292).

It is evident that expatriate academics in HEIs often have to meet additional job demands besides adjusting to the new environment, understanding organisational systems and ways of teaching, and getting documents (i.e., work permits and visas). Taris and Schaufeli (2014) assert that the personal and job resources that the expatriate academics need to meet all these demands may be more than those needed by host country academics, often resulting in increased stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression.

Acknowledging that people have different personal and coping resources to manage their challenges is essential. For example, personal resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, optimism, and emotional intelligence could help expatriate academics to regulate their attitudes and behaviours, and employ strategies to integrate with the host country communities and workplace (Ngonyama-Ndou 2020:253; Tummers & Bakker 2021:2). From a job resources point of view, organisational support such as training, an adequate work environment and resources, and the support and collaboration of colleagues, will aid them to adjust and increase their motivation, work engagement, and job performance (Taris & Schaufeli 2014:23).

The JD-R model applies to this study because it emphasises the interplay between demands and resources within different contexts and concerning different criteria. This model outlines the job resources and demands of employees in relation to leadership (Tummers & Bakker 2021), optimal cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates (Maharjan, Stoermer & Froese 2022), flourishing at work, and job performance of academics (Van Rensburg et al. 2018).

Successful adjustment affects well-being and job performance significantly because well-adjusted expatriate employees perform better than maladjusted expatriate employees (Chen 2019:6). Expatriate academics are required to adjust to new norms, work ethics and relations with colleagues and superiors (Uddin, Hussin & Rahman 2020:147). Uddin et al. (2020:147) find that adjusting successfully to these work factors enhances job performance and results in a higher task completion rate.

Reports indicate that most HEIs do not involve themselves in expatriate academics' adjustment and leave them to their own devices (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:72). However, HEIs and expatriate academics should work towards the process of adjustment to improve efficiency in the critical performance areas of teaching, administration, research, and service to the community (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:71; Wilkins & Selina 2019:454). Therefore, it is paramount that their efficient adjustment is facilitated as maladjustment will be detrimental to employees' well-being and job performance.

Higher education institutions cannot shirk their responsibility to help expatriate academics adjust and should provide resources, mechanisms, and programmes (Ngonyama-Ndou 2020:253). Examples of such support may include unique, customised induction for expatriate academics to educate them about language, values (cultural and organisational), and local-community functionality. In addition, HEIs should foster a work environment conducive to cross-cultural intelligence by preparing expatriate academics to interact

with and teach students in a manner that will build rapport and avoid student resentment towards expatriate academics (Alemu 2020:89). Chen (2019:6) reports that people with a high cross-cultural intelligence adjust quickly to their host country, at work, and in the community. Higher education institutions should promote fair procedures and policies, equality, access to similar resources and treatment, job satisfaction and work engagement while ensuring an organisational culture sensitive to employee needs (Bhatti et al. 2018).

Problem statement

Should South African HEIs wish to remain globally competitive, they must incorporate the principle of internationalisation by appointing expatriate academics (Ramalu & Subramaniam 2019). Should they fail to do so, such HEIs will not be able to improve their international rankings, become more competitive and become more impactful in their research and knowledge production and modernisation of teaching and learning practices, attract foreign students or merely enhance interculturalism (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:71). Recent studies on adjustment have focussed on students who migrate to international HEIs to complete their formal and professional qualifications (Iwara, Kativhu & Obadire 2017:10628; Mittelmeier et al. 2019:1; Mokhothu & Callaghan 2018:1). Research has also concentrated on migrant academics at international HEIs (James & Azungah 2019:150; Maharjan et al. 2022:285; Wilkins & Selina 2019:451). Most of these studies were conducted in Europe and Asia. Inadequate research within the African and South African HEI context leaves a gap in our knowledge of how expatriate academics adjust and perform (James & Azungah 2019:152; Ngonyama-Ndou 2020:252; Sehoole et al. 2019:215).

Failure to adapt leads to psychological maladjustment, which includes distorted thinking, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour. Also, expatriates' high levels of stress result in low levels of job satisfaction, performance, and happiness (Maharjan et al. 2022:288). Antoniadou and Quinlan (2020:72) contend that dealing with challenges in host countries may create a sense of inadequacy, disorientation, isolation, and difficulties in establishing friendships and maintaining them.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore expatriate academics' adjustment experience and their recommendations to improve adjustment at an HEI. These recommendations will be of great value to human resources professionals, industrial and organisational psychologists, line managers, and expatriate academics to facilitate their adjustment.

Literature review

Considering the HEI landscape and the world of expatriate academics briefly described above, it is important to conceptualise the adjustment construct and how expatriate academics experience it in a higher education context. Adjustment is defined as a psychological processes people work through continuously as things change to balance their own needs with the demands of the new context by adjusting and making some changes (Mesidor & Sly 2016; Weiten, Hammer & Dunn 2012:11). Moritsugu et al. (2016) define adjustment as the ability to cope with everyday challenges towards a point of successfully managing one's circumstances.

