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WHEN THE HOST COUNTRY BECOMES HOME: FAMILY FORMATION, INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND LONG-TERM SETTLEMENT OF EXPATRIATE ACADEMICS IN MALAYSIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

International academic mobility is commonly examined through attraction, adjustment, organisational integration and retention, yet these perspectives do not fully explain what happens when a host country gradually becomes the centre of an expatriate academic professional, family and social life. This conceptual integrative review develops a whole-life account of long-term settlement among expatriate academics, with Malaysia as the focal institutional context. Drawing on expatriate-academic research, self-initiated expatriation, job embeddedness, conservation of resources, organisational support and expatriate-family scholarship, the paper distinguishes organisational retention from host-country retention and long-term settlement orientation. It argues that family formation, including marriage, partnership, children and local kinship ties—can alter the configuration of links, fit and perceived sacrifice through which expatriates become anchored to place, while institutional support and national policy shape whether these relationships become sustainable. The review introduces Academic Expatriate Settlement Embeddedness (AESE), defined as the accumulated configuration of professional, family, community and institutional links, perceived compatibility with the host environment, and anticipated sacrifices associated with departure that influence whether an expatriate academic envisages the host country as a longer-term home. Malaysia provides a theoretically useful setting because university talent policy, multicultural and religious conditions, marriage administration, immigration status and employment arrangements intersect with academic careers. The framework proposes that settlement is neither a simple extension of job satisfaction nor an automatic consequence of marriage; rather, it emerges from interacting work and non-work resources and constraints. The paper offers propositions, institutional and policy implications, boundary conditions and an empirical research agenda for testing AESE across public, private and international higher education settings.

Keywords: *expatriate academics; self-initiated expatriates; family formation; marriage; job embeddedness; community embeddedness; organisational support; settlement; Malaysia; higher education*

Introduction

International academic mobility has been an integral part of the internationalisation of higher education, providing universities access to specialised knowledge, research networks, and international experience. However, the academic literature from expatriates is predominantly based on an employment-centred framework in which mobility is explored by way of the motives of expatriation, the adjustment to the host context, the organizational experience and the intentions to stay or leave. Przytuła's systematic review (2024) of 110 studies published from 1980 to 2022 reveals the maturity of this field as well as the continued focus on scholarship around the themes of mobility, adjustment, careers and organisational outcomes. While this focus is useful, it can become conceptually limiting if international mobility is not seen as a transitory period of employment, but as an influence on the longer-term professional, social and family location of academics.

This is important because staying in a university has nothing to do with staying professionally active in a host country and seeing that country as the place of one's future life. An academic can move from one Malaysian university to another without giving up their sense of attachment to Malaysia; similarly, an academic can stay with the same employer but have a more transient view of Malaysia in which they are planning to move on or back to Malaysia. Lehtonen, Koveshnikov and Wechtler (2023) analytically make this distinction by conceptualizing the expatriate–host-country relationship as a social exchange and demonstrate in a sample of 451 self-initiated expatriates that both career and community embeddedness make a difference in predicting host-

country withdrawal intention. Their work takes the focus away from the mere issue of expatriate turnover and asks a more fundamental question: do expatriates stay or go from the host society?

This is further reinforced with a whole-life approach. Hsu, Chen and Shaffer (2024) found that cultural intelligence positively correlated with both forms of embeddedness (organisational and community) and that both kinds of embeddedness were related to career satisfaction in their sampled population of 147 self-initiated expatriate academics. It is not just that non-work resources are relevant to expatriates; rather, work and non-work resources co-evolve and can have an additive impact on the sustainability of an international career. Previous studies also reveal that host-country organisational embeddedness and host-country community embeddedness are conceptually different and that the combination of them affects mobility intentions (Lo et al., 2012).

The need for this wider perspective is very evident in recent work of expatriate academics. Based on interviews with 50 foreign-born academics from 21 countries in 16 universities in Poland, Przytuła (2026) discovered that they wanted to stay even with incomplete organisational embeddedness. Particularly in the face of systemic support gaps, communication challenges and organisational fit issues, a sense of belonging and good prospects for career development and recognition, as well as the employment base, were seen as reasons for staying. In the same way Ding, Yang and Mlynarski (2026) demonstrate that the process of international faculty integration does not necessarily transcend from outsider to insider, with faculty possibly engaging in negotiation and collaboration, as well as tactical non-pursuit and strategic self-detachment. These results challenge the one-way process of attraction leading to adjustment, adjustment leading to integration, and integration leading to retention.

