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## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF DIASPORA

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the contemporary relationship between international student migration and diaspora formation. It argues that international students have been largely absent from recent discussions of ‘knowledge diasporas’, where migrants’ ‘home’ states attempt to harness and co-opt the skills and knowledge of their émigrés. This is surprising, given students’ evident role in knowledge circulation and exchange. In this paper, we foreground the significance of international students but also explore their relationship to diaspora formation from a different angle. We argue that some states are increasingly engaging in (sometimes seemingly contradictory) policies designed to *obstruct* overseas diaspora formation, and these policies centre on their international student populations. Through a number of case studies and drawing on the secondary literature, we demonstrate the ways in which states are strategising to repatriate international students following their studies overseas. More broadly, we argue, this represents an alternative to popular notions of brain circulation and knowledge diasporas, chiming with a far more long-standing concern with ‘brain drain’.

**KEYWORDS:** *diaspora, international students, states*

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we draw on secondary literature to uncover the complex ways in which recent international student migration/mobility intersects with diaspora formation. The contemporary diaspora has been described by Cohen (1996) as possessing some of the following features: dispersal from a ‘homeland’; a collective memory/myth pertaining to the homeland; idealization of the homeland (and a collective commitment to maintaining it); the development of a ‘movement’ espousing return; and the existence of a strong ethnic group consciousness that is sustained over time and rooted in a sense of distinctive characteristics. They may also have experienced a difficult relationship (such as exclusion or discrimination) within their ‘host’ society. Commonly given examples with extensive global reach include Jewish, Irish and Chinese diasporas.

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Recently, academics have become interested in exploring ‘knowledge diasporas’: that is, communities of highly educated, highly skilled citizens living overseas, maintaining significant ties back to a ‘home country’ (Jöns *et al.*, 2015; Larner, 2007; Leung, 2015). Home states have been increasingly acknowledging – and actively developing policies in relation to – their knowledge diasporas; governments are progressively attempting to harness the skills and knowhow of their citizens abroad through ‘diaspora strategies’ (Larner, 2007; Leung, 2015). This development in state-emigrant relations reflects a broader recognition of the nature of population migration globally – that skilled and talented individuals will often be transnationally mobile, living ‘cosmopolitan lifestyles’ and attached (in different ways) to more than one country simultaneously (Basch *et al.*, 1994). Whilst emigration was traditionally seen as a ‘loss’ for home states (discussed in terms of human capital and ‘brain drain’), contemporary transnationalism has been said to signal the possibility of ongoing benefits attributed to maintaining ties (political, economic and social) with émigrés. It has required states to reimagine their spatialities, as they extend their reach beyond traditional nation-state boundaries and come to recognise the value inherent in their geographically dispersed migrant populations.

What has been striking, however, is the absence of ‘international students’ from these debates. The international student mobility literature has grown substantially over the past 15 years, to encompass a range of issues around state strategies, policies and student experiences (see Brooks and Waters, 2011 for an early overview) – including those that relate to mobility to and from states with more authoritarian forms of governance (e.g. Chankseliani, 2018b; Del Sordi, 2018). Surprisingly little work, however, has discussed international students in terms of ‘knowledge’ and the contribution their movement can make to debates around mobility and knowledge diasporas (although see Park, 2019). In an exception to this, Raghuram (2013) has written that student migration is a ‘key component of knowledge migration’ (p. 138). Students are the embodiment of mobile ‘knowledge’ (Park, 2019), broadly defined to include different types of capital (cultural and social) as well as what Williams (2007) has called ‘embrained’ and ‘embodied’ knowledge: ‘encapsulated in the individual’ and transferable via international migration (Williams, 2007, p. 364). International students are, in theory at least, migrating *to learn* (Li *et al.*, 1996); their *raison d’être* is knowledge acquisition and exchange. In this paper, we therefore begin with the assertion that international students do play – and have the potential to play – a significant role in knowledge diaspora debates.

Furthermore, we recognise here that discussions around the ‘knowledge diaspora’ often reflect a *particular* view of the nation-state (as liberal democratic, as opposed to authoritarian) and a perspective on knowledge, skills and mobilities that has, over several years, been promoted through Western-origin, international organisations such as the World Bank and OECD (both of these organisations have been instrumental in promoting the idea of a global

knowledge economy) (Robertson, 2005). States that lack a liberal democratic tradition (such as those we review in this paper) espouse differing views on the relationship between their populations, knowledge and ‘development’. Although there are a small number of studies that have begun to explore diasporic strategies within authoritarian states (see, for example, Baser and Ozturk, 2020; Moss, 2016; Tsourapas, 2020), the relative absence of such perspectives from mainstream debates has resulted in the exclusion of alternative views of diaspora, especially around the ways in which states may be actively *discouraging* diaspora formation, and an inability to account for the political considerations underpinning states’ objectives. Here, we focus on the myriad of ways in which states are explicitly attempting to woo, lure, or oblige their citizens to ‘return’ immediately following their studies overseas. Through these policies, it would appear as if states are *actively reinventing* concepts of ‘brain circulation’, perhaps in fact revisiting the idea of ‘brain drain’ and thereby challenging Western-centric notions that the knowledge diaspora is inherently valuable. Consequently, states are being far more proactive than ever before in their attempts to prevent outgoing international students from staying abroad.

