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Student Migration from Kerala to Overseas Destinations: An Empirical Analysis of Determinant Factors

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Abstract

Student migration from Kerala to foreign countries has increased significantly in recent years due to educational aspirations, better career opportunities, and global exposure. This study examines the major factors influencing students' decisions to pursue higher education abroad. The research highlights the role of quality education, availability of advanced courses, employment prospects, scholarships, migration networks, and socio-economic conditions in shaping migration decisions. Push factors such as limited educational opportunities, unemployment, and intense competition within the state are also considered. In addition, the study explores the influence of parental expectations, peer groups, and the growing trend of internationalization in education. The findings reveal that economic advancement and the desire for improved living standards are among the primary motivations for student migration. The study contributes to understanding the changing educational and migration patterns among Kerala students and provides insights for policymakers and educational institutions regarding international student mobility.

Keywords: Student Migration, Kerala, Foreign Education, Higher Education, Push and Pull Factors, International Mobility, Employment Opportunities.

Introduction

Kerala has long been recognised for its high literacy rate, educational awareness, and migration culture. In recent years, student migration from Kerala to foreign countries has emerged as a major socio-economic trend. A growing number of students are choosing countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and the United States for higher education and career opportunities. According to data presented in the Indian Parliament, more than 13.35 lakh Indian students were pursuing higher studies abroad in 2024 across 108 countries. Kerala has become one of the leading contributors to this outward student migration. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 estimated around 2.5 lakh student emigrants from the state, with districts such as Ernakulam, Thrissur, and Kottayam reporting the highest numbers. Recent surveys also indicate that nearly seven out of ten Kerala students studying abroad are either unwilling or uncertain about returning to the state after completing their studies. Several factors influence this migration trend, including the desire for internationally recognised degrees, better employment opportunities, higher salaries, global exposure, and access to advanced courses in STEM, Artificial Intelligence, business, and technology. At the same time, unemployment, limited career opportunities, and intense competition in India act as major push factors. Family expectations, peer influence, educational consultancy services, and the aspiration for improved living standards further encourage students to pursue education abroad.

Therefore, understanding the factors influencing student migration from Kerala is essential for framing effective educational and migration policies.

Push and Pull Factors

Push Factors:

Push factors are unfavourable conditions in the home country that encourage migration. These include poverty, unemployment, low wages, political instability, discrimination, poor education and healthcare facilities, environmental disasters, and cultural restrictions. Such conditions limit opportunities and quality of life, motivating individuals to migrate in search of better education, employment, and living conditions.

Pull Factors:

Pull factors are favourable conditions in destination countries that attract migrants. These include better job opportunities, higher wages, quality education, healthcare, political stability, personal freedom, and improved living standards. Push and pull factors often work together, where poor conditions at home and attractive opportunities abroad jointly influence migration decisions.

Education System in Kerala

Kerala's higher education system is well-developed and combines public and private institutions to provide comprehensive educational opportunities. The state has several reputed universities, including University of Kerala, Mahatma Gandhi University, and Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, offering undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs in various disciplines. The system is regulated by University Grants Commission and supported by the Kerala government through investments in infrastructure, research, and faculty development. Scholarships and financial assistance schemes help students from economically weaker sections access higher education. The Kerala State Higher Education Council plays an important role in promoting educational reforms, innovation, and quality enhancement. Private colleges and universities also contribute significantly, particularly in professional fields such as engineering, medicine, and management. Kerala's high literacy rate reflects its strong commitment to education and human development. The state has also integrated technology into education through digital learning platforms and initiatives like Digital University Kerala. Recent efforts focus on expanding institutions, improving research facilities, strengthening industry collaborations, and enhancing student employability through skill development programs.

International Education

International education involves the movement of people, ideas, and knowledge across cultural and national boundaries, supported by globalization. It helps students adapt to global changes by offering

education that meets international standards. Studying abroad provides diverse courses, research opportunities, and skill-based training, broadening academic and career prospects. It also exposes students to different cultures, languages, religions, and ethnic groups, creating a multicultural learning environment. This enhances cultural awareness, mutual understanding, and appreciation of diversity. As globalization increases opportunities for work and study abroad, international education has become an important part of personal, academic, and global development.

