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Working Paper

From “Brain-Drain” to “Brain-Retain”: Can Human Resource Development (HRD) turn human capital outflow to retention?

***Dr Fotios Mitsakis
Lecturer HRM/OB
Nottingham Business School
Nottingham Trent University
fotios.mitsakis@ntu.ac.uk
+44 (0) 115 848 2448***

Abstract

Purpose: The paper aims to address the causes and challenges of the “brain-drain” phenomenon by examining whether a “brain-retain” can be attained through greater human resource development interventions being offered from organisations. It seeks to highlight the reasons that led many high-skilled Greek individuals to migrate to a different country to look for a job. Thus, the hypothesis being formed suggests that greater HRD initiatives (innovative and strategic in nature as well) could significantly correlate with individuals’ intention to remain within an organisation; eventually, for “brain-retain” to eliminate “brain-drain”. To serve its purpose, the research aims to depict “work immigrants” perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation so to offer useful recommendations to both HRD practitioners and academics.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Individuals who left Greece to look for new career opportunities in a different country have been identified as the target audience of this research. Since it was difficult to directly (face-to-face) approach them, as all were spread across Europe (some even beyond European borders), several internet social and professional networks offered the best solution in accessing research participants. The snowball technique was also utilised (recommendations from initial participants). For instance, Facebook was one amongst them so to access various “Greek community” groups. Additionally, several professional groups within LinkedIn offered additional research participants. So far, 207 people have successfully completed the survey questionnaire, with the large majority of them being allocated in UK and a few more countries.

Findings: Research evidence highlights “brain-drain” as an intriguing and important issue both within the organisational and national contexts. The causes of human capital’s emigration are identified (crisis and low wages amongst the most important ones, along with limited career advancement opportunities), along with highlighting the respective industries in which greater workforce mobility was noticed. A striking observation emerged from most participants’ responses highlighting that better/clearer training, developmental and career advancement opportunities (amongst other reasons) can positively associate with their intention to remain within their Greek organisation rather than going abroad. To this extent, the research could make a strong argument that strategic HRD interventions could offer a way in handling such a widespread social phenomenon.

Originality/Value: The research could offer both theoretical and practical considerations. The study, based upon its final findings, will extend existing research both within the “brain-drain” and HRD literature by exemplifying how the latter could turn the former into a “brain-retain” state. Since the Greek economy (and employment relations respectively) has dominated the headlines of most global media over the last 5-6 years, that became the research’s focus. Research findings are subject to limited generalisation though due to their sole focus on Greek individuals who emigrated because of the “brain-drain” phenomenon. Yet, concurrently, it can be equally argued that these can constitute the starting point of future research within different national contexts; thus, to offer a comparison amongst people and nations over the phenomenon under investigation.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Brain Retain, Brain Gain, Human Resource Development (HRD).

Introduction

The “brain-drain” phenomenon is not a current trend, yet it has become more intense in recent years due to the global financial crisis. For many years, and for a variety of reasons, many nations have been hit by this “brain mobility” within which their highly-skilled individuals to mainly represent those “work immigrants” who sought employment elsewhere (Mitsiniotou, 2016; Hadjimatheou, 2012). Therefore, “brain-drain” can be described as the migration of highly-skilled and talented individuals to a different country from that in which their knowledge was generated (Marinakou et al., 2016). The causes of this emigration are mainly financial-related, such as an economy’s recession. As to that, “brain-drain” often associates with economic loss for those countries experiencing high rates of high-skilled workforce mobility (ibid). Further to that, there is a social loss as well for them which relates to the exodus of its most capable and well-educated professionals (Smith, 2016; 2015). Taking that into consideration, such a social phenomenon becomes increasingly a matter of concern within the EU and across the globe.

Precisely for Greece, the “brain-drain” phenomenon has existed since the early 1950s, yet it has dramatically increased due to the economic crisis and its aftermath in 2008 (Theodoropoulos et al., 2014). Besides the crisis though, various other factors that contributed to “brain-drain” were also noticed; amongst them the reduced meritocracy and the corruption in Greece, the greater employment and career advancement prospects being offered abroad etc. (OECD, 2015). Further to that, the sectors which have mostly been influenced by “brain-drain” were identified, with construction, banking and finance, health, and shipping to lead. A study conducted by Labrianidis and Vogiatzis (2011) estimated that more than 190.000 graduates have left Greece to seek employment mainly (but not only) in another European country.

