

'Brain Drain': Why not promote It?

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During the past few decades much has been written about brain drain from Sri Lanka to the affluent countries and the resultant loss to the nation.

Yet, Sri Lanka is not averse to promoting its nationals to work abroad, if one were to go by the hundreds of thousands of unskilled workers, mainly females, who are actively encouraged to seek employment in the Middle East in spite of the meagre salaries they earn and the innumerable reports of harassment, torture and the non-payment of wages. Professionals and skilled workers going for employment in foreign countries is a more profitable alternative and the authorities should create the environment for those interested and capable of doing so for developing the necessary infrastructure for training them.

Sri Lankans are fortunate in that they have free health services and free education up to the tertiary level . When a vast sum of money is spent on training an engineer, doctor, dentist or any other professional, the country cannot afford to lose their services, without requiring the graduates to repay their debt to the nation. An untapped resource that needs to be exploited vigorously is the large number of secondary school students who qualify for higher education but are deprived of the opportunity due to lack of student positions.

Establishing fee-levying universities, with their colleges for training health professionals, engineers and workers with other specialised skills, as has been done in other South Asian countries, will allow at least a proportion of these candidates to acquire marketable competencies and qualifications that are in demand. Such institutions would complement the government facilities but would in no way destroy free education as often alleged by interested parties. The recent announcement by the Minister of Higher Education that Sri Lanka plans to allow the opening of private universities is welcome, and those who may oppose such ventures unfortunately do not see that this step will result in a substantial increase in the number of places available for education at the tertiary level. If the current university undergraduates and those interested in the maintenance of standards of education were to voice their opinions on the matter, all that they should rightly insist is that only candidates with the stipulated minimum pre-requisites are enrolled for training. The writer, at least for argument's sake, would go even further: forget about the qualifications with which they entered the training programmes, but ensure that those who leave the institutions are properly assessed in all the relevant competencies needed to perform satisfactorily in their future roles (although this approach may be an inefficient use of resources). After having offered free education, is the Sri Lankan government obliged to provide employment to the university graduates? Many probably would say "No", and the often seen protests at Lipton Circus or opposite the UGC premises by recent graduates may be viewed as misdirected. It is the responsibility of the aspiring undergraduates to choose fields of training that are likely to offer adequate opportunities for employment, rather than go for archaic areas of studies with limited or non-existent employment prospects purely because of some lofty ideals on and attachment to heritage, culture or history. Sri Lanka should rightly take a leaf out of India's book as regards higher education. All that the its institutions, which include over 100 fee-levying medical schools, do is to train the aspirants in the various fields and let them find their own employment. The graduates venture out to the wide world, and many institutions in the oil-rich Middle East, not forgetting the Indians employed in the affluent West, are almost entirely staffed by Indian nationals at administrative, managerial, technical and, where applicable, tutorial levels. Kerala, a Southern State of India, proudly proclaims that it has a 100% literacy rate and many hospital and university departments in the Middle East are almost fully Keralite-dependent. So many Indian doctors and dentists are employed in Kuwait, one of the richest countries in the world, that they have their own Indian Doctors Forum and an Indian Dentists' Association. A story doing the rounds among Keralites themselves is that when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, there was a Keralite already there to offer the new visitor a young coconut! Sri Lanka should train professionals for 'export'. Let

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private, fee-levying universities play their role and produce highly skilled workers for foreign employment. By: Gamini Premadasa (Medical Educationalist) Courtesy: The Island Online