The issue is not fully developed, however, because it doesn't address what happens when intimate and family life itself becomes more and more defined in the host country. While spouses and children have long been recognised in the expatriation literature, the majority of this research only starts with the traditional international-assignment model of employees moving with an established family. In that model, the family is typically seen as a 'satellite' family unit that can be adjusted so it will be more successful when the family unit is assigned. Shah et al. (2022) show, for instance, that organisational support can have an impact on expatriates' adjustment, as well as their spouses' and children's adjustment and that the adjustment processes of family members are linked. This type of evidence is helpful but not exhaustive of the other pathway, that of the expatriate who arrives on their own and eventually forms a long-term relationship, gets married to a host country citizen, has children, or becomes part of local kinship circles.

That alters the theoretical query. Family is no longer just a state of being for those adjusting to the expatriate lifestyle; it can also be a way of altering, or changing the meaning of, the expatriate lifestyle. Marriage or partnership can form new connections to partners, children, extended families and communities, while the evolution of family life can increase familiarity with local institutions, cultural practices and routines, and when leaving, it may also be more expensive because it can have a greater impact on one's spouse's work, children's schooling, housing, kinship networks and social resources. These processes are similar to the links, fits and sacrifices components of Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), but they also broaden the theory beyond the question of why an employee remains in a job to the question of why an internationally mobile academic becomes attached to a country.

Family formation must not be romanticised as a natural pathway to settlement, however, at the same time. Career choices could be negotiated/relational for mixed-nationality couples. There is a growing body of evidence in much of the world that spouses can be a facilitator or a gatekeeper when it comes to job decisions, particularly in Japanese female self-initiated expatriates with French husbands and wives (Journal of Global Mobility, 2026). Family formation can thus involve both greater resources at the local level and tensions between two careers, as well as transnational responsibilities, caring duties and mobility restrictions. The settlement is then better seen as a dynamic pattern of resources, relationships and institutional arrangements than as a result of marital status.

Malaysia is an interesting environment to study this configuration. In their study of 17 expatriate academics from four Malaysian public universities, Richardson and Wong (2018) found that familiarity with the country, the perceived desirable cultural and religious setting, and the perceived research environment affected the mobility of the expatriates and that social adjustment may be more positive than work environment adjustment. Research opportunities, cost of living, institutional reputation, professional development, geographic location and departmental relationships were also found to be factors associated with expatriate academics' motivation to remain, by Parnian, Hosseini and Wong (2013). While these studies are not representative of the sector in general and cannot be used as a guide to the attractiveness of Malaysia as a place to live, they help to make a distinction between the attractiveness of the place to work and the attractiveness of the institution offering the place of work.

The current policy in Malaysia aimed at higher education makes that distinction more pertinent. The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035 recognizes the importance of including academic and administrative staff in the national talent agenda, and also mentions and connects evidence based talent governance to holistic well-being, work life balance, flexible working hours, wellness programmes and family friendly initiatives (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2026). The priorities suggest that talent sustainability is not just a recruitment or performance management initiative. Professional opportunity is fundamental for the viability of a long-term academic career for internationally mobile academics, with viability being a function of the compatibility of a longterm academic career with family and community life.

Marriage is also analytically significant in Malaysia but not a determining factor, as a result of the country's institutional context. The administration of Muslim marriage matters under the state Islamic religious authorities, and the procedures and documents are different across the states (Government of Malaysia, 2026a). There are specific arrangements for immigration policy for foreign spouses of Malaysian citizens separately as well. A foreign spouse who is legally married and meets the relevant

requirements may be granted the required social visit visa and may apply for approval to engage in lawful employment or professional activity and conduct (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2026a, 2026b). These rules are not meant to imply that marriage equals permanent residence, citizenship or settlement. Their theoretical significance is rather in the potential of the institutional shift in marriage between family status and residence/employment affecting the resources and constraints that affect one's decision to move.

In this context, this paper proposes a framework for Academic Expatriate Settlement Embeddedness (AESE), which is the cumulative combination of professional, family, community and institutional ties, experienced compatibility with the host environment, and expected sacrifices of leaving that help to shape the sense of the host country as a more permanent home. AESE differentiates organisational retention, host country retention and long-term settlement orientation. It thus fills a void between the research of expatriates and the broader landscape of mobility in which career paths, close relationships, familial duties, communities and institutions increasingly become interwoven.

The paper questions, How does the family formation and the level of embeddedness in the host country interact with institutional support and the Malaysian institutional environment in the process of expatriate academics' transition from short-term international employment to long-term settlement orientation? It contributes by seeking to embed expatriate-academic scholarship from the host organisation towards settlement in the host country; by offering to reconceptualise family formation as a potentially consequential embedding process as opposed to a background demographic variable; and by bringing together university support and community conditions and policy into a whole-life framework. Importantly, the framework is not based on the notion that settlement is desirable for all expatriates nor that the university's role is to secure the 'freeze' of internationally mobile talent. It is used for explanation and to clarify how the same professional opportunity can be experienced differently by different academics, resulting in different experiences across the organisation, planning for departure, and planning for a long-term career in the host country.

