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International Academics as Agents of Transformation: Lived and Managed Internationalization in a Finnish University

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Abstract

This article explores internationalization processes as an ongoing transformation of higher education institutions by examining a case of internationalization efforts at Tampere University (TAU) in Finland. Against the prevailing policy discourse of international "talent" which tends to instrumentalize international academics, we explore how the experiences of international academics provide a window into complicated dynamics of lived and managed internationalization, including how international academics are themselves agents of transformation. This case study combines a survey and interviews with self-identified international staff at TAU, as well as our own critical reflections as a team of international and Finnish academics who conducted the research and used the findings to advocate for changes. Our analysis emphasizes a relational understanding of international academics and highlights intersecting challenges around language, uncertain career prospects, and distance from university decision-making forums. Taken together, the findings illuminate the contradictory positioning of international academics and show the complicated convergences and divergences between managerial attempts to increase the university's global competitiveness and the diverse needs, positionalities, and agencies of international academics.

Keywords

change agent; Finland; international academics; university internationalization

1. Introduction

Seen as a way to improve the quality of research and higher education, international cooperation and academic mobility of staff and students have been at the forefront of universities' internationalization actions (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2016). However, critical voices highlight that internationalization has become increasingly dominated by commercial and economic rationales (Bamberger et al., 2019), perpetuating geopolitical, economic, and colonial inequalities (Stein, 2021). This has prompted new ways of thinking about internationalization as a process closely aligned with societal engagement (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021), inclusivity (Janebová & Johnstone, 2020), and sustainability (Nikula & Van Gaalen, 2022).

This new pivot towards internationalization encourages new approaches to international academic mobilities and, more specifically, to international academics in higher education institutions. Rationales for hiring international researchers and teachers are diverse: tackling staff shortages, increasing international cooperation in research and education, supporting institutional reforms through international learning, and boosting research productivity by selecting top researchers (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2016). Attracting academic talent from abroad is widely seen as a key to success for universities and national economies (Leisyte & Rose, 2017), yet much remains understudied regarding how policies and practices interact across national, institutional, and individual levels, and how international academics' experiences entwine in these dynamics (Rumbley & de Wit, 2017).

This article explores internationalization processes as an ongoing transformation of higher education institutions by examining internationalization efforts at Tampere University (TAU) in Finland. Attracting international academics to Finnish universities is seen as one important aspect of internationalization; however, the current policy discourse of recruiting the "best talent" (Siekkinen et al., 2024; van der Wende, 2015) instrumentalizes the presence of international academics in Finnish universities in the interest of increasing research and funding competitiveness. Moreover, building internationalization management procedures around mostly quantitative indicators (e.g., number of international staff and students), homogenizes the diversity of positionalities and lived experiences of internationalization.

This case study provides insight into the complex interaction between planned and emergent aspects of internationalization at TAU, a university recently established through an organizational merger. We seek to produce deep, context-dependent knowledge, to reveal the dynamism and mechanics of processes of internationalization, to capture multi-layered narratives, and to build knowledge for practical decision making (Flyvbjerg, 2011). We present an analysis of a survey and interviews with international academics at TAU, focusing on lived and managed internationalization (as transformation). The survey and interviews with self-identified international researchers, teachers, and other staff emerged as a project of local trade union associations, the Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers (Tatte), part of the Union of Research Professionals in Finland, with support from the TAU chapter of the Finnish Union of University Professors. The authors of this article are either members of these unions and international researchers themselves who lobbied on international issues in their respective unions or researchers hired with the unions' support.

While relying on participants' self-identification, our understanding of "international academics" encompasses a broad range of mobilities and varied relationships to citizenships, languages, nationalities,

and other identities. The research itself makes as objects of inquiry the categories of "international" and "internationalization" rather than taking them as settled terms. Furthermore, we develop critical reflections on our participation in the transformation we are researching, and, more specifically, on our attempts, as mostly international academics ourselves, to use this research to advocate for improved conditions for international academics at the university. In doing so, this research uses an engaged form of inquiry that highlights the agencies of international academics as they/we navigate the complicated landscapes of managed and lived internationalization.

