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Beyond the Brain Drain: Redefining the Professions

by Martin Godfrey, Brighton *

The traditional policy measures employed by Third World governments to reduce the "brain drain", the migration of critical groups of professionals to industrialised countries, have proved to be largely ineffective. The following article suggests a redefinition of job content and of professional training in the interests of greater relevance to national needs and resources. This, the author argues, would incidentally remove the possibility of brain drain which was always a mere symptom of the real problem.

The sixties and early seventies were years of high and rising levels of migration of Third World professionals, particularly scientists, engineers and doctors, to industrialised countries, particularly the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. They were also the years of proliferation of reports of national and international commissions of enquiry into the causes of brain drain and of recommendations of policies to reduce it.

Salaries and Working Conditions

The most popular of these recommendations, as might be expected, was for an improvement in the material rewards and working conditions of the professionals concerned. An international report by the Education and World Affairs Committee put the assumption underlying this recommendation most brutally, in the words of one of its members: "The brain-losing countries' top-priority task is to improve the conditions under which the 'critical elite' are expected to work. Political, administrative and institutional leaders in developing countries must realise that professional men normally have dual loyalties, divided between their country and their intellectual professional careers. Losses of key professional leaders will continue unless the conditions of work in their countries can satisfy such elemental needs as minimum salary requirements to permit full-time employment, recognition of individual talent and creativity, adequate progression through career channels, increased labour mobility and opportunities to maintain and cultivate contacts with professional counterparts abroad. The EWA viewpoint amounts to saying that professional men the world over have much the same requirements for job satisfaction and, unless the traditional cultures and pay scales of many brain-losing countries (developed and less developed alike) can adapt to these requirements, then, in Kenneth Boulding's phrase, 'high-

level manpower with get-up-and-go will get up and go'".¹

Most national and international reports put it less bluntly but made recommendations that were essentially based on this viewpoint. For instance, the report of the Colombo Plan's 1972 special topic committee on Brain Drain recommended "the reorganisation of systems of administration to give a proper place to professionals: factors like salary, service conditions, working facilities, academic and professional environments, etc., weigh heavily in the locational decisions of skilled manpower"². In similar vein, the Indian government encourages doctors with overseas qualifications to return home by the offer of jobs and of loans to help set up private practices³. The report of the Sri Lanka Cabinet Committee recommended a review of salaries for critical groups such as doctors, scientific personnel, pilots and aircraft engineers, moving "away from the usual criteria of salary determination based on old parities and differentials" and looking at "the problem from the point of view of demand, supply and incentives, as well as the need to retain these personnel within the country"⁴.

The trouble with such measures, recommended or implemented, is that they do not have much effect on the number migrating unless they are generous. As Sen puts it, "it is unlikely the brain drain to America can be reduced significantly just by raising the salary level of scientists, engineers and doctors in the under-developed countries. The changes that can be made . . . are small in comparison with the gap vis-à-vis the United

¹ George B. Baldwin, Brain drain or overflow?, in: Foreign Affairs, Vol. 48, No. 2, January 1970, pp. 358-372.

² Colombo Plan Consultative Committee, The Colombo Plan for co-operative economic development in South and South-East Asia. The special topic: brain drain, The Colombo Plan Bureau, Colombo 1972, p. 4.

³ Roger Jeffery, Migration of Doctors from India, in: Economic and Political Weekly, March 27, 1976, p. 507.

⁴ Sri Lanka, Report of the cabinet committee inquiring into the problem of technologically, professionally and academically qualified personnel leaving Sri Lanka, Sessional Paper No. X-1974, Colombo, pp. 36-49.

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States salary levels, and it may matter little whether one's income goes up five times or seven times"⁵. Similarly, the improvement in service conditions that can be made is usually small in comparison with the relevant international gap.

Moreover, it is difficult to withhold an improvement in the rewards of the internationally mobile from other groups of top salary-earners who can plausibly claim "comparability" with them. Civil service salary commissions have long been open to claims based on such comparisons. Thus to try to pay international transfer earnings to the mobile would not only reduce the numbers that could be absorbed: it would also have a drastic effect on internal income distribution⁶.

Bonding Schemes and Emigration Controls

In practice governments generally do allow themselves to be bullied into paying internationally mobile professionals rather more and into making their working conditions rather better than domestic considerations alone would warrant but not enough to reduce the incentive to migrate — with the result that they have to resort to bonding schemes and emigration controls. There is a tendency for such schemes to be ineffective. In Sri Lanka, for instance, graduates of the university must serve a five-year period of public service after qualification — with the result in the case of doctors (for whom it is strictly enforced) of "a loss to the country of graduates with five years' experience rather than those with one year's experience"⁷.

