

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF STUDENT RETURNEES

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Introduction

The phenomenon of return migration has received renewed attention in recent writings (such as Mayr and Peri, 2008; Tamaki, 2011; Valentin, 2012), particularly with the advent of the migration-management and migration-and-development discourse. Moving on from the analysis of migrants' purely economic contribution, current literature has looked into their non-economic participation such as through return and transfer of knowledge and skills and social network use. Within the broader theme of this book, this article discusses the characteristics of returnee students, the challenges they face in returning value to their homelands, and the incentives home countries can offer to help them make this effort. The first part of the article introduces student migrants. The second briefly discusses the typologies of returnees based on their motivation for return. This is followed by presenting the challenges they face in using their knowledge and skills. The last part describes how returnees can be motivated to use their knowledge and skills in their home countries.

Methodology

The article is based on qualitative fieldwork from 2009-2014 with Nepali students currently studying in different institutions in the UK, Denmark, and Sweden as well as those in Nepal who returned after completing their education and/or extended stays from different countries (excluding India).

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Fieldwork methods include focus group discussions, key informant interviews, participant observation, informal interviews, and small group discussions and case studies.

The returnee respondents were graduates, Ph.D. students, and post-doctoral students who were working in educational sectors, entrepreneurial activities, government offices, and non-governmental international organizations in Nepal.

Who Are Student Migrants and Returnees?

Student migration is not new for Nepal: historically, India was their chief destination. This is changing and recent Home Ministry data (Ministry of Education, 2014) shows that countries like Australia, Japan, and the United States are the most important destinations for Nepali students today, and that they have gone to 85 countries in the fiscal year 2014-2015 alone. Altogether, 28 763 students went abroad for study in the fiscal year 2014-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, no empirical data exists to ascertain the number of returnees since, so far, no system records student returns.

Since we were unable to gather information on the number of returnees, we tried to understand who is returning based on interviews, focus groups, and participant observation of different programs organized by student returnees.

We found that the majority of the returnees had been abroad either fully or partially self-funded. We did not find anyone who had gone on scholarships, though key informants said this had been quite common in the past. Similarly, the funding for international education came from their households and rarely from personal income.

Regarding their ages, a large number of returnees had been abroad in their twenties. Students were found to start looking for opportunities to study abroad as soon as they entered the twelfth grade and generally left the country during their undergraduate years.

The choice of destination was determined by consultation with friends and seniors from schools, their neighborhood, and family members for boys, while for girls it was largely based on family networks. Girls were of the opinion that the parents found it safe to send them if there was a possibility of

having a family member as a local guardian in the destination. In other cases, girls would be allowed to go if trusted family friends live in the destination country.

The study also finds that certain established notions exist about the destinations. For example, students often said that if they liked practical education, the United States would be one choice; if they preferred a more rigorous, theory-oriented education, the choice would be the UK; and for technical education, it would be Germany, Sweden, or Finland. However, the cost of education, the possibility of earning while studying, the existence of scholarships after enrollment, and the reputation of the certificate from the destination country in Nepal's labor market were all taken into account for making the final decision. These factors also have gender dimensions, but that is not the area of interest in this article.

Our analysis shows that, based on their decision to return, returnees can be broadly classified into the following five categories shown below.

RETURNEES WITH THE FIRM INTENTION OF RETURNING PRIOR TO MIGRATION

These returnees already have a firm idea of returning when they plan to go abroad. They were sure from the very first that they would return once they completed their studies. A typical quote from this kind of returnee is, "Oh, I was very sure that I would return after completing my Ph.D. I did not even think of staying a day more. I had already bought my return ticket."

Others were not so firm at first but knew that they would come back at some point soon after completing their studies. These students had the idea that, apart from knowledge, they would gain some work experience abroad and also try to earn some money so that they could recover part of what their parents had invested for their international education: "Yes, I thought I would study in Denmark but also work here and gain some work experience. I had heard that it is easy to get some internships or jobs. I was attracted by that. So I thought, ok, I'll study, do some work, and try to earn some money, which the household spent on me and return to Nepal."

RETURNEES WHO DID NOT FEEL THEY BELONGED IN THEIR DESTINATION COUNTRY

The study finds that the feeling of not belonging to the host country, the stigma associated with being viewed as a second-class citizen, and general exclusion from the host country also motivated some to return. These returnees were not intent on returning sooner, but after spending some years abroad, decided that they could not assimilate into the host society. They talked about being singled out both in their daily lives outside the university or in the university environment:

I got that feeling even when I became so much closer to their culture and system. By then I was really speaking like them. My accent had changed, my behavior has changed. I could understand their humor. I was living with them. I lived in the flat with Scottish, Australians, New Zealanders. And they use the “F” word so much; it was no problem at all when they used it. The moment I use it, they all look at you with surprised eyes—you know, eyes wide open. Again that’s a difference [...] because we come from different races. They don’t expect us to become one of them, no matter what, even if we are in the same boat. We have the same education, the same brains—I am actually much smarter than average. Actually I was a topper in the masters in my department, but still it’s not there, the acceptance that all people are equal [...] for them, I am not one of them.

But after having decided to live there after study and getting a job, they come in closer contact with the society and their perception of the people in the host country changes. This knowledge motivates some to return.

FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

Some people have a family obligation to look after parents and the family property once the parents get old. Such returnees do not have siblings to look after ageing parents back home or manage the property once the father is old. For some, this was clear from the very start; for others, their siblings settled abroad; and for a third group, the parents did not want to live outside Nepal with them. These returnees feel the obligation to work and return to their family members after completing their studies: “I have to take care of

my parents; you know, that feeling of responsibility you get [...] ok, I am old enough, they have cared for me during my life, and now it's my turn to care for them after finishing school [...] Not that somebody forced me, but those are just my feelings."

Such returnees, however, are mobile and travel outside Nepal for training, conferences, and short courses. They strive to keep their professional networks in their former destination countries active through joint work, regular contact, and joint projects that prolong their mobility. However, they do not intend to leave the country again for a very long period.

"MISSING HOME" RETURNEES

These students ultimately never become comfortable with the socio-cultural way of life in their destination countries and prefer the relaxing, slow pace of Nepal. For these students, being at home also means less responsibility to care for everyday matters, and an easier time starting new ventures and maintaining back-up plans if other ideas fail, something that would have been very difficult in the destination country: "You have a nice house to live in—I don't pay rent. I don't have to worry about the electricity bill; I don't have to worry about calling a plumber if something goes wrong; there's always food in the fridge; there is everything in your house. It's very stress free, you know."

RETURNING TO USE KNOWLEDGE

These returnees come home motivated to use their newly acquired knowledge and skills. They refer to their effort abroad as "one link in the chain," meaning that when they contribute to the host society, they are just adding to what is already there rather than starting something new. However, if they do the same thing in Nepal, it will be new for Nepal. They feel that their small effort in the home country could make a significant impact in local people's lives, while the same effect cannot be achieved in the host country: "So that urge to come back and do a good job was stronger. [...] As I began to teach others, it became much more clearer that I have a much bigger role to play in my society, in my country than staying here in general."

In general, these returnees feel that there is more space to contribute to society in Nepal and this gives them a sense of importance and satisfaction.

Challenges Facing Returnees

The following section describes in brief the challenges faced by the returnees in their homelands.

LOSS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

The most significant challenge to returnees is the loss of social networks they had possessed prior to migration. While social networks played an important role in migration and life in the destination countries, returnees complained that they have lost all the social networks upon return. This hampers their access to important information that would ultimately help them to start a business or land a desirable job. In Nepali society, where face-to-face reference plays an important role in being hired, they were at a disadvantage with respect to their peers who had not been abroad due to this loss of social networks.

DIFFICULTY IN FINDING BASIC INFORMATION FOR START-UPS

Another issue that came up in the narratives involved information. The government and the majority of Nepali institutions have a manual system. Virtual information with open access is not common even for public information. This often means that people have to visit different offices in person to get it. This caused enormous problems for returnees who were used to a different system abroad. Furthermore, because they did not understand the nuts and bolts of the Nepali system, they would often have to spend days finding out which particular departments or offices to visit for any information.

LACK OF RULES AND POLICIES

Another significant challenge that returnees face when they want to start up a new business is the lack of rules and policies. While they import ideas from the host country, these are often new in Nepal, where no clearly defined rules and policies exist about them. Hence, they cannot register their businesses in Nepal.

POLITICAL UNIONS

Political unions, which have a strong presence in the private sector, are another factor that hinders them from using their knowledge. Having spent a considerable period outside the country, they are not able to negotiate properly with these unions and they feel this like a loss because they are not up to date with Nepal's fluid local politics.

LACK OF BACKUP INSURANCE AND FINANCIAL SCHEMES AND THE NEED TO SELF-FINANCE IDEAS

The fact that there is no investment to support young returnees who want to start up small businesses is frustrating and pushes them to re-migrate. This means that even when they come with innovative ideas and dream of using them in their homeland, they have to earn money at other jobs until they can finance their ideas. A few NGOs such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) have now started schemes to provide funding for Nepali returnees from Germany to start the project of their choice. However, these are sometimes country-focused and a large number of returnees are left out.

Recommendations and Best Practices

This section presents the best practices and recommendations:

Managing Out Migration and Recording Return. Nepal could benefit from also including students who go without the “no objection letter” as well as

getting details about destinations, courses, duration of stay, and linking it to the other national datasets such as vacancies in government and non-governmental organizations to match and hire skilled employees.

Outreach to Migrants in Destination Countries. Maintaining regular links with students abroad benefits students who find their networks eroding, but also allows the country to have a record of its human capital. The home country should take initiatives to reach out to students. This can be done by government envoys who visit abroad, periodic outreach by the Nepali embassy, the government formally involving students in social and philanthropic activities, and by establishing information hubs for students.

Integrating Returnees into Youth Policies. While the country has drafted a youth policy and has established an employment fund for young people, returnees are not included in this policy. The study finds that, like their labor counterparts, a good majority of student returnees also re-migrate from their homeland due to not being able to make an appropriate living when they return. Hence, making provisions for them to benefit from youth policies is important to be able to use them as resources for the country.

Providing Financial Back-up and Insurance. Returnee students come with innovative ideas but lack the financial resources to act on them. Case studies show that when they have been able to manage funds to put their ideas into practice, they have contributed very innovatively to solve persisting local problems such as electricity outages in Nepal. Thus, providing financial support in the form of rolling grants would help these returnees implement their ideas. Providing back-ups in the case of business failure is another aspect of inviting returnees to use their knowledge and skills.

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