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Before Filipinos are recruited and deployed overseas, colleges and universities intentionally work to educate students for overseas jobs, says one observer from the Singapore Management University.



There are about 10 million Filipinos work overseas (Photo: AFP/Noel Celis)

SINGAPORE: In 2006, government agencies reported that more than 13,000 Filipino nurses left for countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Saudi Arabia.

Not included in this number are the nurses who left as permanent immigrants for places like the US and Canada.

Yet, in the years that followed, the biggest problem that plagued Filipino officials was not brain drain, but brain waste.

By 2016, the number of unemployed nurses in the Philippines had ballooned to the tens of thousands. Most of these nurses were young people who pursued nursing degrees to access overseas jobs, but found themselves unable to leave after graduation.

Policymakers blamed many factors such as retrogression at the US embassy and the global financial crisis. Yet, in my own research, part of the problem is an export-oriented higher education system that attempts to produce Filipino workers for foreign employers.

EDUCATING FOR EXPORT

Researchers have long studied how the Philippine state uses emigration as a development strategy, deliberately enabling the departure of its own citizens to maximise the remittances they will eventually send home.

Less known is how the Philippines' higher education system also attempts to produce employable workers for "export". What this means is that before Filipinos are recruited and deployed overseas, Philippine colleges and universities intentionally work to educate students for overseas jobs.

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A university student graduation. (Photo: REUTERS/Brian Snyder)

To do so, Filipino school owners and administrators adopted strategies of flexible production. They try to act like global factories by quickly shifting resources and manpower to produce the "right" types of graduates at the "right" time.

This has meant rapidly changing what academic majors are available, what courses are taught, and even how building space is allocated, just to offer degrees that supposedly address foreign labour needs.

In the case of nursing, news of active recruitment among US hospitals prompted school owners to quickly expand their nursing programmes.

In 2005, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education recorded close to 450,000 students pursuing nursing degrees. This number is close to ten times more than the usual number of nursing enrollees when nursing degrees are not "in demand" overseas.

Nursing leaders also adjusted curriculum to teach students skills that would be useful in the context of an advanced economy, such as the electronic charting of patients' information - even though most Philippine hospitals still rely on paper records.

There are some advantages to these export-oriented strategies. Schools are able to expose students to workplace expectations beyond the Philippine context. Given the limited space within public institutions, private schools also offer more opportunities for young Filipinos to access higher education.



In 2005, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education recorded close to ten times more than the usual number of students pursuing nursing degrees. (AFP File)

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Yet, research on education and work has also shown that it is never really possible to predict what kind of skills future jobs will need in a domestic labour market.

This issue raises the question of how well schools can really be flexible to the needs of employers beyond national borders, where changes in immigration policy and political regimes can make it even harder to predict what jobs will be available for migrants.

For example, in the late 2000s, a major called Hotel and Restaurant Management (known also as HRM) became popular due to reports that hotels and resorts in Singapore and the Middle East were looking to hire migrant workers. School owners rapidly shifted resources to this major, converting nursing laboratories into hot kitchens, and hiring more instructors in hospitality services.

Now, critics worry about another oversupply of graduates with hotel management degrees, most of who will likely end up working contractual jobs as housekeeping staff.

RESPONDING TO ASPIRATIONS

School owners and administrators are not solely to blame for this issue. It is important to note that 88 per cent of the Philippines' more than 1,900 colleges and universities are privately owned and depend completely on student tuition.

Higher education is expensive and Filipino families are anxious to ensure their children's financial stability.

School owners I have spoken to argue that they are only giving their students what they want to study.

Most people assume that migration occurs when young people are unable to find jobs to fit their training and qualifications. But in the Philippines, a large number of Filipinos actually choose their college majors based on what jobs are supposedly available abroad.

In this sense, higher education in the Philippines has become about learning to leave the country, desires which private schools respond and cater to.



Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) from Kuwait gather upon arrival at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Pasay city, Metro Manila, Philippines February 21, 2018. (Photo: REUTERS/Romeo Ranoco)

AVOIDING PITFALLS

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On the other hand, government agencies and universities can do more in avoiding the pitfalls of export-oriented education. The task of actually educating "employable" graduates is not a simple process of churning out products the way a factory manufactures material goods.

While school owners and state officials tried to follow a model of flexible production, their efforts fell short and have led to problems that even the Philippine state failed to anticipate.

Job insecurity and the weakening of professional values have demoralised college educators and faculty. Meanwhile, students are trapped in careers they did not choose for themselves, and struggle to stay "employable" as labour market demands change.

AIMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Philippine case prompts us to ask ourselves: What purpose should higher education serve? What are the costs of always prioritising global needs in local classrooms?

Export-oriented education is likely to spread, as more countries begin to use emigration as a development strategy. In recent years, state agencies in Vietnam, Indonesia and China have begun to use the Philippines as a model for labour export, making its higher education system a blueprint for these nations.

In many ways, the drive to produce future migrant workers, while flawed and problematic, is a powerful goal that suppresses the other ways colleges and universities produce citizens who work for the betterment of society.

There is then a need to talk about the public role of higher education as a setting for critical thinking, civic-minded youth, the development of human talent and knowledge, beyond the production of future workers.

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