



International Students and Diaspora Roots/Routes

Annette Bamberger

Abstract

A study of French Jewish students in Israel revealed that their mobility was motivated by the pursuit of cosmopolitan skills for a global knowledge economy, as well as a deeper connection to an ethnic identity and a “homeland.” Diaspora is a timely lens to understand international student flows, and much empirical work remains to be done, across contexts and levels, to understand its implications for international higher education.

International student mobility (ISM) tends to be portrayed as the rational pursuit of primarily economic advantage through the acquisition of academic qualifications, language skills, international social networks, and multicultural attitudes, which are rewarded in global and local labor markets. Alternative narratives of ISM, such as the desire to enrich an ethnic identity and engage with a “homeland,” have been particularly underdeveloped. Yet, there appear to be many nations in which student mobility flows are linked to ethnic identities and diaspora roots/routes. Recent studies have indicated diaspora trajectories in ISM to China, Cyprus, Ireland, Israel, Korea, Morocco, and South Africa, suggesting that a student’s desire to connect with, and enrich, an ethnic identity and ties with a “homeland” may contribute to mobility.

French Jewish Students in Israel

International students in Israel have historically been Jewish students who possess an ethnoreligious connection to the country. They flow from more affluent countries offering better academic credentials and are better placed in the global hierarchy, with the United States and Europe (particularly France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) being the largest source countries.

Based on a study of French Jewish international students in Israel, I explored the roles of, and interaction between, both the pursuit of cosmopolitan skills and attitudes and ethnic identity influences on the nature, trajectories, and purposes of ISM. The analysis revealed that for these students, ISM was motivated by both the pursuit of cosmopolitan skills for a global knowledge economy and the pursuit of deeper understanding of, and connection to, an ethnic identity and a perceived homeland. Students’ choice was expressed as a package of an academic program, international institution, English language skills, international social networks, and destination country. This indicates that some forms of ISM are more than the pursuit of cosmopolitan skills and attitudes for economic advantage. Rather, ISM may comprise the blending of cosmopolitan and ethnic identity pursuits within the framework of an international higher education (HE) program, to gain economic advantage and foster ethnic identity. This provides several important insights.

First, it shows that ISM serves as the expression of multiple and hybrid identities. In this case, the pursuit of cosmopolitan skills and attitudes within the framework of an international program in Israel asserted affiliation not only with a particular transnational ethnoreligious group and a diaspora homeland, but also with a globally mobile cosmopolitan group of international students. Second, it suggests that this dual pursuit could, in certain instances, disrupt the global hierarchy of HE destinations. In this case, students from France (a more affluent and “center” country) studied in Israel (less affluent and “peripheral”). Third, this study illustrates a trajectory of ISM that follows diaspora routes and social and emotional connections with “homelands,” indicating the relevance of diaspora beyond academic mobility and knowledge production. This demonstrates that ISM allows for a multitude of practices and identities that at times align and meld with, but extend beyond, purely economic considerations. ISM should be understood as a complex assemblage in which multiple intentions and identities are interwoven with economic, political, social, ethnic, and cultural concerns. This resonates with scholarship that rejects the dominant economic advantage narrative and instead views HE and student mobility as a process of “self-formation” or “becoming.”

Beyond Student Perspectives

The connection between diaspora and ISM deserves further exploration. However, it would be a mistake to focus only on international students and their motivations/experiences. To gain a holistic and critical understanding of diaspora and international HE, the investigation of not only the individual but also the institutional, national, and supranational levels is needed. A recent research project that I undertook with colleagues analyzed the social media marketing of Israeli universities toward international students. It indicated that some universities are actively tailoring their marketing efforts toward attracting diaspora students. Universities may also be tailoring their curricula and program offerings to such students—in some cases, as part of political programs of nation-building from afar. For instance, Jinan University in China caters to (ethnically Han) Chinese diaspora students and provides a curriculum rich in Chinese history and language, Confucian thought, and, significantly, Chinese Communist Party ideology.

States have identified international HE as a way to engage “their” diaspora youths and create or renew bonds, often with aims to bolster allies abroad to advocate for the homeland and provide economic assistance and remittances. With these aims in mind, Morocco inaugurated the Summer University program for second generation Moroccan students living abroad. However, Rilke Mahieu’s 2019 study revealed that the program was so warped in its optimistic presentation of the country that many diaspora youths were instead disillusioned by the experience. This suggests that while a desire to connect with a diaspora identity and homeland may spur some ISM and shape the desired experience (i.e., diaspora international students may wish for deeper ties with local communities, be more interested in local languages, histories, cultures, and religious practices), students may also be more critical of their “homelands,” as their greater knowledge and understanding of the society—stemming from perhaps previous trips to the country, family ties, and exposure to diverse international media sources—may undermine states’ attempts at nation-building through ISM.

More transactionally, diaspora students have been identified in national internationalization policies and programs as “low-hanging fruit” in an increasingly competitive international student market, with the expectation that they would be easier targets for recruitment, given the possibility of extended family support in the homeland and supposed positive associations with the country (and presumably its HE system). Israel and Korea’s recent national internationalization policies take these approaches.

The “diaspora option” has likewise been advocated by international organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO as a viable development strategy—particularly to combat brain drain and promote brain circulation. Thus, the institutional, national, and supranational levels shape the field with their different perspectives and interests. Diaspora is a timely lens to understand international student flows, and much empirical work remains to be done, across contexts and levels, to understand its implications for international HE. ▲

Diaspora is a timely lens to understand international student flows.

Annette Bamberger is a Golda Meir Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Email: annette.bamberger@mail.huji.ac.il.