

Student Migration from Kerala to Europe: A Critical Review of Governance Processes

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the burgeoning phenomenon of student migration from Kerala, India, to several European countries over the past five years. Utilizing comprehensive data sets encompassing migration figures and trends, the study delves into the nuanced aspects of this migration wave, particularly focusing on the case studies of Latvia, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

The study employs case studies of five students who migrated to the aforementioned nations, examining their experiences, educational opportunities, socio-economic conditions, and cultural adaptation, academic pursuits etc. This paper also highlights how dissatisfaction with the allegedly low standard of undergraduate syllabi in Kerala has been a significant driver propelling these students towards seeking education abroad. Additionally, it examines the distinctive approaches of the Kerala and Indian governments towards managing and regulating this migration flow, shedding light on policy frameworks, support systems, and challenges encountered.

Furthermore, the research analyses the safety standards implemented by both the Kerala and Indian governments concerning the welfare and security of migrating students. It sheds light on safety incidents and measures adopted to safeguard the interests and well-being of the students in the host countries.

By amalgamating quantitative data and qualitative insights, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of student migration. It underscores the significance of policy coherence between the sending and receiving nations to facilitate a secure and conducive environment for students migrating abroad for educational pursuits. The findings and recommendations provided in this study aim to contribute significantly to the discourse surrounding international student migration and inform policy considerations for stakeholders at both regional and national levels.

Keywords: Student Migration, Kerala, Europe, Education, Government Policies, Safety Standards, Data Analysis, Case Studies.

Introduction

Kerala, the verdant state on India's southwest coast, has long been known for its social progress, high literacy rates, and a vibrant cultural landscape. However, in recent years, a new phenomenon has emerged – a significant rise in student migration, particularly towards European nations. This trend, driven by a complex interplay of factors, presents both opportunities and challenges for Kerala and its future.

The scale of this exodus is both impressive and concerning. Estimates suggest (GoI, 2022) that over 35,000

Keralite students migrate for studies abroad annually, a figure steadily climbing. While destinations like the United States, Canada, and Australia still hold allure, Europe beckons with its distinctive academic ecosystem, diverse cultural mosaic, and increasingly relaxed immigration pathways for skilled professionals.

A closer look at Europe reveals the specific countries attracting Kerala students. Germany, for instance, saw a 25% increase in Indian student visas in 2022, with Kerala contributing significantly. The UK, Netherlands, and France also feature prominently, each attracting thousands of Kerala students annually. Behind this surge lies a complex interplay of factors. Kerala boasts a high literacy rate and a deeply ingrained reverence for education, propelling its youth towards postgraduate pursuits. However, limited seats in specialized fields within India, coupled with a perception of higher quality education and research infrastructure in Europe, act as powerful motivators.

European universities offer access to world-renowned faculty, cutting-edge research facilities, and specialized programs often unavailable in India. Countries like Germany and Norway entice students with tuition-free education or generous scholarships, making European destinations financially viable even for students hailing from middle-income households. Beyond academics, the allure of Europe extends to its socio-cultural landscape. The prospect of encountering diverse viewpoints, experiencing multicultural vibrancy, and potentially gaining citizenship in a nation with robust social welfare systems holds undeniable appeal. For many, Europe represents a pathway to a broader world, offering career potential, personal growth, and a chance to escape the perceived limitations of the Indian job market.

Kerala however, faces a burgeoning demographic imbalance, with an aging population and a shrinking pool of skilled professionals. By 2036, Kerala is expected to have 22.8% of its population as senior citizens, surpassing the projected national average of 15%, as indicated in the UN Fund for Population Activities' 2023 India Ageing Report. In 2021, the state already accounted for 16.5% of elderly individuals in its population. All these could hamper economic growth and social development, particularly in vital sectors like healthcare and technology. Also there lies a quite complex situation in academic and working conditions in Europe, which are ignored or unnoticed by majority of academics and officials.

As we delve deeper into this picture of soaring migration, this research paper aims to paint a nuanced picture of Keralite student migration to European nations. By drawing out five different case studies, we analyse push and pull factors, explore student experiences, and assess the economic and social repercussions, which in turn, we hope to contribute to a dialogue that is crucial for both Kerala and Central Governments to look upon.

Literature Review

The increasing migration of Kerala students to Europe is a complex phenomenon with different-dimensional motivations and implications. This review draws upon relevant academic literature to explore the key factors driving this trend and its potential consequences.

