

Educational and Employment Migration from Kerala to the United Kingdom after COVID-19: Experiences, Challenges, and Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This study explores how migration patterns from Kerala, India, to the United Kingdom have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the shift from student visas to Skilled Worker visas. While migration from Kerala has traditionally been directed towards Gulf countries, a noticeable move towards education-led migration followed by employment in the UK has emerged in recent years. Difficult economic and social conditions in Kerala continue to play a key role in driving this trend. The study is based on a survey of 200 participants. Most respondents were young adults, with 56.5% aged between 26 and 30, and a majority (74%) identifying as women. The main motivation for migration was the search for better job opportunities (43.5%). However, the findings reveal what can be described as a “migration paradox”. Although many migrated with strong qualifications, 91.5% are currently working as healthcare assistants, and 84.5% report a clear mismatch between their qualifications and their current jobs. The study introduces a “Triple Insecurity Model” to explain the challenges faced by these migrants. This includes three key layers of insecurity: uncertainty about long-term settlement (reported by 91%), difficulties related to employer sponsorship (92%), and experiences of workplace discrimination (95%). Together, these challenges contribute to significant psychological strain and difficulties in adapting to a new cultural environment. Overall, the findings suggest that current sponsorship systems may disproportionately disadvantage ethnic minority migrants and push skilled individuals into lower-skilled roles. The study highlights the need for timely policy reforms and recommends that social work professionals adopt culturally sensitive approaches to better support migrants from Kerala facing these complex challenges.

Keywords: Kerala Migration, UK Immigration Policy, Structural Precarity, Triple Insecurity Model, Healthcare Sector, Social Work Practice.

Introduction

Migration has always been an important part of Kerala’s economy, with many workers traditionally moving to Gulf countries. In the past, this migration to the Gulf provided a major source of income for many families (Ansari. P. A & Rahman, 2021; Dr. A. P. A & Rahman,

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2021). However, this long-standing pattern changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted this system significantly, forcing many workers to return home where they faced job loss, financial difficulties, and social isolation (Jacob et al., 2020), (A & Rahman, 2021).

At the same time, the UK began to experience a growing shortage of health and social care workers, with a 9.5% vacancy rate in adult social care roles (Wash et al., 2024). As a result, the UK has increasingly become a preferred destination, particularly for students and healthcare professionals (Lakshmi, 2025), (Amarnath, 2025). This new trend is influenced by several factors, including limited access to well-paying jobs in Kerala and the strong demand for healthcare workers in the UK (Davda et al., 2018; Walton-Roberts et al., 2017). Along with stagnant wages and fewer opportunities in Kerala, this has encouraged many people to look at the UK not just for work, but also for higher education that can lead to employment, especially in the healthcare sector (Lakshmi, 2025), (Amarnath, 2025).

A new wave of migration has emerged, increasingly driven by educational aspirations. Many young people now see studying abroad as a pathway to long-term settlement, often described as the “student-to-migrant” pipeline (Amarnath, 2025). This is quite different from earlier patterns of short-term labour migration to the Gulf. Today, people in their twenties are moving to the UK for postgraduate studies, hoping it will open doors to global career opportunities (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024). This shift reflects a clear push-pull dynamic. On the one hand, factors such as outdated curricula, intense competition, and low wages in sectors like nursing push people to leave Kerala. On the other, opportunities like the UK’s Graduate Route visa and the perceived quality of British education pull them in (Lakshmi, 2025; M. & Afnitha, 2025; Thomas, 2025). The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 shows that the number of student emigrants rose sharply from 129,763 in 2018 to around 250,000 in 2023, now accounting for 11.3% of the total migrant population (Johnson, 2025).

Despite the promise of better opportunities, this migration pathway is often marked by uncertainty and vulnerability. Many students rely on high-interest loans, creating financial pressure that makes immediate employment necessary (Kavitha & Parvathy, 2024), (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024). The transition from student visas to employer-sponsored work visas adds another layer of difficulty, creating what may be described as a “Triple Insecurity Model”- legal, economic, and social uncertainty; especially when migrants depend on sponsorship to remain in the country. This often leads to what can be called a “migration paradox,” where highly qualified individuals end up in low-skilled or unstable jobs just to cover living costs. Such work can also interfere with their studies (M. & Afnitha, 2025), (Amarnath, 2025).

