The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal. September-October, 2026. Vol. 4. Issue 5. 372-377

Published by: Pather Dabi Educational Trust, (Regn No: IV-1402-00064/2023), Under Govt. of West Bengal, India

The Social Science Review
A Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN: 2584-0789
(Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International e-Journal)
Homepage: www.tssreview.in

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC TALENT AS HUMAN-CAPITAL INFRASTRUCTURE: RETHINKING THE ATTRACTION, EMBEDDEDNESS AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF EXPATRIATE ACADEMICS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Mehrunishah Begum

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author Details:
School of Business & Technology, IMU University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Corresponding Author:
Mehrunishah Begum

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405054

Abstract

International academic mobility is commonly justified through access to expertise, global networks and institutional internationalisation. Yet the recruitment or retention of expatriate academics does not, by itself, demonstrate that internationally mobile expertise has become an enduring institutional capability. This conceptual integrative review develops a human-capital infrastructure perspective on expatriate academics, with particular reference to Malaysian higher education. It critically synthesises expatriate-academic, international human resource management, organisational support, job embeddedness and knowledge-transfer research. The paper distinguishes three outcomes that are often conflated in the literature: presence, retention and institutionalisation. Presence denotes successful recruitment; retention denotes continued employment; institutionalisation denotes the conversion of individual expertise, relationships and networks into capabilities that persist through teaching, research, postgraduate supervision, organisational learning and international collaboration. On this basis, an expanded International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework is proposed. The framework links antecedent host-country, institutional and policy conditions to four talent-conversion mechanisms—attraction, integration, development and knowledge exchange, and embeddedness—and then separates retention from institutionalisation as related but non-equivalent outcomes. Eight propositions are advanced for empirical testing. For Malaysia, the framework aligns with the Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035 but argues that internationalisation metrics should move beyond international staff headcounts towards evidence of capability transfer and durable institutional value. The paper contributes a more critical explanation of when international academic mobility becomes institutional infrastructure rather than merely international staffing.

Keywords: *expatriate academics; international academic mobility; human capital; institutional capability; job embeddedness; perceived organisational support; knowledge transfer; Malaysia*

Introduction

Higher-education internationalisation is now manifested in international academic mobility. Universities bring in academics who are mobile to gain access to specialised knowledge, boost their research profile, enrich international networks, broaden their teaching, provide post-graduate education and demonstrate international orientation. These expectations are strategically achievable, but an assumption has been made that needs to be unpacked: The presence of internationally experienced academics will lead to institutional capacity. Recruitment is not a guarantee that the knowledge, relationships and capabilities that are part of the individual will be shared, developed or retained in the institution.

This difference is significant as the literature by expatriates has developed significantly. According to a systematic review by Przytuła (2024), 110 studies covering the period 1980–2022 were identified and six thematic streams were distinguished in the field. The current size of this large body of evidence suggests that another sweeping review of expatriate academics would not be of great value. The question that remains is more particular. Much of the literature on the subject focuses on the reasons for academics' migration, their adjustment, their level of satisfaction and even their future intentions. They are key outcomes, but they do not address a more strategic question: when does an internationally mobile academic expertise become an institutional resource, one that goes beyond the individual appointment?

The connection is far from automatic, as evidenced already. However, Djikhy and Moustaghfir (2019) reported low levels of knowledge transfer even in an institution with an international orientation, suggesting that these knowledge transfer are not necessarily present when faculty members are international. In a Malaysian study, Richardson and Wong (2018) found similar

findings that expatriate academics could socially adapt relatively well to the host country but at the same time were not satisfied with aspects of their work environment, which had implications for retaining the expatriates. Linear assumptions of integration are complicated by more recent work. Ding et al. (2026) demonstrate that international faculty can continue to experience 'outsiderness' and can engage in a strategic exchange of engagement and detachment instead of the predictable trajectory of moving from outsiderness to assimilation. The results indicated that it could be concluded that recruitment, adjustment, integration and retention are conceptually different but related processes.

A timely context in which to advance this argument is available in Malaysia. Based on Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035, the strategic shift identified are Purpose Driven and High Performance Talent, Responsible Research and Innovation, and Global Prominence and International Collaboration. It also stresses talent development, mentoring, career pathways, cross-institutional cooperation, international research collaboration, knowledge sharing and staff mobility (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025). The policy direction thus raises an organisational and national question: how can the mobility of talent and skills be translated into sustainable capacity building?

This question is answered in this paper via the concept of a conceptual integrative review. It presents three interrelated arguments. First, international academic recruitment should not be interpreted as an expression of the institutional ability but rather as acquisition of human capital. Second, while retention is a good indicator of international talent management success, an academic can stay on and fail to add to collective capability, while a less tenured academic can depart, leaving behind long-term research, supervisory or network effects. Third, the strategic outcome to be explained is institutionalisation – the degree to which internationally mobile knowledge, relationships and practices are institutionalised in institutional routines, teams and capabilities. On the basis of these arguments, the paper is proposing an enlarged International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework and eight propositions for empirical testing in the future.

Materials and methods

This study does not use a conventional systematic literature review or meta-analysis approach. The methodological decision is intentional and based on the level of development of the literature in expatriates (academic) literature and the aim of the present study. Systematic reviews can be useful if there is a well-defined research question, where the aim is to review all of the available evidence in relation to that question, and to review them systematically, to assess the evidence for the review, and to draw conclusions. Meta analysis is suitable if there is adequate and comparable quantitative evidence, with the aim of aggregating the evidence statistically. The aim of the present study is different. It does not aim to make any estimate of the strength of the relationships between the pre-established variables, nor does it try to offer another comprehensive and descriptive mapping of publications on the expatriate academics. It, on the contrary, is a series of questions that it tries to ask: how can concepts and findings scattered in various fields of literature be joined and how can they explain a theoretically relevant and under-researched issue: 'how' internationally mobile academic human capital is transformed—or not—and into sustained institutional capability within higher education institutions?

This is of particular significance as there has already been a systematic mapping of the wider expatriate-academic literature. Przytuła (2024) undertook a thorough systematic review of 110 research studies across the period of 1980–2022, and highlighted the main thematic currents in which foreign academics have been studied. Another similar mapping project would only add a small amount. The present study does not aim to replicate this existing body of evidence, but rather builds on it. This analytical interest moves from a question of what is known about expatriate academics to one of what the literature as a whole is telling us—and not telling us—about the process of academic expertise becoming institutionalized in the academy. This must extend beyond the expatriate-academic field to include more theoretically relevant research on the themes of human capital, organizational support, job embeddedness, and knowledge transfer, among other themes in the context of internationalization of the field of higher education.

This goal is especially well served by the integrative review, which allows for the analysis and synthesis of evidence produced by various methodological and theoretical approaches. The review approaches that demand methodological homogeneity are not the only ones that can be used; integrative reviews can also include quantitative, qualitative, conceptual and theoretical pieces as long as they provide different aspects of a complex phenomenon (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). International academic mobility is indeed a career phenomenon, an organisational talent management problem and an institutional capability question and as such requires a methodological breath. None of the above-mentioned research traditions is sufficient to reflect all three levels. Therefore, an analysis of a single methodological stream would risk the duplication of the fragmentation that the current study aims at overcoming.

The integrative approach also allows a critical synthesis but not only aggregative. It is not assumed that the results found in the literature are part of a coherent and linear description of international academic talent management. Rather, attention is given specifically to tensions and discontinuities between relations which are generally assumed. The linkage between successful attraction and effective organisational integration is not a natural one – formal organisational support does not necessarily lead to recognition or experience by international academics, adjustment to the host country does not necessarily lead to satisfaction with the host institution, continued employment does not necessarily indicate a degree of strong embeddedness, and the presence or retention of international faculty does not necessarily lead to knowledge transfer or to a durable institutional capability. These tensions are relevant analytically because they reveal a lack of awareness of the relationship between recruitment and adjustment/residence and successful international academic talent management.

