Crisis and Homesickness: A New Opportunity for Brain Gain in Latin America?

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There is growing pressure on Latin American countries to produce larger numbers of highly skilled talent. A solid base of teachers with the qualifications to train such talent is imperative to serve that demand. However, these countries' ability to produce, retain, or attract high-level faculty has been historically poor. The universities produce insufficient numbers of doctoral-degree holders, and those doctoral programs that do exist are often of poor quality. In addition, brain drain remains a problem. Yet, things might be changing: overproduction of PhDs and deteriorating working conditions for faculty, particularly for adjuncts, in industrialized countries may represent an opportunity for the developing world.

There seems to be a surplus of PhDs in many fields in some industrialized countries, and in some of them a deterioration of the academic profession has been observed. The majority of the professoriate in the United States are adjuncts, non-tenure-track professors, or contingent faculty. Recently graduated PhDs in many fields are having trouble finding good jobs—that would compensate for the time, effort, and money invested in the doctoral studies—or finding a job at all. For some, these are signs of the emergence of "academic proletarianization."

Academic proletarianization is not unique to the United States. Spain is an interesting case to explore. Despite significant differences across regions, academic salaries for tenured professors in Spain are competitive in the European Union context. In contrast, compensation for professors hired on fixed term contracts is usually very low. A study by the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) showed that in Catalonia, monthly salaries for full-time non-tenure track faculty are in the range of US$409 (for *profesores asociados*) to US$1,637 for post-docs. This situation, combined with the general economic difficulties that the country is facing, has prompted many potential professors to leave the country in search of a better future. This trend has been illustrated several times in *El País*—one of the main Spanish newspapers—and other media.

In contrast to the surplus of people with doctoral degrees in the United States, Spain, and other industrialized countries, most developing countries have the opposite problem: the number of scholars and scientists with doctoral degrees is very low compared to the countries' needs; and the pace at which local higher education systems are producing their own doctoral-degree holders is not sufficient to fill the gap. Brazil, a heavyweight in Latin America and the country with the most doctoral-degree holders and doctoral students in the region, has a shortage of PhDs. Despite producing 12,000 PhD graduates per year, it only has 1.4 doctorates per 1,000 inhabitants aged 25 to 64 years old, compared to 23 in Switzerland, 8.4 in the United States, or 6.5 in Canada.

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Your Crisis, My Opportunity?

This situation seems to be a perfect case for a supply/demand solution. There are some countries with a surplus of highly skilled talent and other countries with a great demand for such talent. However, it is not that simple. Academic mobility is not as fluid as the mobility of unskilled labor, and attracting talent has proved to be challenging.

Some Latin American countries have designed programs to entice international professors and researchers. The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Chile launched PAIR, the International Regular Academic Program, which has attracted approximately one hundred Spanish professors, as well British, Italian, Mexican, and Argentinian academics. Ecuador is perhaps the country with the most aggressive strategy to attract talent in the region. As part of an ambitious plan to improve the country's education, some Ecuadorian public universities have launched international calls aimed at highly qualified faculty (i.e., master's- and doctoral-degree holders). Recently, the Universidad Nacional de Ecuador launched an international call to attract 500 professors from all areas of knowledge, to be expanded to 5,000 in the next five years. Even though the call was open for all nationalities, the Ecuadorian government focused its efforts on Spain, where it placed full-page invitations in local publications. Salaries offered were competitive when compared to those paid to adjunct faculty in Spain. This, and the economic crisis in Spain, motivated a good number of Spaniards to apply and, for those hired, move to Ecuador. Having Spanish as a common language has contributed to

the success of this initiative.

In contrast, Venezuela is suffering a massive case of brain drain. SciDev.Net reported that the Universidad Central de Venezuela had lost approximately 700 professors between 2011 and 2012, and the Universidad del Zulia has not been able to fill 1,577 vacant teaching positions. Working and living conditions in Venezuela are deteriorating, and most of those who went abroad to complete advanced training programs have decided not to come back to the country. Researchers, teachers, and highly skilled workers have migrated to different countries in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania.

Homesickness May Not Be Enough

Many countries are focusing their efforts and resources on attracting home expatriate academics who left the country to study abroad and decided to stay. At the end of 2013, *Colciencias*, the Colombian government's agency for research and innovation, launched "Es Tiempo de Volver" (It is Time to Come Back), a program aimed at attracting approximately 200 researchers from the diaspora. In addition to a relatively good salary—although not competitive with the remuneration typical of the countries where most of the expatriate researchers were based—the program offered tax exemptions, a relocation allowance, and a research grant. In April 2014, there were over 10,000 applications, 900 of them from holders of doctoral degrees.

Argentina, through its program *Raices*, has repatriated over 1,000 scientists since its creation in 2003. In addition to the repatriation component, the program also includes a networking strategy, by which Argentinian researchers who are not willing to come back to the country can keep in touch through short research stays or by directing research projects—such as theses and dissertations—from abroad.

The success of these initiatives varies from country to country but, in general, they all have the same weakness: they address only their own conationals, overlooking potential candidates from other countries who might be willing to migrate in search of better economic and academic opportunities.

Conclusion

Salaries are by no means the only variable that professors take into consideration when deciding to move to a different country, but they are an important factor. The existence of a solid academic community, infrastructure for research and teaching, and other elements also carry weight in any decision to relocate. The overproduction of doctoral-degree holders in many industrialized countries, together with the poor job availability for young professors entering academia in those places, may play to the advantage of nations with less-established academic communities, which are willing to attract members of the diaspora as well as international talent. Confining recruitment efforts to their own nationals can be a mistake for countries with low numbers of PhDs, as there is a growing stock of highly skilled researchers and professors willing to cross borders in the quest for a reasonably good working opportunity. ■

The Struggle to Rebuild and Transform Higher Education in Afghanistan

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The higher education system in Afghanistan was one of the casualties of more than 30 years of war, with more than one million people killed, over 6 million who fled, most of its higher education institutions damaged, many of its institutions closed, women excluded from education and more than half its faculty members and staff lost. Its academic programs are a shell of its once proud history as a higher education leader in the region. The Ministry of Higher Education faced an enormous task to repair and rehabilitate the system once the Talibans were removed.

Confronting the Challenges

Among the most difficult challenges were the human cost of the war, including a high incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental health issues affecting more than half of the student population. Replacing the half of the faculty members who were lost to the war was another challenge. The personnel processes lacked transparency. Ideology, ethnicity, and region had become the most important factors in these decisions. The entrance examination (the Kankor) had also been compromised and people had lost faith in it. Higher education had broken down in other ways. No research was underway, and the universities had little to offer the government in solu-