Research Article

Exploring Perceptions of Higher Education Internationalization:
An Academic Expatriates' Perspective

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Abstract

The current research explores the perceptions of academic expatriates in the UAE on higher education internationalization. A qualitative approach was applied to this study as it was believed to generate a comprehensive, actual, and thorough understanding of participants' insights on the topic. Thirty academic expatriates were selected to create focus groups to discuss the research question. Focus groups were held semi-structured, allowing researchers and participants to encourage exhaustive discussions on pre-defined questions and beyond. As a result of thematic analysis, seven main themes and 29 related codes were identified. The consistency of coding was calculated using intra-class correlation to achieve the trustworthiness of the findings. Further analysis and discussion allowed researchers to explore the topic in-depth. The research has reflected on the perceived readiness of academic staff in the internationalization of higher education. Individual, institutional, and global factors are among the main variables that affect shaping faculty perceptions on internationalization and their willingness to participate in the process. The main findings of this study are that awareness of internationalization leads to faculty acceptance and engagement, as well as perceptions of challenges related to internationalization. Perceived readiness is also influenced by potential individual opportunities that may result from internationalization.

Keywords: Higher Education; Internationalization; Academic Expatriates; Perceived Readiness

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education is no longer a new industry and, over recent years, has been a vital source of revenue for higher education institutions. The mobility of all students (not only a small elite group), scholars and programs, but the global branding of higher education institutions and competition have also all contributed to making the internationalization in higher education an item of great importance for many academic institutions (de Wit and Altbach, 2021).

Academics are essential agents of internationalization in both research and teaching. It is vital to first understand the culture and climate of the academic community, as well as its values, attitudes and present behaviors, before embarking on the process of implementation of internationalization

(Flander and Klemencic, 2014). This research study aims to explore academics' perceptions concerning internationalization. In line with this aim, the research question of this study is: What are the perceptions of academic expatriates on internationalization in the UAE?

Many research studies have explored internationalization from the students' perspectives (Caroll and Ryan 2005; Warwick 2008); other studies researched various positive and negative impacts of internationalization from home students' perspectives (Leask and Carroll 2011). Another research has uncovered students' views on having expatriate professors (Barend and Winkvist-Noble 2006). Further studies explored academics' perspectives on teaching students with diverse backgrounds (Barrington 2004; Leask 2009; Vita 2001), with proposals on overcoming the challenges. There is, however, a gap in research on the perspectives of international academic staff working overseas (Minocha, Shiel, and Hristov, 2019). This research contributes to the existing body of literature by seeking to fill in this gap. Participants in this research study are all academics in the United Arab Emirates that are expatriates and, therefore, not working within their national context.

2. Literature Review

The international direction of higher education institutions underwent significant changes throughout higher education history and finally became substantially more complex than it used to be (de Wit, 2019). By the end of the last century, the world entered a multidimensional transition period that affected all aspects of life: economics, finance, science, technology, communication, education, politics, etc. This new paradigm has triggered increasing interdependence and competition in all countries and industries (Gacel-Avila, 2005). In such a reality, the author considers the role of higher education institutions as providers of global insights to students to equip them with a better understanding of relationships among countries and develop tolerance towards cultural differences and pluralism. Such a role requires universities to be active players in the international arena themselves, achieved only through internationalization.

Knight and de Wit (1995) provide reasons, arguments and various aspects of higher education internationalization. The authors argue that the internationalization of higher education will positively impact economic growth, labor market development, foreign policies, national education demand, personal growth, cultural function, enrichment of teaching and research quality, and institutional growth. Altbach and Knight (2007) list and describe an additional profit, access to international education, internationalization tradition, internationalization of developing countries, and individual internationalization among stimulating factors for internationalization. These stimulating factors need to be well thought out while analyzing the internationalization of higher education.

