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# “It’s a mind-changing game!”: Health professional educators working abroad

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## Abstract

Higher education is now a global industry. As students and staff travel across the globe to study and teach, both the student population and the academic staff profile is becoming increasingly international. While there is a reasonable literature documenting the experiences and challenges of international students, little is, however, known about educators who chose to work outside their country of origin. Following a pilot study carried out in the Middle East, a revised online survey canvassed the global community of health professional educators ( $n = 89$ ) to garner not only demographic information but also first-hand accounts of their experiences as international educators. The educators were overwhelmingly positive about their rich experiences in new cultural contexts, acknowledging considerable personal development and broadening perspectives. Their challenges were largely personal, in terms of the impact on their families and adapting to new ways of doing things. We propose an innovative model taking into consideration the many individual and environmental factors involved in the pre-departure and the immersion phases.

**Keywords:** , Adjustment, adaptation, antecedent, health professional, international educator, personality trait

## Background

Higher education, like all other business, is now a global industry. The last two decades have therefore witnessed the "globalisation" of higher education, as thousands of students travel between continents for their tertiary education. To meet these demands, many established Australian, American, UK and Indian universities have established offshore campuses in Asia and other emerging economies, e.g. the Middle East. Thus, not only are students increasingly on the move, so too are educators (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Dunn & Wallace, 2004; Harden, 2006; Smith, 2009; Fenton, 2010; Kim, Wolf-Wendel & Twombly 2011; McLean, 2013; McLean, McKimm & Major,

2014; Bovill, Jordan & Watters, 2015; McLean *et al.*, 2015).

While much has been written about the expatriate workforce, this has largely been from the perspective of the globalisation of businesses and corporations. By comparison, the academic expatriate workforce has barely been researched (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Fenton, 2010; Dunn & Wallace, 2004; Smith, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2011; McLean, 2013; McLean *et al.*, 2014; Bovill *et al.*, 2015). The move to another country to study or work will undoubtedly immerse the individual in a different culture or at least, a different way of "doing things", requiring adjustment and adaptation (Grove and Torbiörn, 1985; Haslberger, Brewster and Hippler, 2013).

"Culture" is, however, a highly contested term (Bovill *et al.*, 2015), with multiple meanings. While some individuals might perceive it as a constraint (e.g. restrictions on women), others might view culture as the inherited traditions that connect members of a community (Clever, 2001). "Culture" is also used in the context of an organisation (i.e. organisational culture), depicting how "things are done", the relationships that exist and the administrative structures. The term, "culture shock", has been used to describe the situation of an individual realising that he/she cannot fully meet the demands of the environment or when the environment does not meet expectations. This leads to stress, generally perceived as negative emotions, which in turn leads to an unfreezing of the mental frame to allow changes to be made, followed by a refreezing of the mental frame (Lewin, 1997) (i.e. adaptation). This adaptation involves cognition and emotions (internal), behaviour being the observable (external) manifestation (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985). For some, however, this may lead to cognitive dissonance, i.e. when one needs to behave in a way which contradicts one's norm (Haslberger & Brewster, 2005).

This paper describes the experiences of a group of health professional educators who had been or were working away from their "home" country. Our aim was to use existing frameworks to develop a renewed model that captures the individual and environmental factors that impact on their adjustment and adaptation as academics to new cultural contexts. For the purpose of this study, respondents will be referred to as *international educators*.

## Method

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### *Setting*

An online survey, piloted in the Middle East (McLean *et al.*, 2014) was adapted for an international audience. Our data collection was framed around the following research questions:

1. What drives health professions educators to work abroad?
2. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks for institutions hiring foreigners?
3. What are the personal benefits and challenges of being an international medical educator?
4. What advice can these educators offer?
5. What traits and attributes are required to work internationally?

### *Survey instrument*

Details regarding the development and refinement of an approved online survey instrument piloted in the Middle East have been described elsewhere (McLean *et al.*, 2014). Modifications for an international audience included removing two items, rephrasing three (e.g. removing reference to the Middle East) and adding six new questions to gather information about respondents' professional and personal experiences whilst working abroad. Using both selected response items and open-ended questions, the survey instrument anonymously collected biographical information as well as details of participants' past and current positions and roles as international educators. The

questionnaire comprised 42 items. Of relevance to this study are the 17 questions (largely open-ended) relating to their experiences and views on being international educators.

### ***Participants***

Through the authors' contacts and collaborative networks and the hosting of the online survey on MedEdWorld ([www.mededworld.org](http://www.mededworld.org)) for two months during late 2012, the responses of 89 participants (58% male; 42% female) with a mean age of  $51.4 \pm 12.1$  were analysed. Participants were born in 29 countries, had undertaken their undergraduate and post-graduate studies in 27 and 22 countries, respectively and collectively and had worked in more than 87 countries. For 45%, "home" was no longer the country in which they were born. The majority (64%) were medically qualified, with 89% having post-graduate qualifications (clinical specialisations and/or Masters/PhDs) (McLean *et al.*, 2015)

### ***Data analysis***

The largely open-ended responses to the questions posed were thematically analysed (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Three researchers (MM, SM and ADS) independently identified the main themes and sub-themes within the comments. These were compared and discussed until consensus was reached.

