

Understanding Overseas Migration of Students from Kerala

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Abstract

The main driving force for Kerala student's international migration was found to be educational. Other factors were surpassed by the desire for greater employment opportunities and higher-quality education abroad. Students' growing emphasis on international educational experiences and their perception of local educational institutions' shortcomings in fulfilling their goals are reflected in this trend.

Keywords: Migration, Kerala, educational quality, migration motivations, educational policy reform

INTRODUCTION

This study looks at the direct causes of the migratory trend of international students from Kerala, a state with a distinctive out-migration history. The number of emigrants from Kerala is estimated to be 2.2 million, closely aligning with the 2.1 million recorded in the KMS 2018. A significant rise in student emigration has substantially contributed to maintaining the emigration levels in 2023. From 129,763 student emigrants in 2018, the number has doubled to about 250,000 in 2023. This notable increase in student emigration underscores a significant shift in the demographics of emigrants from Kerala, wherein there has been an increase in the number of emigrants leaving at a very young age, as early as 17 years. Students constitute 11.3 per cent of total emigrants from Kerala, indicating that a growing number of younger individuals are choosing to emigrate, particularly for educational opportunities abroad. (KMS, 2023). As per information received from Missions and Posts abroad, the total number of Indian students pursuing higher education in universities and other tertiary institutions abroad were 1.33 million as of January 2024. State-wise and academic course-wise data of Indian students pursuing higher education abroad is not available. Indian students have gone to foreign countries for various reasons, including personal choices in respect of education. (**The Ministry of External Affairs, 2024**) Understanding the reasons, experiences, and trends of student mobility (particularly during the previous five years) is the goal of the study. The target population for this study comprises students from Changanasserry in the Kottayam District. The study's sample size is five hundred, derived from the feasibility and resources available for in- depth analysis.

Objectives

This study's primary objectives are:

1. To identify the key factors motivating students from Kerala to migrate for higher education.
2. To examine the nature and characteristics of this migration.
3. To explore the trends and patterns shaping student mobility in the current global context.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of international student migration from Kerala, contributing to the body of knowledge in migration studies and informing policy and practice in higher education.

Methodology

The survey unit was students between the ages of 15 and 30, representing a range of genders and socioeconomic backgrounds. The target population for this study comprises students from Changanasserry, a prominent educational hub in the Kottayam District of Kerala, known for its high literacy rates and student migration patterns. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires. The study collected data from 500 respondents, using a mixed-methods technique. The secondary data were collected from sources like official reports of Govt of Kerala, Govt of India, Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023, undertaken by Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, Ministry of External Affairs, GOI etc. This study adopts a multi-form of methods like qualitative and quantitative research methods, to explore the features of international student migration from Kerala. The quantitative data were analysed using statistical techniques like frequency distributions and percentages presented in the form of tables and figures. The study is limited to Changanasserry region of Kottayam district hence there are apprehensions in generalising the findings.

Motivation for Migration

The main driving force for Kerala students' international migration was found to be educational. Other factors were surpassed by the desire for greater employment opportunities and higher-quality education abroad. Students' growing emphasis on international educational experiences and their perception of local educational institutions' shortcomings in fulfilling their goals are reflected in this trend. Higher pay and economic stability in the host nations also served as important motivators, suggesting a practical view of education as an investment in future employment opportunities.

Recommendations from friends, relatives, or former students were crucial in the decision-making process, demonstrating the significant impact of social networks. This research emphasizes how crucial first-hand accounts and experiences are in influencing opinions and decisions about studying overseas.

Table 1. Key factors influencing student's decisions to study abroad

Factors for migration	Frequency
Educational Factors	120
Higher wages and financial consistency in the host country	46
Recommendation from family, friends or alumni who had previously studied abroad	60
High living standards	44

