



International Journal of Development Issues

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Article information:

To cite this document:

AKM Ahsan Ullah, (2018) "Skill drain from ASEAN countries: can sending countries afford?", International Journal of Development Issues, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-12-2017-0210>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-12-2017-0210>

Downloaded on: 14 May 2018, At: 06:57 (PT)

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Skill drain from ASEAN countries: can sending countries afford?

Skill drain
from ASEAN
countries

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Abstract

Purpose – Migration of skilled workers to other countries remains a highly contentious issue. Skill drain does not take place based on skill surplus and deficient equation. Skilled migrants can make their choice to migrate on their own with minimal control of the Government. This paper aims to argue that sending countries lose skill which cannot be offset or justified by the remittances inflow.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a research conducted on skill migration from the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. In this study, skilled migrants are engineers, medical doctors, nurses and academics. The author interviewed 12 engineers (four from the Philippines; two from Malaysia; four from Singapore and two from Thailand); nine medical doctors (four from the Philippines; three from Singapore, one from Malaysia and one from Thailand); eight nurses (six from the Philippines and two from Thailand); and 14 academics (six from the Philippines; five from Singapore and three from Malaysia) who were working abroad.

Findings – Skill migration continues to grow because of the growing demand, wage differentials, glorifications of the contribution of remittances to development and failure of the origin countries to retain them. The question remains whether the respective sending country is producing more of them so that they can send after their own demand is met. This paper investigates whether the sending end can afford exporting such skills.

Originality/value – This is an important contribution to the scholarship.

Keywords Southeast Asia, Brain drain, Skilled migration

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The loss of skilled labour is of vital importance for development and development potential of a country. The loss of teachers undermines the ability of schools and education systems to function, the loss of nurses impairs efforts to deliver even basic healthcare and public health programmes and the loss of other skilled professionals acts as a barrier to institutional capacity building (Numn, 2005, p. 7).

There has been a longstanding debate that whether skill migration is beneficial for countries of origin. Skilled citizens, i.e. human capital is one of the most important resources for a country. To transform a citizen into human capital, nations invest a huge amount of resources. A one-year increase in the average education of a nation's workforce results in increase of the output per worker by between 5 and 15 per cent. Therefore, loss of skilled workers has the potential to thwart the growth of a nation. Empirical literature suggests that skill migration eventually leaves the country skill-empty, which in the long term has impacts on development. Most skilled migrants tend to settle elsewhere at some point of their life as opposed to the unskilled migrants. Thus, it is highly likely that the country would lose them forever. Skill loss cannot in anyway be justified and compensated by glorification of migration.



Migration has never been free of cost even in the historical era of near-open borders. The costs involved in general are for transportation, finding work, lodging and sustenance at the new environment (Ullah, 2010; Rahman and Ullah, 2012; Rahman, 2011). Legal restrictions on migration, however, have imposed new financial costs. Skilled migrants tend to move out of their origin to a richer country with the hope that they would be able to fully exploit their potentials (Ullah, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; 2013a, Dodani and LaPorte, 2005). The trend is apparent in some Commonwealth states in the ASEAN region. Rationally, the free movement of goods between any two countries tends to expand free movement of workers at the same time. Over and above that, the integration of ASEAN, through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), aims not only to administer the South–North migration but also to elevate the South–South migration (Susantono, 2015). The AEC aims to have a free flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labour. Eight professions are covered under skilled labour which are: engineers, architects, doctors, nurses, lawyers, accountants, surveyor and tourism industry. Between 1990 and 2013, intra-Asean migration increased from 1.5 to 6.5 million (Nadaraj, 2016). As part of the AEC commitment, members of the region have decided to foster the mobility of skilled workers. This commitment is signed under the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (Zhao *et al.*, 2000; Helliwell, 2006). The AEC focuses on breaking down trade barriers, so that the region can foster economic output up to 7 per cent by 2025 and generate approximately 14 million employments (Susantono, 2015). Economic integration may be seen as favourable as a whole but free movement of skilled labours may stimulate a brain drain from resource-poor countries to resource-rich ones (Chaitrong, 2012).