Thus, the review is a conceptual synthesis and theory development. The strategic value of internationally mobile academic knowledge, expertise and professional networks is explained by Human Capital Theory, whereas the relational explanation is given by Organisational Support Theory, which explains the influence of the institutional treatment and support on academics' experiences and attachment; and Job Embeddedness Theory explains the influence of professional and community links, perceived fit and anticipated sacrifice on continued affiliation. These views are not just juxtaposed, however. They are critically discussed with regard to their explanatory boundaries. Human Capital Theory outlines the value of knowledge but offers only partial insights into the transformation of individual embodied knowledge into collective organisational capacity. According to Organisational Support Theory, reciprocal relationships between employees and organisations exists, but do not directly connect supported academics to their application of skills within institutional systems. The Job Embeddedness Theory is able to account for the fact that people stay, but it does not provide evidence for the idea that extended retention leads to broader institutional value. These views can then be integrated into a review that no single of the three can explain on his or her own.

The synthesis that follows is thus an open one as opposed to a confirmatory one. It is used to produce a second-order conceptual understanding based on the connections, paradoxes and knowledge gaps found throughout the literature. This process results in the separation of three outcomes often implicitly considered as manifestation of the same phenomenon: presence, retention and institutionalisation. Presence: Effective recruitment of international academic human capital; retention: the persistence of the employment or institutional relationship; and institutionalisation: embedding of internationally mobile knowledge, networks, professional skills and capabilities in institutional routines, relationships and collective capacities which can lead to value beyond the individual appointment. This distinction will be explored as the conceptual basis for the proposed International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework, which will cover mechanism of attraction, integration, development, and knowledge exchange of internationally mobile human capital and outcomes of retention and institutionalisation.

Conceptual integrative review is not a replacement for systematic evidence synthesis, therefore. Instead, it is used for a different scholarly purpose: to transcend the description of an already sufficiently mapped field, to point to gaps, inconsistencies, and flaws in current understandings, to link up previously disjointed theoretical approaches, and to develop a framework and propositions for empirical testing later on. This positioning coincides with the perspectives of Torraco (2016) and Whittemore and Knafl (2005) that integrative reviews should not only summarize previous research, but also "reinterpret, hypothesize, and suggest new directions for future research that draw on and extend the existing body of knowledge.

Review boundaries and analytical question

The guiding overarching analytical question for the review is: How is internationally mobile academic human capital transformed into sustained institutional capacity in HE institutions, and in what organisational and institutional contexts? The question is deliberately formulated to move the unit of analysis from the experience of international academic mobility as a single career event to the organisational transformation of international mobility. This distinction is crucial as recent studies have shown that the expatriate academic experience can not be fully captured by a model of recruitment and adjustment or retention alone. The systematic synthesis conducted by Przytuła (2024) reveals that a pool of 110 studies published from 1980 to 2022 has emerged around a variety of themes such as motivation for mobility, adjustment, identity, careers and organisational experiences. Over the last few years, these concerns have been expanded to include embeddedness, integration and the dynamic accumulation of professional and career capital (Przytuła, 2026; Ding et al., 2026). This current review thus does not seek to be exhaustive of the experiences of expatriates in the academic world. Instead, it captures the organisational pathways and mechanisms by which expertise that is moving across the globe can come into being, be circulated and then absorbed and embedded into, within and by the host university.

Constructed boundary of the population

Primary interest group are academics who pursue academic careers in professional academic roles abroad. Various partially overlapping terms have been used in the literature to refer to this population such as expatriate academics, international academics, international faculty, foreign academics, and self-initiated expatriate academics. It is important to keep in mind that these labels are drawn from various subject areas and aren't necessarily completely interchangeable. In particular, there is a spotlight on the role of individual agency in starting a career abroad, as opposed to career moves being initiated by an organization; academics often make their own international moves.

However, focusing the review on research with the exact term expatriate academic would limit the evidence base to a potentially small number of studies. The fields of international faculty and similar terms are often the ones used in recent research on higher education to explore similar phenomena. For instance, Ding et al. (2026) explore the international faculty integration process in Chinese universities and show that this process is not necessarily a one-way street of outsiders becoming insiders. Their participants have applied various strategies (collaboration, negotiation, tactical non-pursuit and strategic self-detachment) in various areas of university life. There is evidence that is directly relevant to the present review and helps to clarify the organisational processes by which internationally mobile academics engage with or continue to be somewhat separated from host institutions.

Studies are deemed to be conceptually eligible if they focus on internationally mobile academics working within a higher education institution and provide evidence about at least one of the following aspects of the proposed talent-conversion process: attracting academics, embedding academics, supporting academics, developing academics, sharing knowledge with academics, supporting academics' professional development, retaining academics, or building the capacity of the host institution. The range of terminology is thus accommodated, and the conceptual relevance in relation to the analytical question is the primary constraint.

The difference between academic and corporate expatriation

The review differentiates between academic expatriation and typical corporate expatriation. This distinction is required as academic careers have certain characteristics that makes it difficult to simply transfer assumptions learned from multinational corporate assignments. Traditional assigned expatriates are often sent abroad by an employing organisation to serve a specific organisation purpose. Internationally mobile academics, on the other hand, often have significant choice in terms of destination and institution of employment, and international mobility can be a part of a self-directed career path.

Academics are also very much connected to the wider professional community outside of their place of employment. Research networks, disciplinary organizations, publication networks, editorial activities and international scholarly communities can continue to serve as a source of professional identity and opportunity, beyond the host university. As a result, internationally mobile academics might have multiple attachments, both to the employing institution and to their external networks. This kind of permeability can be particularly pertinent to the current study because the institution acknowledges the academic but does not necessarily control, capture or retain the professional capital of the person who has that academic.

Corporate expatriation research is therefore only selectively integrated, as research findings that are relevant for higher education education can be clearly derived from the research findings (such as organisational support, adjustment, embeddedness). The results of CEs are not taken to mean that they automatically transfer to the academic world. The distinction is important in avoiding the slippery slope of academic mobility being simply one more way of staffing internationally.

Organisational - not just individual results

The second boundary is related to the outcome of interest. Focusing on individual outcomes such as adjustment, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, intention to stay and turnover is apposite for much expatriate-academic research. Although these variables are still relevant to the present analysis, they are not viewed here as adequate measures of institutional success, but rather as intermediate or employment outcomes. Recent studies provide an example of how this distinction is warranted. The author of the aforementioned study, Przytuła (2026), studied 50 foreigners (from 21 countries) teaching in 16 Polish universities and found that the participants were able to express willingness to stay even when they did not feel embedded and did not have to deal with organizational fit, communication, or institutional support. In this sense, then, it is not possible to conclude that intention to retain an academic means that he or she has achieved a complete level of integration into the host institution. Likewise, Ding et al. (2026) illustrate how it is possible for international faculty to have selective distance from specific domains within organizations and to be productive in other domains. Combined, these findings challenge an assumed sequence of attraction leading to adjustment, adjustment leading to integration, integration leading to embeddedness, and embeddedness to retention of the newcomers.

Employment outcomes and institutional capability outcomes are thus separated in the present review. Job satisfaction, adjustment, perceived organisational support, embeddedness and intention to remain are important because they can impact on the context for mobilising internationally mobile expertise. The question of ultimate theory though is whether the academic's know-how is also put into practice in collective activities like collaborative research, supervision of postgraduates, mentoring, development of curricula, working with others on knowledge transfer, academic leadership, learning within an organisation and building international networks.

The analytical boundary for knowledge exchange

The knowledge exchange is at the heart of this boundary as the international recruitment does not necessarily signify that international mobility has spread across the institution. Such lack of knowledge transfer, although the institution studied was oriented towards the international, was pointed out by Djikhy and Moustaghfir (2019) in their study, in the perspective of international faculty from a human-resource-development perspective. They conclude that teamwork, collaborative research, orientation, training, institutional resources and incentives are important mechanisms. This evidence reveals an important limitation in recruiting approaches to internationalisation. It is possible to ensure that more international academics are working in a university without increasing collective organisational learning. International faculty numbers are thus not an indicator of the impact of internationalisation, but rather an input factor. The present review thus considers knowledge exchange to be an important conversion process whereby individual know-how can be linked to broader institutional capacity.

Knowledge exchange is viewed in an iterative manner and is not a one-way process. It does not mean that expatriate academics know more than their local counterparts and that they must “export” their knowledge to the local academics. International movement of academics introduces disciplinary, professional, methodological and network knowledge that has been shaped in other contexts, while local academics carry institution- and context-specific knowledge about the national system of learning, the national student body, the national research system, professional practices and regulatory conditions. These knowledge resources can combine and interact to create institutional capability. This is a reciprocal interpretation as it does not define expatriate academics as external experts but rather as actors involved in a larger institutional learning process.

