

Understanding the Impact of Brain Drain of Academics and Professionals on the Sri Lankan Economy

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Abstract

This research examines the increasing issue of brain drain among academics and professionals in Sri Lanka, focusing on the diverse motivations behind skilled emigration and its implications for the country's socio-economic landscape. Utilizing an inductive approach, the study incorporates qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with professionals across various sectors, including healthcare, education, engineering, and information technology. Key findings reveal that economic factors, especially wage disparities and limited career advancement, are primary drivers of migration. Participants expressed frustration with stagnant salaries and insufficient job prospects in Sri Lanka. Additionally, other influential factors such as the desire for professional development, concerns about political stability, quality of life, and significant social networks play critical roles in shaping migration decisions. The analysis illustrates that the emigration of skilled individuals has profound consequences for critical sectors, exacerbating talent shortages and hindering innovation and productivity. This outflow intensifies existing social inequalities, particularly affecting marginalized communities that rely on skilled professionals for essential services. To address these challenges, the study calls for urgent policy interventions targeting the root causes of brain drain. Recommendations include enhancing domestic career opportunities, improving institutional support, and fostering diaspora engagement. By providing valuable insights into the brain drain phenomenon, this research aims to retain skilled professionals and leverage their potential for national development.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Skilled Migration, Economic Factors, Talent Retention, Policy Interventions

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Brain drain has long posed a challenge in Sri Lanka, particularly within technology, healthcare, and education sectors. The World Bank indicates that over the past few decades, the nation has witnessed a notable outflow of its skilled labor force, adversely impacting economic development and hindering progress (World Bank, 2017). This exodus compromises Sri Lanka's capacity to enhance service delivery, foster innovation, and maintain competitiveness in the global market. The education system has notably suffered, as many scholars, particularly those with postgraduate degrees, seek opportunities abroad due to poor research facilities, limited professional advancement, and political instability (Perera, 2015). The brain drain extends beyond

individual talent loss, negatively influencing economic growth. For instance, data from the World Bank shows that Sri Lanka's labor force participation rate was only 50.7% in 2020, indicating that many skilled workers are employed abroad (World Bank, 2020). The departure of these professionals deprives the nation of crucial expertise and productivity needed for economic advancement. Furthermore, the loss of skilled individuals exacerbates social inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities reliant on professionals for essential services. The urgent need for policy interventions targeting the root causes of brain drain becomes paramount. Initiatives such as the 'Diaspora for Development' program aim to harness the expertise of Sri Lankan expatriates for national development, highlighting the

potential for positive outcomes even amidst the challenges posed by emigration.

Sri Lanka has historically been a hub for developing skilled professionals across various fields, including medicine, engineering, and information technology. However, a continuous outflow of talent has emerged due to limited career opportunities, political instability, and inadequate infrastructure (Wickramasinghe, 2020; Perera, 2019). The phenomenon of brain drain ultimately hampers economic development by depriving the country of essential human capital necessary for progress. The migration of skilled professionals reflects deeper socio-economic issues within the country. Major factors driving this trend include the lack of career growth prospects and persistent political instability, which undermine confidence in Sri Lanka's future (Jayasuriya, 2017). Additionally, insufficient investment in vital sectors further exacerbates the outflow of talent, trapping the nation in a cycle of underdevelopment (Hettige & Huq, 2015).

1.2 Rationale

In recent years, the brain drain situation in Sri Lanka has worsened, creating substantial hurdles for the country's economic advancement and growth prospects (Hettige & Huq, 2015). The flight of skilled professionals and academics has resulted in a talent shortage in essential sectors, which adversely impacts innovation, productivity, and overall competitiveness. Furthermore, the loss of human capital deprives Sri Lanka of necessary resources to tackle critical socio-economic challenges, including poverty, healthcare, and education. Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that lead to the brain drain of skilled professionals and academics.

1.3 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the various factors that lead to the brain drain phenomenon in Sri Lanka

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To identify and assess the primary causes of brain drain affecting skilled professionals and academic researchers in Sri Lanka.
2. To explore the effects of brain drain on essential sectors such as healthcare, education, engineering, and information technology.
3. To develop a strategy to help promote the retention of human capital within the country.

2. Methodology

The philosophical foundation of this study is interpretivism, emphasizing the understanding of human experiences from the subjective interpretations of individuals. This philosophy is well-suited for exploring skilled professionals' perspectives on brain drain and the social interactions that shape their motivations and decisions. The study utilizes an inductive approach, allowing insights and theories to emerge from the qualitative data collected rather than testing existing hypotheses. A qualitative method focused on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was facilitated thorough an examination of participants' perspectives.