Most migration in Asia consists of low-skilled workers, although over the past three decades, mobility of professionals, executives, technicians and other highly skilled personnel has been on the increase. Countries such as India, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Singapore have been trying to attract professionals on either temporary or permanent basis (Castles and Miller, 2009a, 2009b).

Since the past three decades, the stock of intra-ASEAN migrants has risen substantially (from 20.3 to 34.6 per cent). The rise among ASEAN nationals living abroad is also remarkable. In the destination countries in ASEAN, more than half of the migrant stock comes from other ASEAN member states – for Singapore 52.9 per cent; for Malaysia 61.2 per cent; and for Thailand 96.2 per cent (ILO and ABD Institute, 2014). Since 1990, intra-ASEAN migration from Myanmar, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Cambodia has shot up in each case by around 40 percentage points in terms of their total nationals abroad (ILO and ABD Institute, 2014). This means intra-ASEAN migration has been a necessary reality for keeping their economy going.

The growth in ASEAN cross-border labour migration has two patterns (Manning and Bhatnagar, 2003): first, migration is centred around the Mekong river states with Thailand as the hub and the four countries of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam as labour suppliers (Pasadilla, 2011) and the second is the Malay migration region, with Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia as the major destinations for workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand account for about 90 per cent of the region’s total migrants and 97 per cent of intra-ASEAN migrants (ILO and ABD Institute, 2014). Disparities between the six other member states, namely, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand (ASEAN-6) and the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Vietnam) are evident (ILO and ABD Institute, 2014). These differences partly explain regional pattern of labour migration. Disparities are marked when it comes to wages, i.e. a worker in Malaysia earns, on average, more than three times the monthly salary of an Indonesian worker.

Not all educated and skilled migrants leave their home country merely for seeking better pay or for a better living, rather under certain circumstances, such as war, political unrest, ethnic or religious persecution, migrants are forced to leave (Torres and Wittchen, 2010; Ullah, 2014). Simultaneously, Siar (2014) claims that the frequent movement of people crossing the borders is commonly large because of the high rates of unemployment and poverty. These movements are seen as solutions to some individuals who need to start a living. However, Castles and Miller (2009a, 2009b) argue that the emigration of skilled people does not damage the economy, rather they opt to seek jobs outside their home country, so as to become productive by exploiting the skills and knowledge they possess.

ASEAN is home to about 616 million people (Jones, 2013) (as of 2011), of which about a little less than half (270 million) are in their working age (ASEAN Statistics). The bilateral migrant stock (as of 2011) contributes 12.8 million or 6 per cent to the total global migrants or 30 per cent to total migrants in ASEAN (Orbeta and Gonzales, 2013) (Table I).

Skilled/educated individuals move out of their countries of origins where they believe they can bring their knowledge into effective actions and build new life. The unevenness of the migration pattern because of rigid national [im]migration policies, inequalities of professional education and licensing regimes, as well as the vast income gap between countries represents that with the ever increasingly interconnectedness, the risk of brain drain has become a serious matter of concern (Susantono, 2015; Bernard, 2015).

The notion of brain drain is a common nuanced phenomenon that is seen from two lenses: detrimental and beneficial (Ullah *et al.*, 1999). According to Torres and Wittchen (2010), brain drain does not simply express the situation when the educated individuals in their home country emigrate to look for higher wages or better opportunities in another country – but also when the individuals who earned knowledge and completed their education abroad do not return to their home country. Dodani and LaPorte (2005) claimed that the countries (mostly the origins) that have invested in education and training to the individuals would be at loss of significant resources as they migrate, while the recipient countries accrue benefit, as they did not invest in educating those migrants in the first place.

I will expand the term affordability, in this context why these countries are losing skills and why they are in fact not in a position to lose them. Affordability is in general represented by the absolute highest price consumers can pay for anything, which implies that the price/cost of anything is within the means of a consumer. Literature in conceptualizing affordability generally cites housing affordability. The term “affordability” has been in widespread use in the US housing policy since the 1960s (Jacobs *et al.*, 2003). However, it has become an integral terminology in policy discourse in Australia and the UK during the 1980s (Kemeny, 2004; Hajer, 1993).

