



Brain Drain Versus Brain Gain: Reassessing Global Talent Mobility in the Higher Education Sector

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Abstract: Transnational mobility of skilled people has remained a significant aspect of higher education around the world. It is commonly referred to as the brain drain phenomenon, and the sending countries, especially the Global South, felt that it was a one-sided loss as their finest graduates targeted other nations to pursue opportunities. However, there has been a more sophisticated outlook of brain gain and brain circulation due to the growing complexity of global networks of scholars, policymaking, and altered labour markets. The paper re-examines the notion of global talent mobility in post-secondary education applications by examining its reasons, patterns, and impact in the twenty-first century. According to findings of UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank, and national education data, the research paper explores the effects of scholarships, bilateral academic agreements, and employment opportunities after studies on the mobility of students and professionals. The focus is on the role of India as one of the main sources and a new place of global talents with references to the governmental programs and policies, such as the National Education Policy 2020, the presence of international branch campuses, and the role of diasporas. Socio-economic impacts of mobility, including transfer of knowledge and innovativeness potential, remittances, and issues like brain waste and inequality of access, are also examined. The article suggests that the dichotomy of brain drain and brain gain is no longer sufficient, while a model of reciprocity and sustainable academic relationships would be more realistic today. The findings indicate that the cautious policies in higher education, international partnership, and the strong legal framework will change the movement of talent to a bilateral process that is beneficial to both the sending and receiving nations.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Brain Gain, Talent Mobility, Higher Education, Globalisation

1.0 Introduction

The mobility of human resources, particularly in the global platform, has never been left behind in shaping higher education in the world. This brain drain has been historically referred to as brain drain and was seen as one way among developed nations that exported the best minds and talent to the developing nations. The immigration of the country in the

form of doctors, engineers, scientists, and academics was perceived as a serious constraint to the development of the country, where it was impossible to take advantage of the capital expended in education by the sending countries (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Meyer, 2001). A lot of the twentieth century portrays migration negatively: loss was made to imply less state capacity, declining innovation, and reliance on the developed countries (Beine et al., 2008).

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This has changed with time. Towards the end of the twentieth century, scholars and policy makers came up with the term brain gain and the brain circulation theme, where they understood that one way that would take place was the outward migration that would result in mutual benefits. The international graduates also bring it home as they remit and transfer knowledge, create research ties, and in some instances bring home new advanced skills which strengthen home institutions (Saxenian, 2006; Kapur & McHale, 2005). Migration can thus be regarded as a turn-taking process, and consequently, the knowledge flow of the world is benefiting both sending and receiving nations (Portes, 2009).

Higher education is the main component of this change. Colleges have proved to be forums for talent worldwide, for cultivation, sharing, and distribution. The international mobility of students is growing rapidly: as UNESCO (2022) has stated, the number of students studying abroad increased by 2 million in 2000 and by more than 6 million in 2021. The growth is not only on the side of student ambitions but also on that of the state policies of talent attraction. The national policies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the East Asian countries are developed to internationalise higher education on the principles of scholarship and research collaborations and post-studies employment (OECD, 2020; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Migration of students is now a national innovation, soft power policy, and global competitiveness (Marginson, 2011).

A major example is in India. It comes second after China as the largest source of international students with over 1.3 million students studying in other countries (World Bank, 2022). The Indian diaspora has been seen as a wasted human capital, but now it has become important in the movement of technology, transnational entrepreneurship, and bilateral cooperation in fields such as IT, pharmaceuticals, and tertiary education (Commander et al., 2004). The policy programs are targets that not only make India a sending country but also an

international study destination to promote international campuses, faculty exchange, and diaspora involvement (Government of India, 2020).

Actors that encourage the return migration and collaboration with the diasporas are not a new phenomenon; examples are provided of South Korea, Taiwan, or China (Cao, 2008; Sternberg & Müller, 2005), where it is shown that with the well-established institutions, the mobility of talents may generate development. Conversely, retention of skilled professionals remains a problem in other parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, which is indicative of inequalities (Teferra, 2010).

The following are the central questions that these forces are likely to raise: Could the old brain drain-brain gain dichotomy mirror the realities as they are today? What to do to frame international migration as a two-way win, rather than a two-way loss? In what way do such nations as India take advantage of the opportunities in the globe and, simultaneously, decrease inequality and brain drain?

The paper will respond to these questions by explaining the history behind the argument of brain drain, the rise of brain gain, the circulation perspectives and the policy governing the movement of talent in the twenty-first century. India, as a global provider of international students and as a destination of talent, is in a relatively strong position with the rest of the global countries in terms of showing the potential of global higher education mobility, and also gives information concerning the policy strategies required to offer migration as a sustainable development force.