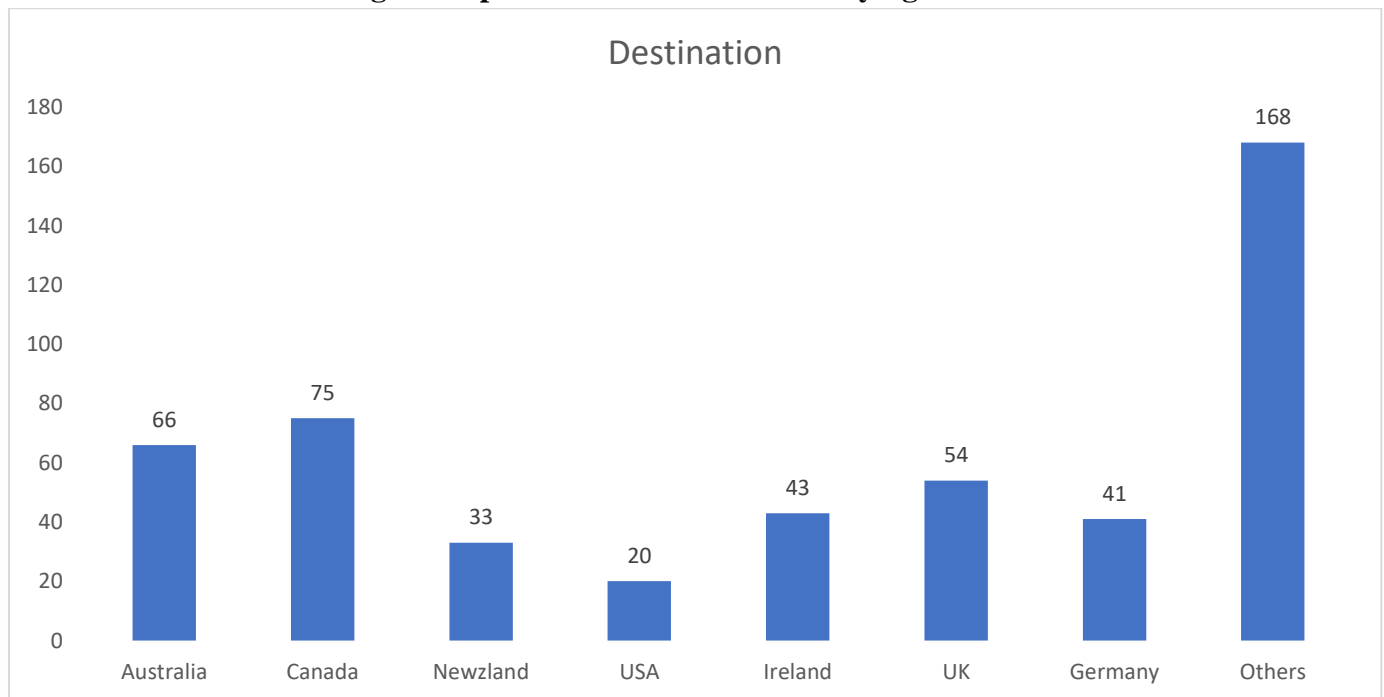
Job insecurity in the home country	30
All of the above	200
Total	N= 500

Source: Primary Survey

Preference for Migration Destination

The survey revealed a clear preference for English-speaking nations, with the most sought-after travel destinations being the UK, New Zealand, and Germany. The perceived quality of education, post-graduation job prospects, and language familiarity in these nations are the reasons for this preference. It's interesting to note that typical travel destinations like the USA and New Zealand were less popular, maybe as a result of more stringent visa requirements or greater living and educational expenses (Figure 1).