In this paper, we first review extant literature on both ‘knowledge diasporas’ and ‘state strategies’ that engages specifically with highly skilled nationals who have moved abroad. We then draw on four case studies – Singapore, China, Kazakhstan and Russia – to examine in more detail the steps taken by various governments to encourage international students to return ‘home’. Not all these countries are classed as ‘authoritarian’, but all have long-standing parties in power, with little change at the top of government, and consequently may not ‘fit’ the model of diaspora strategies and knowledge that the literature describes. The subsequent section then explores some of the assumptions explicit and implicit in these strategies, relating to national identity, state motivations (political versus economic) and temporal framing, drawing out some commonalities across the four national contexts, but also highlighting some key points of difference. We consider the implications of these strategies for understandings of transnational student and graduate mobilities and related state responses. Whilst we acknowledge the value that a historical exploration of these issues might bring to such debates, we are interested here in states’ recent responses, in relation to the huge increase in international student mobility over the past two decades (OECD, 2019). We begin with a discussion of knowledge diasporas in relation to state strategies.

#### DIASPORAS, KNOWLEDGE DIASPORAS AND STATE STRATEGIES

As the number of students choosing to leave their home nation to pursue a higher education elsewhere increased during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so governments across the world became concerned about the possibility of ‘brain drain’ – i.e. that these highly skilled individuals would choose to remain abroad after their

studies. It was held that, as a consequence, economic and societal development in their home nation would suffer and inequalities between nations would continue to grow. While such disquiet was voiced more commonly by less developed nations, these views were mooted more widely; indeed, the European Commission has expressed concern about the number of European students remaining in the US after doctoral study there (Gribble, 2008). Various initiatives were put in place to try to retain students within domestic institutions, such as increasing the capacity and size of national higher education sectors, and welcoming foreign providers to establish transnational campuses (Gribble, 2008; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015). More recently, however, there has been a notable shift – from trying to *prevent* educational mobility to encouraging those educated abroad to return and/or engage with their home nation from afar. This shift reflects a recognition by states of both the inevitability of international student mobility and the transnational nature of much migration; migrants rarely move permanently from one country to another, cutting ties as they do so. Instead, they are likely to maintain significant links with their home country and, in the process, provide states with opportunities to harness those ties.

The valuing of overseas education is also seen in the attempts made by various governments to benefit from individuals educated abroad, even when they do not return permanently to their nation of birth (Larner, 2007). Specific strategies include encouraging diasporic individuals to invest in their home nation, facilitate trade, and transfer their skills and knowledge through transnational networks (Gribble, 2008; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015). To enable these actions, governments have taken a range of practical steps, such as establishing business associations and other networks around the world. Short-term visits have also been encouraged through offering summer camps for children and internships for students, and by making it easier for expatriates to move in and out of the nation-state (Leung, 2015; Welch and Hao, 2016; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015). Furthermore, discursive change has been evident, as governments have adopted more inclusive ways of discussing the nation – evidence of the re-spatialising of states, mentioned above. In Singapore and New Zealand, for example, the diaspora has become included in official accounts of the national community (Gamlen, 2013; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015) while China has shifted from considering emigration an ‘imperial crime’ to viewing all ethnic Chinese as an integral part of the Chinese nation (Ho, 2020; Lum, 2015). Few studies have explored, however, the extent to which international students take these factors into consideration when deciding whether, following graduation, to stay overseas.

While the majority of the literature on diaspora strategies focuses on approaches taken by states, higher education institutions can also exert some influence on the diaspora. Indeed, the increasing importance placed on ‘internationalisation’ within the higher education sector has had the effect of positioning international researchers as ‘transnational knowledge brokers’ within

their universities, able to form highly valuable connections with scholars and other knowledge workers in their nations of origin (Larner, 2015). Such individuals are valued by the country in which they are located and also by their 'home' nation. By being co-opted into such projects of 'internationalisation', Larner (2015) contends that members of knowledge diasporas should be viewed not only in cultural or economic terms, but as a part of a 'new global assemblage' that emphasises distinctly political rationalities. Jöns' (2009) work develops a somewhat similar argument in a different context, showing how academic mobility to Germany in the second half of the 20th century played a key role in reintegrating Germany into the international scientific community, and enabling it to become the most important source of international collaborators for American scientists and engineers in the 21st century.