Our contribution is to offer perspectives from the lived side of internationalization and to highlight the complicated convergences and divergences between managerial attempts to increase the university's global competitiveness and the diverse needs, positionalities, and agencies of international academics. Rather than a clear and straightforward opposition, this article reveals an ambivalent landscape, where the agendas and practices of managed internationalization offer both opportunities and challenges, and where the lived interests and identities of international academics continually converge and diverge with managed processes. Contributing to existing conceptions of higher education internationalization (de Wit et al., 2015), we argue for a relational approach to internationalization as a transformative process that unfolds through the relational dynamics between lived experience and managerial strategy.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

In the wider context of marketized higher education, internationalization of the academic workforce has been framed within the instrumentalizing discourse of "talent import" and "brain gain" (Scott, 2015; van der Wende, 2015) but also as tokenistic diversity "box ticking" (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Wang, 2021). While policies and public discourse romanticize the "wandering scholar" privilege (Smithers et al., 2025), international academics are usually employed on fixed-term contracts, causing uncertain career trajectories and a range of affective "hidden injuries" (Morley et al., 2018). Previous studies showed the "darker side" of academic mobilities (Richardson & Zikic, 2007) connected to gender inequalities (Henderson, 2021), geopolitical, linguistic, and citizenship-based hierarchies (Bauder et al., 2017; Scott, 2015). Moreover, the mobility/immobility binary has been problematized as individuals experience being "stuck in place" in a chain of mobilities, all the while engaging in "sticky" cross-country ties of family and community engagements (on "stuck and sticky" aspects of academic mobility see Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021). Empirical insight into the lived experiences of international academics is needed to better understand the complex "negotiations between affective and relational attachments, career planning, home and destination attributes, higher education contexts, dominant discourses of internationalisation and postcolonial hierarchies which structure the global higher education sector" (Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021, p. 691). The lived experiences of international academics are particularly under-researched in the context of Finland (Jousilahti et al., 2022; Siekkinen et al., 2024).

Informed by these perspectives on internationalization and international academic mobility, we explore internationalization as a continuous transformation of a higher education institution. Transformation is conceptualized as a deep, extensive change in the strategy, structure, culture, and behavior on the level of a global field, system, or institution (Dee et al., 2023). Transformational change can be planned, i.e., designed and led by transformation actors (e.g., university leadership); or it can be emergent, coming from the grassroots initiatives (Dee et al., 2023). Our focus is on the dynamic interplay between planned and

emergent aspects of internationalization in a university. We use the terms "managed internationalization" and "lived internationalization" as interrelated aspects to capture the planned and emergent aspects of internationalization, respectively. To understand the dynamic interrelatedness, we adopt a relational perspective to the university as an organization (Emirbayer, 1997; Özbilgin, 2006). Rather than researching these phenomena as self-subsistent fixed entities (Emirbayer, 1997), relational ontology focuses on the relations through which the phenomena get constituted.

Exploring the process of internationalization through the lens of relational ontology allows us to focus our analysis on different layers of what Özbilgin (2006) describes as relationality between the self, the others, and the circumstances. We operationalized this relational approach through analyzing the relationalities between international academics and their profession, colleagues, and the university as an institution. We also emphasize the spatio-temporal relations, mobilities, and imaginaries that constitute the university, and the transformation thereof, as both deeply embedded in the prevailing power-geometries of the present and as an always unfinished site of multiplicity and heterogeneity—of the "simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005, p. 32). This approach is well-suited to understanding the university as simultaneously a site of knowledge production, of teaching and learning, of labor and management, of "human capital" development, of struggles over the direction of society, of state investment aimed toward successful participation in locally and globally competitive knowledge economies, and much else besides. In this sense, the university is constituted by relations and mobilities stretching outward towards its varied "local" and "global" contexts, and this is manifestly the case even "before" intentional strategies of internationalization are considered.

While international academics might be instrumentalized (explicitly or implicitly) by the discourse of strategic internationalization, they themselves can become agents of institutional transformation (Dee et al., 2023) by actively engaging in institutional decision-making or even by simply being present in university spaces in ways that disrupt routines or assumptions, creating the need to be accommodated or responded to. Going one step further, we examine our positionalities in these layers of relationalities and offer our own critical reflections as a team of international and Finnish academics who conducted the research and acted as change agents at the university. Aiming to elaborate on the internationalization relationalities and transformations, this study addresses three research questions:

> RQ1: How do international academics experience internationalization transformations at TAU?
>
> RQ2: How are the relationalities of lived and managed internationalization constructed in participants' accounts?
>
> RQ3: How can international academics emerge as change agents within internationalization transformations at TAU?

