

Research Article

Quest for Quality Education and Anticipation for Permanent Settlement: Nepalese Students' Migration to the UK as a One-way Trajectory and Brain Drain

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Abstract

Unlike the existing education related migration literature, this study argues that higher education factors alone may not be the main reasons for Nepalese students' migration motivation to the UK. Through a rigorous qualitative analysis of thirty-five in-depth interviews with diverse cohorts of Nepalese students in the UK, this study illuminates the multifaceted processes by which educational migration transitions from temporary sojourning experiences into long-term permanent settlement pathways. Grounded on framework of push and pull factors, this study identifies Nepal's unstable political situation, lack of employment opportunities and unsecured future as the key push factors, while revealing the perceived value of British education, enhanced global employment opportunity and prospects for secured future as the primary pull factors. In addition to this, the study further highlights limited return intention among Nepalese students, instead, the study reveals their deep-seated residential intention in the UK. Thus, on the one hand, this study signals Nepalese students' migration as a predominantly *one-way trajectory*, indirectly functioning as a mechanism of one-way trajectory and systemic *brain-drain*. Simultaneously, the findings underscore the necessity of comprehensive and effective policy intervention designed to mitigate long-term socio-economic consequences linked with such persistent unidirectional migration. Thus, this study offers a necessary re-evaluation of established narratives regarding international students' migration patterns.

Keywords

International Migration, Immigration, Educational Migration, Brain-drain, One-way Trajectory

1. Introduction

Recently, education-related migration has been a global phenomenon contributing to the changing landscape of international migration. According to UNESCO's 2024 report, over 6.5 million students were enrolled in higher education institutions outside their home countries, with more than 70% originating from Asia and Africa, seeking opportunities in the Global North. The report highlights the central role of OECD

countries—particularly the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia—as leading destinations for international students. Among them, the United Kingdom hosted over 732,000 international students in 2024 and became the 2nd largest host nation after the USA [1]. This growth has been shaped by several interconnected factors, including UK's historic colonial ties, the high values placed on British

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academic degree, enhanced labour market opportunities, access to the resources and aspiration for the permanent settlement [2-4].

Against the backdrop of increasing trend of education related migration, the South Asian—particularly Indian students constitute a significant flow to the UK, representing the second largest group among the international student population [5]. Compared to Indian students, Nepalese students' migration to the UK has been significantly smaller in size and until recent years, it has been characterised as a recent phenomenon, which lacks a rich scholarly discussion.

To present it briefly, Nepal has never been a member of the Commonwealth nations; however, it has maintained a distinct diplomatic bond with the UK for over two centuries. Despite the enduring bilateral relationship dating back to 1816, the contemporary trend of Nepalese students migrating to the UK is fundamentally distinct from earlier patterns of temporary mobility, which were largely associated with professional trainings and government's official purposes [6]. Such links of educational aspect of Nepal-UK exchanges was once illustrated by some Royal family members, including the late king, Birendra's enrolment at Eton. Those early migrants, especially until late 1990s, maintained strong patriotic ties to Nepal and usually returned after completing their course, reflecting a circular rather than permanent migration pattern.

On contrary, the contemporary Nepalese students' migration to the UK, exhibits markedly different characteristics, motivations, and settlement intentions [7, 8]. It has been evident that the feature of recent trend of Nepalese students' migration has increasingly evolved into a pathway for long-term or permanent settlement in the United Kingdom [8-10].

Recent data from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology reveal that more than 100,000 Nepalese students received permission to study abroad in 2023-2024 alone, highlighting a tenfold increase from the early 2000s. This growth has been credited not only to the perceived quality and international recognition of British higher education but also to broader aspirations for socio-economic stability, financial security and eventual motives for permanent settlement in the UK [7, 11]. Unlike circular migrants, as stated above, who maintained firm commitments to Nepal, recent education migrants often develop deeper attachments to the UK while loosening ties to Nepal. Consequently, this shift, to many stances, has contributed to unidirectional trajectory combinedly reinforcing brain-drain dynamics [12-14]. As a result, this trajectory should be observed distinctively.

Further to explain this, on most occasions, international students often arrive with dual intentions: pursuing quality education while simultaneously seeking opportunities for long-term settlement [15-17]. With no exception, it has been observed that Nepalese students' migration to the UK have been predominantly influenced by diverse factors, principally the desires for long-term settlement in the UK. As these students pose not a minimal prospect of return to Nepal, this trend can be compared with the context of one-way trajectory and brain-

drain [2, 4, 18]. Thus, it can be argued that educational migration gradually portrayed as a unique manifestation of contemporary brain-drain, influences through multilevel mechanisms that simultaneously facilitate emigration of potential Nepalese professionals [19, 20].