Review of Literature

Vishal P Deshmukh et al., (2022) discusses about the factors influencing Indian students for migration. One of the causes of students migrating is thought to be the limited number of seats in educational institutions and the high competition for admission to institutions offering higher education. The students believe that a degree earned abroad is more respectable than one earned at an Indian educational institution and is highly valued on the labour market. The quality of education is another factor; the study says that only a few higher educational institutions in the country meet international standards. After graduation, students have access to employment prospects in nations like Canada, whose welcoming immigration laws enable them to work and establish themselves there.

Kevin and Bijulal (2024) investigated the growing trend of student migration from Kerala, India, to European countries, focusing on case studies of Latvia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom over the past five years. The research reveals that dissatisfaction with the perceived low standards of undergraduate education in Kerala has driven students to seek education abroad. Through comprehensive data analysis and case studies of five students, the study examines their experiences, educational opportunities, socio-economic conditions, cultural adaptation, and academic pursuits in the host countries.

Anilaskariah (2024), in their study titled "Dynamics of International Student Migration: An Explorative Study in the Context of Kerala, India," examined the motivations and experiences of Kerala students migrating abroad for higher education. Using a mixed-method approach with 37 respondents, the study found that students preferred countries such as the UK, New Zealand, and Germany due to better educational quality and career opportunities. Educational loans were identified as the primary funding source. The study also highlighted challenges such as financial stress, cultural adjustment, and social adaptation. Poor educational quality, outdated curricula, and limited job-oriented courses in Kerala were major migration factors.

Justine George et al., (2023) discuss the increased migration due to the educational drawbacks in Kerala. In the study, the researcher used a study by the Centre for Development Studies to mention the number of students moving to foreign countries. As per the study, about 1.5 million students from Kerala were attending higher education abroad. 12% of the graduates from Kerala continue their education overseas. Two out of every three young people in Kerala want to move overseas for work and associated reasons. The shortcomings of Kerala's educational system, including its outdated curriculum, lack of emphasis on skill development, and institutional and infrastructural issues, are the main factors driving students to continue their studies abroad. The United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia are the top 11 choices for migrant students. Additionally, students think that immigrating as a student is one of the simplest methods to obtain citizenship or permanent residency.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the major factors influencing student migration from Kerala to foreign countries.
- To examine students' perceptions regarding higher education opportunities in Kerala.
- To analyse the push and pull factors responsible for international student migration.

Hypothesis of the Study

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is no significant association between the educational factors and students' decision to migrate abroad for higher education.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁)

There is a significant association between the educational factors and students' decision to migrate abroad for higher education.

Methodology of the study

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature and focuses on the educational, economic, and social factors influencing students from Kerala to migrate abroad for higher education. The study aims to identify the major reasons behind international student migration and analyse students' perceptions regarding overseas education opportunities. The study area is confined to Kerala students pursuing higher education in foreign countries. Both primary and secondary data were used for the research. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to students studying abroad. The questionnaire included questions related to educational background, migration motives, financial support, and perceptions of education systems. Secondary data were collected from journals, books, research articles, government reports, newspapers, and online sources. The study adopted the snowball sampling technique, where respondents helped identify other migrant students. A total of 90 respondents were selected for the study. The collected data were analysed using appropriate statistical tools for interpretation and conclusion.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents Considering Overseas Education

Considerations	No. Of respondents	Percentage
Better quality of education	30	33%
Lack of adequate opportunities in Kerala	20	22%
International exposure	10	11%
Better career prospects	15	17%
Improved standard of living	10	11%
Cultural experience	5	6%
Total	90	100%

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 reveals out of 90 respondents, the primary reason for student migration from Kerala to foreign countries is the **better quality of education**, cited by 33% of respondents, The **lack of adequate opportunities in Kerala** (22%), Better career prospects (17%) and international exposure (11%), showing that students seek improved employment opportunities and a globally competitive education system, Quality of life (11%). Majority 33% of respondents, are migrating from Kerala to abroad for better quality of education.

Table 2: Exploring Educational Opportunities Before Deciding to Study Abroad

Explore education in Kerala	No. Of respondents	Percentage
Yes	69	76.7%
No	21	23.3%
Total	90	100%

Source: Primary data

Table 2 reveals that the distribution of the respondents based on the exploring educational opportunities before deciding study abroad. out of 90 respondents 76.7% respondents are explore the educational opportunities in Kerala before they going abroad, and 23.3% respondents are not exploring the opportunities in Kerala. Majority 76.7% respondents are exploring the educational opportunities in Kerala before going to study abroad.

