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International Visiting Scholars: Brain-Circulation and Internationalization

YUKIKO SHIMMI

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International visiting scholars are scientists and professors who attend universities in other countries to engage temporarily in research or teaching, while also maintaining their affiliation and position at their home universities and returning after their visiting period ends. They usually have doctoral degrees or are professionally trained. Unlike international students, visiting scholars come and leave at
their own schedules. The length of their visits varies, ranging from several months to a few years. While some visit by themselves, others travel with their family members. Some are junior academics, while others are senior professors. Their previous international academic experiences also may vary. Despite the fact that there are large numbers of visiting scholars globally, they have received only limited attention.

Since international visiting scholars usually do not have specific obligations at their host universities, they are very flexible regarding their activities during the visits.

The application procedures and the fees to become visiting scholars vary between institutions, departments, and even between academic programs. Some universities offer programs that provide events, seminars, and other support for international visiting scholars, while other universities provide close to no services. International visiting scholars often rely on one or more funding sources, including their home and host institutions, governmental or private grants, fellowships, or scholarships; they sometimes also use their own savings to supplement their income, while living abroad. Due to the variances in scholars’ backgrounds and situations, the experiences of international visiting scholars can be quite different for several ones.

Though some countries or individual fellowship programs report the number of visiting scholars, most countries do not report any information on the number of visiting scholars. In fact, UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development do not report data, regarding the number of international scholars in their annual reports. As for the trend of international visiting scholars in the United States, it is useful to understand the differences and trends of the three categories of J-1 exchange visitor visas in the United States: professors and research scholars are each allowed to stay for six months to five years, and short-term scholars are allowed to stay for less than six months. While this broader group of scholars on J-1 visas does not precisely match the characteristics of the group I—studied with academic afflictions, this data provides a trend of the group of people who largely overlaps the population of international visiting scholars.

The Institute of International Education reported in 2011 that there were 1,369 professors, 26,370 researchers, and 18,106 short-term scholars on a J-1 visa in 2009 in the United States. Chinese visiting scholars were the largest group in all three categories, and this number has dramatically increased recently. India also moderately increased numbers of scholars during the same time period. On the other hand, most other leading countries in sending J-1 scholars—including South Korea, Japan, Germany, Italy, France, Brazil, and Spain—decreased numbers of research scholars, while increasing the number of short-term scholars. Though there are some differences by country of origin, a trend seems to be that the number of short-term visits is increasing in relation to that of long-term visits.

Flexibility: Opportunities or Challenges?
Since international visiting scholars usually do not have specific obligations at their host universities, they are very flexible regarding their activities during the visits. They can enjoy the opportunities at the host universities by utilizing their physical presence to use library resources, audit courses, participate in seminars, and interact scholars and students. While many of them use their time to engage in their individual research, some might participate in collaborative research projects with scholars at the host universities. They can also be involved in teaching activities at the host universities or work on institutional relations between the home and host universities.

While to a great extent scholars can decide on what activities they want to engage in during their visits, the lack of structure might be challenging to some of them. Scholars must take initiative in actively seeking out opportunities at host universities; otherwise, they likely will underutilize the opportunities. They can easily feel isolated from the community of the host university, unless they consciously try to interact with other scholars. Although there is institutional support for international visiting scholars to promote interactions with other scholars and students at some universities, these arrangements often rely on individual scholars. Finding opportunities for interaction can be especially challenging for scholars who have not had previous international academic experiences or existing networks with scholars at host universities, as well as for those who are not comfortable using the native language of the host country. This issue can be especially relevant for scholars in humanities and social sciences who do not work in labs that allow scholars to see other members on a daily basis.

Brain Circulation and Internationalization
The importance of studying and serving this population can be discussed from the perspective of brain-circulation and internationalization. International visiting scholars who temporarily visit host countries, and then return to their home countries are considered one form of short-term brain circulation. Unlike brain drain or brain gain, brain
circulation emphasizes the potential benefits for both the sending and receiving countries as a consequence of the continuous and circular moves of scholars. Previous studies have discussed the benefits of short-term brain circulation, such as the development of international scholarly networks, knowledge transfer and exchange, and the addition of human capital through return mobility. In order to fully realize the potential benefits from the circular moves of the international visiting scholars, further studies and policy arrangements on the population are crucial.

From the perspective of the internationalization of higher education, international visiting scholars are relevant in some key approaches in internationalizing universities. As participants in the international scholarly exchanges at universities, they can potentially stimulate international connections of scholars at universities in other countries. They might also engage in international research collaborations during their visits. In addition, their international experiences create important learning opportunities to broaden their professional and personal perspectives. As faculty members, their international academic experiences could influence university education through their instruction and curriculum, which directly or indirectly affects the education of their students. At universities that host international visiting scholars, they can be resources for internationalization by effectively integrating themselves in the community.

Although brain circulation and internationalization highlight potential uses of international visiting scholars, current institutional and national initiatives have not paid much attention to international scholar exchange—as compared with international student exchange. Although there are some governmental initiatives for international visiting scholars, such as Fulbright visiting scholar programs or the China Scholarship Council, many international visiting scholars move individually with little relevance to the institutional and national policies on the internationalization of higher education. The development of a more coordinated system of scholarly exchange through international visiting scholars will be meaningful—not only for the individual scholars but also for the institutions to enhance the research and teaching capacities, as well as the overall internationalization of the universities.