

DYNAMICS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF KERALA, INDIA

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Abstract: This study investigates the dynamics of international student migration from Kerala, a region with a distinctive history of skilled migration. The research focuses on understanding the motivations, experiences, and trends in student mobility, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study gathers data from 37 participants in Thiruvalla, Kerala, using structured questionnaires, telephonic interviews, and Google Forms. The demographic analysis of respondents primarily includes students aged 20-30 years, representing a blend of gender and socioeconomic backgrounds. Key findings indicate that the principal motivation for migration is pursuing higher quality education and improved career prospects. The study reveals a preference for English-speaking countries, with the UK, New Zealand, and Germany being the favored destinations, reflecting language familiarity and perceived educational excellence. Most respondents migrated after completing their undergraduate studies, aiming for postgraduate education abroad. The reliance on educational loans as the primary funding source highlights the significant financial commitment of students and their families. The research identifies substantial challenges students face, including financial constraints, social and psychological adaptation issues, and the hurdles of cultural integration. Interestingly, most students desire employment in host countries post-graduation, suggesting a trend towards long-term migration goals. The study concludes that the perceived drawbacks of Kerala's educational institutions – such as low-quality education, outdated syllabi, and lack of job-oriented courses – significantly influence migration decisions. This underscores the need for educational reforms in Kerala to align with global standards and students' aspirations. The study provides valuable insights into the factors driving international student migration from Kerala, emphasizing the need for policy interventions and educational improvements.

Keywords: International student migration; Kerala; Educational quality; Migration motivations; Educational policy reform

1. Introduction

In the evolving global education landscape, international student migration emerges as a pivotal element, intertwining educational aspirations with global mobility. This phenomenon, characterized by students pursuing academic opportunities beyond their national borders, has significantly increased in recent years, particularly in regions like Kerala, India [1]. The impetus behind this trend, underpinned by a confluence of socio-

economic, institutional, and cultural factors, necessitates a comprehensive exploration to understand its multifaceted nature and implications [2]. A study by Sara Forsberg analyzes the mobility dispositions of Kerala's youth transitioning from education to work, using Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and habitus. It reveals that Kerala's migration history profoundly influences its aspirations. It highlights differences within the middle class, where transnational capital creates distinctions among 'Indian youth', and examines the varied perceptions of cities and regions as symbols of cultural or economic capital in shaping students' future education and employment expectations [3].

The increasing mobility of students from Kerala reflects broader trends in global education and migration, underscoring the importance of delving into the dynamics of this movement. While previous studies have shed light on various aspects of international student migration, including motivations, destination choices, and economic impacts, a gap exists in understanding the nuanced interplay of factors that drive students from specific regions like Kerala to seek education abroad. A 2019 survey in Calicut, Kerala, involving 491 students, reveals that the majority, influenced by family, friends, and media, are aware of and aspire to migrate to Middle East Gulf countries for job opportunities, despite youth with migrant fathers showing a lesser inclination. This trend suggests that migration will remain a key life choice for Kerala's youth in the next 10-20 years, highlighting the need for policies that promote safe and informed migration [4].

This study aims to bridge this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the forces shaping international student migration from Kerala, focusing on the post-pandemic context [5].

The evolving labor markets have prompted concerns in Kerala's higher education sector, such as skill mismatches, student migration, and vacant seats in institutions, urging policymakers to actively seek and implement solutions to maintain the sector's progress and integration with global labor markets [6]. The Significance of this study is manifold. Firstly, it contributes to the broader understanding of international student migration, which has far-reaching economic, cultural, and educational implications. Secondly, by focusing on Kerala, a state with a unique migration history and educational landscape, the study offers insights into regional variations in student migration patterns. This is particularly pertinent given Kerala's high literacy rate and status as a major source of skilled migration. Lastly, the study's findings have practical implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and students themselves, as they shed light on the factors influencing migration decisions and the challenges migrating students face [7].

This study's primary objectives are to identify the key factors motivating students from Kerala to migrate for higher education, examine the nature and characteristics of this migration, and 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.