## **Results**

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### ***Why did respondents choose to work abroad?***

The reasons offered for working abroad were both personal and professional, with the most frequent being to gain experience ( $n = 11$ ), as part of a current job ( $n = 11$ ), by invitation ( $n = 11$ ), a job offer ( $n = 9$ ) or motivated by interest ( $n = 9$ ) or career or self-development ( $n = 8$ ). The word "opportunity" was used by 15 ( $\pm 17\%$ ) of the respondents. Around 11% of the participants referred to wanting to work or gain experience in a developing country or low resource setting, suggesting an underlying altruistic motivation. Only three respondents indicated that their move was financially motivated.

### ***What were the benefits of being an international educator? (Table 1a)***

The benefits of being "international" largely revolved around experiencing a new country and/or culture, including different educational systems and practices, health care systems and networking opportunities. Another major theme was that of their personal development in terms of becoming more open and flexible. They wrote about their "horizons being broadened" by being in another culture and also about seeing things differently. In essence, they learnt more about themselves. They also identified the benefits of collaboration, for example, of working with others to develop a new curriculum. Others identified a deeper appreciation of the constraints faced by those living in under-resourced countries or regions.

**Table 1a.** Personal benefits of being an international health professions educator.

Benefit	Explanation	Exemplar quotations
Experiencing a different country and/or culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved awareness of education and education systems</li> <li>Gaining knowledge and health and health care systems</li> <li>Developing relationships and networking</li> <li>Learning about other cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broadening your professional horizons by understanding how students in other cultures learn</li> <li>Exposure to other cultures, teaching and learning approaches and opportunity to use resources or facilities not available in my home country.</li> <li>Cross-fertilisation of ideas; co-learning with faculty from the host country</li> <li>Experiencing different cultural practices and their role in health care of the society.</li> <li>The opportunity to learn from others, to get different perspectives, to make new friends, being able to network, to get life experience by traveling, to see other health care systems</li> <li>The making of friends in another culture is a great privilege.</li> <li>Opportunities to learn about cultures of others</li> <li>Appreciation of other cultures</li> <li>Exposure to other cultures, teaching and learning approaches and opportunity to use resources or facilities not available in my home country</li> </ul>
Personal development and self-discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skills development, including resourcefulness</li> <li>Developing confidence</li> <li>Developing humility</li> <li>Developing attributes, e.g. patience; tolerance; pragmatism</li> <li>Broadening horizons and viewpoints (leading to doing things differently); seeing alternatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skills improve dramatically, communication skills have to improve as well</li> <li>Acquiring of skills such as resourcefulness and self-sufficiency</li> <li>Learning more about my capabilities</li> <li>I could write a lot here! It broadened my perspectives and matured me personally and professionally. I grew in confidence, but I hope also in humility as I considered the diversity in the student population and the constraints that many worked against almost daily</li> <li>Becoming more patient, open, pragmatic</li> <li>Being forced to have a fresh perspective on things, having to deal with unexpected consequences, being forced to be quick on your feet, good for your self-respect (I can do this)</li> <li>Experiencing other perspectives and getting out of your comfort zone</li> <li>It broadens your horizons, changes the way you think, forces you to consider alternate points of view</li> <li>A richer academic life. Seeing how problems are dealt with in other countries helps make sense of some issues back at home and makes working with international students in the UK easier</li> <li>Get a broader perspective on issues, learn from different cultures and approaches increases confidence and understanding, increases tolerance</li> <li>It broadens your horizons, changes the way you think, forces you to consider alternate points of view</li> <li>I saw alternative solutions. For example, I am currently working with a consultant radiologist on some simplified CXR training material to be used in very resource-poor settings</li> </ul>
Other minor rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity to travel</li> <li>Financial</li> <li>Sense of accomplishment</li> </ul>	

**What were the challenges of being an international educator? (Table 1b)**

The major challenge responders identified about working abroad involved their families, largely the consequences of being separated and/or disruption if their partner and children accompanied them:

*"Sometimes difficult to combine with having a family with children. You want them not to be brought into a difficult position as you are away and yet you go for the challenge of going abroad.... My marriage broke up during a stay with my whole family abroad. That was quite a stressful period for all of us, but mostly for my children and my partner, as I had my job anyway".*

Another major challenge was that of adapting to working in a different culture, exacerbated if the language was different. Included in this theme were the challenges in the learning and teaching arena:

- "There were cultural challenges regarding respect for teachers, an expectation to treat or address students as you would address fellow colleagues. The culture of political correctness in what you do or say was also a big challenge because in my culture a teacher has more power/authority over students and therefore could get away with a few things".*
- "Understanding my formal role in the system in which I was hired and my freedom to make decisions. In non-formal education: planning and time-keeping is hard and it requires some flexibility to adapt learning objectives to feasibility vs. find the right strategy to keep people on target".*

Several respondents identified impact on their career trajectories (Table 1b), some positive but others (e.g. the

academic employed at home but who worked abroad) noted that international activities were not recognised for promotion.