In theorising these developments and, in particular, the ways in which the highly skilled have been encouraged to engage with their home nation from afar, Larner (2007) argues that understandings of the nature of diaspora have changed. Whereas in the past 'diaspora strategies' were viewed as mobilising groups of people who had already organised themselves according to their country of origin, those that have been played out in the 21st century, with respect to highly skilled individuals:

... are a new way of thinking about populations made manifest in the relatively recent 'discovery' of expatriate populations by a range of governments, the development of diaspora strategies as a means of accessing new economic opportunities and skill sets in the context of a knowledge-based economy ... and the proliferating techniques such as webpages, databases, networking and events through which high-skill expatriates are being mobilised. (p.332).

She goes on to contend that such diaspora strategies represent both a new 'geographic imaginary and political-economic field' and 'the active constitution of new spaces and subjects with distinctive characteristics' (ibid.). Jöns *et al.* (2015) have developed this argument further, suggesting that the members of such knowledge diasporas are highly diverse individuals who are not necessarily defined by their collective identities (as has often been the case in conventional understandings of diaspora) but who may become linked 'through individual feelings of belonging and shared experiences of socialisation such as language, cultural practices and education' (p.116).

Reviewing the wider literature on the knowledge diaspora, it is notable that many accounts have focussed on academic staff and/or those in other forms of highly-skilled employment, rather than students *per se*. (There are clearly some important exceptions to this, some of which we have discussed above). While many studies note that student mobility can provide an important route to settling abroad and developing high-level skills (e.g. Baas, 2006; Robertson, 2013; Waters, 2006), the literature tends to focus on strategies to lure home, or engage with, those already in employment (e.g. Varma and Tung, 2020 on India;

Zweig and Wang, 2013; Zweig *et al.*, 2008). Why have students been generally neglected in these accounts, given that their outward mobility can, in some cases, represent a sizable population? The first reason, perhaps, is the assumption that international students are always on a temporary sojourn. A short-term and narrow temporal perspective means that states are often only concerned with students' visa status at the time, and not with the fact that students are becoming cosmopolitan and mobile workers of the future. And this ignores the fact that many international students intend to – and are able to – convert their student visa into permanent residency in many countries. A second reason may concern the general lack of attention and respect given to students as migrants within the migration literature (Li *et al.*, 1996). Despite a huge growth of research in this area across the disciplines of education, sociology and geography (e.g. Beech, 2019; Ma, 2020; Tannock, 2018; Van Mol, 2014), the field of migration studies continue to valorise certain categories of migrants as subjects of interest, and students are seen, somehow, as less important or worthy of study (Raghuram, 2013). We now turn to focus specifically on students – emphasising the role they have played in recent state strategies around knowledge and brain drain.

With respect to encouraging students' return, initiatives have included: bonding arrangements (where students in receipt of state scholarships are required to sign a contract to promise to return to work in their home nation for a specific number of years); sandwich courses (which allow study abroad for one or two years, but students remain registered at a higher education institution in their home nation); and repatriation schemes that offer very attractive terms and conditions in relation to, for example, work and housing (e.g. Gribble, 2008; Welch, 2015; Welch and Hao, 2016). Some nations have also proffered a variety of moral arguments to encourage return, such as emphasising the obligations of nationals to support their nation state (Ziguras and Gribble, 2015). Writing with respect to Singapore, Ye and Nylander (2015) have shown that whilst the state sponsors mobility (from a very limited number of junior colleges) to elite overseas institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, it also requires all scholarship-holders to sign a contractual bond that obliges them to work for five to six years in public service on graduation. Similar schemes have been documented in relation to China. Indeed, Leung (2015) contends that selecting 'top scholars' and sending them to elite institutions in the US and UK was adopted in the mid-2000s as 'the official strategy to improve the quality of Chinese human capital to meet the demands of the increasingly inter-related capitalist global political economy' (p.192). In these cases, we can see the considerable importance attributed to a stay abroad, while return is also strongly encouraged and, in some cases, clear steps are taken to try to enforce it. This is, however, a particular interpretation of brain *circulation*, where circulation stops on return to the home country. Indeed, we would like to suggest here that there is evidence that many states are actually demonstrating a renewed concern with

a far more traditional notion of ‘brain drain’, leading us to question the limits to the knowledge diaspora discourse *in practice*.

In summary, our review of the extant literature has identified several gaps that this paper seeks to address. First, we have noted that the role played by international students is often neglected in analyses of the ‘knowledge diaspora’, which tend to focus, instead, on academic staff and/or individuals already in highly skilled employment. Second, it is notable that, within the now-sizeable literature on international student mobility and the decision-making processes undertaken by mobile students (e.g. Geddie, 2013; Williams and Baláž, 2008; Sin, 2013), there is very little discussion of the consideration such students give – if any – to particular incentives offered, or pressure exerted, by their home nation to return home on completion of their studies. Finally, we have noted that states without a liberal democratic history are often neglected within discussions of diasporic strategies. Our paper is intended to take forward debate in all three areas.