Temporal boundary: Recruitment to institutionalisation

Another boundary is with time. The international academic talent management is often thought of as a process of recruiting and retaining talent, with retention being the desirable outcome. In the present review a longer time frame is followed. Recruitment is the first step to affiliation, while retention is ongoing affiliation. The two do not necessarily show the longevity of the institutional impact of the appointment. This temporal separation results in the idea of institutionalisation, which is referred to in this study as the institutionalisation of internationally mobile academic knowledge, relationships, networks and the practices

of academics, which are linked to collective organisational activities and capabilities in a way that is not always reliant on the presence of the individual academic. Institutionalisation can then be seen as part of the establishment of a sustainable research group, as the development of the skills of supervision among colleagues, as building collaboration networks that persist in the absence of subsequent mobility, as building curriculum or programme skills and capability, as the development of successor skills, or as embedding practices that continue after the expatriate moves away. This is not to say all contributions have to remain forever long after an academic's death. On the contrary, institutionalisation reflects that the international academic human capital creates a value, not just a value for the individual, but a distributed one. This allows for a theoretically important possibility which is that high retention can be associated with weak institutionalisation, and relatively short tenure can be associated with substantial institutionalisation. So the length of time employed and the length of time in institutions should be considered separately but in relation to each other.

Geographical boundary: Malaysia as focal context, Policy boundary: Malaysia

The review is carried out in the context of policy and institutional framework in Malaysia, but the theoretical synthesis does not only rely on empirical studies confined exclusively in Malaysia. This would not give enough evidence and would not allow for access to current literature in the broader expatriate-academic field. International evidence is therefore leveraged to find and build theoretical mechanisms, and Malaysian empirical studies and policy evidence are used to explore the contextual relevance and implications of these mechanisms. This is especially suitable in the context of the Malaysian Government's current policy towards higher education. In the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035, talent development, research and innovation, and global prominence and international collaboration are seen as key aspects of the transformation of higher education (MoHE Malaysia, 2025). It focuses on mentorship, career development, strategic partnerships, international cooperation and knowledge transfer, and extends the discussion on international mobility beyond an end goal. When considering higher education, the institutional issue raised is whether mobility enhances the capabilities that help shape the future of higher education in Malaysia. Existing Malaysian evidence, however, warns against homogenizedizing the national context. Parnian et al. (2013) pointed out that for expatriate academic experiences, research opportunities, institutional reputation, professional development, and aspects of the living and working environment are relevant. A study by Richardson and Wong (2018), which was based on expert academics who were expatriates and were employed in four public universities in Malaysia, also showed evidence that positive social adjustment to Malaysia was possible despite negative institutional adjustment. These results confirm the importance of separating out host-country attractiveness from host-institution capability. Furthermore, Malaysian higher education includes public universities, private universities, overseas branch offices of foreign universities and others with varying forms of governance, employment models, resource configurations and internationalisation policies. This research therefore does not imply that the mechanisms found will be the same throughout the sector. The institutional type on the other hand is considered a possible boundary condition that needs empirical research.

Final analytical boundary

Combined, these boundaries identify the intersection of international academic mobility, organisational talent management and institutional capability development for the review. This study does not try to account for all the antecedents or consequences of academic expatriation. Nor does it regard retention as the main measure of success. Its tighter scope is to offer an understanding of the organisational change dynamics between internationalised academic human capital and the institutional value.

The International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework has been further expanded in this boundary. In the framework, attraction offers access to international academic human capital; integration determines how much of that human capital can meaningfully be incorporated into institutional structures; development and reciprocal knowledge exchange makes it possible for expertise to flow and grow; and embeddedness enables professional and social links that can assist ongoing affiliation. Retention and institutionalisation are then considered as interlinked but separate outcomes. The main analytical thesis of the review is thus that the strategic importance of international academic mobility cannot be just deduced from the presence and retention of international faculty; it requires consideration of the organisational processes by which mobile human capital transforms into distributed and enduring institutional capability.

Literature identification and selection logic

The literature identification strategy was not intended to facilitate statistical comprehensiveness, but rather conceptual completeness and theoretical relevance. This separation is in line with the goals of a theoretical integrative review, with the main aim of discovering and critically analyzing the theories and evidence that explain a specific phenomenon, as opposed to the estimation of a synthesized effect size (or the reproduction of an exhaustive systematic mapping of all publications in a field) (Battistone et al., 2023). However, methodological flexibility does not exclude the need for transparency. Integrative reviews involve multiple types of evidence, and the variety of possible sources for evidence actually make it more important to have a clear search and select strategy (Kutcher and LeBaron, 2022).

The four evidence domains for the literature search were four interconnected evidence domains derived from the analytical question developed in Section 2.1. The first domain was about the focal population, which involved studies of expatriate academics, international academics, international faculty, foreign academics, academic expatriates and self-initiated expatriate academics. The second domain explored how internationally mobile academics became attached to host institutions such as attraction, recruitment, adjustment and integration, organizational support, career development, knowledge exchange and transfer, embeddedness and retention. The third domain was theoretical mechanisms needed to account for the three processes, specifically human capital, perceived organisational support, job embeddedness, talent management and organisational learning.

The fourth domain focused on the institutional outcome (contextual analysis) level of the analysis which was institutional capability, higher education internationalisation, internationalisation, academic mobility, research collaboration and Malaysia.
The search terms were thus gradually added with each iteration instead of being searched by an overly specific search term. Illustrative combinations included: ("expatriate academic" OR "international academic" OR "international faculty" OR "foreign academic*" OR "self-initiated expatriate*"") AND "higher education" OR "universit*")** Then followed combinations of concepts such as:(("expatriate academic" OR "international faculty") AND (attraction OR recruitment OR adjustment OR integration OR retention)*); (("expatriate academic" OR "international faculty") AND ("organisational support" OR "organizational support" OR embeddedness OR "job embeddedness"))** (("international faculty" OR "expatriate academic") AND ("knowledge transfer" OR "knowledge exchange" OR "organisation learning" OR "organizational learning")). (expatriate academic OR international academic OR international faculty) AND (Malaysia OR Malaysian).**
Where the expatriate-academic search was not sufficiently able to capture the theoretical mechanism under investigation, higher-education terminology was added to additional searches to provide a more comprehensive view of the search area. The staged method was used since the scholarship relevant to the project is spread across international human resource management, organisational behaviour, higher-education studies and international academic mobility and knowledge-management literatures, the latter of which is not likely to be retrieved from a single disciplinary vocabulary. The search focused on Scopus and Web of Science as the main multidisciplinary bibliographic databases, as they cover a wide range of peer-reviewed management-related and organisational research and higher education research. This decision further aligns with the previous systematic review on expatriate academics conducted by Przytuła (2024), which used both databases to locate papers published from 1980 to 2022, and after applying selection criteria, still ended up with 110 papers. Instead of duplicating that finished search, the present review relies on Przytuła's synthesis as a key point to work towards identifying the existing evidence base that has been developed by scholars who are now expatriates and to highlight the literature published since that time and the surrounding theoretical areas that are not addressed by a systematic review oriented around a population group.
The temporal strategy thus had two complimentary parts in it. First, literature that theorized concepts which were essential to the analysis was kept regardless of the date of publication. This involves basic literature research on Human Capital Theory, Perceived Organisational Support and Job Embeddedness. If that were the case then excluding such work would be a detriment to the theoretical analysis, as modern uses of these constructs still make use of their basic conceptualizations. Second, on the empirical literature on expatriate academics and international faculty, special attention was given to new research published since the 1980–2022 period covered by Przytuła (2024) to ensure the inclusion of relevant literature, particularly from 2020 onwards. This way the review remains more theoretically consistent and includes new evidence that can challenge and/or extend previous assumptions.
The expatriate-academic literature was given greater significance due to the fact that the focus of such publications has shifted from traditional expatriate motivation and adjustment studies to more recent articles. For instance, Przytuła (2026) directly tests Job Embeddedness Theory on expatriate academics and finds that intention to stay is compatible with an incomplete organisational embeddedness. In a similar vein, Ding et al. (2026) define international faculty integration as a non-linear process that includes collaboration, negotiation, tactical non-pursuit and strategic self-detachment. Theoretically, the developments are important for the current study, as they undermine the notion of a seamless international academic employment trajectory from recruitment to adjustment and integration to retention. Thus, recent publications have not been selected just for the freshness of the reference list, but rather for changing or qualifying or extending the conceptual relationships examined in the research.
Conceptual relevance was the basis for study selection, rather than methodological design. Peer-reviewed empirical quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method research papers were eligible if they provided evidence about internationally mobile academics and a part of the proposed talent-conversion process. Conceptual and theoretical publications were added if they founded, developed or critically examined theory that was essential to the explaining of the connection between individual academic human capital and organisational capability. Where they added evidence regarding the development, limits or gaps in the literature, systematic and integrative reviews were also included.
Studies were prioritised if they focused on one or more of the following issues: (1) reasons and factors that draw internationally mobile academics to host countries; (2) organisational, professional or sociocultural integration within host institutions; (3) perceived organisational support, leadership, fairness or institutional treatment; (4) career opportunity and professional development; (5) knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer, mentoring or organisational learning; (6) professional and community embeddedness; (7) intention to stay, retention or subsequent mobility; and (8) institutional consequences resulting from international academic employment.
There were a number of exclusion boundaries used to maintain conceptual continuity. Studies focused solely on international students or international student mobility were excluded as the employment relationship and organisational aspects affecting academic staff are significantly different to those affecting students. Existing studies on the conventional corporate expatriate phenomenon were not considered as first-hand empirical data of the expatriate-academic phenomenon. Where such studies were not able to identify a mechanism which was transferable from the particular context to the higher education context, they were not considered.Such studies were only considered where they identified a mechanism that was transferable from the particular context to the higher education context and then examined in relation to higher education. Research that was purely on migration and did not have an academic professional employment dimension was also excluded from the main scope.