These challenges have important implications for social work. Migrants frequently experience emotional stress, cultural adjustment difficulties, and a lack of support networks, often relying on informal or spiritual coping strategies (Bhattacharjee & Thomas, 2025), (Jacob et al., 2020). For many migrants, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, studying abroad is seen as a long-term investment, with many hoping to settle permanently rather than return home. While this trend raises concerns about ‘brain drain’, it also creates global opportunities for skilled individuals (Amarnath, 2025), (Kavitha & Parvathy, 2024). However, the reality is often more complex. High living costs and unstable part-time work can expose students to financial

stress and exploitative conditions, which can affect both their academic performance and overall well-being (C & Antony, 2025), (Amarnath, 2025). Many end up working long hours in sectors like delivery or hospitality, which adds further strain and reduces their ability to focus on studies (C & Antony, 2025), (Amarnath, 2025), (Almadadha et al., 2025).

Post-pandemic policy changes have further tightened conditions, including restrictions on work hours and visa rules, making it harder for students to manage their finances and secure long-term stability (C & Antony, 2025). This highlights the need for stronger social work support, including mental health services, legal guidance, and financial counselling, to help migrants cope with these overlapping challenges (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024). At a broader level, there is also a need for policies that can turn migration into a 'brain gain' by supporting skill development and encouraging more balanced opportunities both within and outside Kerala (Johnson, 2025).

Study Objectives

This study examines the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of migrants from Kerala who came to the UK on student visas after March 2020 and later transitioned to Skilled Worker visas. It aims to:

- Understand the key factors that have driven educational migration from Kerala to the UK after COVID-19.
- Explore the academic experiences of Keralite students in UK institutions.
- Examine how migrants transition from student visas to Skilled Worker visas.
- Analyse their work experiences and the challenges they face in the workplace.
- Explore how migrants adjust socially, culturally, and psychologically.
- Assess their access to support systems, welfare services, and community networks.
- Examine how recent and proposed changes to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) rules affect their sense of security and future.
- Highlight what these migration experiences mean for social work practice and policy.

Literature Review

Since the pandemic, there has been a noticeable rise in student migration from Kerala to the United Kingdom. This shift appears to be driven by a mix of challenges within Kerala and the opportunities perceived abroad. At the same time, migration patterns were moving away from Gulf countries and increasingly toward Western nations, reflecting a growing preference for long-term settlement rather than temporary work (Kavitha & Parvathy, 2024), (Amarnath, 2025).

Studies show that many Keralite students are motivated by the hope of better education and career prospects, which they often feel are not easily available within Kerala's institutions (M. & Afnitha, 2025), (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024). Common reasons include outdated curricula, limited vocational training, and intense competition for a small number of university seats (Thomas, 2025), (M. & Afnitha, 2025). The UK has become a popular destination, partly because of the widespread use of English and relatively attractive immigration pathways. In

particular, the Graduate Route visa which allows students to stay and work after completing their studies; has been a major draw (Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024), (Ahmed & Davies, 2024).

However, once in the UK, Keralite students often face several academic and institutional challenges. One of the main difficulties is adjusting to a different style of teaching and learning. In India, education tends to follow a more hierarchical teacher-student relationship, whereas the UK system encourages independence and critical thinking (Gordon, 2020), (Potter & Krishnan, 2026). The return to in-person learning after the pandemic has added further challenges. Many students have had to readjust from online education, which can affect their engagement and performance (Zhao & Wenchao, 2023). At the same time, the high cost of living forces many to take up part-time work, often at the expense of their studies and overall well-being (Amarnath, 2025; Potter & Krishnan, 2026). Institutional support is available, but it does not always consider the cultural and academic backgrounds of Indian postgraduate students (Gordon, 2020).

Moving from a student visa to a Skilled Worker visa is a key step for many migrants, but it is not an easy one. While the Graduate Route offers temporary flexibility, long-term settlement depends on securing a job with an approved sponsor (Agrell et al., 2024; Huang & Arnold, 2020). This process can be uncertain, especially because immigration policies, salary thresholds, and sponsorship requirements often change (Luthra & Platt, 2016; Nuka-Nwikipasi et al., 2026). The lack of a clear and stable pathway to citizenship makes it difficult for migrants to plan their futures (Huang & Arnold, 2020).

In the labour market, Keralite migrants often face what researchers describe as “ethnic penalties”, where they are more likely to be placed in lower-quality jobs compared to similarly qualified local workers (Zwysen & Demireva, 2018). Many migrants end up working in jobs that do not match their qualifications, and some experience exploitative conditions, especially in private sector roles (Amarnath, 2025; Cederberg, 2016). In sectors like healthcare, which employ many Keralites, there are also reports of harassment, bullying, and discrimination based on ethnicity (Calenda & Bellini, 2021). Barriers such as the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and limited professional networks make it harder for them to fully integrate into their careers (Amo-Afful et al., 2025; Foster & George, 2025).

