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Impact of migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar on skill acquisition and brain drain

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Since the boom in the economies of Gulf countries in the mid-1970s, the region has gradually become an appealing destination for professional migrants. In the Gulf, professionals gain skills and knowledge which could be beneficial for their home countries. However, the majority of studies on professional migrants have only focused on those who migrate to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. This study on Sri Lankan professional migrants to Qatar attempts to address this dearth in literature by assessing the skills and long-term plans of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar. The study is based on primary data gathered via in-depth interviews and an online survey of 125 Sri Lankan professionals based in Qatar. Drawing on the concepts of brain drain and brain gain and using a mixed-method analysis, the study identifies that the enhancement of communication, technical, managerial and other skills and the exposure to cutting-edge technologies by Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar are valuable for Sri Lanka. The study also identifies that the majority of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar have prolonged their stay in the country. Moreover, a significant number of these professionals intend to migrate to OECD countries permanently without returning to Sri Lanka, which prevents the country from benefiting from their skills.

\textbf{Introduction}
Migration of professionals has become a key field in migration research due to the continuous flow of highly-skilled persons from developing countries to developed nations (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). The early studies on the migration of professionals viewed the migration of the most skilled and educated members of poor developing nations as a drain on the human capital of these countries. However, recent studies on the subject argue that developing countries have the potential to gain from the migration of their highly-skilled members to developed countries through technology and knowledge transfers that take place via return and circular migration. (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Kone & Özden, 2017).

The majority of studies on high-skilled migration from developing countries have focused on professional migrants to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD) countries\(^1\) as around 85% of highly-skilled migrants emigrate to an OECD country. However, in certain countries, high-skilled migration to non-OECD countries such as the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) nations\(^2\) accounts for a significant per cent of labour outflows (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). The GCC is one of the largest regional hubs for international migrants in the world (Babar, 2013; Damir-Geilsdorf & Pelican, 2019; Shehan, 2012), and there is a considerable outflow of professionals from South Asia to Gulf countries (Carrington & Detragiache, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to analyse the trends in the migration of professionals to the Gulf nations to understand the impact of the highly-skilled labour outflow from developing nations to the Gulf region. However, studies on the migration of professionals from developing nations to the GCC is sparse (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2018a; Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019).

In the Sri Lankan context, as the data published by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) indicates, migration of professionals has significantly increased in the past two decades (by around 800% between 1998 and 2017). According to the SLBFE statistics, countries in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) attract the highest number of professionals from Sri Lanka with 70% of professional migrants leaving for the GCC countries between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).\(^3\) However, like that of the majority of studies on professional migrants around the world, studies on Sri Lankan professional migrants have almost exclusively focused on those who migrate to the OECD countries (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). According to the best of our knowledge, professional migrants to the Gulf has not been covered in the existing literature on either Sri Lankan professional migrants nor Sri Lankan migrants to the Gulf.

The studies that have been conducted on the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to OECD countries reveal that Sri Lankan professional migrants gain various skills and knowledge in the host countries that are beneficial for them and Sri Lanka (De Silva et al., 2013). Unfortunately, a significant number of professionals who migrate from Sri Lanka to OECD nations settle down in these countries (Anas & Wickremasinghe, 2010; International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009) which prevents Sri Lanka from capitalising on the skills they gain while abroad and the potential knowledge and technology transfers. However, Sri Lankan professional migrants to the GCC do not have the option to obtain citizenship, or permanent residency in their host Gulf nations since all migrants to the Gulf are guest workers (or their dependents) who are bound to leave their host countries at the end of their employment contracts (Hvidt, 2016; Thiollet, 2016).\(^4\) Therefore, migration of Sri Lankan professionals to the Gulf could be beneficial for Sri Lanka if the migrant professionals return with enhanced skills resulting in skills and technology transfers.

On average, Qatar has attracted the highest number of Sri Lankan professionals among Gulf nations since 2010 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Hence, this paper attempts to assess the impact of migration of Sri Lankan professionals to the GCC using professional migrants to Qatar as a case study. A mixed methodology has been used to 1) analyse the skills Sri Lankan professionals enhance in Qatar, 2) the use of these skills for Sri Lanka and 3) the probability of their return to Sri Lanka during their productive years.


**Literature Review**

*Migration of professionals: a curse or a blessing?*

Human capital is a vital driving force of development processes, especially in developing countries. Therefore, the loss of human capital due to the migration of the most talented and educated members of developing nations to wealthier countries has often been viewed as a strain on labour-sending poor countries and has been referred to as a ‘brain drain’, especially in the early literature on the subject (Kone & Özden, 2017; Skeldon, 2005). However, over the years, this view has undergone drastic changes. In the last couple of decades, a group of scholars who argue in favour of highly-skilled migration has emerged. This new group of scholars views the migration of professionals as a ‘brain gain’ that could generate net positive effects for labour-exporting nations through return and circular migration (Kone & Özden, 2017; World Bank Group, 2016).

