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From Migration Aspiration to Intention: A Narrative Synthesis of International Student Migration in South and Southeast Asia, with a Proposed Model for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

International student migration from the Global South is now recognized not as a short-term educational stopover, but rather as a process that is also linked to labor market integration, long-term habitation and citizenship aspirations. Although a considerable body of migration research has confirmed that migration aspiration is a reliable predictor of migration intention, the psychological and relational processes by which this translation is achieved are relatively under-theorized, especially for Pakistan, a country with elevated emigration levels but with a relatively small amount of qualitative migration literature, particularly fieldwork-informed qualitative work – Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews (IDIs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) – in comparison. This article critically synthesizes recent qualitative, conceptual, and documentary literature on international student migration by drawing on multiple foundational strands of scholarship, from the classical push-pull theory to the more recent aspiration-ability distinction, and then the more comprehensive framework of aspirations-capabilities which now dominates the field. The synthesis has been built largely using the qualitative studies from Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Vietnam that were published between 2021 and mid-2026 and is framed around five recurring themes that characterize the aspiration-to-intention pathway: the economic calculus, intrinsic well-being aspiration, imagined belonging, relational embeddedness, and structural and policy volatility. The synthesis reveals that these dimensions work synergically: economic reasoning is not fully and completely informed but is carried out based on socially filtered information; intrinsic aspiration often exceeds and reframes economic reasoning; and policy tightening in the destination country does not extinguish but redirects aspiration. The article positions these findings in the context of the peculiar structural conditions of acute economic instability and a growing internal brain-drain debate in Pakistan, and proposes a nuanced, process-oriented conceptual model to study Pakistani student migration based on fieldwork-informed qualitative work (FGDs/IDIs/KIIs), while also highlighting the intersection of economic and intrinsic aspiration, gendered relational embeddedness, and Pakistan's own policy and public discourse on brain drain as priority gaps to be explored in future qualitative fieldwork.

Introduction

The distinction between those who want to migrate and those who actually migrate has long been established in the migration scholarship. Lee's (1966) seminal push-pull model provided a compelling explanation at the aggregate level for the structural forces that give rise to migration pressure (economic imbalance, political situation, social relationships), but assumed that the move from "wish" to "plan" was relatively straightforward. Carling's (2002) aspiration-ability model challenged this notion by emphasizing that aspirations and abilities should be looked at independently, an assertion further elaborated by Carling and Collins (2018) by demonstrating that aspirations are a multi-layered notion, made up of a series of different aspects – desire, expectation and perceived possibility. Later de Haas (2021) integrated these threads into a comprehensive aspirations-capabilities framework, highlighting that migration is not a mechanical response to unequal opportunities, rather it is a function of "what people aspire to" and "what they believe they can do about it". This separation is particularly significant in terms of international student migration from the Global South, where study abroad has become associated with labor market integration, long-term habitation, and citizenship aspirations rather than a temporary period of study abroad (Rahman et al., 2026). The scale of this phenomenon is vast; it is estimated by UNESCO that there were about 264 million tertiary students around the world in 2023, and out of these approximately 6.9 million were internationally mobile, with South Asia as one of the fastest-growing regions of origin. Furthermore, Pakistan alone contributed an estimated 0.115 million internationally mobile tertiary students that year (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) also highlights that student mobility showed considerable resilience after the pandemic, as it recovered more quickly than many had expected (IOM, 2024).

However, the process of how aspiration becomes intention, and then, along the pathway, how it transitions to settlement or return, or something more multifaceted is comparatively under-theorized in the South Asian context particularly. Recent qualitative research has demonstrated that this translation is neither linear nor entirely economic. A recent comparative study related to Bangladeshi and Nepali tertiary students revealed that migration aspirations were driven less by a quest for better education and more by a desire for dignity, predictability, and future security, which was continually re-shaped by the experiences of migrants, such as insecurity over employment, visa regimes, and legal uncertainty, once they arrived in their respective destination countries (Rahman et al., 2026). Likewise, a qualitative study conducted in Japan on Vietnamese students unfolded that although economic considerations are central in the students' initial articulation of their plans, an intrinsic dimension of migration aspirations – personal well-being and the sheer desire to live in a foreign country – plays a crucial role that can be overlooked if researchers focus solely on students' instrumental calculations (Nhi, 2025). These findings suggest that there are at least five recurrent themes in the recent literature through which the aspiration-to-intention pathway seems to operate: an economic calculus, the paradox between perceived economic opportunity and domestic constraint; an intrinsic well-being aspiration, one that is broader than a narrow economic framing; a sense of imagined belonging, or confidence in one's own ability to adapt socio-culturally in a foreign country; relational embeddedness in family, peer, and diaspora networks, that differently enables or constrains mobility; and, more salient in the 2024–26 timeframe is the structural and policy volatility in destination countries, as visa tightening and changing immigration politics redirect what aspiration can realistically become.

