

Changing landscape of border higher

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Universities in developed countries are attracting the best brains from the South. We must be aware of this brain drain threat.

OVER the past two weeks, there were three international conferences involving high-level discussions on the subject of cross-border higher education (CBHE) attended by scores of educators, policy-makers and heads of institutions and organisations of higher learning all over the world.

That these conferences were held so close together and at this time is not a mere coincidence but rather an expression of widespread concern. This is particularly so when framed within the context of borderless or transnational education, the other names for CBHE.

While this form of education is not entirely new, namely the movement of students abroad to acquire knowledge, or of scholars sharing their expertise globally, today's educational landscape is beyond these.

Under the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), for example, there are at least two other modes of CBHE that are officially recognised: the commercial presence of providers, including the setting up of branch campuses in different countries, and cross-border supply where only the programmes move.

This is often the case in twinning and franchising programmes, as well as e-learning or distance education. All these are covered under the GATS where education is one of the 12 sectors that can be "traded".

Student selection and admission are increasingly being influenced by "marketing" practices.

In addition, "enrolment management" is being adopted to allow institutions to maximise the admission of students who are financially independent or have good test scores, turning selective universities into "bastions of privilege" rather than "engines of opportunity".

The "attract-to-reject" approach is preferred because by rejecting a proportionally larger number of applicants, it can easily win a "more selective" ranking in magazine surveys.

More recently, the British-based Observatory on Borderless Education (Aug 5) cited a study by Sweden's National Agency for Higher Education indicating that the number of fake (borderless) universities worldwide rose from about 200 in 2000 to more than 800 in 2004.

In Malaysia, for instance, last year it was estimated that there were some 10,000 holders of fake American degrees .

The gravity of such a problem is recognised by the British Quality Assurance Agency and it admitted that it was "genuinely concerned" about such fraudulent practices.

This partly has to do with CBHE disguised under the ubiquitous term called "internationalisation" that most countries are rushing into without much in-depth understanding of the dire consequences.

Unlike the past, the current trend in higher education is generally slanted towards trade and economic goals rather than academic and socio-cultural ones.

Being regarded as a marketable commodity, higher education is somewhat linked to elements of commercialisation.

In turn, for-profit ventures emerge as a dominant driver on the global education scene, reinforcing further the demands set by GATS as seen in a draft report to be tabled at the Hong Kong WTO meeting.

In developing countries, the overall impact of CBHE can be even more significant. While many may indeed have a greater opportunity to earn a degree in higher education (including fake ones), there are also downsides.

One is the brain drain phenomena facilitated by the lucrative international education market, where internationalisation becomes a convenient vehicle to lure talent from the South.

Foreign students, particularly those doing post-graduate studies in science and technology, are regarded as a boon not only to the education system of the host country but also to its economy.

WILL HE STAY? Many students like this one from Ivory Coast may choose to stay after completing their studies in the US

This is the case for the US, according to the executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) in his article "Luring students: America's future is stuck abroad" (IHT, Nov 17). Such is the case with other developed countries as well.

This is because as the population in the industrial countries ages, and its demography shifts, it becomes more difficult to find someone to train from among them. Instead, there is a detectable excess capacity in their training centres and the universities.

So "luring students" to the North and the richer Gulf states of West Asia seems to be a choice economic option. But at whose expense?

This is indeed the bone of contention as voiced by the South African parliamentarian and former education minister, Kader Asmal.

In his letter to a British newspaper (FT, Nov 16), he wrote: "EU countries assist in developing higher education in the South and then wish to take the cream of the PhD students by seducing them with the offer of citizenship. This is not a brain drain but a destruction of the intellectual capital of the South."

More alarming, the destructive strategy is shared by many nations to offset their human capital deficit.

So if the process of "creaming off" the human and intellectual capital from the South remains unchecked, one can envisage a phenomenon which is not much different from the colonial days.

Then, much of the economies in Europe were in ruins and cheap migrant workers seemed to be the answer. Migrants were brought in, sometimes as slaves, and they toiled to create the Western powerhouses of today.

Only this time around, it is migrant brainpower and talent that are being sought after instead, creating an impact far more devastating on the South because they are not readily replaceable.

Hence, predictably, the migrants' home countries will sink into deeper socio-economic turmoil, turning them into easier targets to be colonised.

The only way to safeguard this from happening is not to allow CBHE to degenerate into a subtle neo-colonial vehicle disguised as part of a globalisation and market-driven strategy.

If we fail to do so, we could be re-colonised yet again and, this time, it may be impossible to remove the shackles.

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