Scholars who view the migration of professionals as a drain on the human capital of labour-sending countries argue that mass reduction in the stock of professionals in developing countries due to South-North migration inhibit the economic growth of poor developing countries (Anas & Wickremasinghe, 2010; Parkins, 2010). These scholars cite several reasons that make the migration of professionals a financial burden for developing countries. One of their foremost reasons is that migration prevents developing countries from reaping the benefits of the investment they make in human capital by subsidising the education of their citizens (Shaw, 2006; World Bank Group, 2016). Secondly, they argue that the migration of professionals imposes financial costs on sending countries in terms of losses in tax revenue. The basis for this argument is that professionals in any country have the highest earning potential in the labour force and migration of such persons exposes sending countries to significant tax losses (World Bank Group, 2016).

The migration of the highly skilled and the educated not only creates financial costs but welfare losses as well. The stock of professionals in a country helps to generate spillovers that are necessary for the long-term development of a country. As Shaw (2006) argues, highly educated and skilled persons tend to be more productive when they work with individuals who have similar skills. Thus the migration of professionals indirectly reduces the productivity of those professionals who remain in the home country. Moreover, the highly educated community of a country helps ‘improving governance and strengthening the administrative capacity of the state’ (Shaw, 2006, p. 67). Therefore, migration of professionals eliminates such positive spillovers resulting in welfare losses. Moreover, as Lowell and Findlay (2001) points out, certain studies have argued that since professional migrants tend to emigrate along with their families, the percentage of their foreign earning they remit is small, and hence their remittances do not cushion the losses to sending country economies in terms of lost human capital.

On the other hand, those who argue in favour of migration of professionals claim that migration of the highly-skilled increases the total stock of human capital in labour-sending developing countries. The basis for this argument put forth by the ‘brain gain camp’ is that in developing countries, there are limited incentives to pursue higher education as the return to education is low. However, the emigration of professionals motivates others in those countries to pursue higher education as a means of increasing
their chances of migrating to developed countries and earning better salaries. However, as only a fraction of those who pursue higher education will get the opportunity to migrate, the total stock of human capital in labour-sending nations increases due to incentives provided by those who migrate (Beine et al., 2001; Docquier & Marfouk, 2004; Kone & Özden, 2017; Lowell & Findlay, 2001).

Another advantage of the migration of professionals highlighted by the ‘brain gain camp’ is that when professional migrants return to their countries of origin, it enhances the productivity of their home countries as a result of the knowledge and skills they gained while abroad (Lowell & Findlay, 2001). It also results in technological improvements when return migrants use the technologies they learnt in the host countries in their home countries (Addis, 2014; Docquier, 2014). It is also argued that migration of professionals positively influences the formation of business networks in developing countries and helps those countries to become a part of international trade platforms (Docquier & Marfouk, 2004; Kone & Özden, 2017). For example, Khadria (2014) argues that Indian professional migrants are ‘agents of development’ who bring advanced technologies and investment opportunities to India.

Migration of professionals could also help to solve the unemployment issues in developing countries. Shaw (2006) argues that poor developing countries that find it challenging to generate an adequate number of productive jobs for professionals due to reasons such as poor investment climate and mismatch between available jobs and skills of professionals could benefit from their migration. Moreover, as Addis (2014) highlights when these professionals return with improved managerial and entrepreneurial skills and start business ventures in their home countries, it could help to create new job opportunities for others in these countries, and this could help to ease the unemployment issues that may exist in those countries.

Though migration of professionals is no longer viewed solely as a burden on labour-sending countries, scholars are yet to agree whether it results in net benefits for all developing countries. Shaw (2006) argues that it is hard to provide a generalised conclusion as to whether the migration of professionals leads to a brain drain or gain as there is not sufficient empirical evidence to settle down the matter. He further suggests that though available data indicates that high rates of professional emigration affect only a limited number of countries, it is hard to conclude that brain drain affects only those countries as the available data does not distinguish between the different levels of skills among professional migrants. Therefore, a country with a lower rate of high-skilled emigration might still face brain drain if those who are emigrating are the most qualified in their respective professions.6

Lowell and Findlay (2001) argue that there is an optimum level of emigration of professionals. According to them, if the emigration rates for professionals is less than the optimum level, it would negatively affect the incentives to pursue higher education. On the other hand, an emigration rate higher than the optimum level would lead to the depletion of the stock of highly-skilled and educated persons in a country, and as Carrington and Detragiache (1999) points out, is the case with small countries in Africa and Central America. Lowell and Findlay (2001) further argue that temporary migration could help to achieve the best of both worlds, especially when professional migrants return with enhanced skills and experience after short stays in developed countries. However, whether the migration of professionals is a boon or bane for a developing
country depends on the policies of the labour-sending country (Docquier, 2014; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012), and country-based evaluations are necessary to determine the extent of brain drain or gain (Docquier, 2014; Lowell & Findlay, 2001).