This article carries out a narrative synthesis of the recent qualitative, conceptual, and documentary literature around these five dimensions in order to obtain a more integrated, mechanism-level account of how migration aspiration turns into migration intention among university students in the Global South, specifically countries from South and Southeast Asia, and locate Pakistan within that account, which is a key sending country that is under-represented in the qualitative literature. The five dimensions are not tested against a pre-determined model, but rather this synthesis regards them as sensitizing concepts based on which the existing literature can be read comparatively, with an explicit attempt to highlight potential points of convergence and divergence in the Pakistani case relative to other South and Southeast Asian countries.

The article is divided into three sections. First, it outlines the theoretical development from the push-pull theory to the aspirations-capabilities framework, which provides the conceptual language for the synthesis that follows. Second, it draws on recent qualitative, conceptual, and documentary literature on international student migration around the five dimensions listed above, informed primarily by cases from South Asia and Southeast Asia published between 2021 and mid-2026. Third, it introduces a streamlined and process-based conceptual framework for the aspiration-to-intention transition adapted to the case of migration of Pakistani students, highlighting the need for further qualitative fieldwork in Pakistan to cover specific gaps.

Methodology

This article does not present any new primary data. It conducts a critical narrative synthesis of published qualitative and conceptual literature and documents related to international student migration aspirations and intentions, as outlined in the review typology advanced by [Grant and Booth \(2009\)](#) and as guided by the procedural blueprint for narrative synthesis formulated by [Popay et al. \(2006\)](#). A narrative review is not a systematic or scoping review, but rather it is a review that looks at a select subset of literature identified for a specific purpose and purposefully aims for the development of a new conceptual argument. This strategy aligns well with the current objective, which is theory-building, not extensive mapping.

Search strategy

Structured searches of migration aspiration and intention literature were conducted using academic databases and search engines (Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and publisher platforms such as Taylor & Francis, Springer, and Frontiers) with the combination of the following terms: migration aspiration, migration intention, international student migration, aspirations-capabilities, push-pull theory, brain drain, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Global South or individual countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Vietnam). The timeframe for the search was limited to the period from 2021 (the year de Haas formalized the aspirations-capabilities framework that anchors this synthesis) to mid-2026. In addition, reference lists of key retrieved articles were hand-searched for additional relevant articles (a snowballing technique) and seminal pre-2021 theoretical studies ([Carling, 2002](#); [Carling & Collins, 2018](#); [de Haas, 2011](#); [Lee, 1966](#); [Massey et al., 1993](#)) were also included that were directly referenced by the contemporary literature as origin points.

Inclusion and Exclusion

Sources were selected if they (a) specifically investigated international or cross-border student migration, and not immigration or labor migration in general; (b) explicitly discussed and/or analyzed the concepts of aspiration and intention, or the transition from aspiration to intention, conceptually or empirically; and (c) were peer-reviewed journal articles, university-press books, or reports from major institutions (UNESCO, IOM).

Analytic Approach

Adhering to the guidance provided by [Popay et al. \(2006\)](#), the synthesis was carried out in **three phases**: (1) preliminary theoretical model developed from foundational literature (Section 3); (2) organizing findings from retrieved qualitative, conceptual, and documentary literature around the five sensitizing dimensions: economic calculus, intrinsic well-being aspiration, imagined belonging, relational embeddedness, and structural and policy volatility (Sections 4-5); (3) exploring relationships within and across these groupings to create an integrated account for Pakistani context (Section 6). The five dimensions were used as sensitizing concepts in the qualitative-research sense: broad orienting concepts which served as a guide for the reading and organization of the sources, but which were not treated as fixed, testable variables. Where a particular study addressed more than one dimension (which is the case for most of the richest qualitative work) its contribution was apportioned according to its content across the relevant dimension(s) to which it applied.

The Positionality and Constraints of the Method

It must be borne in mind that this being a narrative synthesis and not a systematic review, the treatment of the themes in the corpus is subjective and depends on the selection of the sources and grouping of the themes, which are subject to the researchers' judgment. This is a limitation inbuilt in the method rather than a deviation from it ([Grant & Booth, 2009](#); [Paré et al., 2015](#)).