2.1 Population and Sampling

The population for this study comprises of academics and professionals across various sectors, including education, healthcare, engineering, and technology. This population consists of individuals with specialized skills and expertise, who are particularly susceptible to brain drain. The purposive sampling method was used to select participants with relevant characteristics. The participants were approached through professional networks, social media platforms, and referrals to create a targeted participant pool consisting of individuals with advanced degrees and significant experience in their fields. A total of 10 participants were interviewed to gain insights into their views on migration and domestic career opportunities.

2.2 Participants' Background

1. Participant A: A seasoned professional who has made a significant impact in the tech industry since relocating to Australia in 2014.
2. Participant B: An award-winning business strategist recognized for her expertise in developing effective strategies that foster growth and innovation. After leaving Sri Lanka, she has established herself in Australia.
3. Participant C: A software engineer with 20 years of industry experience in Sri Lanka, migrated to Canada in 2024.
4. Participant D: Previously the finance manager for Hemas Group, moved to Australia in 2015.
5. Participants E: A dedicated state sector nurse with 15 years of experience, migrated with her family to Australia in 2020.
6. Participants F: A sworn translator (English-Sinhala-English) currently serving in the Public Administration Ministry. Participant F processing her documents for migration to Canada.
7. Participant G: A CIMA-qualified professional who graduated from the University of Colombo, worked in the mercantile sector in Sri Lanka for seven years before her migration to Australia in 2015.
8. Participants H: After serving for 10 years as a psychiatrist in Sri Lanka, moved to Australia in 2020.
9. Participants I: A chef who migrated to Australia in 2016.
10. Participants J: A former government school teacher with 5-6 years of experience, initially moved to the UK with her family before relocating to Australia for permanent residency.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with skilled professionals who have either emigrated or chosen to remain in Sri Lanka. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, allowing interviewers to explore predetermined topics while enabling participants to express their own experiences and insights. This adaptability is crucial for

capturing the diverse perspectives surrounding brain drain (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

2.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from these methods was analyzed using thematic analysis, which identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach helps researchers organize and interpret qualitative data to uncover significant insights and connections to broader research questions. The data analysis involved thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups.

2.5 Limitations

Several limitations to the methodology must be acknowledged. The subjective nature of qualitative data can introduce variation in participants' interpretations, influenced by social desirability bias (Patton, 2002). The purposive sampling method, while effective for in-depth insights, may limit the representativeness of the sample and generalizability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3. Analysis and Findings

The analysis revealed several recurring themes reflecting participants' motivations to migrate. These include economic incentives, professional development opportunities, socio-political factors, pursuit of a higher quality of life and the influence of social networks and family ties.

3.1 Economic Incentives

A prominent theme identified is the influence of economic factors on participants' decisions to emigrate. Many respondents cited significant wage disparities and better job opportunities in destination countries as key motivators for their migration. Participants expressed frustration with stagnant salaries and limited opportunities for career advancement within Sri Lanka, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes the role of economic incentives in migration decisions (World Bank, 2020). For instance, a teacher (Participant J) noted how financial constraints hindered their ability to provide quality education, stating that moving to Australia offered not just better pay, but an

improved environment for professional growth and student learning.

Participant J stated, *"As a teacher in a government school for over five years, I continually faced the frustration of stagnant wages and limited resources for my students. Despite my passion for education, the financial constraints made it difficult for me to provide the quality of learning my students deserved. Moving to Australia represented not just a chance for better pay and working conditions, but also an opportunity to create a more conducive environment for both my professional growth and the future of my students."*

3.2 Professional Development

Participants frequently discussed the lack of growth opportunities in Sri Lanka, highlighting their desire for better training, mentorship, and resources to enhance career prospects. Many reported that access to advanced research facilities and collaborative environments abroad was pivotal in their decision to migrate, reflecting the fact that the pursuit of professional growth was an important factor in the decision to migrate.

Participant H stated, *"As a psychiatrist who spent a decade working in Sri Lanka, I found that my ability to help patients was often limited by the resources available and the stigma surrounding mental health. Moving to Australia has given me access to better facilities and a supportive professional environment where mental health is prioritized. I want to provide the best possible care for my patients, and I believe that here, I can truly make a difference in their lives."*

Participant E stated, *"As a dedicated nurse working in Sri Lanka for 15 years, I often felt the weight of not having the professional support I needed to excel in my role. The healthcare system was stretched thin, and adequate resources were frequently lacking, including essential medications, which made it incredibly challenging to provide the high standard of care my patients deserved. While I love my profession and the opportunity to help others, the limited support, the scarcity of medicine, and the lack of opportunities for continuing education were frustrating. This experience motivated me to relocate to*

Australia, where I can access professional development and work in an environment that truly values the contributions of skilled healthcare professionals."