Table 3: Challenges in Pursuing Higher Education in Kerala

Challenges Faced While Pursuing Higher Education	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Limited Availability of courses	35	39%
Outdated curriculum	15	17%
Lack of research infrastructure	32	36%
Lack of international collaboration	8	9%
Total	90	100%

Source: Primary data

Table 3 reveals on the most significant issue are the limited availability of courses (39%), indicating that students struggle to find diverse and specialized academic programs that align with their career aspirations. The lack of research infrastructure (36%) is another major concern, showing that students face difficulties accessing modern laboratories, funding, and high-quality research opportunities. Outdated curriculum (17%) Lack of international collaboration (9%) is the least cited challenge but still plays a role. Limited opportunities for student exchange programs, global partnerships, and exposure to international academic standards may reduce the appeal of local education. Majority (39%) respondents are indicating that students struggle to find diverse and specialised academic programs that align with their career aspirations.

Table 4: Assessment of the Education System against Global Standards

Education system meets the global standard	No. Of the respondents	Percentage
Yes	20	22.2%
No	20	22.2%
Partially	50	55.6%
Total	90	100%

Source: Primary data

Table 4 reveals about the distribution of respondents based on Kerala's education system meets the global standard. Out of 90 respondents 22.2%respondent have meet the global standard, 22.2%does not meet the global standard, and 55.6%ptially meet the global standard. Majority 55.60% meet the global standard.

Table 5: Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Higher Education

Factors influencing higher education	No. Of respondents	Percentage
Global ranking of universities	38	42.2%
Availability of scholarships	22	24.4%
Visa policies	25	27.8%
Better standard of living	5	5.6%
Total	90	100%

Source: Primary data

Table 5 reveals the distribution of respondents based on the factors influencing higher education. Out of 90 response 42.2% respondents have global ranking universities,24.4% respondents are influenced by the availability of scholarships, 27.8% are influenced by the visa policies, and 5.6% are influenced by a better standard of living. The majority (27.8%) of respondents are influenced by the visa policies.

Table 6: Chi-Square Test of Association Between Financial Support and Students Higher Education Decisions

INFLUENCE	FINANCIAL SUPPORT				Total
	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Not important	
Global ranking	10	20	5	3	38

Availability of scholarships	8	10	3	1	22
Visa policies	7	9	8	1	25
Standard of living	3	2	0	0	5
Total	28	41	16	5	90

Source: Primary data

Ho: -There is no significant association between financial support influence the migration of the students for higher education

Ha: - There is significant association between financial support influence the migration of students for higher education.

Ho: - Denotes null hypothesis

Ha: - Denotes alternative hypothesis

The symbol for chi- square and the formula are as follows.

$$X^2 = \frac{\sum(O - E)^2}{E}$$

O: Denotes observed frequency

E: Denotes expected frequency

E= (Row total ×column total) / Grand total.

O	E	O-E	(O-E)²	(O-E)²/E
22	11.82222	10.17778	103.5872	8.762072
10	17.31111	-7.31111	53.45235	3.087748
5	6.755556	-1.75556	3.081975	0.456213
1	2.111111	-1.11111	1.234568	0.584795
8	6.844444	1.155556	1.335309	0.195094
10	10.02222	-0.02222	0.000494	4.93E-05
3	3.911111	-0.91111	0.830123	0.212247
1	1.222222	-0.22222	0.049383	0.040404
9	7.777778	1.222222	1.493827	0.192063
7	11.38889	-4.38889	19.26235	1.691328
8	4.444444	3.555556	12.64198	2.844444
1	1.388889	-0.38889	0.151235	0.108889
3	1.555556	1.444444	2.08642	1.34127
2	2.277778	-0.27778	0.07716	0.033875
0	0.888889	-0.88889	0.790123	0.888889
0	0.277778	-0.27778	0.07716	0.277778
90				20.71716

Calculated value $X^2 = 20.71716$

Degree of freedom = (r-1) (c-1)

= (4-1) (4-1)

= (3) (3)

= 9

Value of 9 degrees of freedom @5%level of significance = 16.919

Chi -Square Summary Result

Test statistic	Value
Calculated χ^2 value	20.717
Degrees of freedom (df)	9
Critical χ^2 value at 5% level	16.919

Result

The chi-square test reveals a statistically significant association between financial support and its influence on students' migration for higher education. The calculated χ^2 value of 20.717 with 9 degrees of freedom exceeds the critical value of 16.919 at the 5 per cent level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. The finding indicates that financial support-related considerations significantly influence students' decisions regarding international higher education. In particular, access to scholarships and other forms of financial assistance may help students overcome the economic barriers associated with studying abroad. The result underscores the importance of financial support mechanisms in shaping international student migration decisions.