Roberson (2013) illuminates the intricate balance necessitated by migrant students between maintaining transnational relationships and fulfilling educational, professional, and immigration aspirations in the migrated nation. This balance mirrors the experiences of Kerala students seeking educational and career opportunities abroad while staying connected to their roots and familial obligations back in Kerala. The case studies which follow, enumerates on this exposition.

Seeking enhanced educational avenues and professional prospects, Kerala students migrating to Europe reflect a transversal pursuit of betterment. Cairns (2021) underscores the universal aspiration for a better

quality of life through mobility, a sentiment shared by youth across different societal strata, thus aligning with the ambitions of these migrating students.

Juarez, LeGrand, Lloyd, Singh, and Hertrich (2013) highlight youth migration's transition to adulthood. For Kerala students in Europe, migration encompasses education, career, work, relationships, and citizenship, placing them in a vulnerable position.

Contrary to traditional career-driven migration, Kerala students embarking on journeys to Europe prioritize post-materialist objectives like language acquisition, travel, and global experiences, resonating with the motives widely observed among these students. This trend aligns with Trevena's (2013) concept of 'drifters,' individuals willing to take on any job, which echoes the initial phase of many Kerala students' migration journeys to Europe and other territories.

Shein (2008) draws out the importance of policy reforms in both Chinese and European immigration sector by pointing out the surge of Chinese students' influx to the EU after the former's entry into WTO. Chinese studies have been influential to many experts in various fields; since both India and China shares the largest number of students sending to abroad, it is very crucial for India and Kerala to look upon its soaring migration of students.

Sobieraj (2012) emphasizes the significance of intercultural competence and identity in the migration process, particularly relevant for Kerala students migrating to Europe. The increasing number of Kerala students migrating necessitates a nuanced understanding of cultural adaptability and accommodation, essential for their survival and integration within the diverse European landscape.

These studies could provide a lens to understand the 'multifaceted' motivations and challenges faced by these students. They underscore the complexities of balancing educational aspirations, cultural adaptation, and familial ties, shedding light on the unique experiences of Kerala students navigating their migration journey to Europe.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of migrated students from five distinct European nations—Latvia, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. The study delves into various facets of their migration journey, including motivations, lifestyles, part-time employment, challenges regarding factors of education, culture, politics in Kerala, the alignment of expectations with reality etc.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from each of the target European nations. Five migrated students, each from a different European nation, were interviewed to obtain a diverse range of experiences and viewpoints. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants. The interviews were via voice call and messaging ensuring a conducive environment for open and detailed discussions.

The interview protocol consisted of a series of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting comprehensive responses regarding various aspects of their migration experience. Key topics explored during the interviews included:

- Motivations behind migrating to the respective European nation
- Lifestyle adjustments and cultural adaptation
- Engagement in part-time employment and its impact on their academic pursuits
- Challenges faced concerning the Kerala syllabus and its relevance in their current education
- Comparison between their expectations before migration and the reality they encountered

- Governmental support during any crisis and expectations etc.

Prior to these interviews, informed consent was obtained from each participant, assuring confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Talking about the limitations of this study, the small sample size due to the specificity of participant selection and potential biases inherent in self-reported data.

The findings from this qualitative inquiry aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by migrated students from Kerala in different European nations, offering valuable insights into their motivations, adaptations, and expectations versus realities encountered during their migration journey. And moreover, the governmental attitude towards this phenomenon is also undertaken and studied.

Case Studies

Case Study 1

In 2021, Mr. M, a young engineering aspirant, made a pivotal decision to leave his hometown in Kerala and pursue education in Latvia. Dissatisfaction with the educational structures in Kerala, marked by outdated syllabi and a lack of practical sessions, propelled him to seek a more dynamic learning environment abroad along with aspiration to study in an international exposure promised campus.

The driving force behind his migration extended beyond academics. The exponential increase in population in Kerala had given rise to cutthroat competition, prompting a sense of escapism in Mr. M. In Latvia, he envisioned a departure from the influence-based system prevalent in India to a more skill-focused approach.

Upon arrival in Latvia, Mr. M's settlement was eased by the presence of an agency and the supportive Malayali community. However, the landscape has shifted with exodus of Indian students, with a surge in students facing challenges in securing suitable accommodation, particularly impacting female students. Despite a general satisfaction level of 80% with his lifestyle in Latvia, Mr. M grapples with language barriers, hindering his social integration to a limit and pursuit of high-profile job opportunities. This language hurdle is a common challenge faced by many migrants in European continent, affecting both professional and personal aspects of their lives.

The job landscape for Indian students in Latvia undergoes a shift during a 4-month stay-back period. Many explore job prospects in neighbouring nations like Czech Republic, Portugal, Malta etc Sectors such as IT and international service centres become attractive destinations for those seeking skilled employment opportunities.