Research that did not relate to academic mobility with international employment was included only if it directly helped to understand the accumulation, exchange or institutionalisation of academic human capital. Those studies that only mentioned internationalisation, but did not focus on it specifically, were excluded, but those that provided light on talent mobility, international faculty, research collaboration, knowledge exchange or capability related to the analytical frame, were included. In the Malaysian context, empirical research with expatriate and/or international academics working in Malaysian higher education institutions was specifically looked for. Elderly Malaysian evidence was kept in spite of its age because it remained directly relevant to the phenomenon and there was scant evidence in the national context to support more recent evidence. For instance, Parnian et al. (2013) present evidence on adjustment, retention motivation and satisfaction of expatriate academics in Malaysia, and Richardson and Wong (2018) show that positive adjustment to the social environment does not necessarily equate to positive adjustment to the employing university. The present framework relies on the need to distinguish between host-country attractiveness and host-institution experience, a key aspect of which is revealed by these studies.

The older works of Malaysia, however, were not taken for granted as the representative of the contemporary environment for higher education without qualification. They are interpreted in the context of newer international studies and the Malaysian current policy. The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035 was particularly included as a policy source as it sets the current national strategic context for talent development, research capability, knowledge exchange, international collaboration and academic mobility. Policy documents were not used as evidence of organisational outcomes but as contextual evidence.

Backward and forward citation searches were used to complement the identification process. To determine foundational studies and reviews, reference lists were explored in particular, because these were widely cited in the older literature, and newer literature in which the older literature was cited, were consulted and considered if they contributed to the conceptual development relevant to the framework. Theory building reviews are especially important in terms of citation chaining since the important theoretical contributions might not be written in the same language as the focus empirical literature. From this, a study that doesn't explicitly mention the term expatriate academic in the title or keywords but does provide explanatory insight into institutionalisation will be helpful.

Selection was thus performed in two phases of relevance assessment. On the first level, publications were evaluated on phenomenon relevance, where as the publications are about internationally mobile academics, organisational mechanism, or the Malaysian higher-education policy context. At the second level eligible publications were judged in terms of theoretical contribution, that is, whether findings, or conceptual arguments, helped to explain how international academic presence became integrated, knowledge shared, embedded, retained, or institutionalised. This second stage was especially relevant as not all studies on expatriate academics make an equal contribution to the theoretical question addressed in the present review.

Only studies were included if they did not directly report on the proposed framework were excluded because they did not support the framework. Any evidence of relationships that was not intuitive or expected was included. That was a key one to avoid a confirmatory synthesis involving a literature that must be chosen after the model is set. Studies that reported that despite their intentions to stay, embeddedness was not achieved, or that despite positive experiences with the host country, embeddedness was not positive with the organization, or that embeddedness was selective but not complete, or that there was little knowledge transfer despite a lot of experience with the international faculty, were therefore not treated as abnormal, but as theoretically illuminating. The opposing conclusions from these studies were significant factors for the IATI Framework.

The review is not accompanied by a PRISMA flow diagram and its objective and selection logic are not exhaustive systematic review, as a last point. The existing body of literature on expatriates in an academic context has been systematically mapped by Przytuła (2024) with Scopus and Web of Science, which included 110 studies from 1980 to 2022. The present review, however, adopts a transparent literature identification process guided by theory to further expand the knowledge base and connect with the surrounding literature of theory. This is in line with the current recommendations for theoretically integrated reviews that should clarify the focal phenomenon and inclusion boundaries, critically analyse relevant theories and then offer a refined or new explanatory framework that is built from the synthesis of the theories (Battistone et al., 2023). This evidence base is thus judged by the relevance, diversity and explanatory value of the literature that is included, rather than by the number of literature boxes.

Critical synthesis procedure

The analytical procedure was designed to move beyond descriptive summarisation towards critical comparison, conceptual integration and theory development. This distinction is important because the contribution of an integrative review does not arise simply from assembling findings from heterogeneous studies. Rather, methodological rigour depends on the systematic reduction, comparison and interpretation of evidence in relation to the review question (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). More recent examination of integrative-review practices similarly shows that data analysis may be inductive, deductive or framework-based, but requires an explicit analytical procedure through which evidence is transformed into higher-order interpretations rather than reported as disconnected study summaries (Younas et al., 2022). For a theoretical integrative review specifically, the analytical task extends further to the critical examination of theoretical explanations, identification of their boundaries and integration of complementary perspectives into a revised or novel conceptual account (Battistone et al., 2023).

Critical appraisal of the evidence

The included literature was not treated as methodologically or conceptually equivalent. Each publication was considered in relation to its research design, empirical context, population, theoretical basis, analytical contribution and relevance to the focal

phenomenon. Particular attention was given to whether conclusions were supported by the design and evidence presented and whether findings could reasonably inform the organisational conversion of international academic human capital.

This approach was important because the expatriate-academic literature contains considerable methodological and contextual heterogeneity. Quantitative studies can identify relationships among constructs such as organisational support, satisfaction, commitment and retention intentions, but cross-sectional associations provide limited evidence concerning how these relationships develop over time. Qualitative research provides richer evidence concerning adjustment, identity, institutional experience and embeddedness but is frequently based on relatively small and context-specific samples. Single-institution studies can provide important organisational insights while offering limited grounds for sector-wide generalisation. These limitations were therefore incorporated into the interpretation rather than treated merely as procedural weaknesses.

Context was also considered during appraisal. Evidence derived from one national higher-education system was not assumed to transfer automatically to another. Employment regulation, academic governance, language, immigration arrangements, institutional autonomy, promotion systems and wider sociocultural conditions can influence international faculty experiences. For example, Ding et al. (2026) identify five reflexive tactics through which 30 international faculty navigate Chinese higher education, including contextual collaboration, negotiation, tactical non-pursuit and strategic self-detachment. Their findings provide important evidence that integration can be selective and non-linear, but the institutional and policy conditions of Chinese higher education form part of the explanation and therefore constrain simple generalisation to Malaysia.

Similarly, Przytuła's (2026) study of 50 expatriate academics from 21 countries across 16 Polish universities provides strong contemporary evidence concerning links, fit and sacrifice, while also showing that intentions to remain can coexist with incomplete embeddedness and organisational-fit difficulties. This evidence is theoretically important for distinguishing retention from embeddedness, but it does not establish that precisely the same configurations will occur within Malaysian universities. Accordingly, international studies were used primarily to identify and interrogate mechanisms and theoretical relationships, while Malaysian evidence and policy were used to assess contextual relevance.

