

Some Thoughts on the 'Brain Influx' in Africa

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Abstract

The mobility of people and societies is not only a global phenomenon but also part of social transformation. One of the forms of mobility is the movement of foreign academics to seek 'greener pastures'. This is normally referred to as the 'brain influx' or 'brain-gain'. Against this backdrop, the article examines some of the causes of the brain influx in Africa and its functional and dysfunctional effects. It concludes that the brain influx will not easily go away in an age of globalization and the desire of foreign academics to improve their lot in all spheres.

Keywords: Africa, mobility, brain influx, foreign academics

Introduction

The concept of mobility is a major factor in social transformation and an inherent feature of all societies that accompanies enormous cultural, social and economic flexibility. It is as old as society itself and has resulted in the movements of people, for instance, the 'exodus' of the Israelites from Egypt to the 'promised land of Canaan'. It denotes the ways in which people organize their livelihoods at any point in time and space and their rationales for various choices. It also entails recognition of a multiplicity of influences, actors and strategies and pushes people into new relations and redefines their sense of identity (Schlee 2002).

In Africa, mobility has always influenced societies; people have often moved and used space to carve out livelihoods and is seen as a major means of survival (Rain 1999; de Bruijn *et.al.* 2001; Tsikata 2005). Mobility encompasses all types of movements such as travels, explorations, migration, tourism, refugeeism, pastoralism, nomadism, pilgrimage and trade (de Bruijn 2007: 110). Howard (2005) has shown that mobility is not only an important factor in the creation of societies in his analysis of the spatial factor in historical studies in Africa but also the creation and modeling of time and space by social actors.

It is within the context of mobility that this article examines the movement of foreign academics to seek ‘greener pastures’ in what is referred to as the ‘brain influx’ or ‘brain-gain’, rather than the negative ‘brain-drain’, to which such movement has been referred and which has generated considerable debate¹.

Some of the Causes of the Brain Influx

One of the greatest challenges to capacity building in the public sector in sub-Saharan Africa is the inability to attract and retain professionals like health workers and academic staff mainly as a result of poor conditions of service. The attraction and retention of staff is more pronounced in universities which have not only lost staff as a result of poor conditions but also failed to attract new ones (Akyeampong 2000). The destructive influence of staff loss, attraction and retention has led Ali Mazrui to observe that African universities are being ‘dis-Westernized without re-Africanization’, calling the process ‘the Bantustanization of African universities (Mazrui 1993: 4-7).

The causes of the brain influx have been categorized into ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. The ‘push’ factors include economic constraints, political turmoil or intolerance in developing countries and social and psychological

¹ For some of the contributions to the debate over the brain drain, see Ajayi, Goma & Johnson (1996); Court (1999); Court (2004); Jaycox (1993); Logan (1992); Manuh, Budu & Sulley (2002); Mazrui (1993); Saint (2004); Samoff & Carrol (2004); Sawyerr (2004); Smyke (1994/ 1995); and Teferra & Altbach (n.d.).

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pressures (Tefferu & Altbach 2003; 2004; Tettey 2006). The 'pull' factors, on the other hand, include the attractiveness of some countries, especially the industrialized ones to many foreign academics, the promise of economic success, political sanctuary and increasing shortage of skilled labour in developing countries (Demers 2002; Nyamnjoh & Naatang 2002; Tefferu & Altbach 2003).

An important dimension of the brain influx, which has received less attention in the literature is the internal brain influx, which refers to movements of academics away from institutions of higher education to other sectors within the same country largely because of economic reasons. In the words of Tefferu and Altbach (2004: 42),

academic staff are also lured away by a variety of government agencies, where salaries are often better and the working environment more comfortable. In many cases, the salaries and benefits in universities are lower than comparative positions in and outside of the civil service. For instance, a comparative salary analysis in Ghana in 1993 revealed that salary levels in sectors such as energy, finance, revenue collection, and the media were all higher than those of the universities.

In addition to this, the brain influx is also attributed to some weaknesses inherent in most universities in Africa. For instance, at the University of Ghana, Legon, some of the weaknesses which have given impetus to the brain influx include the following:

- Dependence on government for salaries resulting in inability to offer attractive remuneration packages;
- Overloaded and ageing faculty compounded by inability to attract fresh talent;
- Weak recognition and rewards systems addressing superannuation and home ownership schemes;
- Slow, over-centralized and bureaucratic decision making system;
- Lack of formal training in teaching and poor teaching aids/laboratory equipment;

- Inability to charge realistic fees that reflect at the minimum, cost recovery as a result of political pressure; and
- Inadequate funding for research partly attributable to poor marketing of research projects and weak proposal writing skills (University of Ghana, 2001: 13-14).

These weaknesses have been exacerbated by some key threats to the existence of the University. They include the following:

- Low morale and motivation which accelerated the brain-drain and the loss of high calibre of personnel to industry and new universities;
- Ageing faculty, high faculty turnover and the absence of mentoring combined to indicate a crisis in human resource supply which had invariably led to lowering of output quality;
- The establishment of new tertiary institutions, especially by churches, which increased the competitive pressures on the University;
- Woefully insufficient financial resources to enable investments in facilities to keep pace with student population expansion resulting in decreasing quality in teaching, research and quality of campus life (Ayee 2006).

