BALIK SCIENTIST PROGRAM (BSP) AND THE RETURN OF FILIPINOS EDUCATED ABROAD

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, international education has been one of the subjects frequently explored as research topics. There is no doubt that globalization as a theme has also invaded the four walls of the classroom. The cooperation being undertaken by academic institutions has created a big mark in the international setting as it affirms the existence of a borderless world pressing for global understanding via promotion and extension of opportunities for study abroad. The experience abroad provides students with important concepts not only acquired within the classroom setting, but it also allows them to generate a better perspective of the society; thus, it contributes to the intellectual, social and emotional enhancement of the students. Coming home after being overseas for years offers opportunities, benefits and challenges. This paper analyzes the Balik Scientist Program (BSP) of the Philippines' Department of Science and Technology (DOST), along with other concerns that impact the implementation of the four-decade old program. A comparative approach on existing brain gain efforts initiated by other countries is also conducted. By addressing budgetary concerns and system orientation, it is expected that BSP as a brain gain mechanism could be strengthened. The program needs to forge ties clearly with other related public agencies and private entities to realize its goals fully.

Keywords: Balik Scientist Program; brain gain; international education; policy studies; study abroad

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Introduction

Life abroad forms new perspectives because it shapes the way one sees the world based on a person's experiences. To become global citizens of the contemporary society, it is expected that attending educational institutions abroad must provide students the competencies they need. Year after year, there has been a tremendous increase on the number of students who decide to cross borders and pursue higher learning. These students eventually pursue their careers abroad, or go back home and practice their professions.

Arouca (2003) made an inquiry regarding the reentry shock being experienced by repatriation scholars. Through the use of problems involving inter-relationship and psychological symptoms, the study inspects the support programs provided to students as they return to their country and how they incorporate their experience abroad into their careers back home. Eight students participated in the study entitled "A qualitative study of returning study abroad students: The critical role of reentry support programs," which involves two research inquiries: (1) How does a reentry support program help students during the reentry process; and (2) how do the participants integrate the study abroad experience into their academic career?

A related narrative research conducted by Alandejani (2013) recounts the experiences of female scholars from Saudi Arabia who pursued graduate studies abroad. Through thematic and constant data comparative analyses, it was identified that 'reverse culture shock' was experienced by the participants, citing 'patience' to be the significant factor in combating identified challenges.

The study places its significance as it recommends to institutions involved to extend support to students in 're-adjusting' to their own cultures while realizing the fruits of their study-abroad experiences. An extensive discourse was also recommended to back up scholars on how to apply the knowledge and ability they acquired from foreign countries. Highlighting the transformational learning theory, particularly the cultural-spiritual view, Alandejani's narrative integrates the acquisition of new knowledge, outlook, and skills of the consciousness of the study participants.

Le (2014) concentrates on Vietnamese repatriate scholars. This study's scopeis limited on students who have returned to Vietnam after obtaining their US diploma. The major points of the research include the transition period (from the US to Vietnam), the participants' perception on the importance of their US academic experience, and their future plans. With the help of the Vietnamese's main stories and experiences as the main tools, recommendations are presented, which include: (1) incorporate co-national networks into institutional resources; (2) create an International Student Academic Success Unit; (3) incorporate international content into class materials; (4) promote a more culturally diverse and balanced student body; (5) increase teaching experience for international students.

Song (1997) in his work The Reversal of Korean Brain Drain (1960s - 1980s) looks at the condition of the 'brain gain' phenomenon as South Koreans return home after obtaining their diploma outside their country, particularly from the United States. The article also mentions the vital role being played by international Korean scholars in the process of the country's progress in the economic landscape.

It also affirms how the dreaded 'brain drain' incident can be an advantage, not to mention the psychological, emotional, and economic factors involved. The study carefully scrutinizes the situation experienced by Korea during the 'Brain Drain' Period, hoping that it may also provide "schemes for developing countries in implementing policies concerning returning expatriates."

The survey conducted for this study involves Korean scientists who have decided to return to Korea, and those who decided to stay abroad. Government policies carried out during the 1960s to 1980s are also covered.

> The shift in the trend of residence choice attributes to Koreans returning home after obtaining their degrees abroad, noting that in 1987, about two-thirds of the involved respondents actually came back to Korea. Also, personal situations during and after graduate work strongly affected their residence decisions, including the country's economic boom and the 'high prestige' being related to teaching jobs (Song, 1997).

As mentioned in the study, another motivation for returning home can be attributed to 'family', 'personal situation' and 'children's education'. Interestingly, the study also looks at the demographic information of Korean students abroad, mostly men, which implicitly 'discourages women from pursuing professional careers in science and engineering'. Noting the author's findings, it is revealed that Koreans have similar opinions on the importance of 'personal relationships' despite the unanimous favor given over America's work attitude, education system, etc.

