

BRAIN DRAIN ISSUE

Two reports on the movement of skilled labour to and from Australia were released in July. Both relied on data from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and, at a superficial level, reached the same conclusion. Thus both conclude that there is a net gain of people with skills to Australia. It is in the detail of the analysis that serious differences appear as to what this means.

The first report, *Skilled Labour: Gains and Losses*, from Bob Birrell and others for the Monash Centre for Population and Urban Research argues that there has been a net gain of skills to Australia but admits that it “lacks qualitative information on the occupational characteristics of movers, such as level of education and job experience”. **Without further studies of who is leaving and arriving and with what qualifications, and especially whether immigrants are using their skills in Australia, the Birrell report gives little useful information.**

It stands in stark contrast to the report, *Emigration from Australia: Economic Implications*, from Graeme Hugo and others for the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA). This report uses similar data and comes to the same general conclusion—that there is a net gain in the number of skilled people coming to Australia.

However, the CEDA report makes a much more systematic attempt to get beneath the figures and the trends it identifies are worrying indeed. To quote: **“Nevertheless, the skill profile of emigration remains higher than that of immigration. The gap between numbers of skilled immigrants and the number of skilled emigrants is decreasing.”**

Thus there is little substance to the government’s claim on release of the Birrell report that the government’s policies to keep talented people in Australia are working and considerable evidence to the contrary. The CEDA report is a clearly articulated argument for policies that address emigration and ensuring that home-grown talent eventually finds it attractive to return.

FASTS Occasional Paper 3 documented the movement of highly qualified mathematicians and statisticians from universities and showed a serious brain drain. It also showed few of the young researchers were returning. This is consistent with the CEDA study. Also consistent with the CEDA study was a further analysis of the Birrell data by Barbara Preston as it applied to teachers and nurses, both areas in demand in Australia. Yet the number leaving Australia is increasing.

The next stage of the CEDA study is to interview emigrants and the institutions and groups that employ them. The Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) believes that a study also needs to be done to determine what happens to skilled immigrants. Are they employed in positions that use their skills and education?

Jan Thomas
August 2001