3.3 Political and Social Stability

Concern for political and social stability also emerged as a critical factor influencing migration decisions. Participants cited political uncertainty, deteriorating governance, and social unrest in Sri Lanka as reasons for their desire to leave. These sentiments align with findings of Kumar and Silva (2022), indicating that perceptions of instability foster insecurity about the future, prompting professionals to seek stability in more developed countries. Participants articulated the importance of a stable environment for personal and professional growth, underlining that political factors weigh heavily in their migration choices.

3.4 Quality of Life

The analysis reveals that quality of life considerations significantly influence migration decisions. Respondents expressed that migration offered better living conditions, access to quality healthcare, education, and a favorable social environment. This observation echoes research by De Silva and Nawaratne (2018), indicating that perceptions of a higher quality of life in destination countries significantly impact individuals' decisions to emigrate. Concerns regarding their children's education were prevalent among participants, as illustrated by one who emphasized the importance of providing better educational opportunities for their children in Canada. This desire underscores how family considerations are intricately tied to professional migration decisions.

Participant C stated, *"I worry deeply about my children's education and future; I want them to have access to the best opportunities and learning environments possible, which I believe they can find in Canada. I want them to grow up with the resources and support needed to thrive in their careers, something that has become increasingly challenging in Sri Lanka."*

3.5 Social networks and family ties

The influence of social networks and family ties also emerged as a noteworthy theme. Many participants highlighted the role of familial connections and social networks in facilitating their migration process. Research supports that such networks offer essential support and information regarding job opportunities and emotional backing during the transition (De Silva & Nawaratne, 2018). The presence of relatives or friends in the destination country often made the prospect of migration more feasible and appealing, reinforcing the interconnectedness of social support and migration.

3.6 Impact of the brain drain on the Sri Lankan Economy

3.6.1 Health Care Sector

The outflow of health care professionals such as doctors and nurses has created shortages in skilled medical personnel, especially in rural areas, leading to increased workloads on the remaining staff, diminished quality of care, and delayed access to services. It also impacts public health outcomes negatively.

The government invests heavily in training medical professionals; therefore, their departure causes a loss of return on public investment. The healthcare system struggles to meet demand, which can reduce overall productivity and increase healthcare costs (Sirisena & Gamage, 2019).

3.6.2 Education Sector

Sri Lanka faces a shortage of qualified teachers and academics, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Many educators migrate for higher salaries and better working conditions abroad. This reduces the quality of education and hampers the development of a skilled workforce in Sri Lanka. Lower education quality affects the skill level of future professionals, limiting innovation and productivity growth. It also reduces Sri Lanka's competitiveness in the global economy (Perera & Jayawardena, 2017).

3.6.3 IT Sector

Sri Lanka's IT sector has potential for rapid growth, but brain drain of software developers, IT managers, and specialists limits this growth. Skilled IT workers often migrate to countries with more advanced tech industries and higher wages. This causes a talent and skill gap, slowing innovation and reducing the sector's contribution to GDP and export earnings. It also reduces the ability of local firms to compete internationally (Fernando & Silva, 2018).

3.6.4 Engineering Sector

Many engineers seek opportunities abroad, attracted by higher pay and better infrastructure. The loss of engineers affects infrastructure projects, construction, and industrial development. The shortage can delay key infrastructure projects and industrial expansions, hindering economic growth and foreign investment opportunities (Wickramasinghe, 2020).

3.7 Policy interventions

The talent deficit resulting from the emigration of skilled professionals, particularly in vital sectors like healthcare and education is a concern for Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE, 2021), indicates a growing number of skilled migrants departing from the country in these critical areas. The outflow of talent undermines local industries and economic growth, highlighting an urgent need to address the underlying drivers of migration.

The findings emphasize the necessity for comprehensive policy interventions to address the root causes of migration and enhance the socio-economic environment in Sri Lanka. By understanding the multifaceted reasons driving skilled individuals to emigrate, policymakers can develop strategic initiatives aimed at retaining talent and fostering a more conducive environment for professional growth and social equity within the country.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed systemic issues, such as economic instability and insufficient professional support, motivating skilled professionals to emigrate. Furthermore, it highlighted the negative consequences of brain

drain on sectors like healthcare and education, underscoring the urgency for solutions addressing these challenges.

To mitigate brain drain and promote knowledge retention in Sri Lanka, several recommendations are proposed: enhancing domestic career development opportunities through collaboration between government and private sectors; improving institutional support for professionals; implementing targeted immigration policies to attract expatriates back to the country; fostering collaboration and networking to create a supportive ecosystem; investing in research and innovation; promoting diaspora engagement; and establishing regular monitoring and evaluation of policy interventions.

In conclusion, the research highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to tackle brain drain in Sri Lanka. By addressing economic, social, institutional, and policy-related challenges through evidence-based strategies, the country can leverage its human capital effectively, fostering a conducive environment for talent retention and sustainable development in the years to come.

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