Having all that considered, this working paper aims at analysing the Greek “brain-drain” phenomenon, along with examining the ways in which it can turn into a “brain-retain”. The paper further explores the causes and the challenges of the phenomenon by examining the opinions of those left Greece to seek a new life elsewhere. Finally, it seeks to provide an answer as to whether human resource development initiatives could hold human capital back from leaving organisations. Research findings (study in progress) highlight the reasons that made a large majority of young individuals to leave the country, along with presenting what will make them return. In addition, research participants offered their insights into what could help in coping with “brain-drain” and thus to turn the current situation into a “brain-retain” state. It was interesting though to notice that much of them do not intend to return back home for any reason (not at least for the following 5-6 years). Overall, the exodus of well-educated/talented individuals has resulted both to short- and long-term implications for the country’s economic recovery and growth.

Literature Review

It is suggested that the “brain-drain” phenomenon initiated due to the ineffective utilisation of a country’s workforce expertise (Iravani, 2011; Hilderbrand and Grindle, 1997). However, other argue that other factors are also lie behind the outburst of this social phenomenon, including inadequate organisational budgets for staffing, training and developing the workforce, unfavourable employment conditions, unattractive remuneration packages, political interference and/or corruption etc. (Marinakou et al., 2016).

According to Iravani (2011), such a “brain mobility” can be categorised into a four-tier classification, namely the “brain-expert”, the “brain-exchange”, the “brain overflow”, and the “brain-drain”. The author suggests that due to demand and supply declination, there is always a surplus (“brain overflow”) of highly-skilled individuals with the local/national employment market, which might be absorbed from a different one (ibid). The “brain-drain” refers to the outflow of competent professionals to a different country, while a “brain exchange” could occur between two or more countries when individuals from one country emigrate to another one (and vice versa) so for a knowledge and expertise transfer to take place (ibid). In that case, this phenomenon might be temporary as the “brain losses” are compensated by the respective “brain gains” (ibid). However, in the case of Greece, such a “brain mobility” starts as a “brain overflow” since the country cannot absorb its human capital (lack of jobs due to the crisis), and turns into a “brain-drain” as most individuals choose to emigrate.

Since the early 1950s, the “brain-drain” phenomenon was a major shaping factor of Greece’s socio-cultural landscape, yet as a result of different reasons compared to today. Back then, mainly male individuals from poor social classes, and with some skills, used to immigrate to a different country so to be able to support their families (Marinakou et al., 2016). However, these days, the so called “work immigrants” consist of young, well-educated, and ambitious individuals of both sexes who look for better career opportunities elsewhere, mainly in order to support their lives (Ifanti et al., 2014; Giousmpasoglou, 2014; Christopoulos et al., 2014). Eventually, a human capital quality drop was noticed compared to previous states in the past (OECD, 2012).

The global financial crisis, followed by the Greek economic crisis and its prolonged recession, deteriorated the Greek economy and led to an increase of the unemployment rate, along with evoking feelings of labour insecurity and poverty amongst Greek citizens at unprecedented levels (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2016; Koulouris et al., 2014). Therefore, the “brain-drain” phenomenon re-emerged as a social problem relating with human capital losses in a period when individuals, businesses, and society’s development and growth were needed so to eliminate the negative aftermath of the economic crisis and the recession. That further resulted to a loss of national human capital resources as the recipient countries (mainly UK, Germany and UAE) received the respective educational return on investment of those individuals (Ifanti et al., 2014; Iravani, 2011, Marinakou et al., 2016). The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) reported that 57 percent of these “work immigrants” were men (with women to account for 43% respectively), while over 42 percent of them to consist of young individuals aged between 20 to 26 years old. The large majority of them work for the construction industry, followed by banking and finance, health services (doctors & nurses), shipping and educational sciences (ibid). Further to that, research findings indicated their educational level with 63 percent holding a master degree, 16 percent a doctorate, and the remaining 21 percent to hold a bachelor and/or a college degree.

Overall, Theodoropoulos et al. (2014) and Gropas and Triantafyllidou (2013) suggest that such a “brain-drain” outflow mainly affect the well-educated and talented individuals, and thus it is expected to have major long-term implications for Greece’s economic growth and competitiveness.

