

Research Article



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# An Empirical Analysis of Transnational Migration and Post-Study Decisions of Kerala's Educational Migrants

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As the migration of students from Kerala goes on unabated, the current paper focuses on the factors that motivate students to migrate. Migration decisions of students to a certain extent are influenced by their aspirations to take advantage of better employment prospects in the destination country. This is obvious from their post-study plans which in turn depend on the push factors especially those relating to bleak employment prospects and poor quality of lives in their home state. Post-study decision plans of the students are also inextricably linked to their choice of destination country. Those who have emigrated to the United Kingdom and the European Union have expressed their preference to stay back in their host country to further their career prospects and enjoying a better quality of life. Contrarily, those who have emigrated exclusively for securing higher education in countries like China and Russia prefer to return to their home state. Amongst the emigrant students who prefer to remain abroad, the majority are aspiring first-generation learners from urban areas belonging to low-income families. This establishes the role of unfavourable local conditions in determining the post-study decisions of emigrant students.

## Keywords

Students, migration, post-study plans, higher education, employment

## INTRODUCTION

Kerala of late has been witnessing migration of hordes of students to foreign countries. Citing the Ministry of External Affairs, George & Pious (2023) reported that 30,948 students from Kerala travelled abroad in 2019. As per the records placed on the state assembly by the Minister of Higher Education of Kerala, 4% of the students who have gone abroad from India are comprised of students from the state. Referring to these observations made by the Minister of Higher Education, it can be suggested that out of 13,24,954 students who migrated from India for higher education abroad in 2022, a sizeable figure of about 52,998 students is from Kerala. Reckoning the magnitude of student migration from the state, the question posed is whether student migration from Kerala is driven by their desperation or aspirations. While the former alludes to the negative factors that

push students out of Kerala in search of better education opportunities, the latter refers to the positive factors that pull the students towards the foreign countries. This study is an assessment of the motives of emigrant students focusing on their post-study plans.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literatures on various facets of student migration bring to light the trends and underlying patterns of international student migration explaining the motivating factors that influence the decisions of students to migrate abroad. A host of empirical literatures examines the migration of students from developing nations including India towards developed countries in search of better education and employment opportunities. The factors that motivate international migration of students are basically the same across the developing nations and are found to be both academic and professional. International

student migration in search of superior quality higher education and brighter career prospects is further supplemented by their desire to get exposed to new cultures and also to enrich their social experiences. International student migration from India is primarily determined by factors that can be categorised as push and pull factors. Professional aspects such as better possibilities for career advancement, better working and research conditions abroad, international exposure and financial benefits are key motivational factors influencing student migration from India. Another main pull factor to go abroad is the expectation of a better working environment (Hercog & Van de Laar, 2017; Wadhwa, 2016). Baas (2006) analysing the migration of students from India to Australia reveals that the primary goal of migrant students is to secure permanent residency in Australia. Kaur (2019) confirms the rising trend in post-study employment in the host countries observed among migrated students from Punjab in India. The majority of migrated students primarily had a motive to settle permanently in their destination country.

International student migration from our neighbouring country, Nepal is also influenced by a host of factors. The push factors identified are lack of employment opportunities, lower wages, dissatisfaction with the government and overall political situation, and the willingness to follow the 'trend' of migration. The pull factors identified were better earning opportunities, higher wages, possibilities of staying longer in the destination country and scholarships and financial aid provided by the destination country. Student migration from Nepal is also driven by motivational factors such as quality of education at foreign universities, the value of a foreign degree, exposure to diverse cultures, and the variety of career opportunities available after procuring a foreign degree (Joshi, 2022; Baral et al., 2024). Kharel (2022) analysing student migration between Nepal and Japan has observed that easier visa regulations, absence of language requirements, plenty of part-time work opportunities and the education consultancy services have facilitated international student migration.

International student migration has far-reaching implications. Those countries witnessing emigration of

talented students need to improve the quality of higher education, update the curricula, and offer more new-age job-oriented courses to retain their best students. The increasing trends in post-study employment in destination countries point to a potential shift in migration patterns, with implications for the labour market and immigration policies in sending and receiving countries (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024; Javed et al., 2019).

The aforementioned literatures bring to light the causes and consequences of international student migration from the perspective of the host and the home countries. Review of the existing literatures served to expose the research gaps in the field of transnational student migration. Though a voluminous amount of literature exists on international and interstate migration in the context of Kerala with a few of these focusing on the international student migration, there is a dearth of empirical research on return and settlement decisions of student emigrants. This research gap so identified in the field of transnational student migration is addressed by examining the association between the post-study decisions of students and its determining factors.

Hence, in the context of the huge scale of international student migration from Kerala, the paper seeks to identify the specific patterns embedded in the student migration from the state and its link to the post-study options available for the emigrant students abroad.

