



The Kerala exodus: Patterns and socio-economic effects of student migration

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Abstract

Student migration from Kerala for higher studies has become a major contemporary trend, shifting from traditional labour migration to education-led migration, especially toward the Global North. This study identifies key drivers such as limitations in the state's higher education system, unemployment, aspirations for global mobility, opportunities for permanent settlement, and evolving social attitudes. It also highlights the impacts, including brain drain, ageing population, financial pressures on families, and changes in social structures. The paper concludes that this trend reflects deeper structural constraints and emphasizes the need to improve higher education quality, employability, research opportunities, and local career prospects to reduce migration driven by compulsion.

Keywords: Kerala, student migration, higher education, brain drain, diaspora, employability, international education

Introduction

Kerala has historically occupied a distinctive place in migration studies because of its long tradition of out-migration (CDS, 2023; Rajan & Zachariah, 2019) ^[14]. For decades, migration from the state was primarily labour-oriented, with the Gulf region functioning as the dominant destination (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019) ^[14]. In recent years, however, a new pattern has become visible: large numbers of students are leaving Kerala to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate education abroad (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023; UNESCO, 2021) ^[10, 20], especially in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United States (OECD, 2022) ^[11]. This shift represents more than a change in destination; it signals a transformation in the social meaning of migration itself (Rajan et al., 2021) ^[15].

Student migration from Kerala is increasingly tied to aspirations that combine education, employment, and long-term settlement (OECD, 2022) ^[11]. For many families, overseas higher education is no longer viewed only as an academic investment but as a pathway to social mobility, migration security, and improved life chances (Rajan et al., 2021) ^[15]. A number of studies note that students frequently select destination countries not only for university quality but also for work opportunities during and after study, as well as possibilities of permanent residence (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2021) ^[11, 20]. This trend has generated serious debate in Kerala (Centre for Development Studies, 2023) ^[4]. On one hand, migration is seen as an opportunity for skill acquisition, international exposure, and upward mobility (OECD, 2022) ^[11]. On the other, it raises concerns about brain drain, declining enrolment in local colleges, ageing communities, financial burdens on families, and the weakening of the state's long-term human resource base (Rajan et al., 2021) ^[15]. Research also suggests that a substantial proportion of these student migrants come from lower- and middle-income households and often depend on educational loans, making migration a high-risk strategy rather than a purely elite choice (Centre for Development Studies, 2023; Reserve Bank of India, 2022) ^[4, 16].

Objectives

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to analyse the drivers behind the shift from labour migration to education-led migration among students from Kerala; (2) to assess the multi-dimensional impact of student migration on Kerala's higher education system, labour market, and society; and (3) to propose policy measures addressing the structural causes of student out-migration from Kerala.

Methodology

This paper adopts a secondary data analysis approach, drawing on academic studies, journal articles, and government reports on student migration from Kerala, including the Kerala Migration Survey (Centre for Development Studies, 2023) ^[4], Reserve Bank of India Remittances Survey (2025) ^[17], and International Organization for Migration World Migration Reports (2020, 2024) ^[7]. The analysis synthesizes evidence from surveys, interviews, and institutional data, focusing on key themes such as Malayali student diaspora trajectories, higher education quality, identity and labour dimensions, and post-study outcomes. As a conceptual study, it does not include primary fieldwork but consolidates existing evidence to examine the drivers, patterns, and implications of student migration from Kerala.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the push-pull theory of migration (Lee, 1966) ^[9], which explains student migration from Kerala as the result of interacting push and pull factors. Push factors include limitations in higher education quality, unemployment, and weak research and industry linkages, while pull factors involve access to better universities, post-study work options, and improved living conditions in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (OECD, 2022) ^[11]. The study also draws on the new economics of labour migration (Stark & Bloom, 1985) ^[18], which views migration as a household strategy to diversify income and address financial constraints, particularly through education loans. Additionally, the feminization of migration perspective (Piper, 2008) ^[12]

highlights changing gender dynamics, with a rising share of female student migrants reflecting greater educational attainment and aspirations for autonomy (Centre for Development Studies, 2023)^[4]. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of student migration from Kerala as both an individual educational decision and a structural response to economic and institutional constraints.

Results and Discussion

The following section examines the major dimensions of student migration from Kerala, including the transformation from Gulf labour migration to education-led migration to global campuses, the district-wise distribution of student migrants, and the key drivers behind this. The following section examines the major dimensions of student migration from Kerala, including the transformation from Gulf labour migration to education-led migration to global campuses, the district-wise distribution of student migrants, and the key drivers behind this shift. It further analyzes recent trends, the multi-dimensional challenges faced by migrants along with the socio-economic effects on Kerala, and offers a structural interpretation of why migration has become a compelling strategy of exit rather than a purely educational choice.

1. From Gulf Corridors to Global Campuses

Migration is deeply embedded in Kerala's social and economic history. Earlier waves of migration were dominated by workers moving to Gulf countries in search of employment and remittance opportunities. In contrast, the current phase is characterized by youth leaving for educational purposes, often with the intention of entering foreign labour markets after graduation. This transformation is significant for three reasons. First, it changes the age profile of migrants, with many now leaving immediately after school or undergraduate education. Second, it alters the class character of migration, as educational loans have made study abroad possible for lower-middle-class families. Third, it shifts the social meaning of education itself: a foreign degree is increasingly valued not just for learning, but for mobility, employability, and residence rights.

