

## BRAIN DRAIN, TALENT

### Brain Drain, Talent Mobility and Academic Networking

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## ABSTRACT

Talent is the key to economic development and the network build among talent is the resource crucial for national competitiveness. Talent are highly mobile, a more talented individual tends to show higher tendency to move in respond to better economic opportunities. Therefore managing talent is a challenging job. This paper examines the evolution of brain drain to talent mobility and it analyses talent networking for a special group of talent, which is academics. The purpose of the paper is to explore the nature and patterns of academic networking and the challenges in forming and maintaining the network.

Keywords: talent management, networking, globalisation, knowledge economy

## INTRODUCTION

In this day and age, besides debt crisis, probably the other hotly debated topic in any contemporary business economic forum is talent crisis. Schwab, in the World Economic Forum said that “... *the world is moving from capitalism to talentism*” (World Economic Forum, 2012). Talent crisis is widely recognised as today’s problem rather than a problem of the future. It resulted not only from talent shortage in the labour market, but most importantly from skills gap or mismatch. On one hand, people are complaining about the difficulty to find a job, on the other hand, companies are lamenting about the difficulty to find the right people to fill the vacancy. This talent constraint is one of the key reasons holding back companies from innovating and exploring market opportunities (PwC, 2012).

No one would argue the importance of talent in economic development. But, who are the talent? Generally, human talent refer to highly educated and skilled people, who have distinct capacity to acquire new knowledge and learn quickly, to create new ideas as well as produce high economics value products (Kuznetsov and Sabel, 2006; Salimano, 2008). Many terms are associated with talent, such as human capital, knowledge worker, experts, and professionals. In this paper, our purpose is not to make a distinction between the terms used although there are some conceptual differences between these terms. In addition, there are many types of talents such as technical talent, scientists, academics, entrepreneurs and cultural talent (Solimano, 2008). We will use talent as a general term to refer to skilled knowledge worker but will focus on one specific type of talent, which is academics when we discuss the nature of networking among talent.

Talent is the source of innovation, creativity and key to success and competitive advantage in today’s knowledge-based economy. Quoted from McKinsey & Company, Inc. (2001) “*We have found repeatedly that having strong talent in key positions creates huge improvements in performance*”. The competition for talented people is becoming more intense than ever before. At the same time, talent is highly mobile. The intensity and patterns of mobility has changed significantly following the advancement of information communication technology, cheaper transportation cost, expanding globalisation activities and more integrated labour market worldwide. In the quest for talent, governments are developing various attractive schemes and policies, companies are engaging in proactive talent management practices while individuals are seeking opportunity to upgrade own values. The relentless competition for talent is changing the way how talent are being managed. From the protectionist approach to reduce brain drain, to more open approach in managing talent mobility and nurturing talent networking, many new issues arise, for instance what are the obstacles in talent mobility, how to create a win-win strategy in dealing with talent mobility, how to promote networking and improve connectedness of talent.

This paper examines three interconnected issues, namely brain drain, talent mobility and networking. The main objective of the paper is to provide an insight into the nature, patterns and problems associated with talent mobility and networking. A special group of the talent is studied in this paper for the development of networking framework. The focus is on academics because academics are highly mobile, and it is common for academics to form various types of collaborative relationships, but to what extent such collaborations are formed? How such networks are formed? How effective are government programmes, and institutional effort in facilitating knowledge networking? From the discussions with several academics, we hope to provide a preliminary understanding on the patterns, challenges as well as some suggestions to harness fruitful connection between academics. This paper is organised as follows: the next section discusses brain drain and its evolution to talent mobility. It is following by discussion on academic networking. The final section concludes the study.

#### FROM BRAIN DRAIN TO TALENT MOBILITY

For decades and for various reasons, people are moving across national borders. Both push and pull factors associated with personal considerations, socioeconomic, cultural and political, had contributed to such movements. According to the World Bank statistics, more than 215 million people in the world are international migrants (World Bank, 2011). Empirical evidences have often demonstrated that migration involves permanent movement of intellectual workers, in one direction from developing to developed countries, particularly OECD countries and at a scale that would endanger the development at home country in the long term (Carrington and Detragiache, 1999; OECD, 2002; Jallowiecki and Gorzelak, 2004; Leipziger, 2008; Solimano, 2008). Hence, international migration is often associated with the reduction of the stock of human capital in sending countries, or “brain drain”. Based on the estimate provided by Lowell, Findlay, and Stewart (2004), about 10 per cent of the tertiary educated elites living in advanced countries, particularly North America, Western Europe and Australia in 2001, were born in developing countries. About 40 per cent of India’s emigrants had education above high school level (Economist, 2011). The scale of talent migration is pretty staggering.

