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Self-formation in international student mobility: A comparative biographical study of Turkish international higher education graduates

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Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract:

This biographical study investigates how internationally mobile students develop human capital, social capital and civic values while studying abroad and how these link with their perceived contributions to their home country. The study uses the framework proposed by Marginson (2014) that international higher education contributes to student self-formation.

The study adopts a biographical approach and focuses on the important moments in the lives of Turkish international education graduates (see Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Roberts, 2002). Semi-structured interviews and life timeline forms designed accordingly with this approach were used for data collection. Designed as a comparative research, the study's fieldwork took place in five countries. Several criteria were used in the selection of these countries.

The fieldwork of this study has just been completed with 50 participants across 5 countries. The researcher is in the process of transcribing the qualitative data collected. Findings will be discussed during the conference.

Paper:

This study investigates how internationally mobile students develop human capital, social capital and civic values while studying abroad and how these domains link with their perceived contributions to their home country.

The study builds on the idea proposed by Marginson (2014) and later developed by Tran (2016) that international higher education contributes to student self-formation. Self-formation in this study is conceptualised as an individual's active endeavour to form and transform themselves during their degree education abroad. This active agency towards self-formation is not independent of context or higher education institution. Self-formation is not peculiar to internationally mobile students; however, these students go through an immense process of self-formation during their study-abroad experience as they leave behind the country they are used to living in and in a way insert themselves into a different one with different values, norms and understandings. Using this approach, I examine

international student self-formation with a particular focus on the development of human capital, social capital and civic values.

Following the traditional definition of human capital (Becker, 1993), higher education is an investment that is expected to pay back after a period of time. Accordingly, higher investment, should bring higher returns. The returns from obtaining a degree abroad should be higher than getting a degree at home as the former is normally associated with higher financial and non-financial costs.

Social capital is an array of entities such as networks, norms, and social trust that share two aspects in common: they comprise some element of social structures and they promote certain actions of two or more actors within the structure (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The focus of this study is on the public good aspect of social capital. Some prominent scholars have looked at this aspect of social capital and linked it to human capital (e.g. Coleman, 1988) or to civic values (e.g. Putnam, 2000). However, these three concepts have not yet been used together to examine international student self-formation.

Civic values are defined in this study as an individual's judgements on the characteristics of a good society. This study focuses on how international student mobility experience may, if at all, influence an individual's civic value development. After all, international students insert themselves into a different country context with potentially differing civic values and observe first-hand a different polity.

Perceived contributions to home country constitute another important element. It is assumed that individuals' self-formation during their international student mobility experience plays a role in the forming of such perceptions. The study does not predefine contribution to home country to allow participants explain it in connection with the above-mentioned concepts.

Conducting this research for the Turkish context is important. Building on Beine, Docquier and Rapoport's (2008) argument, Turkey is susceptible to high levels of international student mobility and brain drain as it is an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2016). Also, several international watchdogs contend that Turkey is on a downward trend in terms of democracy (e.g. Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). Thus, the current situation provides an important case to study the perceived contributions to home country in relation to self-formation through international student mobility by Turkish international education graduates.

Based on this discussion, the aim of this study is to answer the following:

1. How do Turkish migrants and returnees who have studied abroad explain their self-formation during international student mobility, with a particular focus on the development of human capital, social capital and civic values?
2. How do Turkish migrants and returnees who have studied abroad explain their (potential) contributions to Turkey?
3. How do Turkish migrants and returnees who have studied abroad explain the links between their (potential) contributions to Turkey and their self-formation during international student mobility experience?

The study adopts a biographical approach and focuses on the important moments in the lives of Turkish international education graduates (see Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Roberts, 2002). Semi-structured interviews and life timeline forms that were designed accordingly with this approach were used for data collection. In addition, photos were requested from participants with interesting life stories.

The study includes Turkish students who have studied their degrees in different countries with the contention that different country contexts might influence student self-formation in a different way. Consequently, the fieldwork of this study took place in five countries. Four of these countries - Germany, the UK, Bulgaria, and Azerbaijan - were selected purposefully from the ten most popular destinations for Turkish students using UNESCO Institute of Statistics data (2018) to ensure diversity whilst maintaining feasibility. Criteria such as political economy, historical/cultural ties and quality of higher education institutions were used in the selection of countries. Turkey, the fifth country, is the home country of the study participants. Returnees who have completed their degrees in the above-mentioned countries were interviewed in Turkey.

The study includes Turkish international education graduates; this comprises both migrants who stayed in the country of study afterwards and returnees who returned to Turkey after graduation. Participants were chosen from the top 5 universities in each of the selected host country mentioned above. This decision was made based on the assumption that differing levels of university quality might play different roles in students' self-formation. Only degree-graduates, including bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees, were interviewed rather than short-term-mobile students, as the longer the stay in the host country, the more significant and enduring the impact is on students (Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2018; Dwyer, 2004). Participants were specifically chosen from both social sciences subject areas and non-social sciences subject areas, as subject areas make a significant difference in students self-formation with regards to human capital, social capital and civic values (Hillygus, 2005; Mayhew, Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2016). Based on these criteria, both snowball and maximum variation methods were used for participant recruitment. Matching method, as described by Nielsen (2016), was used to make sure that the migrant and returnee participants are similar especially with regards to host country, gender, and study area.

The fieldwork of this study has just been completed. 50 participants across 5 countries were interviewed. The researcher is in the process of transcribing the qualitative data collected. Findings will be discussed during the conference.

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