The idea of affordable housing recognizes the fact that the households incomes are not sufficient to allow them to access appropriate housing in the market without assistance (Milligan *et al.*, 2004, p. i). However, Bradley (2008) calls the term affordability vague while Whitehead (1991), Milne (2006) and Komives *et al.* (2005) deny that this term has a clear basis in economic theory that contends that a household chooses the bundle of goods and services that maximizes utility. In this current research context, affordability in essence is meant to explain whether the ASEAN countries are in a position to lose their talents. This paper is based on a research conducted on skill migration from some Commonwealth countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, plus some other countries in South East Asia such as Thailand and the Philippines. Skill migration continues to grow because of the growing demand, wage differentials, glorifications of the contribution of remittances to development and failure of the origin countries to retain them. The question remains

Table I.
Intra-ASEAN
migration data

	Intra-ASEAN		Ratio of outbound/ inbound		Total migration		Ratio of outbound/ inbound		Share of Intra-ASEAN to total migration (%)	
	Outward migration	Inward migration	Outward migration	Inward migration	Outward migration	Inward migration	Outward migration	Inward migration	Outward	Inward
Brunei D.	9,313	120,578			24,343	148,123	0.16		38.26	81.40
Cambodia	53,722	320,573			350,485	335,829	1.04		15.33	95.46
Indonesia	1,518,687	158,485			2,504,297	397,124	6.31		60.64	39.91
Lao PDR	82,788	10,134			366,663	18,916	19.38		22.58	53.58
Malaysia	1,195,566	1,882,987			1,481,202	2,357,603	0.63		80.72	79.87
Myanmar*	321,100	814			514,667	98,008	5.25		62.39	0.83
Philippines	335,407	9,096			4,275,612	435,423	9.82		7.84	2.09
Singapore	122,254	1,162,960			297,234	1,966,865	0.15		41.13	59.13
Thailand	262,721	448,218			811,123	1,157,263	0.70		32.39	38.73
Vietnam	221,956	21,511			2,226,401	69,307	32.12		9.97	31.04
TOTAL	4,123,515	4,135,357			12,852,027	6,984,461	1.84		32.08	59.21

Notes: *Means that the data were based on earlier estimates by the World Bank, i.e. 2007, while the rest are from the 2010 released data. Brunei D.= Brunei Darussalam

Source: Author's computation based on migration data from <http://go.worldbank.org/JTC7NYYT0> (accessed 23 February, 2011)

whether the respective sending country is producing more of them, so that they can export skills after the domestic demand is met.

Objectives and methods

This paper delves into the question why ASEAN nations cannot afford to lose their skilled migrants. This paper argues that losing skill from sending countries could be detrimental to the countries of origin and this loss could not be justified only by the remittances inflow.

In this study, skilled migrants are engineers, medical doctors, nurses and academics. I interviewed 12 engineers (four from the Philippines; two from Malaysia; four from Singapore and two from Thailand); nine medical doctors (four from the Philippines; three from Singapore, one from Malaysia and one from Thailand); eight nurses (six from the Philippines and two from Thailand) and 14 academics (six from the Philippines; five from Singapore and three from Malaysia) who were working abroad (Table II).

In selecting the respondents, snow-ball technique was applied. A checklist was used to collect data. The primary intention to ask question has been to know whether they consider their migration as a brain drain, if yes, what way it is, and if no, what is their reflection on this current on-going debate about brain drain and brain gain, and why they particularly left their own soil.

Conceptual considerations and findings

Because of the fact that this paper deals with a concept “affordability”, I conceptualize this term so as to make the direction of the paper clear. In what way ASEAN country’s affordability is questioned in the paper? Before the time migration studies came under academic investigations, migration used to be considered as natural human phenomenon. Since the past decade, security, political, social and economic factors have been predominantly occupying the space in public debate about migration. Most scholars view migration as one of the best options for making positive impact on development (Ullah, 2010; 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Rahman and Ullah, 2012; Skeldon, 2006). One of the reasons for this is the volume of remittances being channelled into origin countries. From 20 to 40 per cent of GDP of many countries is constituted by remittances. While this is a great indication of contribution to development, it is important too to look into the potential negative impact migration may have in both origin and destination countries in the long run (Ullah, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Ullah and Hossain, 2014, Ullah, 2016). While in this paper affordability is viewed from two perspectives, origin and destination, primary attention has been paid to countries of origin.