**Table 1b.** Personal challenges of working internationally, with family issues being the most commonly identified challenges, followed by culture and language.

Challenge	Explanation	Quotations
Family issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two scenarios:</li> <li>• Leave family at home</li> <li>• Take family to new country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Moving often can be disruptive for a family. Same goes for travelling a lot (not a reason not to do it, but it can turn into being a sacrifice). If you don't have a family, I really see no drawbacks</i></li> <li>• <i>Travel time not compatible with family; I have reduced all my international consultancy work, although I enjoyed it a lot, since I have four children</i></li> <li>• <i>To some extent, disruption of family life where intercontinental moves for residence over long periods interrupts schooling, etc. But there are compensations and benefits for family as well</i></li> <li>• <i>One misses one's family and is often out of pocket, but these are more than matched by the chance to improve the learning or arrangement of medicine in another country</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes difficult to combine with having a family with children. You want them not to be brought into a difficult position as you are away and yet you go for the challenge of going abroad</i></li> <li>• <i>Traveling a lot can be exhausting (to see family); some people may not enjoy the experience</i></li> </ul>
Cultural and language issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Culture shock! .... I fluctuated hugely from unrealistic expectations, through to very low (and probably quite patronising) expectations and then to some kind of equilibrium. Wanting to discuss frustrations without sounding racist - it could be very difficult!</i></li> <li>• <i>Culture and norms are often the biggest barriers even within same country contexts. In class-ist societies, educators from 'foreign' strata are often perceived as outsiders.</i></li> <li>• <i>Language barrier as it relates to English language accent</i></li> <li>• <i>The biggest drawback is the language. English is grammatically a very contorted language. As a simple example; it is the only language that requires an auxiliary verb to turn a sentence into a question or to make it negative. None of the languages I speak (including Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) has this. But this is surmountable. It becomes really complicated with idioms. To really convey a message well, you need the nuances, expressions and proverbs, especially in teaching and supervising students. I find this the most challenging part of the move.</i></li> </ul>
Impact on career trajectory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not recognised or rewarded</li> <li>• Delays completion of training</li> <li>• Seen as slacking by some</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You work hard but do not get any recognition, not supported for professional development activities</i></li> <li>• <i>Delay in completing training. Decision not being understood in home country</i></li> <li>• <i>Apart from a few snide comments about "sloping off abroad again", can't say I noticed any.</i></li> <li>• <i>Not valued by university for promotion</i></li> <li>• <i>Takes time to get into the system, hence moving from country to country may delay career progression</i></li> <li>• <i>Material cost and lack of reward or recognition</i></li> </ul>
Different processes and systems "the way things are done"		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Very difficult to convince government and professionals to improve any education</i></li> <li>• <i>Frustration of slow change</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes, putting up with the way a country/ institutions operate might be hard</i></li> </ul>
Other (mostly personal) issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Home" (where?)</li> <li>• Personal safety</li> <li>• Opportunities doesn't materialise</li> <li>• Away from home institution</li> <li>• Loneliness; lack of social support</li> <li>• Social security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Confusion of identity! Juggling many places called "home"</i></li> <li>• <i>Personal safety risks</i></li> <li>• <i>The appeal (travel, seeing new places) rarely is fulfilled because of time pressures and limited resources</i></li> <li>• <i>Lack of social support networks</i></li> </ul>

**How did they deal with the challenges? (Table 2)**

"Adaptation" emerged as a key word in dealing with the challenges, either in terms of gaining an understanding of the local norms (often through seeking advice from colleagues) or in terms of finding ways to deal with language differences (e.g. learn a few words; use of a translator in the clinical setting). There was acknowledgement that respect, dialogue and negotiation were necessary and some conflict might be anticipated. Some educators offered a different perspective, seeing a need for a two-way broadening of perspectives and some give and take, so that both parties (local and visitor) benefitted from the cross-cultural experience.

Respondents acknowledged that this adaption took time and that some "issues" could not always be resolved or were only partially resolved:

*"Cultural expectations regarding diligence and work ethic. Never fully resolved this, but tried to encourage the more diligent students and reward their efforts! ... Dissonance by working with an older male lab technician from the north of the country (very chauvinistic stereotypically!). In general, by the end of four years, I felt a far greater understanding of the culture and environment, although some frustrations remained and were never fully resolved".*