Sri Lanka's experience, also, of ingenuity in evading bonds on the part of those trained at home, for instance by leaving before examination results are announced, and of bondbreaking by those trained abroad is repeated in other developing countries. Controls over the issue of passports and foreign exchange can obviously be an effective means of preventing people from leaving the country but mobile professionals retained by them or by bonding schemes are likely to become frustrated and demoralised, an obstacle both to efficiency and reform.

Compensation Schemes

This array of problems has encouraged several governments of developing countries to settle for a strategy of living with, or even enthusiastically

embracing, the brain drain. The governments of the Philippines and South Korea, for instance, look actively for employment opportunities overseas for their skilled, semi-professional and professional workers and sign "export contracts" for such manpower.

In the same spirit is the pressure, encouraged by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), for government-to-government compensation by brain-gaining to brain-losing countries. In support of such pressure UNCTAD⁸ has recently tried to calculate the transfer of resources represented by the immigration of third-world social and natural scientists, engineers and physicians into the United States in a single year, 1970. Defining benefits lost to the developing country and benefits gained by the US in terms of losses and gains of life-time income streams, modified in various ways, they calculate that this immigration represented a transfer to the US of around \$ 3,700 mn compared with US development assistance to developing countries in the same year of \$ 3,100 mn. The largest single contribution to US net income, \$ 881mn, came from the Philippines, with India a close second in the list of contributors with \$ 875 mn. Clearly compensation on such a scale, if it were ever likely to be obtained, would make brain drain easier to live with.

A scheme that has attracted a lot of recent publicity, and which at first sight looks like an attempt to reduce the brain drain rather than to live with it, is the suggestion that a special income tax should be collected from immigrant professionals by the tax authority of the host developed country⁹. The tax authority would then hand over the revenue, under United Nations auspices, to the government of the country of origin. This scheme appears to differ from the export contract and government-to-government compensation schemes in that it is intended not merely to raise compensatory revenue but also to reduce the level of migration. Indeed, in principle, given a sufficiently high tax rate, both brain drain and revenue could presumably be reduced to zero. However, on admittedly preliminary calculations¹⁰, elasticities of response seem to be such that tax rates would have to be punitively high for the tax rate to have more than a marginal effect on the number of migrants. In which case the scheme

⁵ A. K. Sen, Brain drain: causes and effects, Ch. 15 in B. R. Williams (ed.), *Science and Technology in Economic Growth*, International Economic Association, Macmillan, London 1973, p. 403.

⁶ For further discussion of this effect see Martin Godfrey, *The international market in skills and the transmission of inequality*, in: *Development and Change*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 1975, pp. 5–24.

⁷ B. Senewiratne, *Emigration of doctors: a problem for the developing and developed countries*, part II, in: *British Medical Journal*, 1, 5959, 1975, p. 669.

⁸ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *The reverse transfer of technology: economic effects of the outflow of trained personnel from developing countries*, TD/B/AC. 11/25 Rev. 1, New York 1975.

⁹ Jagdish Bhagwati, William DellaFara, *The Brain Drain and Income Taxation*, in: *World Development*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1 and 2, February 1973, pp. 94–101.

¹⁰ See, for instance, George Psacharopoulos, *Estimating some key parameters in the brain drain taxation model*, in: *Journal of Development Economics*, 2, 1975, pp. 309–318; and Don de Voretz, Dennis Maki, *The brain drain and income taxation: Canadian estimates*, in: *World Development*, 3, 10, 1975, pp. 705–716.

would be little different in effect from government-to-government compensation and one wonders whether it is worth confronting the formidable political, legal and administrative problems raised by the scheme for so little return ¹¹.

Changes of Trend

Resort to the recommendation of such ingenious devices and the strong upward trend in brain drain up to 1972 are evidence of the inadequacy of the traditional remedies. Indeed it has always seemed likely that a reduction in the flow of migrants would come as a result not of policy measures taken in the countries of origin but of developments in the countries of destination. This is what has happened since 1973, when two important changes of trend have occurred.

