

Getting Graduates to Come Home—Not So Easy

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It is said that we live in the new era of the “brain exchange,” but in our view the old-style brain drain continues to a significant degree. With only modest success, countries, such as China, continue to try to get some of their scholars who have stayed abroad after completing advanced degrees to return home. In fact the large majority of Chinese (and Indian) students who have gone abroad for study have not returned home over more than 20 years. Moreover, the numbers recently have only improved modestly despite China’s impressive economic and academic growth.

Historically, governmental efforts to convince scholars to return home have not prevailed. India, for example, has over the years created a variety of programs to attract back successful Indian academics who settled abroad. One challenge is to match overseas salaries. Perhaps the most important serious issue—the academic conditions in Indian universities and laboratories are often problematical. Some academics who were lured by these special programs found

working conditions and the academic culture inadequate and returned to their positions in the West. Only at the Indian Institutes of Technology and of Management has there been limited success.

The Chinese government and universities have also tried in many ways to convince scholars and scientists settled abroad to return, with only modest results. Similar programs in other countries have been similarly ineffectual. China recently has started a program to lure scholars back home by providing significant financial and other incentives to Chinese PhDs working abroad. The program is named the 111 Project. The national 111 Project was introduced by the Ministry of Education and the State Administration of Foreign Expert Affairs, intending to invite 1,000 top scholars from the world top 100 universities to build 100 world-class innovation bases at top Chinese universities, in which top foreign-trained experts work with domestic experts to conduct high-level research, to enhance higher-level scientific competence and comprehensive competitive power globally. The program originated in 2005, and it created a lot of interest in China because it expressed a kind of urgency and eagerness in attracting some of the world's top Chinese scientists back home. Many universities have used this opportunity to establish research initiatives and centers. So far, 662 111 Project scientists have been selected, and 310 of them are now working at Chinese research universities.

UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES

However, the program has created some unanticipated problems. Some Chinese universities do not fully understand the international academic labor market

and, in their search for overseas talent, have relied on résumés, educational background, titles, personal contacts, and recommendations rather than on careful evaluations of prospective candidates and their academic work and impact. In some cases, the sponsoring universities found that the scholars and scientists who agreed to return are not the ones most desired. Those who decided to return may be late career professors from middle-ranking US and UK universities who, perhaps, see a stagnant career in the United States or United Kingdom and desire either a fresh start or a cushy job in China. Some use their newfound fame in China as a platform for pontificating on a range of topics. Top-ranking Chinese academics from the best Western universities generally have not been willing to return permanently. At best, they agree to some kind of joint affiliation with a top Chinese university and visit periodically to lecture, provide advice, and collaborate with professors in China. This policy may in fact be the best strategy for taking advantage of top overseas Chinese expertise.

Another unanticipated result of the program is salary compression—highly paid returnees earn much higher salaries than local academics, often creating envy and morale problems. The success of any academic department and this program involves the sense of academic community, which can be shattered by highly unequal salaries or better working conditions and facilities for the returnees. When domestic professors find that a returnee may not contribute more than they do, they may refuse to cooperate, and harm the work of the department. While many of the returned scholars can still speak Chinese, they may not understand the new academic culture in China. Lack of cooperation from local colleagues and problems of re-entry include the academic realities the returned scholars face.

SOLUTIONS

Using the talent of academics from developing and middle-income countries who have, for many reasons, chosen to settle in the West is a laudable goal. Yet, even in a globalized world, luring some of the top academics home is not an easy task, and most of the programs that have been attempted have failed. The truth is that as long as the conditions of academic work vary significantly from country to country—including salaries, conditions of academic work, the academic culture, and academic freedom, to name a few—the “best and brightest” are unlikely to return. Those who are most desirable—midcareer academics who are highly productive and located at the top universities—are the least likely to return.

The best that can be done—and it is in fact quite a good alternative—is to build ties with these academic “stars” and create ties that can yield practical results that will neither harm the local academic culture nor demand impractical results.