Knight (1994) highlights that in the internationalization process, optimism often prevails over realism; hence, the scholar suggests a cycle scheme to make internationalization realistic. Components of the proposed cycle are: a) awareness - according to the author, university leaders and personnel must realize the importance of the internationalization; b) commitment – higher-level managers need to support internationalization by showing their commitment to lower-level managers and staff; c) planning – a proper comprehensive plan for internationalization needs to be developed; d) operationalization – internationalization plan needs to be implemented and achieved by educational activities, solving organizational issues, and providing detailed implementation manuals; e) evaluation – it needs to be done in two directions such as constant review of the process and budgeting internationalization activities; f) reinforcement – it is essential to support, recognize, and reward efforts of academic and supporting staff. Such reinforcement can guarantee the overall success of internalization.

Various scholars define higher education internationalization as a strategic process and review it from different angles (Schoorinan, 1999; Taylor, 2004; Rudzki, 1995, Kouijzer, 1994). The synthesized conceptual framework for higher education internationalization (Alpenidze, 2015) provides a strategic concept of internationalization based on a systematic review of existing

literature. This framework links the strategic management process, critical components of higher education internationalization, and influential external environment and internal resources. The author provides five main areas of internationalization: international students, academic exchanges, collaborative programs, international networks, campuses abroad, and joint research. Moreover, a high degree of internationalization is seen as a source of competitive advantage for higher education institutions (Alpenidze, 2015), making it an unavoidable route for higher education institutions to compete and develop. Having studied various literature on higher education, Gacel-Avila (2005) concludes that internationalization of higher education needs to be considered as a comprehensive strategy relevant to the main demands of society, concentrating on the three main areas: a) Internationalization needs to be accepted as a fundamental part of educational policy that enables higher education institutions to enhance education quality according to global trends; b) strategic role of international cooperation for educating global citizens needs to be clearly envisioned; c) internationalization has to be more addressed in research on education.

By synthesizing various research Paige (2005) derived a model of internationalization of higher education comprised of ten elements to have full-scale internationalization in place:

1. Leadership- support of different level managers is critical for successful internationalization.
2. Strategic plan- having a strategic plan for internationalization is essential. The plan needs to highlight objectives, actions, and timeline.
3. Institutionalization- internationalization needs to be supported by creating and successfully functioning adequate forms of leadership.
4. Infrastructure-having professional team and structural divisions responsible for various areas of internationalization such as the assistance of international students and professors, administration of study abroad and exchange programs, grants, agreements, and development of academic personnel, is critical.
5. Curriculum- internationally recognized and accepted curriculum is an essential factor for internationalization. Such curriculum eases students' involvement in study programs at home and abroad.
6. International students and scholars- international students, researchers, and professors play an undoubtedly vital role in internationalization as they share their own experiences with local students and staff.
7. Study-abroad, student and faculty exchange, double-degree or other types of study abroad programs that are part of the existing curriculum are critically vital for internationalization.
8. Involvement of academic personnel – academic personnel is an organic part of the curriculum; hence, more academic staff involved in international activities means more international aspects in their daily work.
9. University life-international extracurricular activities, both on campus and abroad, also support rapid internationalization.
10. Monitoring - to develop internationalization further, constant monitoring of the process is crucial to check various indicators set in advance, analyze, draw conclusions and provide recommendations.

When we have a close look at strategies, concepts, and processes described by many scholars (Paige, 2005; Gacel-Avila, 2005; Alpenidze, 2015; Knight and de Wit, 1995; Flander and Klemencic, 2014; Minocha, Shiel, and Hristov, 2019; de Wit, 2019, de Wit, 2020, Zapp and Lerch, 2020), there is no doubt that the faculty body is one of the main driving forces and primary internal resource for successful internationalization. However, the main challenge to the sustainability of internationalization in higher education is faculty engagement Stohl (2007). According to the author, there is a need to move beyond the conceptualization in the faculty engagement process and overcome this challenge by convincing faculty that they will benefit from internationalization activities. These challenges are understandable as irrespective gradual increase of research on internationalization, and there is still a lack of analysis on faculty role in internationalization is (Dewey & Duff, 2009) or how internationalization has benefited higher education and particularly