#### FOUR CASE STUDIES

##### *Rationale for Choice*

Our aim in this paper is to present case studies that illustrate the various ways in which nations have attempted to obstruct overseas diaspora formation. Our approach is thus based on *exemplifying* cases (Bryman, 2001), i.e. cases that have been chosen, not because they are ‘unique’ or ‘critical’ (Yin, 1994), but because they enable us to explore in some depth (within the limitations of a journal article) relevant social processes, such as the motivations of nation states for engaging in particular practices. By choosing four such case studies, we are also able to make some comparisons between nation-states, exploring similarities and differences, and gaining a deeper awareness of social reality in different national contexts (Hantrais, 1996). In selecting our cases, our choices were based largely on the extant literature. We sought to bring together academic studies, newspaper reports and ‘grey literature’ that had discussed, at least to some degree, steps that national governments had taken to prevent diaspora formation – although the issues may not have been framed in this way in the original study or report. Given the limited previous discussion of this topic (noted above), our choice was relatively constrained. We certainly do not claim that we are presenting an exhaustive discussion of possible cases; rather that the four states we have chosen, taken together, raise interesting issues about the range of diasporic strategies employed in contemporary society, and help to identify some key differences in national perspectives (as well as some similarities). Moreover, although we did not set out to choose only states lacking a liberal democratic tradition, our sample of four nations that are authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian in nature does start to address the imbalance in the literature on diasporas discussed above. The

sample also allows us to engage with wider diaspora scholarship (not connected to knowledge diasporas *per se*) that suggests that authoritarian states have a tendency actively to discourage diaspora engagement in state affairs and more often to brand diaspora members as ‘deserters’ and ‘traitors’ (Gamlen *et al.*, 2013).

As noted previously, our analysis is based exclusively on secondary sources, using a range of texts that have discussed, in some way, strategies employed by national governments to prevent diaspora formation among international students (or former international students). We have not, therefore, conducted our own primary research into the four national contexts and are reliant on the data produced by others. While this is, to some extent, a weakness of our approach, our intention in this paper is primarily to raise awareness of activities in this area by nation-states, and to tease out some of the more conceptual ideas – about, for example, how national identity is conceived, and how states balance short- and longer-term objectives – that underpin them.

### *Singapore*

On the one hand, Singapore is involved in the creation of (academic) diasporas by encouraging the immigration of non-citizen ‘foreign talent’ from other countries through scholarships that carry a ‘bond’, ‘that is, a legal requirement that the “scholar” works in Singapore for a number of years following graduation’ (Yang, 2016, p. 2). As Yang (2016) notes, scholarship students might be thought of as ‘appropriated’ people, claimed by Singapore and bringing explicit benefits (in terms of human capital) to the state. At the same time and reflecting the contradictory nature of many states’ policies towards immigration/emigration, as we have alluded to above, Singapore has taken measures to ensure that as many as possible of its own citizens – ‘outgoing’ international students – subsequently return. This aligns with a discourse of ‘brain drain’, which has been strongly articulated within the city-state since the 1990s (Ziguras and Gribble, 2015).

The early 1990s saw the launch of ‘My Singapore’ – an initiative designed to instil a sense of pride and achievement in those who chose to stay in Singapore (whilst concomitantly, dissuading others from leaving and encouraging emigrants to return) (Gomes, 2010). Although the majority of government scholarships, sending students overseas for study, are ‘bonded’ (see above), not all students actually return, and in the late 1990s and early 2000s the government decided to ‘name and shame’ individuals who broke the conditions of their bond and stayed overseas following their graduation (Ziguras and Gribble, 2014).

In this case study, a certain ambivalence on the part of the state is evident. Whilst it values the knowledge that can be gained from a period studying abroad, in a way not seen by many other nations, evidenced through the

provision of studentships for Singaporean nationals explicitly for this purpose, this mobility is however very limited. Significant steps are taken to ensure students return to Singapore – using both moral and economic incentives. The deployment of ‘naming and shaming’ practices is particularly interesting, as it suggests that even though graduates have chosen to remain abroad, the state assumes that they continue to care about their reputation in Singapore, and would be concerned if their families received any disapprobation as a result of decisions they had taken. Indeed, as Yeoh and Willis (1999) describe, Singaporean nationalism is in part based on an articulation of gendered notions of the family, rooted in Asian (familial) values. These various actions also suggest that the government sees the formation of a Singaporean ‘knowledge diaspora’ as both a highly possible outcome of outward student mobility, if the state does not intervene, and something that is much less likely to benefit the state than the physical return of mobile students.