**Migration of professionals: the Sri Lankan experience**

The migration of the highly-skilled and the most educated members of the country is not a new phenomenon for Sri Lanka. During the British colonial period, highly educated persons in administrative positions of the country migrated on a small scale to other colonies of the British empire for employment (Collyer et al., 2009). Beginning in the mid-1950s, professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants and university lecturers belonging to wealthy, English-speaking elite families left for the OECD countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada in search of greener pastures (Colombage, 2010; Gamburd, 2010; Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013). With the hike in oil prices in the world market in 1973 and the resultant economic expansion in the GCC countries (Zachariah et al., 2003), recently, the Gulf regionalso has become an alluring destination for Sri Lankan professionals (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2018b).

In recent years, the outflow of professional migrants from Sri Lanka has significantly increased. According to the data published by the SLBFE, between 1994–1998, an average of 601 professionals left Sri Lanka per year seeking foreign employment. This figure increased to an average of 5945 between 2013 and 2017, which is an increase of 889%. Along with the number of professional migrants, the proportion of professional migrants as a percentage of total departures for foreign employment has also increased over this period from an average of 0.42 between 1994–1998 to an average of 2.33 between 2013–2017 (SLBFE, 2017). The vast majority of these professional migrants of Sri Lanka migrate to the GCC countries with an average of 4496 (75.8%) professionals migrating to the Gulf per year between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

As discussed in the previous section, the migration of professionals does not necessarily harm the sending country. In Sri Lanka, foreign employment of professionals helps to relieve the pressure on the government to provide jobs during economic slumps (International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009). Moreover, when the migrants return to Sri Lanka with the skills and knowledge accumulated abroad, it leads to an increase in productivity (International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009) resulting in a ‘brain gain’. For example, the study by De Silva et al. (2013) reveals that medical specialists who returned to Sri Lanka after their training in OECD countries found themselves to have improved a variety of skills such as clinical, communication and research skills, and felt that international training is vital for producing quality specialist doctors.

Though professional migrants who return to the home country with unique skills and knowledge they gain in the host countries are valuable resources for a developing nation, problems occur when professionals migrate in vast numbers and when they do not return to the home country during their productive years. These are two critical issues related to the migration of professionals in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has the highest and the third-highest rates for expatriation of doctors and nurses to the OECD countries, respectively (Arunatilake et al., 2011). Moreover, according to Docquier and Rapoport (2012), Sri Lanka is among the countries which experience extremely high emigration rates of
tertiary-educated as a percentage of the national high-skilled labour force with 28.2 per cent of college graduates migrating to an OECD country in 2000.

Sri Lanka does not only have a very high outflow of highly-skilled tertiary educated persons but also has a low rate of return professionals. As Anas and Wickremasinghe (2010) argue, though the majority of Sri Lankan scientists who leave for the OECD countries initially migrate for higher studies, upon completion of their studies they are likely to remain in the host country to gain better career opportunities. Likewise, around 50% of Sri Lankan doctors who migrate to developed countries to complete their mandatory foreign training do not return (International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009).

**Conceptual framework**

When Sri Lankan professionals migrate to countries that have advanced industries and high-tech services and use cutting-edge technologies and better managerial techniques, they have the potential to enrich their skills and knowledge. If these professionals return to Sri Lanka with those enhanced skills, it could lead to a brain gain for the country through the transfer of advanced technology, skills and knowledge. Moreover, it could result in increased productivity in the country. Therefore, temporary migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar, a country with an advanced economy and employs the latest technology could benefit Sri Lanka if these professionals obtain skills that are useful for the country (Figure 1). However, if these professionals choose to migrate to a third country permanently without returning to Sri Lanka or come back to Sri Lanka only for retirement, then Sri Lanka will be unable to make use of the knowledge and skills they accrued, and it could lead to a potential net drain on the human capital of the country.

**Methodology**

According to the Sri Lankan Embassy in Qatar, as of 2018, approximately 140,000 Sri Lankans resided in Qatar. Nearly one-fifth of them belonged to skilled and professional categories, while the remaining 79% were unskilled or low-skilled workers (Asees, 2018). According to the data published by the SLBFE, Qatar is the most common destination among Sri Lankan professional migrants with an average of around 1577 professionals migrating to Qatar per year between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

Out of the many categories of Sri Lankan professionals working in Qatar, three were selected for this study: engineering, quantity surveying and accounting. These three professions were selected since each of them have a substantial number of Sri Lankan migrants working in Qatar and have well-established professional bodies encompassing a significant proportion of the total number of Sri Lankan engineers, quantity surveyors and accountants in Qatar.