3. Study Setting

The internationalization of Finnish higher education has been on the national agenda since the 1980s to enhance global competitiveness. The national internationalization strategy discusses Finnish universities in connection with creating a competitive economy that attracts talent (Ministry of Education and Culture,

2022). This strategic direction is clearly communicated in the government's program called "Talent Boost," focusing on attracting workers from outside the country to meet Finland's labor needs. The same intention partly motivated TAU's recent organizational merger (Vellamo et al., 2022). TAU was established in 2019 through a merger of two higher education institutions (University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology). The merger was a contested process (Poutanen et al., 2022) that resulted in the second-largest multidisciplinary university in Finland with about 22,000 students and 4,200 staff members. The internationalization strategy of the newly merged TAU aimed to build the university's brand as an international cooperation partner and create a global community by investing "in international recruitment of best talents" (TAU, 2020). While the strategic goals of the merger and the internationalization process differ in some respects, Vellamo et al. (2022) found that they both focused on academic excellence through attracting international academics. In other words, international academics are often seen as the "best talent" to be imported (Siekkinen et al., 2024; van der Wende, 2015) for the instrumental needs of increasing research and funding competitiveness.

This study examines TAU's internationalization transformation in the post-merger period of dynamic organizational changes that involved the redevelopment of institutional policies, structures, and procedures, including HR management and internationalization agendas. Conducting this research at that time offered valuable insight into processes and relationalities of lived and managed internationalization transformations as they unfolded. While TAU is a somewhat exceptional case given these post-merger dynamics, the discourse of attracting international talent—both to strengthen competition among universities and contribute to the national knowledge-economy competitiveness—is broadly shared among Finnish universities and within the national policy environment (Siekkinen et al., 2024; Vellamo et al., 2022).

The case study analyses data collected through a survey and interviews, perspectives raised during events in the university community, and our observations and reflections over the course of the research (2021–2025). The mixed-method survey (N = 74) implemented in 2021 contained 42 questions grouped into six sections: (a) career and working life, (b) participation in academic and non-academic institutions in Finland, (c) living in Finland, (d) international university, (e) additional comments, and (f) background information. Informed by relevant previous studies (e.g., Bauder et al., 2017; Morley et al., 2018; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021), the authors drafted the initial survey questions which were then revised based on community feedback in meetings with representatives of the two union associations (some international academics and some authoring this article), correspondence with TAU's international HR unit, and a meeting with TAU's coordination group for internationalization (around 15 administrative coordinators of different university departments). The survey included open-ended and Likert-type (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) questions, as well as single and multiple-choice items; it was anonymous and no questions were mandatory (see the survey instrument in Tatte workgroup, 2022). The link to the online survey was disseminated through internal communication channels of the unions and the university. This approach allowed the survey to reach the whole university and those participants who might not have responded to an institutional survey. The survey data were first analyzed using descriptive statistics, capturing patterns in participants' responses to Likert-type questions and further interpreted through the participants' written narratives in the open-ended questions. This data-driven analysis process could be characterized as qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), complemented by the patterns identified through descriptive statistics.

To gain additional qualitative accounts on the patterns observed in the survey responses, we conducted 13 individual interviews with international academics in 2022. During the semi-structured interviews, we asked interviewees to share their perspectives and experiences of working at the university and living in Finland. Interviewees were also asked to share their views on the work of the trade unions and consider practical suggestions for the university's internationalization activities. The interviews lasted between 23 and 40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014).

The survey and interview datasets were analyzed separately and published in two reports (Honkanen & Tatte workgroup, 2022; Tatte workgroup, 2022). The themes presented in this article include and expand our analysis of the survey and interviews to encompass also the reflections of the university members who participated in community discussions. These include discussions around survey design (in 2021), an event presenting the preliminary survey findings, and a workshop on drafting recommendations to TAU (both in 2022). Through these discussions, we sought to invite a broader community—including international academics who may have not participated in the survey and interviews, and anyone interested in internationalization at TAU—to contribute to the research. We also aimed to involve university administrators to capture their understanding of TAU's ongoing internationalization processes. We critically reflected on our encounters with the university actors, practices, and policies as we reported the study results, developed practical recommendations, and observed the shifts that unfolded in the institutional landscape. Our engaged inquiry produced insights into the change processes over an extended period of time and hence created "opportunities to feed inquiry into collective action and action into collective learning" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 49). The presentation of the results and subsequent discussions and community engagements created spaces for reflections that fed into collective learning and action that was carried forward into faculties/departments as well as university policy. In this way, the research acted as and mobilized participants as agents of change.

The themes we present in this article were (a) prevalent in the survey and interview data (Honkanen & Tatte workgroup, 2022; Tatte workgroup, 2022), (b) repeatedly revisited in the community discussions, and (c) provided fruitful insights into the complex interrelatedness between lived and managed internationalization (i.e., relationality between individuals and their profession, their colleagues, and their institution).

Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary and based on principles of informed consent. Prior to data collection, an institutional research permit was obtained from TAU. The call for participation was open to all employees and researchers who self-identify as international members of the university. We noted in the call that "international" is understood broadly to include persons with international backgrounds affiliated with the university, including researchers, teachers, and administrative/professional staff. This also included different forms and lengths of affiliation with the university, such as part-time employees, grant-funded researchers, or doctoral researchers (i.e., PhD candidates who might not have an employment relationship with the university). Participation in the follow-up interviews was not connected to participation in the survey.

The majority of the survey and interview participants were working as researchers and/or teachers across the seven faculties of the university, whereas only seven participants (8%) worked in administrative positions and three worked at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (a separate polytechnic belonging to

the broader Tampere Universities community). Approximately one third of the survey participants were affiliated with the largest Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, and one quarter with the Faculty of Social Sciences. There were fewer respondents from the second-largest Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology and the third-largest Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences (3% and 6% respectively; see Tatte workgroup, 2022). Most participants were in the early career stage (university instructor, research assistant, doctoral researcher, postdoctoral researcher), and less than a quarter of participants were in advanced career stages (professor, research director, university lecturer). This participation rate reflects the lower proportion of international academics in advanced career stages across Finnish universities (Jousilahti et al., 2022; Pietilä et al., 2021). Gender was asked in an open-ended question, in which approximately two-thirds of the participants identified as women or as female. The reported lengths of stay in Finland varied greatly (from four weeks to 57 years), and over half of the participants have lived in Finland for at least three years. About half of the participants held a (shorter-term or longer-term) permit to reside in Finland, while a little less than half reported being a citizen of Finland or another country (including EU countries) that does not require a permit to reside in Finland. Approximately 42% of the survey respondents had previously worked as a researcher or teacher outside of Finland.

4. International Academics at the Intersections of Lived and Managed Internationalization

In this section, we present our analysis of the survey and interviews examining how international academics experience internationalization processes at TAU (RQ1) and explore how participants' accounts illustrate the interactions between lived and managed internationalization (RQ2).

4.1. Intersecting Aspects of Career Progression

International academics at TAU discussed their work and career trajectories as characterized by high-performance demands and future career uncertainty. While these features could be said to characterize work in today's academia in Finland and more broadly (e.g., Pietilä, 2019; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017), being an international academic was seen as adding another layer to the demands of academic work. There are estimates that around 70% of academics at Finnish universities have fixed-term contracts (Pietilä, 2019), and similarly, about 65% of our study participants reported being employed on a fixed-term contract (ranging from three months to five years). A career trajectory consisting of a chain of short-term contracts caused experiences of uncertainty, particularly among early-career academics: 29% of survey respondents perceived that they do not have options for career advancement, and 41% disagreed with the statement that their position is secure enough for career planning. The experience of not having opportunities for career advancement was connected to the position of international academic, but also to intersecting aspects of gender and/or language proficiency, as well as to being perceived as "temporary colleagues" and/or as racialized persons:

> [The] thing that worries me a little bit, it comes back again to the languages, is how accessible and inclusive it will be for foreigners at higher levels of management. For example, it's been mentioned already a few times that maybe I'll be the next head of unit, and then some say: "You don't speak Finnish, you have to learn Finnish." And so it could be that I also cannot advance….There is this upper ceiling for internationals because of the operating language still being Finnish….How inclusive are we really when it's already not that inclusive gender-wise. (Interviewee 5 [I5])

The quote describes the "upper ceiling for internationals" in advancing their career in a Finnish university in connection to not having access to higher levels of university management and leadership roles (such as leading a unit). The interviewee implies that language (TAU's administrative language is Finnish; we discuss the language aspect in Section 4.3) and gender act as an invisible barrier to advancing to senior leadership roles, having an impact on equal career progression opportunities. The quote hints at the persistent gender inequalities in (Finnish) academia that have been well documented (e.g., Jousilahti et al., 2022; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Jousilahti et al. (2022) call this phenomenon "gender scissors" that clip the career advancement for women in Finnish academia; similarly, they observed "ethnic scissors" clipping careers of international academics in Finland (see also Pietilä et al., 2021).

