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ALL THAT IS NEEDED FOR THE TOP-PERFORMERS TO CHOOSE LATVIA – TO “REMOVE THE FENCE”

VISS, KAS NEPIECIEŠAMS, LAI AUGSTAS RAUDZES ZINĀTNIKI IZVĒLĒTOS LATVIJU – “JĀNOŅEM ŽOGS”

Kopsavilkums

Augstākās izglītības darba tirgus globalizācijas ietekmē Latvijā notiek administratīvo procedūru pārskatīšana profesora amata piešķiršanai, lai gūtu labumu no diasporas. Tiek apgalvots, ka administratīvās barjeras – prasības pēc doktora grāda – dekonstruēšana atvieglos kvalificētu diasporas pārstāvju reemigrāciju uz Latviju. Analizējot izvirzītos apgalvojumus par labu ierosinātajiem grozījumiem, autore pamato savu argumentāciju ar atziņām no jaunākajiem pētījumiem par diasporām un augsti kvalificēta darbaspēka migrāciju no mazām, atvērām ekonomikām.

Autore piedāvā jēdzienu “smadzeņu kapitalizācija”, ar to domājot nacionāli vadītus stimulējošus pasākumus, lai izmantotu diasporu tās atrašanās vietā, kā arī klātesošā cilvēkkapitāla attīstības veicināšanu. Šis jēdziens var interesēt valstis, kuras cīnās ar intelektuālā darbaspēka aizplūšanu un kurām jāreķinās ar to, ka tuvākajā nākotnē nebūs iespējams to pārvērst par smadzeņu ieguvumu.

Atslēgvārdi: augstākā izglītība, diaspora, augsti kvalificēti darbinieki, atvērts darba tirgus, smadzeņu ieguvums, smadzeņu kapitalizācija

Keywords: higher education, diaspora, high-skilled workers, open labour market, brain gain, brain-capitalizing

Summary

The globalization of higher education labour market and endeavour to capitalize on diaspora recently called to attention the reconsideration of the administrative procedures in place for awarding a professorship in Latvia. It is claimed that deconstruction of administrative barrier – requirement of doctoral degree – will make it easier for qualified members of the diaspora to re-emigrate to Latvia. Referring to the raised assertions in favour of the proposed amendments, the author reacts, cautiously supporting her own argumentation by findings of recent researches

on diaspora and high skilled labour migration from small, open economies. As a result, a term “brain-capitalizing” is coined, meaning national incentives of capitalizing on diaspora *in situ*, as well as nurturing the existing human capital. The term can be of interest to high-emigration countries fighting the brain drain, but unable to revert it to brain gain in any near future.

Introduction

Globalization contributes to and is enabled by migration of workforce. Until recently, migration research rather focused on immigration policies made by migrants’ destination states than emigration policies devised by migrants’ states of birth or ancestral origin¹.

Movement of the highly educated across international borders to seek better opportunities abroad as a significant part of global migration flows has become an increasingly discussed topic among policy makers and researchers².

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the institutionalisation of diasporic spaces through what have come to be known as “diaspora strategies”, that reflect attempts to identify and harness the energies and resources of their offshore citizens in order that they are more likely to support the development aspirations of their former home country³.

With the Diaspora Law⁴ that came into effect in 2019, Latvia established such a diaspora strategy, an umbrella legislative framework for implementation of national diaspora policy, with Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the principal coordinating public institution. The main focus areas considered in this paper include maintaining and strengthening diaspora’s ties with Latvia; promoting cooperation with and participation of the diaspora in the fields of economy, science and culture; supporting those who wish to return to Latvia.

Methodology

In its essence, referring to these focus areas of the Diaspora Law, as well as the Law’s objectives of encouraging and providing support for return migration and the engagement of the diaspora in the development and promotion of the Latvian national economy, the transfer of knowledge and technology, as well as research

¹ Gamlen A., Cummings M. E., Vaaler P. M. Explaining the rise of diaspora institutions. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2019, p. 492.

² Kasnauskiene G., Palubinskaite J. Impact of High-Skilled Migration to the UK on the Source Countries (EU8) Economies. *Organizations and Markets in Emerging Economies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2020, p. 55.

³ Larner W. Globalising knowledge networks: Universities, diaspora strategies, and academic intermediaries. *Geoforum*, 2014, 59. 10.1016/j.geoforum. 2014.10.06.