This study is solely based on primary data gathered through two instruments: in-depth interviews with key informants and an online questionnaire.

- Key Informant Interviews (KII)
Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants identified by the researchers through judgemental sampling. These key informants included three members of the executive committee of the Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – Qatar Chapter, an office-bearer from the Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – Qatar as well as three engineers, three quantity surveyors and three accountants with two to ten years of experience working in Qatar. Ten of the key informants were mid-career professionals, while the other two were senior professionals. Among the ten mid-career professionals, three had commenced their careers in Qatar as junior professionals. All the key informants were males which the authors do not consider as a limitation since the vast majority of Sri Lankan engineers, accountants, and quantity surveyors in Qatar are men.

Data from the key-informants were collected in two segments. The first batch of interviews, which included seven in-depth interviews were conducted from 20th to 30th June 2017, prior to sending out the online questionnaire. The data from these interviews were used in designing the survey. The second group of interviews were conducted in parallel with the online survey from 15th July to 5th August 2017.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – migration flow and impact.
Online survey

The online questionnaire was developed based on the data collected from the first group of key informants and an extensive review of the literature, and it was pre-tested on a group of five professionals who were not a part of the survey. Since a list of all members of the population was not available, the sample for the questionnaire was selected using three non-probability methods; snowball sampling, judgemental sampling and convenient sampling.

Initially, the survey was conveniently emailed to quantity surveyors and engineers respectively through the Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – (Qatar Chapter) and the Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – (Qatar Chapter). However, since the response rates from engineers were low, data on engineers was also gathered through purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. Data on accountants was solely based on the snowballing sampling method. Altogether, the questionnaire was sent out to more than 600 professionals (around 500 quantity surveyors, 70 engineers, 50 accountants) but received only 125 responses (20.8%).

This sample of 125 includes 64 quantity surveyors, 47 engineers and 14 accountants. Even though the numbers of engineers and accountants in the sample is far below than that of quantity surveyors, the authors do not consider it as a limitation since it is assumed that the number of Sri Lankan quantity surveyors in Qatar far exceeds those of engineers and accountants. The majority (46%) of the respondents were between the ages of 31–40, while 34% were 21–30 years old. 12% were in the age group of 41–50 while only 6% were above 50 years old. Nearly 97% of quantity surveyors and 96% of engineers in the sample were males which is reflective of the male dominance in the engineering and quantity surveying professions both in Qatar and Sri Lanka. Among accountants in the sample, 86% were male, while 14% were female.

All the data gathered were used in a mixed-method analysis to gain more precise in-depth insights into various aspects of the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar. The KILs were used in thematic qualitative analysis, whereas the information collected through the online survey was analysed using quantitative methods.

Results and discussion

The skills and career benefits Sri Lankan professionals gain in Qatar

The survey revealed that among the various skills that Sri Lankan professionals get to enhance in Qatar, language and communication skills to be the most common with 75.8% of the respondents (N = 125) stating that they were able to improve their language skills in Qatar. Since around 86% of the population in Qatar are expatriates (Thiollet, 2016), English is one of the most commonly used languages, especially among professionals. Therefore, one of the major skills that Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar get to improve is their English skills. According to interviewees, apart from English, some professionals get the opportunity to learn other languages like Hindi and Arabic depending on the nationality of the subordinates they supervise.

The language and communication skills are followed by industrial exposure and technical skills with respectively 70.2% and 65.3% of the respondents stating that they were able to enhance their industrial and technical skills through their work in Qatar. At
the moment, there is a large number of mega-scale construction projects undergoing in Qatar as Qatar is preparing to host the FédérationInternationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in 2022. These projects have provided ample opportunities for Sri Lankan professionals to be a part of mega-scale projects exposing them to state-of-the-art technologies and enabling them to improve their technical and industrial knowledge and skills.

According to the KIIIs, the multinational and multicultural atmosphere in Qatar helps Sri Lankan professionals to improve their managerial, negotiation and interpersonal skills as working with professionals from a large number of countries creates opportunities to learn and experiment with different management practices. Furthermore, this cultural exposure helps to boost the confidence level leading to the development of the personal- alities of Sri Lankan professionals. This view is supported by the survey results with respectively 65.3% and 58.1% of respondents stating that working in Qatar has helped enhance their managerial skills and has led to their personality development.