First, the international capitalist economy has suffered a severe recession which has reduced the rate of expansion in its demand not only for resource-based professionals such as engineers but also for school and university teachers, physicians and surgeons. Secondly, the medical profession in the main receiving countries has reversed its traditional policy and is supporting programmes of huge increases in output from medical schools. The combined medical school output in the four developed Commonwealth countries (the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) will by 1980 be about 2½ times the level of the level of the early sixties; in 1975 medical school intake in the US was almost double its level of 10 years earlier and by 1980 output is expected to reach 15,000 a year. These trends are reflected in the steps being taken in the UK, Canada, Australia and the US to limit the immigration of professionals, particularly doctors, such as the decision by the United Kingdom General Medical Council to withhold recognition of Indian medical qualifications. Of course, the UK in its special intermediate position (with a net loss of over 93,000 British professionals between 1964 and 1972) will feel the backwash effect of the immigration restrictions in the other three countries and will thus have a double incentive to restrict the inflow into the UK.

Other changes are taking place, the effects of which are less easy to predict. The oil-producing countries have emerged as new areas of substantial excess demand for professionals. About 400,000 foreigners, in a wide range of occupations, are employed in Saudi Arabia alone and requirements for a further 300,000–500,000 are estimated in the 1976–80 plan. A further 600,000

foreigners are employed in the rest of the Middle East region and Iran is also heavily dependent on foreign workers. At the same time moves towards liberalisation of licensure regulations in the European Community, coinciding with Britain's entry, have increased the opportunities for movement between EC countries, whether to the advantage or detriment of outside immigrants remains to be seen.

Thus the direction and nature of brain drain is changing and the prospects for its size depend to some extent on the timing and pace of recovery from recession. In the case of professions other than doctors the reaction to recession in developed countries has in many cases been to cut back on training provision, which may mean some short-term opportunities for qualified immigrants as activity picks up. Moreover, to the extent that third-world professionals fill a *specific* role in developed countries, opportunities for them might persist even though the gap between *overall* demand and supply were closing. Nevertheless, on balance, while professionals will continue to migrate in large numbers, the boom in South-North movement of the sixties and early seventies is unlikely to be repeated in the foreseeable future. The climate has changed.

Does this mean the end of the brain drain problem for developing countries? In our view it signifies not so much the end of a problem as an opportunity to recognise its real nature.

Consider, for instance, what would happen if *all* the professionals from developing countries were to return home, as many of them are likely to do in the changed climate, and if *no* further migration were possible. The result would be disastrous — as Jeffery puts it for the case of the Indian medical profession, “a large mass of dissatisfied doctors, with skills irrelevant to most of the work they can find within the country” ¹². In other words the fundamental problem is not the number of those who migrate but the nature of the professions and of the professional training which underlies the migration.

“International Professional” at Stake

What is at stake is the concept of the “international professional”, implying an international network of mutually recognised qualifications. The professions in most Third World countries are tightly integrated into this network. International professional associations usually see the establishment of a common standard and inter-recognition of national qualifications as one of their basic aims. Thus many Third World professionals have foreign and/or internationally recog-

¹¹ Martin Partington, *The brain drain tax proposal: a lawyer's view*, in: *World Development*, 3, 10, 1975, pp. 717–749; and Oliver Oldman, Richard Popp, *The brain drain: a tax analysis of the Bhagwati proposal*, in: *World Development*, 3, 10, 1975, pp. 751–763.

¹² Roger Jeffery, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

nised qualifications, obtained either abroad or at home. Even when the state of using foreign qualifications has not meant indigenisation, most Third World professions, encouraged as already described by the transnational professional and educational establishment, take care to ensure that their qualifications are still internationally recognised.

Now international solidarity and exchange of information are wholly admirable, but insistence on "international standards" for the professions would only make sense if the world were an undifferentiated place. In fact, countries, and regions within countries, differ in two important ways — in the needs of their people and in the resources available to meet those needs. Both these types of difference have implications for the sort of professional that is required.

This is most easily illustrated in the case of the medical profession¹³. The difference in needs between the people of, say, Latin America and the United States derives partly from the difference in age structure, with a much smaller proportion of the US population below the age of fifteen and a much higher proportion above the age of forty-five than is the case in Latin America, and the resulting difference in the relative importance of various pathologies — degenerative diseases associated with ageing in the case of the US, infantile, juvenile and obstetric problems in the case of Latin America. Needs also differ because of the differing degrees of urbanisation and material standards of living, with a predominant need for uncomplicated preventive medicine and sanitary care in rural Latin America. Malnutrition, Chagas disease and yaws are almost unknown in the US and diphtheria, poliomyelitis, leprosy, malaria, tetanus, typhoid and pertussis have been virtually wiped out, in contrast to the situation in Latin America. The difference in the level of resources available to finance health care between the two countries under comparison makes it necessary for Latin America to search urgently not only for ways of preventing its doctors from receiving their full international exchange value but also for ways of economising on the training and maintenance of medical manpower.

