

GEORGE ODHIAMBO

BRAIN DRAIN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LOST HOPE OR OPPORTUNITY?

Abstract

The flight of human capital is a phenomenon that has been of concern to academics and development practitioners for decades but unfortunately, there is no systematic record of the number of skilled professionals that many African countries have continued to lose to the developed world. Termed the “brain drain”, it represents the loss of highly skilled professionals from a source country to a recipient country. Kenyan higher education institutions for many years have seemed to operate on the assumption that there will always be people ready to join the institutions as academic staff hence no emphasis on retention. The situation has gradually changed in the last two decades as public higher education institutions in Kenya have continued to face a number of challenges with regard to numbers and quality of academic staff. This led the Ministry of Education-Kenya (2006) to advise the institutions to show more eagerness to recruit, develop and retain qualified academics. However, it is clear that these challenges have not been met. This paper critically examines the migration and brain drain in public higher education institutions in Kenya and its implications and suggests that the institutions should continue to explore strategies on how best to use the skills and experience of emigrant academics, and how to minimise their outflow.

Introduction

Skilled manpower labour is an important asset for any nation in development process but this is gradually disappearing from the African continent into other parts of the world and concerns about this phenomenon have been expressed at various levels. Although some amount of mobility is obviously necessary if African countries are to integrate into the global economy, the migration of huge numbers of students and skilled persons pose a threat of a “brain drain” which can affect growth and development. While there is little doubt that highly skilled workers are scarce in many developing countries, it is also true that many academics, scientists, engineers, medical doctors and other highly trained professionals from developing countries work in the developed world.

About 3 percent of the world’s population (191 million people) live in a country other than their country of birth, with 33 percent having moved from a developing country into a developed country (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). The actual data on brain drain in Africa is very scarce and the few available are inconsistent. However, the little statistics available clearly indicate a continent losing the very people it needs most for economic, social, scientific, and technological progress. According to the African Capacity Building Foundation, African countries lose approximately 20,000 skilled and qualified personnel every year to the developed countries and nearly one in 10 tertiary-educated adults that have some university or post secondary schooling and born in developing world now live in the developed world (Sriskandarajaah, 2005).

The brain drain has been the subject of highly controversial debates with three distinctive schools of thought. One examines it from the perspective of highly detrimental effects on the developing countries arising from the loss of their brightest minds and a second argues that the problem is overdramatised and draws attention to the beneficial consequences of the migration for countries losing the professionals. The third argues that it neither benefits the receiving nor the sending countries as African professionals who live in developed countries find themselves in poorly paid jobs that have no relevance to their training or academic achievements and in the long run lose their competencies and are unable to make any contributions. For Africa, the phenomenon has resulted in a major development constraint (Sako, 2002) in the sense that the educational level of individuals that are leaving the continent to other parts of the world is high and many of these people subsequently do not return to their home country afterwards.

It is believed that the brain drain phenomenon began in Africa just after the independence of many countries, and has continued over the years. According to Wusu (2006), the number of Africans heading out of the continent was initially small during the 1960's, but later increased due to the deterioration of social, political and economic conditions. It is estimated that 27,000 highly educated Africans migrated to developed countries between 1960 and 1975, increased to 40,000 annually during the following decade, peaked at about 80,000 in 1987 but has levelled to about 20,000 a year since 1990 (Wusu, 2006, p.92).

Reasons for migration follow several patterns. Some Africans prefer to migrate to former colonial powers because of their familiarity with the language and culture and other destinations are influenced by geographical proximity and having support networks in the host country to help with adjustment to the new life and with finding temporary employment (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

Push and pull factors and what migration means to African academics

The main causes of the brain drain can be generally understood when looking at the push-pull theory. The pull factors can be described as the favourable conditions in the receiving countries which attract many migrants from Africa, and make them decide to migrate in the first place. Among others, these include higher salaries and standard of living, high standard of education, safety of environment, less bureaucratic control and immigration policies encouraging migration. The push factors on the other hand, can be described as the unfavourable conditions in Africa which motivates people to migrate into other parts of the world. These include low wages and crimes, less job opportunities, poor educational systems, political repression, armed conflicts and lack of psychological satisfaction.

The question of what migration means particularly to African academics in the developed nations is important. Although the answer is beyond the scope of this paper, we can note that it is not pretty. It is written on the face of obnoxious waitresses and club bouncers, the policeman who treats you like criminal, colleagues who though you are doing the same job successfully still feel that you always need to prove yourself and the list runs on and on! It is reflected in the floods of negative media images that poison peoples' minds with racist stereotypes. African scholars are forced to confront the indelible mark of Africanity in their bodies and as Nesbit

(2002, p.71) puts it, they are “forced to wear, explain and even defend a badge of inferiority”. You are no longer a Kenyan, a Nigerian or Malawian but a member of the mythical race created by white imagination. It creates a duality that is the root of the existential crisis faced by migrant African scholars.

