

From brain drain to brain circulation: How labour mobility can help less developed European regions

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One of the potential problems created by the free movement of people is that skilled workers are drawn toward more developed areas, undermining the development of their own regions. As [Riccardo Crescenzi](#), [Nancy Holman](#) and [Enrico Orrù](#) write, this process, commonly referred to as 'brain drain', can present a number of challenges for less developed European regions. However, drawing on research in Sardinia, they suggest that fostering an alternative process of 'brain circulation', in which the international networks and contacts of individuals living within an area can be utilised as a resource for development, can make mobility a positive driver of change.



For southern Italy, like many less developed regions in Europe, it is probably impossible to stop the brain drain process that afflicts the area, where the most highly skilled workers leave for other countries or more developed European regions. But the experience of a recent mobility programme in Sardinia, which invested €200 million of European funds, demonstrates how the brain drain process can, with the right investment, be reshaped as a process of 'brain circulation' by exploiting the international networks and contacts of individuals living in the area.



In a recent [study](#) we analysed the locational choices made by beneficiaries of the Master & Back programme, which provided a group of young, high quality graduates from Sardinia the opportunity to study for a Master's or Doctorate in top class universities in Italy and abroad. Within our research we examined the academic and work history, family background, prior migration experience, occupational status and geographic location of the beneficiaries.



Young people gathered in the heart of Europe: inauguration of the festival 'EYE2014' at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Credits: [Claude Truong-Ngoc](#) / Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

According to our results, using purchasing power parity, the average net monthly salary of graduates who decided to work abroad was between €968 and €1019 more than those who came back to Sardinia. There were no significant

differences in salary between those who worked in another Italian region and those who came back to Sardinia. The rates of return tended to confirm the importance of economic factors in locational choice – 50% of those who had studied in another Italian region decided to return to Sardinia as opposed to 36% who undertook courses abroad.

However, the salary difference can only really explain part of the migration dynamic for the beneficiaries. Contrary to expectations, cultural, creative and environmental amenities rarely determined the locational choice of our graduates. Interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, social networks had a key role to play. Those who studied outside of Italy developed social networks and relationships in the new location that helped them to find new work opportunities. On the other hand, the same individuals that maintained active social networks in their home region had strong incentives to return. For many, the end of their studies meant trying to balance social networks at home and those made abroad when determining where to locate.

An emergent trend was the construction of various transnational careers, where work was based simultaneously in Sardinia and abroad, allowing beneficiaries to capitalise on both networks and experiences in each location. For example, engineers in green technology worked in Sardinia with rich networks developed in Germany. Alternatively, architects with Sardinian clients were able to use designs developed in Barcelona (and vice-versa with Sardinian designs and materials presented to Spanish architectural studios). The form and type of collaboration was varied among recipients, but typically involved an exchange and use of ideas, networks and materials in a strongly transnational context.

Considerable resources have been spent by regional governments in various European countries to stem the flow of the brain drain, including giving economic incentives to recipients to encourage their return. Master & Back also offered these types of incentives. However, this part of the policy arguably overlooks the circulatory and social nature of migration networks.

In this sense it is fundamental to make local labour markets accessible, open and based on skills and knowledge. Moreover, there should also be efforts to reinforce the social networks of students and young mobile professionals, by encouraging them to connect culturally, professionally and academically and by creating dedicated internet platforms to support this.

It is necessary to leverage the circular nature of migration rather than pursue often unrealistic strategies aimed at the permanent and exclusive (re)attraction of highly skilled labour to disadvantaged areas. In this sense flexible forms of work including tele-working from abroad can offer interesting opportunities. Less developed regions should also incentivise international careers through reducing unnecessary red-tape and costs, most especially with respect to taxation (on income and housing), health care and the transfer of pension contributions and benefits abroad or back to Italy upon return. The pension rules also should be overhauled to accommodate international careers.

In synthesis, the case of Sardinia provides lessons for most disadvantaged regions that struggle to educate, train and retain skilled graduates. This is that geographical mobility does not have to see itself as a hostage to the phenomena of brain drain. Instead, policies like the use of European Social Funds for education, should embrace the real benefits that a mobile and trained workforce can bring to disadvantaged areas through their knowledge and networks. Helping to facilitate these links and allowing them to thrive not only facilitates their future return, but can bring new business opportunities, entrepreneurial ideas and investments to less developed European regions.

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