When looking at the significance of the skills gained in Qatar across the three professions (Figure 2), a couple of considerable differences can be identified. Firstly, industrial exposure and technical skills, which were identified as significant career benefits by more than 65% of engineers and quantity surveyors in the sample are among the least developed skills by accountants. Secondly, whereas more than half of the engineers and quantity surveyors have improved all categories of skills, skill-gain is below 50% for accountants in all skill types except for managerial and communication skills.

Similarly, even though 84% of the total respondents believe that the skills gained in Qatar are unique and that they would not have been able to gain these benefits from a similar job in Sri Lanka, there are noteworthy differences in the views on the uniqueness of the skills obtained across the three professions. Whereas 87.5% of quantity surveyors and 85.1% of engineers believe that their jobs in Qatar have enabled them to gain unique career benefits, only 64.3% of the accountants consider that their jobs in Qatar have equipped them with exceptional skills that cannot be attained from similar jobs in Sri Lanka.

![Figure 2. Skills and career benefits gained in Qatar across professions. Source: Survey data (2017)]
The differences in the type and level of skill enhancement across professions could be due to the nature of jobs available in Qatar. Though the multibillion-dollar construction projects undergoing in Qatar have created job opportunities for a lot of professional categories, when it comes to skill accumulation, it seems to have created more opportunities for professionals directly related to the construction sector. Hence, compared to Sri Lankan accountants, Sri Lankan engineers and quantity surveyors have more opportunities to enhance skills, particularly their technical skills and industrial exposure.

The majority of the engineers and quantity surveyors that stated that the experiences gained in Qatar are unique are junior professionals. The reason for this could be that young, and inexperienced professionals rarely get the opportunity to be part of mega-scale projects in Sri Lanka since such projects are rare in the country. Even though there have been a few large-scale construction projects in the recent past, according to KIlS, usually senior professionals get the opportunity to work on them. However, the mega-scale construction projects undergoing in Qatar at the moment require the services of a massive number of professionals. Hence, there are ample of unique opportunities for junior professionals in Qatar to expand their horizons. This applies in particular to junior engineers and quantity surveyors and can be further illustrated through the case studies of Chamal, Yogesh and Gayan.

According to Chamal, a thirty-year-old electrical engineer who migrated to Qatar with just one year of work experience in Sri Lanka, the industrial exposure he received in Qatar is tremendous. Even though he was new to the industry, he was given the opportunity to design the cable networks of sophisticated expressways such as Qatar North Road and Al Khor Expressway, projects which worth billions of dollars. He believes that working on such mega-projects helped him to grasp technical skills at a much faster pace than he would have been able to in Sri Lanka. He also believes that the complex projects that he undertook at a young age, though strenuous at the beginning, enhanced his confidence to take on even more challenging projects.

According to Yogesh, a thirty-one-year-old quantity surveyor who has worked in Qatar for nearly seven years, the projects that he got to undertake as a young quantity surveyor in Qatar were ‘far more challenging than what [he] would ever experience in Sri Lanka’. Since there was a shortage of senior quantity surveyors in his company, he got the opportunity to embark on complex projects enabling him to expand his technical and industrial knowledge to great extents at a much younger age. Today he is a panel member and an assessor for Assessment of Professional Competency for Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors, a feat he believes he would not have been able to achieve if he were in Sri Lanka.

Gayan is a thirty-three-year-old quantity surveyor who migrated to Qatar soon after he received his two-year Higher National Diploma in quantity surveying. His first job in Qatar was as an assistant quantity surveyor. Soon afterwards, he started following a Bachelor of Science Degree in Quantity Surveying at the University of Salford through distance learning, something he could not have afforded in Sri Lanka. Upon completion of his degree, he was promoted to the position of a quantity surveyor. Gayan’s story is similar to that of many Sri Lankan quantity surveyors who come to Qatar as assistant quantity surveyors and progress to the level of quantity surveyors through work experience and academic qualifications. The majority of them would not have been able to afford to read for a degree at a foreign university from the income from their Sri Lankan jobs.
The perceptions of professionals on the usefulness of the skills gained in Qatar for Sri Lanka

The vast majority of the respondents (97%) consider that the skills they gained in Qatar are useful for Sri Lanka, but with varying degrees. 77% of the respondents believe that the skills acquired are extremely or very beneficial to Sri Lanka while respectively 17% and 3% think that the skills they gained are only moderately and slightly useful for Sri Lanka.

As has been identified in previous studies on international migration such as Addis (2014)’s study on Ethiopian migrants, one of the major advantages Sri Lanka could reap from professionals who have worked in Qatar is their up-to-date knowledge about the latest technology. According to the KIIIs, their exposure to the latest and advanced technology could result in initiatives to upgrade the technologies used in Sri Lanka. This is particularly the case for engineers and quantity surveyors. Even with regard to accountants, their exposure to operational processes that are technologically advanced could prove to be beneficial for Sri Lanka.