⁴ *Diasporas likums [Diaspora Law]*. Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/302998> [viewed 08.11.2021.].

and development, in the spring of 2021 several proposals⁵ were submitted for discussion at the Education, Culture and Science Commission of the Parliament. The proposals challenge the requirement of a PhD degree for obtaining the professorship in Latvia and seek to create an alternative career path documented by “qualification corresponding to professorship; scientific and pedagogic experience comparable to the requirements”, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs further specifying/limiting the eligible candidates to the members of Latvian diaspora having dual citizenship with Latvia – thereby to ensure favourable conditions for re-emigration.

The proposals are supported by rhetoric that the doctoral degree is a formal requirement, which does not assess the actual achievements of the candidate for professorship, further arguing that this leads to a closed, uncompetitive higher education system that restricts the range of potential applicants, with system consequently becoming unable to attract outstanding scientists and teachers and remaining mediocre in its performance.

To develop a stance on the submitted proposals, the author analyses the findings of recent researches on diaspora and highly-skilled labour migration from small, open economies and develops a set of arguments.

Discussion

There are several considerations that the policy makers should examine when considering these proposals.

Even though the need for flexible career paths is increasing, one of the largest recent comparative studies of European national regulations on academic staff showcases the complexity of academic position landscape in Europe. The study: “Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe – Academic Staff 2017”⁶ finds that as a matter of fact 22 European higher education systems enlist 6–9 academic staff positions, whereas 10 systems designate between 10 or even more academic staff positions. Each position may differ in terms of employment, qualifications required, its main focus on research or teaching. Even in highly regulated higher education systems, higher education institutions are usually sufficiently autonomous to establish own positions. The great diversity of positions hinders a straightforward comparison of “qualification corresponding to a professorship”. To highlight the issue, the author would like to use the information provided by the abovementioned study on two neighbouring small countries – the study finds

⁵ Homepage of the 13th Parliament of the Republic of Latvia. The Amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions No. 981/Lp13. 1st Reading 09.06.2021. Available: <http://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS13/saeimalivs13.nsf/webSasaiste?OpenView&restricttocategory=981/Lp13> [viewed 08.11.2021.].

⁶ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff – 2017, 2017. Available: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/eurydice-brief-modernisation-higher-education-europe-academic-staff-%E2%80%93-2017_en [viewed 08.11.2021.].

8 nationally defined academic positions in Latvia and 13 positions in Estonia. Taking English translation of the position as the common denominator, it must be concluded that an identical position – “lecturer” in Latvia and Estonia is assigned to different categories of seniority. If in Latvia 35% of the academic staff belongs to the category of the junior academic staff (assistant, lecturer, researcher), then in Estonia only 16% (teacher, assistant, instructor) of academic staff are pinpointed though their positions as belonging to this category. Consequently, the system contains an already pre-programmed high statistical probability that any representative of the Estonian academic staff who might want to transfer to Latvia would belong to a senior position category than the local “competitors” for the position.

The study indicates that in most of the countries a doctorate is a legitimate legal requirement to qualify for certain categories of academic positions. Latvia, by upholding the PhD requirement, still falls within scope of the majority of European countries. In fact, academics intending to progress towards intermediate and/or senior positions in Europe commonly have to comply with a range of further qualification requirements, which constitute formal, structured and often centrally coordinated evaluation of academic achievements and experiences, that *per se* do not give access to a concrete position within an institution. Therefore, the barriers in place for attraction of the academic staff in Latvia, embodied by the formal requirements of a PhD are already to be considered as moderate if compared to the existing European practice.

The prominence of formal, structured and often centrally coordinated evaluation of academic achievements and experiences, given the differences between countries, provides the easiest and cheapest way to compare qualifications between candidates for certain categories of academic staff in the European Higher Education Area, hence *de facto* fostering the mobility of workforce and labour market integration.

Indeed, in a small country, efforts should be made to avoid taking decisions that would require compliance assessment of globally diverse and numerous qualifications with Latvian requirements, and prerequisite that this should be conducted for each individual candidate to professorship. It is more cost efficient to substitute a considerable segment of academic achievements and experiences that must be evaluated with a formal requirement of PhD degree.

As already mentioned, despite several decades of efforts to create a European Higher Education Area, there are significant differences at the national level between the positions of academic staff, and a formal doctoral degree is the common denominator in the assessment of qualifications. In case of Latvia, dual citizenship, in addition to the countries of the European Union, means not only the United States, but also Turkey and Northern Macedonia, not only Australia, but also Brasil⁷. If the European Higher Education Area provides sufficient infrastructure to support

⁷ Homepage of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Dual Citizenship. Available: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/dubultpilsoniba> [viewed 08.11.2021.].

decision-making when evaluating the qualifications, then in case of other countries we have much less certainty of the specificities of their higher education systems.