Critical appraisal was therefore used not to impose a single methodological hierarchy across heterogeneous evidence, but to determine how much interpretive weight a source could reasonably carry for a particular conceptual claim. Seminal theoretical publications were assessed for conceptual relevance and explanatory scope; empirical studies were assessed in relation to design, context and evidential contribution; and policy documents were used to establish strategic context rather than as empirical evidence of organisational outcomes. This distinction prevented normative policy aspirations from being interpreted as proof that particular talent-management processes currently operate effectively within Malaysian higher education.

Data extraction and conceptual coding

Relevant information was extracted into a structured analytical matrix. For empirical studies, the matrix recorded: author and year; country or higher-education context; study purpose; participant population; research design and sample; theoretical perspective where stated; principal findings; limitations; and relevance to the focal talent-conversion process. For theoretical and conceptual publications, extraction focused on the principal constructs, proposed relationships, underlying assumptions, explanatory contribution and theoretical limitations.

An additional interpretive field recorded whether each publication primarily contributed evidence concerning attraction, integration, development, knowledge exchange, organisational support, embeddedness, retention or institutional capability. Studies could contribute to more than one category. This avoided forcing multidimensional studies into mutually exclusive classifications and permitted relationships among mechanisms to become visible during synthesis.

The extraction process also distinguished the level of outcome addressed by each study. Findings were coded according to whether they principally concerned:

1. individual outcomes, such as adjustment, satisfaction, professional identity or well-being;
2. relational outcomes, such as perceived organisational support, collegial relationships, fit and embeddedness;
3. employment outcomes, particularly intention to remain, retention or subsequent mobility; or
4. institutional outcomes, such as knowledge exchange, research collaboration, mentoring, organisational learning, network development or capability formation.

This distinction became analytically important because much of the expatriate-academic literature concentrates on the first three levels, whereas the central concern of the present review lies in the transition towards the fourth. Coding the level of outcome therefore allowed the synthesis to identify not only what the literature explains, but also where its explanatory emphasis becomes comparatively thin.

From descriptive categories to theoretical tensions

Following extraction, the evidence was compared within and across conceptual categories. The first stage involved identifying recurrent findings concerning attraction, organisational experiences, support, integration, development, knowledge exchange, embeddedness and retention. However, recurring findings alone were not considered sufficient for theory development. The analysis therefore proceeded to a second stage in which attention shifted from similarities to contradictions, discontinuities and theoretically problematic relationships.

Four tensions emerged as particularly important.

The first concerned attraction versus integration. Factors that make a country or university attractive at the recruitment stage do not necessarily predict the quality of subsequent organisational experience. An academic may be attracted by institutional reputation, research opportunity or favourable host-country conditions but encounter administrative barriers, restricted

participation or weak professional support after appointment. Attraction therefore establishes access to international human capital but cannot be interpreted as evidence of successful organisational integration.

The second concerned formal support versus perceived support. Institutional policies, orientation arrangements or administrative assistance may exist without being experienced as meaningful organisational support. Organisational Support Theory therefore directs attention away from the simple presence of HR practices towards how those practices are interpreted by academics. This distinction becomes especially important in international employment, where unfamiliar administrative systems, communication barriers and unequal access to informal networks may alter the meaning attributed to institutional practices.

The third tension concerned embeddedness versus retention. Job Embeddedness Theory predicts that links, fit and anticipated sacrifice can strengthen attachment and reduce turnover. Yet contemporary expatriate-academic evidence complicates any deterministic relationship. Przytuła (2026) found that expatriate academics reported intentions to remain despite incomplete embeddedness and difficulties with organisational fit and communication. Retention can therefore occur without complete embeddedness, suggesting that continued employment should not be treated as a sufficient indicator of successful integration.

The fourth tension concerned international faculty presence versus institutional capability. Universities frequently justify international recruitment through anticipated contributions to research, teaching, knowledge exchange and internationalisation. However, those benefits depend upon mechanisms that connect individually held expertise to collective organisational activities. International faculty can be formally employed while remaining peripheral to decision-making, resources and local academic networks. Ding et al. (2026), for example, demonstrate that international faculty may occupy an "outsider-within" position in which formal inclusion coexists with partial institutional marginality. International presence must therefore be distinguished analytically from the institutionalisation of international expertise.

These tensions were retained precisely because they challenge linear assumptions within international talent management. Rather than treating contradictory evidence as noise to be reconciled, the analysis used contradiction as a mechanism for theoretical problem identification.

Integration of theoretical perspectives

The next stage involved comparing the explanatory contribution and limitations of the three principal theoretical perspectives used in the review: Human Capital Theory, Organisational Support Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory.

Human Capital Theory provides the fundamental rationale for why internationally mobile academics matter. Their disciplinary expertise, professional experience, methodological capability and international networks constitute potentially productive resources. However, the theory is less explicit about the organisational processes through which individually embodied and mobile human capital becomes distributed institutional capability.

Organisational Support Theory addresses part of this limitation by explaining how employees interpret institutional recognition, treatment and resource provision and how those perceptions influence reciprocal attitudes and behaviours. Its contribution to the present review therefore lies primarily in explaining the quality of the relationship between the international academic and the host institution. However, strong perceived organisational support does not by itself demonstrate that an academic's expertise has diffused through research teams, supervision, mentoring or organisational routines.

Job Embeddedness Theory adds a further relational and contextual dimension by explaining continued affiliation through links, fit and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001). Its recent application to expatriate academics confirms the relevance of these mechanisms while simultaneously showing that embeddedness can remain incomplete even where academics intend to stay (Przytuła, 2026). The theory is consequently powerful for explaining attachment but less able to determine whether continued attachment produces durable institutional capability.

The theoretical synthesis therefore focused on the explanatory space between these perspectives. Human Capital Theory explains the potential value entering the institution; Organisational Support Theory helps explain the quality of the organisational relationship through which that value may be mobilised; and Job Embeddedness Theory explains relational and contextual forces influencing continued affiliation. None independently explains whether internationally mobile expertise becomes sufficiently distributed across organisational relationships and routines to generate institutional value beyond the individual academic.

This unresolved explanatory space provided the theoretical basis for introducing institutionalisation of international academic human capital as a distinct outcome.

Development of the presence–retention–institutionalisation distinction

The distinction among presence, retention and institutionalisation emerged through comparison of the outcome levels identified during coding.

Presence was defined as successful organisational access to internationally mobile academic human capital through recruitment and employment. Presence is therefore an input condition. It demonstrates that international expertise exists within the organisation but provides no evidence regarding the extent to which that expertise is connected to collective activities.

Retention was defined as continuation of the employment or institutional affiliation. Retention is an important employment outcome because continuity creates opportunities for relationships, knowledge exchange and capability development. Nevertheless, the evidence reviewed does not justify treating duration of employment as equivalent to institutional contribution.

Institutionalisation was consequently conceptualised as a separate organisational outcome: the extent to which internationally mobile academic knowledge, relationships, professional practices and networks become distributed through collective organisational activities and embedded sufficiently to generate value that is not wholly dependent upon the continuing presence of the individual.

The distinction permits configurations that conventional retention models can overlook. High retention may coexist with low institutionalisation where an academic remains employed but operates largely independently of local research, mentoring, supervisory or organisational networks. Conversely, substantial institutionalisation may occur despite eventual mobility where an academic establishes enduring research collaborations, develops postgraduate supervisory capacity, mentors colleagues, contributes to curriculum capability or creates international partnerships that persist following departure. The purpose of this distinction is not to diminish the importance of retention. Rather, it locates retention within a broader capability-development process and prevents it from becoming the sole criterion against which international academic talent management is evaluated.

Construction of the IATI Framework and theoretical propositions

The final analytical stage involved translating the relationships and tensions identified through synthesis into the International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework. Consistent with the purpose of a theoretical integrative review, framework development was not based on simple frequency counting of themes. Battistone et al. (2023) emphasise that theoretical integrative reviews critically examine theories addressing a phenomenon and bring them into conversation to refine, integrate or construct theoretical explanations. The IATI Framework was developed according to this logic.