Materials and Methods

Review design and methodological rationale

This study uses a theory-building conceptual integrative review. This design was suitable as the focal phenomenon is across literatures with different units of analysis and methodological traditions: expatriate academics and international faculty, self-initiated expatriation, job and community embeddedness, organisational support, expatriate families, skilled-migrant integration and Malaysian policy. An integrative review is a review that allows empirical and theoretical sources to come together for an analysis, and a theoretical integrative review is best used in situations where multiple theories can clarify different aspects of a phenomenon but no single theory can fully account for it (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022; Battistone, Kemeyou, & Varpio, 2023).

The decision is also made based on the maturity of the expatriate-academic field. Przytuła (2024) has done a systematic review in the field of commerce, which is based on PRISMA, and selected 110 articles published from 1980 to 2022 from Scopus and Web of Science. A wide-spread, descriptive mapping would thus add scant value, especially in comparison to the value of detailed mapping.A wide-spread, descriptive mapping would therefore not be of much benefit, particularly when compared to value added from detailed mapping. Instead the present review starts from a more restricted theoretical issue: the existing literature is able to provide an explanation as to why academics relocate, adapt and stay in their overseas postings, but less so to what extent the circumstances of work, family, community and institution combine when the host country is also a potential long-term domicile.

The review is not confirmatory, but generative. It is not intended to calculate pooled effect sizes or provide full coverage of all the studies on expatriations. Rather, it pinpoints evidence that can help clarify the difference between organizational retention, HC retention, and orientation to settlement, critically evaluates and compares theories and explanations in work and non-work settings, and derives propositions for later empirical testing. Methodological transparency is achieved by stating the evidence domains, the boundaries for inclusion and the logic of the synthesis, thereby neither inventing search counts nor claiming the synthesis to be systematic that the design does not justify.

Literature identification and boundaries

Literature identification was grouped under four lines of evidence. The first included the focal population (expatriate academic*, international academic*, international faculty, foreign academic* and self-initiated expatriate*). The second included "organisational embeddedness", "community embeddedness", "job embeddedness", "adjustment", "integration", "family", "spouse", and "marriage", "children", "social networks", "social support", "retention", "repatriation" and "host-country withdrawal". The third one was an explanation theory, which included Job Embeddedness Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, Perceived Organisational Support and social exchange perspectives. The fourth focused on institutional conditions unique to Malaysia such as the higher education talent policy, Muslim marriage administration and foreign spouse residence and permission to work.

For the same reasons as the previous systematic review of expatriate academics, Scopus and Web of Science were deemed as the main bibliographic reference points as they are multidisciplinary. Searches were complemented by the publisher databases and by the chaining of references and targeted retrieval of recent studies, where the new work built on earlier constructs. Peer-reviewed articles written between 2020 and 2026 that made a significant contribution to the argument were prioritized, whereas the older articles were kept if they were seminal theoretical contributions, high relevance to Malaysia's context, or important foundations for expatriation research.

Empirical research was relevant if it included analyses of internationally mobile academics or self-initiated expatriates, and provided data on aspects of organisation and/or community embeddedness, family and spouse adjustment, institutional support and host-country withdrawal, or repatriation or long-term mobility. Selected where the mechanism could be applied to academic mobility, corporate expatriate studies informed the discussion on adjustment of the family, and organisational support. The reason why student mobility was not included was because the institutional linkage is not the same as the academic employment. To make the point that the Malaysian institutional context was one that existed at that point in time, policy documents were included but were not assumed to be empirical evidence of individual behaviour.

Marriage is a key element to the question posed in the paper, but there are relatively few direct pieces of research written by expatriate academics about marriage and settlement, so the synthesis has been designed to separate the two. Claims on academic mobility and integration and embeddedness are supported by evidence from academics who have been overseas; claims about expatriate family and mixed-couple research is supported by evidence from expatriate family and mixed-couple research; and Malaysian official evidence sets the policy context. In those contexts, the paper reports the relationship that emerges from these literatures as a proposition rather than as a well-established causal effect.

Analytical synthesis

The synthesis was not just a thematic frequency count but was based on structured comparison. Research studies analyzed included: population, national context, research design, theoretical lens, major findings, and outcome level and its implications for work, family, community or institutional embeddedness. Special consideration was given to the contradictory patterns (e.g., intention to stay even though there is lack of organizational fit, positive social adjustment despite work dissatisfaction, and community embeddedness despite organizational mobility), which reveal the limits of the retention as a single outcome.

