

Brain Drain: the Exodus of Sri Lanka's Healthcare Workforce

Abeysooriya, B.M.V.¹, Karunathilake, I.M.¹, Wanigasekara, T.², Palihakkara, U.³,
Amarasiri, M.M.P.L.¹

Difficulties in establishing a migration profile for Sri Lanka

Despite public and industry concerns about the departure of professionals as migrants from Sri Lanka, there are no comprehensive centralized mechanisms to track and document the migrant outflow from the country. This poses a significant challenge in quantifying "brain drain" within the national context.

The annual outflow of labour migrants is estimated to range between 230,000- 250,000 persons (IOM, 2022). The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE, 2021) documents 122,264 labour migrant departures in 2021. There is a decline in the outward migrants in 2020 and 2021 compared to the average of 226,510 annual migrants in the preceding 5 years from 2015-2019 (SLBFE, 2021), which is expected considering the mobility restrictions adopted internationally to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in 2022, 311,056 labour migrants departed from the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022), when Sri Lanka experienced significant changes in the sociopolitical and economic landscape as it emerged from the global pandemic; with adverse conditions akin to, and possibly worse than those which created waves of migrant exodus in the past (Jayawardena, 2020).

However, the SLBFE statistics do not accurately reflect the migration profile of Sri Lanka (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). The SLBFE documents "outward labour migrants", as those who complete the process of 'mandatory registration of Sri Lankans leaving for employment abroad', which limits the statistics to mostly domestic, unskilled, and semi-skilled workers who seek employment abroad directly via the SLBFE and foreign employment agencies. Most skilled workers migrate to OECD countries (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020) and do so via the routine emigration process with little incentive to voluntarily complete the registration with the SLBFE, leading to under- documentation of this population of labour migrants. Therefore, professional and skilled worker departures are under-represented in the national statistics (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). For example, in 2021, the SLBFE documents only 17 skilled and professional workers departing for the UK and only 19 to Canada (SLBFE, 2021).

The SLBFE statistics also do not account for those with professional qualifications who depart for higher education in foreign institutions utilizing the "study abroad" strategy (Jayawardena, 2020) to lay the foundation for future employment and residence in the countries where they receive their education.

In a study conducted among 107 Sri Lankan students enrolled in an educational program abroad, of whom 43 (40.2%) were enrolled in a postgraduate program, most stated they had no intention to return to Sri Lanka, indicating the trend toward 'brain drain' within the albeit small sample population.

¹Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

²Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

³Organization of Professional Associations, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author: Movinya Abeysooriya
Email: medmbbs171260@stu.cmb.ac.lk



© SEAJME. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited

South-East Asian Journal of Medical Education
Vol.17, no.2, 2023