

Brain drain: Let's value, celebrate our talents

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

New Straits Times - 12/04/2005

NEWS that some Malaysian medical students on public scholarships had "turned their backs on the country" was not as shocking to the medical fraternity as it was to taxpayers.

The exodus of doctors and other professionals from Malaysia is not a new phenomenon. This is an example of "brain drain" that the country has been suffering over the years. This only shows what impact heightened mobility and the demand for k-workers have on nations today, and is not unique to Malaysia.

There is sharp concern that this is threatening socioeconomic growth in the developing world. Nowhere is this more apparent than among healthcare workers, notably doctors.

Developed countries attract them directly or indirectly. For example, the various scholarships funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office reportedly benefit more than 2,000 students a year, from close to 150 countries.

And they are not just any students; rather, potential leaders, high achievers, opinion-formers and policy-makers. Beyond scholarships are policies to attract the best among them to stay on and eventually become citizens.

Being k-workers par excellence, these highly qualified professionals generally have no loyalty whatsoever to anyone. Their loyalty is directed to the comfort that they can grab for themselves at the expense of patriotism and national interest.

PRECIOUS RESOURCE: If Britain, the US and other countries can attract our best and brightest, what can we do to compete?

We are still naive when trying to relate to this group of students on public scholarships on the matter of national service.

Medicine is now a big business, increasingly a commodity to be bought and sold. We have just lost some of our finest hospitals to the highest bidder, a bitter experience indeed.

Since at least three years ago, countries such as Britain have taken aggressive measures to attract skilled foreign professionals.

In a July 2000 speech in Paris, the then British Home Minister said foreigners were "innovators, those people who have particular skills that mean they would have very good ideas that could take our economy forward".

In 2002, the British Government introduced a very creative flagship scheme, the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP), to allow "for successful people with sought-after skills" the opportunity to live and work in Britain.

On its website this is specifically highlighted: "Doctors entitled to practise as general practitioners in Britain should seriously consider the HSMP as their application will be considered a priority application. "To help all those interested in the HSMP we have produced a detailed guide to the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme."

The HSMP is similar to the skilled migration programmes for entry into Australia and Canada.

It differs from the conventional work permit because you do not need a specific job offer in Britain to apply.

In fact, an HSMP applicant can start a business and be self-employed as long as (s)he meets the minimum score of 65 based on various criteria.

They include education, achievement in a chosen field, past earnings and work-related experience. For example, holders of PhDs score 30 points, Master's 25, and bachelor's degrees 15 points.

For work experience, the points awarded are 25 for five years of graduate-level work, 35 for five years in a graduate job "requiring a very high level of technical or artistic skill", and 50 for 10 years of graduate work experience, such as senior or specialist level work.

Similarly, the rest of the criteria are not impossible targets for highly skilled foreign professionals.

If this is not enough, the qualifying score reportedly was lowered from 75 to 65; while at the same time it was

expanded to include qualifications and job experience of spouse or partner that would bring in an additional 10 points.

Not surprisingly therefore, the programme is very popular as indicated by the 2003 figures: 4,000 people, which likely include Malaysians.

The 2004 British Budget announced a new provision for graduates who have completed their MBAs at any of the 50 top business schools to allow them to work in Britain for up to 12 months, with provision for a three-year extension.

Needless to say, schemes similar to the HSMP, be they in Australia, Canada or elsewhere are designed as a long-term investment because migrants with professional qualifications not only enrich the country economically, but also culturally and professionally.

In the United States, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) recently quoted a study indicating that for every 100 international students who receive science and engineering PhDs from American universities, the US gains 62 patent applications.

The foundation's executive director recently wrote: "Congress should eliminate the requirement that visa seekers pursuing advanced degrees in the US demonstrate that they will return to their country."

This is in addition to schemes such as the US Green Card Lottery where each year 50,000 immigrant visas are available through a lottery.

Anyone winning such a visa is entitled to take his family along to live and work permanently in the US.

A survey by the US Association of Manufacturers estimated a 35 per cent shortfall of scientists and engineers over the next three years (and 80 per cent for employees in skilled production). And this is said to be hampering their ability to serve their customers and exploit new opportunities.

Could these be reasons for what is termed as "bad influence on Malaysians pursuing medical and other degrees overseas"?

These are strong pull factors for better and more exciting opportunities abroad, especially for aspiring young professionals.

Are we also aware that students in non-European or non-American institutions could have stayed back to work? Apparently, there are not too many, if at all, as compared to the US, Britain and Australia.

Is it because Malaysians studying in non-European and non-American institutions are more patriotic?

Perhaps, but could it be that there are no "bad influences" in those places to hold them back?

What about those studying in so-called "unrecognised" or "unscheduled" medical schools? One would think they would rather not return to face an uncertain future back home.

Given the complexities of push-pull factors and the interplay of new variables (some of which we seem not to be even aware of), it is certainly not helpful to generalise or single out any particular sponsor (in this case Mara) on what was "learnt" during a brief visit abroad.

How many of our students who have studied abroad, whether on public or private scholarships or self-financed, have returned to diligently serve the nation?

If Britain, the US and other countries can attract the best and brightest, what can we do to compete?

Bear in mind that money is not the only motivation for these highly sought after intellectuals.

As it stands, we are not even able to attract our scholars back. In this regard one is tempted to agree with the Mara Education Foundation chairman who said:

"It is not just monetary factors which drive graduates to other countries. Those who hold doctorates often leave because of a lack of top-notch facilities and equipment in Malaysia."

Once a person is made to realise his potential—which is what education is all about — the call is entirely his in this borderless world.

The reality is that this is not just a Knowledge Era anymore. It is also a Talent Era and a Brain Era, all combined in one.

This is the era that does not respect the rules and procedures cast in stone in the last millennium.

This is fundamentally what playing in the big league is all about, where the rules of the game change all the time.

Unless there is enough room to respond to the changing environment in creative and innovative ways, we are not ready for the big league. Only those who understand this will thrive.

This is reflected internally too in terms of the urban-rural divide, especially in the healthcare sector.

The point to emphasise is that despite the many top universities in developed countries, they realise it is important for then- future to enrol foreign students and make the top ones stay back.

And since the numbers staying back is declining — the US and to some extent Britain are not attracting as many international students as they used to — serious efforts like the British HSMP and US Green Card Lottery are being made to reverse the situation.

The numbers remain far lower than pre-9/11 numbers. In part, it is because foreign-born scientists and those holding doctorates ' find it difficult to get a visa.

Recently, however, it was reported that the US Senate had passed a BUI to expand the number of employment-based green cards and temporary visas available to highly skilled foreigners.

After all, one-third of America's engineering professors are foreign-born, according to the NFAP.

And without international students, certain science and technology programmes cannot be offered at many US universities, because foreign students populate classes and serve as teaching assistants.

Malaysia has lost a lot of ground and needs to re-think its course of action fast.

The fact remains that Malaysia is still a rich hunting ground for talent and brains.

This means we still have a fighting chance, but only if we value and celebrate knowledge and talent and quickly translate them into a real competitive advantage.

Otherwise, not only will we not be able to make the Big League but we will be at a disadvantage in an intensely competitive world.

[Terms & Conditions](#)