Point Systems and International Student Flows

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The mobility of international students is currently an important policy issue over the world. Part of the reason is that international students, especially those who in science and engineering fields, provide a stable source of human resources in science and technology. Since the 1960s, Canada and other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries started to use a point system—of evaluating academic achievement—to select highly skilled immigrants. These point systems, which assign "points" to assess the quality of applicants, favor international students who received higher education in the host country, and facilitate them for citizenship after graduation. Therefore, the point system is believed to attract potential students from abroad.

WHAT IS A POINT SYSTEM?

As a method for selecting immigrants, point systems are burgeoned in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Basically, this is a system for evaluating merits of immigrant applicants based on awarding points. Three key elements are included in the point-system design: criteria, weight, and threshold. Criteria vary by countries, but five main sources are commonly used:

education, occupation, work experience, language, and age. Usually, the weight is assigned with a scale to measure that criterion. If the maximum score of the criterion is 100, weight can be evenly distributed in a scale. Finally, based on past experience and/or forecasting on the number of potential applicants, one can set a pass mark with a certain percentile (75% or above). Applicants awarded with points above the pass mark are selected.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT FROM RECEIVING COUNTRIES

The United Kingdom used to have a highly restrictive immigration policy and in some respects still does. Before 2008, there were 80 different routes into the United Kingdom to work, train, or study. These 80 entry schemes are mainly categorized into three channels: work permit employment; permit-free employment; and the Highly Skilled Migrant Program. Before the program, there are 462,609 noncitizen students and 341,791 nonresident students enrolled in United Kingdom's tertiary education. One year later, both enrollments increased with an 8 percent growth rate.

In Canada, point systems were initiated in 1967 under the Immigration Act of 1952, as a method for selecting immigrants. The original purpose of this system was to address the shortage of skilled labor. Prior to June 11, 2002, higher weight was assigned to special vocational preparation. That means, if an applicant has a job offer for a position that no Canadian ready, willing, and able to fill, the probability for him/her to exceed the threshold (70 points) is higher. Canada changed its point systems in June 2002. More points are assigned to language, working experience, and ability of integration since then. This change can be interpreted as an adjustment to the demand of high skilled in the labor

market. Under current systems, there are six selection factors: education, language, experience, age, employment, and adaptability. The maximum number of points that a person can accumulate is 100, and the current pass mark is 67. The number of international students in Canada was under 40,000 in 2002. After the high-skill-favored policy change in 2002, that number tripled to 125,000. The average annual foreign student enrollment in tertiary education from 1998 to 2002 is 36,340. This average also tripled after 2002. As a matter of fact, Canada's point system does attract more international students to receive higher education since 2002.

The point systems in Australia and New Zealand are similar. This paper uses the Australian system to demonstrate the design of Oceania point systems. Based on the Canadian framework, Australia introduced the Australian General Skilled Migration program in 1982. That program's main characteristic is that points are awarded according to Skilled Occupation List, which is a list of occupations that Australia needs to fill job shortages. An applicant must have recent skilled work experience; otherwise, it is relative difficult for one to be eligible for immigration as a skilled worker. In terms of international students' flow to Australia, it is hard to find a cutoff after 1998 since Australia's point system remains relatively stable since the 1980s. The international flow indicated a clear drop around 1990. It turned out that the Migration Amendment Act (1989) set the talent pool, which lowers the passing mark at one hand and increases the wait time at the other hand. So, the amendment indeed intimidates prospective skilled immigrants.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT FROM SENDING COUNTRIES

As the point systems are in receiving countries, the impact on sending countries is usually ambiguous and hard to distinguish from other factors. In this section, change in the outflow from sending countries to the United Kingdom and Canada is used as an indicator of the possible impact.

China is the largest home country of international students. Using the data from China's Ministry of Education, I calculated the average annual outflow of years before/after the policy to see if policy matters. Result indicates that the average annual outflow from China to Canada doubled after Canada's revised point system (from 5,187 to 11,509). The outflow to the United Kingdom after the Highly Skilled Migrant Program increases by 18 percent, as well.

India holds the second-largest population. The primary source of data on students' outflow is the Ministry of Labor. The number of Indians outflow to both the United Kingdom and Canada increases after the implementation of point systems in the host country. Numbers doubled in the United Kingdom and tripled in Canada.

Russia is not a traditional sending country but significantly has sent students abroad since 1990. Again, the before-after comparison indicates a positive change in the average number of outflows from Russia to the United Kingdom and Canada. The increase rate is 25 percent to the United Kingdom and 57 percent to Canada.

CONCLUSION

As policy implications, policymakers usually refer to either "brain drain" or "brain gain," when they think about the migration of international students or

highly skilled workers. More recently, some researchers coin "brain competition."

To put point systems into a larger picture, these systems are indeed a method of talent classification and selection. At national level, a country needs a National Talent System to build up the nation's core competitiveness in the global competition for talent. The competition could turn out to be "brain share" only if universities, industry, and the government work together to recruit talents worldwide. Meanwhile, government needs to work on talent development of both foreign-born and native-born individuals so as to build up the nation's competitiveness.