The need for international skills has rapidly grown in developing nations. The supply–demand mismatch for labour is one of the main drivers for international migration and this is particularly evident in some countries in Asia. This happens because of the fact that they experienced remarkable economic growth in the past two decades (ABD Institute, 2014). For example, Thailand has been in shortage of skilled labour in a number of sectors because

Countries of origin	Physicians	Nurses	Engineers	Academics
Singapore	3	0	4	5
Malaysia	1	0	2	3
Philippines	4	6	4	6
Thailand	1	2	2	0
Total	9	8	12	14

Table II.
Distribution of
respondents (country
and profession wise)

Thai market experienced insufficient skills both in terms of quantity and quality to meet the growing skill need [NESDB (National Economic and Social Development Board), Government of Thailand, 2013]. Increased dependency on foreign technologies also led many countries like Thailand to import increasing number of foreign skilled labour.

Some Commonwealth countries in ASEAN (for instance, Singapore and Malaysia) are facing fertility decline and the population size is shrinking and they are becoming dependent on migrant population as a result. At the same time, some human resource-surplus countries are ready to send labour to other countries. Apparently, the trade-off looks great in the way that some countries are deficient of skills and some are surplus. This might imply that a demand and supply theory works in striking a balance of need of both ends. The question has always been left unanswered which is: can the countries with surplus human resources really afford losing their human resources and the human resources-deficient countries can afford importing migrant workers?

Scholars defended the early 1980s theory of brain drain and came up with brain gain theory. Lately, the theory of brain waste is replacing the earlier ones. This theory is gaining prominence in scholarly debate owing to the fact that the brain that goes out is unlikely to come back and those who really return cannot use the skill they gained overseas because they engaged in such jobs where their skills were redundant; thus, they eventually get de-skilled. One of the most pressing issues is that skill that a country produces is drained but the gap remains as it is or gets bigger as the country is not producing more than they export (to reduce the gap). For example, the Philippines is losing medical doctors and nurses but the supply is less than they need. The dire need of medical doctors in clinics in rural Philippines could not be met, as a result. This kind of loss is not taken seriously into account by policymakers because remittances inflow is seen to be a counterbalance of this loss (Table III).

Primary reasons for leaving the country: Majority (65 per cent) of the engineers (irrespective of countries of origin) confirmed that they left their own country for a better salary base, which means that wage differentials are primary drivers for their decision to leave. Most Filipinos (85 per cent) pointed to the fact for the decision to leave the country that the country was becoming inhabitable in terms environment, political culture, corruption and price hike which may not match the majority's income. Most Singaporeans (irrespective of their professions) pointed that it was their choice to move out of the country. Most of them, however, mentioned about a common response which is "life in Singapore is very stressful". Their skill is marketable and sellable, and the skill is in high demand elsewhere. Most Malaysians and Thais pointed to the wage differentials as their primary reasons for taking over jobs abroad.

Migrants in many countries including the Philippines are often called heroes. This title is given to recognize their contribution to the economy, and this eventually works as encouragement to leave the country. In addition, migration is seen as the tool for easing unemployment problem. It should however be noted that skilled people may not be the

Professionals	<i>f</i>	(%)
Engineers	12	28
Academics	14	32.5
Physicians	9	21
Nurses	8	18.5
Total	43	100.00

Table III.
Profile of
respondents

Source: Field data 2014-2015

reasons for growing unemployment problem. In addition, migrants are often seen as alien in destination countries. In many countries, recently in Europe, though because of the mass influx from the Middle East, a strong opposition to the migration was heard from people at large under the belief that migrants steal their jobs. This allegation may lead people to potential xenophobic practices of which there are myriad of evidences (Ullah, 2010).