academic staff (Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015). The latter researched the perceived impacts of higher education internationalization on academic Faculty. The results were categorized into three areas: individual, institutional, and global. Among the perceived impacts on an individual basis, research indicated opportunities and needs for personal and professional growth, consideration of foreign-born colleagues, learning foreign languages, an increase in workload and stress, an increased international reputation, promotions, and tenure. At the institutional level, the research identified the following perceived effects: the presence of an increasing number of international students, teaching international students, ensuring sensitivity towards international students, internationalizing the curriculum, teamwork, publication, dissemination, and visibility of international research, Anglo-American perspectives and structures, economics and funding, engagement within and outside one's institution, institutional and connections. The following perceived impacts on a global scale were found: the use of English as a lingua franca, collaboration, connectivity and the spreading of knowledge, international mobility of faculty, policy framework and global progress, academic rivalry, global developments, expanding perceptions and perspectives, implementing ICT, heterogenization and pluralization, dealing with forthcoming challenges (Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015).

The current research has been inspired by the existing body of literature summarized above that shaped the research question, research method, and focus group questions to find out faculty perspectives and perceptions of higher education internationalization in the academic environment where the researchers work.

3. Method

A qualitative approach was chosen as the methodology best suited to uncover the perceptions of academic expatriates with respect to higher education internationalization, as researchers deemed it as more apt than a quantitative approach at providing an in-depth, real, and detailed understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences and thoughts. The context of the data being gathered is also important to researchers, and qualitative approaches provide such context, unlike quantitative ones.

Thirty academic expatriates working in the UAE were purposively selected to participate in this research study. The aim of the study, the duration of the focus group, and the identity of fellow participants were shared with participants in the email invitation to the focus group. Two focus groups were held online in line with the COVID-19 safety regulations. All three researchers facilitated the two focus groups sharing the roles of introducing the focus groups by explaining the aim of the study and confidentiality and anonymity; probing; note-taking; summarizing responses; involving all participants, and concluding the study. Participants were informed that their identity, as well as the identity of the institution they work for, would not be disclosed in the research report. All recordings would be kept for the purpose of transcription and coding and only retained up until article publication.

Focus groups were held in a semi-structured fashion, and prior to the two focus groups, the researchers agreed on (based on the research question and literature review) the following questions to ask participants:

1. As an academic, how aware are you of the internationalization of higher education?
2. How could internationalization impact you and your institution?
3. In your opinion, what are the global effects of the internationalization of higher education?
4. Are you ready to participate in the internationalization process of your institution? If yes, what does readiness mean for you?
5. What is the link between faculty awareness of the impact of internationalization and their readiness for internationalization?
6. What challenges do you foresee in the internationalization process in our system?
7. What type of support do you think you will need to implement the internationalization?

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, following transcription and the collation of notes taken by the three researchers, each researcher separately coded the content of the

interviews. The codes in the results section below were pre-determined prior to the start of coding based on the research question and above specified focus group questions. Room for flexibility was allowed for researchers to add or delete codes as the individual coding proceeded. Inter-coder reliability was calculated to add rigor to the study. The findings are outlined in the section below together with the qualitative research findings that include quotes from participants.

4. Results and Analysis

Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of seven main themes and 29 related codes (Table 1). The reliability of coding was measured using intra-class correlation of paired scores. In interpreting reliability, values of less than 0.5 denote poor reliability, values between 0.5 and 0.75 denote moderate reliability, values between 0.75 and 0.9 denote good reliability and values larger than 0.90 denote excellent reliability. The coding of researchers was paired in Table 1 using the criteria of the highest intra-class correlation.

