

The contributions of study abroad to home countries: an agential perspective

For the CGHE webinar series
on 'The future of cross-border
academic mobility'

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Background

- International higher education (IHE) provides a **significant opportunity for individuals to improve and form themselves**.
- With increased capabilities newly formed through IHE, the assumption is that **IHE graduates will have a higher potential to contribute** to their home countries and the wider society.
- Contributions to home country is discussed in several lines of literatures:
 - Brain drain/gain/circulation literature (mostly migration scholars but not necessarily)
 - Diaspora literature (interest from education scholars increasingly)



Literature

- A recently emerging line of scholarly work in the IHE literature has started...
 - ...investigating IHE graduate contributions to the home country specifically (that is, not indirectly through a focus on diasporas) and
 - ...without building on the discussed binary brain drain logic of whether studying abroad is a lost skilled workforce upon not returning.
- Three main narratives emerge:
 - 1) A narrative that frames graduate contributions using human capital theory
 - 2) A narrative that builds on human rights approach as a basis
 - 3) A narrative that frames graduate contributions using capabilities and agency



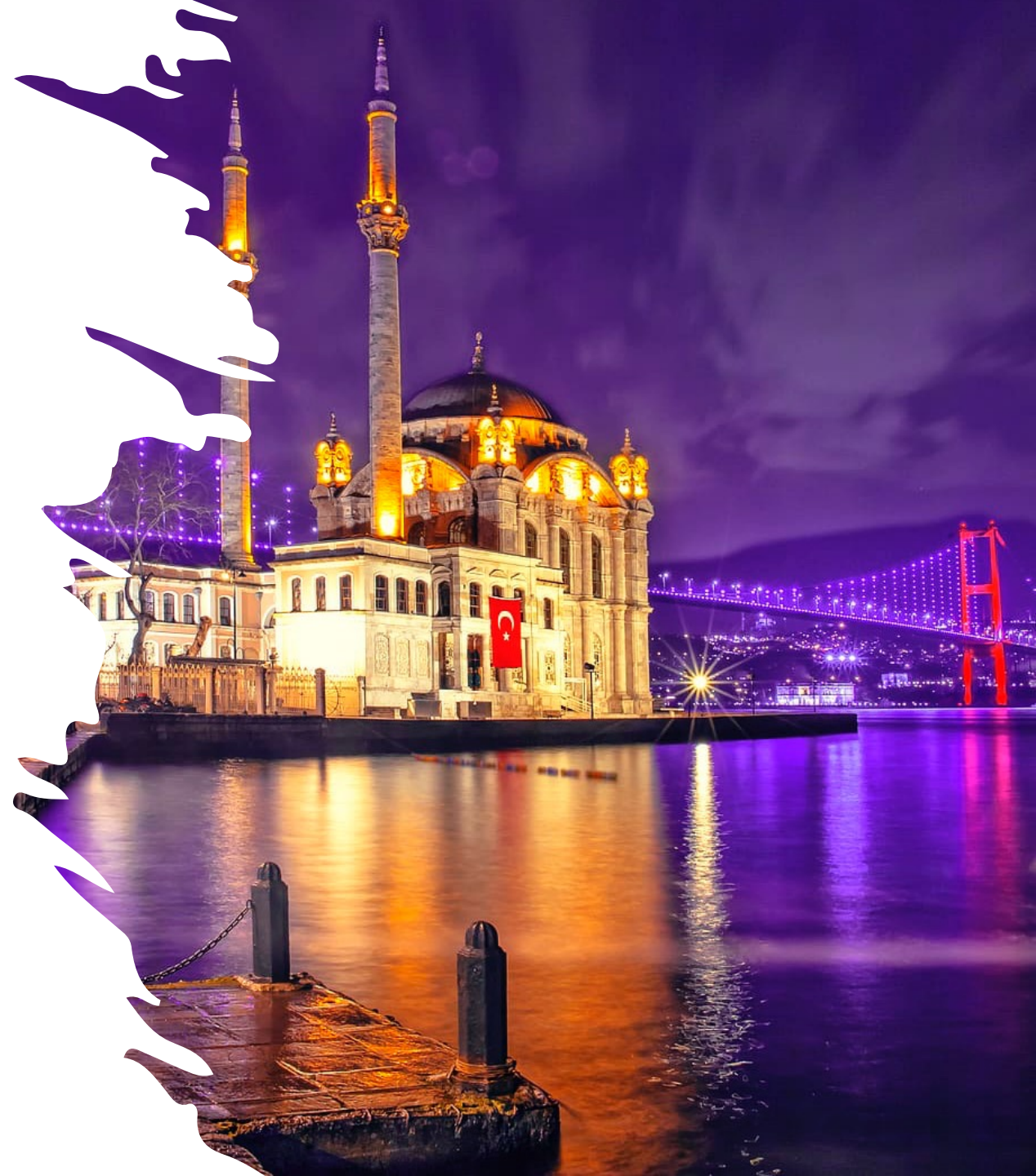
Theoretical framework: an agential lens

- In this study, I draw on individual agency to investigate IHE graduate contributions.
- I define agency and argue that: **IHE graduates have freedom to attain whatever they decide to contribute to their home country and beyond it, as responsible agents** (building from Sen, 1985; Campbell, 2018)
- I combine this agential perspective with the push–pull model (Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) in the theoretical framework: **individual agency goes hand in hand with push–pull factors.**
 - Push factors are those that drive students away from their home country, demotivating them from contributing to it.
 - Pull factors are those that attract international students to specific destination countries



Turkish context and Turkish international students

- This study's participants are interviewed in four destination countries, but they are all from Turkey.
- Just like all international student groups, Turkish IHE graduates show similarities and differences from other international students.
- They are similar in that:
 - they all cross country borders to obtain a degree education,
 - leave behind their existing networks and friends and form new ones,
 - witness and experience novel civic values in a new setting.
- They are different in that:
 - Being from an upper-middle-income country geographically close to many high-income countries. As a result, they may have both the motivation and the means to cross borders for studying.
 - Complicated and volatile political situation, especially the data was collected 4 years after the coup attempt in 2016.
