CHERRY PICKING: A DUBIOUS PRACTICE*

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the practice of importing skilled workers from other countries, providing an overview of its costs, benefits, moral arguments and common justifications. The author argues that countries that engage in such "cherry picking" should either discontinue the practice, export equal numbers of skilled migrants, or provide compensation to sending countries.

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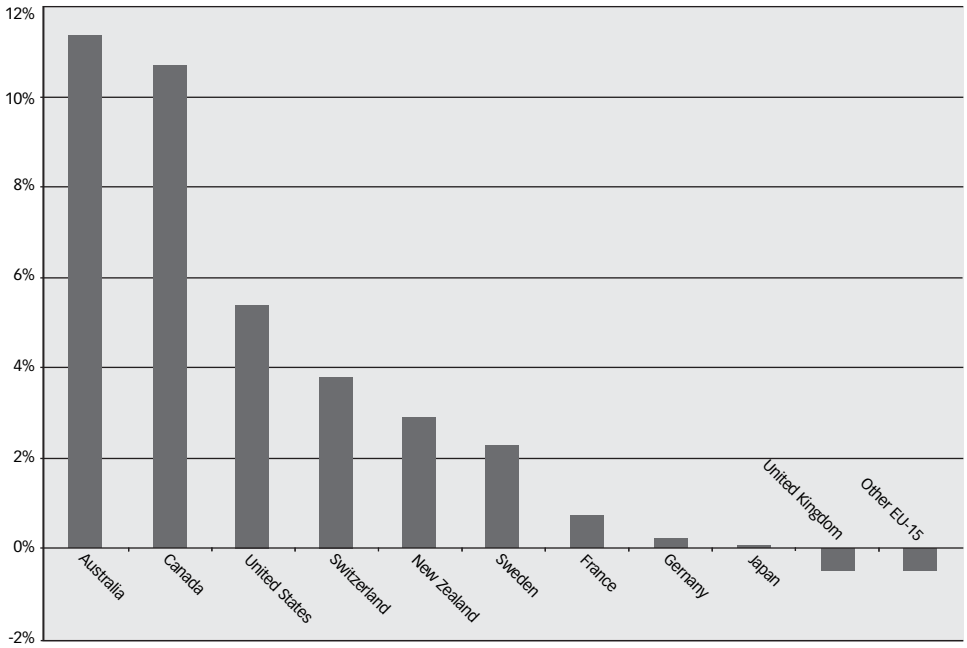
There are now more than 190 million people living in countries in which they were not born (United Nations 2002). Many of these are highly educated migrants, whose numbers will rise as more countries follow the lead of Australia and Canada, which actively encourage the immigration of skilled workers.

Many countries both export and import skilled workers. If a country imports more skilled workers than it exports, it enjoys a "net brain gain" from the rest of the world. The extent to which individual countries have enjoyed such a gain varies widely. In relative terms, Australia and Canada are the leaders, with a net brain gain equivalent to around 11% of their working-age population (Figure 1). In absolute terms, the United States is the largest beneficiary, followed by Canada and Australia (Figure 2). Western Europe as a whole has not been a net importer of skilled workers.

The World Bank estimates that the rich industrial countries have enjoyed a net brain gain equal to 14 million at the expense of poor countries (Docquier and Marfouk 2005). Official spokespersons from Australia and Canada frequently extol the virtues of their selective immigration policies, with the implicit message that other developed countries should follow their example. If this does occur, the result will be an even larger brain drain from poorer countries.

