Chapter 5

From Brain Drain to Reverse Brain Drain:
Implications for South Asia and the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

A reverse brain drain trend has resulted in a significant shift in the mobility of highly skilled workers educated as international students in Western countries to Asian countries. This chapter explores the brain drain to reverse brain drain situation in South Asia and highlights the implications for South Asia and the United States of America through an extensive literature review. The author argues that understanding the effects of reverse brain drain for South Asia and the USA can be crucial, and special policies and governmental programs are required to manage the trend in South Asia, and fill the void of professional workers in the USA.

INTRODUCTION

International mobility has usually been understood as a unidirectional phenomenon, with international students moving from developing countries to developed countries (Altbach 1991, 2004; Lee & Kim, 2010). Recently, this trend is changing; China and India have experienced a major influx of their highly qualified and highly skilled citizens returning from western countries (Chacko, 2007; Ismail, Kunasegaran & Rasdi, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2010). Historically, many developing countries suffered from brain drain, but according to Ismail et al. (2014), these countries have successfully transformed their brain drain experience to brain gain.

Many researchers have argued that this reverse migration trend from brain drain to brain gain has serious implications, not only for home countries, but also for the host countries, and it may lead to policy shifts at national and international levels (Chacko, 2007; Lee & Kim, 2010). According to the
Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (2014), the movement of professionals has come to a critical point among world economic movers such as South Korea, China, and India. The knowledge-based economy is driving the talent war in the Asian region, and 55% of CEOs in the Asia-Pacific region will be increasing their efforts to recruit highly talented professionals (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2012). Ismail et al. (2014) argued that this “talent war” is interlinked with reverse brain drain – a new strategy through which developing countries attract and retain professionals as an asset for their national development.

Researchers have offered several reasons for the reverse brain drain trend, such as lucrative careers, ample professional growth opportunities, and better living standards, which become the deciding factors for international students’ choice to stay in the host country after the completion of their degrees (Chen & Barnett, 2000; Lee, Rhoades, & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2006). While there has been a lot of focus in the literature on economic and political conditions as deciding factors for international student mobility trends (Chen & Barrett, 2000; Lee & Kim, 2010), less research has examined or defined the geographical and contextual situation at the regional level; in particular, several countries in South Asia are not included in this discussion. The literature on brain drain and reverse brain drain focuses particularly on a few countries such as China, Korea, India, and Vietnam and it lacks a broader inclusion of the regional contexts and implications of this trend for South Asia as a region (Chen, 2003; Lee, & Kim, 2010; Li, & Lo, 2012; Saxenian, 2001, 2002, 2005; Upadhyya, & Rutten, 2012; Zweig, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). This paper is an attempt to extend the conversation to explore the brain drain to brain gain process in South Asia, study its impact on the region, and examine the United States of America as a major host country which is losing its talented, highly skilled, Asian immigrants.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. Where is South Asia in the process of brain drain to brain gain?
2. What are the reasons for returning for highly skilled workers educated in developed countries, particularly the USA, to their home countries?
3. What are the implications of reverse brain drain for South Asian countries and the United States of America?


**BRAIN DRAIN: A SHIFTING PARADIGM HISTORY**

According to Meyer (2003), there has been a significant shift in the brain drain discussion over time. The term Brain Drain was first coined by the British Royal Society in the 1960s to describe the outbound mobility of scientists, doctors and engineers from developing countries to developed countries (Ismail et al., 2014; Sajjad, 2011). Historically, the term “brain drain” had a negative connotation because it was
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