Over time, research has identified various types of adjustment, depending on the context in which persons find themselves. Maharjan et al. (2022:287) emphasise cross-cultural adjustment and describe it as a state of psychological satisfaction with living and working conditions and interaction with host country nationals (HCNs). Cross-cultural adjustment is necessary if expatriate nationals want to coexist harmoniously with HCNs. They need to adjust to the rules and nature of the new culture to live and work comfortably (Maharjan et al. 2022:287). In addition, Ngonyama-Ndou (2020:254) classifies adjustment as general adjustment, interaction adjustment, and work adjustment. General adjustment describes the comfort with non-work factors such as food, language, schools, transportation, and clinics (Bhatti et al. 2014). Bhatti et al. (2014:77) define interaction adjustment as the comfort gained by interacting with HCNs inside and outside the work environment, whereas work adjustment is defined as the comfort that the job, one's responsibilities and workload allow. Expatriate academics in new countries and HEI environments require academic mobility despite significant differences between their home and host country. Consequently, expatriate academics need to adjust to the new environment in the host country, both on a communal and social level and while at work, to live and work securely.

Integration into host country communities is always a challenge for expatriate academics. Host country nationals regard them as outsiders and on top of that, they are a minority (Alemu 2020:81). This slows down the adjustment process both at work and in communities. Expatriate academics may therefore feel inadequate, disorientated and isolated if they fail to forge links and form friendships (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:72). Schartner et al. (2022:5) argue that in Thailand, expatriate academics are regarded as a threat to HCNs' values and security. In South African HEIs, poor treatment of especially black academics from other African countries has been reported (Sehoole 2019:225). Being regarded as a threat to indigenous values and security and having to share limited resources, aggravate the situation and amount to xenophobia and racism (Sehoole et al. 2019).

Furthermore, Schartner et al. (2022:5) found language barriers to be the most significant challenge faced by expatriate nationals. It is impossible to communicate if HCNs speak different languages. In countries where a common language, such as English, is used, communication with HCNs poses no problem (Richardson & Wong 2018). Expatriates also rely on HCNs for information about service institutions, including schools and clinics (Haslberger & Dickmann 2016). Faulty information may increase stress, anger and confusion, hindering expatriates' adjustment (Haslberger & Dickmann 2016).

Besides uncertainty about their residency and challenges with visas or permits, expatriate employees contend with work adversities such as relationships with local colleagues, salary scale issues, recognition for promotion, access to research funds, and considerable workloads (Schartner et al. 2022:5). Challenges also extend to adjusting to new organisational or academic culture, new systems, workload expectations different from what they are used to and, finally, behaviours of host country students who are accustomed to different teaching methods, not to mention unfair treatment because of their race (Schartner et al. 2022:5). According to recent global studies, expatriate academics worldwide must deal with the same challenges (Antoniadou & Quilan 2020:76; Ngonyama-Ndou 2020:259; Schartner et al. 2022:8; Sehoole et al. 2019:224). On a personal level, expatriates may also have to cope with financial shortages or the death of a family member in their home country, which may cause them to be unable to return at short notice (Weiten et al. 2012).

Research design and methodology

Research approach and strategy

This qualitative study adopted a case study strategy and the interpretive-paradigm approach (Starman 2013; Yin 2014). The interpretive paradigm allowed the researchers to explore the experience of employee adjustment by expatriate academics in an HEI setting (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 2014).

Sampling and data collection

A sample of five participants (see Table 1) was purposively selected from the population of approximately 50 expatriate academics and guided by data saturation when no new themes emerged (Creswell & Creswell 2017). Sample inclusion criteria included expatriate academics aged between 18 and 65 years who had been on the staff of the HEI for more than 1 year since their adjustment levels stabilised and improved after 1 year (Isakovic & Whitman 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol guide containing three questions. Further probing follow-up questions were asked when necessary (Christensen, Johnson & Turner 2011). These questions included: (1) Describe your adjustment process thus far; (2) Do you think your job performance is affected by your adjustment? and (3) What recommendations would you give the organisation to improve the well-being and adjustment of expatriate employees? With the permission of all the participants, interviews were audio recorded, whereafter the interviewer transcribed them verbatim to ensure authenticity (Kelly 2014).

TABLE 1: Socio-demographic information of participants.

Participant Number	Age (years)	Gender
A	44	Male
B	56	Female
C	47	Male
D	50	Male
E	52	Male

Data analysis

Creswell and Creswell's (2017) six steps of content analysis were followed to analyse the data. The six steps include: (1) organising and preparing the data; (2) reading through the data for familiarisation; (3) coding the data; (4) generating descriptions of context, people or themes; (5) representing the themes and descriptions; and (6) interpreting themes and descriptions.

