

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Migration of Nurses and Allied Healthcare Professionals from Sri Lanka: Role of the State Universities

N. Rathnayake and I. Kotapola

*Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Ruhuna, Karapitiya,
Galle, Sri Lanka*

The migration of healthcare professionals is a burdening issue in Sri Lanka. The country invests to produce these skilled graduates; however, due to multiple push factors such as low salaries, heavy workload, lack of professional identification, and on the other hand better wages, expanded career growth and facilities available with the technological advancement in developed countries motivate them to pursue their career in such countries. Migration provides both professional and economic benefits for the healthcare graduates, however, it negatively affects the healthcare system of the country mainly through brain drain, absence of return on investment for education, healthcare deficiencies, and poor services in the underserved areas. State universities in Sri Lanka produce these skilled healthcare graduates for local and international healthcare systems while facing numerous challenges. Addressing migration positively is a main responsibility of the universities, as migration has both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, by taking necessary measures, universities can turn it into more positive than negative effects. Hence, universities can initiate measures including the revision of curricula with global standards, enhancing the language proficiency of graduates, and helping the government to establish legislation and policies for balancing migration and retention. Further, universities can promote ethical migration with a few arrangements such as service agreements, temporary migration programs and further improving the working conditions to avoid the brain drain while working with both the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Health. Transforming brain drain into brain circulation is a promising initiative to overcome issues associated with migration. This approach facilitates the mutual benefits for individual healthcare professionals, the country's healthcare system, and their families.

Keywords: *Allied Healthcare Professionals, Migration, Nurses, Sri Lanka, State Universities*

Introduction

It is recognized that the migration of healthcare professionals, mainly nurses and allied health workers has become a significant burdening issue for low- and middle-income countries including Sri Lanka (Abeysooriya et al., 2023). The healthcare graduates of Sri Lanka are highly recognized by the global healthcare system for having blended knowledge and skills which make it easier for them to acquire a position. Sri Lanka initiated baccalaureate-level education for nurses and allied health professionals in

the year 2005 recruiting qualified undergraduates from Advanced Level examinations under University

Grants Commission elevating the standard of healthcare education in Sri Lanka. From the inception of the pioneer nursing degree program in Sri Lanka in 2005 at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, several state universities have so far created nearly 5000 healthcare professionals including nurses, pharmacists, medical laboratory scientists, radiotherapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists etc. Although comprehensive data on

the migration of Allied Health Sciences graduates from Sri Lanka is limited, a significant proportion

*corresponding author: nirmalarathnayake@ahs.ruh.ac.lk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0666-2975>



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appears to be employed in developed countries and has settled with their close relatives.

Initiation of nursing and allied health degree programmes was mainly taken to address the global healthcare needs supporting foreign employment expecting the return of investment to enhance the foreign income of the country. However, the current increased migration trend has led to no return on investment. Hence, to understand this phenomenon, this editorial explores why healthcare graduates migrate, the impact of migration, and how Sri Lankan state universities can ethically support this migration.

Why Sri Lankan healthcare graduates migrate?

Well-known pull factors and push factors are affecting on migration of healthcare professionals globally. Economic challenges, excessive workload, political and administrative barriers, and limited professional recognition within the country for healthcare professionals serve as key push factors. Low salaries which undervalue education and service, high patient-to-staff ratios, and burdening administrative responsibilities are obvious in countries like Sri Lanka making the professionals more burnout and dissatisfied which leads to stress and dissatisfaction (Hajian et al., 2020, Ekanayake and Amirhalingam, 2021). At the moment the healthcare system is struggling with the lack of human resources which was worsened due to the recent economic crisis followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Sri Lanka has no proper system to adequately acknowledge the allied health practitioners with remuneration and recognition to enhance their satisfaction, hence this leads to leaving many skilled, talented professionals from the country leaving a vacuum that creates a negative impact on the country's healthcare system.

In contrast, nations such as the UK, Australia, Canada, and Malaysia provide opportunities for skilled healthcare graduates with better working conditions and higher salaries in a sophisticated advanced healthcare environment. Together with these, they offer permanent residency, family benefits, and various opportunities for professional growth.

Negative impacts of migration of healthcare graduates

All migrating healthcare graduates have been educated with the investment of the Sri Lankan government that was established under the Free Education Policy in Sri Lanka. Migration of healthcare graduates, therefore,

extensively impacts on brain drain which is of utmost importance for the country's healthcare system, reduced or no return on investment in education while creating many healthcare disparities and inequalities in the country (Anas and Wickremasinghe, 2010, Abeysooriya et al., 2023). This burden mainly lies with the remote and underserved areas. According to the annual financial reports of universities and the University Grants Commission, it is estimated that the Sri Lankan government invests approximately 2.8 to 4.0 million rupees to produce a single healthcare graduate, although this figure has not yet been specifically calculated. As the trend of migration is rising, the country is unable to get the return worsening the situation of the country.

