



Flight of the FLAMINGOS

The loss, gain and circulation of the highly skilled

By Michael Kahn

The Mont Fleur political scenarios of a decade ago envisioned four possible futures. These were the ostrich, the lame duck, Icarus, and the flight of the flamingos. The most desirable outcome would be the last, where the country, like a flamingo, slowly takes off.

Since the early '90s there has been a different flight, where the skilled have left (by air) for greener pastures. Flight is akin to brain drain.

Against this background, the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI) asked the HSRC's Knowledge Management research programme to study the mobility of research and development (R&D) personnel. We used the flamingo metaphor to understand our pool of skills under the organiser 'the flamingos migrate only to return when the brackish waters are replenished'.

We conceive mobility as involving human resource development, and the loss, gain and circulation of knowledge workers. Our data sources included local emigration and immigration data, as well as primary data from employer interviews, life histories of the mobile, and personnel data from the parallel national R&D survey.

Given the primacy of the survey we added questions on mobility to provide quality up-to-date information on R&D staff.

Mobility is a worldwide trend. For example, the UK sees its top researchers migrating to the US, where they meet Chinese, Indians and Russians that have already made the great leap 'US-ward'.

Under apartheid (both formal and informal) skill shortages were met through active immigration policies. However, through the period of transition, during which official emigration of the skilled has exceeded immigration fourfold, policy has seemingly ignored the looming crisis.

The project has confirmed the earlier work of Kaplan, Brown and Meyer that identified flows into the principal sink countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), whose immigration figures suggest inflows from South Africa at levels four times higher than the official StatsSA emigration data declares.

Also, despite the concerns expressed by many in science and technology over the past two decades, insufficient numbers of school leavers follow science-based careers. Moreover, the majority of those who could do so don't.

One interesting finding is that the age profile of the science council sector is quite different to the ageing profile of higher education researchers, as found by Mouton in a study based on publication patterns. We

have yet to receive and process the data of the other major sectors (higher education, government and business) that will then provide the big picture.

But this much is certain – government immigration policy lacks coordination and is restrictive toward the highly skilled. It is understandable that government will act to protect the semi-skilled or unskilled against competition from immigrants, but disincentives to the immigration of the skilled are counter-productive.

Our flamingos have been flying away. If, as India, Canada and Taiwan have done, we do not ensure that that our lagoons where the flamingos can settle retain their nutrient potential, our R&D system will age and wither.

The Peruvian scholar Francisco Sagasti argues that it takes 15 years to create R&D expertise, but only two to destroy it. Indeed. One possible source of comfort is that the loss of personnel out of the science councils through emigration in 2002 was as low as 5%. This could of course be cold comfort, meaning that the flamingos migrated long before the survey was conducted. •

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