### *China*

As noted by Lum (2015, p. 51), China has one of ‘the oldest, largest and most geographically extensive overseas populations in the world.’ It has a long-standing and significant diaspora (Ho, 2020) and has benefited, in different ways, from its globally dispersed population. And yet: ‘Generations of migration pose both governance challenges and opportunities for China ... While migration upsets the territorial foundations of the modern nation-state, it has the potential of introducing more flexible forms of citizenship that enables the nation-state to retain a form of sovereignty over their overseas populations’ (Lum, 2015, p. 52). It is, it would seem, a complex extra-territorial arrangement.

Like Singapore, China has also developed a clear strategy for encouraging the in-migration of students from overseas. China’s ‘internationalisation’ strategy is particularly strong (it has become a key destination country for international students) yet, at the same time, the country continues to revere and reward graduates with an overseas education through incentives for their return. Presently, China offers a high number of scholarships to overseas students, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (Ding, 2016) and the Chinese Government Scholarship Program (Dong and Chapman, 2007), encouraging students to stay and work after graduation. However, the Chinese government has also attempted to implement successive policies to attract overseas ‘talent’ back to China. The most successful of these, Yang and Marini (2019) argue, is the ‘Young Thousand Talents’ (Y1000T). Established in 2011, the Y1000T programme has supported around 4000 researchers to return. According to Lum (2015), incentives include access to hukou (household registration), education for children and start up loans for businesses. Individual companies are also seen to be offering incentives for Chinese students overseas to return upon graduation. As noted in one media report:

The 2017 edition of the annual blue book of global talent Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad [...] notes that the number of returning graduates and postgraduates continues to increase in tandem with government policies to promote employment opportunities back home. According to a separate CCG report published last year jointly with recruitment platform Zhaopin.com, some 432,500 students returned to China after graduating from overseas universities in 2016, up 36.26% from 2012 ... (Sharma, 2018, n.p.)

The actions taken by the Chinese state with respect to students who have studied abroad underlines the continuing perceived value of an international education. Despite Chinese universities rising significantly within world rankings, and the high level of competition to gain access to the 'top' domestic higher education institutions, the efforts undertaken to encourage mobile students to return indicates that international credentials (particularly those from Anglophone nations of the Global North) remain highly valued – and of equal if not, in some cases, greater prestige when compared their domestic equivalents. Through the steps taken to reduce the size of the Chinese 'knowledge diaspora' outlined above, the Chinese government further enhances the privileges of those who have studied abroad. As Wang (pers. comm.) has noted in her ongoing doctoral work, recent changes to China's city-administered systems of allocating hukou to graduates has favoured overseas educated returnees, allowing international graduates access to the best jobs in the most attractive urban areas (Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen). A similar tendency to favour internationally educated graduates in the private sector workplace ensures that a historical reverence for a Western, English-medium education continues, despite the fact that, over the past few years, China's attempts to attract international students to its higher education system have been highly successful. China ranks third behind the US and the UK for numbers of international students educated globally (Lee, 2020). This would suggest that China is deploying a complex 'strategy' when it comes to knowledge diasporas and international education; seeking a resident population comprised of overseas education graduates and locally educated foreigners and a locally educated, domestic population – the best of all worlds.

### *Kazakhstan*

Soon after securing independence from the Soviet Union (in 1991), Kazakhstan established an international student mobility scheme, known as the Bolashak programme. This has provided full scholarships to enable a relatively large number of young people (currently estimated to be over 12,000 (Del Sordi, 2018)) to move abroad for their higher education, on the assumption that they will help to consolidate the Kazak state on their return (Holloway *et al.*, 2012). The government believed that overseas-educated graduates would make an important contribution to the economy and national development more

generally, while reducing pressure on Kazakhstan's own university sector. However, Del Sordi (2018) reports how the scheme was also intended to reduce 'brain drain' from the country – and make it more difficult for mobile students to settle abroad, through the various conditions that were attached to the scholarships. Indeed, extreme sanctions are used against those who do not return – including having to pay back their entire studentship. Moreover, requests for extensions to the stay abroad (even when made on academic grounds) are refused. In addition, measures are taken to ensure that returning to Kazakhstan is seen as an attractive proposition as possible – through, for example, ring-fencing the best employment opportunities for returning graduates. The state also intervenes to build Kazak student communities abroad through, for example, various events that are organised by the Kazak embassy. Furthermore, peer groups are mobilised by the state, Del Sordi (2018) argues, to put pressure on scholarship-recipients to retain a strong Kazak identity to help ensure their return home at the end of their degree.

