

COMMENTARY : INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AND DEVELOPMENT, AND WHAT IT COULD MEAN FOR SRI LANKA: A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

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International student mobility and its impact in countries of origin is still an under-researched topic in migration studies. Instead, most studies focus on immigration and integration of international students into the labour market in countries of study (King & Raghuram, 2013). In a global knowledge economy (Powell & Snellman, 2004), immigration countries in the Global North perceive international students almost exclusively as ideal immigrants who are (mostly) young, flexible and highly skilled when they enter the labour market after graduation (King & Raghuram, 2013; King et al., 2022; She & Wotherspoon, 2013). That is particularly important against the background that many Western countries are experiencing a sharp decline in their fast-aging labour force. Therefore, governments established specific policies to attract highly skilled migrants, including scholarship programmes for international students (Krannich & Hunger, 2022a; Krannich, 2024a).

According to UNESCO (2024), more than 50% of the 6.3 million international students worldwide are enrolled in only seven countries: United States (about 1 million international students), United Kingdom (more than 500,000), Australia (over 450,000), Germany (about 370,000), Canada (320,000), France (250,000) and China (220,000). Most of these students come from countries in the Global North (more than 3 million) and China (more than 1 million) and India (about 500,000). In most countries in the Global South, less than 5,000 students study abroad (UNESCO, 2024). These UNESCO numbers indicate that international student migration is still a privilege for students from rich countries.

However, international students can play an important role for their countries of origin. From a development perspective, just like other forms of highly skilled and skilled migrants (de Haas, 2012; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020), they can also contribute to the development in their countries of origin. Political decision-makers in countries of origin take action to motivate students to return after graduation and to apply the knowledge they gained abroad in their jobs at home. That should help to stimulate development in home communities. Many sending countries have even established their own state scholarship programmes for students to study abroad, including China, India, Colombia and Georgia (Krannich & Hunger, 2022a).

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Some research studies already insinuated that international student mobility can have positive effects on sending countries if students take over leading positions in the economy, politics or academia after graduating and returning from abroad (Gēdeshi & King, 2019; Tejada, 2013). In contrast, there are studies that illustrate negative impacts of highly skilled emigration on sending countries. For instance, the emigration of physicians to Europe or North America causes dramatic gaps in African and Asian healthcare systems (Faist et al., 2013). Whether migrants can have positive or negative impacts on sending countries depend on social and economic as well as political determinants (in all affected countries) (Massey & Parrado, 1994).

Our own research on international students and alumni from selected countries in the Global South (Colombia, Georgia, Ghana, Indonesia, and the Palestinian territories) studying in Germany shows that they transfer development-related knowhow back to their country of origin by doing diverse activities in leading positions.² For instance, as businessmen, they created new jobs. They introduced new therapy methods as physicians, were involved in legal reforms as lawyers or invented new irrigation systems for the African agriculture. Furthermore, as doctors, they offer training in hospitals in the host country for colleagues invited from their countries of origin, or as researchers, they develop new research methods and pass them on to their students. In short, former Colombian students contributed mainly to the peace process through their professional work and civic engagement in Colombia, Georgian alumni contributed to the legal and political development of Georgia, whereas Ghanaian alumni supported agricultural advancement and environmental protection. In Indonesia, former students participated in the economic growth, and former Palestinian medical students in Germany helped to rebuilt health care in the Palestinian territories (Krannich & Hunger, 2022b).

Students and alumni can also establish networks. Not only do they link both countries through their transnational activities, but as contact persons, they can also help other organisations, businesses, universities, hospitals or state institutions to gain ground in these countries. In doing so, knowledge can not only be acquired and transferred but also produced through networks.

² The research findings were based on a quantitative and qualitative study from 2016 to 2018 about international students studying in Germany and receiving a scholarship from a German organization (Catholic Academic Foreigner Service (KAAD)). Here we surveyed current and former students who stayed in Germany as well as the ones who returned to their countries of origin after graduation (see Krannich & Hunger, 2022b).

For instance, in our research we found many cases where former students created scientific networks, established new universities in their countries of origin or founded new businesses, which included their new knowledge based on their experience gained in countries of study as well as in their country of origin.

Our study also illustrated that development can be achieved through different forms of migration: One-time migration to the country of study and staying there after graduation (through transnational social networks); return migration to the country of origin after graduation; and through circular migration between the country of study and their country of origin (Krannich & Hunger, 2022b).

But what does international student mobility mean for Sri Lanka? How can Sri Lankan students studying abroad actually contribute to the development in Sri Lanka? I do not want to give a precise answer to that, because I cannot draw on any empirical data (yet), but I would like to develop some considerations, which can stimulate discussions and in-depth research about international Sri Lankan student migration.