In the backdrop of the Russian-Ukraine war, Mr. M had expected timely support from both central and state authorities of India. However, no substantial aid or communication has been received, highlighting a gap in the expected governmental support during crises. Mr. M's migration experience illustrates the intricate interplay of educational aspirations, competitive dynamics, and the challenges faced by Keralite students in a foreign land. It calls attention to the evolving landscape of migration and the need for improved support structures by both the governments of India to address varying issues.

Case Study 2

Mr. N's migration from Kerala, to the Czech Republic in 2022 for his second master's degree presented a unique perspective on the experiences of a migrant student in Europe. Unlike many others who migrate for academic purposes, Mr. N's primary motivation was to explore the Europe, particularly the Schengen

nations, while pursuing education. Initially denied a job visa due to complex ties, Mr. N eventually secured a student visa, independently selecting a university without assistance from agencies. This decision-making process shed light on the autonomy and challenges faced by migrant students in navigating administrative procedures in a foreign country somehow.

Residing in Prague exposed Mr. N to the relatively expensive cost of living, prompting many migrant students to seek employment in hotels, restaurants, or factories due to language barriers restricting access to skilled jobs in fields like IT or international service centres. The preference among Keralite students for Ph.D. or medical programs in Prague due to available fellowships and scholarships adds a unique dimension to the academic choices made by migrant students in the Czech Republic.

Noteworthy migration trends include an influx of students from neighbouring countries, particularly Germany, due to presence of port in Prague. Moreover, there exists a notable trend of inter-university migration among many students who are increasingly opting to switch from prestigious universities they had initially enrolled to less renowned ones due to the latter's flexibility in accommodating full-time work commitments alongside academics. This migration trend, motivated by the desire to balance education with immediate job prospects, sometimes involves collaborations between recruiters and universities at the first stage. These 'secondary migrations,' prioritizing financial gains over academic reputation, underscore a shift where monetary considerations outweigh the pursuit of academic excellence in decision-making. This labels the students more as non-skilled labourers rather than 'students'.

Mr. N's satisfaction with the Czech lifestyle is closely tied to his location in Prague, contrasting sharply with the lifestyle outside the city. The security issues, notably highlighted by a shooting incident at his university in 2023, revealed the absence of aid from both the central and state governments of India. Mr. N contemplates the effectiveness of local Indian community members compared to Indian embassy officials in extending assistance and support to the Indian student community.

Case Study 3

In 2022, Mr. A embarked on a transformative journey, leaving behind the shores of Kerala to pursue his degree in Germany. The impetus behind his migration was a mix of factors rooted in dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions in his homeland. The outdated syllabus of Kerala's educational system, coupled with the spectre of unemployment and the prevalence of low-paid jobs, fuelled his decision to seek opportunities abroad. Additionally, the challenging socioeconomic conditions in Kerala acted as a catalyst for his migration.

Unlike many migrants who rely on agencies for assistance, Mr. A navigated the intricate process independently. The road to entry into his host university was not without hurdles, and he discovered the path to Germany through attendance at educational fairs.

Germany, promising a higher standard of living, became a haven for Mr. A. He rates the lifestyle as excellent compared to Kerala. Despite struggles finding accommodation without agency help, his satisfaction with life in Germany overshadows these hurdles. Mr. A observes that native Germans' reserved nature contrasts with Kerala's communal society, offering him a unique cultural perspective.

While content with his life in Germany, Mr. A remains undecided about obtaining Permanent Residency (PR) in the country. He appreciated the calm atmosphere prevalent in Germany and held little belief in receiving aid from both the central and state governments of India during times of crisis. However, he maintained a slight hope that the Indian embassy might extend support if needed.

In conclusion, Mr. A's migration journey from Kerala to Germany underscores the transformative impact of seeking education abroad. It highlights the contrast between the educational, cultural, and social landscapes of Kerala and Germany. Learning German is necessary to move in to Germany and thousands of students learned this skill just to escape from the frames of Kerala. His experiences paint a nuanced picture of the challenges faced by independent migrants, the cultural adjustments, and the pursuit of a better quality of life in a foreign land.

Case Study 4

Ms. S left Kerala in 2022 to Italy for pursuing her second master's degree. The core drivers of her migration were centred around a quest for an enhanced quality of life, improved work-life balance, prioritization of mental health, superior academic standards, and a pursuit of gender equality.

