

Impact of Herding Behaviour in the Choice of Higher Education Institutions: Educational Migration from Kerala

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Abstract:

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, according to the Kerala Migration Survey 2023. This notable increase in student emigration underscores a significant shift in the demographics of emigrants from Kerala. There has been an increase in the number of emigrants leaving at a very young age, as early as 17 years. The KMS 2023 has revealed that 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. It is important to develop new policies that will encourage Malayalee international students to return home after acquiring valuable skills abroad, fostering a wave of brain gain.

Keywords: education, migration, peer influence, quality education, globalisation, brain drain, population ageing

INTRODUCTION

Migration for education has become a significant trend in Kerala, with an increasing number of students heading abroad for higher studies. This migration is not solely driven by personal aspirations or career goals, but is often influenced by herding behaviour, where individuals tend to follow the actions of others in their community or social circle. This behaviour is shaped by various social, economic, and cultural factors, which contribute to the growing phenomenon of students from Kerala opting to pursue education abroad. Herding behaviour, driven by various social, economic, and cultural factors, has shaped the educational migration patterns in Kerala, especially towards countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The educational migration may lead to long term brain drain from Kerala. The skilled young population may stay abroad leaving aged people alone at home. The ageing population issues will continue more seriously in the coming years.

According to the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023, approximately 2.5 lakh (250,000) students emigrated from Kerala, marking a substantial rise from 1,29,763 in 2018. Ernakulam has the highest number of student emigrants, followed by Thrissur and Kottayam, while Wayanad has the lowest. A growing number of younger individuals, some as young as 17, are choosing to emigrate for educational opportunities abroad.

Kerala has long been a leader in human development indicators, such as education and healthcare.

However, despite the availability of quality education within the state, a significant number of students continue to migrate abroad for higher studies. This pattern of migration raises concerns about the depletion of Kerala's educated workforce, particularly in sectors such as engineering, medicine, technology, and research. While student migration may offer immediate educational benefits to the individuals involved, it raises several critical questions about the future development of Kerala's economy and the sustainability of its workforce. There is a need to investigate the factors driving this trend, its impact on the local educational system, and the broader social and economic implications for the state. The migration of students for higher education is not an isolated issue but is intertwined with the broader challenge of brain drain. While many students initially migrate for educational purposes, a substantial proportion chooses to stay abroad after completing their studies, contributing to the emigration of highly educated and skilled individuals. This loss has far-reaching effects on Kerala's labour market, innovation capacity, and overall socio-economic development.

Review of Literature

Mary Lucia Joseph (2023) analysed the underlying reasons behind the increased levels of student migration and some of its resulting social and economic impacts on Kerala using a theoretical framework that combines hypotheses based on the push and pull models of migration.

Ismail Thamarasseri and Deepthy Baby (2023) analysed the factors that lead students to migrate. The study also analysed the various problems faced by undergraduate migrant students abroad.

S Irudaya Rajan (2024) presents a detailed statistical analysis of migration from Kerala. He described in the study that a significant rise in student emigration has substantially contributed to maintaining the emigration levels in 2023.

Research Gap

Herding behaviour among students in Kerala, like in many other regions, has become a significant trend, particularly when it comes to higher education and career choices. Migration for education has become a significant trend in Kerala, with an increasing number of students heading abroad for higher studies. This migration is not solely driven by personal aspirations or career goals, but is often influenced by herding behaviour, where individuals tend to follow the actions of others in their community or social circle.

The migration of students from Kerala for higher education has garnered significant attention, but there are still several research gaps that need to be addressed in order to fully understand the underlying causes, impacts, and long-term consequences of this trend. While much attention has been given to the short-term impacts of student migration, less is known about its long-term effects on Kerala's talent pool, especially in terms of brain drain.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the state's strong educational framework, many students from Kerala are increasingly seeking education in advanced countries. The primary drivers of this migration include the pursuit of better career opportunities, advanced specializations, and the promise of higher wages. While migration can offer individual students improved life prospects, its collective effect on Kerala's human capital raises concerns about the long-term impact on the state's workforce, economic growth, and socio-cultural development. This study seeks to examine the factors influencing international student migration from Kerala, with a particular focus on how this migration is contributing to the state's brain drain. The long run impacts of

students migration are also analysed in the study.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the push and pull factors behind international student migration from Kerala
- To analyse the long-term impacts of student migration on Kerala's economy

Methodology

The study uses both primary and secondary data. Secondary data is collected from various magazines, articles and websites. Primary data is collected from 200 students who are ready to migrate to other countries for higher education. The students were contacted with a structured questionnaire.