 - Significant decrease in purchasing power.
- In other words, the push factors emanating from Turkey are currently strong.



Methodological approach

- **Data collection:** qualitative study with semi-structured interviews
- **Participants:** 50 Turkish recent IHE graduates
- **Fieldwork locations:** Four purposefully selected destination countries from most popular destinations for Turkish students + Turkey for returnees.
- **Participant recruitment:** snowballing and internet searching

Table: List of universities the participants obtained their degrees from with regard to country locations

Country of study	Number of participants	Interviewed in host/home country	Participant universities
Azerbaijan	12	5/7	Azerbaijan State University of Economics Baku State University Azerbaijan Technical University Baku Engineering University (Old name: Qafkaz University)
Bulgaria	12	5/7	Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" University of National and World Economy Technical University – Sofia Medical University-Sofia
Germany	14	8/6	Humboldt University Free University of Berlin Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich Technical University of Munich
United Kingdom	12	6/6	University of Oxford University of Cambridge University College London Imperial College London London School of Economics University of the Arts London

A background image showing a crowd of people with their hands raised, suggesting a public gathering or protest. The image is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the text overlay.

Findings – Three major emergent themes

- 1) Agential rejection to contribute
- 2) ‘Better from Abroad’
- 3) Shifting allegiances and transnationality

Agential rejection to contribute theme

- The excerpts under this theme support an **agential decision to reject contributing to home country**, citing some of the perceived factors pushing them away from doing so.
- The participants who explained they do not want to contribute to home country dwell on negotiations in their minds whether their home country, Turkey, deserves their efforts in this matter.

Should I provide this support to Turkey? Do I want Turkey to develop? ... Does Turkey deserve it? Or did it give me something to deserve it in terms of education and social rights? ... I am not sure about that, and I guess it doesn't deserve it. *Simge, Bulgaria, Returnee graduate*

I would be happy to contribute to Turkey, I mean our beautiful country, but on the other hand, I do not see reciprocity for this. I have such positive feelings towards Turkey, but Turkey does not seem to have such positive feelings towards me. *Defne, Germany, Migrant graduate*

Why don't we go back and contribute after studying abroad? Well, it's our own life, our own choice. Maybe because of our resentment, maybe we saw some negativities in Turkey and not here, and so we stay. We didn't study here with a government scholarship. We paid with the financial support given by our own family or the income we earned by working while studying. *Onur, Bulgaria, migrant graduate*

'Better from Abroad'