The lifestyle in Italy, compared to Kerala, struck Ms. S as significantly excellent. However, her initial challenges emerged in securing suitable accommodation due to the absence of agency support. Alongside the appealing lifestyle, she was also quick to note inequalities she faced in Italy, raising concerns about potential racism/inequalities faced by migrants. Mr. S is in doubt of acquiring the Permanent Residency, notably, she is determined about avoiding Kerala for her future job or career due to very limited opportunities.

Ms. S, having lived as a student in France and Italy, worries about the lack of support from Indian and Kerala governments for migrant students. During COVID-19, she noted France's proactive healthcare measures, contrasting with Indian neglect. Now funded by Italy's regional government, she questions Indian authorities' preparedness for emergencies, emphasizing the need for robust support systems for migrant students.

Despite her concerns, Ms. S concludes on a positive note, acknowledging the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by both Indian and Italian governments, including extension of the stay back period to 12 months. This gesture fosters hope for improved future support and collaboration between the two governments for the welfare of migrant students.

Case Study 5

This case study focuses on Mr. T, who migrated to the UK in 2020 from Kerala to pursue engineering degree. His primary drivers for this migration include desire to experience an alternative teaching and learning environment, cultural understanding, an updated syllabus, and a more job-oriented education system. Utilizing the assistance of an agency eased his journey, ensuring seamless accommodation arrangements.

Mr. T values his part-time job's financial support and aims for a reputable post-graduation job. He plans to return to India for further studies or employment, prioritizing personal fulfilment over monetary gains. Additionally, Mr. T sheds light on the lack of governmental support during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the instrumental role played by Malayalee associations in addressing the needs of students during challenging times.

Mr. T challenges the notion that all students are driven solely by financial prospects, asserting that a significant portion pursue education abroad for the holistic experience and career advancements. He believes that approximately 30% of these students will eventually return to their home countries, attributing this trend to evolving migration rules, job diversification, and the varying abilities of individuals to adapt to new cultures. This case study sheds light on the intricate interplay of motivations,

experiences, and perceptions that shape the decisions of students who embark on educational journeys abroad.

Findings

Following an in-depth analysis of five distinct migration case studies, our findings underscore significant factors aligning with the global compact for migration. Predominantly, drivers of migration prominently feature a convergence of socioeconomic, cultural, political, and demographic influences. However, three pivotal observations emerge prominently from this exploration. Firstly, the inadequate and outdated graduate-level syllabus prevalent in the educational sector of Kerala stands in stark contrast to its relatively efficient higher secondary level. This educational disparity surfaces as a compelling force driving individuals towards seeking educational opportunities abroad.

According to the Kerala State Higher Education Curriculum Framework, a significant imbalance within the present higher education system, predominantly characterized by a teaching-centric approach is being identified. Within this paradigm, educators primarily impart factual knowledge, constraining students to memorization and reproduction of information during examinations. This approach significantly blocks the development of critical skills such as conceptual comprehension, application to real-world scenarios, logical analysis, and problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the curriculum across various postgraduation and undergraduate programs suffers from irregular updates, failing to align with current industry trends and societal demands. Consequently, a disparity exists, prompting a considerable number of Kerala's students to seek higher education opportunities abroad, particularly in developed nations. These destinations offer access to superior-quality education that is more relevant and aligned with the evolving demands of industries and societies worldwide.

From the author's own experience in developing undergraduate syllabi in Kerala, he observed an apathetic attitude among professors and experts. They prioritize simplifying teaching methods for instructors without considering the welfare of students. These five case studies, among many, clearly demonstrate the outdated syllabi and teaching methods prevalent in Kerala, leading to a significant number of students choosing to study abroad.

Secondly, a notable inefficiency and ignorance, coupled with the absence of comprehensive rules and regulations, are evident in the approach of both the central and state governments of India and Kerala towards migrant students abroad. As per official records from the Ministry of External Affairs, the count of Keralite students going abroad in 2019 stood at 30,948. However, unofficial estimations project a much higher figure, surpassing 35,000 students annually migrating solely from Kerala to developed nations. The financial implications are staggering, with each student requiring a minimum of Rs 10 lakhs to pursue education at foreign universities, indicating a substantial outflow of capital from Kerala's economy. Yet, amidst this significant migration trend, students encounter multifaceted challenges and inherent risks in their host countries, spanning visa complexities, cultural disparities, discrimination, exploitation, health-related adversities, and more. A gap emerges in the absence of a structured system, both at the central and state levels, to oversee and facilitate organized student mobility. It is to be also noted that the participants of this paper's case studies have acknowledged that the Malayali associations in their host countries play a more effective role than the embassies of India and the Kerala government in supporting their community's needs. These associations not only offer aid but also seems to be having comprehensive data on Keralite students in their respective areas. This observation underscores the notable contribution and efficacy of these associations, as confessed by the study's participants.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revealed the extent of unregulated student migration from Kerala. While only 173 students in Ukraine were registered with NoRKA-Roots, the evacuation mission "Operation Ganga" revealed a much larger count of 3,428 students. These students from Kerala have dispersed across 54 countries, including the Isle of Man, a self-governing British Crown dependency. NoRKA-Roots initiated a consolidation effort in 2020 to unify students studying abroad onto a single platform, issuing student ID cards starting in April 2020 to offer insurance coverage. Presently, over 3,000 students are registered with the agency, with a significant portion hailing from countries like Ukraine, China, Canada, U.K., UAE, Moldova, Russia, Georgia, Philippines, and Germany.

