

Intellectual Migration: Historical Development and Contemporary Trend

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Increasingly there is a global race for ‘talents’, those well-educated and highly-skilled migrants who would significantly contribute a country’s economic development and enhance her global standing. The cross-border movements and transnational activities among this group of people are characterized as “brain circulation”. In this article, we coin a new conceptualization of “intellectual migration” (including both students and skilled migrants) to explore the characteristics of, and the impacts by, those highly-skilled migrants on their home and receiving countries. We argue that intellectual migration often root in different dynamics and take a different route than family or labor migrants. As such, the flows and volumes of international students and scholars may well be different from, and not in sync with, the general immigration trends from the same country.

Upon briefly discussing transnationalism as the theoretical underpinning, this paper first traces the history of Chinese overseas intellectual migration and impacts of the earlier pioneers on China. It then provides an overview the contemporary intellectual migration between Asia (China, and the NICs) and the United States, in part as a result of changing geopolitics, global economy and government policies. The economic growth and increasing wealth in developing economies enable students to go abroad to study. Large-scale of highly-skilled migrants from China emerged after Chinese economic reform and grew along with the economic development and openness. We conclude that intellectual migration can have positive impacts on both sending and receiving countries and potentially achieve the UN’s “triple win” goal for these countries and migrant themselves.

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