Theoretical foundations: from push-pull to aspirations-capabilities

"A Theory of Migration" by [Everett Lee \(1966\)](#) is rightfully one of the most widely quoted starting points in migration literature. It provided a parsimonious description of migration and attributes migration to a combination of area of origin factors, area of destination factors, intervening obstacles, and personal factors. In this conception, migration is the product of a push-pull analysis: poverty, political instability, or lack of opportunity at home, compared to opportunity, employment, and security abroad. Later, [Massey et al.'s \(1993\)](#) influential review and appraisal of international migration theories identified a family of related approaches,

including neoclassical economic theory, the new economics of labor migration, dual labor market theory, world systems theory, and migration systems theory, all of which involve the notion of push-pull logic at a different level of analysis. The continued relevance over time of this family of theories resides in its intuitive plausibility and its openness to conducting large-scale empirical testing. One can measure, model, and predict aggregate flows of migration with reasonable success by observing differentials in wages, opportunity, and stability between origin and destination.

Despite this, one of the weaknesses of this family of theories is that it sees migration as having been a more or less a mechanical reaction to structural differentials, not leaving much room for individuals' interpretations of these differentials, or for the well-documented empirical conundrum that the majority of those who experience push-pull pressures never actually migrate (Carling, 2002). An influential critique in the "Determinants of International Migration (DEMIG)" project, led by de Haas at the International Migration Institute, Oxford, proposed that the research on determinants of migration had failed to break away from "obsolete, theoretically void push-pull and gravity models," that fail to capture important non-economic and agency-related factors influencing migration decision-making (de Haas, 2010, 2011).

Carling's (2002) work on Cape Verdean emigration was one of the first systematic efforts to fill this gap to move beyond a lack of clarity on this point by arguing for the analytical separation of migration aspiration from migration ability. People can be pushed and pulled most strongly in favor of migration, and yet not have the desire to migrate; or in contrast, they can have the desire to migrate most strongly, and yet not be able to make it happen, which is what Carling called *involuntary immobility*. This reframing changed the main research question of this treatise from "why do differentials give rise to migration?" to "why do some but not others, under identical structural possibilities, come to want to migrate while others do not; and why do some but not others, translate that want into action while others do not?"

Carling and Collins (2018) further extended this reframing by presenting a new, ground-breaking, and much needed special issue of the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies focusing on aspiration, desire, and the drivers of migration, which introduced the concept of aspiration as not a single, uniform state, but as a nested concept which intersected with personal desire, socially embedded expectation, and normative obligation. They argued that aspiration is not just a matter of preference ranking, but is determined by what the community and social position of a person make thinkable, desirable and legitimate. This shift was a welcome move towards a closer contact with the broader sociology of the formation of aspirations, including Appadurai's (2004) framework on the "capacity to aspire," which has since become a recurring theme in qualitative migration studies within South Asian settings (Rahman et al., 2026).

De Haas (2021) integrated these developments into a more complete set of aspirations-capabilities model, suggesting that migration – and, just as importantly, the decision to stay – is the product of both aspirations (what people want) and capabilities (people's actual freedom to attain what they want), the latter of which depends on access to economic, social, cultural and human capital. The push-pull logic is not eliminated from this framework, but rather made subordinate: structural disparities remain meaningful but only to the extent as they are perceived, interpreted and acted upon by individuals whose capacity to act is also socially structured. Besides, Kley (2011) developed a complementary and parallel contribution from a life-course perspective, which sees migration decision-making as a three-stage process – consideration, planning, and realization – influenced at each stage by a different group of predictors: perceived opportunity differentials, influential others, life-course events, and material and psychological resources. This is something the aspirations-capabilities framework does not encompass but is captured by Kley's (2011) staged model: a temporal architecture to indicate when different psychological and social mechanisms are enacted in decision process.

Collectively, these five contributions – specifically, Lee's pioneering push-pull model, Carling's distinction between aspiration and ability, Carling and Collins's layered model of aspiration, de Haas's integrative aspirations-capabilities model, and Kley's staged life-course framework – combine to offer a theoretical framework for the synthesis that follows. Instead of treating any one of these contributions as an all-encompassing account, they are considered collectively (integrated into a single framework) in this article to organize the qualitative, conceptual and documentary literature reviewed in Sections 4 and 5 around five repeated dimensions of the aspiration-to-intention pathway: economic calculus, intrinsic well-being aspiration, imagined belonging, relational embeddedness, and structural and policy volatility.

Thematic Synthesis I – The Psychological Mechanisms of Translation

Having established in Section 3 that aspiration is not about a simple preference or a straightforward reflection of the structural push-pull disparities, this section draws on the empirical literature to examine what aspiration is actually made of – psychologically – for university students in the Global South contexts. Three reoccurring themes are evident in the recent qualitative evidence: the first is an economic calculation process students engage in, often more dynamically and reflectively than push-pull models expect; the second is an intrinsic well-being aspiration that outstrips and sometimes outcompetes the economic calculation process; and the third is a sense of imagined belonging, of confidence, albeit perhaps tentative, in one's capacity to adapt socially and culturally to life abroad.

