

Opinion Article

No 11
October 2013

Young Scientists Flee Abroad: Brain-Drain? Brain-Gain?

Anastasia Papakonstantinou

PhD candidate at the Department of Economics,
University of Peloponnese

The crisis that is currently besetting Greece started out as a financial meltdown, while it has now mutated in the first widespread social and employment crisis of the globalized economy. Greece is experiencing a deep recession with cumulative contraction of its GDP, with aggravation of most economic indicators and subsidence of the production and technological base. Unemployment exceeds 26% and more than 870.000 jobs have been lost over a period of three years, from 2010 to 2012. Because of high unemployment in Greece and contraction of its economy, a large number of mainly young scientists seem to have migrated abroad in the last three years, a fact that is often referred to as "brain-drain".

Existing literature indicates that the brain-drain phenomenon primarily concerns developing countries. For these countries, immigration to a large extent involves the relocation of the best and brightest portion of their workforce in Silicon Valley, in hospitals and universities of the developed world; thus, there is growing concern about the way they will manage to achieve development without input from the highly skilled human capital that they possess. At the same time, developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the USA, are implementing policies designed to motivate the highly skilled human capital of developing countries to migrate to them, or to remain there and not return to its home country.

More and more people in crisis-hit Greece are voicing their concern over the observation that the most brilliant minds, the scientists of the country, are leaving their home country to look for a job and decent living abroad. As Greeks, we have a tendency to exaggerate, a tendency which is inflated by domestic media that almost daily refer to numbers related to how many Greek doctors, engineers, lawyers have "fled" abroad or refuse to return after studying abroad, due to the economic crisis and unemployment. At this point, the following question arises: Is the financial crisis the leading cause of scientists fleeing abroad? Subsequently, does (or will) this outflow only have negative consequences for economic growth?

The economic crisis and the explosion of unemployment cannot be considered as the only criteria for a person who chooses to seek a job abroad. Young people, scientists, were seeking employment abroad even in the pre-crisis era. Unemployment and recession of the Greek economy simply intensified the phenomenon. The crisis cannot account for the exodus of young people abroad on its own. An important factor is the production model

Young Scientists Flee Abroad: Brain-Drain? Brain-Gain?

Anastasia Papakonstantinou, PhD candidate at the Department of Economics, University of Peloponnese

of the country, which is based on creating and maintaining jobs related to the supply of cheap services, whereas it generates few or no job positions for scientists. Apart from unemployment, however, there are additional factors that interfere with the professional and social status of scientists in Greece. Hetero-employment, low earnings, underemployment and employment in jobs inferior or irrelevant to their qualifications, as well as cronyism and corruption, make up the reality facing the scientific workforce of the country.

In 2010, when the time came for the country to tackle its massive problems -emphasized by the financial crisis- namely the serious structural problems of the Greek economy, many people argued that the crisis should be viewed as an opportunity. An opportunity to overcome the pathologies, weaknesses and structural problems, which caused and inflated the effects of the global financial crisis on the Greek economy. Three years later, no new production-development model for the country has been created yet, which would exploit its scientific workforce. The increasing number of young people looking for a job abroad serves as criterion of the failure of politics to change the production model of the country.

The Greek economy continues to suffer from structural rigidities and, thus, the formulation of a national development plan is necessary. This plan can be implemented only through the necessary institutional reforms and reorganization of the structures of Greece. The fundamental problem of the Greek economy is the lack of a large production base. In addition, the deficiency in specialized production, not only in services and industry, but also in the rural economy and the vertical exploitation of mineral wealth, makes up an additional problem that is further aggravated by the decoupling of education from the country's productive specialization itself. There needs to be a plan for the specialization of Greece. Thereafter, the economic and educational policies have to be oriented towards the success of this plan, as well as towards the "production" of highly skilled citizens who, as a result, will not be having trouble in entering the labor market. The country can and must specialize in high added-value sectors, such as information technology, nanotechnology, biogenetic, the production of new energy forms as well as modern social policy sectors, like high medicine and education. In this case, the reforms required have much more space and prospects for success; accordingly, based on this specialization, the country can ensure employment and high salaries for its youth. Only then will the leak of talents abroad be brought to a halt, while at the same time the conditions for the return of those who have left will be created. On the one hand, the exodus of young scientists abroad limits growth prospects domestically in the short-run, while on the other it creates scope for benefits over time, through their return or partnerships with domestic institutions, universities or companies. Developing countries are implementing reverse brain-drain programmes that motivate scientific staff -successful immigrants- to return home either temporarily or permanently, so as to pass on their knowledge. Greek scientists who might return will provide the human capital that will boost growth, considering that they will bring their expertise, culture, specialized knowledge and connections to the domestic economy.

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)- CRISIS OBSERVATORYVas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail info@crisisobs.gr**Learn more about our work** - Visit our website at www.crisisobs.eu

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.