Table 1: Intra-class Correlations

Theme	Codes		Intra-class correlation	ANOVA	Frequencies Rater 1 / Rater 2
Awareness of Internationalization of higher education	1	Foreign Universities	.79	$F_{(10,11)}=8.4$, p=.001	21 / 23
	2	Academic Expatriates	.68	$F_{(10,11)}=5.3$, p=.005	17 / 20
	3	Student exchanges	.81	$F_{(10,11)}=9.4$, p=.0005	17 / 22
	4	UAE-Education destination	.3	$F_{(10,11)}=1.9$, p=.1	2 / 5
Personal Impact	5	Work-life balance	.1	$F_{(10,11)}=1.3$, p=.3	5 / 1
	6	Networking	.5	$F_{(10,11)}=3.1$, p=.04	4 / 10
	7	Collaboration	.5	$F_{(10,11)}=3.1$, p=.04	9 / 12
Institutional Impact	8	Student benefits	.4	$F_{(10,11)}=2.5$, p=.07	37 / 32
	9	Competitive advantage	.6	$F_{(10,11)}=3.9$, p=.02	5 / 3
	10	UAE brand image	.3	$F_{(10,11)}=1.7$, p=.1	3 / 2
Global Effects	11	MNE effect	1	$F_{(10,11)}=\text{infinity}$, p= <.0001	6 / 6
	12	Cultural intelligence	.9	$F_{(10,11)}=16.1$, p= <.0001	20 / 17
	13	Highly mobile workforce	.9	$F_{(10,11)}=3.8$, p= <.0001	4 / 3
	14	Diversity	.8	$F_{(10,11)}=12.1$, p= 0001	28 / 21
Challenges	15	Safety	.8	$F_{(10,11)}=11.8$, p= .0002	2 / 3
	16	Time zone	.9	$F_{(10,11)}=18.2$, p= <.0001	3 / 4
	17	Quality assurance	.9	$F_{(10,11)}=20.3$, p= <.0001	14 / 10
	19	Cultural clashes	1	$F_{(10,11)}=\text{infinity}$, p= <.0001	20 / 20
	19	Repatriation	1	$F_{(10,11)}=\text{infinity}$, p= <.0001	3 / 3
	20	Competition	.8	$F_{(10,11)}=7.9$, p= .001	15 / 17
	21	Global recession	1	$F_{(10,11)}=\text{infinity}$, p= <.0001	6 / 6

Theme	Codes		Intra-class correlation	ANOVA	Frequencies Rater 1
					Rater 2
Readiness	22	Faculty Readiness	.9	F(10,11)=29.5, p= <.0001	40
					39
	23	Institutional Readiness	.3	F(10,11)=1.9, p= .1	9
					3
	24	Student Readiness	.8	F(10,11)=8.2, p= .0009	13
					15
	25	Family Readiness	.4	F(10,11)=2.5, p= .07	3
					1
Support	26	Administrative	.7	F(10,11)=5.5, p= .004	16
					20
	27	Recognition	.9	F(10,11)=44.1, p= <.0001	7
					17
	28	Mentoring and training	.9	F(10,11)=24.2, p= <.0001	12
					13
	29	Strategy	.9	F(10,11)=37.72, p= <.0001	11
					10

Intra-class correlations range between 1 and .1. Excellent reliability resulted for the codes *MNE effect, Cultural Clashes, Repatriation, Recognition*, and *Global Recession*. Good reliability was attained for the codes *Foreign Universities, Student Exchanges, Cultural Intelligence, High Mobile Workforce, Diversity, Safety, Time Zone, Quality Assurance, Competition, Faculty Readiness, Student Readiness, Recognition, Mentoring and training*, and *Strategy. Networking, Collaboration, Competitive Advantage* and *Administrative Support* are codes having moderate reliability of intra-class correlations. Low reliability of intra-class correlations resulted in *UAE-Education Destination, Work-life Balance, Student Benefits, UAE Brand Image, Family Readiness, and Institutional Readiness*.

4.1 Awareness of Internationalization of Higher Education

Foreign Universities is one of the four codes related to this theme. Participants in this study are aware of the internationalization of higher education in the UAE mainly as a result of the considerable number of foreign universities with a campus in the UAE. The considerable presence of foreign universities in the UAE is described by participants as a contributory factor towards the positive perceptions with respect to higher education internationalization. Statements made by participants such as are, *we are advanced in this field*, and *we have approximately 30 foreign universities,* indicate the awareness of such internationalization.