In addition, Dalla et al. (2013) argued that labour market's characteristics, the greater career advancement opportunities, and career development incentives constitute the main factors of most "work immigrants" emigration. Consequently, that highlights how "brain-drain" could feature as an important issue within the HRD context. Thus, Verma et al. (2008) suggests that this is the outcome of the parent country's inability to utilise its workforce's skills, coupled with a relative lack of providing career development and advancement opportunities as well. Eventually, HRD could play a crucial role in offering the afore-mentioned opportunities to those talented individuals so as to help eliminating the "brain-drain" phenomenon, or at least, to turn it into "brain-exchange".

The significance of HRD in turning "brain-drain" into "brain-gain" associates with the underpinnings of human capital theory emphasising on the relationship between workforce's skills and quality in promoting organisational learning, "knowledge-sharing", and performance (Stewart and Tansley, 2002; Swart et al., 2003; Nafukho et al., 2004; Swanson, 2001). According to Kessels and Poell (2004) and Cross et al. (2002), HRD, and its professionals, should promote the appropriate strategies in helping their employees and organisations with the development of intellectual capital which eventually will result to competitive advantage for the benefit of all. In a similar vein, Mankin (2009) and Wang and Holton (2005) note that an organisation's workforce represents a valuable organisational asset which could be significantly improved through investment in their training and development. However, when individuals decide to migrate, organisational investments in human capital's development turn into a deficit for them and the parent country as return on investment generates to the host country (ibid). Eventually, the "brain-mobility" is intensified when the most talented, well-educated and highly-skilled individuals leave their home country.

Overall, the "brain-drain" phenomenon has been intensified over the last few years mainly due to globalisation and the economic crisis. Nevertheless, what it remains crucial is the role of HRD in turning such a social phenomenon into a "brain-gain" state. Yet, as Marinakou et al. (2016) noted "*the proper and attracting circumstances have not been created to keep the educated in.*" (p.11). Low investments in workforce's development also results to this "brain outflow" which eventually impedes an economy's growth.

Research Methodology

Following the research study's focus on "brain-drain" and how HRD could turn it into "brain-retain" as a means of holding human capital from migrating to a different country, individuals who left Greece, and their work, to look for other career opportunities in a different country were identified as the target audience of this research.

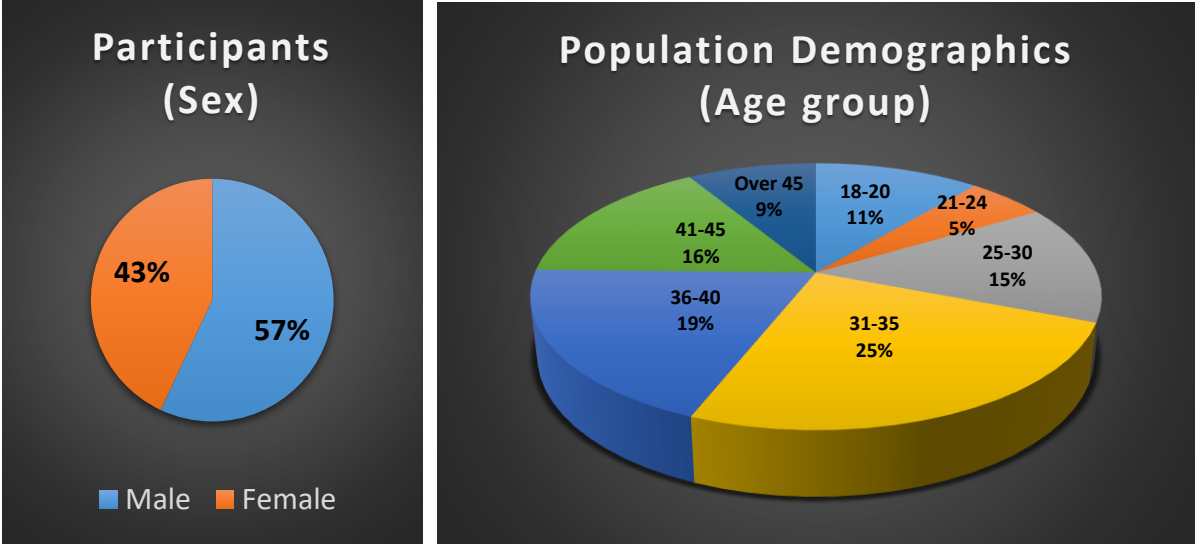
As it was difficult to directly (face-to-face) approach them, as research population were scattered across Europe (some even beyond European borders), several internet social and professional networks offered the best solution in accessing research participants. For instance, Facebook was one amongst them so to access various "Greek community" groups. Additionally, several professional groups within LinkedIn offered additional research participants. The survey questionnaire focused on identifying demographic information and other statistics (e.g. age, sex, recipient country, educational level and work occupation etc.), along with highlighting the factors that made those individuals to emigrate, their intention to return back home, what will make them return and their propositions on how to turn "brain-drain" into "brain-retain".

