

Rethinking the brain drain in the Philippines

Virginia A. Miralao

It was in the mid-1960s that brain drain came to be regarded as costly for the Philippines. It was seen to be draining human resources at a critical stage in the country's development, and wasting precious public investment in education and in citizens' skills formation. But evidence on the brain drain shows that it was less important, and for the social sciences in particular, than the public's perception of the phenomenon might suggest.

Concerns about the brain drain in the Philippines grew from the mid-1960s under the joint impact of new immigration policies in countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia, which opened their doors to highly skilled immigrants, and the imposition of martial law in the Philippines in 1972. The term 'Philippine diaspora' is used to describe the resulting outflow, estimated to stand presently at 8 to 9 million workers (or some 10 percent of the overall population) spread across more than 190 countries on all the continents.

Early concerns over brain drain

It was in the mid-1960s that brain drain came to be regarded as costly for the Philippines. It was seen to be draining human resources at a critical stage in the country's development, and wasting precious public investment in education and in citizens' skills formation. But evidence on the brain drain in the 1960s and in the next two or three decades shows that the brain drain was less important for the country as a whole, and for the Philippine social sciences in particular, than the public's perception of the phenomenon might suggest. Data is scarce on the number of experts living abroad. A 1967 study by the Institute of Philippine Culture concluded that the brain drain represented less than 18 percent of college graduates who went abroad to study, and was not causing a 'critical loss of personnel'. There are reasons to believe that at that time, the brain drain in the social sciences may have been even lower than these overall national estimates.

A 1987 paper by the Research Institute for Mindanao Culture identified the main constraints on the development of the social sciences as lying in insufficient capacity, low salaries, and inadequate libraries and research facilities, particularly in universities outside Metro Manila.

In the following decades, the shift in global labour market demand towards higher skilled and talented workers meant an increase in what is conventionally thought of as the brain drain, including in the social sciences. Although the statistics maintained by various government agencies do not provide sufficient information on the qualifications of migrants and do not allow good estimates of recent brain flows, many developments in the country's migration environment tend to negate the basic assumptions and interpretations of the brain drain.

Reinterpretation of brain drain in the 1990s

The first such development is the temporary nature of much contemporary migration. Most foreign fellowship programmes employ moral persuasion, or require a return-service contract, which helps ensure that foreign study fellowships lead to a 'brain gain'. A second development has to do with the responsiveness of Philippine colleges and universities to the demands of the global labour market. They are skilled at producing precisely the graduates whom other countries need. The brain drain assumption that outflows of skills and expertise create persistent local labour shortages seems even less true today than before. A third, related development has been the absence of a large domestic employment demand for the country's university graduates, and the role of the state in brokering their hiring and employment in countries where the demand for professional labour is high. Critics of government may find the state policy tantamount to encouraging a brain drain, but other groups may regard it as sound in terms of higher remittances and the possible transfers of knowledge via Filipinos returning from abroad. A fourth development has to do with the late return of known scholars who were studying abroad during the declaration of martial

law or left because of it. A fifth development concerns the growing number of Filipino professionals who divide their professional time and practice between their country of destination and the Philippines. And finally, we cannot ignore the role of associations such as the Philippine–American Academy of Science and Engineering (PAASE) and the International Conference on Philippine Studies (ICOPHIL) in developing exchanges. Quite a number of these exchanges result in collaborative research or projects between expatriate academics and their colleagues in the homeland. All these developments demonstrate how cross-border movements can potentially translate into a brain gain for the Philippines.

To conclude: contrary to the earlier talk of the Philippines' brain drain losses due to emigration, there is increasing reference today to the country's 'diasporic dividends', from remittances as well as from brain drain and gains. However, attempts to analyse and understand the evolving nature and consequences of Philippine social scientists' overseas migration are hampered by a lack of data. Filipino social scientists can lend their expertise to efforts to improve the country's migration databases and to research the many different impacts that the migration of highly skilled scientists, and specifically social scientists, have on research and development. 😊

Virginia A. Miralao

Is a sociologist and fellow of the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), currently working on Philippine migration and education issues. She was PSSC Executive Director from 1996 to 2009 and Secretary-General of the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC) from 1996 to 2005.