Significance of the study

Kerala's strong educational foundation has paved the way for its citizens to achieve global success, but this has come at a cost. The outflow of students, who represent a significant portion of the state's skilled workforce, risks undermining the state's future development. To address this challenge, Kerala needs to identify and implement strategies to mitigate the effects of brain drain, including improving local employment opportunities, incentivizing return migration, and creating a more conducive environment for innovation and skill development within the state. This study will provide valuable insights into how important it is for Kerala to retain its educated youth and prevent the loss of its intellectual capital.

Economic Liberalization and Rise of Professional Education

The economic liberalization in India, which began in the early 1990s, had a profound impact on education and migration patterns. During this period, Kerala saw a boom in the demand for higher education, especially in professional fields like engineering, medicine, business, and information technology. As the global IT industry expanded, many students from Kerala began to pursue higher studies and jobs in the United States, the UK, and later in countries like Canada and Australia, which offered more advanced technological education and better career prospects.

Current Trends and Brain Drain

In the last decade, the trend of student migration from Kerala has reached its peak. This period has been marked by several key developments:

- **Global Educational Opportunities:** The increasing availability of specialized courses, international scholarships, and student exchange programs has further driven migration.
- **Brain Drain and Talent Retention Challenges:** The migration of highly skilled students, particularly in fields such as medicine, engineering, and IT, has led to growing concerns over the brain drain from Kerala. The state continues to lose a significant portion of its educated youth to foreign countries, particularly to countries like the United States, the Gulf region, and Australia.
- **Emigration as a Career Norm:** For many students from Kerala, migration is no longer just about education—it is often viewed as part of a broader career path. The desire for better job prospects, higher salaries, and a higher standard of living abroad continues to drive migration, even as the state has made significant progress in sectors like education and healthcare.
- **Europe as an Emerging Destination:** There is also a growing interest in studying in countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, where quality education is available with low or no tuition

fees, especially in fields like engineering, science, and technology. Scholarships and opportunities for post-graduation employment have also contributed to this shift.

- **STEM Disciplines:** Kerala students continue to favour STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. Engineering and medicine remain dominant fields, but there is increasing interest in data science, artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, robotics, renewable energy, and biotechnology. This shift aligns with global industry trends and the demand for professionals in emerging sectors.
- **Management and Business Studies:** The popularity of MBA programmes and specialized courses in business management has surged, as many students from Kerala are aspiring to become entrepreneurs or leaders in the global marketplace. The presence of global business schools and multinational corporations in the US, UK, and other countries makes them highly attractive destinations.
- **Creative Fields:** There is also a growing trend toward pursuing degrees in creative disciplines such as design, animation, fashion, and media studies, with many students opting for international institutions that offer specialized programs in these areas.
- **Shift Toward Postgraduate Programs:** While undergraduate student migration has traditionally been prominent, more Kerala students are opting for postgraduate programs abroad, particularly in science, engineering, business, and medical fields. This trend is driven by the increasing competition for professional jobs in Kerala and the growing recognition of the value of international degrees.
- **Research Opportunities:** Kerala students are increasingly seeking research-based postgraduate programs in top global institutions. Fields like life sciences, medical research, environmental studies, and engineering innovation are witnessing heightened interest due to the emphasis on cutting-edge research and academic excellence abroad.
- **Private Institutions and Consultancy Services:** The rise of private educational consultants and agencies in Kerala is also shaping the migration trends. Many private institutions and consultancy firms assist students with application processes, visa requirements, and scholarship opportunities, making the migration process smoother and more accessible.

Push and Pull Factors of Student Migration from Kerala

Student migration from Kerala, like in other regions, is driven by a combination of push factors (conditions that drive students away from their home state) and pull factors (conditions that attract students to other destinations). These factors are multifaceted and encompass socio-economic, educational, and cultural elements that influence the decision to pursue higher education abroad.

A study was conducted among 200 students who were ready to migrate, using a structured questionnaire. The push and pull factors according to them are the following.

