

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY OF TALENT: THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE¹

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ABSTRACT

This note focuses on the international migration of talent to OECD countries. Based on evidence of flows of university students as well as on the stocks of highly skilled people in OECD countries, it argues that Europe is more attractive, in quantitative terms, to talent from other developed countries than to talent from developing countries. It also argues that Europe's relative lack of attractiveness to highly skilled migrants from developing countries is related to historical, economic and institutional factors. Among these are the fact that Europe's immigration policies have only recently moved to favor the highly skilled after focusing family reunification and asylum migrants, the structure of labor markets in several EU countries, restrictive product market regulations and barriers to entrepreneurship, and that Europe's higher education sector, while attractive to students from developed countries, appears to be less attractive/open to students from outside the EU. When one considers that a large share of highly skilled migrants get part of their higher education in the host country, this represents a weakness for Europe. At the same time, the EU should balance openness and selective migration policies with development goals including building higher education and research capacity in developing countries.

1. Introduction

The international mobility of knowledge and human capital – i.e. talent – is a crucial element of corporate competitiveness and economic development in the era of globalization.³ Innovation benefits from the agglomeration of talented individuals, whatever their nationality and citizenship, in a relatively small number of locations. The contribution of foreign skilled workers to economic growth and achievement in host countries, in particular to research, innovation and entrepreneurship, is increasingly recognised – witness the number of foreign-born US Nobel Prize winners or creators of global high-tech companies, such as Intel or eBay, and other successful start-ups. While barriers persist to the international circulation of talent, in particular for those professions that require certification, these are much lower than for the migration of the low-skilled, as

¹ This note is prepared for the UNU-MERIT L20 international conference on 8 March to draft a science, technology and development agenda for a proposed new informal grouping of the leaders of the world's 20 leading countries. The opinions expressed in this paper are the authors' own and do not reflect the position of the OECD, the OECD Development Centre, or their member states.

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³ But note also that increased mobility of highly-skilled personnel goes hand-in-hand with the globalization of research and development and the opening of facilities in China, India and other emerging economies by OECD-based multinationals (UNCTAD 2005).

the growing demand and competition for talent in OECD countries pressure governments to attract and hold on to skilled labour – to use the current jargon in French politics, to adopt l'*immigration choisie* as a policy.⁴

Does this possibility of cross-border mobility benefit all countries equally? International development needs an effective transfer of talent from areas of abundance (the rich countries) to developing countries. Nonetheless, what we witness today is rather the movement of highly-skilled people leaving developing countries and heading to the developed world in order to support their growth process. Can these developments impede collective efforts to make poverty history? Can in fact developed countries' policies act at cross-purpose and lack overall coherence? Or, alternatively, shall we take into account simultaneously of other aspects of globalization — such as remittances, inward investment, technology transfer, increased trade flows, and charitable activities of diaspora communities — when quantifying the impact of migration on development prospects in sending countries?

This short note presents some data on the issue, stresses the need to go beyond a strict dichotomy between “brain drain” and “brain gain” when assessing the consequences of the international circulation of talent, and highlights the existence of important policy implications, especially in the domain of development cooperation.

2. Quantification of the problem

Internationally comparable data on the migration of the highly skilled is incomplete, but sources confirm an increase in migration flows during the 1990s, from Asia to the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. The increase comes from strong demand in OECD countries for IT and other skills in science and technology as well as the selective immigration policies that favour skilled workers. Not all skilled migrants are in search of educational, economic or intellectual opportunities. Sometimes, they are forced to leave their homes as a result of war, or political, ethnic and religious persecution.