In undertaking this exploratory study, the aim is not only to add to the academic discourse on student migration but also to provide practical insights that can guide future strategies and interventions. The outcomes of this study are expected to benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including educational institutions, government agencies, and the students themselves, as they navigate the complex landscape of international education and migration.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods, to explore the dynamics of international student migration from Kerala. The methodology is designed to capture a comprehensive view of the factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad, their experiences, and the resultant trends and patterns in student migration.

2.1. Sample and Data Collection

The target population for this study comprises students from Thiruvalla in the Pathanamthitta district, a region in Kerala known for its significant rate of international migration. A purposive sampling method is used to select participants, ensuring the sample represents various socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and migration experiences. The study's sample size is thirty-seven, derived from the feasibility and resources available for in-depth analysis.

Primary data is collected using a structured questionnaire, telephonic interviews, and Google Forms. The questionnaire encompasses structured questions to gather detailed information on various aspects of international student migration, including motivations, destination preferences, and post-migration experiences.

2.2. Pre-Test of the Questionnaire

To ensure the questionnaire's reliability and validity, a pre-test is conducted with a small subset of the target population. Feedback from the pre-test is used to refine the questionnaire, enhancing its clarity and relevance to the research objectives.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data is subjected to rigorous analysis using statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics interpret the data, presenting findings as tables, charts, and graphs. This approach facilitates a clear understanding of the patterns and trends within the data. Additionally, qualitative data from interviews is analyzed thematically, allowing a deeper exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations are paramount. Participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and consent is obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents are maintained, ensuring that personal information is protected and used solely for research purposes.

2.5. Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective biases. The small sample size and focus on a specific region in Kerala might limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the dynamic nature of international student migration means that the trends and patterns observed may evolve.

3. Results and Discussions

This section presents the study's key findings on the dynamics of international student migration from Kerala and discusses their implications for migration and educational policies in the broader context.

3.1 Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The study's demographic analysis reveals a predominance of participants aged between 20 and 30 years, reflecting the typical age group of students considering overseas education. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with a slight majority of male respondents. The respondents predominantly belonged to Hindu and Christian religious backgrounds. A significant proportion of participants came from middle-income families,

with monthly incomes ranging from 50,000 to 70,000 rupees, indicating that the higher-income segment does not exclusively pursue international education.

3.2. Motivation for Migration

Educational factors emerged as the primary motivation for students from Kerala to migrate abroad. The quest for higher-quality education and better job prospects in foreign countries outweighed other considerations. This trend reflects the increasing importance that students place on global educational experiences and the perceived inadequacies of local educational institutions in meeting their aspirations. Additionally, economic stability and higher wages in host countries were significant motivators, indicating a pragmatic approach to education as an investment in future career prospects.

The influence of social networks was also notable, with recommendations from friends, family, or alums playing a critical role in decision-making. This finding underscores the importance of personal experiences and testimonials in shaping perceptions and choices regarding education abroad.

Table 1. Ranking of factors influencing students' decision to study abroad

Factors	Total score	Rank
Educational factors	459	1
Higher wages and economic stability in the host country	273	2
Limited job prospects or low wages in the host country	239	3
Recommendations from friends, family, or alumni who had previously studied abroad	109	4
Cultural assimilation and integration in the host country	74	6
Personal development	46	7
High living standard	45	8
Low job security in the home country	87	5

3.3. Preference for Migration Destinations

The study showed a marked preference for English-speaking countries, with the UK, New Zealand, and Germany being the most popular destinations. This preference can be attributed to the language familiarity, perceived quality of education, and post-graduation employment opportunities in these countries. Interestingly, traditional destinations like the USA and Canada were less preferred, possibly due to stricter visa regulations or higher costs of living and education (Figure 1).