Push factors- Reasons Why Students Leave Kerala

Factors	Number of respondents	Percentage
Lack of Advanced Courses	126	63
Global Standards of Education	159	79.5
Limited High-Paying Job Opportunities	200	100
Saturated Job Market	149	74.5
Higher Salary Expectations Abroad	200	100
Limited Entrepreneurial Opportunities	60	30

Quality Disparities	112	56
Infrastructure and Facilities	174	87
Social Pressure for International Exposure	124	62
Traditional Emigration Culture	79	39.5

While Kerala’s education system is strong, there is a gap in the availability of certain specialized courses, particularly in fields like engineering, medicine, technology, and business management. Students often migrate to countries where these programs are better developed and recognized internationally. Despite Kerala’s strong educational system, the job market for graduates in certain fields is limited, with fewer opportunities for well-paying jobs, especially in sectors like information technology (IT), engineering, and research. Many students see migrating as a way to secure better career prospects, particularly in countries with higher demand for skilled professionals. Over time, Kerala has experienced a surplus of qualified graduates in certain sectors (like engineering and medicine), but the job market has not kept up with this demand, leading to underemployment or a mismatch between skills and available jobs.

Students are often attracted to higher salaries and better economic conditions in countries like the US, UK, and Australia. The economic disparity between Kerala and developed countries plays a key role in the decision to study abroad, as students expect better returns on investment for their education and skills. Despite Kerala’s high literacy rate and the presence of several reputed universities, the perceived quality of education in certain fields, compared to global standards, can push students to pursue studies in well-established foreign institutions that are known for their academic rigor, faculty expertise, and research output. Many students are attracted to advanced research facilities, laboratories, and a more interactive learning environment that is often found in developed nations.

There is a growing societal belief that studying abroad offers students a chance to gain international exposure, cultural enrichment, and global recognition. This societal trend pushes students to leave Kerala in pursuit of more prestigious educational opportunities.

Pull Factors: Reasons Why Students Choose to Study Abroad

Factors	Number of students	Percentage
Quality and Prestige of International Institutions	122	61
World-Class Universities	122	61
Access to International Job Markets	200	100
Higher Earning Potential	200	100
Scholarships and Financial Aid	113	56.5
Low Tuition Fees in Certain Countries	90	45
Pathway to Permanent Residency	200	100
Cultural and Educational Diversity	107	53.5

Countries like the United States, the UK, Canada, and Australia are home to some of the world’s top universities, which offer high-quality education, exposure to cutting-edge research, and a strong academic reputation. Kerala students are attracted to the opportunity to study at institutions that are internationally recognized. Degrees from international universities often hold more weight globally, especially in fields like business, technology, and healthcare, which attract students who want globally competitive qualifications.

After completing education abroad, students often find it easier to secure jobs not only in the country they studied in but also in other parts of the world. Countries like the US, Canada, and Australia are known for their strong job markets and employment opportunities for graduates. The pull of better salaries and benefits in foreign countries is a significant factor.

Many developed countries and universities offer financial aid, scholarships, and student loans to attract international students. These financial incentives make studying abroad more affordable for many students from Kerala, reducing the economic barrier to migration. In countries like Germany, some European countries, and the Gulf nations, the cost of higher education may be lower than in India, and in some cases, even free, which can act as a strong pull factor.

Many students from Kerala are drawn to destinations like Canada and Australia, where there are clear pathways to permanent residency after completing their studies, providing long-term career and settlement opportunities. Studying abroad allows students to connect with a diverse group of peers and professors, providing valuable networking opportunities that can help in career development and future business ventures. The international exposure also prepares students to work in globalized industries and multinational companies.

Students seek not only academic knowledge but also the cultural experience that studying abroad offers. The opportunity to live in a different cultural environment, learn new languages, and experience diverse traditions is a significant draw.

Student migration from Kerala is driven by a combination of push factors, such as the limited availability of specialized programs, career opportunities, and economic conditions within the state, and pull factors, including access to better educational opportunities, global recognition, and enhanced career prospects abroad. As the world becomes more interconnected, students from Kerala will likely continue to seek international education, but it is essential for the state to address these issues to retain its educated youth and mitigate the long-term effects of brain drain. Balancing both the local educational infrastructure and the allure of international opportunities will be key to ensuring Kerala's sustained growth and prosperity.