The analysis then involved comparing the explanatory ability of the Job Embeddedness Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory and organisational-support perspectives. The Job Embeddedness Theory is about the attachment of people to organisations and communities through links, fit and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001). Conservation of Resources Theory may be used to understand accumulated family, career and community resources (Hobfoll, 1989) in that individuals seek to acquire, maintain and prevent the loss of valuable resources. Research on organisational support clarifies the mechanisms through which financial, career and adjustment support can influence expatriate motivation and embeddedness (e.g., Chen et al., 2017), whereas family-adjustment studies provide understanding about how family support – that is, support provided to spouses and children – can impact the expatriate family system (e.g., Shah et al., 2022).

The theoretical gap is between these perspectives. Job embeddedness is limited in identifying anchoring forces in the accumulation of family resources across international careers, resource theory has its limits in explaining the gain or loss in relations to the employer, and organisational support in the institutional treatment does not fully capture the roles of marriage, kinship and residence institutions. AESE was created to fill this explanatory void by conceptualising settlement in terms of four domain professional, family, community and institutional levels rather than an extension of organisational commitment.

Theoretical Foundations

Job embeddedness: from job retention to place attachment

The Job Embeddedness Theory was developed to account for the reason people remain in their job, beyond job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and a web of forces. Links, fit and sacrifice are three dimensions that have on- and off-job application (Mitchell et al, 2001). For foreigners, this architecture can be very helpful as decisions about mobility will always have to cross organizational and community lines. Lo et al. (2012) identify three types of attachment – home country community, host country organisational and host country community embeddedness – indicating that a combination of different types of attachment can occur. Other studies from the expatriate literature also distinguish between the cultural dimensions of belonging to the organisation and to the community but view them as interdependent (e.g., Chen et al., 2024).

When the goal is extended from the retention of academics to the continuity in the host country, then the theory gains more power with the expatriate academics. Przytuła (2026) demonstrates that intentions to stay are maintained even in situations in which organisational fit is not fully realized, thanks to links with local and foreign communities, perceived quality of life, and anticipated sacrifice. This suggests that the 'off the job' aspect of embeddedness is not simply the additional aspect of the employment relationship. It may develop to the point that the academic's geographical choice is to some extent detached from the present employer.

AESE, therefore, holds onto links, sacrifice and fit, but moves their analytical target. Professional links would be colleagues, research collaborators, students, disciplinary networks, career opportunities, spouse or partner, children and extended kin, friendships and neighbourhoods, religious or cultural communities, and familiarity with legal-administrative systems; community links would be friends, neighbourhoods, religious or cultural communities, and familiarity with legal-administrative systems; institutional links would be access to services, familiarity with legal-administrative systems, and residence status. Fit is applied to professional, family, cultural and lifestyle aspects, and sacrifice is about the material, relationship and identity dimensions on leaving the host country instead of leaving the job.

Conservation of resources and whole-life careers

Conservation of Resources Theory suggests that people work to gain, maintain and defend precious resources, and that they feel stressed when there is a threat or loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources are allocated to work and non-work activities in international careers. The authors explicitly take a whole-life perspective, and demonstrate the way in which Cultural Intelligence can help with both organisational and community embeddedness for self-initiated expatriates, such as academics (Chen et al.,

2024). The settlement relevance is that many resources are gained over time and can become geographically concentrated, such as career network, trusted colleagues, spouse, children's education, housing, among others; these resources can form a resource caravan that is expensive to be reconstructed somewhere else.

This viewpoint also prevents the reductionist view of family formation. While marriage can create resources like emotional support, local knowledge, kinship networks, and shared economic security, it can also bring about the loss of those resources—such as a spouse losing a career opportunity, children losing stability or existing caregiving arrangements—when the choice to relocate is made. Recent mixed couple evidence shows that the agency of work is relational, can be facilitated and constrained by spouses and partners (Journal of Global Mobility, 2026). Settlement orientation may actually increase rather than decrease when mobility is not eliminated, but when the losses of mobility are greater than the potential benefits.

Organisational support as a bridge between work and non-work life

Organisational support is relevant to settlement because expatriates seldom live in an organisational and host environment that are isolated from one another. Autonomous motivation and organisation/community embeddedness have been found to be affected by career and adjustment support, as revealed by studies on self-initiated expatriates (Chen et al., 2017). Abdul Malek, Budhwar and Reiche (2015) suggest that in Malaysia, matched data of 134 expatriates and spouses reveals that the support provided by organisations and host-country nationals made a different contribution to the adjustment of expatriates and spouses. Results indicate that support can create resources which flow across the work–non work boundary.