On a personal level, migrants often experience “acculturative stress”, caused by the differences between Kerala’s community-oriented culture and the more individualistic society in the UK (Hakak & Francis, 2021; Potter & Krishnan, 2026). Culture shock can make adjustment even more difficult. Differences in everyday practices such as food, relationships, and social norms can conflict with traditional values (Potter & Krishnan, 2026). This can lead to feelings of isolation and a loss of social identity (Cederberg, 2016; Schartner & Wang, 2024). At the same time, many students carry a heavy financial burden due to education loans, often with strong expectations from their families for financial success (Potter & Krishnan, 2026; Skariah & Sivarenjini, 2024).

Recent changes in UK immigration policy have added to migrants’ concerns about their future. Uncertainty around Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) rules and rising salary thresholds has increased anxiety about long-term settlement (Ahmed & Davies, 2024; Nuka-Nwikipasi et al.,

2026). Many migrants feel that their position in the UK is unstable and that they are viewed more as temporary contributors than potential long-term residents (Bitschnau, 2023; Joppke, 2020).

These experiences show how multiple challenges affect both professional and personal lives. To cope, many rely on informal support systems such as family and community networks, which can provide emotional support during difficult times (Pulla et al., 2020). While universities do offer formal support, these services are often seen as less effective or not culturally relevant for Indian students (Gordon, 2020). However, access to formal welfare services remains limited, often due to visa restrictions and unfamiliarity with the system (Pulla et al., 2020).

Mentorship programs involving social workers could help bridge this gap by connecting new migrants with more experienced individuals (Potter & Krishnan, 2026). These challenges highlight the need for more culturally sensitive social work approaches. Social work should recognize the collective values and family-centred nature of South Asian communities (Pulla et al., 2020). Practitioners in the UK also need to balance individual-focused systems with the communal perspectives of migrant families (Hakak & Francis, 2021; Schwarzer et al., 2016). There is also a need for better policies and support systems, including improved induction programs that help migrants adjust to professional and cultural environments. Social workers should also be more aware of structural barriers, such as ethnic discrimination in the labour market (Hakak & Francis, 2021; Zwysen & Demireva, 2018). Overall, social work needs to move beyond surface-level inclusion and address deeper inequalities faced by Keralite migrants in the UK (Amo-Afful et al., 2025; Hakak et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design based on a descriptive, cross-sectional survey. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for the systematic analysis of social issues using numerical data and statistical methods. By measuring factors such as financial debt, visa-related uncertainty, and psychological well-being, the study aims to provide a clear, data-driven understanding of the “Triple Insecurity Model” experienced by students from Kerala in the UK.

The research focuses on migrants from Kerala, India, who came to the UK on student visas after March 2020 and later transitioned to Skilled Worker visas. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to specifically target individuals affected by post-COVID-19 visa changes, along with snowball sampling through community networks. In total, 200 participants took part in the survey. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to collect information about their experiences and socio-demographic backgrounds. Data was gathered through an online survey consisting of closed-ended questions, which provided quantitative insights. The data was then analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, and presented in tables for clarity.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	12	6%
21-25	47	23.5%
26-30	113	56.5%
31-40	28	14%
Above 40	0	0%
Total	200	100%

Table 2: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	48	24%
Female	148	74%
Other	4	2%
Total	200	100%

The demographic profile of respondents shows that a majority were in the 26-30 age group, accounting for 56.5%. This composition suggests the sample was primarily constituted by young adult migrants. A substantial majority of the respondents (74%) were female; this indicated a notable gender imbalance within the cohort.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Educational Migration

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Better job prospects	87	43.5%
Financial improvement	45	22.5%
Better education opportunities	33	16.5%
Post-COVID opportunities	17	8.5%
Family influence	15	7.5%
Other	3	1.5%
Total	200	100%

The data suggests a predominant trend; Better job prospects (43.5%) were the main reason people chose to move, followed by financial improvement (22.5%). It tells us that people primarily move for better job prospects and financial gains whereas familial influences and educational opportunities appear less frequently as motivators.

