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Motivating Factors for International Migration: A Case Study of Nepalese Students Living Overseas

Tika Raj Kaini

Lecturer in Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Trichandra Multiple Campus,
Kathmandu (Nepal) E-mail: <tikakaini75@gmail.com,
tika.kaini@trc.tu.edu.np>

Abstract

Nepal has one of the highest rates of student outflow abroad in search of better education and employment opportunities. However, this emerging phenomenon also causes much concern about the so-called 'brain drain' and its implications in the country. This study explores the motivating factor for the out-migration of Nepalese students to other countries. I selected six participants living in different foreign countries through purposive sampling and conducted in-depth telephone interviews to elicit their personal experiences. The results indicate that students are motivated not only by push factors such as scarcity of opportunities in Nepal and political disturbances and by an obsolete education system in the country but also by pull factors such as advanced education systems, more predictable employment, and improved quality of life abroad. This study concludes that while migrating abroad gives students opportunities to grow personally and professionally, it also contributes to Nepal's loss of skilled individuals. Therefore, this study suggests that improving domestic education, providing long-term job opportunities, and promoting good governance are crucial for Nepal to retain its human capital and encourage students to return home after studying abroad.

Keywords

Students Outmigration, Brain-drain, Push-pull factors, Nepal.

Centre For Studies of National Development, Meerut

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9412200765

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1. Introduction

Student movement between the home and host country and its dimensions has become an area of major interest for both countries of origin and destination. As an example, the host nation gains via international students on an economic angle, while the country of origin, like Nepal, has to bear migration of its intellectual individuals, called “brain drain” (Jong & Fonseca, 2020). This event gives a two-sided meaning. Nations with advanced development are making profits and having talents; however, nations with underdevelopment are facing the outcome of the economy and social aspect. More and more students from Nepal are exploring study abroad opportunities and are typical of the trend globally, which is mostly oriented toward destinations like Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada (Ghimire, 2019).

In today’s world, international student mobility is obviously a principal avenue connecting high-skilled immigration with other nations (Suter & Jandl, 2006). Nevertheless, it seems that the factors that drive student migration are not adequately explained, with the factors such as good educational standards and the lack of higher earnings cited as the main determinants (Brezis & Souris, 2011). Moreover, it is revealed that the dream of better living situations and being awarded universally recognized degrees are the main factors for students or prospective students seeking an international education (Chacko, 2020). Studying abroad, as Costello (2015) observes, involves not only classroom education but also experiencing cultural differences and living in a host country.

Students from developing countries like Nepal often dream of going abroad to build a better life and secure the future they have always hoped for. In addition to academic qualifications, students enjoy an invaluable work opportunity and financial sustainability during their study abroad (Tran et al., 2020). This is how student migration is not only a tool for individual development but also a

contributing factor to global socio-economic dynamics. At a base level, student migration involves moving from one place to another as either a means of temporary or permanent carrying out of educational or occupational activities, often steered by factors such as escaping political turmoil or improving lifestyle standards (Goldin & Reinert, 2007). The trend of students pursuing higher education in global universities is also strong in Nepal, which, for instance, is reflected by the threefold increase in the number of NOC applicants in the current year as compared to the prior years (Ghimire, 2016). This means that educational migration is truly on the rise.

A good example of this is that 112,593 Nepalese students received “No Objection Certificates” (NOCs) from the government in 2023/24, which is a necessary document for pursuing studies abroad (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2024). There is no doubt that the large-scale exodus of competent population from developing to developed nations like Nepal has been a determinant factor and felt accordingly. Brooks and Waters (2011) contend that brain drain is the main pitfall for developing economies, rendering the local economy weak without the necessary human resource to improve and develop it. Amongst such students, some may eventually come back, while others may still remain overseas, accentuating this evolution.

The culminating out-migration of students from Nepal, however, is a wake-up call to correct the base causes of migration and cultivate an agreeable atmosphere for the homecoming of students. This trend has profound consequences, leading to a gap of skilled professionals and a roadblock of economic advancement in Nepal. In this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the motivating factor for the out-migration of Nepalese students to other countries. Moreover, it attempts to explore the factors underlying the increasing outflow of Nepalese students to foreign education. It aims to give a broad perspective of this trend in its impact on students and Nepal generally while trying to understand their decisions and experiences.