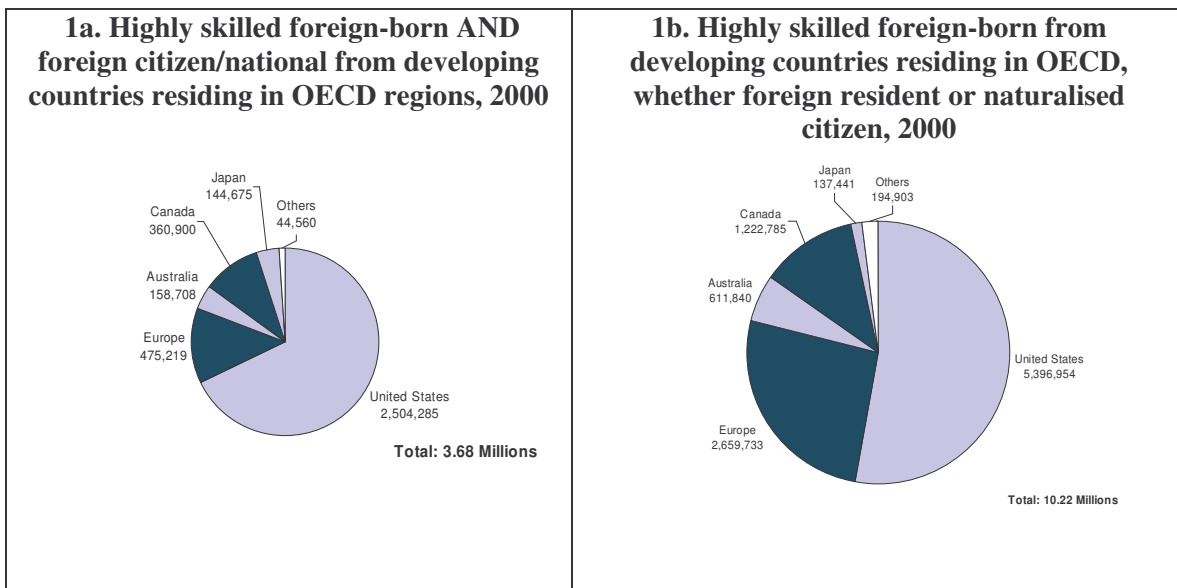
Skilled migration among the OECD countries is also on the rise but appears dominated by temporary flows of advanced students, researchers, managers and IT specialists, suggesting more a pattern of brain circulation than a draining of skills from one place to another. The globalisation of firms has helped fuel temporary flows; in the mid-1990s intra-company transfers accounted for 5-10% of the total flows of skilled workers to the United States from Canada.

⁴ « Mon ambition est de proposer un modèle français de l'immigration choisie, fondé en aucun cas sur la fuite des cerveaux, mais sur la mobilité, la circulation des hommes, des compétences et des idées. Nous devons favoriser la venue en France, à des fins temporaires, des étudiants les plus brillants, de travailleurs hautement qualifiés, de personnalités de talent. La formation, l'expérience et le savoir-faire acquis en France constitueront des atouts essentiels pour la modernisation des pays d'origine. Cette immigration, utile à la France, profitable au migrant, indispensable au pays d'origine, devra s'inscrire clairement dans la perspective d'un retour au pays à l'issue d'une période de quelques années. Elle contribuera à former un réseau d'élites francophiles dans le monde. En facilitant les transferts de technologie, elle deviendra un fer de lance de la modernisation et du développement des pays les plus démunis ». Sarkozy, Nicolas (2006), *Immigration choisie ne signifie pas fuite des cerveaux*, *Le Figaro*, 9 February.

The United States is the main pole of attraction for foreign skilled workers; 40% of its foreign-born adult population have tertiary level education. The United States also takes in 32% of all foreign students studying in the OECD countries. Indeed, higher education is an important channel for US firms recruiting highly skilled migrants.

But the United States is not the only magnet. Canada also attracts talent and, despite its modest loss of skilled migrants to the US, is in fact a net importer of human capital. Skilled migration to other OECD countries is less as seen in Figure 1, but many EU countries have now implemented policies to attract foreign students, researchers and other skilled workers.

Figure 1. Comparison of highly skilled foreign immigrants from developing countries in OECD countries, by foreigner status and host regions, 2000



The new OECD Database on immigrants and expatriates in OECD countries is the first internationally comparable data set – which concerns stocks and not flows – on the foreign-born population as well as the foreign born, non-citizen/national population⁵ for almost all member countries of the OECD.⁶ In 2000 there were 3.4 million highly skilled

⁵ An earlier draft of this paper had defined the foreign high skilled population as “both foreign born and non-citizen/national of the country in which the migrant was resident”. The broader definition, all foreign born, whether the migrant acquired the nationality of the host country or not, is henceforth used in this paper. However, countries differ extensively in the nationality acquisition laws and in some countries, migrants from certain countries tend to obtain host country nationality more frequently which would tend to overestimate the share of highly- skilled foreigners. Despite these limitations, it has become the preferred definition by the OECD as well as the World Bank.

⁶ In Europe there is no equivalent to the SESTAT database maintained by the National Science Foundation in the United States. The Community Labour Force Survey (CLFS) covers the whole of the working population, those with university level education and those in senior scientific or technical posts. Its data make it possible to look at the number of non-nationals working in a European host country.

foreigners (foreign-born and non-citizen) from developing countries in the OECD countries and Europe as region (EU25, Norway, and Switzerland) hosted only 13% of them. The United States hosted nearly three quarters of highly skilled foreigners from developing countries who had not acquired citizenship from an OECD country and were residing in an OECD country in 2000.

