

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Immigration bill could spark brain drain

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The massive immigration reform bill being debated in Congress would make it easier for foreign doctors, engineers and other professionals to become permanent U.S. residents. The bad news is that it will also worsen the brain drain from the developing world.

Under the White House-backed bipartisan immigration bill, which could be approved by the Senate in early June, most of the 12 million undocumented workers in the United States would be considered for permanent residency. But the highly educated ones would enjoy a head start.

The bill establishes a merit-based evaluation system, under which immigrants seeking permanent residency would be judged according to their score on a 100-point scale. Immigrants with advanced degrees who speak English would get by far the most points.

While foreign medical doctors, scientists and other professionals with post-graduate degrees would automatically earn 28 points, immigrants without high school diplomas would get only five points. In addition, English-speaking foreigners would automatically earn 15 points, while those who pass a basic English test would get only six points.

In other words, if you are an English-speaking scientist, you start out with 43 points. If you don't have a high school diploma or lack proficiency in English, you would start out with 11 points.

There is nothing wrong with the United States trying to draw the brightest minds in the world, especially in much-needed professions. And it's unfair to blame foreign doctors and engineers for seeking a better life, or greater professional opportunities, in America.

RACE FOR BRAINS

But Washington should be aware that the proposed immigration changes could unintentionally accelerate a race among rich nations for the smartest minds of the developing world.

"This increases the pull-factor for skilled workers," Paul Ladd, a United Nations Development Program expert on migration, told me. "If you got a master's degree from the University of Nairobi, you know that you will be higher up in the pecking order to apply for residency in the United States."

According to a new report by the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank, growing numbers of developed countries are adopting merit-based point systems that give preference to highly educated immigrants.

Canada started a merit-based admissions system in 1967, Australia in 1989, New Zealand in 1991 and Great Britain in 2001. The 27-member European Union is considering adopting a point-based system in September.

But at the same time, United Nations studies show that 83 percent of Guyana's university graduates and more than 60 percent of university graduates from Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago live in industrialized countries. In Ghana and Zambia, there is a huge shortage of nurses because most have moved abroad.

Granted, recent studies also show that in some cases, poverty ridden countries enjoy a "brain gain" when their most educated people move to richer nations.

India, Taiwan and several Eastern European countries owe much of their high-tech success to the fact that their scientists and engineers moved to the United States, started businesses there and later either moved back or started joint operations in their native countries.

REMITTANCES

Many Latin American countries are benefiting enormously from the \$65 billion in family remittances from their expatriates in the United States.

The higher education their emigrés have, the better jobs they get in the United States and the more money they send back home.

Still, development experts are worried. Poor countries that produce good scientists and engineers may benefit from a "brain gain," but those that are seeing a mass exodus of nurses or entrepreneurs may suffer a growing "brain drain," they say.

My opinion: In an increasingly competitive global economy, nothing will stop rich countries from giving preference to the most educated immigrants, or the latter from seeking a better life abroad.

But Washington should also contemplate the other side of the coin, and instead of cutting foreign aid, as it has been doing in recent decades, increase assistance to developing countries' education systems.

Otherwise, private U.S. and European firms will increasingly scout the world for highly educated workers, which in the long run could worsen conditions in some developing countries and increase the very migration flows that the proposed policies are supposed to bring under control.