



Academic Diaspora and Internationalization: UK-based Turkish Academics

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Abstract

With rising numbers of international academics, the discussions around the possible benefits that they provide to their fellow nationals and home country are well documented in the literature. However, there has been little attention as to how their diasporic engagements reinforce the internationalization of higher education while supporting fellow nationals. Taking UK-based Turkish academics as an example, this article sheds light on the relationship between the academic diaspora and the internationalization of higher education.

Over recent decades, the United Kingdom has become a global hub for international scholars from around the world. Statistically speaking, in 2021, more than 70,000 international academic staff were employed at UK higher education institutions, accounting for nearly one-third of the UK academic workforce. While the United Kingdom benefits substantially from its international academic workforce, the homelands of these international scholars pay a high price for losing such talented minds to the United Kingdom.

However, there are ways to improve the effects of brain drain and even benefit from such academic diasporas. In this article, I use evidence from research on the Turkish academic diaspora in the United Kingdom to show how the diasporic engagements of international academics support internationalization of higher education in both sending and receiving countries. This case sheds light on the myriad ways in which academic diasporas deliberately support fellow nationals (e.g., by establishing transnational research collaborations and hosting fellow nationals), and by doing so, reinforce the internationalization of higher education in both their home and host countries.

Turkish Academic Diaspora in the United Kingdom

Traditionally, the United States has been the most popular destination for Turkish international students to study and for Turkish researchers to work. (Although continental Europe, notably Germany, is the “home” of millions of Turkish migrant workers, it has been a less popular destination for academic migrants). However, this is now starting to change, with the United Kingdom rapidly becoming a new trendy academic hub, attracting thousands of Turkish students and scholars in recent years. In the past five years, while the number of Turkish students in the United Kingdom increased by 30 percent and peaked at 4,135, the number of Turkish academics working at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) more than doubled, reaching 815 in 2021.

Academic Diasporas as a Source of Knowledge

This academic diaspora supports internationalization in many ways. Many UK-based Turkish academics give seminars at Turkish universities and NGOs in Turkey, and even offer master-level courses at Turkish universities during summertime. Due to COVID-19, the virtual participation of UK-based Turkish academics in such activities has skyrocketed. In most cases, thanks to such contributions, students and junior researchers from Turkey contact UK-based Turkish academics to ask for their help, such as feedback on their PhD application proposals or scholarly articles. UK-based Turkish academics further provide tacit knowledge about the UK higher education system. This tacit knowledge includes strategies for students to improve their chances of getting scholarships from UK universities and sponsoring bodies, and for junior researchers to excel at job interviews at UK HEIs. Providing such tacit knowledge to fellow nationals is regarded as a responsibility thrust upon the Turkish academic diaspora.

Academic Diasporas as Hosts

Further, most UK-based Turkish academics act as hosts for fellow nationals, notably students and junior researchers from Turkey. Once they hold permanent positions or have administrative roles at UK HEIs, they welcome and even encourage academic visitors from Turkey. In some cases, these academic visits turn into long-term research partnerships.

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Academic Diasporas as Transnational Research Partners

UK-based Turkish academics, particularly social scientists, easily engage in bi/multinational research projects with fellow nationals, with collaborations occurring thanks to improved information and communication technology and easier travel. The United Kingdom's generous funding opportunities to promote partnerships with low-income countries are widely used by UK-based Turkish academics to collaborate with Turkey-based academics. Since research funds, such as the [Global Challenges Research Fund](#), mostly require knowledge spillover, the Turkish academic diaspora produces vital knowledge likely to support Turkey's development.

In particular, the United Kingdom's flagship binational research partnership fund with low-income countries, the [Newton Fund](#), is an effective tool for UK-based Turkish academics to build binational partnerships with Turkey-based researchers, as it overcomes bureaucratic challenges and exclusively supports binational partnerships with specific countries, including Turkey. In most cases, these research partnerships lead to coauthorship in scientific papers between UK-based Turkish academics and Turkey-based counterparts. (It is worth noting that establishing transnational research partnerships without funding is a near impossible task because of the heavy workload at UK universities.) Lastly, Turkish academics working on permanent contracts at research-intensive UK universities find it easy to build transnational partnerships, as their positions require them to focus more on international projects than on teaching, and they do not have to spend time job hunting.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

These diasporic engagements directly and indirectly reinforce the internationalization of higher education in the United Kingdom, as they involve facilitating international movement of Turkish students and researchers, establishing transnational research partnerships and coauthorships with (Turkey-based) international academics. It is therefore of great benefit for institutions in the United Kingdom to support bi/multinational research projects and mobility schemes in which academic diasporas can take an active role in building bridges—hence, in supporting internationalization of higher education.

In addition, such engagements play a vital role in supporting the development of the home country (in this case, Turkey), for instance by establishing transnational research partnerships, transferring knowledge, and hosting fellow nationals, although these benefits are more limited due to the lack of binational funding, bureaucratic challenges, heavy workloads in Turkey and the United Kingdom, and the absence of formal knowledge diaspora networks.

One particular challenge in the Turkish case is that Turkey does not have a formal program to create a network for academic diasporas that could serve as an essential source of information for both academic and policy making purposes. This negligence is at odds with other countries, which have specifically chosen to consider the presence of their nationals abroad as a strength to be maintained and nurtured. Turkey could benefit further from its academic diaspora by establishing an official knowledge network that could facilitate partnerships with other academic diasporas and look for binational research partnerships with UK funding agencies, hence mitigating the consequences of losing their talents.

As a final remark, many UK-based Turkish academics are critical of the incumbent Turkish government and criticize the declining academic freedom in Turkey; in fact, this disapproval is one of the main reasons behind their decision to work in the United Kingdom. However, they make a distinction between the people of Turkey and the government and keep supporting their fellow nationals for the sake of solidarity. ▲

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