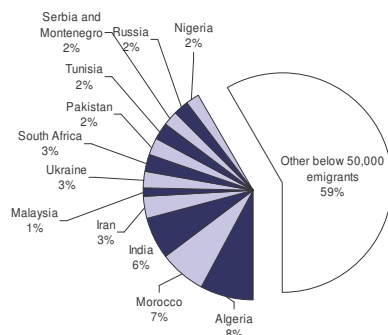
Using a broader definition of foreigners – all foreign born whether he/she has acquired the nationality of the host country – the population of highly-skilled foreigners from developing countries in the OECD area reached 10.2 million individuals in 2000. Whether one uses the narrow definition of foreign highly-skilled in an OECD country, or the broader definition of foreign-born irrespective of nationality, the United States attracts most of the talent from developing countries (Figures 1a and 1b). Just over half of the highly-skilled foreign-born in the OECD resided in the United States. However, of the 3.4 million highly-skilled foreigners from developing countries in the OECD (without the nationality of the host country), some three quarters resided in the United States. Europe hosted only 2.7 million.

The differences in the ratio in the two measures likely relates to differences in the acquisition of nationality and access to higher education as well as differences in temporary and permanent migration and incentives for foreign students to stay in the country after obtaining a diploma. It is well documented that many foreign highly skilled have obtained at least part of their education in host country, especially among individuals who arrived as youngsters to the host country (OECD 2001). The relative higher share of highly-skilled foreigners from developing countries (defined simply as the foreign-born) residing in European OECD countries (25%), compared to the lower share of highly-skilled foreigners in Europe from developing countries who are both foreign-born and foreign citizen (13%), could be due to a combination of the above factors. For instance, it may be argued that successive campaigns to “regularise” migrants in an irregular situation in EU countries during the 1980s and 1990s, may have facilitated the acquisition of the nationality of the host country. In the United States, only around half of the highly-skilled foreign-born from developing countries do not have foreign citizen status and may be US citizens/nationals.

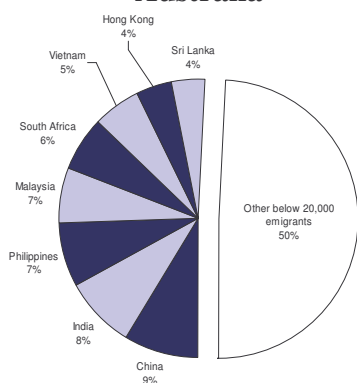
Some 71% of foreign highly-skilled expatriates in the United States come from developing countries, compared to 50% in France. The variance is high in Europe: while Finland has a higher share of the highly-skilled coming from developing countries (77%), it is only 28% in Belgium – despite being a very internationalized country and a destination for foreign student *flows* (30% of Belgian PhDs are foreigners). Some European countries therefore appear not only to attract fewer higher skilled immigrants for settlement than the United States, but those that come tend to come from OECD countries as opposed to from developing countries.

Figure 2. Destination of the Highly Skilled Foreigners (i.e. all foreign-born) from Developing Countries Residing in the main OECD regions, by country of origin, 2000

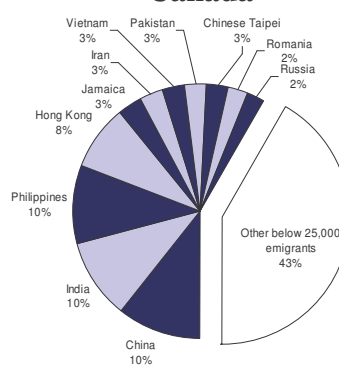
Europe (1)