The concept of brain-drain has initially been theorised in the 1960s to describe the systematic outflow of skilled human capital from less developed to more advanced economies [2, 20]. Since then, this trend has evolved to represent a wider array of migration patterns, with student mobility emerging as a crucial dimension. Although the traditional patterns of brain-drain primarily focused on the emigration of skilled professionals, the recent shift represents educational migration as a foundational mechanism in contemporary global talent flows [11, 14]. In this context, the framework of *de-facto permanent migrants* offers an essential lens for analysing the unidirectional trajectory of Nepalese students to the UK.

It is obvious that the cost of overseas education is significantly expensive and the financial aspect strongly effects these students' choices whether to return to the country of origin or remain in the country of destination for the cost recovering purpose [21]. In this context, Nepalese students and their families make a huge financial investment through different means, such as through high-interest loan, sale of family land and property- with the hope that these investments will be recovered via higher earnings in the UK. Due to the financial pressure, these students often tend to explore alternatives immigration routes to remain in the UK wishing to regain the investment cost instead of returning to Nepal.

2. Methodology

Methodologically, this study has been grounded on the qualitative primary research though some secondary analysis of the key literature relating to the student's migration to the UK has been considered. Primarily, this study has adopted interpretive induction, which has allowed for the systematic study of personal experience and meaning and has been very useful for exploring and analysing the real-life stories of various contexts [22, 23]. Relying on interpretive paradigm, the study has interpreted migration trajectories as socially constructed phenomenon, which has been intertwined with broader socio-cultural and economic structures, and analysed Nepalese students' real-life experiences of their entire migration journey. As argued by Wodak [24], this study has analysed the meaning of how Nepalese students make sense of their lived experiences, motivations, and aspirations. Mirroring the approach of Gergen et al, [25] this study has also emphasised the interpretive rigour and subjectivity inherent in individual narratives, highlighting deep reflexivity and localised knowledge over statistical generalisability.

The empirical data were gathered through 35 in-depth interviews with Nepalese students enrolled across diverse higher education institutions in the UK. By employing purposive and snowball sampling to reach participants primarily via

established network, heterogeneity across academic fields and individuals' demographic characteristics have been maintained [26]. The final cohort consisted of fifteen undergraduates, fifteen postgraduates, and five doctoral candidates, spanning disciplines such as business, engineering, computer science, public health, the social sciences, and the humanities, and included students from both public and private institutions. Gender distribution comprised twenty-four men and eleven women, reflecting structural realities of Nepalese higher education mobility, where entrenched patriarchal norms continue to privilege sons' access to international education [8, 27]. This aspect has highlighted that the gender imbalance within the sample was not incidental but mirrored broader demographic and cultural trends shaped by gender imbalance within Nepalese student migration.

The interviews, guided by a flexible protocol, explored multiple dimensions of their entire migration journey. Drawing on Chavez [28], the interviews were grounded in motivations for migration, educational pathways and associated challenges, employment trajectories and aspirations, integration processes, and future return intentions. In line with professor Les Back, [29], by implementing my skills of art of listening while interviewing these respondents, I have tried to capture the enriched meaning from their life stories linked with their migration journey.

During the data storage, processes and analysis, established qualitative standards have been adhered, prioritising participant confidentiality, autonomy, and well-being [30]. Considering the richness of the information emerged from the in-depth interviews, a multilevel thematic analysis framework has been employed [31-33]. This multi-stage process gave way to the development of higher-order themes that captured both convergences and divergences in participants' accounts. As a member of a Nepalese diaspora, as argued by May and Perry [34], I also rigorously maintained a reflexive journal to interrogate assumptions, positionality, and interpretive biases.

This study has found out several interrelated thematic categories, such as, migration motivations that extended beyond educational objectives; settlement intentions and long-term aspirations; strategic negotiation of immigration policy frameworks; socio-cultural integration challenges; and perspectives on return migration. The subsequent sections present the detailed analysis of the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Migration Motivations: Beyond Academic Pursuits

As stated in broader education migration literature, at this point, it can be argued that for the overwhelming majority, education served less as an end than as a strategic pathway to permanent settlement in the UK [2, 14, 35, 36]. The analysis presents that the access to quality education has always been

cited as a formal motive for migration; however, several underlying reasons were discovered beyond their desire for education.