Participants also discussed the large presence of academic expatriates in the UAE that surpasses the number of local academics. This leads to the code of *Academic Expatriates* in the theme of awareness of internationalization of higher education. The country's success in attracting such a large number of academic expatriates is described as unique and contributes positively to the perception of faculty. The presence of academic expatriates with years of experience in foreign assignments was discussed by participants as positive characteristics of higher education in the UAE *(UAE want international lecturers)*.

Student exchanges is another code that is part of the theme *awareness of internationalization of higher education*; participants shared their experiences of student exchanges in the UAE (ranging from online and virtual exchanges to cross-country and in-class exchanges) and the positive outcome of exposing students to different cultures through such exchanges (*exposing students to various cultures*). Finally, the code *UAE as an education destination* was discussed by participants who claim that the UAE government is engaging in many initiatives to make the UAE an education hub (such as the *recent changes in the VISA system will support UAE as an education destination*). This heightens their awareness of internationalization as well as contributes to a positive perception whilst still recognizing that this industry still has a long way to go and expand especially when compared to other nations such as the UK and Australia, which, as discussed by participants, have a very strong

international education industry (*in comparison to the UK, a lot of work still needs to be done in this field; it is still in its infancy*).

4.2 Personal and Institutional Impact of Internationalization of Higher Education in the UAE

The three codes related to the personal impact of the internationalization of higher education in the UAE are *work-life balance, networking* and *collaboration*. Whilst participants, in general, spoke about their perceptions with regard to higher education internationalization in the UAE and the benefits of networking with counterparts (*we get to network with teachers from our specializations*) from around the world and collaborating on student projects and research (*research collaboration opportunities*), they also spoke about the potential negative impact on work-life balance when virtual and online international collaborations are established across time zones.

On institutional impact, thematic analyses resulted in three codes, namely *student benefits, competitive advantage* and *UAE brand*. The participants' positive perceptions on higher education internationalization in the UAE is influenced by their unanimous belief of the wide-ranging benefits students in the UAE may reap from internationalization (*A massive benefit for my students as it opens up new realities and will change the classroom conversation; enabling students to get a broader view of the world; A great opportunity for our students to be mingling with other nationalities; Students learn to interact with people from different countries and get to know what is happening around the world in their field of study*). Participants believe that students may only benefit from such exposure to different cultures.

Internationalization adds a competitive edge to institutions in the UAE as participants believe that more academic expatriates will want to join UAE universities. In discussing the related financial benefits, a comparison was once again made to countries such as Australia and the UK (*Internationalization in the UK contributes to the GDP of the nation*). The final institutional impact and benefit mentioned by participants is the *UAE Brand image* and how internationalization contributes to improving the image of a country (*Internationalization of universities improves the ranking of universities in the UAE*) in terms of its education sector.

4.3 Global effects

Participants also discussed the perceived global effects of internationalization. The four codes related to this theme are the *MNE effect, Cultural Intelligence, Highly Mobile Workforce* and *Diversity*. Whilst the effect of cultural intelligence, diversity and a highly mobile workforce are perceived to be very positive effects of internationalization, the MNE effect is perceived less positively. Whilst on the one hand, internationalization decreases barriers between countries, improves the cultural intelligence of individuals (*More culturally intelligent future generations; Disseminating positive stories about cultures*) and highlights the opportunities for diversity (*Rich and wealthy diverse perspectives*; *Shaking up stereotypes and power imbalances*), it may also lead to the struggles of smaller universities that may find themselves taken over or crushed by the competition from larger universities (*Franchise approach to Universities; A risk that smaller universities will be less popular*)

4.4 Challenges

Notwithstanding the positive perceptions of participants in this study, faculty members did mention challenges related to internationalization, specifically related to the codes of *safety, time zone; quality assurance; cultural clashes; repatriation of expatriates; competition, and global recession.* On safety, a few participants noted that this might be an initial challenge only for those students who may find the transition difficult to make. The time zone challenge is mainly related to virtual exchange programs involving students who are in different time zones. The quality assurance challenge is related to the MNE effect referred to earlier on. Participants discussed the fear that quality assurance

is more challenging when universities internationalize as subsidiaries may not abide by the same rigorous quality standards (*Quality assurance may not be thoroughly followed in all subsidiaries around the world; What are the measures put in place to safeguard quality assurance?; Focusing more on business as opposed to quality*).