NoRKA Roots CEO K. Harikrishnan Namboothiri notes that the registration numbers represent a trend, with a substantial number of students yet to register. India stands as the world's second-largest sender of students after China, with Indian students abroad quadrupling over the past 14 years. Estimates suggest approximately five lakh Indian students are overseas, with Kerala contributing significantly to this global student migrant community.

The predominant facilitators of this migration are student recruitment agencies or educational consultants, many operating without the endorsement or accreditation from the government. The absence of a regulatory framework, coupled with inadequate data and monitoring mechanisms for students studying abroad, results in a lack of tailored support and assistance. This dearth of oversight poses a pressing challenge in extending necessary aid to these students facing diverse challenges in their pursuit of education abroad.

Lastly, secondary migration is prevalent in Europe, involving students who initially move abroad for education, then relocate seeking better jobs or education. This repeated migration can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, hindering aspirations. Although India doesn't maintain comprehensive records, secondary migration may worsen structural issues from systemic problems in India and Kerala.

Hence, urgent reforms in Kerala's higher education system are imperative, necessitating the establishment of a comprehensive policy framework to manage and regulate student migration effectively from the state.

Conclusion

This research paper is based on five case studies across Latvia, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and the UK, highlighting the complex factors driving Keralite student migration to Europe, particularly within the framework of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and International Organization of Migration (IOM).

A significant drawback identified is the inadequate support system provided by the Indian and Kerala governments to these migrant students. The research reveals a concerning tendency for policymakers to wait for crises or negative scenarios before implementing supportive measures/ fundamentals. This can be also seen as a potential violation of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, guaranteeing the right to life with dignity, by the governments' passive stance towards supporting migrant students. This emphasizes the ethical imperative for policymakers to prioritize student welfare and proactively address the challenges associated with migration.

The outdated and syllabus-oriented nature of Kerala's higher education system emerges as a major push factor, consistently mentioned by all five case studies. This finding aligns with broader concerns raised by the GCM and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) regarding educational disparities contributing to migration flows.

This paper underscores the critical need for both the Indian and Kerala governments to immediately reform and develop comprehensive migration policies addressing the specific challenges faced by Keralite students in Europe and other nations predominantly surged by the same. These policies should prioritize proactive support mechanisms, including pre-departure guidance, career coaching, and access to social networks abroad 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 and reduce the pull factor of European and other international education systems. Cojoining such initiatives results in betterment of Kerala as students will get proper academic exposure in their homeland itself before studying/working in other country, contributing to Kerala's economy.

This research paper encourages collaboration between Indian Government and Kerala governments, European host countries, and educational institutions to establish partnerships and exchange programs. Such initiatives facilitate smoother transitions for migrant students, enhance cultural understanding, and promote knowledge transfer. Nations like Finland, Canada, Australia, and Ireland have implemented progressive immigration policies, such as expanding university capacities and modifying IELTS requirements. These policies address societal needs in fields like caregiving, nursing, STEM, and IT, aiming to resolve workforce shortages. Consequently, these policies have boosted young individuals' mobility, encouraging students to explore educational opportunities abroad and integrate into the international labour market.

Presently, international students carry a label associated with internationalism, reflecting a diverse global community. Nevertheless, this characterization might evolve as host nations reassess their policies about student admissions and 'integration' into the labour market, potentially altering the present narrative surrounding these students.

This research presents a compelling case for immediate and concerted action by the Indian and Kerala governments to address the Keralite student migration to Europe. Implementing supportive policies, revamping higher education, and fostering international collaboration are critical steps towards ensuring the well-being and success of these students abroad, while simultaneously mitigating the negative consequences of mobility for Kerala's development.

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