Reporting

The findings in this study were reported by adopting a qualitative, narrative format, which allowed for rich and thick descriptions of the participants' voices (Patton 2015). Both less frequent and most frequent key themes were reported and presented in detail (White et al. 2014). Verbatim quotes allowed the researchers to give a well-balanced, accurate, and holistic account of the experiences of expatriate academics at the HEI (White et al. 2014).

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to UNISA CEMS/IOP Research Ethics Review Committee and ethics consent was received on 05 August 2020. The ethics approval number is 2020_CEMS/IOP_0003. Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the HEI where the study was to be conducted. The researchers aimed to create a safe interview environment allowing participants to speak freely and authentically when they shared their challenges and subjective lived experiences. The researchers also endeavoured to be true to the voice of the participants and, through constant reflection, guard against their bias influencing data collection and analysis (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 2014).

Strategies ensuring quality data

In this research, verbatim quotes, a review of literature, and applicable theories ensured credibility (Lewis et al. 2014; Ravitch & Carl 2016). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to give detailed accounts of their experiences. Therefore, in reporting the findings, the studied phenomenon was crystallised by including the main concepts emerging from the data and those in other studies and theories. The studied phenomenon was also crystallised by explaining the relationships between these concepts and the empirical study. Also, both researchers confirmed the findings. Interpretations and conclusions aligned with the data (Creswell & Creswell 2017). Participants' subjective experiences were collected and presented verbatim. The researchers ensured that their own bias did not impact the data collection, analysis or reporting of the findings. The researcher ensured that the language and meaning of participants were not lost during transcription, data analysis, and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell 2017; Lewis et al. 2014). The study's limitations were also disclosed (Creswell & Creswell 2017).

Findings

The findings below relate to adjustment experience of expatriate academics at an HEI in South Africa. Five expatriate academics, four males and one female, were interviewed. All participants had been employed at the HEI for more than one year as lecturers ($n = 2$), senior lecturers ($n = 2$), and as a professor ($n = 1$). The following three themes describe the participants' adjustment experiences: Theme 1 comprises the, self-progress made in adjusting to their host country; Theme 2 includes the, factors influencing their adjustment; and Theme 3 involves the, recommendations for facilitating the adjustment of expatriate academics.

Theme 1: Self-progress made in adjusting to expatriate academics' host country

Participants shared the challenges they had encountered and the adjustments they had to make. Participant A mentioned that:

> [I]nitially, …it was very bad. You will get stopped in the road by police just because of your complexion. They can tell you are not from here. They say "Where is your passport? Are you here legally?" But now I have adjusted.

Participant E commented as follows:

> [W]hen I joined, it was a bit of a challenge to move around because I didn't know much some of these places around here but, of course, with time I adjusted well.

Participant A observed that language was less of a barrier at work than in the community:

> It's only when you, maybe, go the communities. Maybe you want to interact and maybe you want to have a drink, you want to sit there and also there are locals.

Both participants A and B indicated that their adjustment progress had been impeded by language and cultural differences. Participant A opined:

> Adjustment is not easy, especially when you are coming for the first time …When I came first time, that you find that a lot of things, your culture itself, the cultural changes, the language around you.

Participant E's family members were affected by his adjustment difficulties. Some challenges were solved while others remained. He explained:

> So I had a bit of a challenge in trying to get a place for a school for my kids … I eventually got a place where my kid was going for school. [I] had to move my child to a[nother] school that I prefer afterwards. …My wife had to follow me and, back home, my wife was working. But when she came, … it was a bit difficult for her to find employment. … [It] has been a negative impact on her adjustment.

Participant E concurred:

> [T]he adjustment in terms of my kids during that particular time was a bit difficult and I can say that in terms of the language as well, I think it somehow affected them.

Fortunately, Participant D's transition met with more success:

> I have learnt a bit of local language. So I now know how to go around and appear as I am from here and accept it.

Theme 2: Factors influencing expatriate academics' adjustment

Three factors hampering the adjustment of expatriate academics emerged from the data. They were: (1) support structures or a lack of it, (2) language, and (3) interaction.

Support structures or a lack of it

Participants found that the institution supports expatriate academics by providing accommodation and food for 1 month during which they had to find accommodation. Participants declared that because the institution had booked accommodation for them at a local lodge, they had a place to stay when they arrived. Participant A had the following experience:

> [T]he first month they would accommodate you somewhere in a lodge … Within that month, you are expected to start looking where you are, looking for a place where you are going to stay after the month. So, during that period, also they pay up your accommodation and your food will be paid there to allow you to adjust.

Participants C, D and E echoed Participant A's experience.

A one-week induction course introduced new employees to the principles of the institution. Participants A, B and E indicated that the institution introduced them to the programmes and opportunities at the institution. They were shown the research offices, the international offices, and the disability facilities on campus. Participant E explained:

> When I joined, there was an induction that was organised by the institution on which I attended. This was not necessarily mainly for foreign nationals, but it was just for new employees. So, during that induction … there were different departments within the institution that were presenting what they offer within the institution and how we as new employees can adjust and to the new working environment. … No, there was, ah, they didn't necessarily divide the employees to say these are local employees or foreign employees. So, there was nothing specifically for foreign national employees.