According to the key informants from all three professions, another key benefit that Sri Lanka could gain from professionals who have worked in Qatar is their high level of productivity. Since Qatar is aiming to complete almost all of the mega infrastructure projects prior to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, all the construction projects in the country are fast-moving projects. Therefore, Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar have got accustomed to dealing with mega projects and high volumes of work within tight deadlines. Therefore, they tend to be highly efficient in their work, more confident and capable of independent thinking and quick decision-making. Moreover, they tend to be highly committed to their work and can adjust quickly to new environments. These qualities would be invaluable for Sri Lanka.

Even though large-scale construction projects are rare in Sri Lanka, several mega projects that have been proposed for quite some time are expected to commence soon. According to the KIIIs, the experiences of Sri Lankan professionals who have handled massive projects in Qatar would be extremely beneficial for Sri Lanka in executing these projects. For example, the Colombo International Financial City project, which is already underway, is similar to that of Pearl Qatar and Lusail Smart City Projects in Qatar since all three projects involve construction on land reclaimed from the sea. The proposed Colombo Light Rail Project is similar to that of Lusail Light Railway Transit System. Therefore, the skills and the knowledge of engineers, quantity surveyors and accountants who were involved in these projects in Qatar would be extremely beneficial for Sri Lanka.

Another potential benefit Sri Lanka could gain from professional migrants who have worked in Qatar is through various business ventures they establish using the capital accumulated in Qatar. Such entrepreneurial endeavours help to create new jobs and provide solutions to unemployment problems in the country. Moreover, it could lead to the aforementioned technological and knowledge transfers. However, according to the KIIIs, the number of returnee professionals who invest in such activities is low as the majority of professional migrants who return to Sri Lanka tend to invest in the real estate sector. According to the interviewees, the main reason for this is the lack of knowledge of investment options and the economic conditions of the country which they perceive to be risky for new types of investment.
The long-term plans of Sri Lankan professionals

Even though the migration of professionals to Qatar could be beneficial for Sri Lanka, the problem is that the majority of Sri Lankan professionals who migrate to Qatar extend their stay in the country way beyond their initial plans. On average, they plan to work in Qatar for 3–4 years. However, most of the time, they prolong their stay well beyond their preliminary plans. 70% of the respondents (N = 125) stated that they have spent or are intending to spend more time in Qatar than they initially planned on.

The primary reason for the prolonged stay in Qatar given by the professionals who have either extended their stay or are planning to do so (N = 87) is the increase in their needs and expectations after migrating to Qatar (72.4%). This is followed by getting accustomed to the comfortable and high-quality lifestyle in Qatar (50.6%), lack of confidence in the future development path of Sri Lanka (39.1%), inflation in Sri Lanka (37.9%) and better working conditions in Qatar (35.6%).

Most of the time, Sri Lankan professionals migrate to Qatar with a specific goal in mind, such as to save up to build a house, start a business and repay debt. However, after achieving the initial objective, professionals tend to prolong their stay in Qatar to achieve additional goals they come up with during their stay in the country. It is due to the escalation in their needs and expectations and can be further explained through the case study of Nalaka, a forty-year-old engineer who migrated to Qatar to save up to build a house in Sri Lanka. His initial plan was to work in Qatar for three years. However, after one year in Qatar, he decided to add another unit to his house. Hence, it took him four years to complete the house. However, at the end of the fourth year, he did not return to Sri Lanka. Instead, he decided to spend another couple of years in Qatar to buy a piece of land for his daughter. Now it has been nine years since he moved to Qatar and he has not still returned to Sri Lanka. Nalaka’s story is similar to that of many Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar.

As research on highly-skilled women in Qatar by Khattab et al. (2020) suggests, in general, life in Qatar tends to be comfortable for professionals, and the KIs and survey results indicate that it is valid for Sri Lankan professional in Qatar as well. According to KIs, a professional can easily afford to have his/her vehicle and rent out an apartment in Qatar within a few months after starting work. What is even more significant is that s/he can do this while saving a substantial proportion of his/her salary. However, in Sri Lanka, a professional has to work arduously for many years to be able to rent out a reasonably comfortable apartment and maintain a vehicle of his/her own. Moreover, since Sri Lankan professionals earn higher salaries in Qatar compared to Sri Lanka, they tend to consume better quality products in Qatar. Therefore, once they get accustomed to the luxurious lifestyle they can afford with their Qatari salaries, they feel reluctant to return to Sri Lanka as they will not be able to maintain the same consumption pattern in Sri Lanka.

