

International mobility experiences and societal change: Exploring transformative contribution to higher education in MENA

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

While existing literature extensively explores the individual benefits of international mobility in higher education, such as developing skills and expertise, scant attention has been paid to its broader societal impacts and potential for driving systemic change. This study addresses this gap by investigating the transformative effects of international mobility experiences within the higher education systems of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Grounded in Critical Realism, data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 prominent individuals across 11 MENA countries explore both individual and systemic-level impacts. While the study reveals individual benefits from mobility, it shows that individuals with international mobility experiences impact systemic changes in their home higher education systems via different forms and practices. Despite contextual challenges, individuals exhibit agency in driving societal transformations. This research contributes to understanding the multifaceted role of international experiences in promoting social change in complex contexts as in MENA.

Full paper

Introduction

International mobility of academics and professionals is often conceptualised as an imperative to contribute to personal and professional growth (Ackers, 2000; Richardson, 2009). It is via mobility that new relations and forms of cooperation and collaboration are made (Kim, 2010). While such individual experiences are important, it is equally significant to explore how such individuals can effectively contribute to bringing about meaningful change in HE systems in their home countries. This is particularly relevant in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where many Arab countries have experienced a complex political climate, marked by authoritarian rule, political instability, and conflicts, which have resulted in varied changes to HE systems and dynamics (World Bank, 2017). The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore how international mobility experiences of individuals impact systemic changes in higher

education in their home countries within structural complexities and socio-political constraints.

The study

The paper is part of a larger ongoing research project on international mobility and world development. The study draws on qualitative data collected on individuals with international mobility experiences from 11 Arab countries in the MENA region: Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. It draws on Critical Realism (CR) which explains the underlying structures that generate observable events and experiences. Distinguishing between the roles of structure and agency in bringing about social change, CR allows to zoom into the explanations of how actors work towards being agentially effective to contribute to societal transformations under specific structural conditions (Bhaskar, 1998; Archer, 2000; Donati & Archer, 2015; Donati, 2021). In-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 120 prominent individuals with leading positions in the MENA region, and the paper draws on data from 30 HE academics and professionals. The paper has employed a theoretically informed thematic analysis through the lens of CR to understand the perceived impact of international mobility experiences on the ways individuals navigate structural complexities in enacting change in their home higher education in the MENA region.

Findings

The initial findings suggest that international mobility in higher education has profound impacts, both at an individual and a systemic level. At the individual level, the data indicate that international mobility fosters the development of skills and knowledge, expands personal networks, and enhances intercultural awareness. It imbues individuals with efficacy, resilience, and a heightened sense of hope to achieve valuable goals.

At a systemic level, the findings show that individuals with international mobility experiences contribute across various domains within higher education, including areas around gender equality, social justice, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. Such contribution takes shape through diverse macro and micro-level forms, such as initiating or contributing to development projects and initiatives for HE transformation, leading student/academic engagement and empowerment efforts, capacity building, involving in consultancy, advocacy, and policy influence, and fostering innovation initiatives at university and beyond.

Enabling factors play a crucial role in facilitating these contributions. The study shows that access to resources, including funding, infrastructure, and technology, is essential. Supportive networks, both locally and internationally, enable collaboration and partnerships. Political will, alignment with governmental agendas, and the presence of a critical mass of supportive individuals also facilitate mobility-related contributions.

However, the findings suggest that several constraining factors impede the full realisation of international mobility's potential. Socio-political instability, resource limitations, cultural resistance, and gender-related constraints hinder the effective implementation of mobility-driven initiatives. These challenges include disruptions due to conflicts, inadequate funding and

infrastructure, difficulties in introducing foreign ideas, practices, and patriarchal forms of dominance in the workplace.

Discussion and conclusion

The study underscores the significance of international HE experiences in driving transformative change in HE in complex settings. While several studies explored individual benefits gained via international HE experiences (Ackers, 2000; Richardson, 2009), the study shows that such benefits extend far beyond individual realms. The study highlights that international experiences impact the agency of HE academics and professionals from the MENA region in navigating socio-political relations, and their subsequent contributions to societal and educational development, despite constraining structures. The study contributes to research on the potential role of international mobility experiences in promoting social change and development (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Spilimbergo, 2009; Chankseliani, 2018), particularly in societies impacted by socio-political events and conflicts. Ultimately, the study aims to inspire and inform efforts to harness the potential of individuals' international experiences to drive progress and shape a brighter future for the MENA region.

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