In some instances, because the induction programme for new academics was delayed, they were merely shown their offices. Participant C recalled:

> I think I had an induction how many months into, probably four or five, into my position … But in terms of moving around the university or getting introductions here and there, huh, that one, I was just shown my office.

Support also came from churches. Soon after their arrival, participants went in search for English churches because of language challenges. Participants B and E mentioned that local churches helped them to adjust and feel part of the community.

Participant E remembered:

> Church-wise, when I joined, I looked for an English-speaking church. So, and at the church, I was very much welcomed and I that helped me to also get to know around because from the church I also had some colleague that I interacted with from there who also helped me to adjust.

Participants also relied on fellow foreign nationals for moral support. They cheered each other up and shared ways to persevere as foreigners in South Africa. Participant C's friend from his home country assisted in his adjustment because they 'were friends before and when I came here, he was showing me around telling me more about the area and stuff'.

Participant A reported that after his arrival:

> [A]s you adjust, also you try to look for those other international lecturers who are also with the university. They can also give you some support and experience until you adapt.

Participant B related that seeking support from other expatriate academics within the same institution helped him to adapt speedily:

> [I]t can be Zimbabweans, it can be Nigerians, it can be Cameroonians. We could talk the same language. We could feel for each other. Even now, we feel quite a lot for each other as expatriate academics … It helped me to adjust fast, that association.

Participant E befriended expatriate academics and noticed:

> I do, of course, meet with the other colleagues on a foreign national kind of grounds, with some other guys who also come from outside the country, who are not necessarily locals. Yes, we have such kind of groupings which also helps to adjust.

Many participants found that local colleagues made them feel welcome and treated them as one of them. They assisted them to find housing and schools. Participant E mentioned:

> So in trying to know the best places to stay, I was interacting with local colleagues and some of the colleagues that have also joined, and so I had no challenges in trying to adapt to the new environment.

Participant C recalled that local and expatriate colleagues' support facilitated his adjustment at work:

> I think in terms of adjusting into the department. You see, adapting into the institution, I will say, for me, it was not that hard because, one, there were also people there in my department who are from my country. They put me through and also the people around me, fellow, my colleagues especially even the local ones.

Participant E enjoyed the support of his family: 'my family as well, because I was with them, they also helped me'.

Participant B had a totally different experience because she had no support. She had to contend with resentment and resistance from local colleagues because of her position at work and being a female.

In addition, management was rather unsympathetic. She explained:

> You call a meeting, he'll say: 'I'm in another meeting'. You tell him you want this thing, it also affects their work, that resentment. I have one member of staff who is like that who feels that to others yes, he talks that I should get that post. Because this one is a foreigner, I think I should get it. … It is another disadvantage for me being a woman and a foreigner. You can't shout to say no, this one, no, no, no! because they will say it's not your thing, it's ours.

Participants B, C and E expressed their appreciation of the way students engaged with them in class. Participant C said:

> So I wouldn't say they played a major role in my adjustment to the university. It doesn't mean I didn't learn anything from them. When we talk, we interact in class. Yes, they tell me some of the things at the university when we are interacting. I could say they played a major role.

Language
Language frequently emerged as an obstacle to effective adjustment. Participants related how the language barrier made them feel excluded from conversations, both at work and in the community. Because of it, they were unable to interact as they wished. Participant A commented that: '…in terms of teaching in the university, I think, well, the language has been fine'. Although Participant B got along famously with her colleagues, in public spaces, the locals were hostile and perceived her as arrogant. '… with my fellow colleagues, it was very good. They understood me. Like in my centre, they tried even to teach me their language nicely…'.

Participant C experienced a bit of both. Sometimes, local people would accommodate him by speaking English, other times, they refused. This made him feel excluded from the conversation and limited his ability to interact:

> [Y]ou speaking English, there are other people who try to resist obviously. Even when we are gathered there, most people they tend to adjust when I am around. They make it a point as much as possible to speak in English. But once in a while, you always find some people start speaking in the local language. I would understand, so I don't normally like complain or that, but sometimes you feel you are losing out something.

Regarding communication with students during lectures, participants had different experiences of how language impacted their lecture deliveries. Participant A believed that her ability to do her job was not affected by language:

> [T]he good thing about the language here is that teaching in sciences, teaching in mathematical sciences, you always speak in English. So, the language, we can say, has not been a problem because you are mandated to use English as a medium of instruction.

Participants D and E remarked that they had to be resourceful and ask local students to assist them in overcoming the language barrier. In this way, they could interact with students who had a difficult time understanding them. Participant D observed:

> That one becomes a real issue, particularly [when] dealing with students coming for first year. English is not their first language,

so, sometimes, I end up in class saying to my students, "You can say it in Pedi and one of you will translate it to me so that I can understand what they say", because the student feels what they want to say but want to say it in local language. Then there is that barrier. But I have managed to go around it by always asking the students to say it in vernacular and I know one of the students will translate it to me.