**Table 2.** Strategies to deal with the challenges.

Strategy	Explanation	Quotation
Understanding local needs and conditions	<p>Personal adaptation</p> <p>Seeking advice from colleagues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It just took some getting used to and observation of what was the 'norm.'</i></li> <li>• <i>Cultural adaptation. Obtaining clinical recognition. Adapting to a new health and regulatory system.</i></li> <li>• <i>Emigrating is always challenging, the cultural differences between my new and old home country are larger than one would expect. Preparing by reading about the culture, applying this to given situations and adopting an attitude of first trying to understand why things works as they do from the cultural perspective of the new country before condemning them from the perspective of the culture was the best way to deal with them. The challenge then is to find the fine line between cultural diversity and complete cultural relativism</i></li> <li>• <i>Familiarising oneself with the local norms and qualities of your students, while maintaining a genuine and non-condescending attitude is key to reaching your audience</i></li> <li>• <i>Learn about the local context to adjust the academic delivery to local needs</i></li> <li>• <i>A greater period of cultural orientation/acclimatisation may have helped with the initial process</i></li> <li>• <i>In Saudi Arabia, it was never clear whether I should shake hands with a man or not. Sometimes it was expected and other times absolutely not. I was fortunate to have sufficient information from family who have worked there and colleagues in the country to give me advice</i></li> </ul>
Dialogue, negotiation, respect		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dealing with it: dialogue, negotiation, feedback and sometimes conflict</i></li> <li>• <i>The challenge of achieving the curriculum. Managed with good support and community co-operation and getting out into the community</i></li> <li>• <i>Dealt with by getting to know all the participants, using their particular strengths and talents to further the general efforts</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Language issues		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Modulating my Spanish was very difficult, I speak quite fast and that was a problem for my students, I am working on this right now because our next course is in a few months</i></li> <li>• <i>Since the main issue was accent and pronunciation of words, I tend to write words on the board or the display unit</i></li> </ul>
Find ways to change attitudes and see things differently; patience		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Slowly seeking to change attitudes, and show life-long benefits of change</i></li> <li>• <i>Cultural expectations regarding diligence and work ethic- never fully resolved this, but tried to encourage the more diligent students and reward their efforts</i></li> <li>• <i>To give international students the benefits of my experience in "both worlds"</i></li> <li>• <i>Help people broaden their perspective!</i></li> <li>• <i>Largely due to expectations of students in the first instance. Persistence and not buying into a dependency model, but this can take time (and a bit of courage and determination)</i></li> <li>• <i>Grin and bear it; when more established try to do something about it [bureaucracy]</i></li> </ul>

### ***What are the benefits and drawbacks for the employing institution? (Table 3)***

In the view of many respondents', the benefits for institutions of hiring international educators far outweighed the drawbacks. The primary benefit was the different worldviews and new perspectives they brought, followed by their expertise. Networking and the opportunity to benchmark standards was also identified.

A major drawback of hiring international educators was perceived or actual paternalism or colonialism (on the part of the educator). Examples provided included the implementation of inappropriate curricula and unsustainable educational and health practices.

Not unexpectedly, respondents identified that with hiring international faculty came cultural and language issues, with expatriates needing time to adjust to the new environment. Several respondents identified staff turnover (because of contract work) being a drawback, with the possible cost implications of ongoing recruitment.

**Table 3.** Perceived benefits and drawbacks for the employing institution.

Benefits	Quotations	Drawbacks	Quotations
<b>Broadening perspectives, views and experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Those from other countries can see things differently, and can bring new ways of thinking to their international setting, as well as to bring new ways of thinking to their home setting.</li> <li>Opening mind to different experiences. Imagining different worlds</li> <li>Widening horizons; think outside the box; understand that health care in one's home country is not the end all</li> <li>Intellectual contributions from a different cultural context. Sharing different cultural experiences particularly as it relates to understanding and treatment of illnesses or disease</li> <li>Exposing the students and staff to broader human experiences</li> </ul>	<b>Paternalism; colonialism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educational colonialism</li> <li>Often not sustainable; inappropriate curricula and teaching from resource-rich cultures; lack of understanding of what is actually needed by host country</li> <li>May introduce ideas, thoughts, treatment plans which are not deliverable within local resources. Speaking about hi-tech medicine may encourage students to leave their home countries</li> <li>An international teacher may persuade an institution of new plans or programs that the government is unable or unwilling to consider, leading to wide-spread disappointment</li> <li>Cultural imperialism</li> </ul>
<b>Expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to a teaching resource that they otherwise would not have. Essential for the initial development of postgraduate training programmes</li> <li>If the teacher brings solid experience and is committed to local priorities then local colleagues can benefit by collaboration. The benefit is of course in both directions</li> <li>International teachers provide expertise that the home nation would find impossible to access internally. They provide role models and a network of contacts for on-going conversations</li> <li>The main benefit in medicine is bringing information about priorities not currently being pursued, and opening discussion and debate. Training for family medicine is a good example; medical ethics is another, as is the social responsibility of medicine.</li> </ul>	<b>Cultural issues</b>  <b>Recognising that this takes time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor understanding of the cultural context in learning and teaching</li> <li>If they are insensitive to the local uses and culture especially if they are put in a position of (executive) power they can harm the organisation. Teachers who do not understand well the educational culture in a country will fail to reach their students</li> <li>Limited initial understanding of cultural values</li> <li>Lack of sufficient insight in local processes</li> <li>Limited initial understanding of cultural values</li> <li>Induction may need time if the international teacher is not experienced in culture or teaching in different countries</li> <li>Teaching needs to be contextualized. Not all international teachers will do this well</li> <li>It takes a while to be on the same page culturally!</li> <li>One must set time aside to get the new colleague familiar with the culture</li> </ul>
<b>Comparing standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>External standard-setting - why should a medical student in Malawi get a distinction at a lower level than a medical student in any other country? Surely the standard needed to work as a doctor is international - if anything you could argue that greater clinical skills are required when resources are scarce! Internationals can bring a fresh perspective. Often my teaching would be on two levels - firstly what should be done in an ideal (i.e. Westernised, resource-rich) world and what was actually feasible where we were working</li> </ul>	<b>Staff-turnover</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too rapid a turnover of staff</li> <li>They can resign any time</li> <li>Do not always stay for very long</li> </ul>
<b>Networking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Benefits of networking - already relationships that look to be mutually beneficial are being formed between different institutions. Sharing of resources.</li> </ul>	<b>None</b>	