2.0 Objectives and Methodology

Objectives

This study aims primarily to analyse the dynamics of global academic mobility in terms of the conceptual frames of brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation. In particular, the research aims to:

1. Find out the history of migration of talent in the higher education sector.
2. Discuss the way in which globalisation has made student and faculty mobility both a challenge and an opportunity.
3. Analyse the situation of India in terms of academic mobility in the international arena, as compared with other international experiences.
4. Discover the policy options that can offset the losses of brain drain against the developmental gains of circulation.

Methodology

The paper is qualitative and analytical in nature and will use mostly secondary data that includes references to academic journals, policy reports, government documents and databases of international organisations like the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO. The choice of these sources was based on the credibility of the sources, the cross-national comparability, and the relevance of the sources to higher education and skilled migration. The qualitative method proves to be especially appropriate because it allows exploring theoretical frameworks, policy paradigms, and socio-economic implications in detail that cannot be fully represented by the use of quantitative data.

Secondary data is both more comprehensive on the debate on brain drain, brain gain and circular migration, and it is also differentiable across countries without the logistical and financial limitations of collecting primary data. Nevertheless, the research also recognises some limitations, such as the fact that it was not able to fully trace both long-term student mobility patterns, and it is possible that there was underreporting in the official data on remittances, flow of migrations and knowledge transfers.

The paper uses a purposive comparative case study design where India, China, South Korea, and Ireland are the chosen countries, according to well-spelt-out criteria:

- (i) their deep involvement in higher education mobility of talents in the world,

- (ii) there is access to good and similar secondary data, and
- (iii) the way they reflect unique policy reactions to skilled migration.

India is the symbol of massive outward mobility and developing trends of skilled migration.

- China stands as an example of state-based strategies of diaspora engagement that lead to innovation and return home movement.
- South Korea is a good example of having effective policies that promote returning migration to restore research capacity.
- Ireland is an example of the shift from historical outward migration to the circulation-based development and the strategies of returning to the home countries.

This comparative framework places India in a global context so that it can be analysed in a more detailed way in terms of international student migration trends, policy reaction, and the implications of international student migration on the formation of higher learning and development in general.

3.0 Literature Review

Six decades of debate over talent mobility have shifted the debate towards a subtler insight into mutual gain. The review tracks three stages, namely brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation, and provides the role of India.

3.1 *The Brain Drain Paradigm (1960s-1980s)*

Brain drain came up in the 1960s, especially in postcolonial countries, where professionals were taken by developed economies. According to Bhagwati and Hamada (1974), it was a net transfer of human capital that hurt a country investing in higher education. The sectors drained enabled those such as medicine, engineering, and academia, which led to shortages and undermined institutional capacity (Meyer, 2001; Beine et al., 2008). In India, Khadria (1999) pointed out how the development of other countries was questioned because of the institutions, such as the IITs, being used as a source of labour in world markets.

3.2 The Changing Direction to Brain Gain (1990s)

Remittances and diaspora engagement transformed the view of migration as potentially positive by the 1990s. In 2022, India alone got USD 100 billion plus remittances (World Bank, 2022). Competent diasporas were known to be knowledge brokers who helped in transferring technology, research cooperation, and entrepreneurship (Kapur and McHale, 2005; Saxenian, 2006). Other countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, implemented their return-migration programs to tap talent and revealed that emigration may accelerate domestic development (Sternberg & Müller, 2005).

3.3 The Brain Circulation Perspective (2000s onwards)

As the world became global, the drain/gain dichotomy was not sufficient. The flow of brains considers migration as a fluid, and students and professionals have connections across the borders (Portes, 2009; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Saxenian (2006) reported on returnee entrepreneurs in India and China as bridges to international markets, and in China, overseas recruitment was institutionalised in the form of the Thousand Talents Program (Cao, 2008). Issues revolve around so-called brain waste, where migrants cannot work to their full potential in host countries, which caps potential gains (Mattoo et al., 2008).

3.4 India within the Global Discourse of Mobility

The experience of Migration in India is in all three phases. The early outflows were regarded as a loss of human capital (Khadria, 1999), but the diaspora is now adding up through remittances, investment, and networks of knowledge, fuelling sectors such as IT (Commander et al., 2004). The recent policies, such as NEP 2020, are to attract foreign students and to consolidate academic cooperation, but India is a significant source of outbound students (OECD, 2023).