Even though translation may be a solution in some cases and may promote learning and ensure that expatriate academics achieve their teaching goals and job performance objectives, Participant E emphasised that language was a problem:

[T]he English is a bit of a challenge to most of them. And you will see that most of the students do prefer to communicate in their own languages, then but in terms of our medium of institution, we use English in classes. So, what it means is that those that are not quite conversant in English, in instead of participating or instead of asking questions or, I mean, participating in classrooms, what they then resort to be quiet, not to participate and this then is because they don't necessarily, they won't be able to communicate in their local language.

Interaction

Interaction emerged as an enabling factor assisting the foreign academic to adjust and succeed in performing. The participants interacted with their colleagues, line managers, local community members, and fellow foreign employees. All participants believed that their interaction at work was good. Participant A mentioned:

In my case, I have interacted well from, let's say, within the department, colleagues in the department, colleagues in the school, the faculty and colleagues even outside the faculty. But within the university we have interacted. And also, the university particularly here, there are opportunities. Like, they allow you to go for conferences, national conferences where you also interact with colleagues from other universities.

Participants interacted to feel accepted and to be assisted with work and other challenges. In the end, because the expatriate academics realised that challenges are common, they shared their coping strategies. Participant A remembered that he had shared his experiences with other expatriate academics at other South African HEIs:

[Y]ou also gain some experiences from their institutions. And if you have difficulties, if you discuss them, they can also advise you on how you can cope with such problems you think you are facing. And something you may think 'I have this problem', but you find that others may have worse problems than you have.

Interaction with local colleagues helped Participant E enormously:

[H]ow I adjusted, it helped me a lot because I have people to interact with. Of course, I also have to take time to interact with the colleagues, the local colleagues around here so that I can be able to be aware of certain places, certain safe places to stay.

By contrast, Participant C believed that:

[I]n terms of interaction, even among the expatriates, like lecturers themselves, we don't get to have that interaction between themselves to help each other to adjust into the society. … I don't see that much interaction.

Theme 3: Recommendations for facilitating the adjustment of expatriate academics

Even though participants still face challenges with work contracts, language and interaction with others, they seem to have adjusted quite well. Participants keenly shared some recommendations to facilitate expatriate academics' adjustment for the benefit of both the HEI and other expatriate academics.

Recommendations to the institution

Most recommendations concern the institution's human resources professionals and industrial and organisational psychologists. Firstly, as for contracts, Participant A noticed: '… recommendations I would make for the institution would be one giving long contracts to expatriate employees, particularly permanent employment status … so you get to settle and stay'. Secondly, Participant E recommended:

[T]hat the institution … have an international office for expatriate academics … that look after the needs of the expatriate employees. I think that will go a long way in trying to help them adjust and feel at home at the institution. And in terms of those that do need work permits, I think the institution also have an office to assist with application in terms of say, information, documents.

Participant B believed that the institutions need to:

[H]ave a programme for helping expatriates to adjust. HR should try to find out challenges which expatriates experience, they do not have any organ to do that. It's just every man swimming for himself. They don't look back to say: 'How have these expatriates adjusted? What challenges are they meeting? What help do they need from the institution?' They don't look for such things.

Finally, Participant C proposed that the HEI could link expatriate academics with local classes in the area that could help them '…to assimilate within the society in terms of language'.

Access to resources such as an office, a laptop, and so forth on their first day could also assist expatriate academics to adjust and to be productive and meet their job performance objectives. Participant A pointed out that:

[T]hey know the date you are coming, they must make sure they set up an office for you, [that] everything is there, the laptop is there. When you come in, you just log in. You don't have to go from one point to the other, spending months trying to get everything that you need for the office. That can frustrate you.

Considering the above experiences, Participant D believed that the HEI had no idea of the difficulties expatriate academics have to put up with.

He recommended that the institution could engage with other international HEIs to find out how they perform in becoming global and inclusive:

> What I have stand to realise is that most of their staff and management are not exposed. I would recommend that they may be taken to institutions maybe outside South Africa so that they can see other universities, how they promote multiple cultural inclusion and how a university becomes a global institution like that. So [that] it can give them a global mindset, so they will realise that the world is now a global village and they are looking even for students, it's not only local students. I think it does, yes, but I would recommend longer periods of time, like going to spend like six months at a university like Cambridge, Harvard, and so forth, so that they realise that no, no, no, the world is not South Africa and South Africa is not the world. The world is bigger.

Recommendations to expatriate academics

Participants highlighted opportunities for interaction and the impact it has on adjustment and job performance. In complete agreement with Participants C and E, Participant A proposed:

> [W]hen they come, they must adjust. Adjusting we are saying by interaction not only with their countrymen, but also try to be international. They should try to adjust to interact with everyone. And also try to interact more with locals so that you also start to learn the culture in the institution. Even with the students themselves try to interact as you teach also there you can also start to understand their culture though you may not be speaking the language, but the culture is easier to learn.