Further to explain, the findings outline a multidimensional framework of push and pull factors shaping the entire migration trajectories. Nepal's ongoing political instability, limited employment opportunities, corrupted and institutionalised nepotism in workplace contexts, and familial and peer-pressure were the prominent examples of push factors. Simultaneously, along with the motives for permanent settlement and the prestige and social capital associated worldwide recognised UK degree emerged as the prime drivers influencing participants' migration decisions. In essence, the findings highlight Nepalese students' education migration to the UK as a complex migration phenomenon. It is worth quoting some narratives to support the argument.

One postgraduate student in finance explained,

"I didn't just come here to study. That was the excuse. My real reason was to build a better future, earn well, and maybe bring my family later."

This sentiment was echoed by participants, who viewed their educational investment as a pathway to accessing the UK labour market, which can lead to the way to permanent settlement in the UK. As stated in its introduction section, it reflects that the financial burden of international education has been an additional pressure forcing Nepalese students to remain in the UK. A business undergraduate noted,

"My parents sold a piece of land for £25,000 to send me here. How can I go back without making that huge sum of money? I must recover that money first before I decide to return to Nepal".

This economic pressure created what participants described as a "no-return" scenario, where the cost of educational investment necessitated long-term settlement to achieve financial recovery. On top of this, most of them shared their family members perceptions towards international education as an investment in the family's future. Their parents always expected from them that they would eventually facilitate broader family migration to the UK or provide ongoing financial support. Social prestige and status considerations also have played crucial roles in migration decision-making. Participants described how international education, particularly from prestigious Western institutions, conferred significant social status in Nepal. This was particularly pronounced among participants from middle-class families who sought to enhance their social standing. One observed:

"In Nepal, people respect you as an intellect, and everyone gives value to someone with an international higher education, especially the British degree. This is a matter of social prestige and honour for a family."

This highlights how British education serves as a form of cultural capital that enhances social standing, regardless of actual employment outcomes. It demonstrates that social prestige linked with British degree has played a crucial role in their migration decision.

As stated above, political instability, systemic corruption, limited professional opportunities, and the devaluation of domestic academic qualifications as key motivations for pursuing higher education in the UK. These conditions contribute to a persistent sense of aspirational middle-class youth. They think that remaining in Nepal has no future, and it restricts personal and professional growth. This kind of sentiment was shared by many female students, who often faced compounded challenges due to entrenched gender inequalities in Nepal.

One female postgraduate student expressed this frustration poignantly:

"We, especially women are given less priorities and have a very few opportunities in in labour market. That restricts our financial freedom, instead, we need to involve in non-productive domestic roles. So, what's the point of returning to Nepal, you tell me?"

Her narrative portrays an abstract picture of broader pattern among participants—particularly women—who view return migration as undesirable or even counterproductive, given the socio-cultural barriers they would likely encounter upon return. Such testimonies reflect a critical intersection of gender and mobility, where women's migration is not only an academic pursuit but also a strategic escape from restrictive socio-political conditions [37].

3.2. Permanent Settlement Intentions and Making of a One-Way Migration

Among many, the most striking findings was the unanimous lack of intention among all participants to return permanently to Nepal. This finding strongly supports the conceptualisation of educational migration as a one-way trajectory, where temporary educational mobility transforms into permanent settlement aspirations [2, 3]. Although they expressed their intention to travel to Nepal temporarily, none of them wanted to return permanently.

One female student's response about the question about her intention to return to Nepal, was clear that she had no intention to return to Nepal permanently.

"I've been here six years and can't imagine returning to Nepal permanently. I've adapted to UK systems—healthcare, transparency, reliable services. I am used to with living in here, can't imagine going back to Nepal," - She said.

This student's statement represents the majority voices of the participants. Participants' attitudes toward return migration and ongoing engagement with Nepal revealed complexity and ambiguity.

"I don't see myself returning to Nepal permanently. My life and career are now rooted in the UK. However, I want to stay connected with my families and friends through different channels, such as organisation and initiatives and want to contribute rather than returning for ever," - another said.

While permanent return migration appears unlikely based on the study's findings, there may be opportunities to promote

transnational engagement and circular migration patterns that could benefit both Nepal and the UK. The participants expressed interest in maintaining connections with Nepal, combined with their reluctance to return permanently, suggests possibilities for developing hybrid engagement models. Some authors have observed that migrants can contribute to their home country in various ways through transnational activities without returning permanently [38]. Similar intention has been observed in Nepalese students in the UK. Without having any intention to return to Nepal, many remained engaged through various socio-economic activities.

