
Israel's Academia – The Bright and Dark Sides

by

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First Article The Bright Side of Israel's Academia

The story of higher education in Israel is a story about one of the jewels in the crown of the Zionist movement. Annual Israeli incomes averaged just \$6,000 during the 1950s and \$10,000 during the 1960s (according to GDP per capita in 2005 prices) – about half of American incomes at the time and roughly a fifth and a third, respectively, of Israel's current living standards. Despite its meager resources and the relentless attacks on its physical existence, the Israel's combination of vision, determination and tremendous sacrifices provided the country with seven state-of-the-art research universities within two and a half decades of its birth.

How good did these institutions become? In the field of economics, for example, European countries were ranked according to the average number of published pages per faculty member in the top eight economics research journals over a span of three decades, from 1971 through 2000. In the accompanying table, England – with its London School of Economics, Oxford and Cambridge Universities – serves as the base country. Below it are Sweden, the country that bestows Nobel Prizes, with just half the number of published pages as the English, the Netherlands, with less than a third, Italy, with less than a quarter, and Finland – with a primary and secondary school system that is the envy of the western world – with a research yield that is less than a fifth of the English.

In first place, above the English, were Israel's economists. For three decades, which began just over two decades after the country's birth, Israeli economists published not 10% more and not 20% more, but seven times the English research output in the top academic journals.

In general, when moving from one field to another over the past decade, from chemistry and physics through economics and computer science, there are two, three and sometimes up to five Israeli universities consistently ranked among the top 150 in the world in each of the fields (on the basis of citations in scientific journals). The country's academic excellence is evident not only in the recent Nobel Prizes that its scholars received, but also in the exceptional number of Israelis that have been invited to study and to teach on a permanent basis at leading universities around the world.

First-class research universities have an important role to play in every country. This is particularly true when the economy in question has a labor force no larger than a single western metropolitan area – and is situated on a sandbar in the middle of a very turbulent ocean. This perspective makes it possible to understand the magnitude of the miracle that occurred here.

Country Ranking* in Economic Research, 1971-2000

(United Kingdom = 100)

1	Israel	691.7
2	United Kingdom	100.0
3	France	78.0
4	Ireland	72.5
5	Belgium	55.0
6	Switzerland	48.6
7	Sweden	42.2
8	Germany	38.5
9	Turkey	38.5
10	Austria	33.0
11	Netherlands	31.2
12	Italy	23.9
13	Norway	21.1
14	Spain	21.1
15	Denmark	20.2
16	Finland	19.3
17	Greece	9.2
18	Portugal	1.8

* average number of published pages per faculty member in top 8 economics research journals.

source: Dan Ben-David, "Soaring Minds: The Flight of Israel's Economists" (2007). Data from Combes and Linnemer (2002).

Israel's universities nourished the environment that enabled the invention and development of unique products and processes that allowed us to survive – and even prosper in some fields – in the merciless competition of the global economy, and enabled Israel to break through the frontiers of human knowledge time and again to continuously upgrade and fortify the defensive shield that assures our existence against all threats and against all odds.

Second Article The Dark Side of Israel's Academia

First-class universities are first and foremost the professional homes of leading researchers and scientists, individuals who bring honor – not to mention scientific, economic and cultural value added – also to institutions that are not Israeli. Therefore, what can one expect when high personal caliber is merged with a domestic managerial setting devoid of the tools necessary for dealing with foreign talent-poaching of Israelis?

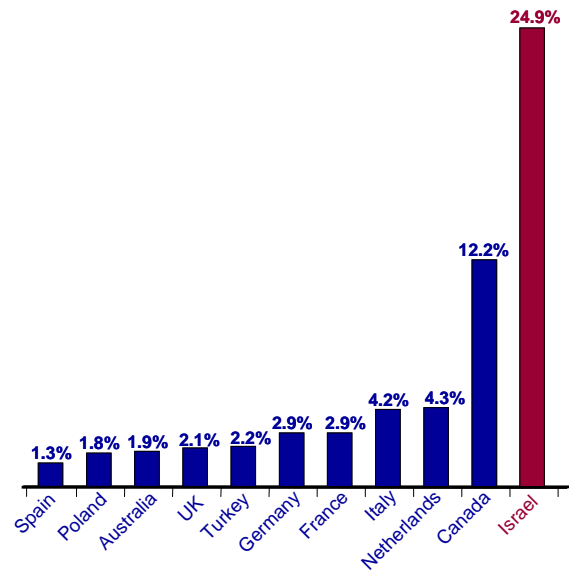
The actual picture is grimmer still since not only are foreigners hunting for young Israeli talent, but we are also giving that talent the boot with our own feet. As indicated in the diagram, we have reached a situation in which the number of Israeli scholars in the U.S. represents one-fourth (!!) of the entire senior faculty remaining in Israeli's universities and colleges. It is no coincidence that the share of senior Israeli faculty in the States is six times the share of academic emigrants from the leading European country. It is also no coincidence that the share of Israeli scholars holding full-time positions in the top 40 American departments in fields like chemistry, physics, philosophy, economics and computer science is unparalleled.

Academic salaries in Israel have consistently declined in relation with academic salaries abroad and in relation with salaries in relevant private sectors within Israel. Therefore, why should it be surprising that a large number of our most gifted individuals are looking for the door – or are choosing not to even enter academic life altogether? As if salary gaps were not enough, we are also witnessing increasing gaps in the funding of basic research between Israel and other countries – which in turn not only harms domestic research but also impairs the possibilities for personal promotions in the future.

Another domestic boot in the pants comes from a steady decline of roughly 50% in the per capita number of positions in research universities. An entire generation was abandoned on the outside, even those wishing to return despite the large gaps in salaries and research funds. External micromanagement that is blind to long-run considerations has imposed destructive constraints on the universities that are reflected in (among other things) non-provision of regular full-time positions for new graduates, forcing them to work as external teachers with disgraceful wages, scandalous social benefits and non-existent research conditions – which then guarantee that these individuals will be pushed farther and farther behind the research frontier, and their academic fate will be sealed.

Foreign Scholars in U.S. Universities

as percent of academic scholars in home country, 2003-4



source: Dan Ben-David, "Brain Drained" (2008).

Israeli universities – which enabled the country to reap the benefits of the high tech revolution when it erupted, and made it possible for us to maintain an existential qualitative advantage in the realms of industry and defense – are products of the investments made by our founding fathers' generation. But the much wealthier subsequent generation diametrically changed Israel's national priorities and reallocated its resources, transplanting the national perspective with sectoral and personal ones, replacing strategic planning with blind faith, swapping common sense with obsolete ideologies – and supplanting the great hopes that our generation was raised on with the black hole that we may bequeath to our children's generation, if we don't get our act together in time.