Major Findings of the Study

1. Quality of Education

A significant proportion of respondents (33%) reported that the pursuit of better-quality education was the primary reason for migrating abroad. This indicates that perceived differences in educational quality between Kerala and foreign destinations influence students migration decisions. The finding highlights the importance of improving the quality, competitiveness and international orientation of higher education in Kerala.

2. Inadequate Educational Opportunities in Kerala

About 22% of respondents identified inadequate educational opportunities in Kerala as an important factor influencing their decision to study abroad. This suggests that the limited availability of suitable programmes may encourage students to seek alternative educational destinations. Expanding diverse and internationally relevant programmes in Kerala could help address this concern.

3. Exploration of Educational Opportunities in Kerala

Nearly 76.7% of respondents reported that they had explored higher education opportunities in Kerala before deciding to study abroad. This indicates that overseas migration was often considered after assessing the available domestic educational alternatives. The finding suggests that students make comparative evaluations of local and international higher education opportunities before migrating.

4. Limited Availability of Specialised Courses

Around 39% of respondents identified the limited availability of specialized courses in Kerala as a major challenge. This reflects a gap between students specialised academic aspirations and the range of programmes available within the state. Strengthening specialised and emerging academic

programmes may reduce the need for students to seek such opportunities abroad.

5. Inadequate Research Infrastructure

About 36% of respondents considered inadequate research infrastructure to be an important limitation of Kerala's higher education system. This suggests that students interested in research-oriented education may perceive foreign universities as offering better academic and research facilities. Improving laboratories, research facilities, funding and institutional research capacity could enhance the attractiveness of higher education in Kerala.

6. Perception of Global Standards

A majority of respondents (55.6%) perceived that Kerala's higher education system only partially meets global standards. This finding indicates a perceived gap between the quality and international competitiveness of higher education in Kerala and that of foreign institutions. Enhancing academic quality, international collaborations and global accreditation may improve students' confidence in the domestic system.

7. Global University Rankings

Around 42.2% of respondents reported that the global ranking of foreign universities influenced their choice of an overseas institution. This indicates that institutional reputation and international recognition are important considerations in students' higher education decisions. Improving the global visibility and academic reputation of Kerala's institutions could therefore contribute to retaining more students within the state.

8. Favourable Visa Policies

Nearly 27.8% of respondents identified favourable visa policies as an important factor influencing their decision to migrate abroad for higher education. This suggests that the ease of obtaining and maintaining student visas can influence the attractiveness of foreign education destinations. Thus, migration decisions are shaped not only by educational considerations but also by destination-country policies and institutional accessibility.

Policy Implications

The findings of the study indicate the urgent need for reforms in Kerala's higher education system to reduce the increasing outflow of students to foreign countries. Educational institutions should introduce more specialized and industry-oriented courses aligned with global labour market demands. Improving research infrastructure, international collaborations, and academic quality can enhance the competitiveness of local institutions. Policymakers should focus on curriculum modernization, digital learning facilities, and skill-based education to meet international standards. Greater investment in higher education and research funding is essential to improve employability and innovation opportunities for

students within the state. The government should also strengthen career guidance and placement support systems to address youth unemployment and career insecurity. In addition, scholarship schemes and academic exchange programs can help students access quality education locally while reducing excessive dependence on foreign education and minimizing long-term brain drain from Kerala.

Conclusion

The study concludes that educational, economic, and career-related factors play a significant role in influencing student migration from Kerala to foreign countries. Better quality education, lack of adequate educational opportunities in Kerala, limited course availability, and insufficient research infrastructure are the major push factors encouraging students to pursue higher education abroad. At the same time, globally ranked universities, favourable visa policies, and improved career prospects act as important pull factors attracting students to foreign destinations. The findings also reveal that many students perceive Kerala's higher education system as only partially meeting global standards, highlighting the need for educational reforms and modernization. The increasing trend of student migration reflects changing aspirations among Kerala youth for global exposure and career advancement. Therefore, strengthening local educational institutions, enhancing employability, and improving research and innovation facilities are essential to reduce excessive educational migration and retain skilled human capital within the state.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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