### What were their memorable experiences?

In response to this question, both positive experiences and challenges were recalled. Mostly, these related to language and culture. Also mentioned were experiencing different perspectives, being able to make a difference and seeing the fruits of their labour:

- "Having to teach an audience that could not understand English or French, relying on a translator 100% to get the message across over a 2-day short course!"*
- "Language with interpreter: Finnish speaking English, interpreted by a Malawian into Putonghua"*
- "My period in Japan: Challenging in terms of culture, language and feedback habits"*
- "Knowledge of English of students, trainees and teaching staff was exemplary. Eagerness to learn was humbling"*
- "It was interesting to be able to understand Portuguese even though I don't speak that language, I learnt from my students"*
- "Religious considerations connected with Islam regarding medical topics that are forbidden in this religion"*
- "I was unprepared for cultural differences between UK and Jamaica. Students and local doctors seemed callous towards their patients. Patients not involved in treatment planning"*
- "The most memorable is probably Nigeria because it opened a wide dimension of community-orientated learning that has endured and provided leadership for the ensuing 35 years"*
- "Inspiring to see medical students evolving from individual clinical care to global health view including social determinants of health; inspired by health professionals who wish to work in poor counties to help reduce global health service inequalities"*
- "Small group teaching in rural Latvia...110 turned up including doctor, nurses....."*
- "The surgical trainees in London thought I brought them the different view of learning surgical skills"*

### ***What orientation, induction or training had they received?***

Less than one-fifth of the respondents had undergone some "training" in relation to their new posts. Although formal training such as university induction, notes, a link to a webpage or as an observer teacher was identified, more comments reflected informal "training", e.g. what they had gleaned from colleagues, presumably also expatriates.

## **Discussion**

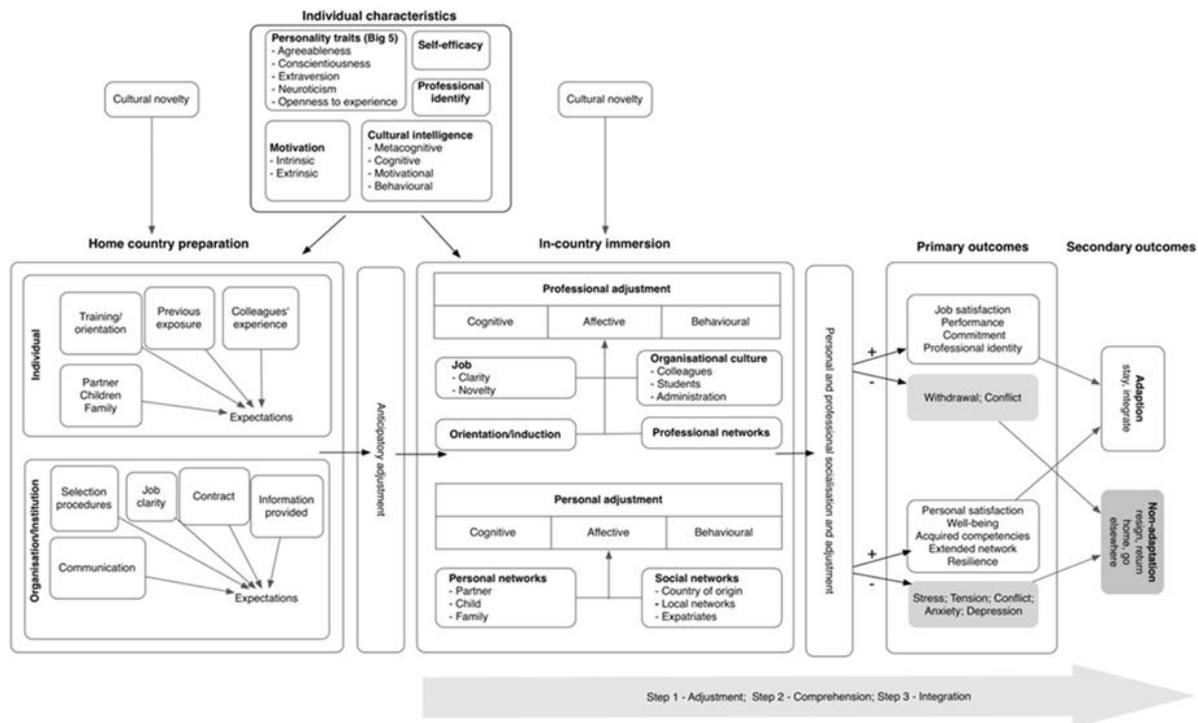
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*"Learnt so much, become a better person, have contact with so many wonderful people and their experiences. It's a mind-changing game!"*