On a more cynical note, not believing that the HEI will do anything to smooth the way for their adjustment, Participant D recommended that expatriate academics:

> [N]eed to accept what is in place and what is happening, and realise that, that's what is there. It is frustrating trying to fight and change things because it's not going to change.

Discussion of the findings

Expatriate academics encounter several challenges in their new environment for the first few years. Challenges range from encounters with police, missing home, cultural and language barriers, interacting favourably with HCNs, and securing schooling for their kids and jobs for spouses. Once these challenges have been overcome to some degree, most expats seem to be fully adjusted (Haslberger & Dickmann 2016; Isakovic & Whitman 2013). According to the literature (Bhat & Beri 2016; Haslberger & Dickmann 2016; Jonasson et al. 2017; Malek, Budhwar & Reiche 2015), expatriate academics attribute their adjustment success to HCNs' support and interaction. Their fellow foreign counterparts, colleagues, families, and churches serve as sources of information about the local environment, community, and culture. This also includes finding suitable accommodation, moving around in the community and interacting with HCNs as a foreigner. Initial support offered by the HEI as temporary accommodation for one month further promotes adjustment. Job-related assistance offered by their managers further enhances adjustment (Haslberger & Dickmann 2016). Well-designed, formal induction workshops and work resources such as an office and laptop help expatriate academics adjust quickly (Tanova & Ajayi 2016). While a 1-week induction course is offered to orientate all new appointees on the services, opportunities and facilities offered by the institution, participants indicated the induction course to be a general one for both HCNs and foreign academics, and was often only offered a few months after joining. The need is expressed for a tailor-made induction course which addresses issues specific to foreign academics' reality to enhance their adjustment process. The findings further indicate that student interaction does not hinder adjustment. In fact, Jonasson et al. (2017) maintain that cordial student-lecturer relationships can be an enhancer of adjustment.

Concurring with the study of Malek et al. (2015), expatriate academics reported incidents of resentment and poor treatment by HCNs, which inhibit their adjustment. Another thwarting factor is language. Their inability to speak the local languages leave expatriate academics feeling excluded both socially and at work, resulting in poor interaction and misunderstandings (Haslberger & Dickmann 2016). Apart from students in the science disciplines, students wish to communicate and learn in their mother tongue. Many lecturers experience it as a linguistic challenge. Even if their fellow students act as interpreters, these students refuse to participate in classes. Finally, falling back on personal resources such as being able to communicate well with most people and being able to become proficient in the local languages further enables seeking advice and gathering necessary information from others, which enables them to integrate more effectively (Bhat & Beri 2016; Jonasson et al. 2017).

Expatriate academics further indicated a need for security and stability (Converso et al. 2019; Kuchava & Buchashvili 2016) which they believe can be offered through longer contracts, a dedicated office assisting expatriate academics with matters such as obtaining the required work permits or any other aspects with which they require assistance. Participants also expressed a need for the HEI to implement programmes that facilitate timely induction, assists them in becoming proficient in the local languages, partner expatriate academics with HCN academics to enhance support and collaboration, and to promote multiculturalism.

Limitations

Literature exploring the adjustment experiences of expatriate academics in South Africa was limited. This study only focussed on the experience of expatriate academics in one South African HEI and all participants from other African countries and thus did not include the voices of expatriate academics within other HEIs and from other continents. Limited resources and time neither enable the researchers to include the experiences of HCNs nor the management of the HEI.

Managerial implications and recommendations

If neglected and not well managed, HEIs run the risk of expatriate academics not adjusting well. This could have severe implications on the well-being of expatriate academics and HCN academics who must work together. This will result in poor job performance and the HEI not meeting its global strategic objectives of internationalisation. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

- Higher education institutions should establish an office, which is dedicated to attending to all expatriate academic-related matters upon arrival. This includes human resource (HR) support; timely induction; providing suitable resources such as an office, technology and all other required equipment; and facilitate language and cultural adjustment programmes.
- Appointing an industrial and organisational psychologist and HR officer to support both the HEI and expatriate academics with adjustment challenges. This could include advising management on the selection, placement, performance management, and talent management of expatriate academics and extending support to expatriate academics with emotional and well-being challenges in the form of counselling.
- Line managers should team up expatriate academics with HCN academics to facilitate collaborative relationships and to foster a culture of multiculturalism.

Future research

Future research studies should include expatriate academics from other continents as their motivation to accept a position in a South African HEI may differ from African expatriates who are mainly pushed by socio-economic factors while expatriate academics from other continents might come purely to experience South African culture (Sebola 2015). It is recommended that future studies also consider and incorporate the experiences and perspectives of institutional management and HCN academics as they might express a different point of view regarding relationship and experiences with foreign academics. Finally, future research should also include the voices of expatriate academics, institutional management and HCN academics in other HEIs to enable a more comprehensive understanding of expatriate academic adjustment in South African HEIs.