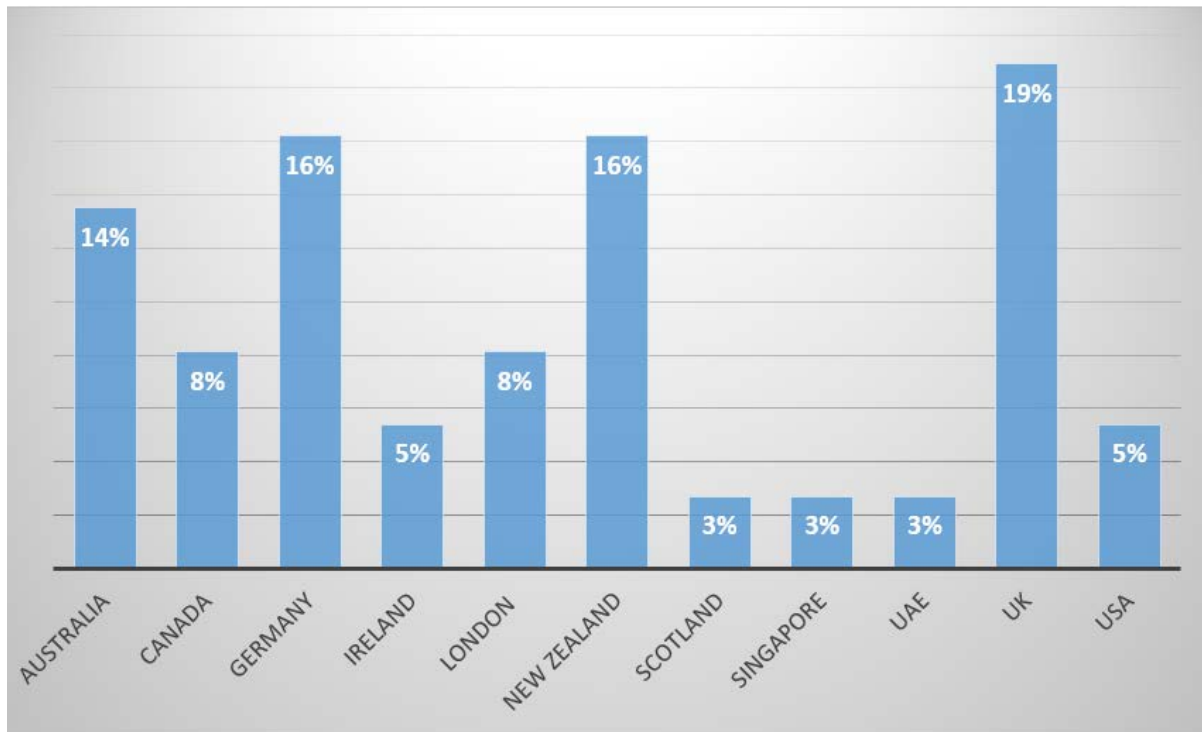


Figure 1. The preferred countries for studying abroad

3.4. Educational Status Before Migration

Most respondents had completed their graduation before migrating, indicating a trend of pursuing postgraduate studies abroad. This pattern suggests that students view international education as an enhancement or continuation of their academic journey rather than a substitute for local education.

3.5 Drawbacks Identified by Migrants in Educational Institutions of Kerala

The study's exploration into the perceived drawbacks of educational institutions in Kerala, as identified by the migrating students, presents a critical aspect of the migration dynamics. According to the respondents, the foremost drawback was the low quality of education in local institutions. This finding aligns with the primary motivation for migration, emphasizing the pursuit of superior educational standards abroad. Additionally, the lack of infrastructural facilities within these institutions was highlighted, pointing to deficiencies in resources and facilities that are pivotal for a modern educational experience. Another significant drawback cited was the duration of courses in Kerala, which some students felt were either too prolonged or misaligned with the requirements of the global job market. This

reflects a growing concern about the agility and responsiveness of the local education system to evolving global trends. The lack of job-oriented courses was also underscored, indicating a gap between the curriculum and the skills demanded worldwide. This misalignment potentially restricts the immediate employability of graduates within the state and abroad. Students expressed concerns about the outdated syllabus in Kerala's institutions, suggesting a lag in keeping up with the latest developments in various fields of study. The limited number of study hours per day, which restricts the opportunity for part-time employment, was also seen as a disadvantage, particularly for students seeking to balance work and study or those needing to support their education financially.