The above comment captures the positive sentiments of a respondent who had worked abroad as an international educator. From the largely qualitative survey, the general impression was that for the majority of our respondents, the benefits and rewards of working abroad outweighed the personal and professional challenges of moving to a new and often unfamiliar context. Not only did such an immersion lead to an increased knowledge and awareness of different education and health care systems and new cultures, for many, it was also a journey of self-discovery and personal development. While a number of technical skills had clearly been developed, the positive impact of rich experiences with a range of individuals from other cultures on their personal development was immense. This personal development was largely around the broadening of their perspectives and the changing of worldviews, corroborating the findings of our pilot study conducted in the Middle East (McLean *et al.*, 2014).

From respondents' responses, there was clear evidence that their immersion in a new context, which for many was a new culture, had required considerable adaptation on many levels. This happened largely *in situ*, on arrival in the new country. Together with personal issues (mostly relating to their families), culture and language emerged as a major challenge, with "culture shock" being mentioned by several respondents. "Shock" can probably be interpreted as the challenge to their mental frame of reference or to a misalignment their between expectations and reality (Lewin, 1997).

Using Lee's (2006) and Haslberger and colleagues' (2013) frameworks, both of which integrate a number of theoretical and/or psychological perspectives, and including issues arising from our study and other relevant work on expatriation, Figure 1 offers a modified and more inclusive conceptualisation of the factors and processes involving in adjusting and adapting to a new cultural environment. In Lee's (2006) framework, adaptation to a new country and/or culture comprises two aspects (Lee, 2006): *Pre-departure (i.e. anticipatory) adjustment* which relates to the various personal and professional activities and factors that prepare the individual (mostly psychologically) for the move, and *in-country adjustment* which happens when the individual arrives in the new country. In our model, the journey to a new country and/or cultural context needs to acknowledge pre-existing factors (*antecedents*) which relate largely to the *individual* (e.g. personality traits; cultural intelligence) but also to the anticipated *environment* (e.g. culture novelty; work-related conditions).



**Figure 1.** The factors and processes involved in working abroad as an international educator.

### Individual factors

The Big Five personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness and neuroticism) have been identified as important individual factors for working in a new context (Bhatti *et al.*, 2014). Table 4 aligns the attributes and qualities our respondents identified as essential for working in a new culture with the Big Five personality traits. Most of their identified attributes and qualities could be aligned with agreeableness and openness to experience.

**Table 4.** Aligning the Big Five personality traits with what health professional educators Identified as being essential for working in a different context, often a new culture (Bhatti *et al.*, 2013).

Personality trait	Explanation: Highlights traits such as	Attributes and traits identified by health professional educators in the present study
Extraversion	<i>Talkative, energetic, assertive</i> Take initiative in building relationships professionally and socially	Good communication; good listener; confident
Agreeableness	<i>Sympathetic, kind, affectionate</i> Good at relationships Value getting along with others, co-operation	<i>Cultural sensitivity, awareness, intelligence; patience; tolerance;</i> humility; humour; respect for others; diplomacy; non-judgemental
Openness to experience	<i>Having a range of interests, imaginative, insightful</i> Non-confirming way of thinking Good at networking	<i>Adaptability/flexibility; being open-minded;</i> considerate of other views; curiosity; interested; willing to learn
Conscientiousness	<i>Organised, thorough, careful, reliable</i> Helps to achieve goals and find meaning Task-orientation so job completion	Hard-working; reflective; self-reliant
Neuroticism (low = emotional stability)	<i>Tense, moody, anxious (if high)</i> Enables handling of problems <i>(if low)</i>	Enjoys challenges; cope with uncertainty; persistence; resilience

\* *Italicised attributes and qualities indicated more frequent responses in the present study.*

Two other individual factors we believe influence an individual's decision to work abroad are *self-efficacy* and *professional identity* (Bandura, 1977) and *motivation* (Ryan & Deci, 2000a,b). Self-efficacy relates to the strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals, while Ryan and Deci's (2000a,b) self-determination theory describes an individual's tendency to support intrinsically-driven beliefs and goals.

An antecedent we consider important in the context of experiencing new cultures, and which is particularly important in-country, is cultural intelligence (CQ), defined as an individual's capability to detect, assimilate, reason and act on cultural cues appropriately in culturally diverse situations (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Shaffer & Miller, 2009; Rockstuhl *et al.*, 2011; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Van Dyne and colleagues (2012) recently expanded their original four factor model (metacognitive CQ, cognitive CQ, motivational CQ, behavioural CQ) to include sub-dimensions (e.g. under cognitive CQ, intrinsic interest, extrinsic interest, self-efficacy to adjust have been identified). Shaffer and Miller (2009) offer several propositions for the direct and indirect effects of CQ on several expatriate success outcomes, including adjustment, performance, retention and career success.