In this case study, we see the Kazak state taking active steps to shape the nature of the diasporic student community in various parts of the world in ways that have not been evidenced with respect to other national groups (i.e. through the actions of local embassies and the use of peer influence). It seems that this is likely to be based on fears that student ties to the home nation will be weakened through overseas study (an interesting contrast to some of the assumptions made by the Russian state, discussed below); overseas locations have considerable allure for longer-term relocation; and considerable intervention is required to ensure that students' *national* identity remains of most significance to them. Implicit in such actions is a belief that, left to their own devices, students' Kazak identity will become less important, and they will feel more distant from their home nation – echoing some of the literature that has suggested that mobile students develop transnational identities (Singh *et al.*, 2007). There is also an implicit assumption that 'knowledge diasporas' are of much less use to the state and its economic development than students who return home, bringing their newly-gained knowledge with them, and remain physically present in Kazakhstan.

### *Russia*

In April 2018, the Russian government launched a scheme to encourage its citizens studying in what were termed 'unfriendly' nations to return home (Atack, 2018). This was in response to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal (a former Russian intelligence officer) and his daughter Yulia, in the UK, and the UK prime minister's assertion in the aftermath of the incident that she believed it was 'highly likely' that Moscow was responsible. The scheme was termed the 'Highly Likely Welcome Back', making reference to the words that had been used by the UK prime minister. A report in *The PIE News* on this scheme

quoted a Russian source as saying that ‘There are serious fears that young Russians may suffer from provocation in countries that show unfriendly attitudes towards our country’ (Atack, 2019). It also quotes a Russian official as saying ‘... the domestic politics in a host of countries, and in Europe in particular, have increasingly taken on a harshly expressed anti-Russian character. We are obligated to highlight the negative influence of Russophobic attitudes on the activities of our compatriots’. As part of this scheme, the Russian government reportedly asked various Russian universities to make spaces available for students choosing to return, and offered support to help those returning find employment in Russia. Here, we can see attempts to encourage students to return as part of a political – rather than economic – initiative, which was understood by commentators at the time as part of a broader breakdown in diplomatic relations between Russia and various Western European countries. Such a move is not, however, without precedent. Indeed, similar steps were taken by Russia, with respect to Turkey, in 2015, following the downing of a Russian warplane of the border between Syria and Turkey (Chankseliani, 2018a).

In this case, the ‘knowledge diaspora’ constituted by Russian international students appears an *impermanent* one – able to be recalled if political conditions are deemed to require it. Moreover, the actions of the Russian state suggest that, at particular times, broader geopolitical considerations override the economic and knowledge-generative value of supporting the studies of students abroad. Indeed, the Russian state appears to position mobile students not in relation to the knowledge that they may generate, of value to Russia whether they return home or stay abroad, but with respect to broader political contestations – continuing a pattern that has been evident since the Cold War (Chankseliani, 2018a). The actions outlined above also indicate that the state assumes an enduring strength between mobile students and their homeland – that such students can be asked to move back home in the middle of their degrees for largely political reasons. Furthermore, it implies an assumption that such students’ primary loyalties are to their home nation – and that, in contrast to some of the literature that has documented significant change in the perspectives of mobile students (e.g. Singh *et al.*, 2007), ‘transnational identities’ have yet to be formed. This also presents an interesting contrast to some of the cases above, in which states appear to assume that without their intervention, students’ original national identities will wane and they will be less likely to make a permanent return home.

## DISCUSSION

The case studies, outlined above, show both similarities and differences in states’ engagement with their overseas students. Broad similarities include the desire to ‘recall’ or reappropriate citizens abroad, and the *active* deployment of

various strategies to achieve this end and the mobilization of some sort of notion of ‘nationhood’ in the process. These are quasi-authoritarian states that have, traditionally, been more interventionist when it comes to population policies than have liberal democracies. There are also, however, some interesting differences between them, and this is what we will draw out in this section. There are three broad points that we wish to make with regards to states’ differing strategies vis-à-vis international students and related attempts to avert longer term brain drain and diaspora formation. These are:

- (1) Differing assumptions when it comes to ideas about ‘national identity’ (and how national identity can be a feature of diaspora);
- (2) Political versus economic motivations for ensuring graduates’ return; and
- (3) Different temporal dimensions – in other words, how states balance short term and longer-term objectives.

### *National Identity*

Although diasporas are often thought of as ‘ethnic’ in nature, national identity is also seen to play a key role in diasporic formation. Members of a diaspora are believed to feel a degree of attachment to a homeland, and this homeland will often correspond to the territorial entity of the nation-state. In a diaspora, rather than losing one’s natal identity through migration, instead it will be reinforced (and even strengthened), in various ways, over time. This may happen through physical mobility back and forth (as in transnational migration) (Basch *et al.*, 1994), through engagement with digital media and with mobile friends and family (Alinejad *et al.*, 2019), or through encountering hostility in the ‘new’ country.

