

Lindley, A.: *Skilled International Migration*, 2012

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SKILLED INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Education and the acquisition of skills have intrinsic benefits, as well as positive effects on wellbeing, health and citizen participation. Well-trained workers are also seen as important for economic development in both less developed economies and in advanced 'knowledge economies' – raising worker productivity and national income, driving technological progress and adaptation. Highly skilled international migration is therefore of great interest to policy-makers in both countries of origin and countries of destination.

The term 'highly skilled international migration' is typically used to refer to the migration of people with a university degree or equivalent skills or training. The progressive internationalisation of higher education and business has broadened the horizons of many graduates who often find that they are able to earn higher wages abroad – for example, a software developer from India can roughly triple his or her real earnings in the US (Clemens 2009). Better opportunities for professional training and personal development and the social recognition associated with having worked abroad also constitute important pull factors. Higher rates of emigration to OECD countries among women university graduates than among their male counterparts are thought to reflect structural and cultural barriers to professional advancement that many women encounter in developing countries (Docquier et al. 2009).

Destination country perspectives

A labour market shortage is typically viewed as a situation where the demand for workers is greater than the supply of workers who are qualified, available and willing to do the jobs concerned. There are various ways of responding to such situations. Most obviously, perhaps, employers may raise wages to attract qualified national workers – although they are often resistant to doing so. The state or private sector may choose to invest more money in developing the domestic skills base. But often employers – particularly in high-technology, engineering, information technology, biotechnology and health care sectors - focus on recruiting skilled workers from abroad (Ruhs and Anderson 2010). It is estimated that some 35 per cent of working age immigrants to OECD countries are tertiary graduates (Docquier and Marfouk 2004). There is also much skilled migration towards emerging and middle-income economies in East Asia, the Middle East, parts of China and South Africa.

To facilitate this, policy-makers have constructed separate migration channels for high and low skilled workers, with distinct terms of entry and rights, tending to welcome the skilled and rotate the unskilled. Skilled migration is typically regulated through some form of labour market needs test. Often workers are required to secure a job offer and an employer who can prove that there were no appropriate national candidates, but many immigration regimes also incorporate 'points-based' immigration channels whereby migrants are admitted based simply on their ability to provide skills that have been assessed to be in short supply domestically (Ruhs and Anderson 2010). Typically, highly skilled migrants are able to access better packages of rights than lower-skilled compatriots – they are more likely to be able to change employer, longer terms of legal residence, more likely to have the right to bring family members, and to have options for permanent settlement/eventual citizenship.

However, there is still a wide spectrum of employment situations and conditions. For some workers unable to break into the upper echelons of their sector, as for many project-based Indian IT workers, engaged on a highly flexible basis by IT companies through 'bodyshop' agencies, temporary migration becomes a more or less permanent way of life (Biao 2007). Although research suggests that highly skilled workers on the United States' H-1B scheme tend to be paid the prevailing wage so are not necessarily 'cheap labour', they have remained popular despite recent stagnation and unemployment in the major sectors in which they work, because they are more flexible labour and have lower expectations regarding working conditions and benefits (Luthra 2009).

Moreover, migrants often do not secure work commensurate to their skills – often referred to as 'brain waste'. Qualifications gained abroad may not be recognized in the destination country (for example, while IT firms tend to be more flexible, the health care sector is regulated by professional associations which are often more restrictive where a mutual recognition agreement does not exist). This means that skilled

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migrants often earn less than similarly qualified local workers (UNDP 2009). For example, in the UK foreign nurses are often employed as care assistants, providing skilled labour for lower pay (Shutes 2011).

While skilled international migration helps to meet employers' needs, it may affect the wages and employment opportunities of different segments of the local population in varying ways, depending on the degree to which different groups' skills complement or substitute for one another (UNDP 2009). For example, the injection of scarce engineering or clinical skills may release a bottleneck to economic growth or to more effective healthcare, benefiting all. But in other circumstances there is the possibility of heightened competition – in 2009 the UK raised the education and earnings requirements of Tier 1 of the points-based immigration system in response to rising unemployment among British graduates (Ruhs and Anderson 2010). However, research suggests that social acceptance of highly skilled and student migrants is generally much higher than for lower skilled migrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010).

Country of origin perspectives

In 1963, British journalists contemplating the emigration of British scientists from the United Kingdom coined the pejorative phrase 'brain drain' (Clemens 2009). Skilled migration is traditionally seen in this light: as offering gains for the destination country and losses for the source country. The term 'brain drain' is often used in a rather sweeping fashion to refer to all skilled worker emigration, implying that these flows have a damaging effect on source country development, or even that they are responsible for underdevelopment. However, correlation is not causation. Deteriorating conditions in the country of origin are more likely to be a cause than a consequence of skilled emigration (Migration DRC 2009). Blaming underdevelopment on skilled emigration assigns a primacy to migration which is inappropriate, given the wide range of other factors at play (Skeldon 2009). Suggesting that skilled emigration is universally damaging is misleading, given the wide range of contexts in which it occurs.

For example, research suggests that labour market size and geography is a key factor, with smaller, marginal areas worst affected by skilled emigration than larger areas close to dynamic economic centres (Skeldon 2009). The loss of relatively small numbers of skilled professionals from small labour markets can have a disproportionately significant impact, by contrast with larger flows from bigger economies (Migration DRC 2009). The top twenty source countries of graduate migrants are primarily small, island or post-conflict states: countries which can ill-afford to lose skilled workers, including Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti, Belize, Gambia, Fiji, Mauritius, Lebanon, Mozambique and Liberia (World Bank 2011). For some of these countries, the term 'brain drain' indeed seems appropriate. However, skilled emigration is also a phenomenon from richer countries and from larger developing countries which are in a better position to hold their own. In some circumstances emigration results from an oversupply of skilled workers, who could not be absorbed the relevant sectors of the home labour market. Skilled migration in such scenarios may still leave an adequate supply of skilled labour for domestic purposes. Moreover, some research suggests that good prospects for skilled migration can generally encourage people to invest in human capital (up to a point), thereby fostering development, as many thus trained will not or cannot actually leave (Stark 2004). This suggests that the impact of skilled emigration can be more complex than the term 'brain drain' implies.

