

Managing the global talent pool: Sovereignty, treaty, and intergovernmental networks

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Abstract

Better management of the international migration of highly skilled people may provide a way to expand the global talent pool as well as to allow existing talent to be used more efficiently. After reviewing contemporary scholarship on the knowledge economy and on migration patterns, this paper considers three broad approaches to governance of migration at the global level: sovereignty, treaty, and intergovernmental networks. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, with respect to the key objectives of facilitating knowledge spillovers from receiving countries to source countries and expanding investment in the development of talent in source countries. The complementarities among the three approaches reveal the promise of a workable international regime in this vital policy area.

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1. Introduction

Two broad trends distinguish economic life in the early 21st century: globalization and rising knowledge intensity. More people from more diverse places are interconnected more fully through markets than was the case in previous centuries. The products that they are exchanging derive more of their value from skills and ideas than from brute labor and raw materials than they used to. These trends could be mutually reinforcing. Globalization may continually create larger markets and new niches for knowledge-intensive products;

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knowledge-intensive producers may gain access to a greater number and variety of skills and ideas as the new century wears on.

At the moment, however, the gap is wide between those who have the potential to contribute to the global knowledge economy and the actual contributions of the privileged few who currently comprise its talent pool. A vast amount of human talent is wasted, due to the vagaries of access to the basic necessities of life, to education, and to social and organizational settings that facilitate continuing creative endeavors. Narrowing this gap and reducing the waste of talent would not only benefit those individuals whose creative potential is thereby realized, but global society as a whole, as the value that those individuals create spills over to the public at large.

Better management of the international migration of highly skilled people may provide one way to address this challenge. In addition to allowing existing talent to be used more efficiently by allowing organizations that need talent to draw from a wider base, effectively managed highly skilled migration (HSM) may induce larger domestic investments in human development in developing countries to expand the talent pool for the future. HSM may also catalyze international resource flows to support such investments if it strengthens financial, organizational, and intellectual relationships across borders.

“Management” is, however, a tricky task; the word itself is a euphemism. No global authority can take the measures that may be called for. Sovereign states are the dominant actors in the international system. Competition among such states has some advantages as a system for “managing” HSM in such a way that it draws more people supported by more resources into the global talent pool. However, as is the case in many areas of public policy, formal and informal modes of cooperation among states might also be useful in pursuing this global public interest.

This paper thus considers three broad approaches to governance of the global talent pool: sovereignty, treaty, and intergovernmental networks. I assess the strengths and weaknesses of each approach—and identify complementarities among them. The ground for these assessments is prepared by reviewing, in the next two sections, contemporary scholarship on the knowledge economy and on migration patterns. Sections on the three approaches to governance follow. I conclude by focusing on the complementarities among the three approaches and the promise of a workable international regime in this vital policy area that incorporates elements of all three.

2. The evolving economic geography of knowledge: appropriability and spillovers

Recent work in economics and geography has undermined a number of long-established and widely held assumptions about the knowledge economy. This work opens new possibilities for interpreting the consequences of HSM. What was once viewed simply as a brain “drain” from developing countries to developed ones is now variously labeled brain “strain” [1], brain “circulation” [2], and even brain “gain” [3]. These more optimistic assessments (from the developing country perspective) remain, however, possibilities whose realization depends on policy choices that are far from certain.

Economic theory has long taken knowledge to be a public good. According to this theory, the use of an idea by one person does not intrinsically limit its use by another, the way the use of a machine does. Nor, absent an intellectual property system, can anyone exclude anyone else from using an idea once it has entered the public domain [4]. These

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