Reasons and factors for obtaining PhD's abroad; the case of Arabs from Israel

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to examine the phenomenon of Arab Israeli graduates who choose to obtain PhD degrees abroad, especially from the USA and Western European universities. This paper shows 'pull' factors that entice these graduates to complete their PhD degrees abroad. It also deals with the added value of studying abroad for them and its impact on their academic careers as well as an up-to-date comprehensive picture of this phenomenon.

Choosing the destination of studying abroad

The choice of USA and Western-European universities is because of the reputation of these places and their great influence in the fields of global media, economy and technology, as well as their academic status (Marginson, 2008), and the granting of funds and scholarships for foreign students at the doctoral stage. The USA is considered as the main country of destination for Arab academics who intend to obtain PhD’s abroad. The USA grants scholarships to research students at the doctoral level in any fields of study through a "Fulbright" grant. The "Fulbright" grants stipends and scholarships to those students with academic excellence and who are engaged in social activities and community service and have leadership abilities. The "Fulbright" foundation has been awarding scholarships and research grants to more than 1300 Israeli academics, including Arab academics, since the establishment of this fund. It is noteworthy that since 2007, "Fulbright" gives grants to between 8-10 Arab students from Israel each year who intend to obtain higher degrees, especially PhD’s in the USA (Shalabi, 2010).
**Data about Arab lecturers with PhD’s in Israel**

In Israel, there are eight universities which include about 5,814 senior lecturers and 2,334 lecturers with no tenure. Each year approximately 1,000 students complete their study for PhD’s in different fields, including a small number of Arab students. Between the years 2005 and 2008 the number of the Arab PhD graduates reached only 126 compared to 3,714 Jewish PhD graduates (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Conversely, the proportion of Arab lecturers at the Israeli universities was only 1.4% in 2009 compared with 1.2% in 2008 and 1% in 1999. The proportion of Arab lecturers at colleges has risen to 13.8% including the Arab Colleges of Teacher Training. (Sekkoy, 2004, 2008). Therefore, the majority of Arab lectures with PhD titles work in teacher training most likely in Arab but also in Jewish education colleges. Approximately, 500 to 600 Arab lecturers work in Arab and Jewish educational colleges, most likely in four Arab teacher training colleges in Israel (Khamaisi, 2009).

The Arab students in Israel perceive higher education as an important stepping stone and sometimes the only means to advance their social mobility individually and as a group (Al-Haj, 1995). There is no doubt that studying abroad is normally considered as a "second chance" after the non-acceptance to study in one’s homeland, or it is an alternative for those who were not accepted at universities of their countries, and at the same time those whose families are able to support them abroad financially (Haj Yehia, 2002). By studying abroad, Arab students from Israel have the opportunity to improve their academic, scientific and social status in their Arab society in Israel. Studying for a PhD abroad means for them social prestige in traditional society, but also to help their national minority achieve full equality in all spheres of life in Israel (Al-Haj, 1996).
Research Methodology

This study adopted qualitative and quantitative research methodology in order to illuminate the reasons for studying abroad to obtain PhD degrees. Concerning the quantitative research, there are about 250 faculty members in the four Arab teacher training colleges holding a PhD who obtained their degrees from Israeli as well from foreign universities. Survey questionnaires were handed out to the 90 faculty members who received their PhD from a foreign university. Participants representing graduates from USA and West Europe universities were selected from a pool of nearly 92 potential candidates aged 30-50 from four Arab teachers colleges in Israel, all of whom had attended many universities abroad, especially in the USA.

Out of the 90 surveys handed out, 32 were completed and returned, a response rate of about 36%. Therefore, the analysis and discussion of this study are based on 36% of the overall population of PhDs received from foreign universities making up the sample space that will be used in this quantitative part of the study. We wanted to understand how migration to different and for them new, cultural and national spaces with their special characteristics affected Arab Students from Israel (ASI) studying abroad. Because of this 13 graduate participants, from the Arab minority in Israel who travelled abroad to obtain PhD’s, were chosen by using a "snowball" strategy (Unrau & Coleman, 1997; Patton, 1990). Individual in-depth interviews were conducted for each member of the populations studied, to obtain a rich and authentic narrative, concerning different aspects of the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Results

Based on the sample space, the PhD degrees were obtained from 7 countries around the world with the USA and Germany making up approximately 63% of the countries
of choice. The results show that the year-average to complete the PhD for Arab students abroad is between 2 and 4 years. 14 of the participants of this study received a full scholarship from grant funds abroad, and especially from funds in the USA. Despite difficult socio-economic circumstances among Arabs in Israel, Arab families invest everything, even selling land, in order finance higher education of their sons abroad (Haj Yehia& Arar, 2009 ; Arar& Haj Yehia, 2010).