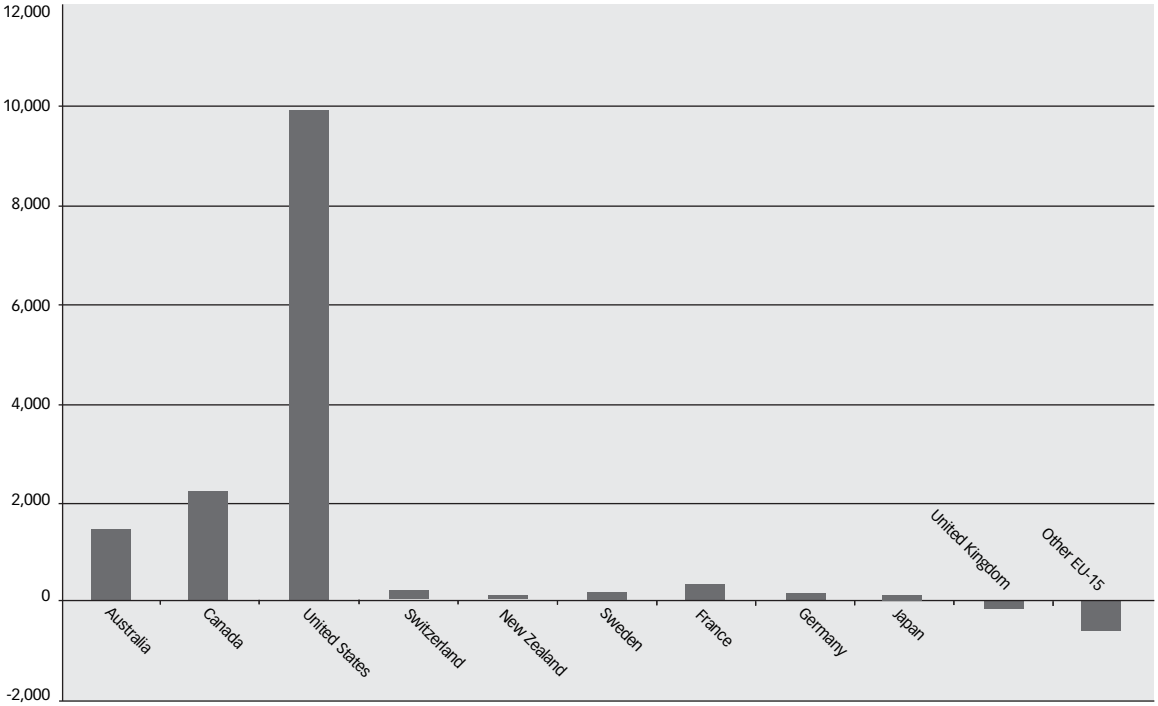
Figure 1
Net brain gain in 2000 (compared to working-age population)[a]



Source: Docquier and Marfouk 2005.

[a] This chart shows net brain gain (stock of immigrants with tertiary education – stock of expatriates with tertiary education) as a percentage of the working-age population.

Figure 2
Net grain gain in 2000 (thousands)[a]



Source: Docquier and Marfouk 2005.

[a] This chart shows net brain gain (stock of immigrants with tertiary education – stock of expatriates with tertiary education) as a percentage of the working-age population.

The countries that have been most affected by the brain drain are the small island economies of the Caribbean and the Pacific where, on average, more than 40% of their skilled workers have left (Docquier and Marfouk 2005). There are 16 other countries with populations greater than 5 million that have lost more than 25% of their skilled workforce through emigration. The figure is often much higher in individual sectors.

Impact on the sending country

The emigration of highly skilled workers has both costs and benefits for sending countries.

Costs

The World Bank (2006) summarizes the costs as follows:

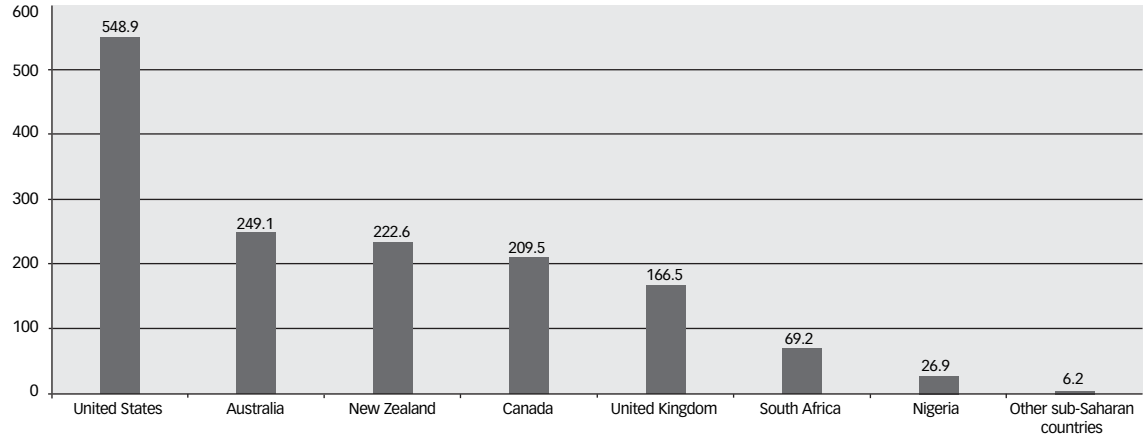
> Large outflows of high-skilled workers can reduce growth in the origin country for these reasons: (a) the productivity of colleagues, employees, and other workers may suffer because they lose the opportunity of training and mutually beneficial exchange of ideas; (b) the provision of key public services with positive externalities, such as education and health (particularly in the control of transmissible diseases), may be impaired; (c) opportunities to achieve economies of scale in skill-intensive activities may be reduced; (d) society loses its return on highly skilled workers trained at public expense. Highly educated citizens, if they stayed in their countries, could help improve the quality of debate on public issues, encourage education of children, and strengthen the administrative capacity of the state – contributions that would be lost through high-skilled emigration.