On cultural clashes, participants had a discussion on the cultural clashes that may occur in the students' families once they return home as the values and beliefs they may have acquired from living in another country may come into conflict with the more traditional one's practiced in their family environment (*sometimes students may come into contact with ideas that go against their family and community; Returning students may want freedoms that are not acceptable in their families; Cultural freedom; idea revolution*). On the repatriation of expatriates, participants spoke about internationalization and the related repatriation of academic expatriates that may raise the challenges associated with repatriation, such as are a reverse cultural shock.

On competition, participants discussed the large competition that results in the internationalization of higher education, making reference to branding and ranking among other points of discussion (*some universities offer scholarships, accommodation and stipends to be attractive; It boils down to branding and ranking*). Finally, participants also mentioned the negative effects of the global recession on the globalization of higher education (*COVID has lost us a lot of money due to the low importation of students*)

4.5 Readiness

On the theme of readiness, participants distinguished between *faculty, students, students' families,* and *institutional readiness*. Whilst unanimously speaking positively of faculty readiness (*Faculty are already academic expatriates from around the world; I travelled from Africa to Europe and now to the Middle East. I am ready; we are prepared because we have experience in other institutions*); participants spoke more tentatively of institutional readiness referring to institutions that have not yet internationalized and the strategic and logistical preparations this would entail (*There are logistical issues to consider such as accommodation arrangements*). Similarly, whilst participants spoke positively of the readiness of students, some spoke more tentatively of the readiness of their families' (*Some families' of students may not be ready for the different cultural values their students may bring with them upon returning from an international experience*).

4.6 Support

The positive perceptions of faculty on higher education internationalization in the UAE is also accompanied by a perceived need for support, specifically related to the codes of *administrative support, recognition, mentoring and training,* and *strategy*. Participants discussed how institutions in higher education that have not yet internationalized need a whole new set-up in order to internationalize (*You need an entire department*). With regards to recognition, participants referred to faculty involved in international exchange programs whose work is not always duly recognized by the institutions involved (*People need to put in extra hours and personal time. For this reason, acknowledgement is very important; recognition for going the extra mile; we need time release and workload reduction in recognition of the additional work*). On mentoring and training, participants believe that running in parallel with internationalization, and there needs to be a mentorship and training program for academics (*Coaching on cultural differences and intercultural exchanges*). Finally, internationalization is perceived as a strategy the institution adopts and not simply as a change that is managed in isolation (*Internationalization strategy that results in a progressive and slow change*).

5. Further Analysis and Discussion

The data gathered through the focus group clearly indicates the awareness, readiness as well as acceptance of UAE expatriate faculty to internationalization. This exploratory research defines the dimensions that drive the perception of academics towards internationalization. The high inter-rater reliability in table 1 suggests that the participants were contributing to the general debate about internationalization. Further analysis of the data suggests that the awareness of the academics is related to their perception of the impact of the internationalization process. The institutional awareness can be linked to the challenges and support features being discussed. In other words, the awareness about foreign universities, academic expatriates, student exchanges and UAE as an education destination has led the participants to what they perceive as the challenges of internationalization, namely time zone and quality assurance as well as cultural clashes. It should be noted that the UAE is an education hub for a large number of foreign universities that hold remote campuses and attract students from the region. However, this is a form of internationalization that has personal and global impacts. The data suggest that this strategy is to build the education hub whilst creating economic and social values. The readiness of academics in this international context is significant to the success of such a system.

