

## **SCHOLARSHIPS, BRAIN DRAIN & THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGER**

*Paper to the Second Conference of the ACU Human Resource Management Network, Malaysia, September 2006*

Dr. John Kirkland, Deputy Secretary-General (Development), Association of Commonwealth Universities

### **Introduction**

The absence of precise statistics on the brain drain of academics makes it difficult to accurately estimate the size of the problem. It is, however, clearly substantial. According to the International Organisation on migration, Africa has already lost one-third of its human capital and is continuing to lose its skilled personnel at an increasing rate. It is estimated that over 20,000 doctors, university lecturers, Engineers and other professionals have left the continent annually since 1990. During 2002, there were almost 7000 academics from an African or Asian background working in the United Kingdom alone (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2002). Further data from HESA (2004), confirms that migration disproportionately affects junior staff.

None of these statistics will come as any surprise to university human resource managers from developing countries, most of whom will also be aware of the lack, to date, of any effective international strategy to counter the trend. In recent years, however, there has been increasing awareness by international funding agencies of the role that higher education must play in development strategies, and the critical role of human capacity within this. There has also been increasing discussion on the role those staff that have migrated can still play in the development of their home countries.

This paper seeks to provoke a debate on the role which human resource managers can play in this. It will focus on three areas in particular – the role of human resource managers in identifying talent, their role in negotiating the conditions under which that talent is developed, and the role in putting in place career development structures that ensure successful utilisation of talent. The questions posed reflect, to a large extent, the author's role as Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom, one of the funding bodies with a particular brief to develop talent in the university sector. It is hoped, however, that the issues raised in discussion will be of wider applicability.

### **A Climate for Change?**

The figures presented above appear to leave little room for optimism on the part of developing country universities. Yet recent years have seen a genuine shift in the attitude of donor agencies towards higher education. First, many have suggested that the role of highly skilled personnel who have migrated can be more positive than previously assumed. Some have argued that brain drain can have positive effects, not only through the direct impact of remittances back to the home country, but also through the ability of diaspora to put development issues onto the agenda and, particularly in the case of academic life, to undertake research work relevant to their

home country. Some, too, point out that the pattern of emigration is not always for life. A report from the Institute of Public Policy Research, a UK think tank, concluded that 'policy makers increasingly see international migration as part and parcel of economic development, and recognise that good management of international migration can produce a win-win situation for both sending and receiving countries. The emerging priority is not simply to *avoid* brain drain from developing countries, but to optimise flows so that the loss of highly skilled people does not cause what we have termed 'brain strain'. The issue of whether human resource managers can play any role in helping this process will be discussed below.

The second trend is the increased belief by funding agencies in the capacity of universities to aid longer term development. The publication of the World Bank report *Peril and Promise* in 2000 signalled a shift in opinion from the concentration on primary and secondary education which had led many agencies to marginalise universities for the previous decade. The theme has since been taken up to national donors. The report of the Commission for Africa, produced in advance of the 2005 G8 summit, positively highlighted the role of higher education, recommending both significant investment in African universities and the creation of a network of centres of excellence throughout the continent.

These developments are encouraging, but areas of uncertainty remain. Some governments have already announced practical measures following G8 meeting, but the total level of support that will be forthcoming is still unclear. Even if the targets are realised, donor support will represent only a small proportion of the funding required. Also, that support that is forthcoming may represent different models to previous aid. The Commission for Africa placed emphasis on the need for African institutions to devise their solutions. Reflecting this, the UK Department for International development has recently announced a £3.5 million grant to the Association of African Universities. DFID and other development agencies are also considering the prospect of 'untying', to give donor recipients more choice in where their training and research collaboration will come from. Suppliers of conventional training and scholarship schemes are also diversifying their 'products'. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK, which has for many years awarded scholarships to staff of developing country institutions, now offers about one-third of its awards by distance learning; the Commission is also one of several agencies to develop 'split-site' awards at postgraduate level, offered in partnership with developing country institutions

### **The Institutional Response**

A common theme in the above analysis is the possibility that institutions will have more opportunity to manage their use of external support. Governments want to see developing countries take a stronger role in identifying their own priorities. Donors are channelling a higher proportion of funding through domestic institutions. Likewise any benefits to be gained through collaboration with diaspora are best likely to be achieved if governments and universities are active in identifying opportunities and putting in place structures to facilitate these.

It is likely that responsibility for responding to these issues rests at several different points within the university. Often this may be driven by the procedures and

objectives of a particular funding body. For example, the Carnegie Foundation of New York concentrates its support for African higher education on six universities, seeking to build close relationships at the strategic level. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has seeks nominations for its international scholarships by writing to Vice-Chancellors. Both of these reflect an emphasis on 'top-down' decision making. Donors value this since it gives confidence that their support is likely to align with wider institutional priorities.

Institutional priorities are also likely to be set largely through the academic, rather than administrative structure. This is true at several levels – the determination of which subjects and facilities should be prioritised, which external sources represent the best means of achieving this, and which individuals will be best placed to benefit from such training and collaborative opportunities that do become available. It is likely that in many institutions there is only limited interaction between these decision making process and those responsible for functions such as human resource management.

### **A Role for Human Resource Managers?**

If the above trends come to fruition, it may be that developing country universities will not only have access to greater external support to develop their human capacity, but also a stronger role in determining how such resources are used. In this context, it may be worth considering what role human resource managers could play in this process. Six particular areas of policy can be identified;

#### ***Identifying Talent***

Whether support is given for external scholarships and fellowships, or internal training, there will be a need to ensure that it reaches those most able to benefit. Academic merit will be a key issue in determining this – but may need to be considered alongside other issues. For example, where academic merit is the sole criteria, there is a danger that opportunities will be concentrated on a relatively small group of staff. Other factors which affect the ability of an individual to benefit from training might be apparent from a human resource standpoint – they might, for example, emerge from close scrutiny of annual appraisal forms or personal circumstances. It may be that human resources departments are able to make a distinctive contribution in these areas. Also (where this is not already the case) there could be a role for human resource managers in administering internal staff development funds, or competitions from internal candidates for external support; thus helping to demonstrate transparency in the process, and integration with wider institutional strategy.