Since the term of “brain drain” was first introduced by the British Royal Society to denote the massive outflow of scientists and highly educated from Europe to North America, the conventional view has often regarded brain drain as harmful to the sending country. There are enough if not excessive studies in the literature to showcase the asymmetric effects of brain drain between sending and receiving countries. Generally, sending countries lose out to the potential contributions of the highly educated people on social, economic, political and cultural, scientific and education development in home country. On the other hand, the receiving countries benefited from the knowledge and skills of these highly skilled migrants, without putting too much investment on them. Brain drain causes greater divergence and greater

inequality in income distribution between developed and developing countries. In order to reduce the damage caused by brain drain, some governments have taken protectionist approaches to restrict, limit or discourage emigration of skilled workers. For example, in the olden days, the authorities may threaten potential emigrants with death penalty (Jalowiecki and Gorzelak, 2004).

However, there are also counter arguments on the labelling of brain drain to sending countries and brain gain to receiving countries. One comment argument is that sending countries greatly benefited from the remittances received from diaspora for domestic development. In addition, there are positive externalities in sending countries such as greater incentive to invest in higher education due to positive migration prospect may result in the accumulation of human capital in home country. On the other hand, the receiving countries may suffer from crowding out effects which caused higher unemployment in the labour market. Based on this argument, the idea of migration seems to be a zero-sum game. In fact, there is no conclusive finding on the negative and positive effects of talent migration, especially when we open up the discussion to more than one-way flow of knowledge workers. Lowell, Findlay, and Stewart (2004) called it “brain strain” rather than brain drain to reflect both the positive and negative consequences of two-way flows of talent.

Basically, the phenomena of brain drain was built on the premise that it engages only a one way linear directional flow of talented people, from peripheral to core countries, which resulted in net permanent loss to sending countries. In today’s global context, what is more relevant is multiple-way talent mobility or “brain circulation” (The Royal Society, 2011). Due to increasing accessibility to travel, communication, and open door policies of many countries, movement of people is not limited to only one way flow. People are constantly on the move, especially skilled knowledge workers. Theoretically, multiple directional movements of talented individuals in respond to better economic opportunities create more optimal resource allocation, encourage skills transfer, exchange of ideas and reduce skills mismatch. As mentioned earlier, talent crisis is partly due to skills mismatch at company and national levels. The existence of critical gaps between skills acquired by employees and required by businesses creates massive challenges for individuals, businesses and governments. From brain drain, the focus has now moved to managing talent mobility. The need for talent movement is more critical than ever before as the world is becoming increasingly integrated and interconnected. It is generally accepted that well managed talent mobility strategy will provide win-win strategy for all parties involved in the game.

## TALENT MOBILITY AND NETWORKING

The moving talent are valuable economic, political and social agents. They are not only bridging skills gap but also connecting the world. Solimano (2008) wrote “*economic development is about mobilizing valuable resources ...*”. Talent mobility is a powerful term; it covers different types of movement, such as (i) physical movement (people moving physically within and across organization, countries, industries and globally); (ii) professional movement (people moving across occupations and skill sets); (iii) job movement (people moving from unemployment to employment, moving jobs to people); and (iv) virtual movement (knowledge and skills moving without physical movement of people) (World Economic Forum, 2012). Essentially all variables are brought back to the same equation, which is to solve the imbalances in the human capital markets (World Economic Forum, 2012).

