



Business education

## Soapbox: Cold welcome in the US

By AnnaLee Saxenian

Published: March 29 2009 20:27 | Last updated: March 29 2009 20:27

Entrepreneurship in the US technology sector is fuelled by immigrant engineers and scientists. Foreign-born students receive more than half of all US doctorates in engineering, maths, computer science, physics and economics and – along with a growing population of international MBAs – have started about half of Silicon Valley’s technology companies.

But the US has changed from a land of opportunity to a country where even highly skilled immigrants feel unwelcome. We have raised barriers for visas, limited access to public sector jobs and reduced the hiring of foreign students for fear of political backlash.

For this reason, US policymakers and educators should be alarmed by a recent survey showing that foreign-born graduate students believe their skills are more valuable in their home countries than in the US. The survey “Losing the World’s Best and Brightest: America’s New Immigrant Entrepreneurs” reports on a Facebook survey of 1,224 foreign nationals studying at, or graduating from, US universities and colleges.

The research, funded by the [Ewing Marian Kaufmann Foundation](#), sends a powerful message:

- Students still believe US universities are the best in the world. But they are less inclined to remain in the US to create jobs and economic opportunities after they graduate.
- High retention rates among doctoral graduates are unlikely to continue. Only 58 per cent of Indian and 54 per cent of Chinese students want to stay in the US on graduation and only 6 per cent of Indian and 10 per cent of Chinese say they want to remain in the US permanently.
- Eighty-five per cent of Indian and Chinese students are concerned about obtaining work visas and some three-quarters believe it will be difficult to find jobs in their field in the US. Only 7 per cent of Chinese students and 25 per cent of Indian students surveyed believe the best days for the US lie ahead.
- A majority believe that their home country economies will grow faster in the future than in the past and that innovation in India and China will outpace that in the US over the next 25 years.

As policymakers in Europe and Asia create incentives to attract talented immigrants, there is growing resentment towards foreign workers in the US, based on the mistaken view that they

displace native-born workers. In fact, foreign-born scientists have created hundreds of thousands of new jobs, billions of dollars of revenue and substantial wealth in the US, primarily in high-technology sectors.

It is natural that many immigrants wish to return home. And economies benefit from “brain circulation” and the global ties that highly skilled immigrants build with their home country counterparts. These “new Argonauts” have contributed to the emergence of dynamic new centres of entrepreneurship and innovation in developing regions from Taiwan and Israel to Bangalore and Shanghai.

But circulation is a two-way street. The survey suggests the US is losing the openness that made it a magnet for the most talented immigrants. The health of US universities depends on the economy. In coming years, even the greatest universities will be challenged as developing economies invest their own systems of higher education.

The Obama administration needs to reduce the bureaucratic barriers for immigrant work visas and permanent residency. Second, it needs to resist the temptation to respond to economic crises by erecting economic barriers or blaming immigrants for problems that are home grown.

Finally, the US needs to restore the investment in research and education that built world-class universities and made the US the world’s leading technology innovator in the postwar period.

The combination of world-class institutions of research and learning and an eager embrace of talent from all over the world will ensure the US remains a sought-after economic partner and the preferred destination for the creators of economic opportunity.

*AnnaLee Saxenian is dean and professor, School of Information at UCLA, [Berkeley](#). She is author of “The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy” (2006)*