The relationship between individual academics and the university was discussed as ideally a two-way commitment expressed through an official (long-term) employment contract, as well as academics' commitment to the university: "Of course I would be motivated [to learn Finnish] because I know that I have a long-term relationship with this university" (I2). However, the conditions for such a two-way commitment were often absent for academics working on short, fixed-term contracts, who are seen as temporary members of the university community, with transient relationships (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Being perceived as a "temporary colleague" affected how international academics could engage in their work tasks and, more broadly, how they could participate in the university community:

> People sometimes just assume that my stay in Finland will be temporary in a way that might limit their interest in working with me or that might cause them to assume that I would be uninterested in being involved in certain ways at the university. (Survey participant 54, [S54])

These experiences of assumed and actual temporariness, alongside barriers to higher-level roles, also tend to narrow the possibilities for international academics to act as change agents within the university, at a complicated intersection of gender, racialization, language, contract type, and career stage.

Experiences of microaggression, discrimination, and even harassment were an important theme in participants' responses. One interviewee described discrimination as usually an indirect or unintentional comment, "little things" that do not give a basis for a formal complaint:

> I have had other experiences that are not very positive of people assuming certain things or thinking that maybe I'm not a full worker…not really seeing me as an equal….There are these little things, like certain comments, it's not something that you can go and report, [and say] that I was discriminated by this person on this day, because they are just comments…they are not so big that you can complain….But those are things that are affecting the psychological well-being of people. (I10)

Experiences of discrimination are not necessarily shared by all international academics, but, in general, seemed to be tied to appearing in public as a racialized person or to using a language understood as "foreign" or out-of-place: "People have shouted in the street to speak Finnish, and also shouted to go back home" (S33). Another participant explained:

> In everyday life, I have experienced nationalism and even racism at varying levels of intensity. Milder forms included being patronized by Finns in public places or a new neighborhood, stronger forms actual harassment or abuse, for example, in traffic or public transport. (S7)

Participants described their own experiences and observations about how they saw discrimination happening around them, e.g., noting that "discrimination is especially crude towards black students and even more for black women" (S11). These experiences become part of the environment through which many international academics must navigate, inevitably affecting their working lives and careers in a range of ways.

4.2. Immediate Working Community and Distant University

Despite encountering microaggressions, problematic assumptions, language barriers, and the structural constraints of fixed-term contracts, participants' accounts describe many examples of positive collegial relations (e.g., good workplace induction, supportive research group), and a large majority of survey participants (around 80%) agreed that they could fully participate in the activities of their immediate work community (e.g., research group or teaching team). However, this positive perception dropped steeply to about one-third when asked about participation in faculty or university decision-making processes. Participation in "higher levels of management" was seen as an important way to contribute to the university's organizational and academic operations, but was acknowledged as inaccessible for international academics, mainly due to the need for strong Finnish language skills. Having limited access to decision-making forums, participants' narratives convey experiences of not having the possibilities to act as change agents in institutional policies and practices, although they saw the need. Examples given include curriculum committees, faculty councils, university board, as well as working groups developing institutional agendas (such as the internationalization strategy). Having representation in decision-making spaces is also seen as an important part of internationalization efforts: "To advance internationality, there also needs to be a focus on administrative and leadership staff….The university would be a more welcoming environment and it would be international from within" (S8).

Participants stressed the need for the university to provide systematic structures and processes for enabling (equal) access to decision-making forums as well as internal university processes and information. For instance, one doctoral researcher described how insufficient institutional support forced them to "find information on their own and fight for their rights…not wanting to rock too many boats" (S29). Another early-career researcher described how they experience the distance from the university, causing feelings of loneliness and non-belonging:

> It was just me and my project, and the money that came with it. But I didn't have any type of relation besides my supervisor…it has been quite secluded and quite lonely, so it has been very difficult to get to know people and be part of the community of researchers…and feeling that…I, my work is important, or it's valued. (I6)

These experiences of non-belonging and not having collegial work relations were described by one survey participant as primarily affecting one's wellbeing: "I sometimes feel I do not belong to the wider TAU community, but it does not affect the quality of my work, it only affects my wellbeing" (S40).

