

# Brain drain and the Greek crisis

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By Lois Labrianidis and Manolis Pratsinakis

In the context of the debt crisis, recession, austerity and their socio-political consequences, Greece is experiencing a new major wave of out-migration. Emigration has become a survival strategy for many people who are finding it hard to make ends meet, while, at the same time, it has also emerged as an increasingly appealing option for others in less pressing need, who see their chances of socioeconomic advancement severely reduced. One dimension of this multifaceted phenomenon concerns the emigration of graduates, which accounts for approximately two-thirds of the outflow.

The emigration of Greek graduates is not a new phenomenon. Greece has long postponed the move from a low-cost to a knowledge-based economy, despite the fact that since the 1990s a significant upward trend in higher education studies was observed in the country. As a result, the Greek economy has been unable to take advantage of the presence of a highly educated workforce and even before the crisis many highly educated people left the country in search of employment that corresponded to their qualifications and career ambitions. Yet it is only now that the ongoing brain drain has acquired alarming proportions, triggered by a sudden aggravation of the unfavourable conditions in the national labour market that were already acting as push factors. The combined effect of the emigration of a highly educated labour force on the one hand and recession and austerity on the other and their mutually exacerbating relationship thus risks imposing a cycle of underdevelopment on the Greek economy. It has also turned Greece into a major exporter of highly skilled labour to the countries of Northern Europe, thus replicating older 'core–periphery' relations within the EU.

In this context, the need for a state policy aimed at alleviating the negative consequences of this phenomenon is acute. In the current circumstances focusing on a repatriation policy will not do, since return to Greece in the short term is not something most emigrants are planning or indeed dreaming of. Instead the focus should be on helping to develop means of cooperation which could lead to the development of viable and sustained transnational ties between them and the Greek society and economy. In the shorter and medium term concrete policies could be implemented to provide a platform allowing emigrants to transfer their ideas and knowledge through collaborations with universities, research centres and private companies, by working intermittently in their country of origin or by establishing their own businesses, a 'bridge' that might later bring them back.

In addition, the Greek state must publicly and formally recognize the fundamental value of this human capital and constantly encourage the creation of a more meritocratic labour market, in order to ensure that the highly-educated labour force is not only employed as befits its skills and knowledge, but also occupies a central role in the Greek administrative/political system and the decision-making centres. Even though highly skilled expatriates cannot steer the process of changing the developmental model of a country all by themselves, they can be extremely valuable partners in such a process. In Greece's case, that could eventually help address some of the reasons that led to their leaving in the first place, hence also enabling the return of some of them with positive outcomes for the Greek economy, society and culture.

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**A research seminar on the topic took place on Tuesday, 22 November 2016, organised by the Hellenic Observatory. To listen to the podcast and more details about the event, please visit the [event page](#).**