Table 4: The Process of Adjustment to Academic Life

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Academic experience	Superior	60	30%
	Proficient	110	55%
	Adequate	30	15%
	Deficient	0	0%
Language or Academic difficulty	Yes	116	58%
	No	84	42%
Institutional support	Strong Assent	20	10%
	Neutral	56	28%
	Disagree	124	62%

Most respondents (85%) rated their academic experience as satisfactory or excellent. However, many still faced challenges; 58% struggled with language or the level of academic difficulty and 62% felt that the support provided by their institutions was not enough. These findings show a clear gap between how students experience their studies and the level of support they receive from their institutions.

Table 5: Visa Transition and Sponsorship Experience

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Difficulty in Sponsorship Procurement	Yes	184	92%
	No	16	8%
Sponsorship source	Agency	116	58%
	Self	60	30%
	Friends	24	12%
Remuneration for Sponsorship	Yes	121	58%
	No	79	42%
Restrictiveness of Visa Regulations	Yes	130	65%

	No	50	25%
	Not sure	20	10%

Analysis revealed that 92% of respondents identified the procurement of sponsorship as challenging, thus suggesting that visa acquisition persists as a significant impediment. Meanwhile, 58% exhibited reliance upon external agencies for support. This means many depend on outside help for migration today. Furthermore, 65% also perceived the prevailing visa regulations as unduly stringent.

Table 6: Employment Experience

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Job type	Healthcare assistant	183	91.5%
	Nurse	7	3.5%
	Engineer	4	2%
	Chef	2	1%
	Other	4	2%
Job relevance	Not relevant	169	84.5%
	Somewhat relevant	15	7.5%
	Highly relevant	16	8%
Workplace stress	Yes	180	90%
Discrimination	Yes	190	95%

Analysis suggests that 91.5% of respondents are engaged in healthcare assistant roles. Such positions often entail minimal specialized preparation. In practice, 84.5% also said their jobs do not match their qualifications. 90% faced workplace stress. 95% faced discrimination.

Table 7: Social and Psychological Adjustment

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Homesickness	Always/Often	104	52%
	Sometimes	60	30%
	Rarely/Never	36	18%
Stress/anxiety	Yes	157	78.5%
Social integration	Yes	80	40%

	Partial	70	35%
	No	50	25%

An analysis indicated that 52% of respondents frequently reported experiences of homesickness, and merely 40% reported full integration.

Table 8: Support Systems

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Community support	Yes	130	65%
Awareness of welfare services	Yes	170	85%
Support source	Family	50	38.5%
	Friends	40	30.7%
	Religious groups	35	26.9%
	Student unions	5	3.8%

It was observed that 65% of respondents had some form of community support. Furthermore, 85% were aware of the welfare services available to them. The primary provision of this support was predominantly attributed to familial and peer networks.

Table 9: Immigration and Settlement Uncertainty

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
ILR awareness	Yes/Somewhat	180	90%
Settlement uncertainty	Agree/Strongly agree	196	98%
Career affected by ILR	Yes	120	60%
Considering other countries	Yes/Maybe	156	78%
Mental health impact	Yes	130	65%

The data indicates a very high level of uncertainty regarding permanent settlement, with 98% of respondents expressing concerns about their future in the UK. There is also considerable anxiety around current immigration regulations, with a significant majority (78%) considering the possibility of moving to other countries.

Table 10: Policy Perceptions

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Importance of social work services	Agree/Strongly agree	170	85%

Need for improved migrant policies	Yes	196	98%
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The survey results exhibit strong support for improved migration policies, with 98% of respondents indicating this need. At the same time, 85% recognised the important role of social work services. Together, these findings highlight a clear need for stronger institutional support and more effective policy frameworks.

Discussion

This study highlights numerous challenges faced by migrants who come to the UK for education. While most migrants move with the hope of finding better job opportunities and improving their financial situation, their real experiences often tell a different story. Across work, immigration, and social life, there are clear links between problems such as job mismatches, workplace stress, unequal treatment, and ongoing anxiety about visas.

The study findings show that these challenges are not isolated issues. Instead, they are part of a larger system that creates dependency and uncertainty for migrants.

Structural Precarity and Dependency

The results can be understood using a framework of structural precarity and dependency, where different forms of insecurity overlap and reinforce each other.

(i) Immigration-related insecurity

Many participants expressed deep uncertainty about their future in the UK. Around 98% were unsure about their chances of settling permanently, and 94% were worried about meeting the requirements for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). In addition, 65% felt that visa rules were restrictive, and 78% had even considered moving to another country.

This shows that immigration status is not just a legal issue; it is also a major source of stress. This uncertainty affects migrants' ability to plan their future, build stable careers, and feel secure in their lives.