In the case of most other professions the implications of these differences are obscured by the fact that the market place, and the highly unequal income distribution that it reflects, unequivocally provides the criterion on which resources are allocated. Thus an architect trained to design ex-

pensive office blocks for the centre of a capital city will find plenty of work in most developing countries, whereas an expert on low-cost housing will not. However, if and when the talk of systems which will meet other criteria than those of the market place, such as employment and basic needs¹⁴, collective self-reliance¹⁵, etc., became reality, the latent disfunctionality of the transnationally defined professional would become obvious. As things stand it must be recognised that the job definition of most professions is inevitably unrelated to the needs of the majority of the people of the countries in which they are located and that the cost of maintaining this definition is unrelated to the resources available.

Withdrawal from International Market

A redefinition of job content and of professional training in the interests of greater relevance to national needs and resources would involve a move away from the concept of the international (and internationally mobile) professional towards the acquisition of task-specific knowledge. The totality of such knowledge would not necessarily be of a "lower" standard than the internationally-defined syllabuses of existing professional training institutions; it would certainly be very different; it would change constantly over time as the structure of the economy changed; and its relatively modestly rewarded possessors would certainly not be regarded as "professionals" by their international counterparts and potential employers. Thus, incidentally, the possibility of brain drain would be removed. But that was never the real problem, always a mere symptom.

Any governments, then, which were seriously involved in a strategy to promote employment, improve income distribution and fulfil basic needs would need to embark at an early stage on a remoulding of their professions. Such a programme would have both negative and positive elements. Negative steps would include: a ban on the local sitting of foreign professional examinations (such as those of the US Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates) and on foreign recruitment of local professionals; pressure on rich-country authorities to withdraw recognition from local qualifications; disaffiliation from international professional associations, which see the establishment of a common standard and inter-recognition of national qualifications as one of their aims; the discouragement by means of scholarships policy and foreign exchange and passport controls, of disfunctional

¹³ For further discussion see Oscar Osلاك, Dante Caputo, The migration of medical personnel from Latin America to the United States: toward an alternative interpretation, paper for the Pan-American conference on health manpower planning, Ottawa 1973.

¹⁴ International Labour Organization, Employment, Growth and Basic Needs: a One-World Problem, Geneva 1976.

¹⁵ Enrique Oteiza, Francisco Sercovic, Collective Self-reliance: some old and new issues, paper for Lima Seminar on Collective Self-Reliance, 1976.

overseas study; and, in the case of countries which are over-producing professionals in response to excess demand in the international market, a restriction in this output to the number that can be absorbed at home.

Institutional Implications

This range of negative policy measures, amounting in effect to a drawing back from tight integration in the international market and system of professional qualification, would have to be combined with a number of positive measures. The redefinition of job content along the lines already suggested and the associated changes in training would need careful study. They would also have institutional implications. Among other things new Third World centres of training would need to be developed on a regional basis to impart those skills which are too specialised and/or needed in too small quantities to be worth providing training for at home. This does not mean that study in a rich country would be ruled out, but it would be study for the acquisition of skills and ideas not available at home and not for the acquisition of the status of internationally mobile professional. Cooperation between developing countries would be essential to the success of such a strategy. The "negative" measures would be much more

effectively implemented by a group of countries than by a single country acting in isolation. The search for more relevant curricula and syllabi and for new locations, institutions and modes of training implies an even greater degree of cooperation. Geographical proximity and the use of a common language would obviously be useful to the strategy as a whole but the sharing of a common aim and political philosophy would be even more important.

The political obstacles to a programme of this kind must not, of course, be underestimated. The snag, from the point of view of implementation, is that the costs and benefits of disengagement are unevenly distributed. Those who gain from the reorientation of production and training are mainly the marginal and powerless. Those who lose from the ending of their tight integration into the international qualification system are, on the whole, the privileged and powerful. That the state so often plays the role of accomplice in maintaining the *status quo* is not surprising in view of the class origins and material interests of most decision makers and their families. Thus, a prerequisite for implementation of a programme of this kind would be the existence of a government with the will and capacity to transcend these interests.

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