### Objectives

- To study the pattern of international student migration from Kerala
- To examine the factors influencing the post-study plans of emigrant students from Kerala

### METHODOLOGY

The research paper is based on the responses of 49 student migrants from across Kerala who have migrated to various foreign countries for the purpose of receiving higher education. As the respondents in the sample were located abroad, purposive sampling - specifically snowball sampling - was relied upon to gather data pertaining to various aspects of migration.

Focus has been placed to include in the sample the students belonging to diverse socio-economic strata hailing from different parts of the state. The key motives for migration were unravelled through their responses to their post-study plans. Non-parametric tests such as the chi-square test was performed to examine the possibilities of an explicit association between the choice of destination countries and post-study plans of the migrant students. Push factors influencing the migration decisions of the students and their role in shaping the post-study plans of students are also being examined in this research paper. Cramer's V was used to test the strength of association between post-study decisions of the emigrant students and the push factors. The binary logistic regression model is employed to establish the link between the socio-economic characteristics of emigrant students and their post-study decisions. The post-study decision of emigrant students is the dummy dependent variable and the factors such as location, educational status of the parents, annual income, possibilities of doing part-time work abroad, gender etc. are the explanatory variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-economic profile of the emigrant students. Migration of students from Kerala is nearly ubiquitous as obvious from the socio-economic background of the surveyed respondents. Neither an urban bias nor a gender divide can be observed in the migration process. In fact, there is a preponderance of student migrants from rural parts of Kerala and girls outnumber boys. Income is not found to be a barrier to migration as 61.2% of the student migrants had an annual income of merely less than Rs. 2 lakhs. Yet another interesting finding is the large-scale migration of first-generation learners as 49% of the parents of migrated students had not received higher education. Employment of parents too has not been a significant factor influencing migration as only 24.5% of the respondents had both the parents employed while the rest of the respondents had either single parent employment or both the parents unemployed or retired. However, migration is largely

**Table 1: Socio-economic profile of the students**

Attributes	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>Location</b>		
Rural	28	57.1
Urban	21	42.9
Total	49	100
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	21	42.9
Female	28	57.1
Total	49	100
<b>Religion</b>		
Hindu	31	63.3
Christian	13	26.5
Muslim	5	10.2
Total	49	100
<b>Social Category</b>		
General	27	55.1
OBC	22	44.9
Total	49	100
<b>Annual income</b>		
<2 Lakhs	30	61.2
2-4 Lakhs	6	12.2
4-6 Lakhs	7	14.3
6-8 Lakhs	2	4.1
>8 Lakhs	4	8.2
Total	49	100
<b>Occupational status</b>		
No regular salaried employment for parents	2	4.1
Father employed and mother home maker	21	42.9
Mother employed father not employed	6	12.2
Both employed	12	24.5
Both retired	8	16.3
Total	49	100
<b>Education status of parents</b>		
Both graduate	14	28.6
One is graduate	11	22.4
None is graduate	24	49
Total	49	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

found among Hindus and Christians and there is a sheer absence of students from marginalised groups as none of the student migrants surveyed belongs to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities.

### Pattern of Migration

A closer examination of migration pattern yielded insights into the destination countries, sources of information pertaining to education opportunities abroad and the nature of programmes pursued by the student migrants.

A few definite patterns pertaining to student migration can be deciphered from the responses (Table 2). The student migrants are mainly flocking to the United Kingdom and the European Union (the EU nations). The major non-EU destinations include Russia, China, and Canada. The majority of the students are going abroad to pursue post-graduate programmes. There is a huge demand for professional courses among the student migrants and they are

**Table 2: Pattern of Migration**

Attributes	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>Emigrated country</b>		
EU nations and the UK	39	79.6
Non-EU nations	10	20.4
Total	49	100
<b>Nature of the programme</b>		
Under-Graduate Programmes	6	12.2
Post-Graduate Programmes	39	79.6
Ph.D. and Post Doctoral studies	2	4.1
Diploma	2	4.1
Total	49	100
<b>Type of the Programme</b>		
Professional course	41	83.7
Non-professional course	8	16.3
Total	49	100
<b>Source of information</b>		
Agency	18	36.7
Family	9	18.4
Friends	6	12.2
Media	16	32.7
Total	49	100

Source: Source: Field Survey, 2024

pursuing medical, engineering and business administration courses abroad. The role of agencies and media in providing information about education opportunities abroad cannot be denied as most of the migrant students relied on these sources for gathering information regarding the destination countries and higher education institutes abroad.

Reckoning the unabated flow of migrant students from Kerala sans frontiers, an attempt was made to examine their post-study decisions.