Long-Term Impact of Student Migration from Kerala

The long-term impact of student migration from Kerala is multifaceted, with both positive and negative consequences for the individual students, their families, and the state as a whole. Over time, the migration trend can shape various aspects of Kerala's socio-economic, cultural, and demographic landscape. Here's an in-depth look at the long-run impact of student migration from Kerala:

Positive Impacts:

- **Remittances and Financial Support:** One of the most immediate benefits of migration, especially to foreign countries, is the flow of **remittances**. Kerala has been a significant beneficiary of remittances from its migrant workers, especially those in the Gulf countries. While these remittances are primarily from workers, many students also migrate to these regions for better educational opportunities, contributing to the economy once they join the workforce.
- **Global Exposure and Knowledge Transfer:** Kerala benefits from the global exposure that its students gain while studying abroad. Many students returning after completing higher education bring back new knowledge, advanced skills, and global perspectives that can be applied to local industries and entrepreneurial ventures.
- **Skill Development:** As Kerala sends students abroad, many of them gain highly specialized skills in fields like engineering, medicine, business, and technology. This leads to a highly skilled workforce

that can potentially fill gaps in Kerala's evolving industries, particularly in tech, healthcare, and service sectors. Some may even return to the state, contributing to knowledge transfer and helping in the development of advanced industries.

- **Educational Reforms:** As more students study in internationally recognized institutions, Kerala may adopt best practices from abroad, influencing local educational reforms. Returning students can bring back ideas for better teaching methods, new curriculums, and modernized infrastructure, which can help uplift the educational standards of the state.
- **Global Networks and Diplomatic Ties:** Kerala's diaspora, which includes both students and professionals, can help foster stronger global diplomatic and business relations. The state government can leverage these connections to attract foreign investments, improve trade relations, and strengthen international collaborations.
- **Improved Education Standards:** As Kerala's students study in top international institutions and gain exposure to advanced educational methods, the state can benefit from a more competitive educational culture. Institutions in Kerala may adopt international standards, develop exchange programs, and promote academic excellence, potentially improving the quality of education.
- **Higher Demand for Specialized Education:** The success of students studying abroad often creates demand for specialized educational institutions in Kerala. This could lead to an increase in the establishment of high-quality universities, vocational schools, and professional training centres to cater to emerging global sectors.

Negative Impacts:

- **Brain Drain:** The most prominent long-term economic effect is the brain drain, where a significant portion of Kerala's brightest young minds do not return after completing their studies. This outflow of educated and skilled professionals to foreign countries deprives Kerala of much-needed talent, particularly in sectors that require specialized training and expertise.
- **Labor Shortage in Key Sectors:** Key sectors in Kerala, like healthcare, engineering, and research, may experience a shortage of professionals as educated youth opt to settle abroad. This could slow down the growth and development of these sectors in Kerala, as local talent may choose to work in global markets instead of in the state.
- **Aging Population:** If the trend of migration continues, the state could face challenges related to an aging population. As educated youth migrate abroad, the population left behind may be older and less able to contribute to the economic and developmental needs of the state. This demographic shift could strain Kerala's social services and healthcare systems.
- **Decline in Family Structures:** As more students migrate for studies and work, the traditional family structure in Kerala could be affected. Younger generations may be less inclined to settle back in their home state, leading to weaker familial ties, potential isolation of elderly relatives, and the breakdown of close-knit communities that were previously a hallmark of Kerala's society.
- **Political Disengagement:** A large number of students leaving Kerala to study abroad may result in political disengagement among youth. If students choose to settle in foreign countries permanently, they may not actively participate in local governance, elections, or civic responsibilities, leading to a disconnect between the youth and political processes in the state.
- **Dependence on Remittances:** While remittances can be beneficial in the short term, heavy dependence on them for economic growth can make Kerala vulnerable to global economic

fluctuations, as changes in international job markets (such as economic recessions or policy changes in host countries) can disrupt the flow of remittances.

- **Unequal Access to Education:** Migration also highlights inequalities in access to education. Students from wealthier families often have the resources to study abroad, while disadvantaged students may not have access to the same opportunities. This can deepen social divisions and perpetuate the gap between different socio-economic classes.
- **Loss of Local Traditions:** As more students migrate and live in international environments, there may be a loss of local traditions, values, and languages. Students may become less attached to Kerala's customs and social practices, leading to a dilution of the state's traditional culture over time.
- **Rising Educational Costs:** The desire for high-quality education abroad also increases the financial burden on families, especially in the case of private institutions. The cost of higher education, along with living expenses abroad, can result in a financial strain for many families.

Conclusion

The impacts of student migration from Kerala are far-reaching and multi-dimensional. While the migration provides global exposure, enhanced career prospects, and remittances, it also brings about challenges such as brain drain, cultural erosion, and societal divide. To mitigate the negative impacts, Kerala needs to focus on creating a better environment for returning students, improving local education infrastructure, and providing more career opportunities for its educated youth. Balancing both the global opportunities available to students and local growth opportunities will be key to Kerala's sustainable development in the long run.

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