Solimano (2008) provides an encompassing analysis on the determinants of talent mobility. Generally, individuals consider the following factors in making the decision whether to move: (i) earning and development gaps (whether income differential justifies the cost of movement and whether living standard and productive potential difference are substantial), (ii) personal factors (whether family responsibility, personal experiences, expectations and goals support the move), (iii) career prospects (the potential to produce better output and move up the career ladder), (iv) concentration effects (whether there is enough critical mass of professional peers and opportunity to interact with quality peers in order to upgrade own skills), (v) signalling effect (whether mobility offers greater reputation and recognition), (vi) socio-cultural affinity (whether there is obstacle in language, or cultural differences), (vii) network of contacts (whether there is possibility to associate with international elite of talent), and (viii) policy regimes (whether policies in home and host countries are friendly to talent mobility). As highlighted above, the mobility decision is determined by a mixture of social, economic, political, cultural and individual concerns. It is a complex decision making process, however, by understanding the motivations and considerations of talent mobility would greatly assist businesses and countries in designing appropriate strategies, measures and instruments to attract, retain and engage talent in the process of development.

In the current context, we observed the co-existence of huge unemployment and/or underemployment on one hand and on the other hand, talent shortages in many industries. The mismatch resulted in misuse of talent or untapped human resources for productive activities. To solve this labour market puzzle, most probably the clue relies on finding effective mechanisms to optimize talent flow. However, World Economic Forum (2012) has pointed out at least two fundamental issues limited talent mobility. The first one is the existence of public and private interventions that constraint the mobility. Apparent examples are special visa requirements imposed by some countries or special qualification certification mandatory by

some industries. The other one is the existence of information gap in the labour market. Employees lack information about current and future skills needs while employers lack information about the capabilities of employees. To counter talent mobility challenges, World Economic Forum has recommended the establishment of platforms to connect various stakeholders in order to solve the problem through collaborative efforts. Indeed, connection and collaboration are essential in today's economy.

As mentioned earlier, talent mobility provides a possible solution to talent crisis and would contribute to more optimal resource allocation. However, to benefit from them, network must be built to connect the moving nodes. The connections of talents, through formal or information links, physical or virtual networks, diaspora communities or professional groups, are useful in transferring information, generating new ideas, sharing technology, stimulating innovation and resolving global problems (The Royal Society, 2011). However, the puzzles are; how to create and maintain such connections? It is commented by The Royal Society (2011) that despite the fact that the connectivity and collaboration among scientists is becoming increasingly important, but little is known about the nature and dynamics of these networks. This paper attempts to take up the challenge to explore the issues. There are different types of talent. Each type of talent has different characteristics and mechanisms for network formation. As such, we have decided to focus on one special group of talent, i.e. academics for our study on networking issues.

### A STUDY ON ACADEMIC NETWORKING

As defined by Solimano (2008), "academic talent" widely include students, professors, researchers and scientists, whose workstation is either locate in universities, lab or research institutes. In this paper, our target group consists of scholars who are teaching and doing research in Malaysian universities. A total of 28 academics from various disciplines, holding different positions in the universities (from lecturers to Vice Chancellors) and having different years of working experiences were selected randomly from five universities in Malaysia. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to reveal the motivations, challenges the patterns of networking among academics.

From the feedbacks received from the respondents, we observe the following findings:

- i. Motivation. Generally, collaboration and networking is a norm in academia. Since most of the issues that we are facing now are much more complex, the scope and scale of the research questions often require multidisciplinary analysis at broader perspective. Although not totally impossible, it is relatively more difficult to produce quality research

without collaborative effort. In addition, some other reasons motivating academics to work in a team rather than doing solo work are to increase productivity and impact of the research, to share research equipment, and to gain greater recognition and visibility. Most of the respondents gave positive reasons for collaboration; however, a small number of respondents did inform us that they are forced to work in team in order to fulfil the KPI (Key Performance Indicators) set by the university.