When it comes to international students, states’ attempts to ensure their return often draws heavily on appeals to nationhood. They depend upon the fact that mobile students will continue to identify with their home country when residing overseas. Most international students will travel on a temporary student visa, and so their absence is, by definition, temporary. Nevertheless, many ‘host’ countries offer international students the opportunity to extend their visas after graduation, to work for a period and even potentially, to apply for permanent residency. This permanent relocation is what ‘home’ states are actively attempting to mitigate.

Yeoh and Willis (1999) proffer a particularly fascinating interpretation of the relationship between nation and diaspora in the case of Singapore. They argue that the two concepts are ‘structurally inter-dependent and embedded in the discursive frame of each other’ (p. 357). They quote Van de Veer (1995, p. 2), where ‘diasporic space’ provides a discursive terrain for situating ‘the

contradictions between the notion of discrete territory and the transgressive fact of migration” (Yeoh and Willis, 1999, p. 357).

As a state-driven enterprise to encourage Singaporeans to venture overseas in order to expand the nation’s economic space, the regionalisation drive fashions a ‘diaspora by design’ wherein those who manoeuvre in diasporic space are expected ultimately to align themselves with and contribute back to the ‘nation’. (ibid., p. 358).

Thus, diaspora always leads back to notions of nationhood. And, as we have seen, states such as Singapore make direct appeal to a sense of national loyalty and (familial) duty when dealing with overseas students and their diaspora more broadly. Its small city-state status makes it particularly vulnerable to a loss of population, and therefore especially keen to ensure that anyone who leaves also comes back. Its policy of ‘naming and shaming’ non-returners relies on a sense of ‘moral duty’ but also implies a lack of confidence in its national identity and a palpable fear of loss.

Contrast this with Russia, which fears a loss of population far less and yet displays far more overt confidence in its ability to ‘recall’ its overseas student population if the political circumstances warrant it. China, with its vast overseas population, has a huge long-standing diaspora and therefore needs to proffer more immediate, material benefits in order to get graduates to return (preferential hukou, tax breaks, schooling for children, and so on) (see Ho, 2020 for an excellent account of the contemporary Chinese diaspora). Appeals to national identity, where a population such as China’s is so already dispersed globally, will not work. Finally, Kazakhstan, with its fragile sense of national identity and fear that citizens overseas will inevitably have this identity weakened, deploys far more punitive measures to ensure return.

### *Political Vs Economic (‘Brain Drain’) Motives*

In the examples that we have given, it is interesting to note that some strategies are more overtly economic whilst others are more ‘political’ and geo-strategic in intent; some combine politics and economics in different ways. As noted above, the concept of ‘knowledge diaspora’ has its roots in Western, liberal democratic ideas around ‘development’; in other words, it has assumed that states are using their overseas diaspora to enhance their economic development ‘at home’. The diaspora is an important source of income through remittances and, importantly, knowledge which can be harnessed to improve economic development. Large countries such as China appear to understand this well – they have geopolitical goals that are fulfilled by keeping some emigrants abroad, and attracting others (recent graduates) back. The latter appear to meet more immediate economic objectives (filling high-skilled jobs in key global cities).

The example of Russia, in contrast, appears to reflect a broader political positioning and concern that their citizens abroad are being met with hostility. Kazakhstan's objectives in encouraging overseas education return are more obviously, traditionally economic – reducing pressure on the domestic education system at the same time as utilising the skills and expertise, directly, of returned graduates (averting brain drain). The knowledge diaspora is of less value to Kazakhstan, as a country, than the physical presence of highly educated and skilled individuals (embodied and embrained forms of knowledge to use Williams's (2007) terminology). Singapore's strategies, tied to bonded scholarships are, similar to Kazakhstan, a reflection of a small-state mentality that *needs* a population present both for economic reasons but also for ensuring the viability and continuity of the nation-state as a political entity. As Yeoh and Willis (1999) have written, diaspora strategies and nation-building are inextricably linked in the case of Singapore. In sum, although some examples lean more towards one side or the other, our case studies demonstrate the complex interweaving of economic and political factors in recent decision making around diaspora formation.

### *Temporal Dimensions*

Some states see the development of a knowledge diaspora and the spatial dispersal of their citizens around the world as a 'long-game' – something that will reap rewards over a number of years, even if the immediate benefit is not so obvious (Ho, 2020). For others, particularly smaller states, the need for 'bodies' is immediate and cannot be deferred. These bodies are central to social reproduction and, consequently, to the state's survival.

This temporal dimension is apparent in how states would seem to view their diaspora and their overseas student population. Some states have been involved in the immediate repatriation of international students, versus others' attempts at gradual persuasion; some, like China, see their long-term overseas diasporas as nevertheless temporary in nature (destined always to return – they have an elemental connection to China), others as more permanent features (unless they intervene directly). Russia is a very good example of a state that views its citizens overseas as 'temporary' and 'recall-able'. China, with its long-term and significant overseas diaspora, knows that it will require more targeted, material intervention in order to prevent the ongoing consolidation of its diaspora in the long term and ensure the immediate return of recent graduates. Singapore and Kazakhstan's strategies are what might be described as 'medium term': spread over several years, and involve both sending students 'out' on scholarships and compelling their return following graduation.