3.5 Critiques and New Issues

Critics observe that there are unequal benefits. The rich students are usually advantaged by internationalisation, which perpetuates the world hierarchies (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Host-country limitations may reduce the possibilities to work and stay in the country after the study (Papademetriou & Sumption, 2013). The idea of market-driven higher education attracts some ethical issues because the financial interests might be more important than developmental ones (Marginson, 2011). The advantages of brain gain and circulation are based on inclusive policies and good governance.

4.0 Conceptual Framework

Global academic mobility as a study field relies on migration theories to define why students and academics move and how this mobility impacts the countries they are leaving and the countries to which they are going. The combination of classical and modern theories explains the workings of brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation.

4.1 Push-Pull Theory

The push and pull framework of migration proposed by Lee (1966) describes migration in terms of factors that compel people to leave their homeland and the factors that attract people to the host countries. In academic mobility, Indian students are driven by constrained opportunities back home and attracted by the world-class institutions in other countries through research facilities, quality education, and after-study jobs (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This theory can be used to explain the initial stages of brain drain.

4.2 Human Capital Theory

Education can be conceptualised as an investment to increase productivity and income, which is referred to as human capital theory (Becker, 1964). Migrants enrich their expertise abroad and transfer these skills to their home countries through remittances, investments, or coming back with new knowledge (Docquier &

Rapoport, 2012). Returnees in IT and biotechnology in India introduce global knowledge, and this drives innovation (Khadria, 1999). The same trends can be found in China and South Korea (Sternberg & Müller, 2005).

4.3 Network and Transnationalism Theory

The theory of transnationalism emphasises the preservation of transnational professional and cultural relationships (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). These continuous networks result in brain circulation, which enables origin countries to receive without the need for permanent return. The Indian and the Chinese diasporas rely on alumni groups, professional associations, and online communities to build partnerships, publish jointly, and enter into joint ventures (Saxenian, 2006; Portes, 2009).

4.4 Dependence and World-Systems Viewpoints

Dependency (Dean, 1968) and world-systems theories (Wallerstein, 1974) emphasise structural imbalances in migration, which reveal that the migrations of skilled people tend to support the hegemony of developed countries. In the past, brain drain in India and other Global South states had shown such asymmetries, which constrain the excessively positive descriptions of circulation (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

4.5 Integrating the Theories

These views in combination offer a multifaceted insight:

Push-pull: Push-pull is used to describe the reasons behind migration (Lee, 1966).

- Human capital underlines the accumulation of gains in terms of competence development and remittances (Becker, 1964; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).
- Transnationalism is a concept that describes networks that facilitate circulation (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Saxenian, 2006).
- Dependency/world-systems demonstrate structural inequalities (Dean, 1968; Wallerstein, 1974).

4.6 Irrelevance to Comparative Analysis

When applied to India, China, South Korea, and Ireland, this framework reveals situational differences: India has been experiencing consistent outflows and new circulation; China embraces state-based strategies in returns; South Korea is a successful example of a return migration; and Ireland is an example of a European shift towards a drain-circulation, in the EU (Sternberg & Müller, 2005; Khadria, 1999).

5.0 Analysis and Discussion

The phenomenon of global talent mobility in higher education should be approached with special attention to the opposite of the loss (brain drain), gain (brain gain) dichotomy. Rather, the current patterns suggest a dynamic process of exodus, re-entry, and circulation that can become a blessing to both sending and receiving nations, provided it is well managed (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

The classical brain drain theory, in which the developing nations lose their best students to more affluent countries, is correct at least to a certain degree. In the case of India, the country has a high level of outbound mobility, where more than 1.3 million students are enrolled in foreign countries in 2023 (OECD, 2023). Nevertheless, statistics suggest that a large proportion of students come back with superior degrees, international connections, and work experience, and turn the drain into a prospective advantage (Khadria, 2017).

One can make the discussion based on four critical aspects:

5.1. Transfer of Knowledge and Innovation

Returning graduates can also have specialised skills and international exposure, which can be used in local innovation ecosystems (Saxenian, 2006). An example is the case of the Indian engineers who had left Silicon Valley and returned to Bangalore in the 1990s, which contributed to making it a global IT centre.

5.2. *Diaspora Engagement*

Although people fail to revert, they can do so indirectly by remittances, investments, and the networks of sharing knowledge (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Diaspora scholars work frequently with home institutions, which improves the research output and exposure.

5.3. *Equity and Access*

Talent mobility is, however, not always good. The international opportunities disproportionately favour students with elite, urban, and rich backgrounds and strengthen global inequalities (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

5.4. *Brain Waste*

The big question is the so-called brain waste, as highly skilled graduates are not adequately employed in the host countries, engaging in jobs that do not correspond to their skills (Mattoo et al., 2008). This nullifies the personal ambitions and the developmental possibilities of mobility.