- ii. Structure of the network. The network can be either random or non-random. Normally, for young (junior) academics and for those from social sciences background, they are less specific about their research partners and requirements for collaboration. They are more willing to work with whoever shows interest to collaborate with them and they are less certain about the outcome. These academics are following the random walk model in networking. On the other hand, senior academics, especially who are from medical or science background, are more determined; they work with certain partners or topics and may not accept requests for collaboration easily without knowing the researchers in person. They follow a systematic or more predictable network pattern.
- iii. Formation of the network. The networks can be formed either through bottom-up approach or top-down approach. The bottom-up approach is widely adopted where academics initiate and organise informal linkage first and bring it to the university level for official endorsement when the network is matured, stabilised and working well. On the other hand, there is also top-down approach where the universities organise academics into purposeful research groups. This approach is typically used when the universities have specific research goals to achieve.
- iv. Platform. There are various platforms for academics to form network with colleagues. The most popular place for academics to find potential collaborators is conference, seminar or workshop. Conferences play an important role in connecting academics as it is specially designed to bring researchers working in the same or related areas together, hence the matching probability is higher. Personal contact is another effective platform where colleagues, friends and even students play a role to connect academics. Another increasingly important platform is social media. Many respondents said they are connected via LinkedIn, Google scholar or Facebook. Some respondents identified their partners through journal. After reading an article, the author is contacted to seek possibility for joint research or other forms of collaboration. But many respondents have complained about the high failure rate of this method as most of the authors chose not to respond to the invitation. Government initiatives such as fellowship and research funding are important platforms as well, but more useful for senior academics who have accumulated enough credential records to compete for the limited opportunities. Other

less visible platforms are R&D Collaboration Office at university, professional associations, and alumni networks.

- v. Strength of the network. There are strong and weak ties in a network relationship. Strong ties entice highly committed members to nurture a lasting relationship. The strong ties are built based on trust, sharing of common interests, respect each other and other positive attitude such as willingness to share, to take risk, to invest in the relationship and open minded. Most of the strong ties are originated from informal networks resulted from bottom-up approach and are more successful in achieving network objectives. On the other hand, some respondents shared their experiences dealing with weak network where there is loose interaction, lack of sharing of responsibility where one person do all and lack of team commitment. The weak ties are often resulted from formal arrangement or the random network model where team members do not know each other very well. The weak ties normally die out after a while and it is a waste of effort for those who put too much effort on it.
- vi. Network maintenance. Many respondents recognise that the success of a relationship depends heavily on personal effort. And, they are willing to invest time and effort to maintain the relationship. Geographical distance is no longer an issue as many respondents cited that they are using email, Facebook and/or Skype to communicate with their partners. However, despite the increasing popularity of virtual networking, the importance of physical meetings and interactions is emphasised at the same time. Therefore, respondents will arrange regular meetings, conferences, social gathering, study group or short term visiting to keep the network active.
- vii. Challenges. There are many challenges in managing academic networking, right from the identifying, forming to maintaining the network. Basically, lack of information impedes the effort to identify the right partner and a lot of time and effort has been wasted in searching the collaborators. There are insufficient directory of expertise or database about professionals, either at institutional level or government agencies level. There are also not enough platform or opportunities for academics (especially young academics) to explore and form the network. Funding and other supporting services are limited for networking. The ecosystem and performance evaluation criteria are not conducive for academics networking as the outcome from networking are often not immediate, direct, concrete and visible.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the time when the global economy is getting more integrated and industries are moving from production-based to knowledge-based, the most important currency for wealth creation is talent. However, attracting and retaining talent is challenging job as talent are highly mobile. The old practice of limiting talent mobility to prevent brain drain is breaking down. Instead, strategies have been suggested to optimise talent flows and to build network to link up the talents. Network is increasingly seen as a resource crucial to the competitiveness of modern nations. This paper examines a special type of talent and explores the nature and patterns of academic networking.

Generally, it is common for academics to form networks with colleagues from the same institution, with local or international researchers to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of their research work and teaching performance. Personal effort is fundamental in developing and maintaining the network. There are many ways for academics to form their networks, but the most effective way is through personal contacts and/or recommendations by colleagues, mentors or even students. Building up a strong network takes time and it works well when there is trust element embedded in the relationship. Social media play important role in academic networking but physical interaction remains vital.

Even though the primary driver for successful networking is academics themselves, universities should play more active role to promote and nurture academics networking. It is found that universities are not providing enough support to facilitate academic networking, especially to young academics, despite the mission of the universities to enhance scientific collaboration and networking. The bureaucratic and rigid system often drives away potential collaborators and the desire to involve in networking activities.

Although the findings presented in this paper are limited to a small number of sources, but as the respondents represent academics from different background who are progressing at different levels of career path, the results shed some lights on the nature, patterns as well as challenges of academic networking, which may be useful for future research.

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