Positive impacts of migration of healthcare graduates

Amidst the negative impact of migration, the benefits for the country are also significant. Healthcare professionals working in developed countries have profoundly contributed to the economy through remittance. While these remittance helps to enhance the living standards of their family members, they indirectly contribute to education and local developmental projects enhancing the economic stability of the country (Joshi et al., 2023). Though a significant proportion of healthcare graduates remain in the developed nations obtaining permanent residency, a reasonable number report back to the country. These returning cadre bring advanced healthcare knowledge and skills to the country which facilitate the country to enhance the service standards of healthcare. These individuals can become mentors in different fields as teachers, trainers, supervisors, and even healthcare administrators. For example, their knowledge of advanced technologies, such as robotic surgery or telemedicine can introduce these innovations to Sri Lankan hospitals. Their expertise in various specialized fields such as critical care, oncology, palliative care, and neurodegenerative care would improve the skills and knowledge of local healthcare professionals. Blending these people after their return strengthens the capacity of the Sri Lankan healthcare system.

Role of Sri Lankan state universities

Migration presents both positive and negative outcomes for Sri Lanka, and consequently, it cannot be entirely avoided. The best approach is to implement appropriate strategies that maximize benefits for the

country while also providing graduates with opportunities to gain valuable exposure to the healthcare systems of developed nations.

Amidst the immense challenges such as insufficient funding for higher education, difficulties in the required training in government hospitals due to scarcity of staff and infrastructure, and challenges in acquiring accreditation, state universities play a crucial role in producing skilled healthcare professionals. It is imperative if that state universities remain pivotal in addressing this pressing need and support the government to maintain a balance between global opportunities and local healthcare needs for a sustainable education and healthcare advancement.

The curricula with extensive training programs offered for nursing and allied health undergraduates meet international standards exposing them to a high-quality theoretical and practical background making them more capable and competitive. State universities in Sri Lanka could provide their expertise and potential to maintain ethical migration to balance the benefits for both country and individual professionals. Following are a few strategies that can be proposed to consider for the future.

1. **Standardized Curricula:** The current curricula of the nursing and allied health science programs have mainly been prepared to meet local needs while addressing a few global demands. However, the academia of the Universities could consider curriculum revision introducing the internationally accepted standards expecting globally competitive curricula with internationally recognized certifications. Evidence-based practice, AI and telemedicine-based clinical training, and informatics could be some innovative aspects to be considered in this process. At the moment, the universities offer several programs such as elective placements, specialized clinical rotations, and professorial clinical placements that prepare undergraduates to train to bear the responsibilities of working professionals; however, the focus should be more enhanced with the new technology.
2. **Language Proficiency:** Language proficiencies should be highly considered in a country like Sri Lanka where primary and secondary education is dedicated to the mother tongue which is not English. Hence, the undergraduates following these degree programs, especially those coming from remote areas are struggling with language and this issue acts as the major barrier to migration. Continuous English language programmes offered through the university career make them proficient in language expertise which meets the qualification for migration is a better approach for universities to consider meeting the graduates to reach international language requirements, enhancing their global employability.
3. **International Collaborations:** Partnerships with foreign collaborators are important. It emphasizes the training needs of developed nations and prepares the graduates to face the competitive examinations to be eligible for migration. The project started by the University of Ruhuna such as with the Southern Health NHS Trust is one such international linkage that facilitates healthcare graduates for ethical migration which benefits both Sri Lanka and NHS, UK fostering closer international bonds between the governments.
4. **Policy Advocacy:** Establishing national strategies that balance migration, and retention is a real need. The state universities in Sri Lanka could contribute with their expertise in establishing such policies and regulations. Win-win initiatives including service agreements requiring graduates to work in Sri Lanka for a specified period before migrating and scholarships supporting ethical migration are a few examples. Brain circulation can be ensured with these types of measures instead of brain drain guaranteeing professionals return with advanced skills and experience.
5. **Retention Strategies:** Pressing the government with appropriate lobbying is important to initiate measures to retain these skilled healthcare resources in the country. These might include financial incentives, improving working conditions, and creating career pathways for further education and specialization within Sri Lanka. Apart from these, temporary migration programs, such as short-term contracts or

fellowships, can provide opportunities for those who have the intention of getting exposure to foreign placements to tie them to their home country. Systematic evaluation of migration trends and assessment of the impact is also essential. Universities can act as the focal points to initiate these discussions and initiatives.

6. **Accreditation and Funding:** Securing international accreditation for local degree programs also enhances the global recognition of Sri Lankan qualifications. Joint funding for training programs and research collaborations with international universities and hospitals can further strengthen the local healthcare system.

Conclusion

The migration of nurses and allied healthcare professionals creates both opportunities and challenges for Sri Lanka. It offers personal and professional development of graduates while it deteriorates the country's healthcare system making the educational investment a waste. Sri Lanka is still in a position to address the issue effectively in a win-win scenario benefitting both healthcare graduates and the country by establishing vital measures. Promoting ethical migration allowing the graduates to serve both local and international healthcare systems while achieving personal prosperity and enhancing the local healthcare system through legislation are important. The collaboration among the state universities, government, and healthcare organizations would be beneficial to create a sustainable strategy to transform the brain drain into brain circulation, ensuring mutual benefits for both the country and its graduates.

“Migration offers skilled healthcare workers the chance to share knowledge across borders, but it demands global policies that balance mobility with equity.” – Jim Yong Kim

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