6.0 Case Studies: Comparative Study of Academic Mobility in the World

Looking at the examples of India, China, South Korea, and Ireland, it can be seen how national context affects the process of brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation, and identifies successful policy interventions and institutional structures.

6.1 *India: A Brain Drain? to Circulation*

India has traditionally been a huge exporter of students and professionals. Classic brain drain happened between the 1960s and 1990s in the migration of engineers, doctors, and academics, particularly those of IIT, to the US, UK, and Canada (Khadria, 1999; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). This exodus hurt domestic innovation and research.

In India, brain circulation has been noted in recent times, with the returnees bringing IT,

biotechnology, and start-ups. The best example of the role of returning graduates is in Bangalore (Saxenian, 2006). Indian diaspora networks also work with local institutions and make entrepreneurial investments, turning what used to be a one-way loss into multidirectional knowledge exchange (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

Some of the policies, such as NEP 2020, are to equalise outbound and inbound mobility by using international campuses, scholarships, and research cooperation (Government of India, 2020). Issues such as disparities in access between rural and low-income students persist, and the possibility of underemployment in other countries (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

6.2 *China: Strategic Return Migration*

The policies of state-led China have turned the brain drain into a brain gain. In the 1980s-1990s, the number of Chinese students in foreign countries was high, and there were low rates of their return. This was the Thousand Talents Program, which offered incentives, grants, and institutional backing to encourage returnees (Cao, 2008).

Returnees had high-tech centres in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, but still had international networks in joint ventures and collaborations. The effectiveness of the program was guaranteed by strategic coordination between universities, research institutes, and the government (Sternberg & Müller, 2005). Nonetheless, advantages often go to the elite academics and institutions in towns and cities.

6.3 *South Korea: Return Migration and Innovation*

Following the Korean War, there was a heavy migration of students and professionals to South Korea. In the 1990s, research fellowships and returnee incentives were effective in bringing back skilled migrants, especially in science and engineering as well as medicine (Lee, 1966).

The returns increased the knowledge base in electronics, automotive, and IT sectors,

including technical know-how and international contacts, which facilitated international joint ventures (Poot, 2010). The example of South Korea shows that research capacity and competitiveness can be improved when human capital investment is coupled with specific policies.

6.4 The experience of Circulation in Europe in Ireland

During the mid-20th century, Ireland had high emigration because of a lack of opportunities and skill loss related to this situation (FitzGerald, 2001). New policies that encourage the growth in higher education, internationalisation of students, and involvement of the diaspora have enabled the flow of the brain.

Irish universities are working globally, and the returnees are working in pharmaceuticals, ICT, and finance (Loxley et al., 2007). EU mobility systems also facilitate the bi-directional flows, which establish knowledge networks that are beneficial to both Ireland and partner nations.

6.5 Comparative Insights

The cases indicate the following important patterns:

- The initiatives by the state (China, South Korea) can transform brain drain into gain through systematic incentives and home-based capacity building.
- Engagement of the Diaspora (India, Ireland) allows this to be beneficial even without the permanent return.
- Fairness and equity continue to be a problem because mobility tends to prefer urban and privileged students (Altbach & Knight, 2007).
- Return migration and knowledge circulation can only be maintained through strong infrastructure and institutional support (Saxenian, 2006; Sternberg & Müller, 2005).

7.0 Policies and Recommendations

The state policies, institutional frameworks, and global structures of India, China, South Korea, and Ireland are the factors that

determine academic mobility. Mobility has emerged as a two-sided issue and as an opportunity, and mobility has been perceived to be permanent brain drain. The directions of the policies can be listed:

7.1 The strengthening of domestic capacity is needed

China and South Korea show that research infrastructure investment, career ladder, and competitive rewards could be used to retain and attract talent (Cao, 2008; Poot, 2010). India has been behind in this, whereas the result is a recurrent exodus of such institutions as IITs and AIIMS (Khadria, 1999).

Recommendation: Have properly invested centres of excellence, strengthen doctoral and post-doctoral education, and career opportunities in universities and industry to minimise out-bound migration and promote return migration.

7.2 The exploitation of Diaspora Networks

Diasporas facilitate knowledge flow and innovation, as is shown by India and Ireland (Saxenian, 2006; FitzGerald, 2001). The skills transfer, investments, and collaborations are some of the contributions made by the returnees and the diaspora professionals.

Recommendation: Diaspora engagement through fellowships, joint research, public-private partnerships, and virtual mentorship systems should be institutionalised and allow giving back without necessarily returning.

7.3 Promoting Equity and Accessibility

Urban and privileged students are the beneficiaries of mobility, which reinforces global inequalities (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Students with low income and death in rural areas are hindered from studying abroad.