Some of the Functional and Dysfunctional Effects of the Brain Influx

The brain influx has both positive and negative effects. It has been pointed out that the brain influx of foreign academics is not necessarily a bad thing and that for its own sake it is inevitably positive. In the words of Dee (2004: 593),

some degree of turnover of academic staff is inevitable and perhaps desirable, (although) high rates of faculty turnover can be costly to the reputation of an institution and to the quality of instruction.

The effect of the brain influx can be viewed from two perspectives, namely, (i) functional; and (ii) dysfunctional (Park 1994).

Functional Effect of the Brain Influx

The brain influx has largely benefited both the new and former institutions of foreign academics. For the new institutions, they use the expertise and experience of the academics who assume higher positions with better conditions of service than they had in their former institutions. They arrive with a lot of expectations being demanded by their new employers, which must be fulfilled as a way of justifying their recruitment. The first year of their employment is usually an adjustment phase and therefore much cannot be achieved. However, in the long run, most of the foreign academics have proved their mettle by contributing to research, teaching and community engagement in their new institutions and injecting a sense of urgency in running their portfolios. Some of them, however, in their enthusiasm try to justify their recruitment and, consequently, make mistakes along the way, which are part of any learning progress.

For poor performing academics, when they leave, it becomes a blessing for their institutions as it gives them the opportunity to invigorate themselves by finding more capable replacements if it is possible to recruit them. However, as a result of the scarcity of experienced academic staff on the African continent, it has become difficult for the institutions to fill the positions with the experienced staff thus perpetuating a vicious cycle leading to serious capacity challenges (Tettey 2006; Ayee 2006).

Furthermore, the brain influx is also beneficial to the economies of the countries of the foreign academics. It has been documented that the brain influx has boosted the economies of some African countries through the remittances of the foreign academics and other migrants. In Ghana, for example, conservative estimates put remittances at 8% of the GDP of the country (Quartey 2009). State interests and state obligations have also led to interventions from countries in Africa to engage with migrants including academics who have left their countries to contribute to socio-economic development of their countries (Camlen 2006). In Ghana two initiatives are important in this regard. First is the enactment of the Dual Citizenship Act (Act 591) and the Citizenship Regulations of 2001, which allow Ghanaian citizens to acquire a second nationality without losing their Ghanaian citizenship. This is expected to facilitate the engagement of Ghanaian professionals and other migrants in local politics and a more efficient

management of their investments in Ghana (Mohan 2008). Second is the hosting of the Home Coming Summit launched by the Government of Ghana in 2001 in an attempt to woo Ghanaians living abroad to come home and invest in the growth of the local economy. The Summit identified the contribution of Ghanaians in the diaspora including foreign academics in several key areas including the following:

- (i) as a potential market for non-traditional exportable items such as foodstuff and garments;
- (ii) as a source of finance capital for investment to develop the local private sector;
- (iii) as ambassadors for Ghana's culture – food, clothes, social life etc.;
- (iv) as a source of modern knowledge and technical know-how for development, particularly information technology; and
- (v) as a link between Ghanaian communities and local foreign-based communities (Ampomah-Asiedu 2011).

Dysfunctional Effect of the Brain Influx

The dysfunctional effect of the brain influx occurs when universities have lost good performing employees without appropriate replacements being found. This aspect results in the expertise base of the universities being eroded to the extent that there is not enough capacity to provide quality training for new generations of citizens. This has led to either low student intake in some programmes, suspension of admission of students into such programmes, shortage of graduates in programmes such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy, engineering, architecture and the performing arts because the diminished faculty is unable to train sufficient numbers of future professionals and gross understaffing.

A further dysfunctional effect of the brain influx is the xenophobia that it has generated in some African countries. Local professionals most of the time are not comfortable with the movement of foreign professionals such as academics to their countries either because of the generous conditions of service granted them because of 'exceptional skills' or that they have come to take their jobs and therefore make them (the locals) redundant.

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Perhaps a personal dysfunctional effect is the adjustment of the foreign academics to their new environment. This has not been easy for them. Some of them experience cultural shock while it takes them time to enter into new relations and redefine their sense of identity. Some of them who bring their families to their new institutions either find it difficult to get good schools for their children or spousal job opportunities, which are not part of the conditions of service, are slim. These, no doubt, make some of them to sit up and question the essence of their taking up appointment in the new institutions. Some of them become disappointed and frustrated especially when they cannot do things like publishing and engaging in consultancy which they used to do when they were at their former institutions. In such situations, some of them resign especially when the terms of the contract with their new employers are not stringent.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the brain influx is not unique or a peculiar phenomenon but rather part of mobility and social transformation. Even though the causes could be attributed to 'push' and 'pull' factors, it is also the result of some weaknesses in most universities in Africa. There are functional and dysfunctional effects of the brain influx on the foreign academics themselves, their old and new institutions as well as their countries. In spite of its functional and dysfunctional effect, it is instructive to note that the brain influx is certainly going to be around for a long time in so far conditions that have created it have not changed much even though the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is arguably the most comprehensive initiative aimed at facilitating the region's socio-economic and political progress has explicitly mentioned a need to 'reverse the brain drain' in its framework document. There is no doubt that the processes of globalization have also heightened the brain influx as information communication technology (ICT) has created new avenues and opportunities for foreign academics to seek 'greener pastures' elsewhere. Above all, the brain influx is a phenomenon of mobility and social transformation and depends on time, space, rationale and choices that people make to improve their livelihood and standard of living. It is therefore

difficult to design policies and strategies to effectively deal with a phenomenon which is mainly determined by individual choices, time and space.

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