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Brain drain, brain waste and exporting talent

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Developing countries should remember the purpose of higher education instead of viewing a degree as a tool for career opportunities overseas

In a [2016 World Bank study](#) on global migration, Filipinos were found to be the second largest group of tertiary-educated emigrants to the United States in 2000 and 2010, trailing only Indians. The study also found that for every Filipino who has moved to another country there is another with similar qualifications living in the Philippines.

While the “brain drain” phenomenon has been widely covered, the country is also plagued by “brain waste” which is best illustrated by the oversupply of nurses in the Philippines.

“It is not that the Philippines does not need nurses. Rather, the government is unable to fund more permanent positions for nurses in local public hospitals,” explains **Yasmin Ortiga**, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the SMU School of Social Sciences. “Adding to this problem is that a nursing graduate needs hospital experience to get a job overseas. So now, we have the problem of having up to 200,000 nursing graduates who are unemployed in the Philippines and also unable to leave the country.”

Ortiga traces this problem to a higher education system that overproduced nursing graduates. In a country where public higher education institutions make up less than 20 percent of the some 2,000 schools offering tertiary degrees, the private educational sector is left to absorb demand, behaving like “global factories anticipat[ing] what kind of labour they think will be in demand overseas”, Ortiga tells Perspectives@SMU. In light of wages in OECD countries that can go up to three times what is offered at home, demand for courses – nursing or otherwise – to land an overseas stint is understandably high.

While the carrot of overseas employment is an attractive lure, Ortiga questions the policy of educating for the explicit goal of securing a job outside of the Philippines.

“Of course students should be allowed to pursue their dreams but it is also a problem when schools market particular majors as stepping stones to overseas work,” Ortiga offers. “It’s not something that you can deliver. The global economy is unpredictable. I find it dangerous to assume that we can predict what kind of professionals and skills will be needed in the future. A lot of the nursing educators I spoke to said: ‘Can’t we just provide a good nursing education in line with local and maybe some international needs, but then give people the choice to move later on? Why do we adjust the curriculum and policies just to push the manpower out [to the global market]?’

“It raises the basic question: What are schools for? If we have schools that are completely driven towards producing future workers not even for your country but for other countries, we have to ask, ‘What is lost in the process?’ How do you balance that with the other purposes of the university, such as producing good citizens?”

On the flip side, if these private education institutions can deliver quality education, does it matter how they structure the instruction?

“Most of them do not,” Ortiga laments, pointing to the profit motive as the main driver. “There has been an over-expansion of programmes that they think are popular among people who want to go overseas. I’ve seen programmes that started with 1,000 students then suddenly expanded to 16,000 students. Then when the demand for nursing degrees declined, their student body dropped to 200 students. This expansion and contraction has costs in terms of pedagogy.

“The students that I interviewed spoke of being in a class of 300 students and having to learn specific nursing skills that require hands-on attention, which was lost in this drive to take in more students. When you talk to school owners, they’ll say they’re giving people opportunities and that if you curtail access to higher education these people lose the opportunity to go overseas.

“The counter-argument, of course, is that when you open up too much you’re not producing talent. A lot of the nursing students don’t pass the nursing board examinations in the Philippines, and those who do sometimes end up not passing the exams in the U.S. If your training is not good in the very beginning, it becomes another form of brain waste.”

Viewing education and work overseas in context

Ortiga, who completed her undergraduate education in the Philippines before postgraduate studies at Harvard and Syracuse Universities, has been living in Singapore since 2015. As an academic who does work “at the intersection of international migration studies and higher education and globalisation”, how does her globalised background inform her research?

“It reminds me of the importance of context and place,” she says. “It also made me aware a lot of theories of education, while theoretical and abstract, are still very much based on the American experience.

“By living in different countries and seeing the contexts, it reminds me of the theories and how they apply to these different places.”

Going forward, how should developing countries approach higher education? Should governments prioritise vocational training instead to minimise brain and financial waste when lucrative job offers do not materialise? Ortiga disagrees:

“The problem when you focus on technical vocation is you are just producing middle- or low-skilled migrants. The ideal is [that] if we have a higher education system that is driven towards global opportunities, we are educating young people who can pursue careers on their own terms. Instead, the Philippines is now treating its own students like commodities, meant to be ‘produced’ and then ‘exported’ to foreign employers.

“My argument is: you don’t have to completely change the system in order to produce good graduates. The success of your graduates shouldn’t be measured in terms of whether they can run machines that exist in hospitals in Dubai, it’s about being able to think on your feet and dealing with different situations. The problem with educating for export is that it narrows the education system into a vocational role when the purpose of the university was to create people who can think more broadly and generally in the first place.”

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