Health – a striking example

Many poor countries have a severe shortage of skilled medical personnel. Excluding Nigeria and South Africa, the average country in sub-Saharan Africa had 6.2 doctors per 100,000 population in 2004. This compares to 166 in the United Kingdom, 249 in Australia, 210 in Canada and 549 in the United States, as shown in Figure 3.

Despite such inequalities, some rich countries have been importing medical personnel on a large scale from poor countries. The United Kingdom is a prime example. Some 31% of doctors currently practicing in the United Kingdom come from overseas, as compared to only 5% in France and Germany. Chanda (cited in World Bank 2006) estimates that at least 12% of the doctors trained in India now live in the United Kingdom. The National Health Service does not actively recruit from sub-Saharan Africa. However, until recently, medical personnel from sub-Saharan countries were free to apply for public-sector jobs in the United Kingdom and there has been no constraint on private-sector recruitment. In 2003, work permits were approved for 5,880 medical personnel from South Africa, 2,825 from Zimbabwe, 1,510 from Nigeria and 850 from Ghana, despite the fact that these countries are among those proscribed for National Health Service

Figure 3
Physicians per 100,000 of population in 2004



Source: World Health Organization.

recruitment. The government has now announced new visa guidelines that may reduce this flow.

Some of the factors that influence the migration of medical personnel from Africa to the United Kingdom are summarized in Table 1.

While emigration may be understandable from an individual point of view, the loss of these professionals is a serious blow for countries whose health services are already under severe strain. As Eastwood et al. (2005) point out:

> Doctors and nurses are the linchpins of any health-care system. In countries already severely deprived of health professionals, the loss of each one has serious implications for the health of the citizens. The idea that repatriated overseas earnings could make up for the deficiency is unrealistic, as there is no way of ensuring that such repatriated income will find its way into investments in health care, particularly without the professionals to champion and lead such improvements. Indeed, senior officials in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Uganda have cited shortage of health personnel as the main constraint to mobilising responses to health challenges.

Table 1
Factors influencing the migration of medical personnel from Africa to the United Kingdom

Push factors away from Africa
Lack of postgraduate training facilities
Poorly funded work facilities
Lack of work posts
Low pay
Civil unrest
Pull factors towards the United Kingdom
Training and career opportunities
Attraction of centres of medical excellence
Better pay and working conditions
Availability of posts

Source: *BBC News*, based on Eastwood et al. 2005.

Benefits

On the other hand, the emigration of skilled workers may benefit the sending country.

Remittances

Migrants from poor countries often send remittances home to finance consumption, house building, land purchase and education. Remittances are a regular source of income for many families, and migrants may send extra money back to their homelands in periods of family or regional emergency. Remittances may also provide valuable foreign exchange for the national balance of payments. Indeed, for a few countries, remittances and foreign aid are almost their only sources of foreign exchange. Such countries live by exporting labour.

The impact of remittances on economic growth is disputed. Wisely invested, remittances can contribute to growth just like any other kind of investment. In practice, however, this may not happen. The fact that a country can rely on remittances from abroad may encourage its leaders to pursue policies that are harmful to growth. Remittances may also discourage effort by the families who receive them. Finally, a large inflow of remittances may drive up the exchange rate, making the economy uncompetitive in world markets (the so-called Dutch disease). Some statistical evidence suggests that on average remittances may be harmful to economic growth (Chami, Fullenkamp and Jahjah 2003).

In the context of skilled labour, remittances are of secondary importance, since skilled migrants tend not to remit large amounts of money back home (Faini 2003). Skilled migrants often come from privileged backgrounds and their relatives at home may not require support. They often bring their families with them, so there is no need to send money home. Many of them also settle permanently and the flow of remittances tends to fall as they put down roots in their new country. The workers who remit the most are the unskilled, unaccompanied, temporary migrants. If the aim of immigration policy were to maximize remittances, these people would get priority.