It is widely acknowledged that brain drain adversely affects the countries of origins. First, the evident impact of brain drain is the phenomenon known as a “labour gap” that reflects the growing gap between the rich and the poor nations. As elaborated by Illagan *et al.* (2013), the poorer a country is, the more (educated) people tend to leave for a richer country. This process usually generates benefits to the respective inbound countries. This trend exhibits that the country is in demand of highly educated workers and the requirement of work experience, which the youth in low income countries may not possess (Battistella and Liao, 2013). One of the respondents (who is a nurse from the Philippines working in Singapore) said that she is better respected there than in the Philippine hospitals. Respect [...] (?), she mumbles in reply [...] “I mean in terms of salary, benefits and status.”

This leads to the second impact in such a way that the resource-poor nations are usually made up of unskilled labours, while rich nations are usually blessed by skilled and educated labours (Bernard, 2015). With this ongoing trend, Susantono (2015) claims that by 2025, more than half of all the high-skilled job positions in the low-income countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam will be taken up by low-skilled workers. In other words, the low-income countries might always lag behind the high-income countries, as they are lacking of the human capital or human resources needed to further advance the economy. Many respondents irrespective of origin said, as long as they contribute to their countries in whatever way they can should be fine. “[...] we don’t have to be in our own country. We can contribute wherever we are[...].” One of the respondents (who is an academic from Singapore) thinks his decision to move out of the country is not tantamount to brain drain. Why and how? He replied, “though I live here, look at my profile, most of my research and publications deal with Singapore. This means now I am contributing more to the country than I could have been if I were in my own country”.

When a country consistently loses its skilled citizens, its identity might get weakened at some point of time. In Singapore, every year, 4 to 5 per cent of the country’s top 30 per cent of population gives up their citizenships to take up overseas jobs (Loh, 2015). The Prime Minister of Singapore during his interview with the *TIME* magazine expressed his concern by saying “If the successful ones mostly leave, we’re going to be depleted. And if it goes beyond the successful ones, we’ll be shrunken.” As Singapore continues to lose its citizens, the government opens its labour market to accept migrants from elsewhere. However, the true identity may be at stake because of the loss of its natives while being inhabited by large proportion of new residents (Lee, 2015).

Competitiveness and growth of a country depend largely on its ability to acquire and fully use new knowledge and the skills of its workforce. However, draining out direly needed skills and knowledge may bring havoc to domestic economy. The problem with this is that many countries are not capable of producing the workforce they need, and many more see their highly skilled workers emigrating (Sugiyarto and Agunias, 2014) (Table IV).

The level of impact of brain drain may closely be linked to the economic and political conditions of the countries of origin. Poorer nations are prone to the detrimental consequences as a result of migration that involved the major outflow of their most talented human resources (i.e. educated and skilled individuals). Then again, the economic integration such as the AEC implemented by the members of ASEAN may be regarded as a

Rank	Country corridor	Intra ASEAN migrant stock	Proportion of intra-ASEAN migrant stock (%)
1	Myanmar to Thailand	1,892,480	29
2	Indonesia to Malaysia	1,051,227	16
3	Malaysia to Singapore	1,044,994	16
4	Lao to Thailand	926,427	14
5	Cambodia to Thailand	750,109	12
6	Myanmar to Malaysia	247,768	4
7	Indonesia to Singapore	152,681	2
8	Singapore to Malaysia	78,092	1
9	Vietnam to Cambodia	37,225	1
10	Thailand to Cambodia	31,472	–
11	Thailand to Brunei	25,451	–
12	Philippines to Malaysia	21,345	–
13	Thailand to Indonesia	19,681	–
14	Singapore to Indonesia	19,681	–
15	Thailand to Singapore	17,644	–
16	Philippines to Singapore	14,176	–
17	Cambodia to Malaysia	13,876	–
18	Vietnam to Lao	11,447	–
19	Myanmar to Vietnam	9,783	–
20	Thailand to Malaysia	8,137	–
21	Indonesia to Vietnam	7,671	–
22	Brunei to Malaysia	5,975	–
23	Vietnam to Thailand	5,966	–
24	Lao to Vietnam	4,284	–
25	Philippines to Indonesia	3,517	–

Table IV.