Song also recognizes the effort made by the Korean government to support returning Korean international students including 'financial incentives' and 'living costs for temporary visitors', along with 'financial aids' for study abroad. This, however, requires recipients to return to South Korea. Furthermore, the country also has vast programs to encourage Korean international students to return home: 'Brain Pool', establishments of graduate schools, and postdoctoral opportunities (Song, 1997). The initiative of helping the activities of returnees also boosts the perspective of Koreans abroad.

In other words, Song recognizes the crucial role being played by economic factors as the core of the brain drain experience. He also places his recommendation of "considering how to optimize the expertise of available human resources to meet the goals of national advancement." Incentives must also be an effective strategy. Furthermore, the author extrapolated his proposition.

> The role of culture also fuels the strategies in encouraging foreign students to return home and contribute to their home country. Above all, it is still the 'overall economic situations' of the home country that create an impact in the decision of returning home. Undesirable living standard and work environment are few factors that thicken brain drain, along with certain political concerns (Song, 1997)

It is undeniable that brain drain is not only a national apprehension, but a global one. However, the Philippine government is not ignorant on the issue and due to this, the government's DOST has established BSP. Despite this effort, the program must be put under the lens of evaluation.

Research Methodology

This study aims to provide a manuscript showing an objective evaluation of BSP comparing it with the Malaysia's and India's programs used to address the issue of brain drain. Therefore, this study is expected to answer the following questions:

(1) What is the current performance of Balik Scientist Program?
(2) What are the strong and weak points of the program?
(3) What are the programs implemented in Malaysia and India to address the brain drain issues?
(4) How do these countries address the issue through their programs?
(5) How can the Philippines' DOST adapt the programs of the two aforementioned countries to help improve BSP addressing the national issue on brain drain?

The data gathering procedure focused on available documents pertaining to the Philippines' Balik Scientist Program (BSP). These include legal documents, and news articles publicly available online. To identify the significance and relevance of the materials, appropriate keywords such as *"Balik Scientist", "brain gain", "international education"*, "return scholars" *and* other related concepts were used for searching. The data gathered are arranged based on their content and concept relatedness and the emerging themes as the research is done.

Data Presentation and Analyses

The Philippines' Balik Scientist Program

Instituted in 1975 through Presidential Decree No. 819 (http:/bsp.dost.gov.ph), Late President Ferdinand Marcos formed the Balik (Returning) Scientist Program (BSP), with high goals of encouraging overseas Filipino scientist, professionals, and technologists in the Philippines, and sharing their expertise in order to accelerate the scientific, agro-industrial and economic development of the country.

With the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) as the main implementing agency, the program has been the forerunner agent in

"strengthening the scientific and technological human resources of academic, public and private institutions in order to accelerate the flow of technologies and stimulating the development of new or strategically important technologies that are vital to national development and progress."

Senate Bill No. 969 s. 2013, also known as An Act Providing for the Establishment of a Balik Scientist Program, Appropriating Funds, was filed in the Sixteenth Congress of the Republic of the Philippines. Its purpose is to 'find ways of reversing the brain drain'. On a larger context, the proposal attempts to strengthen the provision of essential incentives which in turn can attract overseas Filipino scientists to return to the Philippines and eventually contribute in nation building, in forms of information exchange and facilitation of new technologies.

The BSP, being categorized into short term (duration of at least one month) and long term (duration of at least two years) schemes, has been revived since it has come up with an overhaul of benefits being offered to prospective BSP recipients. However, a careful analysis of the program leads to obvious comments regarding the benefits provided. These include airfare, financial assistance, exemption from various tax duties and clearances, research grants, infrastructure appropriation and the like, with funding allocated from the Annual General Appropriations Act of DOST. With the revival effort being strengthened, along with dynamic schemes to improve the program, some obvious and other unseen issues need to be scrutinized.

The present state of the country in terms of structure and systematic approach poses challenges regarding the effective execution of activities of the returning scientists. The budget allocated to DOST is put under fire, given the 'inadequate' allotment designated by the government. Last 2014, figures showed that only 0.53 percent of the total budget was allotted for the department (Salamat, 2013).

When the budget allocation for the department is analyzed, it is seen that it is critically far from the OECD average of 2.25 percent of allocation for science and technology, which can hinder further steps in pushing for "genuine national development that can transform prevailing backward agricultural production and mobilize the vast human resources in the countryside" (Salamat,

2013). In 2018, the allotted annual budget for the Philippines' DOST pegged at 21.040 Billion PHP, equivalent to $ 394, 125, 588, which did not even make it to one of those prioritized government agencies. The department lagged behind other government agencies when it comes to budgetary allocations in 2018.