Table 2. Drawbacks identified by migrants in educational institutions of Kerala

Drawbacks	Total score	Rank
Low-quality education	288	1
Lack of infrastructural facilities	136	3
Duration of course	137	2
Lack of job-oriented course	91	4
Hours of study per day, which limits the scope for part-time jobs	57	6
Outdated syllabus	64	5

3.6. Source of Information and Funding

Relatives and migration agencies were primary information sources, highlighting the role of familial networks and professional services in facilitating student migration. The reliance on educational loans as the primary funding source, especially among middle-income families, points to families' economic commitment and risks in financing overseas education.

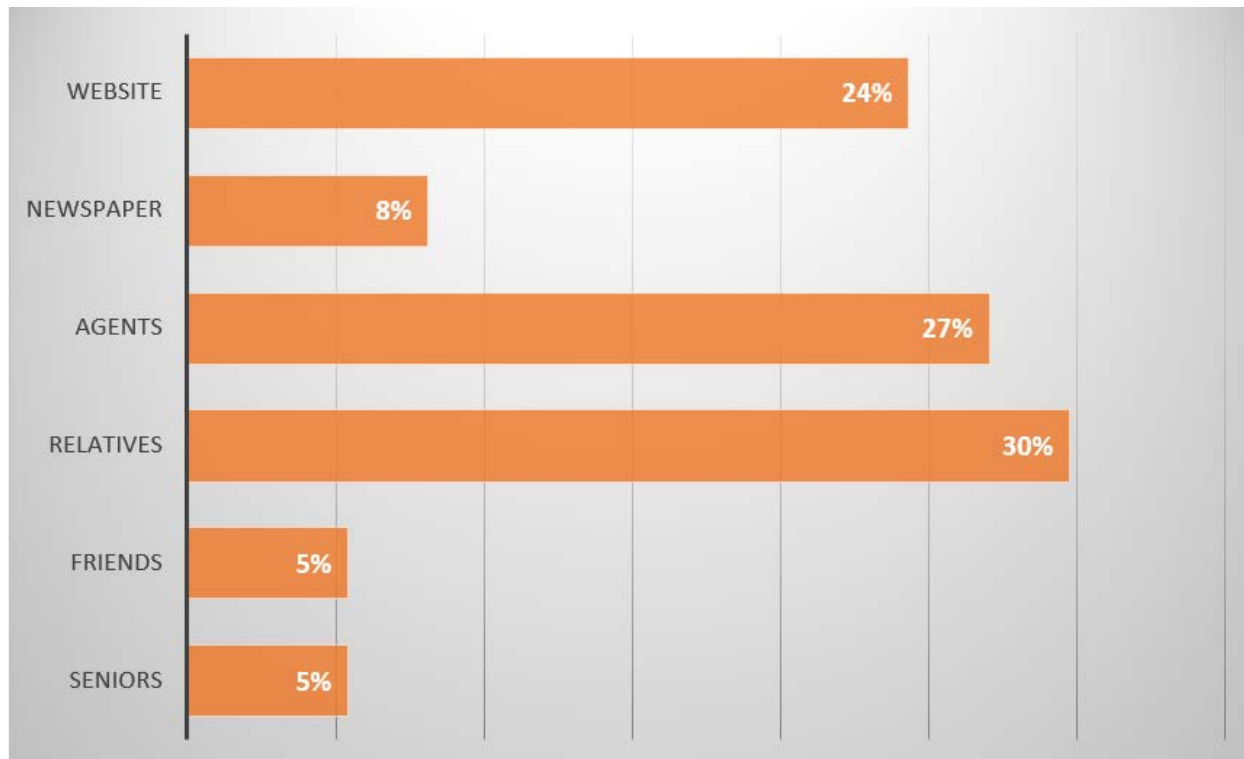


Figure 2. Source of information on destination and college

3.7. Constraints and Challenges

Financial barriers were the most commonly reported constraint, aligning with the reliance on educational loans. Social and psychological challenges, such as cultural adaptation and homesickness, were also significant, reflecting student migration's personal and emotional dimensions.