The data in this research supports the research of Knight (1994), whereby the reality of the cycle scheme is important to internationalization. The participants indicated that their awareness of internationalization is a key driver of internationalization. This awareness will lead to the faculty's acceptance of internationalization and thus engage in the process. Another vital component revealed by participants is the commitment of higher management to internationalization. This commitment is by providing support in planning, operationalization and reinforcement of the process. In this research, the challenges highlighted by faculty can be managed through the awareness and support provided by the institution.

Internationalization of higher education is not a new concept and has a rich history of implementation through international students attending different universities across the world and also a number of countries using internationalization to build internal human capabilities. The strategies used in traditional internationalization models have been based on developing the three pillars of higher education, namely economic, social and institutional strategies, as discussed by Knight and Wit (1995). There has, however, been an evolution in internationalization led by globalization and a rise in the use of learning and teaching technologies. This evolution has led to the development of a comprehensive internationalization strategy, and this study has reaffirmed the pillars of this comprehensive strategy. Although this research focuses on faculty perspective and perceptions, it is important to analyze the data from a wider perspective. Based on the synthesis made by Paige (2005), this study reinforces the importance of 10 elements of the comprehensive internationalization strategy. These elements can be summarized under three main themes, namely, individual, institutional and global factors. These three themes are also discussed in the previous research on the impact of the internationalization of higher education on faculty (Bedenliner and al, 2015). The discussion is based on analyzing the internationalization strategy and implications for faculty and linking these to the perceived readiness of Faculty. The involvement of the faculty in the process is a key element to its success (Paige, 2005). This involvement can take different forms, and one such is the involvement in curriculum development and change. The participants discussed their awareness and readiness based on their involvement and being "in the know" of the process. This involvement is based on faculty engagement (Stohl, 2007), and through this engagement, the faculty will be able to overcome their challenges.

The analysis above indicates that the perceived readiness of faculty is based on their understanding and experiences with the internationalization of higher education. This research data and discussions with the faculty clearly indicate that in order for internationalization to be successful and be value-added, awareness of internationalization is essential. This awareness includes the emphasis on the internationalization of the curriculum (Paige, 2005). In other words, the curriculum

must be globally recognized and valued and thus the emphasis on international accreditation and quality assurance. As pointed out by the participants, the awareness and readiness to internationalization are based on program recognition and international comparability. This is classified as a challenge that needs to be addressed by the institution and all stakeholders. An example discussed is the value of student exchanges, whereby the starting point is to find similarities in curriculum and comparability of learning outcomes and evaluations. This recognition of curriculum is discussed as a support element as well as the global effects of internationalization. It should be noted that institutional support is very important for international recognition, and this is reflected in the readiness component of the research. Readiness to internationalization focuses on individual, social and institutional and recognition of curriculum is directly linked to the readiness. This is emphasized by the fact that the participants pointed out that the benefits of internationalization go beyond academic benefits but include cultural diversity.

The perceived readiness of faculty to internationalization can also be discussed through the individual, institutional and global impacts (Bedenliner and al, 2015). The participants in this research indicated a relationship between readiness and individual awareness, preparedness and opportunities for individual growth. The perceived readiness is based on the individual opportunities provided by internationalization. The faculty are more likely to be ready for internationalization if they perceive a growth opportunity for the self. These opportunities include networking and collaboration and the need of the individual for growth and development. The second impact on faculty discussed by previous research is institutional impact. The UAE brand image and competitive advantage are repeatedly mentioned by participants as a factor that will affect the perception of readiness. The infrastructure and support provided by the higher education institution will impact the perceived readiness, and this is influenced by the trust of the faculty in the institutional support being provided. Lastly, the global impact of the internationalization of higher education has an influence on the perceived readiness of faculty. The fact that all participants in the focus group are expatriates is an indication that the faculty is ready for internationalization, but there are concerns over some of the challenges. These challenges are regarded as potentially having a negative impact on work-life balance or the struggles of smaller universities, or yet again, cultural clashes. These challenges can be managed if there is an integrative and holistic approach to the internationalization of higher education. This approach will be based on creating an international culture whereby all stakeholders, students, faculty and institutional policies integrate international practice into the system.

