
Canary in the Academic Mine

by

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To a certain degree, the recent faculty strike and the Shochat Commission report that preceded it exposed a number of increasingly problematic issues faced by Israel's academic institutions. But both dealt with only on the tip of the iceberg.

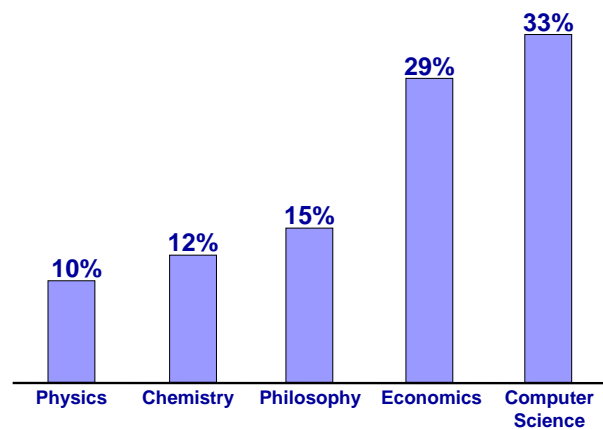
Many years ago, coal miners would enter the mines carrying a cage with a canary. In the event of poisonous gas leaks, the canary's demise provided the miners with an early warning of imminent danger. In Israeli academia, the brain drain from Israel's universities plays the role of the canary. It is important to distinguish between symptoms – e.g. the brain drain – and the actual problem: the state of Israel's universities.

The number of European professors in American universities ranges from one to four percent of all senior academic staff in the professors' home countries. The magnitude of this brain drain has begun to cause considerable concern in the European Union. But if Europeans are worried about the migration of their academics to the States, then Israelis should be nothing less than alarmed. The number of Israeli scholars in the U.S. represents one-quarter of the total senior faculty in Israeli academia (including the non-research colleges).

The outward migration is distinguished not only by the number of those who leave but also by their quality. As can be seen in the diagram, the proportion of Israelis in the top 40 American universities is unparalleled. The number of Israeli physicists in just the leading American departments is one-tenth the entire number of physicists in Israeli research universities. The share of top Israeli chemists in America accounts for one-eighth the entire discipline in Israel. The number of Israeli philosophers in only the top 40 American departments accounts for 15 percent of the philosophers remaining in Israel.

Israelis in top 40 American universities

as percent senior faculty in Israel, by field, 2007



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

Trans-Atlantic wage differentials between the United States and Israel are much higher in the field of economics than in any of the three fields mentioned above. Hence, it is not surprising that the percentage of emigrating economists in the top American universities alone equals 29 percent of the total number of economists in Israel's universities. Salaries differences between the two countries in computer science are even greater than they are in economics. Consequently, the emigration rate of Israeli computer scientists is even greater than that of economists, representing a full third of the entire Israeli senior academic staff in this field. Some leading American departments have no fewer than five to seven Israelis each.

But it is important to emphasize that the salaries provide only a partial explanation for the brain drain phenomenon. In fact, there are four main reasons for the departure of many of Israel's leading researchers from its universities. In addition to (a) the relatively low salaries – in comparison with employment possibilities abroad and within Israel's private sector – there is (b) an insufficient number of faculty positions, (c) inadequate funding of academic research and laboratories, and (d) an archaic institutional organization of the universities that is controlled by the country's Finance Ministry. This ministry's sole preoccupation is to prevent a run on the government's purse, with no long-run strategic perspective (this is true regarding its behavior in other, non-academic, realms as well) and no accountability for any of the long-term consequences of its policies.

Fortunately for us, the country's founding generation had the foresight and the wherewithal to make considerable sacrifices from the little that it had available. They managed to establish a higher education system that enabled the country's future graduates to take advantage of the high-tech revolution when it materialized and to deal with growing security challenges that we face. The phenomenal accomplishments of the past few years – Nobel Prizes and cutting-edge innovations – are the result of past investments. Our children's ability to survive economically and militarily in the future will depend on the investments that we make. It is all an issue of national priorities. The next articles will detail how, for three straight decades, Israel has gone and steadily parched its principal source of national oxygen.