Family-adjustment studies state the case more explicitly. Shah et al., 2022, found that organisational support had a significant impact on the adjustment of expatriates, spouses and children while spouses and children's adjustment were interdependent. For universities, this helps to create a distinction between work-supportive and settlement-supportive practices. The former encompass clear role definitions, good research facilities, and transparency for promotion and professional development; the latter, include credible immigration guidance, family-friendly orientation, information about education and healthcare, culturally responsive practices, flexible work plans and support for career planning in the longer-term. Settlement practice does not need to involve too much institutional involvement in private life – it recognizes that an international career is a construct of a family and community system.

Family Formation as a Settlement Mechanism

A family formation is understood as the process or the reorganisation of close and dependent relationships that occur along the expatriation path, such as marriage, long-term partnership, children and integration into extended kinship networks. The definition intentionally distinguishes between the two concepts of ‘family formation' and the narrower concept of ‘marital status’. A binary married/unmarried variable provides little information on if the spouse is local or expatriate, if the marriage preceded migration, if children are socialized in the local country, or if extended family ties generate strong local ties.

Theoretically it is significant to distinguish between accompanying family and locally formed family. Assigned expatriation is when the family of an employee moves across the border and then faces the issue of adjustment. Local family trajectories are ones in which the expatriate's life is increasingly taken up in the host country. The direction of embeddedness is thus reversed, not importing an extant family system into another context, but part of creating a family system through the context. This can help to develop local social capital and the number of institutional links between the expatriate and the host society.

While marriage to a host-country national can be particularly significant in terms of establishing tight local connections, nationality should not be used as an indicator of successful integration. While the couple may be experiencing differences in religion, gender-role expectations, language, family responsibilities or career goals, the local spouse can offer cultural knowledge and social access. Similarly, intermarriage between two foreigners could result in significant family stability without corresponding levels of local kinship. The theoretical contribution is then not ‘local marriage leads to settlement', but rather, ‘marriage to different ‘family types' leads to different sets of links, fits, resources and sacrifices'.

The temporal horizon of mobility can also be changed by children. Relocation can become a family decision, rather than an individual career choice, as a result of schooling, friendships, language learning, and the impact of health services and being close to grandparents. The outcomes of family members are linked, as illustrated by Shah et al. (2022) in the adjustment of children whose parents are either directly or indirectly affected by their parents' adjustment. In an AESE perspective, the degree of local "embeddedness" of children could lead to greater perceived sacrifice for departing from the area even when the expatriate academic is still able to be professionally mobile.

Transnational obligations work the other way. Competing links that can work against settlement in the host country are established by claims of parenthood, by inheritance and assets in the country of origin, by age of the relative, by citizenship considerations and by a high degree of identification with the country of origin. AESE therefore takes a more multifaceted view of the simultaneous embedding in multiple locations, and not of the one-way movement of "home to host country". Long-term settlement orientation is not about the disappearance of home-country attachment (but) about the relative sustainability of the host country due to the professional, family, community and institutional resource configuration.

The Malaysian Institutional Context

Higher-education talent and institutional support

Malaysia’s higher-education sector includes public and private universities and internationally connected institutions with different governance, employment and internationalisation arrangements. This heterogeneity matters because the support available to expatriate academics can differ substantially across institutional types. Earlier Malaysian evidence already shows

that expatriate academics evaluate both professional conditions and the wider living environment. Richardson and Wong (2018) found that social adjustment could be favourable even when workplace disappointment weakened retention plans, while Parnian et al. (2013) identified research opportunities, cost of living, institutional reputation, professional development and geographic location among reasons for remaining.

The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035 gives the issue contemporary policy relevance. Its talent agenda explicitly encompasses academic and administrative staff and promotes evidence-informed talent governance, holistic well-being, work–life integration and family-friendly initiatives. These priorities provide a policy basis for universities to treat international talent sustainability as more than recruitment. However, the existence of policy aspirations should not be interpreted as evidence that all institutions currently provide equivalent support; the implementation gap itself is an empirical question for future AESE research.

Muslim marriage administration and family institutionalisation

Marriage in Malaysia is governed through different legal-administrative arrangements depending on the parties and the applicable law. For Muslim couples, official Malaysian guidance describes procedures involving pre-marriage requirements, application for marriage permission, solemnisation and registration through the relevant state religious authorities. SPPIM, developed by JAKIM with state Islamic religious departments, supports marriage-related administration in participating jurisdictions, while state-specific requirements remain important (Government of Malaysia, 2026a, 2026b).