Conclusion

Internationalisation and improving academic mobility have several benefits for HEIs. This includes HEIs improving their global rankings and competitiveness through delivering impactful research outputs and teaching practices. It also includes enhanced interculturalism, professional and skills development, greater international collaboration, improved learning experiences, engaging with academics from other countries, and interacting with a new cohort of students (Alemu 2020:88). Academics accept positions abroad to enjoy the socio-economic stability they miss in their home countries and to experience other cultures (Sebola 2015).

Expatriate academics need psychological safety and to believe that they are cared for and have a sense of security. Higher education institutions can ensure this by treating expatriate academics and local employees differently by offering expatriate academics support, such as socialisation, and job resources to help them with the integration process, both in the community and at work (Dowling et al. 2017). Research on how other HEIs approach this phenomenon could help to conceptualise an adjustment model for expatriate academics.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.M. and A.v.N. contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis and findings of the study. M.M. and A.v.N. contributed equally to the writing of this research article.

Funding information

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Alemu, S.K., 2020, 'Transnational mobility of academics: Some academic impacts', *CEPS Journal* 10(2), 77–100. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.464

Antoniadou, M. & Quinlan, K.M., 2020, 'Thriving on challenges: How immigrant academics regulate emotional experiences during acculturation', *Studies in Higher Education* 45(1), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1512567

Badri, S.K.Z., 2024, 'Evaluating higher education (HE) work design to sustain academics' work-life balance', *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 16(1), 134–149. https://doi.org/10.1108/JAHRE-04-2022-0116

Bakker, A.B. & Demerouti, E., 2007, 'The job demands-resources model: State of the art', *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 22(3), 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115

Bhat, A.S. & Beri, A., 2016, 'Social adjustment and job performance of college teachers: An analytical study'. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* 7(2), 206–208.

Bhatti, A.B., Alshagawi, M., Zakariya, A. & Juhari, S.A., 2018, 'Do multi-cultural faculty members perform well in higher educational institutions? Examining the roles of psychological diversity climate, HRM practices and personality traits (Big five)', *European Journal of Training and Development* 43(1/2), 166–187. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-08-2018-0081

Bhatti, M.A., Battour, M.M., Ismail, A.R. & Sundram, V.P., 2014, 'Effects of personality traits (big five) on expatriates' adjustment and job performance', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 33(1), 73–96. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-01-2013-0001

Chen, M., 2019, 'The impact of expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment on work stress and job involvement in the high-tech industry', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, 2228. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02228

Christensen, L.B., Johnson, R. & Turner, L., 2011, *Research methods design and analysis*, Pearson, Boston, MA.

Converso, D., Sottimano, I., Molinego, G. & Loera, B., 2019, 'The unbearable lightness of the academic work: The positive and negative side of heavy work investment in a sample of Italian university professors and researchers', *Sustainability* 11(2439), 1–16. https://doi:10.3390/su11082439

Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D., 2017, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Dowling, P.J., Festing, M. & Engle, A.D., 2017, *International human resource management*, Cengage Learning, Hampshire.

Haslberger, A. & Dickman, M., 2016, 'The correspondence model of cross-cultural adjustment: Exploring exchange relationships', *Journal of Global Mobility* 4(3), 276–299. https://doi.org.10.1108/JGM-05-2016-0021

Isakovic, A.A. & Whitman, F.M., 2013, 'Self-initiated expatriate adjustment in the United Arab Emirates: A study of academics', *Journal of Global Mobility* 1(2), 161–186. https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-09-2012-0011

Iwara, I.O., Kativhu, S. & Obadire, O.S., 2017, 'Factors hindering socio-cultural integration of international students: A case of University of Zululand and University of Venda', *Gender and Behaviour* 15(4), 10628–10643.

James, R. & Azungah, T., 2019, 'Repatriation of academics: Organizational support, adjustment and intention to leave', *Management Research Review* 43(2), 150–165. https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-04-2019-0151

Jonasson, C., Lauring, J., Selmer, J. & Trembath, J., 2017, 'Job resources and demands for expatriate academics. Linking teacher-student relations, intercultural adjustment and job satisfaction', *Journal of Global Mobility* 5(1), 5–21. https://doi.org.10.1108/JGM-05-2016-0015

Kelly, K., 2014, 'From encounter to text: Collecting data in qualitative research', in M. Terre Blanche, K. Durrheim & D. Painter (eds.), *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences*, pp. 285–319, University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town.

Kuchava, M. & Buchashvili, G., 2016, 'Staff motivation in private and public higher educational institutions (case of International Black Sea University, Sokhumi State University and AkakiTsereteli State University)', *Journal of Education and Social Policy* 3(4), 92–99.