### **Environmental factors**

*Cultural novelty*, the cultural distance between the host culture and a person's own culture (Palthe, 2004) and which can relate to, for example, food, housing, safety, entertainment, religion (Farooq & Bagul, 2015), is a consideration when deciding whether to live and work in a particular context. The assumption is that the greater the difference between the new culture and an individual's culture, the greater the adjustment, with the individual looking for differences. Selmer (2006), however, makes the important point that when a culture is perceived as similar to one's own (e.g. the same language is spoken), nuances can be overlooked and inappropriate behaviour is just as likely as in a culture that is very different. Culture shock can therefore sometimes be more intense as anticipatory adjustment

has not occurred.

### ***Pre-departure or anticipatory adjustment***

This describes the numerous activities and factors that culminate in expectations of the impending move. These relate to the *individual* (mainly in terms of preparation of self and attending to family) who will make the move as well as the processes put in place by the future *employer*, e.g. clarity of job role ; communication. Collectively, these factors (process; information) allow the individual (and presumably also his/her family) to make some psychological adjustment in preparation for the move.

### ***In-country adjustment and adaptation***

While anticipatory adjustment is required, most of the adjustment takes place in-country, the extent of which depends to some degree on whether the anticipatory expectations are met (or not met) as well as personal characteristics. Adaptation has been described as the degree of fit between the individual and the environment in terms of social processes and structures and usually involves the convergence over time of behaviours, values and norms and the underlying assumptions of the individual, i.e. reconstruction of a mental frame of reference (Grove and Torbiörn, 1985).

As depicted in Figure 1, once in-country, adjustment involves constant interpretation and understanding of the environment and circumstances, with the individual making cognitive, affective and behavioural adaptations both in terms of his or her personal and professional lives (Figure 1). For Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl (2008), a key consideration in adjusting and adapting to a new context relates to the social network structures that expatriates develop. In their model, antecedents such as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, metacognition and self-efficacy influence social networking characteristics (i.e. strength, diversity), which in turn impact on outcomes such as job performance, global identity and social status. In our model, two networks are depicted: Social (for the individual and for the family) and professional (for the individual in the workplace).

A major issue not commonly reported in the literature on working abroad but which emerged as a major challenge for our respondents, was the impact of the move on individual's partner and children (Caligiuri, Hyland & Bross, 1998; Palthe, 2004; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Nam, Cho & Lee, 2014). This relates both to separation if the family remains in the home country or an inability of the accompanying family to adjust to the new environment. Caligiuri and colleagues' (1998) found that in a global assignment, the adjustment of the accompanying family members becomes the critical factor influencing the overall adjustment of the expatriate.

Not surprisingly, after family factors, the challenge of adapting to a new culture (and language) was identified by our respondents. Haslberger and colleagues (2013) conceptualise adjustment as a person-environment fit: *Do the environmental resources or supplies meet with expectations?* and *Does the individual have the ability to meet the environment demands?* They recognise three dimensions of adjustment: Cognitive, affective and behavioural, each with an internal (individual) and an external standard (environment). If, in moving, expectations are not met, increased demands (and stress) are placed on the individual, creating a 'crisis' which then triggers coping strategies. Although this adjustment-crisis-adaptation process is particularly pronounced on arrival, for Haslberger and colleagues (2013), it is never-ending as there are continuous demands on expatriates, both personally and professionally. While they may be willing to meet external standards more easily in some instances (e.g. leisure activities), this may not be the case in terms of, for example, religion. For some individuals, this may lead to a conscious decision not to adjust.

The learning and teaching environment is a particularly interesting and challenging one in a new cultural context.

Educators are often hired for their expertise in particular areas, e.g. curriculum development, assessment, as some respondents in the present study identified. While teaching in a new context brought opportunities for broadening horizons, they also acknowledged that it could be easy to impose views and standards (i.e. be patronising):

*I found the divide between being empathetic and patronising difficult at first. I learned to put what I 'knew' about the culture and way of teaching aside and learn what works for my students*

Fernandez and colleagues (2006) identified three steps to adapting to a new cultural environment, which they see as "first and foremost about breaking with a number of biases and certainties so as to become familiar with a social atmosphere" (p. 14):

- *Step 1: Immersion-Adjustment: Touching, feeling, seeing, listening and tasting:* The starting point of a different way of thinking and doing things.
- *Step 2: Immersion-Comprehension: Acquired competencies:* One realises intercultural mediation is possible, developing relationships while taking into account of potentially opposing logic, customs and habits. It is during this process that one develops patience, humility and trust.
- *Step 3: Immersion-Integration: Enlightened pragmatism:* The language is learnt and one is integrated into the cultural and intercultural configurations.

