

## Brain drain: Everything you need to know

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The migration of highly trained professionals out of Africa, often called brain drain, leaves many countries in the continent short of the skills needed to meet the challenges of economic development. The problem of the brain drain from poor to rich countries has received a lot of attention in the world's press as well as from academics and researchers. Studies and researches show that the brain drain of professionals from Africa is caused by a lot of factors; economic, socio-political, and even personal. It costs the countries of the continent a massive amount of resources and time to train these professionals who eventually migrate through the brain drain drift.

### What is brain drain?

Brain drain, also known as a human capital flight, can occur on several levels. Geographic brain drain happens when talented professionals flee one country or region within a country in favor of another. Organizational brain drain involves the mass exodus of talented workers from a company, often because they sense instability, a lack of opportunity within the company, or they may feel that they can realize their career goals more easily at another company. Industrial brain drain happens when skilled workers exit not only a company but an entire industry.

Several common causes precipitate brain drain on the geographic level including political instability, poor quality of life, limited access to health care, and a shortage of economic opportunity. These factors prompt skilled and talented workers to leave source countries for places that offer better opportunities. Organizational and industrial brain drain is usually a byproduct of a rapidly evolving economic landscape in which companies and industries unable to keep up with technological and societal changes lose their best workers to those that can.

### Brain drain in Africa

A country's true strength is its people. To Africa's dismay, the continent continues to suffer a brain drain where the highly educated and skilled leave for greener pastures. Losing your doctors, engineers, professors, and other skilled professionals can be detrimental to your country. Brain drain is a topic with which many countries deal. Africa is no exception. The push and pull factors of this brain drain are wide-ranging and complex and depend upon the African country. One might be forced to leave because of war or political instability. The attraction of

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higher pay and better opportunities for one's family might pull them away.

Brain drain can be extremely harmful if you live in an African nation with a limited pool of qualified individuals, to begin with. The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015 showed Burundi as the African country least able to hold on to its top talent. Algeria, Mauritania, Chad, and Guinea round out the top five countries unable to retain their top talents.

This movement and crisis are most clearly shown by examining Africa's medical field. The Ebola crisis highlighted the continent's doctor shortages. In 1973, there were 7.76 doctors per 100,000 people in Liberia. This dropped to 1.37 doctors in 2008. In East Africa, Uganda has less than 5,000 doctors and 30,000 nurses for a population topping 35 million people, according to World Health Organisation data.

Further qualitative research shows groups like Kenyan doctors migrating to the US, UK, and others, but more so to South Africa. US Census data shows the foreign-born African population growing rapidly. These migrants are also more educated compared to those from other continents. During the last 40 years, Africans have increased from about 80,000 in 1970 to about 1.6 million with the largest increase happening from 2000 to 2008-2012. This accounts for four percent of the total US foreign-born population with Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Ghana making up 41 percent of the Africa-born total. These immigrants had a higher level of educational attainment than the overall foreign-born population: 41 percent of those African-born had a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 28 percent overall.

African students continue to flock to American education institutions with the US being the most popular destination country for potential students from sub-Saharan Africa. A report from the New York-based Institute of International Education concludes that ambitious African youth perceive the US as having better quality higher education and access numerous scholarships available for talented students. As of 2014, there were 31,113 students from sub-Saharan Africa, comprising 4% of the 886,052 international students in the US. The top sub-Saharan African countries of origin are Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Cameroon, and Ethiopia.

## **The Impact of brain drain on Africa**

Who benefits from, and loses as a result of, African brain drain? It benefits the receiving countries by supplying them with scientists, doctors, engineers, economists, academicians, and technologists without the cost of spending resources to educate and train them. Recruitment agencies, also, are cashing in on the brain drain issue as many use the powerful tool of the World Wide Web and have collaborations with foreign embassies that require skilled professionals. African professionals who are desperate to migrate invest a lot in their course by paying fees for administration, visa arrangements, to these agencies. They are willing to spend that much because they are certain of earning more, eventually, in hard currency. Even though there is a migration crisis in the health sector in Africa, it appears that many sub-Saharan African countries have not been able to establish a strategy for managing brain drain (WHO, 2003). Despite the enormous amount of investment that African governments spend annually to educate young people in health fields, these professionals over into richer countries after qualifying (Gwaradzimba and Shumba, 2010). Medical practitioners from both Nigeria and Ghana, for instance, in their thousands, are working in the United States whereas there is an acute shortage in the health professions in their home countries. Furthermore, as of 2001, nearly half of the teaching staff of the Medical School, University of Ghana, had left the country, leaving the school without enough academics to train future doctors and depriving people of receiving adequate health care (EI-Khawas, 2004).

The effect of the brain drain leaves Africa in a state where there are low education quality and a lack of skilled professionals to ensure sustainable economic development in the continent. This results in the continent importing expatriates from the brain drainer-countries. This costs the continent a massive amount of money. An estimated 40% of Africa's top professionals live abroad, costing the continent over US\$ 4 million per year in consultancy and expatriate (Oduba, 2000). These expatriates are expensive as they are paid in hard currencies and in many circumstances, the African government does not have a say in the condition of employment. Using the services of foreign experts often forms part of the conditions of foreign aids that the African government receives from the developed countries.

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