

**CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION**

**STUDY ON POLICIES AND STRATEGIES OF
ISRAEL AND SINGAPORE GOVERNMENTS TO
ATTRACT, DEVELOP AND RETAIN
RETURNEE TALENTS**

HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report on our study of policies, programs, measures and strategies of the Israel and Singapore governments to attract, develop and retain returnee talents. Our study has three phases. In the first phase, we attempted to analyze documentary sources and the scholarly literature in the two countries to reconstruct the evolution of their public policies over the years on return migration, while noting the economic, social, political and ideological factors at the national level which interact with the regional and global contexts to produce such policies. We interviewed scholars, academics, and government officials and asked them to reflect and comment on these policies, and to identify their strengths and weaknesses, achievements and dilemmas, problems and challenges. In the second phase of our study, we attempted an analysis of the adaptation and adjustment of a sample of returnees in the two countries. These returnees were asked to comment on their own government's policies and to make suggestions and recommendations for change. In our third phase, we attempted a comparative analysis of the return migration policies and the experiences of adaptation of the returnees of Israel and Singapore. On the basis of the comparison, we articulated policy recommendations to the Hong Kong government regarding return migration.

Objectives of the Study

Our study has three objectives:

1. Compare the government policies of Israel and Singapore in attracting their emigrants to come home, in developing further their talent, and in retaining them so that they will make a contribution to society.
2. Identify, describe and explain the variety of behavioral patterns of adaptation of Israeli and Singaporean returnees upon returning home. Attempts were made to examine the returnees' adaptation to the following areas: (1) work and career; (2) family relations; (3) children's education; (4) social participation; and (5) attitudes to work organization and culture.
3. On the basis of the Israel and Singapore experiences, articulate public policies and make policy recommendations on how to re-integrate returnees back into Hong Kong society, such that they will settle down, feel at home once again in Hong Kong, and make their contributions.

Methodology

The research of our study was undertaken in two stages. At the first stage the information regarding brain drain and return migration and the attempts of the Israeli and Singapore governments to persuade the talented migrants to return home, has been collected from the scholarly literature, special reports by research institutes, newspaper articles and internet sites. The research strategy at this stage attempted to identify social, cultural, economic, personal and professional factors that are associated with leaving and returning.

At stage two, in Israel, nine in-depth interviews with the migrants were conducted. Some of the migrants interviewed lived in Israel, others visited Israel for a short time. At this stage, the research approach was phenomenological, as we sought to understand how the “objective reality” presented and constructed earlier in public documents and the scholarly literature was perceived by the migrants — to see through their eyes the importance of social, cultural, economic, personal and professional factors that influenced their decisions to leave and to return (or not to return). The interviews took about two hours on average and were conducted between August, 2008 and March, 2009.

Two additional interviews were performed with the Israel officials. The first official was responsible for implementing the policies of the Immigration Ministry. The second one was running the contact center in the Academy of Sciences. Then, three in-depth interviews with economics professors from Bar-Ilan Tel-Aviv University and Hebrew University were performed.

The two-phase methodology — objective, documentary or textual study first, and phenomenological study second — was also adopted in the Singapore study. Ten returnee Singaporeans were interviewed. Eight were interviewed face-to-face using an interview schedule and two were interviewed on the telephone. The average interview took 50 to 60 minutes; the telephone interviews were shorter.

Main Findings

Our Israel study has identified several unique characteristics of the brain drain from Israel:

1. Senior academic staff leave if they could find elsewhere a position with much higher wages and greater research budgets;
2. People holding doctoral degrees often leave Israel to acquire a post-doc experience in the US. This experience is perceived as necessary if one is to find a good position in the Israeli academy;
3. Hi-tech specialists are leaving Israel for higher salaries and promotion.

Unemployment and lack of economic opportunities are the main reasons for leaving Israel. Family ties and cultural considerations constitute the main reasons for considering the return to the homeland. Our interviews with the Israel returnees indicate the importance of cultural compatibility with social norms in various contexts.