The snowball technique was also utilised (recommendations from existing participants). Such technique assures that all participants share those characteristics being required from the research (e.g. individuals who migrated abroad), along with possessing the desired knowledge to address the survey questions. Eventually, that helped the researcher to increase the pool of its research participants and thus to enhance research’s outcomes. So far, 207 individuals have successfully completed the survey questionnaire, with the large majority of them being allocated in UK and a few more countries.

Findings and Discussion (upon further interpretation based on final findings)

The study reports on participants’ demographics and profile characteristics (fig.1) as important elements to understand their perceptions of the “brain-drain” phenomenon in their home country.

Figure 1: Population demographics and profile characteristics

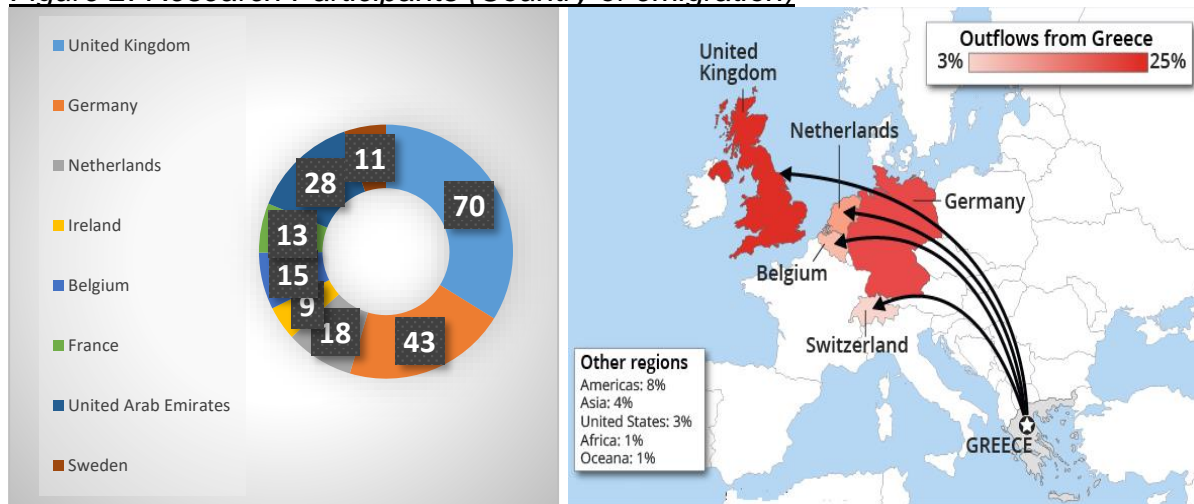


Evidently, the large majority of the individuals are characterised as Generation Y (age 20-35) with the respective percentage to account for 40%. That can offer a clear indication that mostly the young brains have migrated. All research participants aged in this particular age group suggested that they have left Greece to seek better employment and career advancement opportunities abroad. Further to them, most of those individuals aged 24 years old and below emigrated either to study abroad and/or to meliorate their career opportunities. Finally, all people being placed on the age group 36 years old and higher, all suggested that they chose to migrate as either because they made redundant due to the economic crisis or in order to secure a better future for their family (mostly referring to their children – providing them the opportunity to study and look for work in a more stable economy). The large majority of people aged between 31 to 45 years old also suggested that they were working before leaving Greece, yet they thought their life and work prospects could be improved elsewhere.

For most of them, that was the first time moving abroad in a country to live without having any relatives or friends there. Thus, they raised many concerns as to how their life would be affected due to this change and new life start. The majority of them