Concepts were organised into four analytical layers. The first comprised antecedent conditions, including host-country attractiveness, institutional reputation, employment conditions and relevant policy environments. The second comprised talent-conversion mechanisms: attraction, meaningful integration, professional development and reciprocal knowledge exchange, and embeddedness. The third comprised relational states, particularly perceived organisational support, professional and social links and organisational fit. The fourth comprised two related but analytically distinct outcomes: retention and institutionalisation.

Propositions were then developed where the synthesis supported a theoretically meaningful relationship requiring subsequent empirical examination. The propositions are therefore not presented as findings already established conclusively by the reviewed literature. They represent theoretically derived claims generated from the integration of existing evidence and the identified explanatory gaps. This distinction is essential because the proposed IATI Framework remains a conceptual model requiring empirical validation.

Throughout this process, theoretical development was treated as iterative rather than linear. Emerging relationships were repeatedly compared against empirical findings, particularly evidence that challenged straightforward assumptions concerning integration and retention. For example, the proposed distinction between retention and institutionalisation was reconsidered against Przytuła's (2026) finding that expatriate academics may intend to remain despite incomplete embeddedness, while the conceptualisation of integration was reconsidered in light of Ding et al.'s (2026) finding that international faculty can strategically combine engagement with detachment. These negative or complicating cases strengthened the framework by preventing it from assuming that international academic talent management necessarily follows a uniform sequential pathway.

The analytical synthesis therefore proceeded from structured extraction → conceptual categorisation → identification of contradictions → theoretical comparison → conceptual differentiation → framework construction → proposition development. This sequence provides an explicit analytical chain between the reviewed literature and the proposed theoretical contribution and reduces the risk that the IATI Framework appears as an intuitively generated model detached from the evidence base.

Results and discussion

Expatriate academics as a distinctive form of international human capital

In addition to skilled international employees, expatriate academics are organized into one group, though academic activity undermines the typical assumptions about expatriation. Researchers work in universities and participate in a range of disciplinary communities, professional societies, research networks and epistemic communities that extend beyond the boundaries of organizations and countries. They have therefore some institutional-specific and some portable career capital. Even if the academic switches employers, publications, discipline reputation, and method expertise with outside collaborators might benefit. This portability changes the employment relationship, as the university can hire the person, but not necessarily acquire or control his or her networks of knowledge.

There are many academics who work in the country but are self-initiated (not assigned) expatriates. This is important because the institution may not be as much in control of the mobility cycle as it would in a normal corporate expatriation program. When circumstances such as career, family or institutional changes affect subsequent remobility, then the same autonomy that enabled the academic to initiate international mobility is at their disposal. A policy or strategy to retain staff solely on the basis of the first employment contract thus underestimates the ongoing external opportunities that internationally mobile academics are able to access.

The academic mission has several missions. There are multiple avenues through which international human capital can bring value to an institution, such as teaching, research, postgraduate supervision, service and external engagement. But not all of the channels are equally switched on. Even if an internationally recruited academic can publish successfully but lack strong ties with the local academic community, or teach well without feedback into curriculum development, or have strong networks outside the university but not within it, he or she can do so. The analytical unit is not, then, just the individual expatriate academic but also the interplay of individual skills and organisational arrangements that activate them.Malaysia: attraction is not the same as institutional attachmentThe Malaysian examples show why Country Attachment and Organisational Attachment should not be confused. Interviews with 17 expatriate academics in four Malaysian public universities revealed that familiarity with Malaysia, a perceived desirable cultural or religious environment and favourable research environment were significant factors in determining whether academics would move or not (Richardson and Wong 2018). However, social adjustment was generally

more positive than work adjustment, but several people said that the level of dissatisfaction with the work environment decreased their retention plans. This is an important implication of an analysis: An attractive national destination can exist alongside an inadequate organisational experience.

Previous studies in Malaysia also found that research opportunity, institutional reputation, research facilities, professional development, leadership relationship, and surrounding environment were factors that were relevant in expatriate academics' decision to stay in the country (Parnian et al., 2013). Yet a significant amount of the evidence is institutionalized, and the Malaysian higher education system is diverse. There are differences in governance, resources, employment systems, performance expectations and internationalisation strategies among public universities, private universities, university colleges and international branch campuses. By considering 'Malaysia' as a single organisation, there is a risk that significant differences in the context in which international academics work are overlooked.

The current policy environment reinforces the need for a capability-based analysis. The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035 is not just about gaining more visibility in the international arena. It has a talent agenda of competency-relevant development, mentorship, career pathways, cross-institutional collaboration, and evidence-informed talent governance and a research and internationalisation agenda of global research collaboration, knowledge and technology exchange, strategic academic partnerships, and staff mobility (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025). The policy commitments suggest that mobility will lead to developmental and knowledge outcomes. The question is then not how many international academics are there, but does the institution have the process of turning the international academic into capability.

This difference has significance for policy assessment, particularly in this regard. International staff complement is observable, measurable and can be benchmarked but it is an input indicator. It does not tell us much about the extent to which expatriate academics mentor local colleagues, co-supervise postgraduate researchers, form lasting research teams, forge international linkages, or help in curriculum renewal and transfer in practices that linger on after they depart. A system may thus seem to be internationalised but the institutionalisation of international human capital is superficial.

From human capital to human-capital infrastructure

Human Capital Theory is capable of describing the value of specialised knowledge and skills in universities, but fails to describe the process by itself of how the individual knowledge and skills that are embodied, can become an organisational capability. Becker (1964) places human capital in investments that expand productive capacities. However, in universities, much of the capital involved is immovable and tacit. The research judgement, supervisory capacity, disciplinary networks and collaboration routines can not be just stored in organisational databases. They only are institutional resources when they are related, routinized, and repeated. It is here that the term "human-capital infrastructure" describes this conversion problem. It is the combination of individual knowledge and capabilities, and organisational relationships, practices and systems, through which those can be mobilised, shared, developed and sustained. The 'infrastructure' is then not the academic staff per se. It is the architecture that links knowledge to capability.

This separation helps overcome an ambiguity in international faculty studies. When a well-known scholar joins an institution, its human capital increases in an instant. This does not always increase in proportion to its institutional ability. The scholar might be detached from local teams, encounter administrative hurdles, lack strong support for collaboration or leave before establishing strong relationships. Djikhy and Moustaghfir (2019) offer direct support for this warning: even in a higher-education institution with an international orientation, the dynamics of knowledge transfer were found to be limited and teamwork, orientation, collaborative research, training, resources and incentives were identified as key facilitating mechanisms.

Therefore, the paper identifies three outcomes. Presence indicates that international academic talent has been attracted. Retention is defined as the person stays in the institution. Institutionalisation involves the transfer of aspects of the person's knowledge, relationships and processes into group activity which can continue its value-added production after the individual's actual appointment. While linked, not synonymous.

Attraction: acquiring access, not capability

Attraction is necessary because institutions cannot benefit from international academic human capital they cannot access. Yet attraction should be conceptualised as an acquisition stage rather than a capability outcome. Academics assess employment opportunities through a bundle of institutional and host-country attributes: research environment, autonomy, reputation, workload, remuneration, career trajectory, family considerations, safety, cost of living and quality of life. The weight attached to each attribute varies across career stage, discipline, nationality and household circumstances. Consequently, there is no universal expatriate academic value proposition.

A critical implication is that recruitment messaging creates expectations that subsequently shape organisational evaluations. Institutions that sell research opportunity but provide limited research time or infrastructure create an expectation-reality gap. Similarly, promises of international collaboration have little value if governance arrangements or departmental cultures restrict access to decision making and networks. Attraction therefore contains the seeds of later integration: what is promised during recruitment becomes a reference point against which organisational support and fairness are judged.

Proposition 1. Attraction of international academic human capital is necessary but insufficient for the development of institutional capability.

Integration without assimilation

Integration is frequently treated as movement from outsider status towards membership. Recent evidence suggests a more complex process. Ding et al. (2026), based on 30 semi-structured interviews with international faculty in Chinese universities, identify strategies ranging from collaboration and negotiation to tactical non-pursuit and strategic self-detachment. Integration is therefore not a binary state and need not culminate in assimilation. International academics may selectively engage with institutional systems while preserving external identities and networks.

This is not necessarily dysfunctional. The boundary-spanning value of international academics partly derives from their connections beyond the host institution. Complete assimilation could, in principle, reduce some of the external distinctiveness for which they were recruited. The institutional challenge is therefore to achieve sufficient integration for participation, trust and knowledge exchange without demanding conformity that weakens productive external linkages.