We have shown the great complexity of the brain drain issue in Israel and described the emerging policies on returning the migrants home. The policies concentrate on providing information regarding available positions both in the academy and in industry, investing money in returning some of the researchers and creating new positions for some of them in universities and industry.

Dilemmas and challenges abound. One of the questions asked is: who does the program aim at? Just a few “stars” or human capital in a broader sense? Another question deals with difficulties in returning the post-docs in the context of a lack in long-term planning.

The economists in our Israel study call for dealing with the causes of brain drain, making Israeli universities, the tax system, and other fields of higher quality attractive for Israeli and non-Israeli alike.

Our Israel study has reported on the following findings:

1. The problem of brain drain in Israel is a complicated one. The answer to the brain drain should first of all turn to internal systemic reforms in different fields inside Israel: a more attractive tax system, less taxation on foreign income, high quality universities, better financing of the universities, more investments in basic research in technology rather than only in the applied, building more pragmatic connections between the academy and the industry, improvements in the education system, utilization of the local PhD holders, etc.

2. The policies should try to make Israeli universities and other sectors attractive for Israeli and non-Israeli, for Israeli living abroad and locals. Policies favoring migrants over local talents should be treated with caution in light of the rich human capital inside Israel that is still not called for. Probably investing the money in the scientific diaspora is less costful and more efficient.
3. Returnees experience difficulties in adjustment at work, particularly in their relations with locals. This has deep implications for government's and employers' policies to manage returnees – locals relationship, to facilitate the returnees' re-integration into society.
4. For many of the talented migrants abroad, the land of Israel, Israeli people and Israeli culture are important and carry a deep meaning of "feeling at home". This feeling is particularly important in light of Jewish history of the last twenty centuries. It seems that under otherwise equal conditions talented people would prefer to return to Israel or not to leave it.

Our Singapore study has reported on the following findings:

1. There were more push than pull factors that led people to leave the country.
2. Emigrants left Singapore chiefly for political and economic reasons.
3. For those with children, leaving to escape a stressful educational system was one prime reason for leaving Singapore.
4. The process of emigration changed the attitudes of some emigrants towards their home country. Most became more positive towards their home country and even started to appreciate the systems in the home country, even the political system, although, ironically, they left due to dissatisfaction with the perceived authoritarian political system in Singapore.
5. Emigrants returned mainly to look for better-paid jobs and also because of emotional ties with the home country (e.g., to spend time with ageing parents).
6. Some returned because they preferred to have their children re-enter the Singapore education system, although, ironically, they had left Singapore because of its stressful education system.
7. Emigrants slipped back into the routine of life in Singapore quite effortlessly although there were some adjustment issues, especially in their work relations with the locals!
8. For returnees with children, getting their children back into the school system was priority. Whether their children could adjust to the education system was important to their adaptation in Singapore.
9. Most returnees expressed the likelihood that they would emigrate again, for a variety of reasons, e.g., for career advancement, adventure, or to enrich their life experiences. For some, they intended to leave again because they remained dissatisfied with certain aspects of Singapore life.

To attract Singaporeans to return, and to plug the emigration process, the Singapore government has been working on the idea of 'Remaking Singapore' in recent years, making attempts to democratize greater sectors of the society, and also working on rebuilding the physical structure of the city, hoping to transform it into a Global City. It is working to shed its workaholic and straitlaced image to a certain extent, hoping that people will find Singapore an ideal place to live as well as work in, and that people will develop psychological and emotional ties with the country. There have also been signs of the government making efforts to maintain healthy work-life balance, develop innovation in education, accept diversity in learners, and amend laws to suit the populace. Whether returnees remain in Singapore eventually will depend on how successful and how genuine these initiatives are perceived to be. But then, returnees are 'transnationals', who may have their own agendas.

