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The Rationales Behind Emigration of the Turkish Academic Workforce

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

International academics become mobile mainly for career progression, prestige, and capital accumulation (Ackers, 2005; Bauder, 2015; Bauder et al., 2017). However, these motivations cannot explain the emigration of some international academics, including Turkish academics. In this study, I aim to understand the diverse motivations of Turkish academics to emigrate. Discussing why and how the Turkish academics emigrate may provide a better understanding of the patterns of and motivations behind international academic mobility. The data, which originated from 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the Turkish academics working at UK universities, suggest that Turkish academics are motivated to work abroad due to academic, political, and societal factors. While academic reasons are still at the top, political reasons, notably lack of academic freedom, is one of the main drivers of the exodus of the Turkish academic workforce.

Full paper

Introduction

In the literature, international academics are mostly portrayed as voluntary migrants who cross national borders for career purposes such as working with world-renowned scientists at prestigious institutions (Ackers, 2005), extending their international network and

increasing labour value (Mahroum, 2000), and accumulating social and cultural capital (Bauder, 2015). Nevertheless, academics do not always emigrate because of professional gains; instead, they may simply emigrate for a better life, as seen in many migration forms. This qualitative study seeks to understand why Turkish academics leave Turkey and do not return. Investigation of the Turkish academics' motivations to work abroad, in this case, the UK, extends the current academic mobility literature as some of those academics can also be regarded as forced/involuntary migrants leaving/not returning to their homelands because of political and economic pressure as depicted below.

Methodology

This study is deliberately exploratory, and in line with this, a qualitative research design underpinned by a social constructivist philosophy is employed. The data is collected through 50 semi-structured online interviews with UK-based Turkish academics. Once the data is collected, thematic analysis is applied. de Haas's (2021) aspiration-capability approach provided a valuable lens to understand why some Turkish academics cannot emigrate or are unwilling to immigrate despite severe conditions while some can and do.

Findings and Discussion

The data suggest that decision to emigrate from Turkey occurs in several steps and crystallises over the years. The reasons to emigrate include pursuing an overseas education, advancing career prospects, lack of academic freedom at Turkish universities, and the political atmosphere in Turkey.

Firstly, pursuing a postgraduate education abroad is the common reason for many interlocutors to leave Turkey for the first instance. 40 out of 50 of the participants in the study left Turkey for the first prolonged period to pursue their postgraduate education abroad, and half of the participants came to the UK for studying at the doctoral level. All the participants in the study aimed to be an academic; therefore, they needed to have a doctorate degree as required by many universities for full-time academic jobs. The highly cited reason to study abroad is "to become a high-quality

academic".

Secondly, the feeling of "lagging behind" is cited by many foreign-educated interlocutors to move abroad for the second time, but this time for employment purposes. The interlocutors, notably foreign-educated ones, are pushed away because of the teaching-based nature of Turkish universities and the lack of intellectual liveliness the interlocutors got used to abroad. Their foreign degrees from prestigious universities helped them secure an academic job in the UK. Considering the capability-aspiration approach (de Haas, 2021), one could claim that the interlocutors who studied abroad develop their capabilities, and thanks to these improved capabilities, they can move (aspire to move) abroad to work as an academic.

Lastly, not all academics move abroad merely to advance their career prospects; instead, they may simply aim to do their job without worrying, as exemplified by some of the interlocutors in the study. In many interviews, lack of academic freedom in Turkey has been cited as one of the main reasons for leaving Turkey and not returning afterwards. Social scientists, particularly political scientists, suffer the lack of academic freedom in Turkey as their discipline requires them to be critical of some government policies. Therefore, some interlocutors decided to leave Turkey to be able to do their job, particularly if they researched some politically sensitive issues such as the Kurdish question.

However, this is not the first time the Turkish academia has felt political pressure and made some Turkish researchers leave the country. In the late 1990s, an opposite political crackdown happened in Turkey. A post-modern military coup occurred on 28th February 1997, allegedly against the Islamisation of Turkey. In the aftermath, wearing the hijab was banned in the public space, including universities; therefore, hijabi women were not allowed to study at universities and work as civil servants, including academic staff, until the removal of the ban in 2013. In the study, some pious interlocutors left Turkey in the 2000s due to the political pressure on the religious segment of the society.

In a nutshell, the academic rationales, including pursuing an overseas education and advancing an academic career, are the top reasons behind the emigration of Turkish scholars. However, lack of

academic freedom and broader political problems force some Turkish academics to move abroad and stay there.

References

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