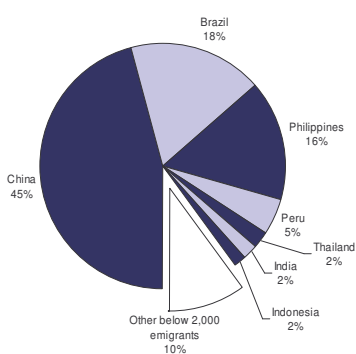
Australia



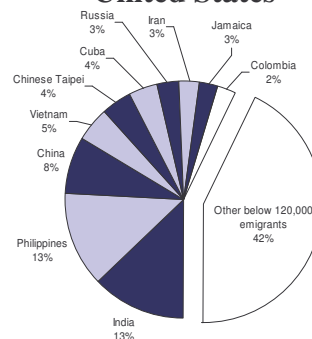
Canada



Japan



United States



1. Europe defined as EU-25, plus Switzerland and Norway.
Source: OECD, 2005

For Europe as whole, the inflows of highly skilled migrants from developing countries are highly diversified and highly atomized or fragmented (Figure 8). In other words, 59% of the stock of highly-skilled migrants from developing countries is made up by countries

who individually account for less than 50,000 of the highly-skilled migrants in Europe. For Europe as whole, Algeria and Morocco followed by India make up the largest sending countries of highly-skilled migrants but they individually account for less than 10% of the 2.7 million highly-skilled foreigners (i.e. defined as foreign-born only) from developing countries in Europe. Only 1.9% (or 47,000) of the highly-skilled migrants from developing countries in Europe originate in China, however, using the narrow definition of foreign-born and foreign citizen, the share rises to 3% but represents only 14,000 individuals.

In contrast, in the United States, four Asian (developing) countries account for 36% of the highly skilled immigrants from developing countries. India and the Philippines each account for 12%, followed by China (8%), and Vietnam (4%). The only Latin American countries that are a significant source of highly-skilled migrants are Cuba (4%) and Colombia (2%). Canada presents a similar profile as the United States with China, India, and Philippines as the main sending developing countries. Similarly, highly-skilled migrants from Asia also account for most of the highly-skilled in Australia that originate in developing countries. Japan, which receives only 1.3% of the highly-skilled immigrants from developing countries who reside in the OECD area, has an even greater concentration of source countries: China alone accounts for 45% of foreign highly skilled migrants, followed by Brazil (18%) and the Philippines (16%).

Based on evidence of flows of university students as well as on the stocks of highly skilled people in OECD countries, Europe is more attractive, in quantitative terms, to talent from other developed countries than to talent from developing countries. Student migration is biased towards intra-European migration flows partly due to geographic proximity and historical reasons. For Europe, the problem is not just one of losing real talent and intellectual property, but also its poor record in attracting skilled foreigners. Potential highly-skilled migrants from developing countries shun Europe because they lack information about competitive employment opportunities there, or conversely, because such opportunities are feeble.

Until the mid-1980s, EU countries did not take any specific action to recruit foreign students in developing countries outside or beyond their traditional spheres of influence. During the 1990s, as private higher education providers have increased and universities were given more autonomy and greater financial responsibility (including the right to levy tuition in some countries), European countries have strengthened their efforts to recruit foreign students, especially from Asia.⁷ Similarly, Europe's immigration policies only moved to favor the highly-skilled in the late 1990s after having focused on family reunification (mainly for the relatives of lower skilled labor migrants from African and Caribbean countries) and asylum migrants (in the Scandinavian countries and Germany). While the focus of policy concerns has been on human resources in S&T, gaps are also emerging for other types of talent (e.g. medical and health talents).

⁷ Universities in EU countries, such as the UK and France, are not only taking a more pro-active stance towards foreign student inflows but they are also emulating US higher education institutions by establishing overseas campuses or cross-border university partnerships with developing countries.

An increasing number of EU countries are also implementing measures to attract foreign students and to facilitate their access to the labor market. France has established a “scientific visa” not subject to labour market testing, a policy also being considered at the European Union level. The challenge for Europe is to remain open to foreign talent while promoting developmental goals such as higher education and research capacity building in developing countries.

3. Winners and Losers

The costs and benefits of the international circulation of talent are hotly debated. For the OECD countries, international migration of the highly skilled is often characterized as brain circulation, generating dividends to the sending and receiving countries.

In sending countries in the developing world, the challenge is greater. Latin American and Caribbean countries whose government-funded colleges offer free tuition risk losing part of their investment in education when their best graduates pursue their careers elsewhere. For these countries, capturing benefits mostly depends on attracting back skilled emigrants and providing opportunities for them to use their new technological competencies. In other cases, the departure of skilled workers is compensated for by the arrival of skilled workers from a third country. The classic case of this domino effect is of South African doctors moving to developed countries while being replaced by Cuban doctors.

Arguably the international mobility of skilled workers can generate global benefits by matching demand and supply of labour, improving knowledge flows, and maximizing the return from education. In the longer term, return flows of people and capital may not only offset some potential negative effects of international migration but also constitute an economic development strategy in its own right. Indeed, there are a few bright examples where this has occurred such as India, Taiwan, Israel, and recently, Eastern European countries. But as noted by others, they remain the exception not the rule.

