



# Towards a policy of cultivating, securing and attracting talent

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A necessary condition for a country's economic, political and social success is to have talent of any kind – scientific, entrepreneurial, artistic. First and foremost, because it is from within environments with plenty of talent that new, high-level entrepreneurial initiatives come out, and in enough large numbers so the action of probability laws makes sure a whole string of successful projects. And secondly, because talent produces ideas, and resources – both at home and abroad – follow ideas. Related to scientific and technological research, Catalonia bears some examples: the Yahoo lab, IBM's stake in the supercomputer and the good outcomes at different European calls would not have been possible without previous human talent.

To attain economic, political and social success, a country obviously needs something more than just talent. It is not enough as a pre-requisite, but other things are also needed: for instance, good labs for research, or good concert halls for music. However, facilities are also necessary as they are – or should be – tools to secure talent. A trap public policies sometimes fall into is being generous and very careful in designing facilities, but much less so when setting up the human teams that are to use them. The basis should always be talent. It is better not to have to choose between brains and bricks, but if there is no other way, then better choose brains. The motto of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, one of the private charities giving most support to research in the United States, brings this priority to the point: «People, not projects».

**Without a good educational system, potential talent will not become effective. The system has to ensure high minimum quality standards in education, and it needs to allow detecting and cultivating specific talent.**

Giving priority to talent is basically good news, as scientific evidence tells us that we humans are surprisingly similar from a genetic perspective. We therefore have the certainty that biological raw talent production is equally distributed. As for the rest, however, things are not that easy nor do they work on their own. There are two factors posing difficulties I would like to look at more in detail: talent needs to be trained, and talent moves.

Creativity without training is rarely successful. Without a good educational system, potential talent will not become effective. In this respect, we need to distinguish between two important features of an educational system, both of which are indispensable for training talent. The first is *extensive quality*, that is, the ability of the system to ensure high minimum quality standards reaching out to practically the whole young population.

The second could be termed as *intensive quality*, which refers to the need for the system to allow detecting and cultivating specific talent in all its potentialities. Let's assume that a small country like Jamaica has much talent in track and field, so we will take for granted that there is a very good system for scouting and fostering excellence in this area. The prevailing idea will for sure not be that there is no need to care about good athletes. Unfortunately, it is not rare to meet prejudices of this kind that obviously have a negative effect on forming talent.

I call this stance *prejudice* because a system that allows to push specific talent to its limit despite ensuring extensive quality, if designed consistently to meet this goal, is not necessarily more expensive than one giving value to extensive quality and uniformity only. For instance, if we kept only to scientific talent, we could think of secondary schools specialised on science – where teachers specifically suited for this kind of subjects would work – or schools could be much larger, as happens in many places in the United States, so as to allow a more diverse teaching offer. Perhaps the school would not be in the neighbourhood. But is this an advantage worth it? Everyone has obviously their own answer to it, but we can certainly be sure that if a country taking care of extensive quality does not have any intensive, it is not due to economic reasons but because the sum of these answers, reflected in its public policies, does not consider it relevant.

Let's have a look at talent mobility. There are many things related to it. First of all, talent reacts to economic incentives, so poor countries tend to export it. One should ask if we should not foster a «fair trade» policy here too and be ready to have staying in the country of origin or, more probably, returning there after a period of training at international centres not become a significant economic burden.

Such programmes would not be difficult to implement. It could be done in many ways. For instance, talking about science, a country could open delegations of its research institutions in a poorer one – in fact, organisations such as the

German Max Planck Institute and the French CNRS already do it to a certain extent. It should be noted, however, that there is a very thin borderline.

**Talent moves for three main reasons: economic incentives, concentration of talent and a high living standard, especially in a cultural respect.**

What I just mentioned has a protectionist version, namely negative discrimination against trained foreign professionals to avoid decapitalisation of their country of origin. The intention may be good, but is it legitimate to put barriers to the basic right of looking for a better life? Or to the right, perhaps less basic but anyway significant, to professional self-development? It would be much better if keeping talent in its countries of origin was promoted by setting up good working conditions there (anti-brain drain policies).

But talent mobility is not only enticed by economic attraction. Talent also searches talent.

On the one hand, there is the attraction of being in a working environment in which the talent of fellow employees has a positive effect on one's own productivity. A football player or a musician strives for being part of a very good team or orchestra.

On the other hand, it is commonplace to long for a setting with a high living standard. We need to bear in mind that quality of life to attract talent not only involves good weather and good restaurants but also a very high cultural and educational level. For instance, Eric Kandel, the 2000 medicine Nobel Prize winner, mentions in his excellent autobiography *In Search of Memory* that one reason for which he moved from Harvard, and thus Boston, to New York in 1965 was that the Big Apple had a very good opera and was the world centre of art. Any city or region aspiring to concentrate talent needs to strongly consider this aspect. A policy to attract talent must not be very segmented. One can certainly not be at the fore-

front in all fields, but it is neither feasible to be a landmark in just one activity but a sheer desert for the rest. This needs to be pointed out as it is not always considered as it should be. Lively museums, excellent orchestras, etc. are very important factors.

**Once a policy to attract and consolidate talent is reached, a massive drop is unlikely: talent likes talent.**

The outcome of all this is that talent tends to concentrate, which should concern us a lot as there is few room left: either a place attracts talent or it expels talent. The medium term, which probably is where Catalonia is now, with inbound and outbound talent breaking even, is delicate and perhaps unstable. The key term of a policy to attract and consolidate talent pushing into the right direction is «critical mass». It is difficult to reach it, but once it is reached, a massive drop is unlikely and the way towards expansion is self-sustained. It is so for the reason already mentioned: talent likes talent. And, by the way, it does so much that it often marries with each other so it is commonplace today that decision-making units are couples for whom a much higher likeliness to find satisfactory jobs for both contributes to generate a stable setting in certain geographical areas, thus creating a very big competitive advantage for such locations.

**Policies to attract and consolidate talent are needed and have to allow long-term engagements. Giving priority to foreign over resident talent creates perverse incentives. Talent needs to be appreciated and treated well, no matter its original location.**

Having reached this point, we have enough clues to name three properties of a good policy to attract and consolidate talent:

- ▶ An overall policy to act on a wide front is needed to allow, for instance, that two instead of one find an interesting job.
- ▶ There is a need for explicit policies addressed at consolidating talent. I say *consolidation*, not just *attraction*. Attraction and retention cannot be kept apart. Existing programmes devoted to attracting new talent are planned the wrong way because giving priority to foreign over resident talent creates perverse incentives, as the message sent out is that you first need to leave to become attractive. An effective talent policy needs to be neutral as to the initial location, with no conditions giving precedence to either foreigners or locals. This has incidentally a big effect on residence and visa policies. To sum up, the best policy to attract talent is appreciating and treating it well, no matter its original location. In the area of science, both the European Research Council and the ICREA in Catalonia follow scrupulously this principle of neutrality.
- ▶ A good policy to attract talent needs to include tools allowing long-term engagements as well as a legal setting having such engagements fulfilled. Well funded programmes with a five-year run only are not effective enough. Indefinite engagements – provided with assessment clauses – are indispensable, related to both facilities and work, but without reaching public service terms. In this respect, the Catalan ICREA model has worked very well under the successive leadership of Salvador Barberà, Enric Banda and Jaume Bertranpetit.

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