Adjustment is thus a precondition first of adaptation and then of integration. If an individual is able to adjust to new ways of doing things, is satisfied with his or her employment conditions and on the personal front, and has settled (including the family), then he/she is more likely to adapt, if adaptation is viewed as adopting "norms" of the local context (Fernandez, Mutabazi & Pierre, 2006). For Fernandez and colleagues (2006), on a personal level, the process of immersion, adjustment, comprehension and enlightened pragmatism is about "embarking on a profoundly humble journey" (p. 18), which ultimately leads to an alteration in personal identity. True integration might, however, only come about by extended contact and socialisation with host country nationals (Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003; Lineberry, 2012) and if one relinquishes "home" culture (Lineberry, 2012). In the longer term, if the employment contract is renewed and the family has settled, then the new country might become a place of residency or home. If, however, the initial adjustments are too far removed from one's internal standards (or one's family's), then adaptation will be difficult and may culminate in the individual and/or the family returning home.

Although training and orientation emerged as being important for adjusting to the new work context, our educators were generally offered no training or what was offered was inadequate. Being "socialised" was recognised as important (as Palthe's (2004) study demonstrated):

*A greater period of cultural orientation/acclimatisation may have helped with the initial process (we had none, and there was a culture locally where people would say what they thought you wanted to hear rather than what was necessarily the case, which made obtaining and acting upon feedback tremendously challenging!) Those who had been there longer could have discussed some of their own initial frustrations or conflicts and how they resolved them, and this would have helped greatly!*

Nam and colleagues' (2014) recent review on our current understanding of cross-cultural training has identified that there needs to be a shift from learning about culture to developing skills to manage oneself and others across cultures. If expatriate adjustment relates to the degree of psychological comfort and familiarity an individual feels in terms of the new culture, then "developing intercultural competence ... is no longer just a recommendation but a requirement for responding to the challenges of globalization" (Nam et al., 2014; p.49).

Bandura's social cognitive theory (2002) is of relevance to this discussion in terms of three proposed modes of

agency, all of which are important in adapting to a new cultural context:

- *Direct personal agency*, in which an individual can regulate him- or herself and the new environment
- *Proxy agency*, in which an individual tries to get those who with access to resources, expertise or have the power to act on their behalf to secure their desired outcomes, and
- *Collective agency*, in which an individual, recognising that a collective effort is more likely to achieve the desired result, will work with others to pool their knowledge, skills and resources, while providing mutual support.

In the present study, direct personal agency and collective agency were the most commonly identified modes of agency, reflecting individuals' need to adjust and adapt, while relying on the support of new colleagues.

## Take Home Messages

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*Am I the right sort of person? Will I be able to adapt?* would be some of the questions facing academics contemplating working abroad. Working abroad does not suit everyone. Having selected the appropriate academic to be employed or to undertake an international activity, considerable support is required, either by the "home" institution (Bovill *et al.*, 2015) or by the international employer. Once in-country, the question might then be *To stay or not to stay?* The outcome would depend on an individual's (and his/her family's) adaptation and adjustment and the support received.

Our study of 89 health profession educators, some with little international experience and others with decades of experience have contributed to our understanding of what it means to be an international educator. Together with the available literature and models on expatriate experiences in general, this study has contributed to a relatively unexplored expatriate situation – that of academics working internationally. Emerging from this study was the overwhelming enthusiasm respondents expressed in terms of the opportunity to work abroad and the benefits of their experiences, particularly in terms of their personal development (i.e. broadening views). Their decisions to become an international educator were, however, not taken lightly as they need to be personally introspective, weighing up the pros and cons for themselves and their families. Our findings have been integrated into an extensive expatriate literature to develop a model which we believe is representative of across both academic and business contexts. Tharenou's (2015) recent article on the need to consider expatriate types (i.e. organisational transfer, self-initiated, skilled migration) is an area of future research as this might impact on adjustment, adaptation and integration.

Based on our own experiences as educators who have worked across several geographic regions and in a range of cultural contexts, supplemented by the input of respondents to our Middle Eastern (McLean *et al.*, 2014) and current survey, Box 1 offers advice to academics contemplating taking up a position abroad. While the pre-departure or anticipatory adjustment is important in preparing oneself for change, it is only once one is immersed in the new culture that the adjustment and adaptation can happen.

**Box 1. Factors to consider when contemplating teaching or working abroad.**

**A. Personal**

1. Reflect on your reasons for working abroad
2. Explore the intended cultural context
3. Reflect on your cultural competency and sensitivity (Am I the right person?)
4. Investigate practical issues such as housing, transport and personal safety
5. Ensure your family members are on board and check their needs (e.g. schooling)
6. Learn a few words and phrases in the language and socialise with the locals
7. Develop and maintain support networks, including in your "home" country

**B. Professional**

8. Consider the intended duration of your stay (as this may impact on your career trajectory)
9. Consider professional registration issues

**C. Institutional/organisational**

10. Gather as much information about your intended employer, the institution, the students, the 'culture'
11. Request a clear job description
12. Visit the country and organisation
13. Read your contract carefully before signing
14. On arrival, request orientation

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## Notes On Contributors

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## Appendices

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## Declarations

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*The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.*

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