The Kenyan situation

There are a number of reasons for my interest in the Kenyan migration. Kenyan population abroad is one of the top 10 among African countries and there is evidence that most Kenyan immigrants experience brain waste in developed countries. Kenya government has also of late consistently expressed interest in its Diaspora (Oyelere, 2007) and there is evidence that Kenya is experiencing a reduction in its national income due to the migration of its professionals (Nwachukwu, 1997).

The early emigration of Kenyans was a product of colonialism. Before 1960, most Kenyan immigrants went to the United Kingdom (UK), but with time, the outflow of skilled manpower moved more to the United States. This change was triggered by the tightening of immigration policy in Britain and the need for skilled human capital in the US. In higher education institutions, between 1960s to 1990s, a vibrant community of scholars left Kenya and many have continued to go overseas to seek better working and living conditions (Odhiambo, 2011).

The term “drain” conveys a strong implication of serious loss. However as indicated in this paper, there is also a growing recognition of the possible benefits of skilled migration for both migrants and the sending countries. For example, Docquire and Hillel (2011) have observed the possibility that high-skilled emigration can lead to a rise in human capital level in the home country. This phenomenon is generally referred to as brain gain. Some have argued that the benefits countries like Kenya might receive from high-skilled emigration could be seen in terms of return flows of income, investment and expertise from migrants back to the country. However, the question of how common these benefits are has been debateable.

Remittance sent back home by Africans in the Diaspora have grown tremendously in the past few years. Kenya for example, is only second to Nigeria in terms of the remittances in Africa. Kenya receives about a quarter of the funds entering the continent with money going to education and health needs of the senders relatives. A common argument has been that increasingly, Kenyans are shifting this resource from mere “sustenance remittance” to more focused investment. A brief look at monthly remittance in Kenya (see table 1) from overseas tend to shift more towards these arguments.

However, a number of scholars such as Ellerman (2006) have argued that flows of remittances are most unlikely to generate economic development although they may reduce poverty.

With regard to higher education, many scholars (e.g. Odhiambo, 2011) have continued to argue that it is one of the most effective instruments for economic, political, human resources and social development and hence the concern about academic brain drain. For example, Ogom (2007) argues that higher education enables a state to maintain a competitive advantage and stimulates scientific research that results into modernisation and social transformation.

Table 1: Monthly Remittance from Kenya's Diaspora (2004 to 2011 in US\$ '000)

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
January	28,564	31,506	40,930	53,925	39,535	45,117	64,139
February	26,056	30,283	39,533	50,382	53,353	46,423	60,759
March	31,219	36,354	48,562	59,344	55,361	52,309	71,577
April	29,216	35,369	38,251	67,872	48,117	52,679	70,071
May	32,358	42,427	41,163	48,538	49,180	51,172	68,124
June	34,360	35,667	48,643	49,490	46,347	52,541	71,888
July	29,133	41,065	53,350	44,137	50,372	50,652	72,797
August	31,759	30,587	58,803	43,388	55,947	51,993	79,563
September	31,616	28,841	60,575	48,953	53,347	58,557	84,854
October	33,037	29,633	46,848	61,113	53,037	58,503	81,311
November	34,282	31,403	55,564	43,970	48,231	56,380	80,802
December	40,557	34,459	41,421	40,129	56,329	65,617	
Annual Total	382,153	407,593	573,643	611,241	609,156	641,943	805,865

(Source: Central Bank of Kenya)

Staffing, teaching and research in higher education in Kenya.

One of the challenges facing higher education in Kenya is the rapid decline in public expenditure on education relative to rapid increase in enrolments. The decreased governmental expenditure has caused strained relations between the government and universities and led to several other problems (see Odhiambo, 2011). The massive expansion of enrolments without corresponding increase in the academic staff has gradually led to a rise in staff/student ration in all public universities in Kenya.

Immediately following independence, Kenya's higher education sector was invested with high national aspirations and supported from public resources. The situation has now changed with reduced levels of public funding for hugely expanded and diversified sector (Odhiambo, 2011). The biggest challenge occasioned by this expansion has been the shortage of academic staff. Due to financial constraints, staff development demands have also not been met (Sifuna, 2010). These have had far reaching effects on the morale of the academic staff and the quality of education offered. As Sifuna (2010, p.420) argues:

In many universities, a PhD degree is no longer a requirement for tenure and publications are a less important criteria for judging who should be promoted. ...Moreover due to very low salaries, it is no longer possible to attract competent staff from abroad to teach in public Universities...

Public universities in Kenya have almost exclusively depended on the government for staff salaries. Remuneration, conditions and terms of service have been major concerns for academic staff some of whom have left the country and never come back where as others have continued to look for better opportunities in the private sector. The demand for better pay has often led to standoffs between the government and the university academic union (UASU). As a manifest of all these problems, conditions of research and teaching have been severely compromised and this has lead to low morale among academic staff.