As the study by Babar et al. (2019) on the mobility issues of highly-skilled migrants in Qatar highlights, one of the reasons for the reluctance of highly-skilled Arab nationals in Qatar to return to their home countries is due to political instabilities and security issues in their home countries. Likewise, according to the KIs, the volatile economic and political environment of Sri Lanka is a major reason that prevents Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar from returning to Sri Lanka. The sluggish economic growth coupled with the continuous
tensed atmosphere in the political arena has resulted in low levels of trust in the future development prospects of Sri Lanka among Sri Lankan migrant professionals.

The inflation in Sri Lanka, especially in the real estate and building material markets is another key reason that drives Sri Lankan professionals to extend their stay in Qatar. A large number of professionals migrate to Qatar to save up to build their houses and invest in real estate. However, when the prices of land and construction material in Sri Lanka rise, it increases the amount that they need to save. According to the interviewees, even though the Sri Lankan rupee continued to depreciate compared to the Qatar Riyal during the past couple of years, they were not able to fully capitalise on this positive trend due to a rapid increase in real estate prices in Sri Lanka.

Despite the current diplomatic crisis and the economic sanctions imposed on Qatar by its neighbouring Arab nations, 10 Sri Lankan professionals still believe Qatari economy to be more stable than that of Sri Lanka and that Qatar can weather this storm. All the key informants stated that the diplomatic crisis had not affected their plans regarding their stay in Qatar yet. Therefore, unless the diplomatic crisis takes a turn for the worse, it is unlikely that the current political issues in the Gulf region would lead to a change in the decisions of Sri Lankan professionals regarding their employment plans in Qatar. Hence, the present trend of extension of stay in Qatar is likely to continue.

Not only do Sri Lankan professionals extend their stay in Qatar, but the likelihood of their return to Sri Lanka for employment in the near future is also low. As Figure 3 shows, only 48.8% of the professionals (N = 125) have plans of returning to Sri Lanka upon completion of their current work contracts. 20.8% have plans to migrate to a country that provides citizenship such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA and the UK. 18.4% have plans to find work in another company in Qatar, and the rest (12%) have plans to migrate to another country in the Gulf.

Among the three professions, accountants have the highest rate of return with 64.3% of accountants planning to come back to Sri Lanka upon completion of their current employment contracts. However, only 48.9% of engineers and 45.31% of quantity surveyors are planning to return to Sri Lanka at the end of their current work contracts. Conversely, quantity surveying was the profession with the highest proportion of respondents stating that the skills gained in Qatar are unique and are either extremely or very

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**Figure 3.** Plans after completing the current work contract in Qatar. Source: Survey data (2017)
useful for Sri Lanka while accounting was the profession with the lowest proportion of respondents stating the same.

The effects of the long-term plans of migrant professionals on Sri Lanka

Migration of professionals could be beneficial for the labour-sending country if professionals return to their country of origin with the skills and knowledge they accumulate in the host countries. Although these countries lose the services of their most skilled workers for a short duration of time, eventually these countries have the potential to gain net benefits when they return with enhanced skills and knowledge. Moreover, since these migrant professionals tend to remit a proportion of their salaries to the home countries, in the short-run, it counterbalances the losses in human capital to some degree.

In this light, migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar can be considered to be beneficial for Sri Lanka as the majority of the professionals in the sample stated that they had gained unique skills in Qatar that are valuable for Sri Lanka. However, despite the inability to gain citizenship in the GCC, Sri Lankan professionals tend to spend a lengthy period of time in Qatar and the GCC which diminishes their ability to transfer knowledge and skills to Sri Lanka. When they will return and whether they will do so during their productive years (before retirement) are unknown. As Addis (2014) argues, if these professionals return only for rest and retirement, then there will be a limited positive impact on the development of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the professionals who have plans of eventually returning to Sri Lanka might do so at the end of their prime age with less productive capacity and energy. Hence, whether they will be as productive as when they were young is doubtful. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the remittances can cushion the losses in human capital in the long run as losses in human capital negatively affects the spillover benefits of having a highly-skilled and educated labour force such as enhancing the administrative capacity of the country.

What is even more alarming than their extension of stay in Qatar is that approximately one-fifth (20.8%) of them are planning to emigrate to countries that provide citizenship permanently soon after the completion of their current work contracts without returning to Sri Lanka. This figure will further rise if the number of professionals who plan to emigrate to an OECD country after working in another company in Qatar or another country in the Gulf is taken into account. Among the Sri Lankan professionals who intend to work in another company in Qatar or the Gulf after the completion of their current employment contracts (N = 38), 15.8% have plans of ultimately migrating to an OECD country, which increases those who have plans to migrate to a country that provides citizenship from 20.8% to 26.4%. These factors prevent Sri Lanka from capitalising on the skills they gained in Qatar.