Sri Lanka is still mainly a country of emigration (as it has been since independence in 1948), while most Sri Lankans migrate to Western countries and the Gulf states to work in the service and construction industry (Fernando & Lodermeier, 2021). There is also a fast-rising number of Sri Lankans studying abroad, increasing by 50% in the last six years from about 21,000 in 2017 to over 31,000 in 2023 (UNESCO, 2024). The main countries of study for these students are the English-speaking countries of Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, and Canada (UNESCO, 2024). About half of the international Sri Lankan students have a scholarship, 44% of these have a foreign scholarship and around 10% have a scholarship from a Sri Lankan institution. Studying abroad created even an industry consisting of universities and foreign education agencies to promote studying abroad by advertisement and commercials (Jayasuriya & McAuliffe, 2017).

Do these Sri Lankan students and alumni abroad also play such a role for the development in Sri Lanka like the above-mentioned international students from other countries? There are indications that students from Sri Lanka probably do engage in developments in Sri Lanka, particularly in the frame of their professions and by participating in local projects through transnational migrant organizations (Lau, 2016). These developmental contributions can have a great potential for the social and economic growth of Sri Lanka. For instance, former Sri Lankan students in Canada and Australia sent remittances to family members and friends in Sri Lanka and participate actively in local community projects through their transnational networks to improve education, health, and infrastructure (International Labour Organisation 2019; 2022).

Furthermore, Tamil students from Sri Lanka take part in migrant organizations located in the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany to support health care services in remote villages in Northern Sri Lanka. They do that from abroad by transnational online knowledge transfers or by frequent visits in Sri Lanka to practise in local hospitals or mobile clinics (Krannich, 2024b).

However, we still do not know much about the specific activities of former international Sri Lankan students in Sri Lanka, particularly about their individual development-relevant activities, and less their collective migrant organization-based commitment. Here, it would be important to know how many Sri Lankan students actually return back home to Sri Lanka after graduating abroad, and how many stay abroad in the country of study. Although there exist no numbers about return rates of Sri Lankan students, according to a recent study (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2023), the return rate among Sri Lankan labour migrants was between 50 and 55%, which can be an indicator for a relatively low return rate, but should not be overestimated regarding student migration. Other studies indicate that many Sri Lankan students use their studies abroad as an opportunity to settle in another country (Jayawardena, 2020). What we surely know is that studying abroad is still a privilege for only a few Sri Lankan students who were lucky enough to get one of the treasured scholarships or the financial support of their parents when coming from elite or upper-middle class families (Jayawardena, 2020).

How can these developments be improved in the case of Sri Lankan students? I have three central points on my mind:

First of all, it needs more financial support and coordination to increase the numbers of Sri Lankans who want to study abroad. Scholarship programmes for international students can be coordinated either in a binational or in a multinational frame—supported by Sri Lankan institutions as well as the country of study under assistance of specialised international institutions—or solely in the framework of international organisations. For instance, already existing scholarship programmes of the Sri Lankan government could be coupled and enhanced in cooperation with the US Fulbright, the German DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), or the British Commonwealth scholarship programme. In this context, international student migration can be governed as an impetus of a long-term migration cycle, starting with studying abroad and followed by working either abroad or in Sri Lanka (after return migration), which could lead to multi-year or even decade-long circular migration in the frame of a job (labour migration) and transnational networks.

Secondly, educational institutions, labour market-focused organisations, and business companies should provide more support either for integration into the labour market after graduation in the host country or for re-integration in the country of origin. This seems to be crucial, because, according to our research results, international students face severe challenges during the transition period between studies and job.

Especially when students return to their country of origin after several years abroad, they have problems in getting accustomed again to living and working standards (Krannich & Hunger, 2022a; 2022b). Similar challenges also exist in Sri Lanka.

Thirdly, involved states and scholarship organisations should foster the creation of alumni clubs (associations of former students). The network of alumni clubs in countries of study as well as in Sri Lanka could also support integration into the labour market after studies, for instance, by mutual help during job and accommodation search. Such alumni clubs do already somehow exist among self-organised Sri Lankan Fulbright or DAAD alumni, but they lack institutional bonds and support. They could, for instance, be tied to affected universities in Sri Lanka as well as abroad.

In a nutshell, cooperation between development-related scholarship programmes, educational institutions, businesses, and a dense network of alumni clubs can accelerate knowledge transfer and exchange between countries, reduce social inequalities across national borders and foster student migration not only from the Global South to the North but also between countries in the Global South.

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