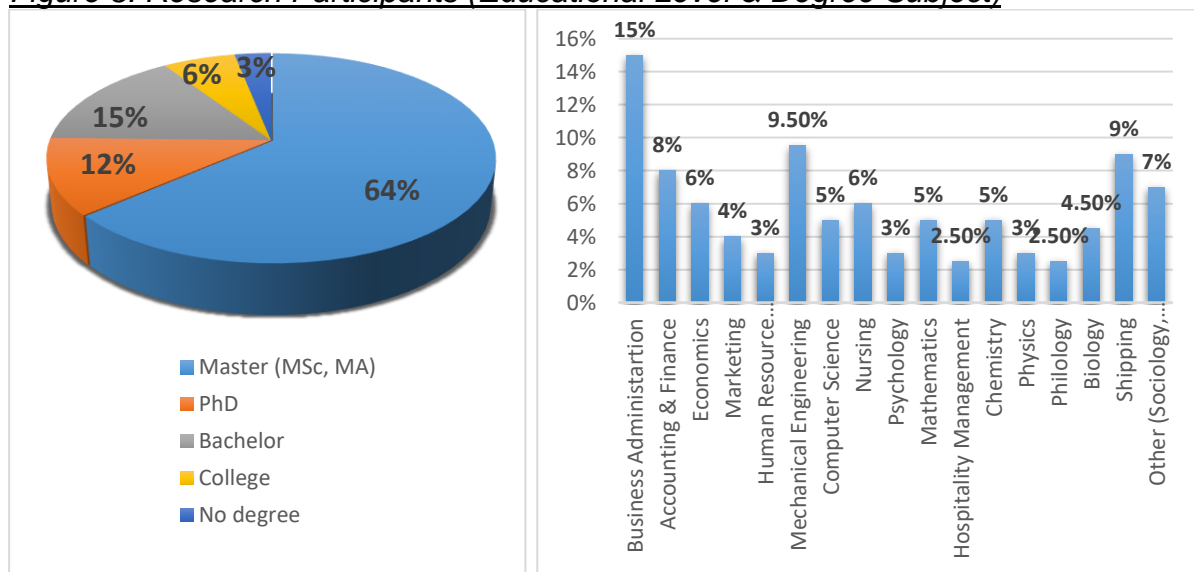
migrated to work in Europe (mainly in UK, followed by Germany), and many moved to UAE as well (fig.2)

Figure 2: Research Participants (Country of emigration)



Interestingly, the large majority of them (64%) hold a master degree, followed by 15% holding a bachelor and 12% having a PhD as presented below (fig.3). Accordingly, participants' subject of expertise (degree) is shown below as well.

Figure 3: Research Participants (Educational Level & Degree Subject)



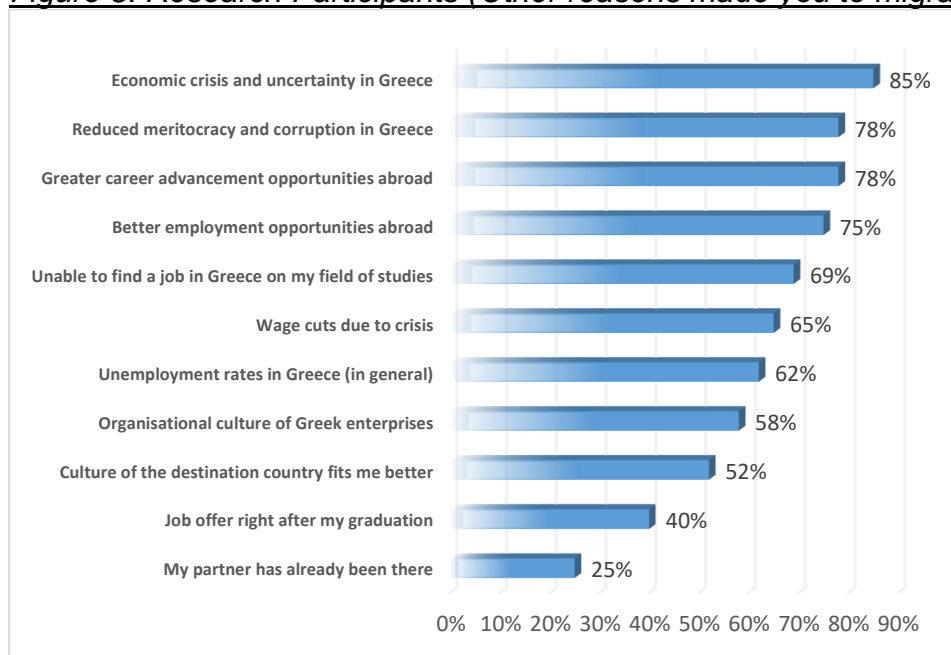
When asked to highlight the factors that made them leave Greece, and what pulled them to the recipient country, slightly more than half of them stated that the main reason was to find a job (while worked before in Greece) either because they were made redundant or in order to increase their earnings and to secure their family's well-being (fig.4).

Figure 4: Research Participants (What made to move abroad?)