**Table 3: Post-study plan of the migrant students**

Post-Study Plan	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Return to India after studies	13	26.5
Pursuing employment abroad after studies	31	63.3
Permanent settlement abroad	5	10.2
Total	49	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

It is obvious from the post-study plans of the migrant students that education is not the only factor determining migration as about 63.3% of them wish to continue there even after their studies (Table 3). However, only a minority prefers to settle abroad permanently. Post-study decisions of the emigrated students are linked to the patterns of migration. This is evident from the association observed between the choice of the destination country and the post-study plans of the student migrants corroborated by the results of the Chi-square tests.

Table 4 explains the association between the choice of destination country and the post-study plans of the emigrant students. EU nations and the UK seem to be the most preferred destination of student migrants from Kerala. Majority of the students who migrated to these countries plan to seek jobs there. All of the five student migrants who wished to settle abroad permanently have opted for the EU and the UK. Analysing the flow of Indian students to Europe for pursuing higher education, the studies confirm that the UK, Germany and France receive the most Indian students in Europe and the UK dominates the market for international as well as Indian students in Europe. The European nations witnessing declining workforce

**Table 4: Association between post-study plans and choice of destination country**

Attributes	Migrated country		Total
	EU and the UK	Non-EU nations	
<b>Post-study plan</b>			
Return to India after studies	7	6	13
Pursuing employment abroad after studies	27	4	31
Permanent settlement abroad	5	0	5
Total	39	10	49
Chi-square value	7.662 with 0.007 level of significance		
Significance level	0.022		

Source: Field Survey, 2024

are exploring the potential of international student migration as a channel to acquire skilled human capital. Besides, the student migration is promoted by reckoning the financial resources that can be generated in the host countries. Researchers maintain that the choice of destination by Indian students is governed by a combination of economic and cultural factors as the rise in migration to Europe coincided with the falling demand for higher education in Australia following the series of racial attacks there (Mukherjee & Chanda, 2012, 2014). Jayadeva (2016) examines the main stimulants behind the transnational student flow from India to Germany. The major attractions include the relatively lower educational cost of procurement of postgraduate degrees in Germany, availability of a wide array of postgraduate courses taught in English, the perceived high quality of German universities etc. enhancing the desirability of studying in Germany. Furthermore, the availability of paid work and internship opportunities, along with favourable post-study work options, constitutes a significant 'pull' factor for Indian students considering higher education in Germany. With regard to migration towards countries such as Russia and China, it is not surprising to observe that 60% of the emigrant students would return to India after their studies as their sole aim of emigration is to pursue higher education in medicine-related programmes that are relatively less expensive compared to their home state.

Further analysis was carried out to confirm whether migration was driven by their desperation or aspirations. The former pertains to the disturbing factors that push young students out of the state; while the latter refers to attractive factors in the destination countries that pull the students inward. Defective education systems, lack of employment opportunities and deteriorating quality of life in the home state serve as the pushing factors while better education and employment opportunities coupled with possibilities of a good life act as pulling factors. Among the student respondents, the decision to migrate was largely influenced by a collection of these factors rather than the sole purpose of attaining better education exposure. In this context, the study examined the association between push factors and post-study plans of the emigrant students. This serves to get a deeper insight on whether the students from Kerala have migrated exclusively for better higher education or for a secure job and for a better life abroad.

The push factors identified are diverse such as lack of new age courses, deterioration in the quality of education, expensive higher education, politicisation of higher education institutes, bleak employment prospects, lack of opportunities to club part-time jobs with studies and absence of a good quality of life. These push factors were broadly categorised into education-related factors and factors other than education; especially lack of employment options and adverse quality of life in the home state.

Table 5 brings out the association between the push factors and the post-study plans of the emigrant students. Among the 6 migrant students who chose to migrate exclusively due to education-related factors, 5 students plan to return to India after studies. This is found to be true in the case of those students who are forced to migrate abroad for pursuing medicine-related programmes that are expensive in their home state and hence unaffordable to them. China and Russia have emerged as preferred destinations for the aspiring medical students as medicine-related courses are relatively less expensive in these countries. However, those who have migrated from the state largely due to bleaker employment prospects and poor quality of life have expressed their desire to continue abroad even



**Table 5: Association between post-study plans and push factors**

Push factors	Post-Study Plan			Total
	Return to India after studies	Pursuing employment abroad after studies	Permanent settlement abroad	
Defective education-related factors	5	1	0	6
Factors other than education (unemployment, adverse quality of life etc.)	3	20	3	26
Both of these	5	10	2	17
Total	13	31	5	49
Chi-square value	13.130 with 0.011 level of significance			
Cramer's V	0.366 with 0.011 level of significance			