Lewis, J., Ritchie, J., Ormston, R. & Morrell, G., 2014, 'Generalising from qualitative research', in J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, M.C. Nicholls & R. Ormston (eds.), *Qualitative research practise: A guide for social students and researchers*, pp. 347–362, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Maharjan, M.P., Stoermer, S. & Froese, F.J., 2022, 'Research productivity of self-initiated expatriate academics: Influences of job demands, resources and cross-cultural adjustment', *European Management Review* 19(2), 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12470

Malek, A.M., Budhwar, P. & Reiche, S.B., 2015, 'Sources of support and expatriation: Multiple stakeholder perspectives of expatriate adjustment and performance in Malaysia', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 26(2), 258–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.937968

Mesidor, K.J. & Sly, K.F., 2016, 'Factors that contribute to the adjustment of international students', *Journal of International Studies* 6(1), 262–282. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.569

Mhlanga, M., 2021, 'Exploring the impact of wellbeing and adjustment at a South African higher education institution' M. Comm dissertation, Dept. of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa.

Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Rogaten, J., Gunter, A. & Raghuram, P., 2019, 'Internationalisation at a Distance and at Home: Academic and social adjustment in a South African distance learning context', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 72, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.06.001

Mokhothu, T.M. & Callaghan, C.W., 2018, 'The management of the international student experience in the South African context: The role of sociocultural adaptation and cultural intelligence', *Acta Commercii* 18(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v18i1.499

Moritsugu, J., Vera, E.M., Jacobs, J.H. & Kennedy, M., 2016, *Psychology of adjustment: The search for meaningful balance,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Ngonyama-Ndou, T., 2020, 'Cross-cultural adjustment experiences of academic expatriates in some South African universities: The case of Kwazulu-Natal', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34(4), 251–268. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-3547

Patton, M.Q., 2015, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 4th edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Ramalu, S. & Subramaniam, C., 2019, 'Cultural intelligence and work engagement of expatriate academics: The role of psychological needs satisfaction', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 19(1), 7–26. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1470595819827992

Ravitch, M.S. & Carl, M.N., 2016, *Qualitative research. Bridging the conceptual, theoretical and methodological,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Richardson, C. & Wong, H.W., 2018, 'Expatriate academics in Malaysia: Motivation, adjustment, and retention'. *Journal of Management Development* 37(3), 299–308. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2017-0421

Schartner, A., Young, T.J. & Snodin, N., 2022, 'Intercultural adjustment of internationally mobile academics working in Thailand', *Higher Education* 85, 483–502. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00846-4

Sebola, M.P., 2015, 'Scarce skills expatriates in South African universities: Rhetoric and realities of the "Messianic" academics', *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 11(4), 180–192. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v11i4.53

Sehoole, M.T., Kolawole, C., Adeyemo, S., Ojo, E. & Phatlane, R.S., 2019, 'Academic mobility and the experiences of foreign staff at South African higher education institutions', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33(2), 212–229. https://doi.org/10.20853/33-2-2805

Starman, A.B., 2013, 'The case study as a type of qualitative research', *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies* 64(1), 28–43.

Tanova, C. & Ajayi, O., 2016, 'International faculty member socio-cultural adjustment and intention to stay: Evidence from North Cyprus', *Asian Academy of Management Journal* 21(1), 47–72, viewed 17 July 2023, from https://smartlib.umri.ac.id/assets/uploads/files/d97bb-aamj21012016_3.pdf.

Taris, T.W. & Schaufeli, W.B., 2014, *Individual well-being and performance at work: A conceptual and theoretical overview*, Routledge, London.

Terre Blanche, M. & Durrheim, K., 2014, 'Histories of the present: Social science research in context?', in M. Terre Blanche, K. Durrheim & D. Painter (eds.), *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences,* pp. 1–17, University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town.

Tummers, L.G. & Bakker, A.B., 2021, 'Leadership and job demands – Resources theory: A systematic review', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, 722080. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.722080

Uddin, S., Hussin, R. & Rahman, B.A., 2020, 'Socio-cultural adjustment and job performance among expatriates: A critical overview', *International Journal of Human Resource Studies* 10(1), 146–157. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v10i1.16046

Van Rensburg, C.J., Rothmann, S. & Diedericks, E., 2018, 'Job demands and resources: Flourishing and job performance in South African universities of technology settings', *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 28(4), 291–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2018.1501881

Weiten, W., Hammer, Y.E. & Dunn, S.D., 2012, *Psychology and contemporary life: Human adjustment*, Cengage Learning, Wadsworth.

White, C., Woodfield, K., Ritchie, J. & Ormston, R., 2014, 'Writing up qualitative research', in J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, M.C. Nicholls & R. Ormston (eds.), *Qualitative research practise: A guide for social students and researchers*, pp. 367–396, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Wilkins, S. & Selina, N., 2019, 'Managing faculty in transnational higher education: Expatriate academics at international branch campuses', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 23(4), 451–472. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318814200

Yin, R., 2014, *Case study research: Design and methods*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.