Other emerging themes related with the economic crisis and the employment (and not only) uncertainty in Greece (85%), followed by the reduced meritocracy and the political corruption (78%) (fig.5). In addition, a high percentage referred to the better employment and the greater career advancement opportunities being offered abroad.

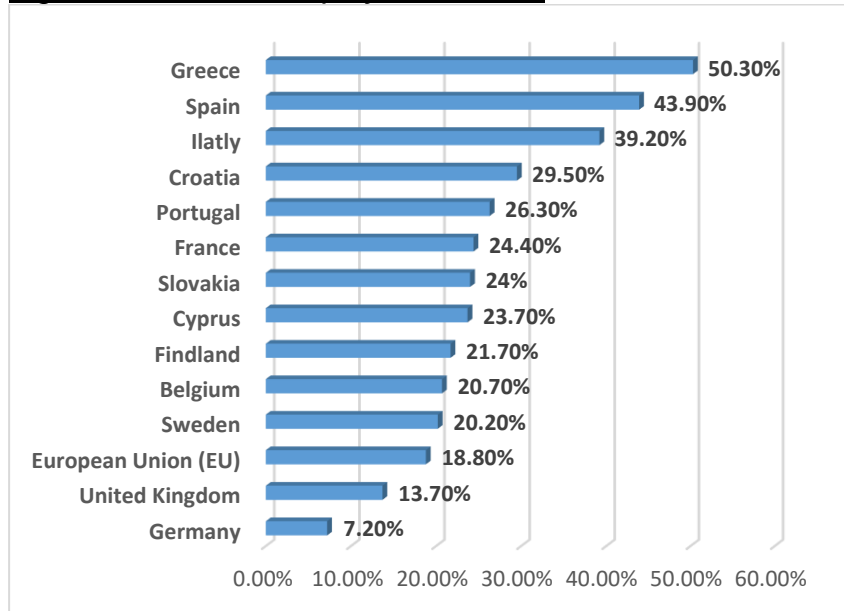
Figure 5: Research Participants (Other reasons made you to migrate abroad?)



Much of them further argued that it took more than a year after their graduation to get a job offer, yet with the basics being offered – that making it impossible to cover living expenses. Eventually, the decision to emigrate was made relatively easy. They associate their concern with the lack of career opportunities in Greece, especially for younger job candidates lacking of relevant working experience. The majority further argued that it was difficult to find a job relevant to what they have studied or anything slightly similar to any other sector. That actually was always a great challenge for

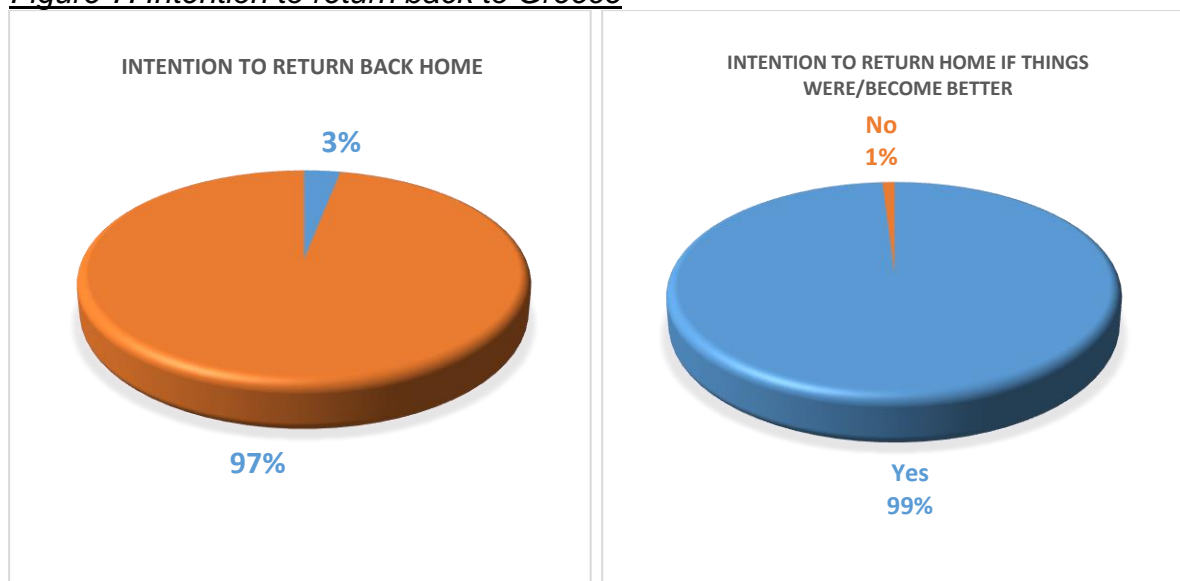
Greece as for many years there is a mismatch between the skills required from the labour market and the qualifications being offered from potential candidates (Karantinos, 2012), a social phenomenon that highly boosted youth unemployment to its highest rate (50.3%) (fig.6 – Eurostat, 2017).