2. Review of Anthropological Perspectives on Migration

As a complex social phenomenon, migration has always fascinated the anthropologist who, in this process, can study it from cultural, social, and interdisciplinary viewpoints. The engagement of anthropology with migration changed dramatically as it moved from early localized works to recent global, transnational, and

intersectional analyses. The discipline now focuses on the processes and contexts of migration and the far-reaching effects thereof while drawing on insights from other fields such as sociology, political science, and economics (Brettell 2016).

Anthropological studies on migration are generally classified into three categories. In the first, they focus on the image of immigrants as constructed by host societies and the immigrants' adaptation to this construction. The second examines the process of migration itself, involving both individual and collective experiences of migrants. The third category deals with the broader contexts of migration, including legal, cultural, and political aspects that touch upon border constructions, estranged connections, and sociocultural networks (Brettell, 2016; Brettell & Hollifield, 2023).

The broader theoretical influences shaped the movement of migration studies in anthropology. In its early years, the discipline was largely an investigation of small, face-to-face communities located in non-Western cultures. Yet since the 1970s it has been increasingly used to study patterns of large-scale migration, employing at times diverse theoretical frameworks, for example, world-systems theory to dissect economic and political forces involved in migration processes through historical instances such as the Atlantic slave trade (Kearney 1986). Meanwhile anthropologists have examined the impacts of rural-urban migration and movements from developing regions into industrialized centers (Castles et al., 2014).

In the 1990s, the focus of anthropology shifted to cultural and social aspects of migration, again largely influenced by postcolonial and transnational perspectives. The shift thus opened up space for the consideration of migration in flows and relationships that make up the world, as well as questions about ethnic versus civic identities, belonging, and sociocultural dynamics operating between newcomers and indigenous people (Foner 2003; Reed-Danahay & Brettell 2008). Foner's work on historical and contemporary immigration into North America provides a comparative framework for examining immigrant experiences versus their host societies' expectations. Likewise, Reed-Danahay and Brettell's ethnographic case studies at two ends exhibit what cultural and political engagement entails for immigrants in Europe versus the United States.

Anthropologists point out the interdisciplinary nature of migration research. Brettell and Hollifield (2023) discuss how

theories of migration are enriched by the contributions of culture and make important cultural perspectives become relevant in the discussions. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014) make an essential part of globalization to frame migration with its deep political, economic, and cultural impacts. On the other hand, works such as Rosenblum and Tichenor (2012) extend the disciplinary scope of international migration to include anthropological as well as sociopolitical viewpoints.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, anthropological research on migration often focuses on particular cases or regions. For instance, White (1995) studied migration of Turks to Germany and considered issues related to cultural adaptation and integration. An online resource that provides detailed information on topics related to migration as well as world regions and specific case studies is the Migration Information Source.

Anthropology's broad approach to understanding migration through the use of both empirical analysis and theoretical understandings underscores its continuing relevance for analyzing one of humanity's most enduring forms of social change. Through collaborations with disciplines such as economics, geography, and cultural studies, anthropology will further our collective understanding of the many facets of human migration in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. Study Site and Methodology

This study focused on individuals who were originally residents of Kathmandu, Nepal, and are now living in various foreign countries. These participants were purposefully selected because their experiences provide valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and factors driving the migration of Nepali students abroad. An exploratory research design within the qualitative framework was adopted to investigate this relatively underexplored phenomenon. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences and the broader social and economic influences on their decisions to migrate. The study targeted a universe of students from the Kathmandu Valley who had moved abroad for education and employment opportunities. From this population, a purposive sampling method was employed to select six participants, ensuring diverse and meaningful contributions to the research. Data were collected through in-depth telephone interviews

using open-ended questions, which encouraged participants to share their personal narratives and reflect on their motivations and attitudes. The data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis, and systematic coding to identify recurring themes and patterns. Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained throughout the study, including the use of pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, as well as obtaining informed consent to respect their autonomy.

4. Data Presentation and Interpretation

Lee's theory of migration (1966) is a seminal theory about human mobility. Lee's definition of migration includes two factors, push factors that induce people to depart from their home of origin and pull factors that induce them to go to a new location. Migration occurs when the interaction between these factors, along with intervening obstacles and personal circumstances, motivates individuals to move.

The education system in Nepal has long been criticized for not adequately preparing students for the competitive nature of the modern world. Outdated curricula, limited access to modern educational resources, and a lack of alignment with job market demands have created frustration among the nation's youth. Apart from the education, the socio-economic factors, including the corruption, nepotism and the job market stagnation, worsen the poor condition. These broader problems have left students feeling incarcerated, their dreams limited by the inefficiencies of the household.