In any case, calling for diminishing the administrative barriers and limiting the eligibility to members of diaspora automatically poses a threat of discrimination, both to non-diaspora members and to local academic staff, which cannot be justified by the leitmotif of encouraging return migration. In addition, the current definition of a diaspora, as defined by the Diaspora Law 1.1) is highly vague and would require further interpretation: “diaspora – citizens of Latvia, permanently residing outside Latvia, Latvians and others who have ties to Latvia, as well as their family members”.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to initiate a broader discussion in Latvia, which would include changing the policy mentality from “border guarding” to “talent attraction”. The very fact that the proposals seek to limit the eligible candidates for the alleviated administrative procedure to different cohorts like “diaspora members” shows that the borders are still guarded against the mobility of highly skilled workforce.

Furthermore, the countries having the restrictions in place, also the ones having additional formal requirements, cannot at best be defined as having mediocre performing higher education systems, thus, Latvia’s having such administrative barriers cannot be directly related to these implied consequences.

It is wishful thinking that by removing the administrative barriers Latvia will be able to attract outstanding scientists and teachers. The requirements for the academic positions are relatively standardized/uniform worldwide, therefore additional factors, such as public investment in research and development, living standards and welfare of the state, as well as attitudes towards immigrants play an important role in choosing the host country.

Consequently, in the fight for highly qualified human resources, countries holding leadership in higher education and science reap greater benefits from an open academic labour market. In less attractive countries, even excellent universities are not able to attract a significant number of foreigners⁸.

Due to the readiness of the globalized higher education labour market to absorb highly skilled workforce, it is often inferred that any returning diaspora member will pose a highly lucrative gain and potentially perform better than local staff members. It should be recognized that mobility and excellence are not interchangeable terms^{9;10;11}. Among emigrants, those who succeed in gaining

⁸ Lepori B., Seeber M., Bonaccorsi A. Competition for talent. Country and organizational-level effects in the internationalization of European higher education institutions. *Research Policy*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2015, p. 789.

⁹ Mahroum S. Global magnets: Science and technology disciplines and departments in the United Kingdom. *Minerva*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2000, p. 379.

¹⁰ Ackers L. Internationalisation, Mobility and Metrics: A New Form of Indirect Discrimination? Vol. 46, *Minerva*, 2008, p. 411.

¹¹ Larner W. Globalising knowledge networks: Universities, diaspora strategies, and academic intermediaries. *Geoforum*, Vol. 59, 2015, p. 197.

a better education, a better-paying job abroad are less likely to return¹². No clear difference in productivity was found between elite emigrants and elite stayers¹³.

Although Latvia would benefit from every highly qualified re-emigrant, notably, researchers who have returned to a small, high-emigration country indicate that the benefits of returning to the country could be higher if they faced no obstacles such as ending up in an environment of less abundant science funding¹⁴. Failing to consider the significance of the work environment that “makes the researcher”, any activities to combat the brain drain may turn into “dumping resources in order to return emigrants”¹⁵. Namely, the expected gains from attracting an emigrant to Latvia may turn out to be unexpectedly meagre if the attracted high-class researcher has to perform while exposed to the conditions of less generous and accessible Latvian science funding. As a country which has only recently joined the OECD and become its full member in 2016, furthermore, having to compete with other developed countries, it is much more important to make economically sound and justifiable decisions, thus fostering the knowledge transfer, maintaining and strengthening diaspora’s ties with Latvia, promoting cooperation with and participation of the diaspora in the fields of economy, science and culture in line with the Diaspora Law.

Recognizing that most members of the diaspora are likely to remain in their home countries, irrespectively of the minor adjustments such as lowering of administrative barriers, instead of efforts to relocate individual members of the diaspora to Latvia, greater efforts could be made in developing tools to support this latent national resource *in situ*. This could be a provision of additional evaluation points for undertaking joint research and publications with diaspora within the framework of available national funding grants, to start with.

In addition, significantly more productive than re-migrants and those who have never left the country are the representatives of academic staff currently on the move^{16;17}. Accordingly, it is more effective to provide mobility opportunities for the current academic staff and to create more favourable conditions for retaining the existing staff, rather than cherishing hope that all that is needed for the top-performing academic staff to choose Latvia is to “remove the fence”.

¹² Qin F. Global talent, local careers: Circular migration of top Indian engineers and professionals. *Research Policy*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2015, p. 405.

¹³ Agrawal A., Kapur D., McHale J., Oettl A. Brain drain or brain bank? The impact of skilled emigration on poor-country innovation. *Journal of Urban Economics*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2011, p. 43.