Fig.1 The preferred countries for studying abroad

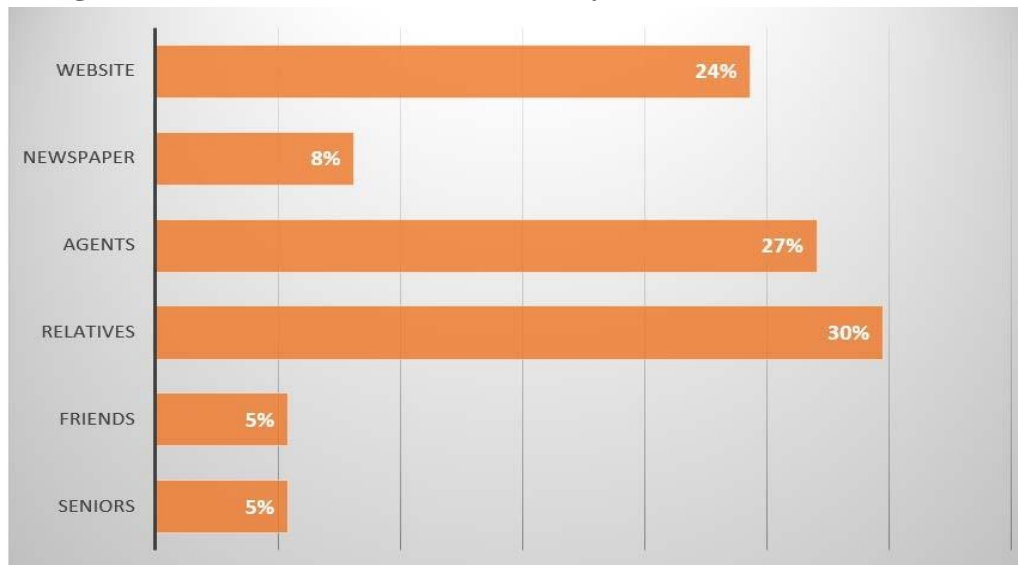


Source: Primary Survey

Source of Information and Funding

The main sources of information were family networks and migration agencies, underscoring the function of professional services and familial networks in easing student mobility. Families' financial commitment and dangers in paying for an education abroad are shown by their reliance on school loans as their main source of funding, particularly for middle-class families.

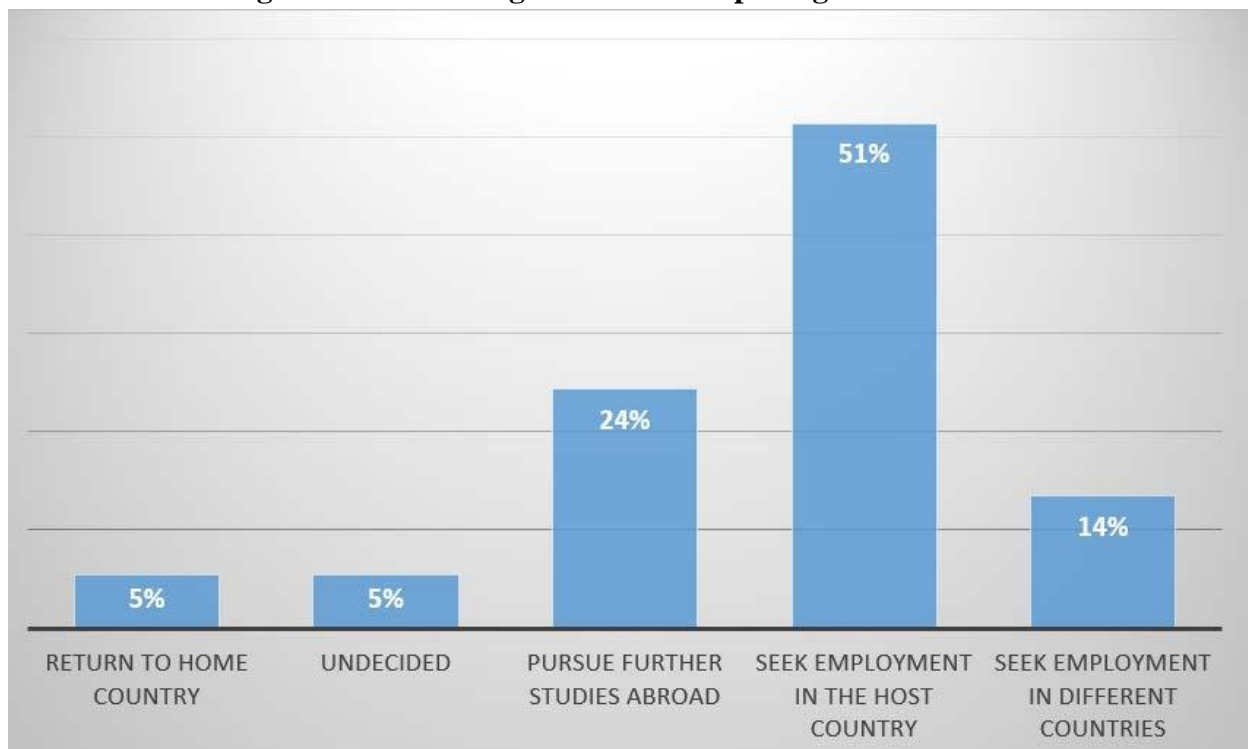
Figure 2. Sources of information on study destinations and institutions



Post-Academic Plans

Most respondents desired employment in the host country post-graduation, indicating a trend towards longer-term migration goals. This preference underscores the perceived economic and professional benefits of working abroad and suggests a potential shift in migration patterns from temporary educational pursuits to more permanent settlement intentions.