It should be noted that in this study, the perceived readiness of the faculty may also be based on the profiles of the participants. The important common factor of all participants is that they are all expatriates who have been exposed to internationalization either through their own education or through their work experiences. This exposure to internationalization may have had an impact on the views of the participants, and this can be seen especially when the challenges were discussed. However, this study confirms there is a perceived readiness of faculty for the internationalization of higher education in the UAE.

Based on this study, the academics have a positive approach and perception of the internationalization of higher education, and they are ready to embark on this experience whilst being mindful of the challenges that they will face. As per previous research, the perceived readiness of faculty to the internationalization is dependent on a holistic strategy. In order to have a holistic approach and to create readiness, a few recommendations may be considered. First and foremost, it is important to create awareness about internationalization. This awareness will also be based on understanding the meaning of internationalization and its facets, that is, the models that can be used and also its impact on academia and on individual faculty. This awareness is crucial for faculty to understand the implications of internationalization and what may impact it may bring to them in terms of challenges and opportunities. This awareness can be created through training and equipping faculty with tools to better understand and adapt to internationalization. This training must cover the wider background to internationalization as well as the detailed implications. It may include understanding cultural diversity, cultural differences and sensitivities as well as the need for

flexibility. This training will create better awareness and enhance the understanding of the faculty.

A second recommendation to improve the readiness of the faculty is to have internal policies for recognition of the faculty involved in the internationalization. These policies will address some of the challenges that affect readiness. One such challenge was the negative impact of internationalization on work-life balance. Universities may include a special consideration in the human resource policies such as work timings, working practices that are in line with internationalization and allocation of specific workload for faculty teaching on international programs, and this will allow the faculty to maintain a work-life balance. This will also address the challenges of mobility of faculty, which can be encouraged through a specific package.

A third recommendation to positively affect the readiness of the faculty will be the internationalization of the curriculum. As discussed previously, this is an important component of internationalization, and as mentioned by the participants, quality assurance through international accreditation provides a stamp of quality which will reassure the faculty that the curriculum matches international standards. This is a way to add value to the individual faculty who will be encouraged to each on the international program. International accreditation of curriculum will make the faculty themselves more international and provide more confidence in the delivery of courses and assurance of learning. This is likely to positively affect the readiness of the faculty for internationalization.

Last but not least, the perceived readiness must be linked to the willingness and motivation to participate in an internationalization process. It is important that there is an operations plan which takes into consideration input from all stakeholders and gains the commitment of all to increase the success of an internationalization program.

The outcome of this research is based on the practical implications of the internationalization process and exploring the perceptions of academics. The main limitation of this study is it is at a time where after the pandemic and all higher education institutions have been working online, and this has led to a change in teaching strategies. On the one hand, it could be perceived that internationalization is more appropriate and implementable with online teaching platforms. On the other hand, the internationalization strategy is also based on creating an international experience for both students and academics. This is an area for further research.

6. Conclusion

This study has reflected on the perception of faculty on the internationalization of higher education and can be concluded that the perceptions of the academics are shaped by a number of factors, including individual, institutional and global aspects. The research was of exploratory nature, and it indicated the importance of faculty perceptions in the internationalization process. This perception is driven by several factors, including awareness, institutional support, global effects and readiness. In fact, the study emphasizes that the perception of readiness is a key element in the internationalization process. This perception of readiness was a focal point of discussions and emerged as a key element in internationalization.

The research has ascertained the importance of the readiness of faculty in the internationalization process through awareness and willingness. The study's overall conclusion clearly indicates that the success of an internationalization process of higher education depends on the readiness of the academics in the UAE, which is in turn positively influenced by institutional support, academic involvement, exposure to internationalization, and perceived opportunities for growth. This conclusion neatly ties up with previous research and also opens a gap for further studies focusing on perceptions. One key area of further research would be to examine the perceived readiness of the faculty and ascertain its importance in the internationalization process. Another area of future research would be to focus on designing a strategy for the implementation of internationalization. Further research will focus on the perceived readiness and how it affects the behavior and inclusion of faculty in the internationalization process.

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