Top 25 intra-ASEAN migration corridor, 2013

Source: Sugiyarto and Agunias (2014) Calculated from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Origin and Destination, 2013 Revision (With permission from author)

step to support the financial system of the region aiming at easing the economic conditions of the less developed countries. As positively seen, the integration and interlinks between the members might elevate the migration process but as negatively seen, uncontrollable migration might end up giving more pressure to the disadvantaged grounds.

Skill drain or skill waste in ASEAN

Over the past two decades, migration landscape has changed (in terms of volume, direction and skill composition) across ASEAN region. Most receiving countries got new policies aiming at being self-reliant in labour market, thus slimming the inflow of migrant workers. These efforts turned out to be a near failure due to two factors: fertility decline and skill mismatch. Hence the unemployment as well as the number of migrant workers are growing. This picture is seen from two opposite lenses: migrants steal the local's jobs hence is the unemployment and that locals are reluctant to take over some certain job categories. Almost all categories (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) of workers originate from the Philippines and Thailand, and Singapore however sends mostly skilled ones. Filipino nurses represent the largest category of health workers migrating, followed by midwives and doctors. They prefer moving to Brunei, Ireland, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates as their destinations. Saudi Arabia has consistently been the top destination for nurses in the past decade. Engineers from both Singapore and the Philippines prefer to move

to North America and Europe. Academics from Singapore moved to the Pacific and North America.

The mobility of people is inevitable because of social, economic and political changes. Vietnam government has two agendas on migration: first, labour export as a strategy to participate in the global trade, as well as to improve domestic economic condition; second, encouragement to self-initiated professional to migrate as a strategy to improve the quality of the local human capital (Nguyen, 2014). Most popular destination for Vietnamese were the former communist countries such as USSR, Germany, Slovakia and Hungary. The labour export was seen as a technique in sustaining the multilateral relations and aimed to reduce macroeconomic instability. As early as 1978, the Vietnamese government had sent approximately 24,000 technical interns who were the skilled workers and students to the USSR (DOLAB, 2012). Unfortunately, a large number of those interns did not return home (Chesnokov, 2011). The continuous migration of the Vietnamese has become alarming because of the fact that the country has been suffering from severe human capital loss (Dang *et al.*, 2010).

Singapore is one of the most prosperous nations in Asia. As of 2012, the unemployment rate is maintained at a low rate with the average of 2 per cent (Walter, 2014). The mismatch between the need for skills for the fast-expanding development undertakings and the domestically available skill has made the country dependent on migrant workers (Ullah, 2012; 2013a, 2013b; 2013c; Rahman *et al.*, 2012; Walter, 2014). However, this dependency has not stopped the native Singaporeans from migrating for better opportunities overseas. At the same time, the large inflow of foreigners into the country has been becoming a point of issue as the local Singaporeans are, on the other hand, looking for jobs abroad. Some policymakers attempted to justify this by the fact that diversity and globalization have made the border open for all and the mobility of people around the world has become largely inevitable (Lee, 2015). Diversity is necessary to create knowledge, and migration is necessary for creating diversity.

Job announcements in Canada, for example, clearly spell out that Canadians and permanent residents of Canada will be given priority. This in fact signifies that while diversity is not closed, national talent should be retained in the first place. Some countries in ASEAN hire “western” people. This is seen as an exclusionary policy by the citizens. Many citizens find it difficult to land into jobs of respective areas of skill and decide to move on elsewhere as a result. For example, in March 2014, Seah Kian Peng, a Member of Parliament in Singapore, “expressed shock” at the overwhelming number of foreign faculty members in universities in Singapore. Singaporean faculty members made up the minority (28 per cent of the 25 faculty members) in the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) political science department. However, this came as no surprise to many Singaporean academics and graduate students. In 2013, a Member of Parliament (NMP) and associate professor of Law at Singapore Management University raised the same issue in parliament. A Senior Minister of State for Education pointed out that Singaporeans made up one in four (25 per cent) faculty members on the tenure-track in both NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU); Singapore Management University’s (SMU) figure is one in six (16.6 per cent); and Singapore University of Technology and Design’s (SUTD) figure is one in three (33.3 per cent). In other words, Singaporean faculty members are a minority in Singapore’s universities. Some 44 per cent of Singapore PhD students revealed in a survey that they believe Singaporean universities have a preference for hiring foreign faculty members (Lay, 2014).