In fact, migrants from developing countries are generally more likely to stay in the host country than migrants from advanced countries. The net outflow of highly skilled workers from a particular sector in a particular country also hinders the pursuit of important socioeconomic goals, including growth, the delivery of key public services and the maturing of the political system. This predicament is likely to particularly affect small developing countries with high rates of emigration such as Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and Fiji (where recent OECD data suggest that around two-thirds of all highly-skilled workers live overseas) or particular sectors in larger countries (for instance health care in some sub-Saharan African countries where large numbers of doctors and nurses have departed).

The harsh reality is that only a handful of countries have been successful in luring their talented emigrés back home. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that some 300 000 professionals from the African continent live and work in Europe and North America. By some estimates, up to a third of R&D professionals from the developing world are believed to reside in the OECD area. While there are often

media reports of successful foreign born entrepreneurs in the United States who establish branches or even firms in their home countries (e.g. such as in India) there numbers are few compared to the numbers of their fellow citizens who continue to emigrate.

4. Ensuring coherence in development cooperation policy

The brain drain does not need to be a fatality. Governments can do quite a lot to address the causes of the brain drain. Universities and research institutions and funding agencies in receiving countries can also be more creative and responsive in the way they recruit foreign talent. The provision of open access and online education to developing countries can also increase the higher education capacity inside the developing world. Research funding agencies in the North should be encouraged to provide opportunities for foreign students to undertake research in areas of relevance to developing countries (e.g. orphan diseases), not just in areas that concern the problems of the developed world. Scientific diaspora networks also play a role as does the development aid community.

In the sending countries, investment in human capital remains important, despite the persistent risks of brain drain. Science and technology policies are key in this regard. Developing centres of excellence for scientific research in areas of comparative advantage (e.g. traditional knowledge systems) and framing the local conditions for innovation and skilled entrepreneurship can make a country attractive to highly skilled workers, both from within the country and expatriates. The task is not easy and it takes time; India's investment in human resources in science and technology and own R&D capabilities dates from the 1950s.

In both the North and South, policies must be more coherent. In many developing countries it is not unusual to hear the local elite complain about the detrimental effect of development assistance on talent. The "policy channel" acts through incoherent signals and incentives. First, the fact that rich countries maintain limits on the circulation of goods and services that fail to provide the right incentives for poor countries to invest in improving the quality of their most abundant assets, i.e. labor. Second, as rich countries fail to invest enough in the replenishment of their own pool of skilled personnel, such as nursing and the ancillary fields, they draw on that of poorer countries. Third, international agreements such as GATS put pressure on signatory countries to liberalize the temporary movement of persons providing services (Chanda 2004).

Some countries have drafted ethical recruitment guidelines, stipulating that health care providers from certain countries will not be recruited. Examples include the guidance on ethical international recruitment practices issued by the Department of Health in England in 1999 requiring NHS employers to avoid direct recruitment from designated countries such as South Africa and the West Indies, as well as the Commonwealth Agreement on Ethical Recruitment. Such agreements, however, are often voluntary, they are difficult to enforce, and may simply displace recruitment activity to other developing countries. A more pro-active attempt to manage migration of health care workers is the bilateral arrangement between South Africa and the United Kingdom (Mafubelu 2004). South African healthcare personnel can spend time-limited education and practice periods in organizations providing NHS services, while UK clinical staff is encouraged to work

alongside healthcare personnel in South Africa.⁸ In order to protect African football, the international federation (FIFA) introduced rules teams that prevent the transfer of under-18 players and safeguard the work of “nurseries” (academies and training schools established by European teams in Africa) through the payment of fees on future transfers (Poli 2005).

Some EU countries have been particularly active in adopting strategies to enhance the capacity of tertiary education institutions in developing nations. It must be borne in mind, however, that in their anxiety to be part of and recognized as first world, developing countries have produced professionals whose expectations they cannot meet. It's a very difficult matter, because the third world does not have the money to pay well enough to hold the trained people and yet does not want to be seen to be producing a substandard (by first world estimations, at least) product.