On the other hand, countries such as Australia, United States, Canada, and United Kingdom have developed high-level education, professional development and strong socio-economic frameworks. These pull factors together with the push factors in Nepal have resulted in a growing number of students moving out in the name of better prospects. Aaryana (pseudonym), a 22-year-old student from Kathmandu and now living in Australia, exemplifies this phenomenon. Her lived experience provides a compelling description of how poor institutional frameworks in Nepal make it an imperative for Nepalese students to study and look for jobs far away from home. She describes it as follows:

After finishing high school in Kathmandu, I dreamed of a career in healthcare administration. But Nepal's outdated

education system, with rote learning, delayed exams, and endless bureaucracy, left me feeling stuck. Waiting months for paper and lab data depleted my motivation, and even my helpful parents started to lose hopes in the system. A friend who studied in Australia introduced me to their practical and efficient education system. Programs such as Vocational Education and Training (VET), modular semesters and financial backups such as Centrelink seemed like the right options to me. The prospect of a stable future through flexible home loan policies under the LMI scheme also stood out.

Leaving Nepal wasn't easy, but staying meant struggling in a system that didn't work. I opted to pursue a world in which recombination translates into real chances and real progress.

Aaryana's story shows the deep frustrations that many Nepali students carry in their home country's educational context. In her case the push factors are comprehensible and complex. First, the reliance on outdated curricula and rote memorization reflects a lack of innovation in Nepal's education system. This method does not prepare students with the real-world skills needed in the current employment market, and are not prepared for workplace difficulties. Second, due to academic process inefficiencies (including repeated exam delays and bureaucratic roadblocks in document verification), students face more obstacles. These inefficiencies are not merely inconveniences; they represent systemic failures that hinder students' ability to achieve their goals in a timely and effective manner.

The pull factors that drove Aaryana to go to Australia are equally powerful. The VET system provides a clear representation in the education structure of Nepal on the one hand, by focusing on practical, job-related programmes, and preparing students for work in real-time on the other. The structured semester system further adds predictability and efficiency, enabling students to plan their academic journeys with confidence. Additionally, Australia strong social security (e.g., Centrelink) has been used to mitigate the financial problems that often come with studying abroad. The accessibility of flexible housing and loan facilities, as demonstrated by the LMI scheme, then comforts students about their capacity to lead a stable life in their new country.

Similarly, globalization is a key framework for understanding migration. According to Giddens (1990) globalization is the increasing degree of world interdependency which involves the local and global.

Robertson (1992) highlights globalization as the “thinning of the world” and growing sensitivity to a global system. Globalization provides Nepalese students opportunities to pursue international education owing to the improvements in communication/ transportation technologies. De Haas (2000) highlights globalization’s role in creating a global labor market, where Nepali students can explore education and career opportunities. Like Aaryana, another participant, 26-year-old Sirjan (pseudonym) from the USA reveals:

As I began my computer science studies in Nepal, I was brimming with hope and excitement to work with the latest technology. But that excitement quickly faded. The courses were outdated, practical training was nonexistent, and there was no access to modern tools or industry exposure. It felt like we were stuck in the past, unprepared for the global job market. It got worse watching my friends abroad, working on the next level stuff doing projects and interning. I was stuck memorizing theories with no real-world application. That’s when I started exploring opportunities abroad, and the U.S. stood out. The adaptability of community colleges, inexpensive supplementary courses and the opportunity to work part-time while attending have been a source of optimism for me. The supportive system, with on-campus housing and resources for international students, made the transition feel possible. Leaving Nepal wasn’t easy, but staying meant staying stuck. Moving to the U.S. was my chance to grow and learn in an environment that values innovation and practical skills.

The personal experience of spending time in Nepal, as recounted by Sirjan, clarifies the great constraints of the educational system in Nepal and the push factors that encourage students such as him to leave Nepal in search of chances abroad and outside the country. The outdated module, poor practical training and inadequate industry engagement made him feel insecure for a career in the global domain. On the other hand, the pull factors of the U.S.-flexibility, innovation, and financial opportunities-provided him with the tools and confidence to pursue his dreams.