Among ASEAN worker in Malaysia, Indonesians are the largest group, about 51 per cent of all foreign workers, followed by Myanmar 7 per cent; Vietnam 4 per cent; and the

Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia about 5 per cent combined (Pasadilla, 2011). Cambodian migrants move mainly within ASEAN, in particular to Thailand and Malaysia. In terms of outward migration, workers from Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia are mostly destined to work within the region, while in the rest of ASEAN countries, out-migration to the rest of the world takes the larger share.

The contradicting factor is that while Malaysia's one-third of labour force is constituted by migrants, a considerable number of Malaysians are living and working abroad. Most of them are educated with tertiary qualifications. In 2013, 308,834 high-skilled Malaysians were living in the OECD countries and Singapore (Rahman *et al.*, 2012; The World Bank, 2014; Mustafa, 2015). Most of them were working in the financial, technical and engineering sectors (Pillay and In Sin Chew Daily, 2015). With the opportunity to migrate, Malaysians who decided to leave their homeland were mostly due to wage differentials, the origin's "unfavourable political issues and public security". Hence, Malaysia is facing an exodus of talent due to the poor prospects and lack of high-skilled jobs (NEAC, 2010, p. 60). This matters very much, as Malaysia is moving towards becoming a high-economic nation by 2020, with the aim of sustainable development and that all they need is a sufficient pool of talent and skilful human resources to achieve it (Ishak and Abdul-Aziz, 2014). Whatever are the reasons for them to leave the country, the fact is that the country lost the skills which placed the country into a position to import skills from other countries. The cost of importing human resources, especially social costs, could be very high. For example, to tackle the issues of security, illegality/irregularity, Malaysia had to form RELA (Ullah, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) which costed Malaysia's image, as Malaysia is known to human rights regime for its infamous and brutal treatment towards migrant and refugee population.

To get most talented people back home, the 10th Malaysia Plan revealed in June 2010 announced a "Talent Corporation" to headhunt Malaysians abroad. Recognizing the fact that the skills Malaysia has lost are instrumental in driving economic growth. This implies that Malaysia realized that they cannot afford losing the skills from the country. This program, however, turned unsuccessful. In the past 15 years, only about 1,000 were attracted to come back (Malaysiakini, 2010). Of the 23 per cent of the residents, Singaporeans and permanent residents (PRs) about half (45 per cent) were from Malaysia (Malaysiakini, 2010). According to Malaysia's Human Resource Ministry, there are about 350,000 Malaysians working in Singapore, and that 386,000 PRs (excluding Malaysian-born Singapore citizens and non-resident Malaysians) were Malaysians.

In the Philippines, brain drain has been a concern since the 1970s, which involved the departure of college-educated and professional workers, mostly the physicians, teachers, engineers, scientists and mechanical officer (Albuero and Abella, 2002). Then in the 1980s, the growing outflow of medical professionals (especially doctors and nurses) had started to become apparent. Of the 2 million domestic helpers from the Philippines, it is believed, about 3 per cent are nurses and university graduates. They compromised their skills to take up foreign jobs (Ullah, 2016; 2015b). Worldwide, 25 per cent of all overseas medical professionals come from the Philippines (Morella, 2008). The continuous outflow of medical professionals, which is labelled as "Medical Apocalypse" (Morella, 2008, p. 5) is a serious problem that is currently faced by the nation. The country is steadily losing its medical professionals, and it has to suffer the lack of doctors and nurses to take care of the local patients – forcing 10 per cent of 2,500 hospitals to shut down, since 2002 (Purgill, 2010). The biggest shortage in many Philippines' hospitals is not the equipment but the medical experts who run the equipment and perform the medical procedures (Voice of America, 2009). As a result, the social development has become extremely poor especially in the sector of health services of the

Philippines. This shows that the mass migration of high-skilled individuals has adversely affected the nation.