For this paper, the relevance of Muslim marriage policy is institutional rather than theological. Formal marriage can connect an expatriate to new administrative, family and community systems, but those connections should not be equated automatically with social integration or permanent settlement. Moreover, procedures vary across states and individual circumstances. The framework therefore treats marriage administration as one component of institutional embeddedness: it can increase familiarity with host-country institutions and formalise family relationships, while its practical significance depends on the couple's wider social, legal and career circumstances.

Residence, employment and the foreign spouse of a Malaysian citizen

Immigration arrangements provide another institutional layer. Malaysian Immigration states that a foreign spouse of a Malaysian citizen may, subject to applicable conditions and approval, use the relevant long-term social visit facility, and a legally married foreign spouse may seek endorsement to engage in lawful employment, business or professional occupation (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2026a, 2026b). The employment endorsement requires compliance with immigration requirements and does not make marriage equivalent to permanent residence or citizenship.

Conceptually, however, this matters because family status can alter the dependence of residence on a particular employer. For some expatriate academics, employment and lawful residence may initially be closely coupled. Where a legally recognised marriage creates access to a spouse-based residence pathway and work endorsement, the institutional architecture of mobility may change. The academic may become more capable of changing employers while remaining in Malaysia, thereby making the distinction between organisational retention and host-country retention especially salient. This is a proposition about institutional opportunity, not a claim that all married expatriates will use or qualify for the same pathway.

Academic Expatriate Settlement Embeddedness (AESE) Framework

AESE conceptualises long-term settlement orientation as an emergent outcome of four interacting domains: professional, family, community and institutional embeddedness. Professional embeddedness captures career fit, collegial and research links, access to resources, recognition and the professional sacrifices associated with leaving. Family embeddedness captures spouse or partner ties, children, extended kin, caregiving obligations and the family-level costs and benefits of mobility. Community embeddedness captures friendships, neighbourhood ties, cultural and religious participation, language, lifestyle fit and everyday belonging. Institutional embeddedness captures familiarity with and confidence in the host country's administrative, legal and service systems, including the practical stability of residence and employment arrangements.

The framework does not assume that the four domains are additive in a simple numerical sense. A severe deficit in one domain may outweigh strength in another. An academic may possess excellent professional embeddedness but leave because the spouse cannot build a sustainable career; another may tolerate mediocre organisational fit because children, spouse and community ties make Malaysia highly attractive; a third may possess strong family links but pursue onward migration because residence insecurity or career stagnation undermines long-term viability. Settlement is therefore configurational rather than linear.

AESE also distinguishes three outcomes. Organisational retention refers to remaining with the current university. Host-country retention refers to remaining in Malaysia even if the employer changes. Long-term settlement orientation refers to the expectation that Malaysia will remain a principal location of future professional, family and community life. The third outcome is intentionally labelled an orientation rather than permanent settlement because legal permanence, citizenship and subjective belonging are distinct and because internationally mobile academics may retain future mobility options even when strongly embedded.

Table 1. Academic Expatriate Settlement Embeddedness (AESE) framework

Domain	Illustrative links / fit	Potential sacrifices of leaving	Primary implication
Professional	Career opportunities; research collaborators; students; institutional reputation; role fit	Loss of position, research access, networks, promotion trajectory	Organisational and career continuity

Family	Spouse/partner; children; extended kin; caregiving; family routines	Spouse career disruption; children's schooling; separation from kin	Family-level anchoring
Community	Friends; neighbourhood; cultural/religious communities; language; lifestyle	Loss of belonging, routines, social support and place familiarity	Host-country attachment
Institutional	Residence/work arrangements; administrative familiarity; healthcare/education access; institutional trust	Loss of legal-administrative stability and accumulated institutional knowledge	Feasibility of long-term settlement

Propositions

P1. Host-country community embeddedness is positively associated with expatriate academics' long-term settlement orientation, independently of organisational retention.
P2. Family formation in the host country strengthens settlement orientation when it increases local links and perceived fit and raises the relational or material sacrifices associated with departure.
P3. The relationship between family formation and settlement orientation is contingent on family configuration; local-spouse, expatriate-spouse and pre-existing accompanying-family trajectories generate different patterns of host-country links and sacrifice.
P4. Family-inclusive institutional support strengthens host-country settlement orientation indirectly by increasing family adjustment, resource stability and community embeddedness.
P5. Professional embeddedness predicts organisational retention more strongly than settlement orientation when family and community embeddedness are weak, whereas family and community embeddedness increase the likelihood of host-country retention after organisational turnover.
P6. Institutional stability—including credible residence, employment and administrative pathways—strengthens the conversion of family and community embeddedness into long-term settlement orientation.
P7. Transnational family obligations and attractive home- or third-country opportunities weaken the relationship between host-country embeddedness and settlement orientation by increasing the resources available outside the host country.
P8. Long-term settlement orientation is highest when professional, family, community and institutional embeddedness are mutually reinforcing; severe misfit in any one domain can produce withdrawal despite strong embeddedness in other domains.