Sirjan’s story points out the critical importance of urgent systemic change in Nepal’s education system to stop the hemorrhaging of the country’s gifted population. Nepal’s labor market offers the imbued challenges to its educated youth, and there exists the embedded corruption, nepotism and lack of meritocratic

hiring practices that can set limits on professional prospects. Such problems can quite frequently leave people feeling disenfranchised when their competences and efforts do not map back to an impactful career. For most, the escape from Nepal is predicated on the promise of objectivity, security and possibility in the exterior world. Moreover, another participant, Sonam (pseudonym), a 25-year-old from UK, shares his experience:

When I graduated, I was eager to start my career, but reality hit hard. Jobs seemed to require connections, not just qualifications. Despite my efforts, I saw others get ahead through influence, not merit. Interviews felt like a formality, with decisions already made, leaving me disheartened and frustrated by a system stacked against me. That's when I began exploring options abroad and discovered the UK. Its structured education system, globally recognized universities, and fair job market stood out. I was attracted by the prospect of merit-based and a fair opportunity and a skill-based system. By learning about social security options such as pensions and employer benefits, I felt assured that I could secure my future there. Leaving wasn't easy, but staying meant constant frustration. Moving to the UK was my chance to live in a system where effort and talent truly mattered.

Sonam's story is representative for many young Nepali professionals. His experience demonstrates the structural deficiencies of the Nepalese job market, which are fueled by the presence of corruption and nepotism and leads to a job setting that discourages hard work and credentials. These push factors, including arbitrary hiring practices and a lack of meritocracy, leave individuals like Sonam feeling excluded and disheartened. On the other hand, the inducements of the United Kingdom-systematic teaching, clear job market and strong social security system-differ sharply with his situation in Nepal. According to Sonam's account, the dream of fairness and chance in the US can induce young professionals to take their own country as a migrant destination. His movement wasn't an unplanned flight, but an intentional move to a system that wanted his talent and work. Similarly, another participant, Suresh (pseudonym), a 25-year-old now living in Canada, expresses his experience as:

I always wanted a job where I could solve practical problems, but in Nepal, that felt impossible. The education system focuses on theory, with little emphasis on practical skills or job market

readiness. No matter how much I studied, I wasn't getting the kind of experience that employers are looking for. Financial stability was another concern—no structured pensions or safety nets made the future feel uncertain. That's when I looked abroad and found Canada. Its education system emphasizes practical, industry-relevant skills, and programs seemed tailored for real-world success. Their pension programs and financial security mechanisms of reassurance, along with a variety of housing options and friendly communities within which they could move, produced a sense of security and ease of move. Leaving Nepal wasn't easy, but staying meant staying stuck. Moving to Canada was my chance to chase my dreams and build a stable, fulfilling life.

Suresh's story also highlights the systemic barriers in Nepal that drive capable young people to look for jobs overseas. The focus on theoretical education, absence of practical training, and lack of financial safety nets constrain people to imagine a secure future in the country. There are these push factors which confine young professionals such as Suresh in a system that is not in line with their goals. Conversely, Canada's causal factors are definite and motivating. Its focus on applied, real-world, career-ready courses creates a clear route toward career readiness, and combined with the practical introduction of structured pension offers lifelong financial peace of mind. Secondly, the availability of a variety and inclusive range of housing choices enables the seamless transfer for students from abroad, allowing them to feel part of the new setting.

Suresh's displacement demonstrates the transformative role that can be played by nations that are committed to investing in education, financial security, and inclusivity. His decision to leave Nepal was not made lightly but was driven by a desire to achieve his ambitions in a system that supported growth and security. Furthermore, another participant, Sarita (pseudonym), a 23-year-old woman living in the United Kingdom, shares her experiences as:

Growing up in Nepal, I dreamed of a career where hard work and skills were rewarded. However, after graduation I found out that the job market does not choose talent and experience but instead considers the existing network (relationship). Interviews felt like formalities, and the outdated education system left me unprepared for real-world challenges. On the other hand, it was a disheartening experience to witness the

fruits of my efforts in a system which did not provide equitable access. Exploring options abroad, the UK stood out. Its universities emphasized practical skills, hands-on training, and industry connections-everything I lacked in Nepal. The open labor market and a merit-based recruitment mechanism instilled in me a hope that eventually hard work will be rewarded. The UK's social security and the well-regulated housing market enhanced the attractiveness, providing security and backing for a new beginning.