The non-belonging experiences could be related to the fact that most of our study participants were early-career researchers whose work is fixed-term and often solitary: "Just me and my project and the money that came with it." Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017) observed that in Finnish neoliberal academia, early-career researchers are often placed on a career path of academic freelancers, detached from collegial

relations and the university's (management) processes. Having distant ties to the university's institutional agendas and practices can therefore be seen as a matter that is structurally produced by the university's management and leadership processes, leading to a structurally produced loneliness (Das, 2024). Previous research showed that many organizational change processes in Finnish universities are conducted in a top-heavy manner, led by managerial and administrative procedures (Poutanen et al., 2022). Major organizational transformation, such as the TAU merger, can alienate academics, causing a sense of powerlessness and narrowing of academic self-governance (Poutanen, 2023). While participants conveyed the message that collegial relations are extremely important in supporting one's work and wellbeing, there is a call for structural solutions to enable active participation in the work community and decision-making forums:

> There is often this case where it's believed all your colleagues will help you or so, and I think this is wrong. The structure of the institution is what has to make sure that it is taken care of, that the international [academic] has the conditions to work in parallel conditions as the locals. (I11)

4.3. Language as a Crosscutting Aspect

Language practices were recognized as the most pervasive and consequential issue shaping international academics' work, participation, and sense of belonging. Finnish being the operating language of the institution was seen as hindering international academics' full involvement in the university community. For instance, faculty/department meetings were reported to occur mainly in Finnish, despite them being often announced beforehand as bilingual (Finnish and English). Notably, more than half of the survey participants assess their Finnish language proficiency as "beginner" or "none," despite widespread recognition of the importance of being able to use Finnish. One interviewee described knowing Finnish as "a must" when working in a Finnish university:

> It's not only a good thing to know Finnish, but it's a must. Otherwise, you simply can't work, or you will be very insufficient. You will absolutely be [an] outsider. You won't be able to follow up on the events or the communication. (I1)

Overall, participants are motivated to improve their Finnish language proficiency in the hope of overcoming the language barrier towards more active participation. Although there are implicit (university) expectations as well as explicit (academics') motivation to learn Finnish, the language practices entail various knotty challenges. One of them relates to the fact that international academics have predominantly short-term contracts with the university, forcing them to focus on work-related demands rather than language studies:

> How is one supposed to learn Finnish on top of a more than 40-hour working week, with no courses for staff (e.g., in evenings, weekend, at a steady pace, etc.)? Staff cannot be expected to learn Finnish without support structures. (S21)

Of the survey respondents, only 24% felt the university provided sufficient time and resources for learning Finnish. At the same time, over half of respondents were either unsure (27%) or agreed (38%) that they would need to learn Finnish to progress in their careers. This implies that there are uncertainties—and possibly differing requirements—on the expected level of Finnish language proficiency. Participants reflected

that even if one was able to use Finnish fluently in daily life, it takes much more time and commitment to achieve a near-native language proficiency needed in academic work. This is further challenged by the important place of English in scientific publishing. While there has been a significant increase in English-taught degree programs offered by Finnish universities, the predominant language of instruction in higher education is Finnish (Finnish and Swedish are the two official languages in Finland; for a historical overview of language use in Finnish higher education see Saarinen, 2014).

These interrelated aspects cause a sentiment of guilt among international academics for "forcing" their colleagues to use English:

> With my immediate work community, I feel that there is no problem, we hold all our meetings smoothly and I feel the communication is clear. However, sometimes, I don't feel comfortable enough to participate in meetings and activities of the university/faculty because my Finnish level is elementary and I don't want to force people to switch to English. (S31)

These language challenges require "a lot of dialogue" in the university community, as one interviewee put it:

> It's not only about foreign staff learning Finnish, but it's also about Finnish language staff, sometimes struggling with English…not everyone feels comfortable saying things in English, so there is also this side of the coin. It's a dilemma and I think we need a lot of dialogue and a lot of, somehow, togetherness. (I2)

Being actively voiced or not, these sentiments of international academics reached decision-makers and the university developed a set of language principles (TAU, 2024) that emphasizes the parallel use of English alongside Finnish as a practical solution promoting flexible language use in research, education, and internal administration: "In support of equal participation, administrative working groups and committees use Finnish and English in their discussions flexibly" (TAU, 2024, p. 7). While explicitly supporting inclusion and equality, the policy also leaves significant room for interpretation. In the context of the busy university reality, flexibility can mean "defaulting" to Finnish only. Studies that examined internationalization and language processes more extensively showed that similar dilemmas occur across universities in Finland (Jousilahti et al., 2022) and other countries where English is not the national language (Björnö, 2026; Saarinen, 2014).

4.4. On Being International

In this article, we use the term "international academic" since the majority of the survey and interview participants worked in academic teaching or research positions. Previous research (on academic mobility) uses different terminology, such as expatriate researchers/scholars, immigrant scholars, foreign-born staff, migrant scholars/academics, mobile academics, transnational academics, and so forth. The inconsistency in terminology and definitions stems from the variety of realities among the members of this heterogeneous group as they encounter different career-related decisions and immigration policies. This terminological complexity is further complicated by the unclear status of doctoral researchers sometimes being considered students and/or employees, and/or affiliated researchers.