Moreover, the impact of skilled migration does not only arise as a result of the movement of workers, but also their transnational interactions. Evidence suggests that although skilled migrants' earnings may be higher than lower skilled migrants, they are not necessarily likely to remit more, largely because they are more likely to spend longer periods abroad and bring family members with them (Faini 2007, Niimi and Ozden 2010). However, they may still remit/invest and return with substantial capital. Moreover, there is growing recognition of the ways that skilled expatriates can facilitate transfers of investment, technology transfer, business practices, marketing expertise – acting as useful bridgeheads to global markets (Biao 2008).

Evaluating the impact of skilled migration on source countries brings many methodological challenges relating to return statistics, calculation of loss of public investment in training, allowing for domestic brain waste and for immigration replenishing human capital lost through emigration (see Migration DRC 2009). Another major challenge is how to capture the less quantifiable dimensions of the impact of skilled emigration – for example it is easier to measure the numbers of scientists who migrate and who remain than to evaluate the impact of migration on the scientific culture of a country. While there are numerous economic studies on the impact of skilled emigration, there is much less work that focuses on impact on politics and society (see for example, Biao 2007, Hammond et al. 2011). Often skilled emigrants are assumed to be a progressive force politically, shaping public debate, articulating and implementing political reform and innovation. But this is not borne out in some prominent

[Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2005](#)

[Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951](#)

[European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950](#)

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examples. For example, in China the state – while relaxing authoritarian political control – is heavily involved in forging new economic relations with its diaspora, effectively domesticating this constituency, and tending to belie earlier expectations that overseas Chinese might act as powerful independent agents in China's transformation (Biao 2008).

For many years, while skilled emigration was seen as an unmitigated loss for countries of origin, policy efforts tended to focus on securing the return of skilled nationals. Significant numbers of skilled emigrants do return— a recent estimate suggested that about half do so, usually after about five years, often having augmented their skills abroad (UNDP 2009). Countries of origin may invest in 'look and see' schemes, 'golden hello' packages and rewards for organizations recruiting large numbers of returnees (Biao 2007). International agencies such as IOM and UNDP have been involved in the crafting of such programmes. However many analysts view subsidised return-of-talent programs as 'expensive failures' in that they engage some temporary return but not necessarily substantial reinvestment of human capital in the country of origin (Richard Black quoted in Beattie 2002). Typically, to secure the latter, there has to be something for skilled people to return to – wider signs of progress, as seen in the emerging economies of East Asia (Skeldon 2009).

The second key approach is to focus on retention – especially in the health care sector. Exit controls are now rare and are hard to enforce in non-authoritarian states. However, several countries have tried to enforce a public service requirement for key workers educated at public expense. This requires anyone not completing their stint to pay off the cost of their training – although evidence from Zimbabwe suggests that the bonding of newly qualified nurses tends to delay rather than substantially reduce emigration (Chikanda 2005). Another strategy is to focus public spending on nationally-specific training that is not internationally recognised (e.g. public health workers rather than doctors), or focus on training people most likely to stay where there are shortages (e.g. train people from remote rural areas rather than urban candidates who may be more likely to emigrate) (Skeldon 2009). Where public spending constraints allow, regular wage reviews and ensuring the availability of appropriate professional training and development opportunities in-country may also help to retain workers (Migration DRC 2009). Related approaches are for destination countries to regulate the recruitment practices of health care providers through codes of practice (although these generally do not extend to private sector recruiters) and for development donors to plug the gaps through aid programmes which subsidise health worker training, retention and return (Betts and Cerna, 2011).

In the last decade, revisionist perspectives on the 'brain drain' have led to a new generation of policy approaches which seek to encourage, instead of (or alongside) retention and return, a 'productive outflow of skills' (Biao 2007). One approach seeks to secure financial returns. Early proposals to levy an international tax on skilled migrants or require developed countries to compensate developing countries per migrant worker (Bhagwati 1976) never took off, but there is considerable interest in how remittances may be leveraged as a source of 'development capital'.

Another approach is for source country governments, private sector actors and international development actors to engage with skilled expatriates as a means to secure investment, knowledge transfer and connections with from foreign actors. For example, the South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA), established in 1998, aimed to promote collaboration between highly skilled emigrant scientists and their counterparts in South Africa (Kuznetsov and Sabel 2006).

Finally, some countries have specialised in labour migration as a development strategy. In the Philippines many health workers are trained for migration – the government has a deliberate policy of labour export at all skills levels, motivated by large inflows of remittances. Small low-lying island states like Kiribati, threatened by rising sea levels, are also increasingly investing in training for skilled migration as the most promising pathway for their people to secure permanent settlement in other states.

In sum, the flow of skilled workers has implications for countries of origin and destination and is a topic of keen interest to policy-makers. Traditionally viewed as a 'brain drain' for developing countries, research increasingly reveals skilled emigration to be a phenomenon with quite complex impacts depending on the context. While the best overall response to the emigration of skilled people is to address underlying structural/developmental problems which cause people to move – low pay, inadequate public sector and education financing and weak institutions – there are a raft of more targeted return, retention and diaspora engagement policy measures that have been used with varying degrees of success around the world to address the issues raised by the movement of skilled people (UNDP 2009).

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