The ability to visit Nepal while maintaining UK residence was viewed as an ideal arrangement that would enable ongoing family and cultural connections. The concept of temporary return visits was more positively received, with many participants expressing an intention to visit Nepal periodically for family events, cultural celebrations, and leisure activities. However, these visits were conceived as short-term family visit rather than steps toward permanent return.

3.3. Leading Towards an Institutionalised Brain-Drain

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that educational migration from Nepal to the UK constitutes a systematic and institutionalised form of brain-drain. The unanimous lack of return intentions among participants, combined with their articulated motivations and experiences, demonstrates that educational pathways have become structured channels for permanent skilled migration rather than temporary academic exchanges.

The institutionalised nature of this brain-drain is evident in several key dimensions. First, the selection mechanisms inherent in international education naturally favour the most capable and economically privileged youth from Nepal. The financial requirements for UK education—including tuition fees, living expenses, and associated costs—create effective filters that select for families with substantial economic resources and students with academic capabilities. This selection process ensures that those who migrate represent Nepal's most promising human capital.

Second, the educational migration process involves substantial financial investments that create powerful incentives for permanent settlement. The finding that participants' families often liquidated assets or incurred significant debt to fund education creates psychological and economic pressures that make return migration financially irrational. The psychology of *sunk costs*, as discussed by Arkes and Blumer [39], becomes particularly relevant, as the substantial investments in international education require long-term employment in higher-wage economies to achieve financial recovery.

Third, the process involves not only the transfer of human capital but also significant financial capital outflows from Nepal. Unlike traditional labour migration, where remittances

provide economic benefits to origin countries, educational migration typically involves net capital outflows that benefit the economies of destination countries. Students and their families invest substantial resources in tuition, accommodation, and living expenses, most of which are absorbed by the UK economy with limited return to Nepal.

The institutionalised nature of this brain-drain is further reinforced by UK immigration policies that, while not explicitly designed to facilitate brain-drain, create structures that encourage skilled migrant retention. The Graduate Route, skilled worker visa pathways, and other immigration policies effectively provide mechanisms for transitioning from student to permanent resident status, creating institutional pathways that can contribute to *brain-drain*.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has demonstrated that contemporary Nepalese educational migration to the United Kingdom constitutes a profound departure from earlier patterns of temporary, elite-driven, and circular mobility. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty-five Nepalese students, the analysis revealed that educational pathways are increasingly functioning as structured routes of skilled migration, with settlement aspirations, a lack of intention to return, and complications with immigration systems shaping the lived realities of migrants. Far from representing temporary mobility, the findings highlight the extent to which international education is now integrated into broader strategies of permanent relocation, social mobility, and economic security.

The evidence strongly supports the conceptualisation of educational migration as an institutionalised form of *brain-drain*. Unlike labour migration models that often sustain reciprocal flows of financial remittances, educational migration is characterised by unilateral outflows of both human and financial capital. This dynamic not only exacerbates Nepal's loss of skilled professionals but also deepens structural inequalities in the global knowledge economy, whereby developing states finance human capital development. In contrast, developed economies appropriate the long-term returns. The absence of return intentions among participants further reinforces the permanence of this phenomenon, challenging conventional assumptions that educational mobility is inherently temporary.

These findings carry significant implications for both Nepal and the UK. For Nepal, the dual outflow of human and financial capital raises urgent questions about sustainable development, national capacity-building, and the future of its knowledge economy. For the UK, the reliance on international education as an economic sector and source of skilled labour underscores ethical responsibilities in managing migration pathways that disproportionately benefit host societies at the expense of sending nations. Policies that facilitate transnational engagement, knowledge exchange, and circular migration could help mitigate these asymmetries; however, such frameworks must be accompanied by reforms within Nepal to

address political instability, corruption, institutional inefficiencies, and limited professional opportunities for the youths.

Ultimately, this study highlights how educational migration, while experienced at the level of individual aspiration and family strategy, is inseparably tied to global structural dynamics. Nepalese students' trajectories reflect not only personal investments in mobility but also systemic imbalances in higher education and migration governance. Recognising these entanglements is essential for advancing more equitable policy frameworks that balance Nepalese students' migration with the developmental priorities of the nation. By situating Nepalese migration within the wider South-to-North educational corridor, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which educational migration reinforces global inequalities while offering opportunities for reimagining transnational engagement in the pursuit of shared developmental futures.

Author Contributions

Dinesh Poudyal: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology

Conflicts of Interest

Apart from voluntarily agreed respondents (35 Nepalese students in the UK), no agencies nor any other authors are involved in this research. It shows no conflict of interest.

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