2. District-Wise Distribution of Student Migrants

International student migration status in Kerala 2023		
District	Emigrant Students	Per cent
Thiruvananthapuram	4887	1.95
Kollam	21607	8.64
Pathanamthitta	10466	4.18
Alappuzha	14217	5.69
Kottayam	35382	14.15
Idukki	6946	2.78
Ernakulam	43990	17.6
Thrissur	35873	14.35
Palakkad	13692	5.47
Malappuram	15310	6.12
Kozhikode	15980	6.39
Wayanad	3750	1.5
Kannur	23512	9.4
Kasaragod	4391	1.78
Total	250003	100

Source: Economic Review 2025, SPB, GOK

The Kerala Migration Survey (Centre for Development Studies, 2023)^[4] highlights that there was a considerable rise in the number of students among the total emigrants from Kerala in 2023, reflecting a rising trend of younger individuals migrating overseas, especially for educational purposes. Table 1 presents the district-wise distribution of student migrants.

3. Drivers of Student Migration

Student migration from Kerala is driven by a combination of educational, economic, and socio-cultural factors. A key push factor is the perceived decline in the quality of higher education, including outdated curricula, weak industry linkages, and limited research opportunities, which lead students to prefer overseas institutions (Academia.edu, n.d.; IJNRD, n.d.)^[2, 6]. Employment-related concerns also play a crucial role, as limited job opportunities, low wages, and underemployment in the state encourage students to seek countries where education is closely linked to stable career prospects (IJMRAST, n.d.; Rajagiri Journal Portal, n.d.)^[5, 13].

At the same time, migration is increasingly shaped by aspirations for upward social mobility, with students from lower- and middle-income households using education loans to access global opportunities, though this often increases financial risk (Academia.edu, n.d.; IJMRAST, n.d.)^[2, 5]. The availability of post-study work options and pathways to permanent residence in countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom further strengthens this trend, as education is often viewed as a route to long-term settlement (Academia.edu, n.d.; Rajagiri Journal Portal, n.d.)^[2, 13]. Additionally, changing youth aspirations—including the desire for greater social freedom, global exposure, and autonomy, especially among women—also contribute to the rise in student migration (IJMRAST, n.d.; The UNN, n.d.)^[5, 19].

4. Recent Trends

Recent trends indicate a rapid expansion and transformation of student migration from Kerala. The number of migrating students has grown significantly, rising from 18,428 in 2016 to 30,948 in 2019, with estimates suggesting that approximately 35,000 students leave annually (Academia.edu, n.d.)^[2]. Preferred destinations are concentrated in countries such as Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, the United States, Germany, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands, with over 70% of students concentrated in a few major destinations (Academia.edu, n.d.)^[2].

Another significant shift is the feminization of migration, with increasing participation of women linked to changing gender norms and employment conditions (Academia.edu, n.d.; IJMRAST, n.d.)^[2, 5]. Additionally, student migration is becoming more inclusive, with a growing number of first-generation learners and individuals from low-income households participating, indicating a broadening socio-economic base (Rajagiri Journal Portal, n.d.)^[13].

5. Challenges and Socio-Economic Effects

Although student migration from Kerala is often viewed as a pathway to success, evidence shows that many students face

significant challenges abroad, including financial strain, loan repayment pressure, work–study imbalance, language barriers, job insecurity, mental stress, and precarious living conditions (Abraham, 2024; Bijulal et al., 2024) ^[1, 3]. Scholars describe this through the idea of a "dual identity," where students simultaneously function as learners and low-paid workers, creating tension between academic goals and economic survival (Bijulal et al., 2024) ^[3].

These individual struggles are paralleled by broader socio-economic implications for Kerala, particularly brain drain and the loss of skilled human capital when students settle abroad (Academia.edu, n.d.; The UNN, n.d.) ^[2, 19]. Additionally, student migration places financial pressure on families through high upfront costs and education loans, often resulting in reverse remittance flows during the study period (IJMRAST, n.d.). It also contributes to declining enrolment in local higher education institutions and triggers wider demographic and social changes, including ageing populations, shifting family structures, and increased care burdens on those remaining in the state.

6. Structural Interpretation

Student migration from Kerala should not be understood narrowly as a matter of students preferring foreign universities. It is better interpreted as the outcome of an interaction between local constraints and global opportunities. The push factors include dissatisfaction with educational quality, weak labour absorption, low salary expectations, and social frustrations. The pull factors include high-quality institutions, international exposure, work opportunities, better living conditions, and settlement options.

A key analytical point emerging from recent research is that migration decisions are embedded in family strategies, financial calculations, class aspirations, and imagined futures. For many young Keralites, studying abroad is not merely about acquiring a degree; it is about escaping stagnation and securing a dignified life (IJMRAST, n.d.; Rajagiri Journal Portal, n.d.) ^[13]. At the same time, the migration process is unequal and risky. Students from low-income households may face significant debt and exploitative conditions abroad. Therefore, romanticizing migration as a universal success model would be misleading.

Policy Recommendations

Student migration from Kerala reflects both expanding global opportunities and deep structural constraints within the state's education and labour systems. While it enables skill development, mobility, and exposure, it also contributes to challenges such as debt burdens, brain drain, and demographic imbalance. Addressing this trend requires a comprehensive policy response focused on:

1. Improving higher education quality through curriculum reform, research funding, and industry-academia linkages.
2. Strengthening employability via skill development programs and internship opportunities.
3. Creating meaningful local employment to absorb graduates in high-value sectors.
4. Promoting return migration and leveraging diaspora engagement for knowledge transfer and investment.

Conclusion

Unless Kerala enhances local opportunities and restores confidence in its institutions, student migration will continue to function more as a strategy of exit than as a purely educational choice. The transformation from labour migration to student migration signals not merely a change in destination but a deeper structural response to the limitations of the state's education and labour markets. Addressing this exodus requires urgent and sustained policy intervention.

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