Recommendation: Implement scholarships, affirmative funding, and low-cost exchange programs to make mobility helpful to social equity.

7.4 Balancing inbound and outbound flows

Ireland has managed to emerge as an exporter and importer of students, improving their economy and education standards (Loxley et al., 2007). India remains mostly a sending country.

Recommendation: To improve the inbound mobility and to increase the soft power, under NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020), simplify visa regimes, provide competitive programs, and promote international collaborations.

7.5 Return Migration Incentivisation

In China and South Korea, returnees contribute the most when career opportunities, research facilities, and incentives are internationally competitive (Sternberg & Müller, 2005; Lee, 1966).

Recommendation: India can introduce research grants, start-up assistance, and tenure-track programs, so that skills obtained abroad do help in domestic development.

7.6 Brain dementia

Mobility does not necessarily mean permanency. Knowledge is exchanged through networks and institutional relationships without necessarily having to move permanently (Saxenian, 2006; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

Recommendation: Research in alumni networks, digital collaboration platforms, joint degrees, short-term exchanges, and visiting faculty programs to get the most out of bilateral benefits.

7.7 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Thousand Talents Program in China and the NEP 2020 in India emphasise the importance of control to prevent the concentration of elites and make them effective (Cao, 2008).

Recommendation: Have independent monitoring mechanisms, longitudinal studies of the consequences, and incorporate the feedback of the returnees to help improve mobility strategies.

7.8 Global Collaboration

Mobility is influenced by visa restrictions, recognition of qualifications, and geopolitics (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Recommendation: Enter bilateral and multilateral agreements in an attempt to harmonise qualifications, streamline visa procedures, and make talent flows easier.

8.0 Challenges

Even though the brain gain has a possibility, there are several challenges:

- Structural Inequality - The Global North institutions draw an overproportional amount of international talent.
- Commercialisation of Education- International student recruitment is usually based on revenue rather than equity.
- Migration Policies -Limiting visa and residency policies deters the advantages of mobility (Papademetriou & Sumption, 2013).
- Brain Waste - Overqualification and under-employment of migrants among migrant graduates decreases long-term benefits.

9.0 Conclusion

The debate on brain drains, brain gain, and brain circulation no longer remains at the simple binary level. The experience of the comparative in India, China, South Korea and Ireland has indicated that academic mobility is dynamic, conditional and varies with the state policies, institutional capabilities, as well as with the international structures. Even though brain drain was previously understood as a one-way traffic, the modern situation can better be viewed as a brain circulation in which the scheme of brain circulation recognises the two-way brain traffic of skills, ideas, and networks.

India has a long history of brain drain, and in the late 20th century, a great deal of well-educated specialists were leaving the country and going to the United States and Europe (Khaddria, 1999; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). The appearance of the IT industry, transnational diaspora network, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proves that outward mobility can be used to domestically benefit by means of institutional changes (Government of India, 2020; Saxenian, 2006). Examples of state-based policies include China and South Korea, where policies of structured return migration, like the Thousand Talents Plan in China, and research fellowships in South Korea, were used to offer enabling conditions to enable the participation of returnees in domestic innovation (Cao, 2008; Poot, 2010). Ireland proves that a country with a history of emigration may use mobility as a means of developing through increased growth in higher education and through the involvement of the diaspora (FitzGerald, 2001; Loxley et al., 2007).

These cases can be learnt through shared lessons. Areas where domestic capacity building should be done include higher learning and research to minimise brain drain and convince people to go back home. Transnational connection may be sustained by involving the diaspora, which does not involve permanent relocation to reap the benefits of mobility in a maximised form (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). To ensure that mobility is inclusive and useful to many socio-economic groups, equity issues should be dealt with (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The brain circulation should be targeted again, as we understand that the knowledge networks, the exchange of professionals, and collaborations all over the world are at the core of sustainable development.

The findings are critical to India since it would like to become a global education hub by the year 2047. The outbound and the inbound flows can be equalised through the assistance of the successful application of NEP 2020 policies, but special support to the returnees and diaspora can contribute to an increase in the level of innovation, research, and entrepreneurship. It is also required to have equity-

based interventions that will enable the privileged few to enjoy access to international education. The phenomenon of academic mobility cannot be viewed as a threat, but a chance for change. As the Indian, Chinese, South Korean and Irish cases indicate, brain drain may evolve into a brain circulation on the premise that benefits are created not only to the sending countries but also to the countries of the receivers. Maintaining mobility in line with inclusive policies, strong institutions, and international collaboration can transform it into one of the four pillars of human capital formation, social equity and international collaboration.

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