Another problem concerns the local labour market stimulated by donor countries. Donors pay often their local staff and consultants salaries and remunerations that are much higher than the norm, therefore making it almost impossible for local institutions to benefit from local talent. This problem is exacerbated when donors manage the latter to migrate. In December 2002 the EC proposed to enhance cooperation and partnerships with third countries throughout a strengthened dialogue on migration (EC 2002). The effective integration of migration concerns into the ongoing development cooperation activities will be critical ensuring successful outcomes. In this context the EC has considered offering jobs currently taken by expatriate staff – notably in the development cooperation sector – to local people under financial conditions that are sufficiently attractive to provide an alternative for emigration. To facilitate this mechanism modalities of technical assistance to developing countries shall be reformed, in coordination with UNDP.

The reasons why migrants may choose not to return include the risk of severing new social and cultural bonds, of disrupting the education of children, or of jeopardizing pension entitlements and their possibilities of returning to the EU to visit family and friends. Migrants may also not return home because they are unaware of job opportunities back home. Almost all Southern scientific diasporas have created groups that use information technology and networking as knowledge-sharing mechanisms, with the ultimate objective of creating ties with their respective home countries. Policy-makers must recognize mobility needs and manage them proactively by making the domestic environment attractive and simultaneously maximizing the participation of the research diaspora. In this regard, development assistance may assist in various ways.

The 6th Community RTD Framework program, which offers training to scientists from third countries, including LDCs, with the aim of increasing the overall scientific and technological capacity of developing countries, includes elements that promote the actual return of trainees, including re-entry grants. Another interesting phenomenon, although at an exceedingly smaller scale, concerns European talent that consider the developing world to be an exciting place to conduct their activity. In this case, again, the focus is on

⁸ The provincial government of Alberta, Canada, as one example, has done active recruitment of more than 40 physicians from South Africa to fill the numerous vacancies in the rural communities (Bundred and Levitt 2000), and over half of the physicians in northern Saskatchewan, another Canadian province, are South African. The South African government in 2001 formally complained to the Canadian government about the number of its physicians being allowed to take up practice in Canada, yet in 2002 the number of South African-trained physicians in Canada increased by another 174, to total 1,738 (McClelland 2002).

scientists, although this is a form of talent mobility where entrepreneurial transfer is arguably the commonest channel.⁹ Esteves (2003) provides some examples in Latin America.¹⁰

5. Concluding Remarks

The risk of a brain drain is real. Stemming the flows by plugging the drain may not be the most efficient or humane way to tackle the problem.

Restricting mobility on the basis of shaky evidence makes little sense, especially when the structural causes that are generating the pressures to emigrate are not tackled.

Developing countries and the development community should do more to improve coherence between aid and capacity building.

Europe could make itself more open and attractive to students from developing countries while at the same time promoting capacity building in sending countries through the provision of cross-border education (e.g. overseas campuses, exports of educational services).

Developing countries must not abandon investment in human capital, despite the risks of brain drain. Furthermore, they should, with the help of the international community, develop research capacity in areas where they have advantages and which can contribute to local development problems.

With regard to the higher education system, engineering capacity should be strengthened in order to boost the capacity to absorb and integrate foreign technologies and inventions. Indeed, there many off the shelf patents (e.g. pharmaceutical patents) that have expired in the OECD countries. Local engineering talent is needed to turn public domain knowledge into solutions to address basic public health issues.

⁹ An important sub-category of European entrepreneurial talent that migrates to the developing country is constituted by (usually younger) individuals who open and run businesses in tourism locations. While some may argue that they fail to build important linkages to the rest of the economy, such entrepreneurs have played a critical role in putting places like Bali, Goa, Mombassa, Pattaya, Puerto Escondido, Tangier, Zanzibar and many others on the global map of tourism.

¹⁰ British geneticist Andrew Simpson, for instance, started at the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research in São Paulo in 1995, coordinating the genome sequencing of two bacteria (*Xylella fastidiosa* and *Chromobacterium violaceum*). Soon after publishing the genome of *Xylella fastidiosa*, the Brazilian researchers were commissioned by the US to sequence a related strain that attacks grapes in California. In 2003, Simpson was invited to move to New York to head the Ludwig Institute's international research program.

Finally, in the specific case of scientific research, the desirability and viability of creating centers of high-quality research (“centers of excellence”) in sending countries to attract diaspora researchers and students must be examined together developed countries.

Policies to improve the attractiveness of Europe to the foreign skilled must therefore take a systemic and coherent approach, linking selective migration policies to economic reforms as well as to higher education and research policies, while not losing sight of their development impact. With the right mix of policies and sustained international co-operation, developing countries reduce incentives for emigration while promoting “brain circulation”. In the longer term, it is obvious that no effort towards reversing the brain drain can succeed without increasing the demand for and the conditions of highly-qualified professional in sending countries.

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