



Internationalization of Higher Education and the Advantage of Diaspora

Fazal Rizvi

Abstract

With their policies of internationalization, higher education institutions have increasingly begun to develop diaspora strategies to take advantage of the cultural diversity and transnational connectivity of their international students and faculty. This article shows how the idea of diaspora is now understood and deployed by higher education institutions to foster competitive advantage.

International mobility of students and faculty has transformed the demography of higher education institutions (HEIs) in many parts of the world, leading to transnational networks becoming a key feature of their internationalization policies. Increasingly, HEIs recognize how these networks can be helpful in working toward their strategic goals. Realizing that their international faculty and students reside in complex systems of transnational relations, they have begun to consider the potential uses of these relations to advance their interests. As a result, HEIs can be viewed as an important site for the formation and cultivation of new diasporas.

Shifting Meanings of Diaspora

While the traditional notion of diaspora implied suffering, loss, and victimization, and referred to communities in exile, its recent meanings are much broader. In popular discourses, it is now linked to a broader politics of transnational experience. Under the contemporary conditions of globalization, the appeal of the concept of diaspora is perfectly understandable since it no longer refers exclusively to ethnicity and migration, but increasingly to transnational networks of many different kinds. It highlights the diversity and dynamism of various communities, the capacity to become “embedded” simultaneously within multiple locations, as well as the ability to forge and retain transnational systems of ties, interactions, and exchange. It also allows for an element of choice in the decision to self-identify as a member of a diaspora community, as a way of maintaining and exploiting ongoing links with others, so long as they are accepted as having common origins and interests.

For contemporary diasporas, mobility across national boundaries does not mean abandoning traditions and links, but acquiring new ones and using transnational networks as a major source of advantage. From this perspective, belonging to a diaspora, forged through mobilities across borders, becomes an advantage, as transnational networks can be exploited as a source of commercial opportunities and political claims, both nationally specific and global.

Diaspora Advantage

This realization is not lost on HEIs, especially in light of the new neoliberal conceptualizations of internationalization, which have unleashed a culture of entrepreneurialism centered on, among other developments, a global competition for international students. To recruit students, an administrative technology has emerged, with certain rules of operation that incorporate knowledge of market segments, as well as a symbolic language about the distinctive benefits of internationalization. In developing strategies of recruitment, it is increasingly assumed that the local knowledge of educational markets that many international students and faculty have is most helpful. Accordingly, HEIs have now begun to develop what they sometimes refer to as their “diaspora strategies.”

For countries in the Global South, such diaspora strategies are of course not new: They have long pursued attempts to harness the knowledge and skills of their citizens who live and work abroad. In more recent years, however, diaspora strategies have also become common in the more established systems of higher education, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, even if their approach is much more complex, focused not so much on aspirations of national economic development as on

HEIs have now begun to develop what they sometimes refer to as their “diaspora strategies.”

attempts to reposition themselves within an increasingly competitive global market in higher education.

As international students become a major source of revenue, and with the globalization of the academic labor market, HEIs in the Global North have begun to consider ways in which they can derive benefits from their staff and students who have multiple ethnic and national affiliations. Leading universities now seek to formally identify and mobilize diasporic scientists, researchers, and scholars to create global knowledge networks, activating academics with multiple ethnic affiliations to advance their strategic agenda, including attempts to recruit highly skilled researchers from around the world. They underline the importance of diaspora research networks in the production of new knowledge, as well as in its utilization and commercialization.

In the area of teaching, too, diaspora strategies are developed to forge various modalities of academic links, for example, by promoting student exchange. International students and faculty are thus positioned as potential “knowledge brokers,” able to forge productive links across cultural and national borders, taking advantage of the opportunities spawned by globalization.

Mobilizing the Diaspora

To realize this potential, however, HEIs cannot simply assume that such groups already exist, whose resources can be easily tapped into and who are already motivated to act as knowledge brokers. A great deal of work has to be done to bring together groups of people from various origins and interests into the service of strategic objectives. Diaspora academics are hence identified, encouraged, cultivated, and supported so that they are willing to perform the brokering function. While some academics and students are reluctant to be so “diasporized,” others perceive great value in diaspora strategies. They readily become active participants in the formation of new diasporas in light not only of the interests of their institutions, but also of their own.

In this sense, the interests of higher education institutions and international students converge, as my own research on Chinese and Indian students in Australia has demonstrated. Many international students, especially those enrolled in business degrees in Australian universities, are convinced that their transnational connectivity represents their “diaspora advantage,” enabling them to make a significant contribution to the economies of both Australia and their country of origin. They believe that this advantage lies in their linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, and ethnic diaspora networks across the globe. They insist that their knowledge of multiple markets makes them both useful citizens of a globalizing community, as well as more innovative, flexible, and enterprising.

The valorization of globalization that now mostly underpins policies of internationalization of higher education is thus aligned to the emerging understanding of diaspora and its various advantages. The contemporary view of diaspora is consistent with the attempts by higher education institutions to internationalize their curriculum with the goal of preparing students to meet the shifting requirements of the economy, transformed by digital technologies and global capitalism, developing in them a positive attitude toward global competition.

In this way, international higher education may be viewed as an ideological site for the cultivation of diaspora networks, which encourages students to develop certain sensibilities and capabilities relevant to participating effectively in a globally networked economy. Dispositions of innovation, enterprise, and entrepreneurialism, consistent with a neoliberal view of globalization, are deeply meaningful to many, if not most, international students—many of them already regarding higher education as an investment in human capital formation. At university, they learn to recognize the importance of creating and maintaining transnational connections, as a way of securing advantages associated with transnational networks. ▲

Fazal Rizvi is professor emeritus at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, US. Email: frizvi@unimelb.edu.au.