Out of the total number of professionals with the intention of settling down in a country that provides citizenship (N = 33), 60.6% are graduates from Sri Lankan government universities who obtained their education up to the tertiary level free of charge. However, on average, they have served Sri Lanka for less than two years, which means that the country would not be able to reap the maximum benefits from the investment made in their education.
According to the interviewees, in general, migrant professionals who settle down in the OECD countries do not remit as much as migrant professionals in the Gulf as they have to pay income taxes in the host country. Moreover, professionals who settle down in the OECD countries tend to make investments in the host countries to secure their futures in those countries. Therefore, once Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar move to the OECD countries as approximately one-quarter of respondents intend to, the amount they remit to Sri Lanka is likely to plummet.

**Conclusion**

Sri Lankan professionals who migrate to Qatar get the opportunity to enhance various skills. Among them, communication skills, technical expertise and industrial exposure can be considered the main areas. The majority of professionals surveyed believe the skills they obtain in Qatar are exceptional and that they would not be able to gain those skills from similar jobs in Sri Lanka. However, there are notable differences in the type and level of skill enhancement across professions in Qatar with more opportunities for skill accumulation for professionals with work directly related to the construction sector.

The majority of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar believe that Sri Lanka will benefit from the skills they have accumulated in Qatar if they return to Sri Lanka. They believe their exposure to cutting-edge technologies and the confidence, efficiency and commitment to work they develop by working in billion-dollar projects in Qatar would be valuable for Sri Lanka. In this light, the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar is beneficial for Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka loses the services of these professionals for a short duration of time, eventually, the country has the potential to gain net benefits when they return with enhanced skills and knowledge. Moreover, since Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar remit a proportion of their salaries to Sri Lanka, in the short-run, it counterbalances the losses in human capital to some degree.

However, the problem is that the majority of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar extend their stay in the country way beyond their initial plans. Despite the inability to gain citizenship or permanent residency in Qatar, a significant percentage of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar tend to spend a prolonged period in the country mainly due to escalation of their needs and expectations after migrating to Qatar, getting accustomed to the high-quality lifestyle in Qatar and lack of confidence in the future development prospects of Sri Lanka. This diminishes the opportunities to transfer their knowledge and skills to Sri Lanka. If these professionals return to Sri Lanka at the end of their prime years, with less productive capacity, there will be only a limited transfer of skills. Moreover, if these professionals migrate to the OECD countries such as Australia and New Zealand permanently as approximately one-quarter of respondents intend to, or return to Sri Lanka just for rest and retirement, there will be zero transfer of skills and knowledge to Sri Lanka.

**Notes**

1. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an intergovernmental economic organisation with 37 member states. In general, OECD countries are high-income
nations with high Human Development Index ranks and are categorised as developed nations.
2. The GCC region includes six nations; Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.
3. SLBFE data vastly underestimates the total number of professional migrants (especially those to OECD countries) as it only includes migrants who have registered with the SLBFE and approximations of migrants who have sought employment abroad through direct means computed through pre-departure immigration procedures (Arunatilake et al., 2011). Migrants who register with the SLBFE are mostly domestic, unskilled and semi-skilled workers seeking employment in the Middle-Eastern countries. Most professionals emigrate under the general emigration laws of Sri Lanka and do not register with the SLBFE (International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009).
4. At present, approximately fifteen million migrants are employed in the GCC region, out of which the majority are low-skilled workers. However, irrespective of the level of skills, all of these migrants are temporary contract workers. They are recruited for a limited time. The *Kafala* system, which is the arrangement employed by Gulf countries to regulate the influx of migrant workers ensures that all migrants who immigrate to a Gulf nation for the purpose of employment have jobs in the GCC before leaving their home countries and that they leave their host Gulf nation at the end of their work contracts. There are no pathways to permanent settlement or citizenship in the GCC for ordinary migrants (Hvidt, 2016; Shehan, 2012).
6. The emigration rate of professionals in certain African and Caribbean countries exceed 30% (Carrington and Detragiache; 1999).
7. This study defines a professional migrant as a migrant with at least two years of tertiary education in a given profession which is the most commonly used definition of professional migrants in migration literature and the basic definition of highly skilled migrants used by the International Organisation for Migration. All engineers and accountants in the sample have at least four years of university education. The majority of quantity surveyors have at least three years of tertiary education.
8. The Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – Qatar Chapter, the Institute of Charted Accountants of Sri Lanka (ICAS) – Qatar Chapter, Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – Qatar.
9. As Qatar does not publicise data on total foreign population, Thiollet (2016)'s calculations are based on Qatar census results and UN World Migration Stocks for 2010.
10. On 5 June 2017, four Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) imposed trade and travel restrictions on Qatari citizens and residents and withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar leading to a diplomatic crisis in the Gulf region. At the time of writing, the issues between Qatar and the opposing party were still unresolved with no changes to the embargoes expected in the foreseeable future.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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