Source: Field Survey, 2024

**Table 6: Determinants of post-study decisions of the emigrant students**

Determinants	B	S.E	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Location	3.047	1.503	4.112	1	.043	21.060	1.107	400.553
Parental education	-2.605	1.208	4.649	1	.031	.074	.007	.789
Annual income	-1.691	1.782	.901	1	.342	.184	.006	6.053
Part time job possibilities in host country	4.329	1.564	7.665	1	.006	75.852	3.541	1624.977
Marital status	.721	1.602	.203	1	.653	2.057	.089	47.490
Gender	-1.549	1.153	1.803	1	.179	.213	.022	2.038
Constant	-.640	1.576	.165	1	.685	.527		

Source: Field Survey, 2024

after their studies either for better employment prospects or for a better life. The association between the operation of push factors and post-study plans of the students are confirmed as the chi-square value of 13.130 is statistically significant at 1% level. Cramer's V is used to examine the strength of association between post-study plans and push factors and it is found to be 0.366 with 0.011 level of significance indicating moderate degree of association.

The socio-economic circumstances of the emigrant students too have influenced their post-study decisions as confirmed by the results of the binary logistic regression analysis.

The explanatory power of the model ranges from 39% to 56.9% as observed from the values of Cox and Snell R-square and Nagelkerke R-square, respectively. The dummy dependent variable in the model is the post-study decisions of the students. The explanatory variables that impact the post-study decisions of the students are location, parental education and ability to

club part-time jobs and learning in the destination countries. Table 6 shows that the probability of remaining in the host country is 21 times higher for those emigrant students hailing from urban areas compared to rural parts. The status of parental education also impacts the post-study decisions of the emigrant students. The first-generation learners are treated as the reference group in the present study. It is obvious from the results (negative B estimates and odds ratio being less than 1) that the probability of longer stays in host countries is higher for first-generation learners rather than second-generation learners. This indicates that bleaker economic prospects for first-generation learners in the home country force them to continue in the host country in anticipation of better job opportunities and economic prospects. This is further corroborated by the presence of a negative B estimate and lower odds ratio for annual income suggesting that those who belong to lower-income strata exhibit a greater probability of

continuing in the host nations. However, the result is not statistically significant forcing the researchers to refrain from such an inference. But it can be observed that the ease of clubbing part-time jobs with learning in the destination countries enhances the probabilities of staying back in the host countries either for further studies or for better jobs. This suggests that majority of the emigrant students are not affluent enough to receive financial support from their families and hence are forced to engage in part-time jobs to survive in the host country.

Amongst the multitude of determinants affecting post-study decisions of the emigrant students, push factors in the home country can be crucial. Young and aspiring first-generation learners from urban locations belonging to low-income groups are migrating abroad in search of better education and employment opportunities.

It can be inferred from the present study that defective educational systems, dearth of new age courses, expensive professional courses etc. are not the only factors that motivate them to leave their home state. Migration for higher education can be seen as an outcome of their desire to materialise their aspirations for a decent job, better livelihood and an advanced quality of life in destination nations. It is evident from their choice of destination countries. Further, the role of socio-economic background of the emigrant students influencing their post-study plans too cannot be ignored as majority of those who prefer to stay back in the host countries are first-generation learners exposed to urban cultures and hailing from low-income families.

### Limitations of the Study

The absence of an official database on migrant students from Kerala poses a serious hurdle in the conduct of research forcing the authors to rely on snowball sampling as it is the only technique for gathering information from migrant group located abroad. However, caution has been exercised to make the sample more representative by including students from all over Kerala. Further, the sample consists of students from various socio-religious categories. Despite collecting responses from 49 emigrant

students, the sample lacks representation from the marginalised sections (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe) of population. Reckoning the massive scale of transnational migration of students from Kerala, there is an urgent need for creation of an official database that enables an in-depth analysis of complex and dynamic issues impacting the incessant process of emigration from the state facilitating desirable policy actions.

### CONCLUSION

Transnational migration of students from Kerala is a reality. However, the factors motivating the students to migrate are not purely educational. The other prominent factors are their aspirations to gain better jobs and enjoy a good quality of life abroad. This has been confirmed by their responses on post-study plans. Those who prefer to remain abroad even after their higher studies are the ones who have chosen the higher education institutes in the EU and UK implying that their post-study decisions are linked to the choice of destination country. Push factors operating in the home country such as bleaker employment prospects and adverse quality of life too affect the post-study decisions of the emigrant students. Besides, majority of the students who prefer to stay abroad are first-generation learners belonging to low-income families hailing from urban areas. Prevalence of options to club part-time jobs with learning has encouraged these emigrant students from less affluent families to stay longer in the destination countries in anticipation of better employment prospects and a good life.

Hence a policy focusing exclusively on the complete overhaul of the existing education systems may fail to arrest the flow of young aspiring students from Kerala towards foreign destinations in search of better employment prospects and a good quality of life.

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