

Where Are You From? Career Experiences of Non-US PhD Holders in the United States

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The prevalence of international scholars and researchers in the United States is largely associated with their pursuit of advanced education at US higher education institutions, unlike many other countries where international scholars and academics look for professional experience and career advancement after completing their education. Accordingly, the number of international students in the United States, particularly at the doctoral level, is strikingly high, especially in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). In 2003, foreign students accounted for 50 percent of doctorate recipients in the physical sciences, 67 percent in engineering, and 68 percent in economics. Many of these international students remain in the country after graduation, expanding the workforce as highly trained individuals.

But while the presence of non-US PhD holders has become a significant feature characterizing manpower in the United States, their professional experience has received little attention. With this in mind, we studied career outcomes and professional experiences among non-US citizens, to check for differences against their US counterparts. For this, we used the 2013 National Science Foundation *Survey of Doctorate Recipients*, which provides data on doctoral graduates from US institutions who are active in the US labor market. Given that the majority of non-US citizens change their immigration status when acquiring permanent residence or US citizenship, we considered citizenship status at the time of doctoral graduation. This is an important consideration, assuming that the cultural, educational, and linguistic background of non-US citizens is likely to have a continuing impact on their career experiences and advancement, even after they become US citizens.

Career Advancement with a Supervisory Role in the Workplace

Our study shows that while US citizens were more likely to hold a supervisory position (50 percent) than non-US citizens (46 percent), this slight difference disappeared when adjusting for their demographic background, field of study, and the number of years since their doctoral graduation. Focusing exclusively on non-US citizens, however, their country of origin had an impact on their likelihood to hold a supervisory position. More than half of PhD holders from Canada (58 percent), Germany (62 percent), India (52 percent), and Russia (50 percent) indicated holding a supervisory position. In contrast, less than 40 percent of PhD holders from China (39 percent), Japan (38 percent), and South Korea (32 percent) held a supervisory position. It is worth noting that these three countries are all East Asian and non-English speaking, in contrast to the first three, which are English-speaking or European.

Abstract

The increasing presence of international scholars and researchers has become a significant feature of the American workforce, yet the career experiences of this group of workers have received little attention. National data on US-trained PhD holders show that non-US citizens are significantly less satisfied with intrinsic and extrinsic career-related factors than their US counterparts.

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Career Satisfaction: Does US Citizenship Matter?

Concerning both the intrinsic aspects (e.g., opportunities for career advancement, intellectual challenge, level of responsibility, degree of independence, and contribution to society) and the extrinsic aspects (e.g., salary, benefits, and job security) of their jobs, non-US citizens were significantly less satisfied than US citizens. This significant difference in career satisfaction by citizenship status remains true even after adjusting for differences in demographic background, field of study, and number of years since doctoral graduation between US and non-US citizens.

Career Satisfaction: Does Country of Origin Matter?

Focusing on non-US citizens, notable differences emerged across countries of origin. Regarding satisfaction with intrinsic factors, PhD holders from Canada, Germany, and India had a relatively higher satisfaction than other non-US PhD holders. On the other hand, non-US PhD holders from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan reported significantly lower satisfaction levels with intrinsic factors than other non-US PhD holders. In terms of extrinsic factors, while PhD holders from India reported higher satisfaction, those from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan reported significantly lower satisfaction than other non-US PhD holders.

Once Foreigners, Forever Foreigners?

To explain the negative effect of immigration or foreign-born status on career outcomes, prior research often cites language barriers, lack of local experiences and references, cultural differences in ways of working or communicating, and subtle marginalization of immigrants (e.g., because of a heavy accent when speaking English) as primary reasons for why immigrant workers experience disadvantages in the labor market. These challenges, however, may be mitigated as these workers' career experience increases over time and they adapt to their professional life in the United States. With this in mind, it is worth noting that the differences between US and non-US PhD holders in the likelihood of holding a supervisory position disappeared when considering the number of years since graduation. On the other hand, our study shows that non-US PhD holders were not as satisfied with their professional experiences as their US counterparts. This finding suggests that non-US PhD holders may continue to experience subtle career-related barriers, resulting in a negative perception of their professional experiences, and lower satisfaction.

Not Everybody Experiences the Same: Country of Origin Matters

There are distinctive patterns in career experiences between PhD holders from Western, English-speaking countries and those from East Asian countries—China, Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan, specifically. Cultural and linguistic distance from the United States is greater for PhD holders from East Asian countries. Therefore, East Asian PhD holders may experience significant challenges, largely due to their language backgrounds, work/communication styles, and cultural norms and values. They may also experience challenges in their workplaces because of racial prejudice and discrimination.

To conclude, we argue that it is important to further examine the professional experiences among highly US-educated members of the workforce, not only by citizenship status but also by countries of origin among non-US citizens. Simply dichotomizing foreign-born PhD holders by citizenship status may result in a misleading understanding of the challenges and difficulties that some experience more than others. Future research should delve into this aspect, focusing on the impact of country of origin and cultural and linguistic background on a variety of career and professional experiences. This will deepen our understanding of non-US PhD holders and their career outcomes and experiences. ▲

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