Figure 6: Youth Unemployment Rates



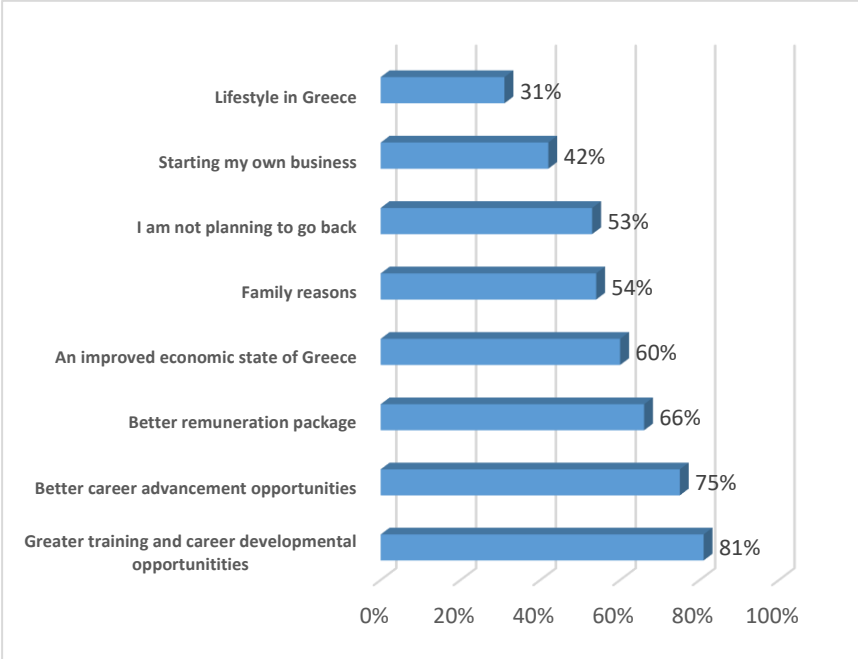
Others commented on the quality of life being offered abroad, along with the respective quality at their work. They suggested that now they have more opportunities to advance their career and eventually to secure a better professional and personal life. They continued by suggesting that moving abroad secured the quality of their children’s life in the long-run, thus they did not intend to return back home (at least for the next 5-10 years). Yet, being asked to state their preference (on where to live) if things were better in Greece, their answer was crystal clear as well contradicting their previous suggestion (fig.7).

Figure 7: Intention to return back to Greece



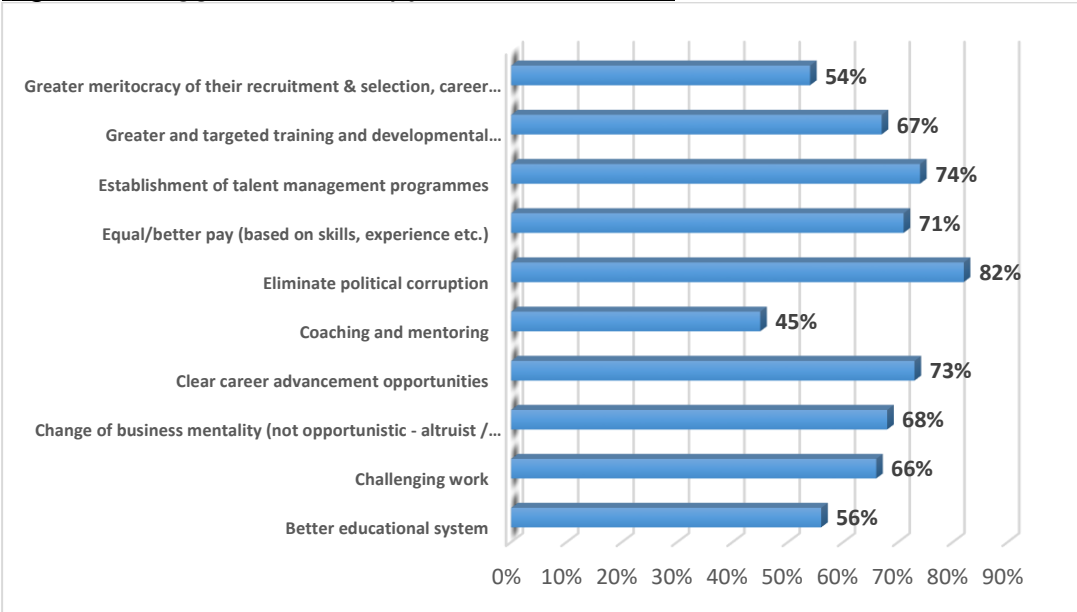
Having indicated this controversial results, research participants were asked to outline the reasons that would make them to return to Greece. Surprisingly, the large majority of them highlighted that greater career development and advancement opportunities (81% & 75% respectively) could offer a strong argument to their decision to return (fig.8) amongst many other reasons.