Incentive for education

The concept of a brain drain has been criticized by a number of authors on the grounds that it takes the supply

of educated labour in poorer countries as fixed (Mountford 1997, Beine et al. 2003, Stark 2004). It assumes that if one educated person leaves there will be one fewer educated person in the sending country. The "revisionists" argue that this is a static way of thinking that ignores the dynamic effects of migration. Graduates who emigrate from poor countries get a large "prize" in the form of better pay and working conditions abroad. The prospect of winning such a prize may encourage more people to enter college, thereby providing additional graduates to offset the loss from emigration. Theoretically, this could result in the sending country ending up with more graduates than before. For example, suppose that rich country Y announces that it will accept 100 graduate scientists from poor country X. For those who manage to emigrate this will be a huge bonus and the prospect of winning such a prize may induce more students to study science. If 200 more students graduate in science as a result, the country will end up with an additional 100 graduate scientists, despite the loss of 100 through emigration.

This is a neat theoretical argument, although some experts question its underlying assumptions (Faini 2003, Schiff 2006). For example, it assumes that the number of students who graduate is primarily determined by the individual demand for higher education. However, in many developing countries there is a supply constraint arising from inadequate facilities and a shortage of suitable educators. The prospect of emigration may well stimulate more demand for higher education, but without extra capacity this may not be available. Indeed, the loss of high-quality graduates through emigration may reduce the nation's capacity to train people.

Circulation, return and diaspora

It is often said that the brain drain is an out-of-date concept, because many emigrants eventually return to their home country or "circulate" by moving back and forth between their home country and abroad. There is some truth in this claim, but it is exaggerated. The return and circulation of graduates depends on conditions in the home country. Economies that are growing rapidly offer many opportunities for graduates, so they tend to experience a high return flow from abroad and more ongoing circulation. Stagnating economies experience less return flow and less circulation. For them, the emigration of graduates is often permanent.

Countries that have experienced mass emigration over a long period of time have a large diaspora abroad, which can help the home country in many different ways, providing access to capital, technology, information and business contacts. They can also lobby the government on behalf of their home country. This is a useful asset, although one should not exaggerate its importance.

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Some moral issues

The migration of highly skilled workers raises a number of moral issues. Some countries actively seek to attract skilled labour from other countries, while keeping out unskilled workers. Even if the sending country is rich, this is a morally dubious practice. The modern state rests upon an implicit contract between generations. Taxpayers in one generation make an investment in young people in the expectation that the latter will give something back to their country in the form of taxes and services when they grow up. If educated young people emigrate when they grow up, the returns on public investment in them are appropriated by the receiving countries. Even when no deliberate attempt is made to lure skilled migrants, it is still the fact that countries who admit such people are reaping the benefit of investments made by taxpayers in other countries.

Flows of skilled labour between countries are not of great importance if they are symmetrical. Losses in one direction are balanced by gains in the opposite direction. However, if flows are seriously unbalanced, then a country with a large excess of skilled immigrants over emigrants will gain a large unrequited transfer from the taxpayers of other countries. This is obviously true for countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States. Such countries could, in theory, compensate foreign taxpayers for their lost investment in human capital, but in practice they do not. Their policy towards skilled migrants is, in my view, predatory. Australia and Canada, in particular, deliberately set out to entice skilled workers from other countries and benefit from the investments that taxpayers in other lands have made in human capital. The United States is less systematic in its immigration policy, but by a combination of accident and design it gets a huge net transfer of highly skilled workers from the rest of the world, which has been of great benefit to the American economy (Chellaraj, Maskus and Mattoo 2006).

The loss of human capital through emigration is particularly important if the sending country is poor and has a severe shortage of skilled workers. When poor countries export skilled labour to rich countries, they lose scarce professionals who may be impossible to replace. They may also lose the brightest and most dynamic of their potential leaders – those who would normally build and sustain the institutions required for development (Kapur and McHale 2005).

Some common justifications

A number of arguments are advanced to defend the countries that are large net importers of skilled labour.

National interest

It is said that every country has the right to pursue an immigration policy in its own national interest. This is a dubious claim. At one time land was the foundation of national prosperity, so stronger countries conquered and settled foreign lands to get rid of their own surplus population and appropriate natural resources. Such predatory behaviour was justified by appeal to national interest. This is how Australia, Canada and the United States came into being. Nowadays, land is no longer so important, and conquest and colonization are no longer in vogue. However, countries are still competing for scarce resources and the strong are still taking the lion's share for themselves. This time, however, the scarce resources are not land and minerals but brains and education – or as they are now called, "human capital." The means are different from in the past, but the objective is still the same – to benefit one's own people at the expense of others by appropriating a scarce resource without payment. And once again this policy is justified by appeal to national interest.