#### ***Training Conditions***

Whether training is offered through internal funding or external donors, there is a need for institutions to adopt a clear policy defining what they expect from recipients, both during the award and afterwards. At an administrative level, such policies need to be consistent, clear and capable of enforcement. More generally, they need to balance the needs of the institution and individual.

No amount of regulation can guarantee, for example, that an overseas training recipient will return to their home country. However the evidence is that they do have

an impact. A recent survey of former Commonwealth Scholars who had returned following their award\* revealed that 52% said that a formal obligation or bond had been 'very significant' in their decision; this in the context of a programme in which the long-term return rate (estimated at about 85%) is higher than many other international schemes. Yet the terms of such obligations can vary – in some cases, employer institutions continue to meet the salary of the recipient during training, in addition to the stipend provided by the sponsor, others do not. The period of time which the recipient must spend at their home institution following training also varies, as does their reporting requirements during the training period and level of 'punishment' should the terms of the agreement not be observed. Development and enforcement of policy in this area, together with the maintenance of contact with, and feedback from, recipients during their awards, may well form an area in which human resource managers can play a significant role.

### *Integration with Wider Career Objectives*

At present, the terms of external grants are typically set by donors, who largely operate in isolation from each other. Particularly if overall levels of support are to increase, there will be a need for a wider perspective from within the institution on their longer term impact. At present, there is no obvious channel through which such views can be articulated. Whilst some donors might resent such a view, arguing that they are best placed to consider the best way of using their own resources, most would welcome it.

This paper cannot anticipate such discussions, but two examples can be given as illustrations. The first concerns re-integration after training or scholarships. First, it is clear from alumni studies of overseas scholarship recipients that many feel a sense of isolation on their return. To some extent this may be inevitable – for example if it relates to lower levels of facilities and infrastructure available – but in some cases it appears to relate to institutional policy. Some argue that inadequate thought has been given to how their new found skills will be utilised, or what balance of activities would best benefit their departments.

A second issue relates to the level at which external support is offered. Because external donors tend to devise their products in isolation from each other, they cannot be expected to see the collective impact of these in the same way that recipient institutions do. No comprehensive analysis of the schemes on offer exists, but it seems likely that many donors concentrate on obtaining postgraduate qualifications for elite candidates and mid-career updating. Both are doubtless important, but do they leave critical gaps. What, for example, about the training of academic staff at 'non-elite' levels, the period immediately after a postgraduate scholarship, at which a high level candidate is making critical choices about future career, or the last decade of an academic career? Would recipient institutions prefer to see stronger emphasis on these – and if so, what should the balance be?

Career objectives are also likely to be important to relevant diaspora. Overwhelmingly, these are likely to have left their home country due to a desire to further their careers. Whilst home institutions will not be able to offer financial benefits or resources that are likely to reverse this decision in the short-term, a creative approach in identifying what academics in this category would find attractive could bear fruit. Would a scheme to support such staff working for limited time

periods in their home country be useful? Would they find joint research or teaching activity attractive for their own careers? What incentives might be put in place – other than financial ones – to encourage such arrangements, and what type of links might exist with their current employers. All of these are issues in which human resource managers have a role to play.

### ***Integration with Institutional Strategy***

In recent years, donors have become increasingly concerned with the impact of their support on institutions, rather than the individual recipient. This is particularly the case at the level of postgraduate qualifications, where the cost of support has increased markedly in recent years. The success of this approach depends critically on synergy between their objectives and those of the institution that they are seeking to help.

Some donors are concerned primarily with *academic strategy*, seeking to help candidates in those subject areas prioritised by the institutions themselves. This could be because they are areas in which the institution has exceptional strength, exceptional need or exceptional potential to grow. However other areas of human resource strategy would also be of interest – for example towards gender, integration of ethnic or under privileged groups or older staff to compensate for the loss of those in early career. In these areas, there is a need to ensure that the priorities of the institution are clear to donors, or those making decisions on the allocation of internally managed funds. Again, this would appear to be an area in which human resource managers can play a critical role.

### ***Development of New Initiatives***

If the expressed enthusiasm of donors for supporting human capacity in developing countries materialises, there will be scope for new and radical thinking. Likewise, if academics now residing overseas are to play an increasing role in the higher education of their home country, there will be a need for creative new structures to accommodate this. In either case, human resource managers could play an important role in identifying areas where current procedures are inadequate or not sufficiently flexible to meet the new requirements, and to propose alternative ones.

Several sources of information could be utilised in support of this role. HR managers are likely to have strong knowledge of existing procedures, and their impact. Where these exist, they are in a unique position to analyse trends that emerge from appraisal systems, or responses to previous internal staff development initiative. HR offices may also have the memory to assess what has happened to recipients of externally funded scholarships over time. Each of these are potentially useful to the institution and to external donors seeking to assist it, providing that adequate mechanisms exist for their opinions to feed into policy.

### **Summary**

This paper has not been based on a detailed survey of the role currently played by human resource managers in staff development, or in the wider policy making of their institutions, although anecdotal evidence suggests that considerable variation exists. The primary aim has been to provoke discussion both on current role, and whether these might be expanded in an environment in which the opportunities for developing

human capacity increase. If so, this potential should be of interest both to institutional leaders and external donors.