Organisational Support Theory clarifies why formal integration practices may not produce the intended relational outcome. Employees form beliefs about whether the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Orientation programmes, mentoring and administrative assistance matter only insofar as they are experienced as credible and useful support. The existence of a policy is therefore not equivalent to perceived support. Leadership behaviour, communication quality, fairness and access to resources influence whether formal practices are interpreted as genuine institutional investment.

Proposition 2. The relationship between international academic recruitment and institutional capability is mediated by organisational mechanisms that enable meaningful integration rather than mere administrative onboarding.

Proposition 3. Perceived organisational support, rather than the mere availability of formal support practices, strengthens the conversion of international academic human capital into institutional embeddedness.

Development and knowledge exchange as conversion mechanisms

Development is often discussed as a retention benefit, but within a human-capital infrastructure perspective it performs a second function: it creates opportunities for expertise to circulate. Research collaboration, mentoring, postgraduate co-supervision, interdisciplinary projects, faculty development and leadership roles allow individual knowledge to enter collective processes. This is the point at which development and knowledge exchange become analytically inseparable.

The direction of exchange also matters. A simplistic 'knowledge transfer' narrative can imply that the expatriate academic possesses superior knowledge that is transmitted to local colleagues. Such a framing is both empirically and normatively weak. International academic work is more accurately understood as reciprocal knowledge exchange. Expatriate academics learn host-institution practices, local research contexts, regulatory conditions and culturally situated forms of expertise while contributing knowledge acquired elsewhere. Institutional capability is strengthened when these knowledge bases are recombined rather than when one is assumed to replace the other.

This reciprocal perspective also changes how success should be measured. Publication counts attributable to an expatriate academic capture individual output, not necessarily organisational learning. More relevant indicators include co-authorship patterns, cross-unit research teams, postgraduate supervision, mentoring relationships, collaborative grant capability, curriculum changes, external partnerships and whether networks continue after the individual leaves. These indicators capture diffusion rather than possession.

Proposition 4. Knowledge exchange mediates the relationship between internationally mobile academic expertise and the institutionalisation of that expertise.

Embeddedness and the limits of retention as a success metric

Job Embeddedness Theory shifts attention from reasons for leaving towards the web of forces that make continued affiliation valuable. Mitchell et al. (2001) conceptualise embeddedness through links, fit and sacrifice. This is particularly useful for expatriate academics because professional and community domains intersect. Research teams, supervisory relationships and departmental belonging coexist with family adjustment, social networks, safety and quality of life.

However, embeddedness should not be collapsed into retention. An individual may remain because alternatives are temporarily unattractive, because immigration or family circumstances make mobility costly, or because particular benefits would be sacrificed. Conversely, an academic can be highly productive and institutionally connected yet leave for an exceptional career opportunity. Retention is therefore an observable employment outcome; embeddedness is a relational condition; institutionalisation is a capability outcome.

This distinction has practical consequences. Universities often infer success from low turnover. Yet long tenure can coexist with low knowledge diffusion. An expatriate professor may remain for a decade, publish independently and teach assigned modules while creating few local research or mentoring connections. Another academic may remain for four years but establish a research group, develop supervisors, create an international partnership and leave routines that continue after departure. If the strategic objective is institutional capability, the second case may represent greater success despite shorter retention.

Proposition 5. Expatriate academic retention and institutionalisation are related but conceptually distinct outcomes.

Proposition 6. Job embeddedness increases the likelihood of retention, but retention does not necessarily indicate high institutionalisation of international academic human capital.

The expanded International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework

The revised IATI Framework separates antecedent conditions, conversion mechanisms, relational states and outcomes. Host-country conditions, institutional reputation and employment conditions shape attraction. After entry, integration, development and reciprocal knowledge exchange create opportunities for organisational support, professional links and fit to develop. Embeddedness can strengthen continued affiliation, but retention and institutionalisation are modelled as separate outcomes. Institutionalisation is reflected in durable teaching, research, postgraduate, organisational-learning, network and internationalisation capabilities.

Framework element	Core question	Illustrative mechanisms	Risk if weak	Indicative outcomes
Antecedent conditions	Why would international academics enter this context?	Country attractiveness; reputation; employment conditions; policy/visa environment	Recruitment difficulty; expectation mismatch	Talent access
Integration	Can the academic participate meaningfully?	Onboarding; inclusive leadership; communication; resource access; voice	Peripheral membership; mistrust; administrative friction	Participation; perceived support
Development & knowledge exchange	Does expertise circulate and grow?	Research teams; mentoring; co-supervision; grants; curriculum work; leadership	Individualised expertise; weak diffusion	Reciprocal learning; capability diffusion
Embeddedness	What connects the academic to institution and community?	Links; fit; valued relationships; professional identity; family/community ties	Fragile attachment; mobility readiness	Relational attachment
Retention	Does affiliation continue?	Career continuity; valued conditions; acceptable sacrifice	Turnover; discontinuity	Continued employment
Institutionalisation	Does value persist beyond the individual?	Routines; teams; successor capability; durable partnerships; network transfer	Human capital exits with individual	Teaching, research, supervision, organisational learning and internationalisation capability

Table 1. Expanded International Academic Talent Infrastructure (IATI) Framework.

Proposition 7. Selective integration can generate greater institutional value than complete assimilation when it preserves boundary-spanning international networks while enabling meaningful local participation.

Proposition 8. Host-country, institutional and policy conditions moderate the conversion of internationally mobile academic human capital into sustainable institutional capability.

Implications for Malaysian higher education

The framework has direct implications for Malaysia's current higher-education strategy. First, international faculty metrics should distinguish input, employment and capability outcomes. International staff numbers capture presence; retention rates capture continued employment; neither captures institutionalisation. Universities could supplement these indicators with measures of collaborative research, postgraduate supervision, mentoring, cross-unit projects, international partnerships, grant networks, curriculum contributions and continuity of collaborations after staff mobility.

Second, talent governance should recognise the heterogeneity of international academics. A senior research chair, an early-career lecturer, a clinical academic and an industry-experienced professor do not bring identical forms of capital and should not be integrated through identical mechanisms. The strategic question is what capability gap the appointment is intended to address and what organisational architecture is needed to mobilise that particular expertise.

Third, the Blueprint's emphasis on mentorship, career pathways, cross-institutional collaboration, global research partnerships and knowledge exchange provides a policy foundation for moving beyond recruitment-centric internationalisation. The IATI perspective adds an accountability question: can institutions demonstrate that international mobility has produced capabilities that remain available to the institution and national system?

Fourth, retention policy should avoid becoming an end in itself. Some mobility is inevitable and can be productive. The stronger objective is resilience: when an international academic leaves, does a research group collapse, a postgraduate supervision pipeline break and an external partnership disappear, or have relationships and capabilities become sufficiently distributed to continue? Human-capital infrastructure is stronger when institutional value is not wholly dependent on the continued presence of one individual.

Discussion

This paper's main contribution is the switch from the retention to conversion problem of the expatriate-academic. The available literature has provided a great deal of knowledge on motivations for and adjustment to, as well as satisfaction and retention of mobility. These continue to be significant, but are mostly used to account for specific employment experiences. The question asked by the IATI Framework is quite different: "How does individual international human capital translate to collective institutional capability?"

The three lenses of theory are also explained in the framework. Expertise is valuable according to Human Capital theory, but it does not outline the organisational processes required to transform individuals into collective expertise. Organisational Support Theory provides insight into how institutional treatment affects the reciprocal attitudes and attachments but does not directly explain if expertise spreads beyond the individual. Job Embeddedness Theory provides a reason for people to stay in their job because of links, fit and sacrifice, but not because they are creating a lasting institutional value for those still on their current jobs. These theories do not 'solve' the conversion problem; IATI Framework facilitates linking these theories around a conversion problem.

The second contribution is the distinction between retention and institutionalisation. This distinction is important because it is easy to see how they are retained and therefore easy to overestimate their value. The low turnover of international academics does not necessarily imply that the knowledge is centralized or decentralized in a university. In other words, institutions can see the departure as a failure even in the face of considerable capacity transfer. A longer time horizon is thus required for a capability perspective than for traditional turnover analysis.