- In this theme, the participants argued that their **contributions to their home country are/would be 'better from abroad'**.
- This theme can be understood better with state and nation separation (Kim & Bamberger, 2021). IHE graduates still want to contribute, but this intention is due to their **allegiance to the people, separating it from the current governing state**.
- Two push factors repeatedly highlighted:
 - no adequate opportunities in home country (e.g. labs and companies)
 - Restrictive atmosphere (academic atmosphere)

I think if I return, I won't contribute as much as I do from here. ... My current company doesn't have any investment in Turkey yet. ... Even if investing [in Turkey] becomes easier, somebody needs to tell potential sponsors about it. ... 14 billion dollars a year enters [to Turkey in our area]. ... Our average investment at once is a 1 billion turnover. If I do one project on such a scale in Turkey, that 14 billion will become 15 billion. *Yasar, UK, migrant graduate*

Turkey, Italy and Greece—these have vast numbers of unemployed women, and some of them are not even considered unemployed ... For example, this is one of the topics I want to work on. ... I can work here on this population of women, who are not even considered unemployed in Turkey. I do not have to return to Turkey to do it. *Zeynep, Germany, migrant graduate*

I sell Turkish brands. Let's say X million Turkish liras a year so that you can understand the scale of it thanks to the exchange rate. We contribute to Turkey that much. *Berke, Azerbaijan, migrant graduate*

Shifting allegiances and transnationality

- This theme brings together the excerpts that indicate **how the participants negotiated their transnational identity shifts**.
- According to Rizvi (2005), such transnational transformations could occur during any international study experience; however, the interview data of this study indicated that the push factors emanating from Turkey are facilitating and even accelerating international students' allegiance shifts.

For me, there is no direct belonging to Turkey, but to the ideals I created. This is not like any country or national unity border. If it is a country compatible with my ideals, I would gladly return, live there and work even for little money. *Zeliha, UK, migrant graduate*

I am from here (Turkey), but it is questionable whether I feel I belong here... because my heart is broken in general. I saw that you could live more pleasantly. . . . So, I want to create added value, but will this be country-based? No, it will be human-centred. I think people are global and the world is a global place. *Rana, Azerbaijan, returnee graduate*

As a person who sees herself a bit more like a world citizen, I think that the issues of the world concern me. Therefore, I choose my work accordingly. ... I was never like a person who thought that I should advance my country from one point to another, but studying abroad further lowered my perceptions that I am attached to one nation. *Aysel, UK, returnee graduate*

Conclusions and discussion 1/2

- This study examined how international study graduates negotiate their agential decisions on contributing to their home country, Turkey, at a time when push factors emanating from home country is highly palpable.
- **All three themes point out the importance of individual agency** in IHE graduate contributions, which has been mostly neglected in this line of research, echoing Tran and Vu (2017) and Campbell (2018).
- Agency is an important concept mostly missing in the brain drain or gain literatures. Return status has been mostly seen as the defining factor for deciding whether an international graduate is a 'lost workforce'. This study shows that there is more nuance into this matter.
 - Some participants argued that they would do everything in their hands not to contribute to their home countries even though they had already returned their home country.
 - Meanwhile, others explained that their contributions would be better if they did not return to Turkey
- Thus, this study supports the studies that problematise return status (e.g. Campbell, 2019; Rizvi, 2005a; Tung, 2008)

Conclusions and discussion 2/2

- Moreover, the larger sociological discussions of human agency **always pair agency with external factors**, often termed as the structure (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1991). Hence, the findings revealed that combining individual agency with push–pull factors provides a more holistic explanation of contributions to the home country.
- This study focussed more on the push factors, as they emerged to be highly prominent in the participants' perceptions of their contributions to Turkey.
- Based on these findings, the recent developments in Turkey, especially the alienating impact of governmental policy and practices, have been **'pushing' away its own citizens who have studied abroad from contributing to their home country**.
- Considering that IHE graduates are highly educated and self-formed young adults (Marginson, 2014, 2018; Marginson & Sawir, 2012) who have a long, productive time ahead, **it is in Turkey's best interest to win their hearts back**.
- Lastly, transnationality in international education is well researched (Bamberger, 2019a; Rizvi, 2005a, 2005b). However, the analysis here indicated that **push factors emanating from home have facilitated and even accelerated the participants' shift in allegiance and transnational negotiations** in their mind.

Thank you!

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