The decline of intellectualism in Kenya's higher education institutions has also made the institutions less appealing to many scholars who have moved out of the

country. In a lecture at Nairobi University, Mazrui (2003) argued that over the last forty years, East Africa (and particularly Kenya) has experienced the rise and decline of intellectuals. He argued that in the early years after independence, the university campuses vibrated with debates about fundamental issues of the day – nationalism, socialism, democracy and the party system, and the role of intellectuals and that since then, intellectualism has died in East Africa? Mazrui argued that it is important to answer the big question of who killed it.

In Kenya, Mazrui (2003) argues that the killers included rising authoritarianism in government and declining academic freedom on campuses. The fate of intellectualism became worse and worse during the years of President Daniel arap Moi. Many Kenyan academic exiles were victims of the Moi era repression even before leaving home, yet these same forces that kept them from achieving their full potential at home demonized them for leaving instead of contributing to “national development”.

There are several ways through which Kenya government can draw on its academic talent abroad instead of demonising them. Among others, it can be done by encouraging collaboration in teaching and research between Kenyan scholars working abroad and Kenyan higher education institutions. It is clear that the promotion of higher education policy reforms and innovation in collaboration with academic Diaspora members is now vital.

Concluding remarks: implications for policy and practice

To solve problems pertaining to Kenya’s academic brain drain we need to understand its nature and implications. This is not an easy task, because analysis of the migration of the highly skilled is based on little data and much conjecture. However, one of the salient issues raised in this paper is that in the absence of fundamental and sustained improvements in the socio-political and economic environment, both the Kenya government and higher education institutions will unfortunately be left with very limited levers for stopping the outflow of academics and attracting and retaining them.

Addressing this issue is neither about morality nor patriotism. Working conditions for academics should be improved and the institutions should provide salaries which reflect market conditions, invest in staff development and capacity building and provide modern facilities for teaching and research. They should find ways of making the institutions a more attractive place to work since academics will not return to Kenya simply out of patriotism.

Also lacking and needs immediate attention is effective political leadership for effective educational policies. To reverse this academic brain drain crisis, the institutions and the government should commit themselves to effective governance and leadership, to improving political structures and initiating improvement in certain social conditions that undermine productivity. These changes might go a long way to encourage Kenyans students to return to their home after achieving their education and to discourage those migrating after their education in Kenya.

The problem of academic brain drain needs a holistic and comprehensive approach. Higher education institutions in Kenya should continue to explore strategies on how best to use the skills and experience of emigrant academics and how to minimise their outflow.

References

- Docquire, F. & Hillel, R. (2011). *Globalization, brain drain, and development*, Research Paper Series, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany.
- Ellerman, D. (2006). The Dynamics of Migration of Highly Skilled: A survey of the Literature. In Y.Kuznetsou (Ed), *Diaspora Networks and the International Migration of Skills: How Countries Can Draw on Their Talent Abroad*, pp. 21-57, Washington DC: The World Bank.
- Mazrui, A. A. (2003). Towards Re-Africanizing African Universities: Who Killed Intellectualism in the Post Colonial Era? *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 2 (3&4), 135-163.
- Ministry of Education - Kenya (2006). *The National Strategy for University Education 2007-2015*, Nairobi.
- Nwachukwu, C. C. (1997). *Brain drain and the African countries: A study of the economic costs of the outflow of human capital*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Howard University. Washington, D.C.
- Odhiambo, G. O. (2011). Higher education quality in Kenya: a critical reflection of key challenges. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17 (3), 299-315.
- Ogom, R. O. (2007). Tertiary education and development in Sub-Sahara Africa at the Dawn of the Twenty First Century: A Lost Hope, Or Present Opportunity? *National Social Science Journal*, 29 (1), 108-120.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001). *Trends in International Migration: Annual Report*, Paris: OECD.
- Oyelere, R. U. (2007). Brain drain, waste or gain? What we know about the Kenyan Case. *Journal of Global Initiatives*, 2 (2), 113-129.
- Sako, S. (2002). Brain Drain and Africa's Development: A reflection. *African Issues*, 30 (1), 25-30.
- Shinn, D. H. (2008). *African Migration and the Brain Drain*. Institute for African Studies and Slovenia Global Action. George Washington University, Washington D.C.
- Sifuna, D. N. (2010). Some reflections on the expansion and quality of higher education in public universities in Kenya. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 15 (4), 415-425.
- Sriskandarajaah, D. (2005). Reassessing the Impact of Brain Drain on Developing Countries. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=324> accessed 16/02/2012
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2009). *International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment*, New York: United Nations.
- Wusu, O. (2006). *Politics and Economics of Africa*, Vol 6. Nova Scotia Publisher, Inc.

Dr George Odhiambo
Faculty of Education & Social Work
The University of Sydney
Sydney, Australia
george.odhiambo@sydney.edu.au