Discussion

The principal contribution of AESE is to change the dependent variable. Expatriate-academic research has understandably concentrated on whether universities can attract, integrate and retain international faculty. Yet the evidence reviewed here indicates that the host country itself can become a meaningful locus of attachment. Once this is recognised, organisational turnover no longer necessarily represents failed international talent retention. An academic who changes universities while remaining in Malaysia may represent a loss to one institution but not to the national higher-education system. Conversely, a university may report strong employee retention while an academic remains psychologically and practically oriented toward eventual departure.

A second contribution is the repositioning of family. Family has frequently appeared in expatriation research as a source of adjustment difficulty or support. AESE instead treats family formation as part of the mechanism through which place becomes consequential. This does not elevate marriage above other relationships, nor does it assume that marriage is intrinsically stabilising. Rather, it recognises that spouses, children and kin can redistribute resources and sacrifices across people and places, making mobility a household-level decision. The 2026 mixed-couple evidence is especially instructive because it shows that spousal influence can both facilitate and constrain work decisions; agency in global careers is relational rather than purely individual.

Third, AESE integrates institutional conditions with relational embeddedness. Lehtonen et al. (2023) show that institutional trust is relevant to host-country withdrawal, while Malaysian immigration and marriage arrangements demonstrate concretely how institutions structure feasible life choices. The framework therefore avoids treating settlement as a purely psychological sense of belonging. An academic can feel culturally at home yet face unstable career or residence conditions; another can possess secure institutional status but lack family or community fit. Sustainable settlement requires sufficient alignment across subjective and structural conditions.

The framework also clarifies the role of universities. Higher education institutions cannot and should not determine employees' private relationships or settlement choices. They can, however, influence whether international academics and their families can navigate work and life without avoidable institutional friction. Patterson and Brotherhood (2024) show that institutional and social support, including language support, predicts international faculty integration. Together with evidence that organisational support affects expatriate families (Shah et al., 2022), this suggests that universities seeking sustainable international talent should evaluate whether their practices are family-aware, administratively credible and capable of supporting integration beyond the immediate job role.

Finally, the Malaysian case contributes to international expatriation scholarship because it illustrates why host-country context must be theorised rather than treated as a control variable. Malaysia combines an internationally oriented higher-education system with distinctive multicultural, religious, family-law and immigration institutions. Richardson and Wong's (2018) finding that cultural and religious environment influenced expatriate academics' attraction to Malaysia indicates that these features already enter mobility decisions. AESE extends the analysis by asking whether they also shape the transition from attraction to settlement.

Implications for Higher Education Management and Policy

The first implication for the universities is the differentiation between international recruitment and international talent sustainability. While it is possible to recruit academics, it is necessary to look at interfaces that expatriates repeatedly encounter after arrival in order to build settlement supportive capability. Institutions need to be able to offer accurate information on immigration and administration, transparent career pathways, family-friendly orientation, accessible information on schooling and healthcare, culturally and religiously responsive support and mechanisms for referring issues beyond their expertise. The practices should be provided, without giving the impression that expatriates are seeking permanent settlement.

Universities should also not be reading too much into their retention figures. It is important to note that, by monitoring only the fact that an expatriate has stayed with the institution, the information cannot be used to determine whether or not the country has gained the expatriate's human capital. There may be a distinction therefore at the level of the sector between institutional turnover and national retention and international exit. Such differentiation would be more in line with a national talent perspective and would help determine if the institutional practices promote academics to stay with the employer or if they are the factors that foster wider Malaysian talent embeddedness.

Family support should be based on choice and privacy. Employers are not required by universities to obtain information about employees' intimate relationships, unless such information is disclosed on a voluntary basis for proper university administration. However, family-inclusive resources can be provided to everyone: orientation sessions that are available for spouses, information portals, school and healthcare guidance, flexible work policies and accessible referral to official immigration or religious authorities. This doesn't make private life into an HR surveillance zone.

The framework emphasizes coherence between higher-education talent strategy and immigration administration and family-related institutions for policymakers. The government's focus on the integration of work and life, and family-friendly policies, under Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint is helpful and is a good policy platform but the sustainability of international talent can also be influenced by clear and easy cross-agency processes. Policy review should not only consider the number of international academics recruited, but the administration should also review the conditions that allow for the formation of predictable medium- and long-term lives for talented individuals and their families when they want it.