The Philippines' National Research and Development (R&D) Agendum is outlined into five categories, namely(1) addressing national concerns, (2) countryside development and inclusive growth, (3) increasing industry competitiveness, (4) improved delivery of government services, and (5) improved delivery of government services (Philippine Embassy - USA). This reflects the crucial role that science and technology plays in initiating programs that create immediate impact on development. Eventually, insufficient budgetary allotment results to inefficient services delivered to people.

Calling for holistic development across the country requires sincere commitment from lawmakers and local and national leaders. Appropriating standard-based budget allocation for the Department of Science and Technology will be the most constitutional step to undertake, as the Philippine Constitution, under Section 10, Art. XIV states.

> "The State shall give priority to research and development, invention, innovation, and their utilization; and to science and technology, education, training and services period."

Catching up with the scientific and technological trends is another challenging aspect that Balik Scientist Program needs to recognize and pursue. The current state of research activities in the academe and scientific community in the Philippines shows that more work needs to be done in keeping up with the standard, and this needs to be executed with sincere and genuine commitment among stakeholders. Boosting scientific publications, offering gigantic support (moral, financial, etc) and establishing sound leadership can initially institute substantial achievement.

The BSP is literally a traditional approach towards utilizing science and technology. With synergy effect it is expected to create, it can also serve as a venue towards reversing the brain drain effect, towards 'brain gain'. With

existing channel and talents being offered by Filipino scientists abroad, this program does not only call for those who are overseas to offer something for the country, but also highlight their potentials towards nation building and development. To realize this grand cause, issues and challenges need to be seamlessly identified and addressed on the grassroots level. With 477 awardees who have already returned since the program has been implemented, the program indeed needs an overhaul, to assess effectively existing problems, along with issues that returnees may face in the future.

Malaysia: From Brain Gain to Talent Corp

"There's no better time than now to return how."

This is how Malaysia's Talent Corp encourages overseas Malaysians to go back and be motivated as they contribute in making the country a "high income nation by 2020" (TalentCorp, 2015).

Just like the Philippines, Malaysia has also its own fair share of struggles trying to reverse the 'brain drain phenomenon' hitting third world nations. Malaysia has also once exhausted available means and resources in bringing overseas individuals come home and hear the government's call to bring back Malaysian talents.

In 2006, Malaysia's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation launched the Brain Gain Malaysia (BGM) with the grand objective of "fast-tracking Malaysia's transition to an innovation-led economy, by leveraging the talent pool of Malaysian diaspora and/or foreign researchers, scientist engineers, and technopreneurs (RSETs) residing abroad through incentive offerings for mutual benefit" (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Brain Gain Malaysia, n.d.).

Under the program, seven industry aspects were prioritized, which includes (1) bio-informatics, (2) alternative energy/renewable energy, (3) biotechnology – food production, (4) emerging technology for curing diseases, (5) climate change - related technologies, (6) nanotechnology, and (7) cybersecurity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, n.d.).

The severity of Malaysian brain drain was reflected when approximately 300,000 Malaysians, or 10% of the university-educated resources have left the country in the last decade (Pak, 2013). A report from the World Bank (2011) identified that "poor prospects" and "lack of high-skilled jobs" are the main reasons that the country fails to keep their talents or encouraging foreign individuals to join the Malaysian work force.

Malaysia's Brain Gain Program boasted grand ambitions of "enticing 50 top-tier scientists and 500 - 1000 outstanding Malaysian scientists to return home" (The Rocket, 2011). Available literatures show that the program failed to achieve its goals, as reflected on the fact that Malaysians still chose to leave the country over the years. Overseas migration has been on the rise, as reports reveal that from March 2008 until August 2009, 304,358 Malaysians left the country. The figure was considered to be a big rise from the number of those who left the country in 2007 which totaled 139, 696 (The Rocket, 2011).

The Human Resources Minister Datuk Noraini Ahmad confirmed that "many had not responded" (to the program) because of the "incentives". Moreover, according to the article, there is a need for the private sector to get involved in encouraging overseas professionals to return to Malaysia and work. In 2011, the World Bank has reported that Malaysians leave the country because of three main reasons: better salary, career prospects, and social injustice (Ng, 2014).

Malaysia's brain drain effort was revived in 2010, through Talent Corporation with an allotment of RM 30 million. Citing the nature of Talent Corporation, Penang Institute's CEO, Dr. Lim Kim Hwa admitted that to keep Malaysia's work force from leaving, there is a need to "pare down Malaysia's income tax rate to narrow the net income differential between the country and other nations (Ng, 2014). It has also been noted that income loss is one great reason that people prefer to work overseas. Lastly, the provision of new opportunities to those prospective returnees would eventually promote the program in the long run.