The Singaporeans in our study have decided to leave the west and return home to Singapore to meet two types of needs, Type 1 or economic needs and Type 2 or socio-emotional needs. They have found better work and enjoyed higher income in Singapore and they want to be closer to their aging parents. While in the west, these Singaporeans encounter racial discrimination at work and in everyday life, living out a life of social distance from mainstream society. Unhappy at work and at play, the Singaporeans come home. Now, having been back home for years, these returning natives, while being happy with their improved economic well-being, have quickly discovered that friendships back home in a fast-paced, capitalistic society are superficial. They are experiencing a work culture that remains unreceptive to return migrants' ideas about creativity; an organizational and governmental bureaucracy that is top-down; and a community that treats the returnees with suspicion. Yes, Type 1 needs are met. No, Type 2 needs are not met. These Singaporean return migrants are thus still in disequilibrium — a state of psychic restlessness. Failing to sink permanent roots in Singapore one more time, they cast their sights beyond the homeland, perhaps back to the west where they once were.

In comparison, the life stories of the Israeli in our study present a picture that is different from that of the Singaporeans. Israelis left their homeland for occupational reasons: to obtain professional qualifications, to gain overseas work experience, to acquire work skills. One can say that their needs at the time of emigration to the west were of Type 1. While in the west, these Israelis, like the Singaporeans, lived in an ethnic enclave community. These Israelis are not exactly happy at work in the west either, complaining about a kind of distant formality in the work culture which could be rather prejudicial to the ethnic outsiders. So, these Israelis decided to return to Israel. It is clear that cultural, familial, socio-emotional rather than economic considerations predominate in their deliberations about return migration. Coming home is motivated by a desire to be back with the people of homeland, the family, the local ways of

everyday life. The Israeli returnees speak freely and sentimentally about the meaningfulness of cultural compatibility and kindred feelings. The returnees now feel close to the ground, the native soil: they feel "at home". But not all is well. Our Israel returnees are discontented with many things at work: the lack of a market of universities; the academia being an archaic institution that resists change; reward based on seniority and connections; seasonal employment or even unemployment; downward occupational mobility; mismatch between skills and work placements, and so on. The Israeli scenario is the opposite to that of the Singaporeans: Yes, Type 2 needs of emotionality or expressiveness are met. No, Type 1 economic or work needs are not met. Though for reasons different from those of their Singaporean counterparts, our Israeli returnees share with them a similar state of restlessness, which may drive them to move further on.

It is clearly the primary responsibility of the Hong Kong government to formulate policies to meet the return migrants' economic needs, the so-called "hard needs" of Type 1. The equally important but often overlooked task is that of emotionality which pertains to the "soft needs" of Type 2 and which is by no means easier because it is more subtle. One indeed wonders if such "emotional labour" is best done by informal, voluntary groups in communities, professional, religious or leisure organizations, family and kinship networks, and even the workplace. The overall goal is for Hong Kong to find her own pathway to a good life in a good society. A person would say he is living a good life when he is physically and psychologically contented. A good society seldom loses sight of the duality of material and non-material needs. Besides a social contract of pragmatism, a good society would also need to be compassionate and sympathetic, and has a heart. To do that, society would need to work out a cultural contract with her members — be they locals or migrants — which strive to achieve internal solidarity, even sentimentality.

Israel satisfies the returnees' expressive needs, but not their instrumental needs. Singapore is the exact reverse of Israel. All societies must strive to meet both needs of their members. Failing that, people will continue to move, again and again.

Policy Recommendations

To attract and retain returnees, the Hong Kong government may wish to consider the following recommendations:

1. Provide one-stop information on schools
2. Improve the education system
3. Establish information websites
4. Develop an integration program based on multiple stages of return migration
5. Integrate various policies into a coherent whole
6. Provide services that would-be returnees need
7. View returnees positively
8. Manage the relations between returnees and locals
9. Pay attention to the dual material and emotional needs of returnees
10. Develop affective ties
11. Examine cultural and recreation possibilities
12. Observe healthy work-life balance
13. Create change: accepting diverse opinions and building a more inclusive society