Conclusions

Throughout history, migration has always been one of the most important drivers of human progress. Evidences suggest that both in the developed and developing world migration has contributed tremendously to the economic development (Goldin, 2013). However, most research studies demonstrated migration phenomenon from positive biasness. As a result, its negativity remained under-researched. Skill migration has always been seen as a great way of getting remittances. Only recently, skill migration is seen as a talent loss. The question hence has been posed in the paper whether sending ends can afford this loss. The ASEAN region is home to a workforce of about 260 million. Among the anticipated outcomes of ASEAN Integration is intra-regional mobility among professionals. ASEAN professionals may soon be able to practice anywhere within the region. What does the current discourse say on who would stand to gain or lose from this eventuality? Loss of skilled workers would retard national growth. This study suggests that skill migration has adverse impact on services provision in the origin country, eventually leaving the country skill-empty. Most skilled migrants tend to settle elsewhere at some point of their life. Thus, the country loses them permanently. Skill loss cannot in anyway be justified and compensated by glorification of migration and remittances.

High demand for skills in industrialized countries has led to intense international competition for skills. Skilled workers help provide destination countries with needed skills; but if overall attractiveness to these workers is insufficient, they tend to move elsewhere. Policymakers have to structure policy responses to benefit from skilled workers, taking into consideration the variety of ways they affect the domestic labour market and the economy. A policy on skilled migration should safeguard the integrity of international protection mechanisms. A balanced return policy is one that will include enforced returns when voluntary returns are not possible. There is no easy way to calculate advantages and disadvantages of skill migration. Of course skilled migrants do better, in general, economically, although unskilled and low-skilled migrants contribute more to the origin country because they got less chance to attain root in destinations (Seven Policy Implications for High-Skilled Immigration, 2015). Highly skilled labour is an essential input to an innovative economy (Industry Canada and Policy Research Directorate, 2008).

Many Singaporeans expressed their deep resentment to protest against the White Paper's prediction that Singapore's population could rise to 6.9 million in the coming 15 years, with immigrants making up nearly half that figure. Many locals blame immigration for rising property prices and living costs. Within Asia, the most important initiative in the area of skills mobility has been undertaken by the ASEAN, which decided in 2007 to achieve a regional AEC by 2015. In the AEC blueprint, the fifth of five pillars is the "free flow of skilled labour". This is a bold step toward creating the institutions and mechanisms for governing mobility in the region (ABD Institute, 2014). The Philippines and Thailand send almost all categories (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) of workers, and Singapore sends mostly skilled ones (Yong *et al.*, 2014). Engineers from both Singapore and the Philippines prefer to move to North America and Europe. Academics from Singapore moved to the Pacific and North America. This study suggests that skill migration has adverse impact in myriad ways on services provision in the origin country. Keeping this fact into account, many countries have now formulated policies for encouraging return migration. Long-term stay out of the country leads to losing roots and often de-skilling. A certain percentage of migrants leave their family back home for the sake of the continuity of their educations. The

consequences of growing up of children without parents often could be longstanding. The bottom line is we must not be complacent with that. The “Brain Drain”, as the flow of skilled professionals out of developing countries has become known, thus marks a potentially serious barrier to economic growth, development and poverty reduction. The continuous movement of skilled labourers seriously causes the depletion of human resources in the countries of origins. The sad truth about migration is that, it may be seen as a strategy to ease unemployment in the countries of origin, as well as to open up better employment chances for the people, yet it should not be done in a way that it leaves the home countries brain-empty.

Migrants are flooding across the borders, and they are stealing jobs and eroding country’s social fabric in the process; in spite of minor short-term dislocations, international migration is a boon: it generates innovation and dynamism while fuelling long-term economic growth (Goldin, 2013). As with debates on trade, where protectionist instincts tend to overwhelm the longer-term need for more open societies, the core role that migrants play in economic development is often overwhelmed by defensive measures to keep migrants out.

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Further reading

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