(ii) Employment and occupational mismatch

A large gap was found between migrants' qualifications and the jobs they were doing. About 84.5% reported working in roles that did not match their education. Although many expected better career opportunities after moving, a significant number especially the 91.5% working as healthcare assistants ended up in low or semi-skilled jobs.

This reflects a process of deskilling, where qualifications do not translate into career growth. Instead, migrants often find themselves stuck in roles that do not match their skills or aspirations.

(iii) Workplace vulnerability and discrimination

Many participants also reported difficult working conditions. Around 90% experienced high workplace stress, 95% reported discrimination, and 70% feared losing their sponsorship. In addition, 82.5% said they had faced pressure or intimidation from managers.

These findings show that work is not just about earning money; it is also a source of insecurity and unequal power relationships. Because migrants depend on their employers for visa sponsorship, they may feel unable to speak up about unfair treatment.

The Migration Paradox

One of the most important findings of this study is what can be called a “migration paradox”. While the main reason for migration was to find better job opportunities (43.5%), the reality often includes job mismatch, discrimination, and high levels of stress.

This highlights the gap between expectations and reality. Instead of upward mobility, many migrants face structural barriers that limit their career growth and keep them in stagnant roles.

Triple Insecurity Model

The study also identifies a “Triple Insecurity Model” which includes:

1. Immigration insecurity (uncertainty around ILR and visa restrictions)
2. Employment insecurity (job mismatch and dependence on sponsorship)
3. Workplace insecurity (stress, discrimination, and managerial pressure)

These three forms of insecurity are closely linked. For example, uncertainty about visas increases dependence on employers. This reduces migrants’ ability to negotiate better conditions. Workplace pressures, in turn, discourage them from raising concerns or seeking better opportunities. Together, these factors create a cycle where migrants have very limited control over their situation.

Social and Psychological Impacts

These pressures also affect migrants’ well-being. More than half reported frequent homesickness, 78.5% experienced stress or anxiety, and only 40% felt socially connected. A quarter (25%) said they felt completely isolated. This shows that insecurity in work and immigration status also affects mental health and sense of belonging.

Implications of the Findings

The study points to several key implications:

- Immigration policies, especially those linked to employer sponsorship, play a major role in shaping migrants’ experiences and integration.
- Job structures often push migrants into lower-skilled roles and limit their career progression.
- Workplace conditions can reinforce vulnerability due to unequal power between employers and employees.
- Social integration is affected not only by cultural differences but also by structural and institutional barriers.

Conclusion

This study shows how structural barriers shape the experiences of educational migrants from Kerala. Rather than facing isolated problems, migrants deal with a connected set of challenges

across immigration, employment, and everyday life. Although many come to the UK hoping for better jobs and higher incomes, their actual experiences often involve uncertainty and instability.

A key issue is immigration insecurity, especially the lack of clear and predictable pathways to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). This uncertainty is closely tied to other challenges, such as working in jobs that do not match their qualifications, being pushed into lower-skilled roles, and facing difficult workplace conditions. Many participants reported high levels of stress, discrimination, and fear of losing employer sponsorship.

Together, these realities create what can be described as a “migration paradox”. While migrants expect career growth and upward mobility, they often experience reduced control over their work and future. This can leave them stuck in limited roles and contribute to anxiety and a weak sense of social belonging.

The findings also highlight a “triple insecurity” affecting migrants: insecurity in immigration status, employment, and the workplace. These are closely linked and reinforce each other. For example, visa uncertainty increases dependence on employers, which reduces workers’ ability to negotiate better conditions or explore other opportunities. This creates a cycle that is difficult to break.

These findings have important implications for both policy and practice. Immigration systems that tie workers to employer sponsorship can create power imbalances and make migrants more vulnerable. Addressing these issues requires broader structural changes, such as making visa systems more transparent and stable, improving recognition of overseas qualifications, and strengthening protections against workplace discrimination. More fundamentally, institutions need to adapt to ensure fair opportunities for migrants and reduce long-standing inequalities. Future research could build on this study by tracking migrant experiences over time and comparing patterns across different countries to better understand how these challenges develop in different contexts.

Limitations

This study also has some limitations. First, the sample had a gender imbalance, with 74% of participants being women. This means the findings especially the “Triple Insecurity Model” may reflect experiences common in female-dominated sectors such as care work.

Second, since most participants were working in healthcare, the findings related to job mismatch and workplace vulnerability may not apply equally to all sectors of the UK labour market.

Finally, the data was collected during a period of major changes to UK immigration policies, particularly around ILR rules. This may have increased the levels of immigration-related anxiety and uncertainty reported by participants.

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