Future Research Agenda

AESE needs empirical evidence. A first research program should design and test a multi-dimensional instrument that distinguishes between the professional, family, community and institutional embeddedness. While there are scales that have been developed for existing jobs, they do not provide a basis, and family and institutional dimensions should not be added on without qualitative construct development. Before exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, interviews with expatriate academics residing in Malaysian public, private and international institutions can help to create locally meaningful indicators.

Longitudinal designs should be used in a second programme. It is difficult to establish the direction of causation with cross-sectional intention-to-stay measures because they are unable to distinguish between those who form relationships within Malaysia first and those already committed to living in Malaysia who are more likely to form local relationships. Longitudinal data could track expatriate academics as they enter, partner or marry, transition to family, change jobs, and immigrate. Event-history or latent-transition analyses would be particularly helpful in separating transient from permanent shifts in settlement orientations.

Third, studies must make comparisons between family arrangements, not marital status. Single expatriates and those with accompanying spouse, dual-expatriate couples, those expatriates who partner with Malaysian citizens, those who have children and those who do not, and academics who have significant transnational care and maintenance responsibilities are among the relevant comparisons. Qualitative research should also explore the interaction between family decision making and religion, gender and nationality, but not make the assumption that everyone experiences the same interaction within any of those categories.

Fourthly, the type of institution should be regarded as a boundary condition. Employment practices, governance, internationalisation plans and resources available to public universities are different to the private universities and international branch campuses. Multilevel designs can be used to assess if the family-supportive climate of the university or the international infrastructure of the university reinforces the connection between the individual resources and the settlement orientation.

Last but not least, cross-country analysis would determine if AESE is country-specific for Malaysia or if it can be generalized. The residence regimes, citizenship pathways, family law, language environment and academic labour markets are all different across countries. Comparative studies between different Asian higher-education hubs could be used to see if institutional embeddedness is more important when there is strong residential clustering with jobs, and if family embeddedness is more important when that dependency on jobs is lowered by having a spouse as a pathway to work.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in this conceptual review. First, there is a limited amount of direct research on marriage and extended settlement among expatriate academics, so it would be premature to integrate findings of research by self-initiated expatriates with that of expatriate families and mixed-nationality couples. The propositions are thus theoretically motivated extensions, not causal findings. Secondly, it is an integrative review, which is not a systematic review, it has a conceptual focus and does not present a PRISMA flow or pooled evidence estimates. Thirdly, Malaysian policy is dynamic and subject to variation, depending on the context of the jurisdiction and the family situation, especially in the field of family administration. Policy statements in this paper should thus be interpreted as contextual conditions prevailing at the time of writing, and not as single pieces of legal advice. Fourth, settlement orientation is different to permanent residence/ citizenship/ objective duration of stay. An academic can be very attached but have global mobility and a long-term resident can be weakly attached. Future studies should thus break down the subjective orientation into its components, along with the behavioural intention and observed mobility separately. Lastly, the framework places emphasis on the settlement which is under theorized but not necessarily normatively better than mobility. One of the reasons for success in international academic careers is their mobility.

12. Conclusion

Academics who are expatriates are not solely confined to universities. Their international journeys take place in parallel in their workplaces, their families, their communities and institutions and over time, these environments can change the place of work to a possible place of residence. The constructs of attraction, adjustment, organisational support and retention have all been well-explained in existing research, but none can alone account for the reasons given for the academic's leaving a university but not moving out of the country, staying at a university but preparing to leave, or gradually reconfiguring future family and professional life around the host society.

Academic Expatriate Settlement Embeddedness fills this void by differentiating between the concept of professional embeddedness, family embeddedness, community embeddedness and institutional embeddedness, and by separating organisational retention, host-country retention, and long-term settlement orientation. Marriage and formation of families are relevant to the framework because they can re-organise links, fit, resources and sacrifices across places, but they do not necessarily ensure settlement. University support is important because work and non-work systems are porous; policy is important because belonging is limited or facilitated by institutional viability.

The implication for Malaysia is both academic and practical. If the intent is to recruit international faculty, it's not enough to judge success at the recruitment stage or at the employer level. The dynamics of building sustainable trajectories for internationally mobile academics—and why some do not leave Malaysia even after relocating to different institutions—provides a richer foundation for considering talent strategy. AESE offers a structure around that inquiry and a set of propositions to work with in order to now consider the transition between the stages of expatriation and settlement as an empirical phenomenon.

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