The estimated percentage of international academics in Finnish universities varies across institutions and career levels: Jousilahti et al. (2022) reported 38.5% of doctoral researchers were international academics,

whereas only 9.4% of those working at the professorial level were international (proportions similar to our study participants). TAU internal statistics report that around 20% of the university community members are international. However, the statistics are usually based on the categorical distinction between "international" and "local" staff, taking into account one's country of birth and/or citizenship. The lived realities (and our own positionalities) indicate that these categorical distinctions offer a simplistic view of a complex issue. One of the open-ended survey questions tried to prompt reflections on this issue: In what sense do you consider yourself an international? In what ways should the university measure/count who is international (e.g., nationality, working language, something else)? To this, one participant responded:

> I'm neither a Finn nor international. I'm nobody; myself. The concept of "international members" is problematic (if not slightly offensive), as it assumes a clean-cut separation, treating every non-Finn as the same. Here's a question you should reflect on: Why do you think the university should measure/count who is international? (S24)

The participant problematizes the concept of "international member" of the university community, seeing it as a way of homogenizing a heterogeneous group of "international" (foreign-born? Immigrant?) academics. This comment also implies that one should be wary of using the "us–them" distinctions, which oversimplify the diversity of contextually ascribed and/or taken positionalities. To answer the same survey question, another respondent wrote:

> Local—national—international?...As a born-Finnish researcher, I have felt (participated in) international (teams) since the 1990s….In some forums, I consider myself to be "more national" but usually also "local."…"Internationalism" takes place in contexts which are beyond "solely national"? (S32)

Reflecting on our own positionalities, we recognize and agree with the problematic raised by the participants. We are a group of researchers who consider themselves international, despite also (now) having citizenship or permanent residence in Finland. At the same time, the accounts of a group of academics who share similar experiences and positionalities as "international academics" at TAU highlight the need for institutional structures that better support international staff, particularly around language and residence status. These intertwined experiences also appear to motivate some to become change agents who challenge institutional practices and advocate for policy and process reforms.

Participants' narratives highlight the complexity of terminology and positionality. They often experienced "international" not as a neutral descriptor but as a label shaping how colleagues perceived them. Their accounts also reveal a disconnect between being recruited as "international talent" and later being treated as peripheral within the institution. One interviewee noted that internationalization needs to be a culture-building process, not treating "internationals" as something "extra":

> I would like to see more work within the university culture and how things are managed. I think that the internationalisation as a goal is a bit naïve, just saying that we want more internationals….How are you going to commit as an institution to provide [a] safe space for them and [a] space where they can really develop their skills and feel like a part of the team and not just, like an extra, nice thing to have. (I10)

While highlighting that the university needs to ensure structures for inclusion across formal and informal university spaces, the participants' responses recognize the need for a joint collegial effort—dialogue and togetherness mentioned by one participant—towards internationalizing TAU as a community and an organization:

> I do believe that if we want any changes, we need to speak [out] loud, because if I sit here saying nothing, nothing changes….And this is what we experience every day. So it's worth to speak because, otherwise, it directly affects the quality of life for both [parties], for me as well as for the locals. (I1)

This participant expresses how experiencing a shift in their position once joining the university and feeling sidelined could mobilize international academics to act on their own interests and aspirations, and to become change agents.

5. International Academics as Change Agents

The need to speak out about the experiences of international academics in dialogue with the broader university community guided this research from the beginning. As a project initiated by local trade union associations and led by international academics, the research was intended to inform union advocacy at the university and, we hoped, prompt changes that would better support international academics. Our research informed a set of recommendations to support international academics at TAU (Tatte workgroup, 2023). These findings and recommendations were presented to the university community, TAU management, and international affairs staff across Finnish universities. They have also informed union advocacy at local and national levels, including work on language policy recommendations. In addition, the study reports were consulted in TAU's internal assessment of internationalization launched in 2024, which informed the university's new internationalization strategy published in 2025. While institutional changes are the result of multiple actors and influences, we are confident that these efforts contributed to ongoing conversations and played a meaningful role, alongside others, in shaping TAU's internationalization transformations. On the one hand, the attention on international academics' experiences energized international academics to voice their opinions and to demand some changes. As was expressed in the community discussions, this research initiative provided an evidentiary basis for international academics to negotiate their positions and actions in the internationalization of the university. On the other hand, the research process and its findings also enabled us, international academics (and local union associations), to act as change agents within the university community. In other words, through these collective efforts, international academics emerged as agents in the university's internationalization transformation (RQ3).