Currently, under the Talent Corporation's mandate, a returnee shall enjoy the following benefits: (1) an optional flat tax rate of 15 percent for

employment income for five years, (2) tax exemption for all personal effects brought into Malaysia, (3) foreign spouse or children will be given Permanent Resident (PR) status within six months, and (4) foreign born children or children already studying in an international stream overseas are allowed to enroll in any international school of choice in Malaysia.

Another issue which needs to be addressed is Talent Corporation's "narrow focus" referring to the categories that the program encourages to return home. The selection of professional Malaysians leaves out blue-collar workers or skilled migrants (The Rocket, 2011).

India's Brain Gain Policy: Indian Talents in Indian Academic Institutions

The Indian government's efforts towards inviting Indian talents abroad highlight the transformation from a country worried about its 'brain drain,' to a country that now thinks of 'brain gain'.

Through the initiative of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development, academicians of Indian origin and Indian citizens from abroad are encouraged to go back to India and be part of local universities and institutions (Sahoo, 2009). To do this, the government intends to amend existing legal provisions on the status of persons of Indian origin who currently hold citizenship of another country. This emerging phenomenon is gaining attention as executives of Indian decent consider employment opportunities and living conditions in India to be good (Gentleman, 2008). As qualified individuals return home, they will be given academic and research freedom by being a faculty member of fourteen (14) innovation universities.

A fund of $500 million was proposed to finance Indian faculty and researchers (Choudaha, 2010). This proposal offers career opportunities in India after the economic recession and deceleration of research in other countries, particularly in the US (Rai, 2014). India's science policy initiated two years ago positioned India to be one of the world's powerful in scientific field by 2020 (Mishra, 2013). This goal targeted individuals in the fields of academe, research, and sciences.

Partnerships between the government industry, and educational institutions accommodate returning scholars. On top of providing various

benefits to recipients of the Brain Gain policy, 'high quality life on the campus with access to schools for the children of teachers, residence, health facilities, leisure, and entertainment are included' (Sahoo, 2009). Other benefits include academic freedom, negotiable salaries, substantial research funds, right environment, freedom from regulation and bureaucratic control and a quality of good life.

To aid in facilitating the recruitment of prospective beneficiaries, networks of key people and researchers from abroad have been set. This is in response to the 'very strong' returning rate of overseas professional Indians (Gentleman, 2008).

However, with the schemes being employed by the government to promote the Brain Gain Policy, specific limitations may impede the successful implementation of the plan. Particularly in terms of financial incentives, the policy could be very expensive and unproductive (Choudaha, 2010). Consequently, it also entails failure to address the needs of the global faculty and inability to establish an all-inclusive approach on who to invite to return to India.

Choudaha also suggested that the program should target not only Indian talent but also foreign talents as well. It has also been recommended that the enhancement of 'competitiveness, productivity, and professionalism of the education sector' should also be given attention.

As foreign-based Indian talents return to their home country, these individuals are expected to convey strategies and attitudes learned from abroad. These perspectives will eventually replace existing traditional and backward system in Indian scientific field. Efficient schemes need to be developed in accommodating returning talents, as well as providing a system that is suitable for returning talents.

Conclusion

The BSP of the Department of Science and Technology can be strengthened by addressing budgetary concerns and system orientation. Keeping up with the trends and aligning policies that genuinely accommodate the goals of the program can create synergic effect towards achieving scientific and

technological progress in the country. Being a scheme existent for almost 40 years, it is high time to review provisions of the program in order for it to serve its purpose.

Programs and schemes that will embrace returning scholars and promote their participation in nation-building are critical at this point. Concrete government national policies are central in order to work hand in hand and achieve sustainable growth and development highlighting knowledge and expertise acquired from academic experiences abroad. It is very pragmatic that the Philippine government set up long-term and efficient schemes targeting those students who left the country. There is also a great need to reform local banking sector along with augmenting infrastructures. Similar to tracing grassroots problems, these issues need to be addressed first in order to crack numerous gigantic challenges encountered.

The Philippines can learn from India and Malaysia in strengthening the BSP. Allocating sufficient funds to effectively implement policies creates efficient delivery of services and benefits. This in turn can also boost the morale of Filipino scholars who intend to return home and help the Philippines. Government – industry cooperation also play in motivating program recipients.

Future researchers under the same context can also explore other related facets of this phenomenon. Issues regarding financial and social gains must also be investigated thoroughly, along with schemes on how to effectively revive brain gain efforts. Specific case studies can also help provide particular insights on the plight of those students who have chosen to go back home.

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