¹⁴ Gibson J., McKenzie D. Scientific mobility and knowledge networks in high emigration countries: Evidence from the Pacific. *Research Policy*, Vol. 43, No. 9, 2014, p. 1486.

¹⁵ Qin F. Global talent, local careers: Circular migration of top Indian engineers and professionals. *Research Policy*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2015, p. 405.

¹⁶ Gibson J., McKenzie D. Scientific mobility and knowledge networks in high emigration countries: Evidence from the Pacific. *Research Policy*, Vol. 43, No. 9, 2014, p. 1486.

¹⁷ Franzoni C., Scellato G., Stephan P. The mover’s advantage: The superior performance of migrant scientists. *Economics Letters*, Vol. 122, 2014, pp. 89–93.

Latvia, one of the EU's lowest spenders on higher education¹⁸ and science¹⁹, is not attractive for foreign academic staff. However, it is not acceptable for demand to be stimulated by breaking down administrative barriers, albeit formal but maintaining certain quality standards.

On the contrary, an open policy for a small, high-emigration country can even be detrimental – increasing the insecurity of the country's academic staff about their careers and motivating the best to look for work abroad.

Conclusions

1. It is a positive development that Latvia has also embarked upon the way to changing the focus from pure “brain-drainism” to “brain-capitalizing” – instead of researching the losses caused to the country by brain drain, it diverts the attention to thinking of ways how to benefit from the emigree nationals, using their skills and knowledge to foster the country's development. In case of high-emigration country like Latvia, it is difficult to talk about “brain gain”. Instead, one has to consider ways of harnessing both the local human capital and the diaspora members from where they are located, e.g., employ a conscious national strategy of “brain-capitalizing”.
2. Understanding that it may take years for the economic development of Latvia to improve the skill premia that can be offered to mobile highly skilled workforce, a small and high-emigration country like Latvia should compensate for the economic disadvantage with other factors that constitute a positive migration experience.
3. It is naïve to expect that highly skilled workforce would not be able to assess the potential benefits and drawbacks of moving from one country to another and could be tricked into moving by removal of some administrative barriers.
4. Really determined top-performers do not need lower fences, as they are used to climbing them, especially if the fence is a regular and standardized formal requirement, alleviating the benchmarking of performance prerequisites between the countries.
5. Lifting the formal requirements that are still considered a useful tool for ensuring a certain quality threshold within the majority of the European countries is not necessarily a factor promoting mobility. Instead, an overarching strategy for improving the work-life conditions of highly skilled workforce should be introduced, backed up by approaches and institutive actions tailored to the country profile.

¹⁸ OECD. Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, 2021, Paris. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en> [viewed 08.11.2021.].

¹⁹ Eurostat. Statistics. Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D, 2009 and 2019. Available: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Gross_domestic_expenditure_on_R%26D,_2009_and_2019_\(%25,_relative_to_GDP\)_F2.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Gross_domestic_expenditure_on_R%26D,_2009_and_2019_(%25,_relative_to_GDP)_F2.png) [viewed 08.11.2021.].

6. Considering the scarcity of the resources, it is imperative to be fully aware of both positive and negative consequences of the planned measures before introducing them. As a small country, Latvia has less human capital to conduct its own research, but it can always draw on the experience of other countries and consult the existing research in the field.
7. It seems to be cheaper to build upon the existing human capital and invest in its development, rather than to aspire to outbuy top performers from much more attractive countries.
8. It seems more reasonable to invest into decreasing the outward mobility trend before investing funds into fostering the inward mobility trend.
9. The investment should aim at capitalizing on diaspora members *in situ* rather than on replanting them to Latvia permanently. At this point in time, replanting would be quite expensive and might result in disappointment both to the re-emigrated top-performer and the country that spent money and efforts to relocate the top-performer, as that specialist would need to show the same performance within the context and realities offered by Latvia.
10. If the ties to Latvia are fostered, once the inward mobility picks up on its own accord as a consequence of the country's natural stage of development, the aggregated benefit might be much higher than the advantage generated by replanting the top-performer and later fighting his or her detrimental experience in form of mouth-to-mouth communication leftovers.
11. When deciding on opening the Latvian academic labour market, politicians must be clearly aware of Latvia's competitive position on the global labour market and evaluate the introduced measures as per their capacity to encourage both inward (brain gain) and outward (brain drain) mobilities. Having a thorough understanding of Latvia's competitive position will form a basis for targeted national "brain-capitalizing" strategy.

Acknowledgment

The publication has been elaborated within postdoctoral research project no. 1.1.1.2/VIAA/2/18/296 (European Regional Development Fund).

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