Sarita's story highlights the systemic challenges in Nepal's education and employment sectors that push skilled individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere. The absence of meritocracy, traditional academic institutions and poor career advancement prospects leads to a wide sense of being underappreciated and dissatisfied. These push factors are exacerbated by the absence of transparent hiring practices and practical training, making it difficult for talented individuals to build fulfilling careers within the country. Sarita's migration highlighted the difference between the systems in Nepal and in the UK. The decision on his part to permanently withdraw was due to the ambition to realize his full potential in a setting that prioritizes hard work and merit. The story is a reminder of the pressing need for systemic change in Nepal to fully understand the drivers of brain drain and establish a reasonable appetizing and supportive context for its citizenry. Like other participants, Aayousi (pseudonym), a 24-year-old living in Australia, shares her story as:

In Kathmandu, I always felt education should be about preparing for real-world challenges, not just passing exams. Yet Nepal's rigid system stifled creativity and ignored individuality. My interest in technical education was brushed aside, and practical courses were outdated, leaving me feeling unprepared and uninspired. Discovering Australia's education system was a turning point. It focused on a working skill, hands-on learning, and programme specific to the expectations of the individual. For the first time ever, I experienced an engagement where my goals were actually given weight. The financial support structures, social safety nets, and accessible student housing made the idea of moving there even more appealing. It was a hard decision to exit Nepal, but remaining would have resulted in compromising my future. Australia made the offer to learn in an environment that celebrates innovation, aspiration, and skill.

Aayousi's account sheds light on the rigid and outdated nature of Nepal's education system, which often prioritizes uniformity over individuality. Her frustration with the lack of creativity and practical learning opportunities reflects a broader issue that affects many students in the country. The push factors in her case—limited scope for technical education, outdated curricula, and a lack of alignment with job market demands—are emblematic of a system that fails to nurture diverse talents. However, the attractors of Australia's education system supplied the condition that enabled Aayousi to flourish. The integration of technical and vocational education at all levels, coupled with a focus on life-wide learning and real-world applications, stood in stark contrast to the rigidity she experienced in Nepal. The specialized programs allowed her to pursue her interests, while the financial infrastructure and supportive housing options eased her transition.

Aayousi's movement highlights the transforming role of an education system in promoting innovation and uniqueness. Her narrative serves to highlight the current great necessity of the Nepalese system of education to be revamped in order to become suitable to multifarious aptitudes and prepare learners to face the challenges of today's employment market. Without such changes, the country risks losing more young minds like Aayousi, who leave not just to escape limitations but to realize their full potential in environments that embrace their aspirations.

5. Major Findings

- ▶▶ Education in Nepal is traditionally done by means of a not updated curriculum and memorizing that does not prepare the students to the real-world problem.
- ▶▶ Lack of access to experiential training, industry experience, and contemporary tools leads to a major hole between what is taught and what is required in the job market.
- ▶▶ Socio-economic problems such as corruption, nepotism and corruption of merit are still discouraging professionals, and young professionals, to fill positions in Nepal.
- ▶▶ Driving forces of aspiring people out of the country are unfavourable conditions at the moment of examination (impractical, postponed and/or failed examinations), bureaucratic obstacles, and lack of financial resources.

- ▶ Host nations such as Australia, United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom attract Nepalese students by providing practical orientation in education, formalized system, and strong social support.
- ▶ Open hiring processes and a merit-based job market exist in these nations that offer the equity and growth potential unavailable in Nepal.
- ▶ Blend of push factors in Nepal and pull factors abroad highlights a compelling requirement for structural changes for the retention of Nepal's youth and to stem the brain drain.

6. Conclusion

Systemic problems in the areas of education and employment have produced a situation in Nepal where aspiration is often frustrated. Outmoded education materials, the absence of applied experiences, and insufficient job prospects bring atrophy to the youth, compelling so many to seek employment abroad, where they can find greater opportunity. These forces are augmented by socio-economic constraints such as corruption, cronyism and lack of effective official bureaucracy. For students and professionals, choosing to depart is not just escapism, but an attempt to find systems that recognize hard work, merit, and development-whether that be Australia's vocational education orientation, whose system is now all too relevant, the UK's system-wide transparency in the job market, Canada's system-wide focus on real-world skills, or the U.S.'s system-wide openness to novel academic structures.

The repeated stories of Aaryana, Sirjan, Sonam, Suresh, Sarita and Aayousi indicate that there is an immediate need for such changes in Nepal. Solving these systemic deficiencies- updating the system of education, encouraging on-the-job training, and providing a merit-based job market- can help narrow the expression between intent and opportunity. Investment in young people and in enabling education and employment through dedicated frameworks will help decrease the loss of highly skilled citizens and stop the talent they bring in order to construct a more sustainable and fair future for Nepal.

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