The third contribution is related to integration. It is important to not assume assimilation as the default outcome, given the evidence Ding et al. (2026) present. International academics can be simultaneous but non-simultaneous. The condition can be advantageous strategically, as boundary spanners bring value to their capability to link otherwise disconnected knowledge communities. The challenge for the management is to ensure that enough trust, voice, and access are established to make it possible for meaningful participation, and that the external networks and identities that enable international connections remain.

The following considerations for Malaysia imply that internationalisation policy increasingly needs to prioritise the quality of the connections that are established through mobility. The Higher Education Blueprint 2026 – 2035 is already a blueprint with a language of talent development, collaboration and knowledge exchange. Next, the analytical step is to inquire how the aspirations at institutional level are measured. If the goal is to build capabilities over the long-term, the headcount, ranking and flows of mobility are not enough.

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations. First, it is a conceptual integrative review and does not claim exhaustive coverage of the expatriate-academic literature. The framework should therefore be treated as a theoretically grounded model for testing rather than as a validated causal model. Second, the Malaysian literature remains relatively limited and institutionally heterogeneous; propositions developed here should not be assumed to operate identically across public universities, private institutions and international branch campuses. Third, institutionalisation is introduced as a conceptual outcome and requires operationalisation. Future research should develop measures that capture capability diffusion, durability and dependence on individual actors.

Empirical testing could proceed in several ways. A multi-institutional Malaysian survey could examine organisational support, development opportunity, knowledge exchange, embeddedness, intention to stay and perceived institutionalisation. Social-network analysis could test whether expatriate academics occupy bridging positions and whether those networks become less person-dependent over time. Longitudinal case studies could follow international academics from recruitment through integration and subsequent mobility, examining what knowledge and relationships persist after departure. Comparative research across Malaysian public, private and branch-campus settings could test institutional boundary conditions. Finally, qualitative work should examine the perspectives of local colleagues and postgraduate students, not only expatriate academics, because institutionalisation is inherently relational.

Conclusion

International academic mobility gives universities access to valuable expertise, but access should not be confused with capability. This paper has argued that the strategic challenge is the conversion of internationally mobile human capital into human-capital infrastructure. By distinguishing presence, retention and institutionalisation, the analysis exposes a weakness in recruitment- and turnover-centred approaches: an academic can remain without becoming deeply connected to collective capability, while a mobile academic can leave behind durable research, supervisory and network effects.

The expanded IATI Framework therefore positions attraction, integration, development and reciprocal knowledge exchange, and embeddedness as conversion mechanisms, while separating retention from institutionalisation as two related but non-equivalent outcomes. For Malaysian higher education, this distinction is particularly timely as the 2026–2035 policy cycle emphasises talent, research, international collaboration and knowledge exchange. The practical implication is clear: the success of international academic talent strategy should ultimately be judged not by how many international academics are recruited or how long they stay, but by what institutional capabilities become stronger, more connected and more durable because they were there.

Acknowledgment: No
Author's Contribution: *Mehrunishah Begum:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing
Funding: No
Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.
Competing Interest: No

References

1. Battistone, M. J., Kemeyou, L., & Varpio, L. (2023). The theoretical integrative review—A researcher's guide. Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 15(4), 453–455. https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-23-00266.1 This is particularly important for our paper because it supports bringing multiple theories into conversation to develop/refine a theoretical explanation.
2. Becker GS. (1964). Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education. University of Chicago Press.
3. Becker, G. S. (1964). Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education. University of Chicago Press.
4. Brotherhood, T., & Patterson, A. S. (2024). International faculty: Exploring the relationship between on-campus support and off-campus integration. Higher Education, 88(2), 467–486. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01124-7 Springer Link
5. Ding J, Yang L, Mlynarski J. (2026). Outsiders within: exploring integration strategies of international faculty in Chinese higher education institutions. Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-026-01724-z
6. Ding, J., Yang, L., & Mlynarski, J. (2026). Outsiders within: Exploring integration strategies of international faculty in Chinese higher education institutions. Higher Education. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-026-01724-z Springer Link
7. Djikhy S, Moustaghfir K. (2019). International faculty, knowledge transfer, and innovation in higher education: A human resource development perspective. Human Systems Management. 38(4): 423–431. https://doi.org/10.3233/HSM-190614
8. Djikhy, S., & Moustaghfir, K. (2019). International faculty, knowledge transfer, and innovation in higher education: A human resource development perspective. Human Systems Management, 38(4), 423–431. https://doi.org/10.3233/HSM-190614
9. Dwertmann, D. J. G., & van Knippenberg, D. (2021). Capturing the state of the science to change the state of the science: A categorization approach to integrative reviews. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 42(2), 104–117. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2474 Wiley Online Library
10. Eisenberger R, Huntington R, Hutchison S, Sowa D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. Journal of Applied Psychology. 71(3): 500–507. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500
11. Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. Journal of Applied Psychology, 71(3), 500–507. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500
12. Hassan A, Hashim J. (2011). Role of organizational justice in determining work outcomes of national and expatriate academic staff in Malaysia. International Journal of Commerce and Management. 21(1): 82–93. https://doi.org/10.1108/10569211111111711
13. Hassan, A., & Hashim, J. (2011). Role of organizational justice in determining work outcomes of national and expatriate academic staff in Malaysia. International Journal of Commerce and Management, 21(1), 82–93. https://doi.org/10.1108/10569211111111711 IIUM Repository
14. Kutcher, A. M., & LeBaron, V. T. (2022). A simple guide for completing an integrative review using an example article. Journal of Professional Nursing, 40, 13–19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2022.02.004 PubMed
15. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. (2025). Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.
16. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. (2025). Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.
17. Mitchell TR, Holtom BC, Lee TW, Sablynski CJ, Erez M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. Academy of Management Journal. 44(6): 1102–1121. https://doi.org/10.2307/3069391
18. Mitchell, T. R., Holtom, B. C., Lee, T. W., Sablynski, C. J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. Academy of Management Journal, 44(6), 1102–1121. https://doi.org/10.2307/3069391 Meta Science Observatory
19. Parnian A, Hosseini N, Wong SF. (2013). Adjustment, motivation for retention and environmental similarity toward satisfaction among expatriate academics. Sains Humanika. 64(3). https://doi.org/10.11113/sh.v64n3.79
20. Parnian, A., Hosseini, N., & Wong, S. F. (2013). Adjustment, motivation for retention and environmental similarity toward satisfaction among expatriate academics. Sains Humanika, 64(3). https://doi.org/10.11113/sh.v64n3.79 Sains Humanika
21. Przytuła S. (2024). Expatriate academics: what have we known for four decades? A systematic literature review. Journal of Global Mobility. 12(1): 31–56. https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-03-2023-0024
22. Przytuła S. (2026). Expatriate academic's embeddedness in host universities: Exploring links, fit, and sacrifices. European Educational Research Journal. OnlineFirst. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041261447093
23. Przytuła, S. (2024). Expatriate academics: What have we known for four decades? A systematic literature review. Journal of Global Mobility, 12(1), 31–56. https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-03-2023-0024
24. Przytuła, S. (2026). Expatriate academic's embeddedness in host universities: Exploring links, fit, and sacrifices. European Educational Research Journal. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041261447093 Sage Journals
25. Rhoades L, Eisenberger R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. Journal of Applied Psychology. 87(4): 698–714. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.698
26. Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. Journal of Applied Psychology, 87(4), 698–714. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.698 PubMed
27. Richardson C, Wong HW. (2018). Expatriate academics in Malaysia: Motivation, adjustment, and retention. Journal of Management Development. 37(3): 299–308. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2017-0421

28. Richardson, C., & Wong, H.-W. (2018). Expatriate academics in Malaysia: Motivation, adjustment, and retention. Journal of Management Development. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2017-0421 Malaysian policy source
29. Silva, R. N. da, Brandão, M. A. G., & Ferreira, M. A. (2020). Integrative review as a method to generate or to test nursing theory. Nursing Science Quarterly, 33(3), 258–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894318420920602 PubMed
30. Torraco RJ. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. Human Resource Development Review. 15(4): 404–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606
31. Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. Human Resource Development Review, 15(4), 404–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606
32. Whittemore R, Knafl K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. Journal of Advanced Nursing. 52(5): 546–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x
33. Whittemore, R., & Knafl, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 52(5), 546–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x

Publisher's Note
The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.
This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/