3.8. Post-Study 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.

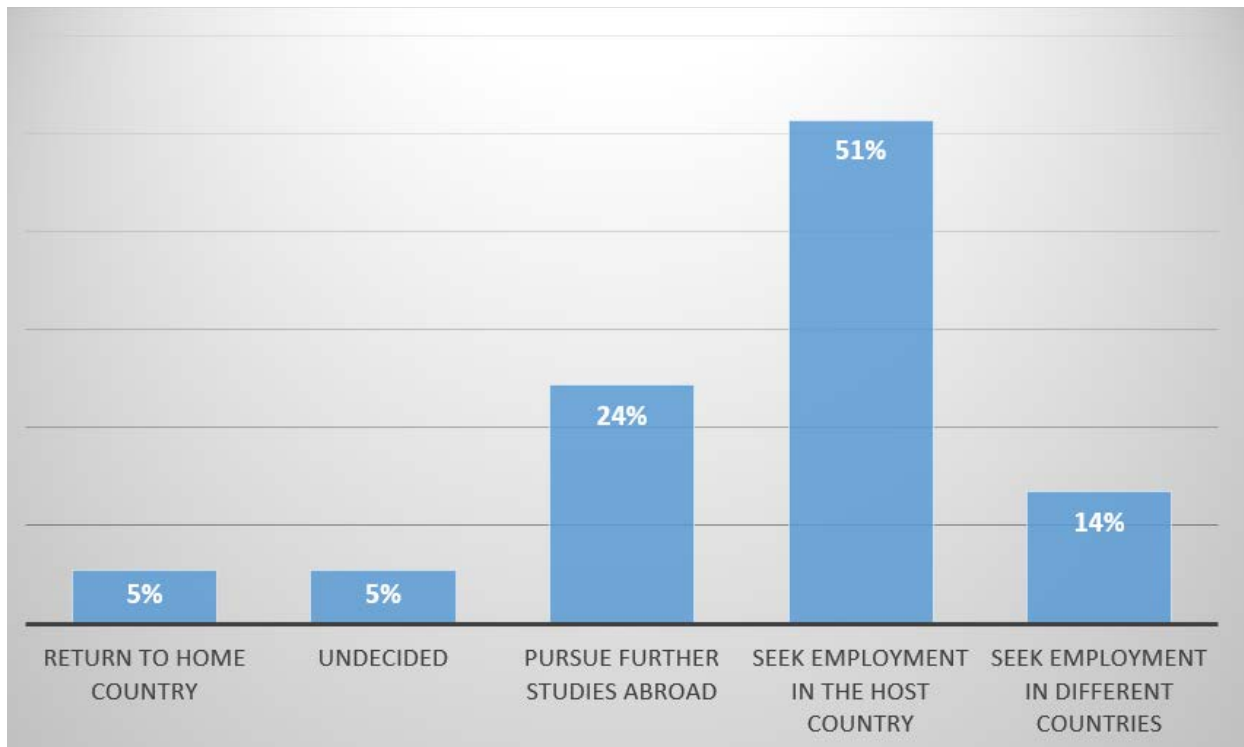


Figure 3. Plans of migrants after completing studies abroad

4. Discussions

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the dynamics of international student migration from Kerala. The solid educational motivation behind migration decisions reflects broader global trends in student mobility, where quality education and career prospects are paramount. The preference for English-speaking countries indicates a linguistic and cultural influence on destination choices. The reliance on educational loans raises concerns about the financial burden and risks associated with international education, particularly for middle-income families. This underscores the need for more accessible scholarship programs and financial support mechanisms for students aspiring to study abroad.

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 highlight 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.

5. Conclusions

This study on international student migration from Kerala offers valuable insights into this trend's motivations, patterns, and consequences. It highlights the primary drivers of migration as the quest for superior education, better career opportunities, and economic stability, reflecting a critique of local education systems and the global ambition of students. A notable preference for English-speaking countries emerges, underpinned by linguistic familiarity and perceived advantages in education and employment. The research also underscores students' financial and social challenges, including significant reliance on educational loans and difficulties in cultural adaptation. The tendency of students to seek employment in host countries post-graduation suggests a shift in migration objectives, potentially leading to a 'brain drain' in Kerala. This calls for multifaceted strategies from educational institutions, policymakers, and host countries to enhance local education quality, provide financial support, facilitate integration, and balance this migration trend's economic and social implications for both Kerala and the host nations.

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