**Reasons for Studying Abroad**

We can find that the top 3 reasons for studying PhD abroad are prestige (a foreign PhD may be seen as well respected), insufficient GPA (i.e., grades are insufficient for entry into Israeli universities) and scholarship (offered by the host university). Other reasons for choosing to study abroad include Curriculum/Culture (an individual is interested in getting exposed to a new culture and way of study), additional language (an individual is interested in achieving fluency in an additional language) and invitation (i.e., an invitation by the host university). The availability of scholarships seems to be the main factors driving individuals to pursue a PhD in the USA and Germany. Meanwhile, we can also find that insufficient GPA as well as academic and social prestige are common factors across nearly all countries of choice.

**PhD Field of Studies**

The results show that social sciences, humanities and education make up about 88% of the overall areas of study while the sciences and others make up the other 12% of the areas. This is not a surprising result given that the former subject areas are the common areas of studies amongst students at colleges of education in the Arab sector and hence, a larger population of instructors with such a background is required.
Impact of PhD on Arab Teacher Colleges

Despite the fact that the PhD studies were pursued outside of Israel, 56% of the individuals indicated that their dissertation did in fact relate to Arab society in Israel. Such dissertations may have an advantage in that not only did they have first-hand exposure to the Arab society in Israel but they also got the opportunity to view it from an external perspective.

Another area of interest that we would like to touch upon is the application/incorporation of Western ideology, theories and practices as an integral part of the teaching experience at Arab Teachers Colleges. The majority of the individuals (16) indicated that they prefer to combine Western and Eastern schools of thought. Moreover, they highlighted the fact that the combination of the two offers maximum benefit to the students and opens up doors to critical thinking rather than falling for stereotypes.

The results show also that English was the language of the dissertation abroad. 56.25% of PhD theses were written in English, 25% written in German, 9.37% in Russian, and 9.37% in Arabic, especially from those who had studied for a PhD in Jordan. The results show also that more than half of the lecturers said that they still maintain a sustainable relationship with the state and university where they studied for a PhD as well as relationship with the supervising professor of the thesis.

The overwhelming majority, 30 (93.75%) of lecturers support studying abroad to obtain PhD’s and even advised others to travel abroad to get this title in order to be exposed to and inculcate other values from universities abroad, especially from The USA and West-European countries.
Added values of studying PhD abroad

According to the interviews with 13 of the study participants, almost all of them spoke of the positive impact of studying abroad to obtain a PhD. **Gameel, who obtained a PhD from Princeton University-USA says:**

"It is an entire experience. The expectations from the student are high. The relationship with the teachers is on equal basis, you don't get the feeling that the teacher is doing you a favor or behaving in a superior and snobbish way. The learning experience is independent. There is no limit to what one can achieve other than the limitation one imposes on oneself. Studying in the USA empowers the students, directs them and allows them to be creative". **Hasan, who obtained a PhD from NY University-USA, says:** "We got original work in its original language- not translated and speaking and controlling the language, one gets to understand the language fully, as a living cultural aspect. We had access to living theoreticians presenting Whechsler, Kaufman, Dass, Naglierie, and other theorists and original thinkers.

To the surprise of some, there is an entire world, way of thinking, originality outside of Israel, culture, ethics and way of dealing with others. One gets to live other cultures and breathe its air "**.Muhsin, who obtained a PhD from London University-USA, says:** "More than the title itself we gained a new Language, a new culture, and exposure to international connections and contacts, as well access to real original thoughts". **Ali, who obtained his PhD from Huston University-USA, says:**

"I start learning to present the theories I teach from both the Western and Eastern (specifically Islamic) view where it is applicable. It seems like students can relate more when the same Western theories are presented this way. It gives them added value to their heritage first and learn to value the view of Western theory for it is based, refers or even in its essence, originated from Islamic thought supported by its
theoricians, the Sunnah and Quran". Ahmad, who obtained his PhD from England' says: "I got Academic prestige and social status and I began loving nature and green ecology". Saeed who got his PhD from Russia:" I don't have any new values, but I became a doctor". Adeeb, who got his PhD from Connecticut University, says:" I learned a new language and a new culture and I am familiar now with the scientific research and I started publishing articles in well-known journals".