Nonetheless, we also note several constraints shaping their possibilities to act as change agents within TAU internationalization. Challenges discussed earlier—such as insecure employment, perceived temporariness, language barriers, and limited access to decision-making—were experienced as restricting their agentic engagement. We encountered similar dynamics in our own research process, as contributors moved in and out of the project due to unstable positions, and as questions around language use repeatedly influenced how we communicated findings and recommendations. This process also made visible the messy (mis)alignments between managerial interest in attracting international academics and efforts to improve their working conditions. University decision-makers at various levels were generally open to hearing our findings, and we were able to discuss them even with senior leadership. There was interest in strengthening

induction processes, revisiting language practices, and expanding support for Finnish-language learning. However, our emphasis on the central problem of short, fixed-term contracts seemed to generate little discussion or action. This is perhaps a question of different interests in internationalization between the university management (talent use and productivity) and our project (raising sticky points of experiences and inequalities). Interest in creating a competitive workplace that would attract "top international talent" seemingly diverges from our focus on dedicating resources to support all (international) academics at the university. There are also diverging understandings of the relationships between Finnish and English at the university. Some valued English primarily as a language of high-level, "international" science (key to university rankings and success in Finland's university funding model), while emphasizing Finnish as the language of administration within the university. This diverged significantly from our recommendations, which sought to open up participation in governance and administration to non-Finnish-speaking staff, while also emphasizing the importance of multilingual science and knowledge production.

The process of carrying out this work also taught us more about the contradictory positioning of international academics as simultaneously a potentially privileged category and one that is left out and in need of support. This contradictory positioning had important implications for dialogue with the broader university community. While the prevailing response of the university community to our project was quite positive, we also encountered moments of questioning or hesitation. Insofar as "international" is positively associated with high-level science and "talent," some colleagues viewed our project as perpetuating (problematic) categorical distinctions between "international" and "local" academics. Within this discourse, the internationality of "local" academics, as well as their pre-existing efforts to support international colleagues, could go unrecognized. Our recommendations about language use could also inspire affectively charged responses, including when they touch on insecurities or difficulties with speaking the language (whether English or Finnish), or when the question of who has the right to decide about language practices in a given situation is raised. Other responses seemed to suggest that international academics were asking for special treatment or that our recommendations were too assertive in tone or too demanding in terms of time and resources. Many of these reactions would be familiar from any situation where a privileged group is challenged. However, the situation here is complicated by the fact that the inequalities in play are quite contextually-bound, even within the university. For example, in a situation of seeking to participate in decision-making at the university, non-Finnish speakers have often been clearly disadvantaged, but in the assignment of undervalued teaching or administrative work, non-Finnish speakers *sometimes* escape burdens that then fall on their Finnish-speaking colleagues. We anticipated some of these complications in our recommendations, but they linger and shape the response to our efforts in subtle ways.

6. Conclusion

This article discussed internationalization as an ongoing university transformation. Drawing on the literature on internationalization and academic mobility, institutional transformation, and relational ontology, our study explored the interrelatedness of lived and managed internationalization transformation at TAU by focusing on international academics' experiences of relationalities to their profession, colleagues, and institution. Their accounts describe (RQ1) career trajectories constrained by short-term contracts, discrimination, and exclusion from decision-making. Language practices play a key role across these issues, accompanied by problematic categorization of "international" as "non-local" and/or "privileged." These accounts of navigating career demands, collegial relations, and institutional commitment illustrate the

complexity of internationalization transformations as they take shape through negotiations between lived and managed processes in an internationalizing university (RQ2). The findings illuminate lived aspects of internationalization and point to complicated convergences and divergences between managerial efforts to enhance global competitiveness and the diverse needs and agencies of international academics. While much of our analysis highlights obstacles to international academics acting as change agents, our approach to engaged inquiry mobilized participants to voice their views and take action, even as we ourselves as international academics sought to influence university policies and practices through our research and advocacy (RQ3).

Against an instrumentalizing approach to international academics, this article has sought to illuminate a more complicated relational reality—one that includes their experiences, agencies, and roles as potential change agents within the contradictory and complex communities they inhabit. The ongoing transformations of universities and broader societies mean that the contradictions and dilemmas we identify here will continue to shift. Yet, we argue that it is through thinking and acting collectively, as we have attempted to do here, that more inclusive forms of "international" university life can be imagined and pursued.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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