Figure 3. Plans of migrants after completing studies abroad



Major Findings

The study's conclusions offer important new information about the dynamics of Kerala's foreign student

migration. The strong educational incentives that drive migration choices are indicative of larger worldwide trends in student mobility, where access to high-quality education and employment opportunities is crucial. The predilection for English-speaking nations suggests that language and culture have an impact on travel decisions. Concerns over the costs and dangers of studying abroad are brought up by the dependence on student loans, especially for middle-class families. This emphasizes how important it is for students who want to study abroad to have easier access to financial aid and scholarship programs.

The study collectively paints a picture of an education system needing significant reforms to meet its students' aspirations and remain competitive in a global context. The migration decisions of Kerala's students are significantly influenced by these perceived inadequacies, driving them to seek education in countries where these elements are better aligned with their expectations and career goals. This section of the study highlights the urgent need for educational reforms in Kerala, focusing on enhancing quality, updating curricula, and creating more job-oriented courses to retain talented youth and prevent brain drain. The social and psychological challenges students face highlights the importance of comprehensive pre-departure orientation programs and support systems in host countries to facilitate better cultural adaptation and integration.

The trend towards post-study employment in host countries points to a potential shift in migration patterns, with implications for the labor market and immigration policies in sending and receiving countries. This trend also raises questions about the 'brain drain' phenomenon and its impact on the home country's talent pool. Overall, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the factors driving international student migration from Kerala, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and students. Addressing the identified challenges and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by student migration can lead to more informed and effective strategies in international education and migration policy.

The study's findings call for a balanced approach that recognizes the aspirations and challenges of students seeking education abroad while considering the socio-economic and cultural impacts on the sending regions. As global educational landscapes continue to evolve, understanding and responding to the dynamics of student migration will be crucial in shaping effective educational and migration policies.

Theoretical Framework

The study's findings align with the Push and Pull factors and Lee's Theory of Migration where factors such as limited local employment opportunities and inadequacies in the domestic education system, political instability, low quality of life serve as push factors, while access to higher-quality education, better career prospects, opportunities for permanent settlement or citizenship, cultural exposure and international networks and improved living standards in foreign countries act as pull factors.

The findings of the study show that in the case of student migration from Kerala, push factors include: Perceived shortcomings in the domestic education system, limited job prospects after graduation, curriculum not aligned with global industry demands etc. For students from Kerala, the pull factors are: World-class universities, post-study employment opportunities, scholarships and student friendly visa policies in some countries. This framework explain why students are increasingly inclined to pursue international education and envision longer-term settlement abroad.

Policy Implications

The increase in student migration from Kerala, as highlighted by the Kerala Migration Survey 2023, has

several implications, including the potential for a brain drain and the need for policies to address the changing migration patterns. To reduce student out-migration Higher Education Policy of Kerala should prioritize globally aligned academic patterns, bring more international collaborations etc. Modernizing Kerala's higher education system to emphasize skill development, practical application, and international relevance is crucial. Updating curriculums, promoting critical thinking, and fostering adaptability would better equip students for global challenges.

Conclusion

This research regarding the migration of international students from Kerala provides important understanding into the motivations, patterns, and impacts of this phenomenon. It underscores the key reasons for migration as the pursuit of higher education, improved job prospects, and financial security, which demonstrate a critique of local educational frameworks and the global aspirations of students. A clear inclination towards English-speaking nations is evident, supported by a sense of linguistic comfort and perceived benefits in both education and job opportunities. The study also highlights the financial and social struggles faced by students, including a heavy dependence on educational loans and challenges in adjusting to new cultures. Students' aspirations to find jobs in the host countries after finishing their studies indicate a change in their migration goals, which could result in a 'brain drain' phenomenon in Kerala. This necessitates a variety of approaches from educational organizations, policymakers, and host nations to improve the quality of domestic education, offer financial assistance, promote integration, and address the economic and social impacts of this migration trend for both Kerala and the host countries.

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