This temporal dimension reflects broader ideas of nation-statehood in a globalising, networked world, where states are having to retheorise their

own spatialities and temporalities in relation to their increasingly dispersed populations (citizens). It brings into question the ongoing importance of physical presence of populations and the control states are able to exert over their citizens (who may, in some cases, possess dual citizenship) *at a distance* (what political theorists often term ‘biopower’). It is this intersection of space and time that we find so intriguing in relation to states’ perspectives on and attitudes towards their students overseas and the questions of if and when they will return.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article, we have focused on the importance of certain (quasi-authoritarian) states’ strategies in relation to knowledge diasporas and diaspora formation foregrounding the *prevention* of diaspora formation. By focussing on such strategies as they relate to students, in particular, we have started to redress the relative imbalance in this literature – which has tended to focus on academic staff and/or those already in highly skilled employment, rather than those coming to the end of their studies, despite the fact that students are central to global knowledge flows (Raghuram, 2013). We identified shortcomings attached to a particular, prevalent view of the ‘knowledge diaspora’ that is predicated on global, neoliberal assumptions attached largely to Western liberal democracies, and expanded our analytical lens to include the approaches of four nations that are often considered more authoritarian in their political systems. Our analysis has indicated that, in contrast to the scholarship on authoritarian states and diasporas in general, there is little evidence that international students are being treated as ‘deserters’ and ‘traitors’ (Gamlen *et al.*, 2013). It has also identified some important differences in the emphases and assumptions in the ‘state strategies’ the four states deploy relating to, as detailed above, the relative importance attributed to political and economic motivations; how ‘national identity’ is understood, and the extent to which it is believed to change during a period studying abroad; and the temporal frameworks within which states operate. Nevertheless, an intriguing commonality across all four nations is the importance that is attributed to *physical presence*, in the context of increasing transnational migration and an understanding of the value of the diaspora. In a sense, the examples described here represent states’ attempts to counter or mitigate transnationalism and its effects. States continue to value the embodied physicality of their populations and it is interesting to contemplate why, exactly, this is the case when it comes to knowledge workers. These examples also suggest that strategies to connect with diasporas from afar (discussed earlier in the article, when reviewing the literature on knowledge diasporas in general) are, in many parts of the world, not considered an adequate substitute for engaging with those who have studied abroad on home soil.

Clearly not all countries have pursued the type of strategies we have discussed above. Indeed, some nations, such as the UK, have relatively few students who move abroad, particularly for the whole of a degree. Other nations have considerably more nationals who move across borders for their higher education but have not taken any specific action to facilitate their return. This can be seen for example, in the case of various European nations who have expressed concern at the number of students from their country choosing to stay in the US after pursuing doctorates there, but have not put in place ‘diaspora strategies’ akin to those outlined above. (The development of the ‘European Higher Education Area’ was intended to ensure Europe could compete with higher education provision in other parts of the world (Robertson, 2009), but has not included the individual-level approaches documented in this article.) Nevertheless, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has seen many more nations across the world taking active steps to recall their citizens studying abroad. Typically, this has been premised on an understanding that students would prefer to spend any period of ‘lockdown’ in their country of origin, with their families, and perhaps also in some cases, a belief that students would be safer in their ‘home’ state. There are obvious differences here from the emphasis on economic development that underpins many of the ‘diaspora strategies’ discussed in this article. Recalling students in this way does, however, articulate with the broader literature on international students that has emphasised that they typically do not take on the rights of citizens in the country in which they study – particularly in relation to health care and social welfare (Duemert *et al.*, 2005). It will be interesting to assess the extent to which governments attempt to ‘manage’ the educational mobility of their nationals as the world emerges from the grip of the pandemic.

Extant literature on students’ decision-making processes as they come to the end of a period studying abroad have tended to foreground two specific sets of influences: personal considerations, and those relating to career and professional development. Studies have commonly suggested that a decision to return home is often associated with the prioritisation of the former (for example, a desire to return to one’s family), while those who choose to remain in the nation in which they have studied are influenced more by professional factors (Geddie, 2013). In these accounts, the role of the state is, however, typically absent. While we have outlined in this article various strategies pursued by national governments to encourage or compel their mobile nationals to return ‘home’, future research could usefully explore the ways in which such messages are *received* by international students, and how they play into their decisions about the future. We know, for example, that not all students required to pay a ‘bond’ do actually return home, but have little insight into the particular ways in which mobile individuals understand and evaluate the messages they receiving about return from their home government. This constitutes a fruitful avenue for future enquiry.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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