Figure 8: Reasons that make you return back to Greece



To associate the discussion with “brain-drain” that actually led them to migrate abroad, participants were asked to provide suggestions on how to cope with this widespread social phenomenon. Most of their suggestions were associated with clearer career advancement opportunities, equal and higher pay, the establishment of a talent management program, and greater and targeted training and developmental interventions.

Figure 9: Suggestions to copy with “brain-drain”



The elimination of the political corruption in Greece was also included amongst the suggestions to cope with “brain-drain”. They clarified their suggestion by arguing that due to the crisis the situation has got worse as everyone tried to secure a job through acquaintances with key people in key positions within organisations rather than equally competing with other candidates. Yet, most importantly, the fact that all agreed that HRD could offer an optimum solution in turning “brain-drain” into “brain-retain” has positively surprised the researcher by validating his hypothesis that greater HRD initiatives (through greater career development and advancement opportunities) could significantly correlate with individuals’ intention to remain within an organisation (thus, not to migrate).

Conclusions

“Brain-drain” emerged not only as a social phenomenon in Greece, but also elsewhere across the globe owing to globalisation and the financial crisis. The phenomenon associates with a “human capital drainage” which results many well-educated individuals to migrate to a different country. The economic uncertainty in Greece, accompanied by the political corruption, the lack of employment and career development and advancement opportunities etc., represent the main reasons that led this study’s research participants to emigrate to work abroad.

Both business world and people value education and training and development, yet the proper circumstances were not developed to keep those highly-skilled and well-educated individuals within the country. Therefore, the brightest individuals left the country, with governments and organisations doing nothing to turn “brain-drain” into “brain-retain”. Working conditions got worst instead, while less employment and career development and advancement opportunities were offered. Eventually, business and individual growth were put in risk. The large majority of the research participants proposed that greater career advancement and development opportunities being offered on behalf of Greek employers could constitute a reason for them to think returning back home, and thus to help eliminate this brain-emigration. Therefore, the Greek government and all Greek organisations should re-design their HRD policies and practices in such a way so to attract expatriates.

The associated costs of this “brain-outflow” are well known. All individuals leaving a country represent a “failed investment” for it and their respective organisation, especially when it is difficult to replace them with equally highly-skilled individuals. Organisations are increasingly recognising that HRD interventions could help in attracting, developing and retaining talent (Gandz, 2006). Having more career development and advancement opportunities secured, many individuals are willing to return so to contribute positively to a “brain-inflow” for Greece. An intellectual inflow is further expected to bring new knowledge and insights so to initiate successful business and HRD strategies to successfully cope with the “brain-drain” phenomenon.

This working paper suggests that a “brain-retain” should be evidenced instead through greater HRD initiatives. Meanwhile, a “brain circulation” is also welcomed (e.g. migrate to study and to work abroad and then return to home country to contribute to local economy’s growth).

In account of all, the study is expected to offer useful insights for HRD professionals (both at organisational and national levels) on how through effective HRD interventions could keep their talented within rather than “pushing” them to emigrate.

The present working paper is expected (in its final format) to extend past research on the much-debated “brain-drain” phenomenon by demonstrating whether HRD holds the potential to keep human capital back from leaving organisations in order to seek for new employment opportunities abroad. Eventually, its implications are expected to offer a theoretical and practical debate on “brain drain” and its association with HRD. Subject to its final research findings, additional research may also be required so to enhance the robustness of the research findings and the generalisations could be made. Therefore, future research may also benefit from monitoring important themes including economic and social aspects, demographics as well as reception and absorption in destination countries so for a comparison to take place.

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