Human rights

It is sometimes claimed that it would be a breach of human rights to ban skilled immigration from poor countries. Such a claim has some force as part of a general argument for the complete abolition of migration controls, but it is unconvincing in the context of selective migration policies. One cannot consistently argue that it is a human right for skilled workers to enter a country, while at the same time supporting the exclusion of unskilled workers.

In my view, the question of human rights is not the central issue. I see nothing morally wrong in refusing entry to skilled migrants from poor countries because they are needed at home, nor in requiring that students from poor countries return home once their period of study is over, nor in requiring that skilled migrants leave once their contracted period of temporary employment is over. However, there are some practical issues to consider. Policies that restrict the immigration of skilled workers from poor countries are more likely to be effective if they are complemented by measures which make it attractive for these workers to spend much of their time in their home country. Such measures may include higher pay and better working conditions at home, together with ongoing contact with counterparts in the rich countries. Academic and professional exchanges, international collaboration and other forms of networking all serve to reduce emigration pressure by reducing the isolation which many professionals in poor countries feel if they are stuck at home, cut off from the intellectual stimulation of the developed world. Negative policies to regulate the flow of skilled workers from poor countries should be accompanied by positive steps to encourage skilled workers to commit themselves to their countries of origin.

Lack of work

Some poor countries cannot find suitable employment for even their small stock of highly educated workers, and it may be of no economic benefit to them if their surplus professionals are forced to stay at home. Under these conditions it might seem sensible for them to migrate to a rich country where there is a demand for their services. They will benefit themselves, the receiving country and even the sending country through the remittances they send back. However, there is a downside. The emigration of educated people who cannot find work at home may act as a safety valve which permits failed economic policies to continue. If potential emigrants were to stay at home, they might provide the leadership and the personnel required for political and economic reform.

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Global benefit

African scientists working in Harvard may discover a cure for a disease that afflicts people in developing countries. Or they may educate postgraduate students from these countries who then return home. In some cases, such activities could have been performed just as well in the emigrants' own country as in the United States, but in other cases they could not. Where there is a clear global advantage in performing certain activities in the rich countries, the emigration of skilled personnel from poorer countries may ultimately benefit the latter. However, it may also be feasible to design forms of international collaboration that achieve the same global benefits without involving the permanent concentration of the world's best graduates in today's rich countries.

Concluding remarks

The Irish sometimes describe a person as "having one arm longer than the other." Such a person exploits the rest of the world by systematically taking from others more than he gives in return. His taking arm is longer than his giving arm. This saying provides a clue to what our attitude towards skilled labour migration should be. Some countries have a very long taking arm and a very short giving arm. They take vast numbers of skilled migrants from the rest of the world and give few in return. Such predatory behaviour should be unacceptable. Irrespective of our national loyalties, we all have global responsibilities and we should not exploit others in this way.

This does not apply simply to relations between rich countries and poor countries. It also applies to relations between rich countries. One rich country can exploit

another by importing a large number of skilled workers whose upbringing and education were financed by taxpayers in the sending country. Countries that seek to attract huge numbers of skilled migrants from other countries (whether rich or poor) should either give up this practice or should educate enough of their own people so they can export a similar number of skilled migrants to the rest of the world in return. Where this is impractical, they should compensate the countries from where their skilled immigrants come, either financially or in some other way. Our giving arm should be as long as our taking arm.

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Note

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International Human Rights Conference

Montréal, Quebec - December 8-9, 2008



To commemorate the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Association for Canadian Studies and its partners including the Pierre E. Trudeau Foundation and the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights will hold an international human rights conference in Montréal, Quebec, on December 8 and 9, 2008.

The conference will address the current state of affairs with respect to human rights throughout the world and investigate the impediments and possible solutions to its improvement globally. Conference session themes include:

- Citizenship and Migration
- Global Security
- Identity
- Religion
- Indigenous Peoples
- Language
- International Recognition of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Gender Equality: Confronting Gender Violence
- Poverty and Economic Inequality

Participants will include academics, government officials, jurists, representatives from non-governmental organizations and others. Confirmed speakers include: Philippe Kirsch (International Criminal Court), Alex Neve (Amnesty International), Emina Tudakovic (United Nations Rapporteur on Refugees), Deborah Anker (Harvard University), François Crépeau (Université de Montréal), Will Kymlicka (Queen's University), Pearl Eliadis (Human Rights Lawyer), Kent Roach (University of Toronto), Ayelet Shachar (University of Toronto), Roderick Macdonald (McGill University), José Woerhling (Université de Montréal)

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