Kareem, who studied at the American University-USA, says:" I learned a lot of scientific research possibilities, especially lab research. I learned a new language and culture, and I learned how to educate my children in a better way". Rawiya, who obtained her PhD at Arizona State University-USA, says:" I was in real academia, equality between man and women, possibilities of publication in good journals and of course the empowerment of the Arab woman". Mahmood, who obtained his PhD from Georgetown University-USA, says: "The most added value is the feeling that you are equal and don't feel that you are less respected as up here. I learned new cultures and new educational approaches. All the results of the research back home are similar!!! Here you don't find that. You can combine between work and studying".

Ghanem, who obtained his PhD from Indiana University-USA, says: "The human relationships between students and lecturers, and I see myself as a cultural bridge with the West". Omar, who got his PhD from Tubingen in Germany, says: "A new language, but also punctuality and mutual respect between students and lecturers".

Fathi, who obtained his PhD from Germany, says: "I was exposed to the world of technology and Hi-tech, the world of communication, research and globalism.

Rasmi, who did his PhD from England, says:" The level of teaching is very high and teaching methods demand that the students think and become critical thinkers and not only hear about critical thinking but to practice it". Saleem, who obtained his
PhD from Richmont University-USA, says:” The general environment is to strengthen self-responsibility and to encourage excellence and professionalism”.

Discussion

The United States of America is the most attractive country for ASI who wants to obtain PhD’s, followed by Germany. Inferred from this fact, is that strong economic states are more attractive for ASI to pursue higher education, if the circumstances don't allow them to study at Israeli universities. The ASI gets more benefits from their geographical as well from their vertical mobility by attaining higher status back home. However, Jordan universities have lately become a target of ASI who wants to study for the PhD, especially in the humanities and the study of Islam. Choosing the USA was because of scholarships and academic reputation of its universities. While Russia has been selected conversely, for reasons related to the overall average of the Master’s degree which does not qualify them to pursue their higher education at universities back home or even in certain countries abroad. Choosing Jordan was because of the common culture and subjects of study which are most likely related to Arabic-language, history and Islamic religion.

It appears that the ASI has another different type of mobility when talking about studying abroad: for the majority of ASI, studying abroad for PhD is not a preferred choice as compared to attending Israeli universities. Due to pull factors from universities back home, ASI could not continue their higher education back home, and studying abroad changed to be a second choice for them. Studying at American as well Western- European universities are considered as an honorable substitute for the Israeli universities and a smooth access to the local Labor market.

Another conclusion of this study lies in the low representation of women among ASI who obtained PhD’s abroad. In comparison to their percentage in the first and second
degree at Israeli universities (Yair, 2009), Arab women from Israel who hold masters degrees do not travel outside the country in large numbers because of traditional family constraints.

Concerning the academic values of studying PhD abroad, it is a fact that there is a positive and direct impact on Arab academics with international academic frameworks, such as international lecturers and researchers, which enable them to strengthen the personal academic identity of Arab lecturers at their colleges in Israel. The academic experience of Arab lecturers abroad contributes to enhance their professional profile. Studying abroad adds an important new aspect to the current phase of globalization taking place in higher education. The international acculturation on the topic of higher education creates new opportunities which can affect Arab lecturers, not only in their professional work and cooperation, but also in the development of self-identity.

There is no doubt that obtaining the first degree at universities back home and obtaining a PhD abroad could be considered as a good way to build a perception of abroad. It deals with a professional socialization which needs professional culture to acquire academic professionalism.

Studying abroad and the interaction with a new cultural experience, push Arab lecturers who obtained their PhD abroad to combine Western and Eastern (most likely Muslim) doctrines and theories in their teaching at education colleges. This combination between Western and Muslim thoughts is often beneficial to students at Arab teacher training colleges. It opens the doors for them to be critical thinkers and keeps them away from stereotypes and prejudices.

In the case of the Arab minority in Israel, despite all the advantages of studying for a PhD abroad, the PhD title is not considered as a guarantee for academic card entry to
Israeli universities. In many cases it is also considered as a card entry to the unemployment market. Wearing the traditional PhD hat which symbolizes for them the bridge to the academic world, can also turn to a degree which does not grant any rights or privileges to its owner, despite being a prerequisite for higher education.

References


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