

CANADA: Whose brain is that anyway?

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19 June 2011

Issue: 176

Brain drain is a problem that will never be solved, Professor Philip Altbach told delegates at the Worldviews Conference in Toronto. While many people feel bad for developing countries that lose top intellectuals, he said that as long as there is a global marketplace for academic talent, there is little that can be done to keep people at home and few to blame for the difficulties this creates. "Morality plays almost no role in this."

Noreen Golfman, who also spoke on a 'research arms war' panel on Friday that looked at the international battles to attract researchers, asked an intriguing question: Who owns these brains?

"The whole assumption behind brain drain suggests ownership. But that goes against the whole spirit of internationalisation," said the former President of the Canadian Federation of Social Sciences and Humanities and a professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

According to Altbach, who is Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College in the United States, several countries have lately been investing heavily in global research talent, namely South Korea, Germany, Russia and China.

He said the United States, Australia and the UK are all "in a funk" and have been less able in recent years to attract research stars to their countries. However, private universities in America, with their recovered endowments, have been buffered from massive cuts at the state level to public higher education and will also be less affected by the expected levelling off of federal research investments.

Initiatives such as the South African Research Chairs Initiative and the Canada Research Chairs have been successful ways to attract back ex-pats.

Also, some countries have been able to staff their universities with academics lost to other countries through joint appointments, in which professors who have established themselves in another country are offered the opportunity to spend half a year working at a university in their home country.

China has been investing in this, topping up the Chinese half of academic salaries. "They realise that they are not going to get them back full time because of the salary, the academic culture and academic freedom issues," said Altbach.

While China has achieved some success with this initiative, many of its students who go abroad also do not return. According to Altbach, over the last 30 years 75% to 80% of Indian and Chinese students who went to the US to study did not go back home. But many are now returning, since their economies are in better shape than those of countries like the US.

Attracting back talent may after all have found a solution, in the economic opportunities of the home country.