Economic calculus

As one might expect, the thread of economic calculations continues to be the most prominent in students' accounts of their desires. However, much of the recent qualitative work makes it difficult to assume that this is a straightforward rational line of thought, and that it is fully informed. Through 23 in-depth interviews (n=23) with international students from Vietnam studying in Japan, [Nhi \(2025\)](#) concluded that economic motivations are important in driving students to study abroad and that students initially focus on practical, career-oriented advantages when articulating their reasons for leaving Vietnam. In a similar vein, [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#), who analyzed 4 focus group discussions (n=40) and 20 in-depth interviews (n=20) of aspiring and migrant students from Bangladesh and Nepal, observed that destination choice was often couched in a clear cost-benefit language: one participant from Nepal, for example, referred to studying abroad as “a one-time investment,” a language that speaks to migration as a calculated capital expenditure rather than a simple escape.

However, both studies point to one thing – this economic calculation is seldom based on full information. [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) reported that it was more common for students to use the stories they heard from their peers or from their seniors and informal networks of people than from official data and information from the institutions and governments, and that the “calculus” they engaged in was often a calculus of incomplete and informally curated inputs. This is important theoretically because it demonstrates that the economic-opportunity aspect of aspiration formation is not simply a rational-actor reaction to objective wage or opportunity dissimilarities (as classical push-pull models would suggest), but a socially mediated interpretation of opportunity that anticipates the discussion of relational embeddedness and, structural and policy volatility in Section 5.

Intrinsic well-being aspiration

A more striking fact across the recent literature is that the economic calculus, however dominant in the students' initial framing, is often not the whole story. [Nhi's \(2025\)](#) central contribution lies right here, that is, the “intrinsic” aspect of the students' aspirations – personal well-being, just being abroad – is important in the sense that it also heavily influences their migration aspirations, and this intrinsic aspect is generally overshadowed by the instrumental aspect (economic calculus), but, in reality, this intrinsic dimension is never completely separable from the instrumental dimension. Not paying attention to it, [Nhi \(2025\)](#) argues, amounts to disregarding the true complexity of the reasons because of which students become interested in studying abroad.

This dovetails with the aspirations for dignity, predictability and future security that are not solely about earning money as described by [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#). For example, their Bangladeshi participants reported that domestic institutions were opaque and politicized, meaning that “even if you study well and get good results, there is no guarantee of a job or a stable future,” and portrayed migration as a path less to better wages than to “systems where effort, process, and outcome were more tightly aligned,” ([Rahman et al., 2026](#)). Their Nepali participants spoke of a related but different intrinsic aspiration: reviving the understanding that effort and credential would transform into progress, as opposed to their home country environment where there prevailed a sense of educational stagnation.

These results, read together, indicate that the layered, non-reducible nature of migration aspiration is empirically observable across at least two differing contexts of the Global South, Vietnam-Japan; Bangladesh/Nepal-multiple destinations ([Carling & Collins, 2018](#); [Nhi, 2025](#); [Rahman et al., 2026](#)). Students do consistently express a desire for dignity, fairness, predictability and self-determination, which prevails alongside economic opportunity-seeking but is not fully accounted for by it. This is particularly the type of mechanism that a purely structural, differential-based theory of migration aspiration formation cannot observe.

Imagined belonging and sociocultural self-efficacy

The third psychological domain is not one that focuses on what students seek from migration, but rather on their self-efficacy to be the kind of person who could live it: the imagined belonging or sociocultural self-efficacy. This is a dimension that is less directly theorized than the first two dimensions discussed here but nevertheless it is present throughout the literature, specifically in the gap between anticipatory narratives made by aspirants and retrospective stories told by migrants.

This gap is explicitly documented by [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) using a paired-population design, that is, a comparison between aspiring students who are still in Bangladesh or Nepal with the student migrants who have settled abroad. Aspirants envisioned migration as a clear-cut process where there would not be any uncertainty and where hardship would be faced and overcome with effort and planning, ultimately leading to a settled life. Nonetheless, this was complicated by migrants' retrospective accounts, which spoke of emotional distress, the abrupt necessity to becoming fully self-sufficient and, in a number of instances, feeling “nowhere fully,” even after gaining legal permanent status. This mismatch between predicted and actual sociocultural adjustment is theoretically important because it indicates that the confidence dimension of migration aspiration is the most under-studied and least well-established, and is most vulnerable to revision when students arrive in the destination countries. There is some explanation for why this confidence comes into being. [Nhi \(2025\)](#) found that students may feel more confident about adapting to a place they emotionally want to belong to, and this may be independent of an objective assessment of the adaptation challenge involved. This aligns with [Appadurai's \(2004\)](#) notion that the capacity to aspire itself is socially and culturally constructed and is not a neutral cognitive evaluation.

These three elements combine into a matrix, an economic calculation, an aspiration for intrinsic well-being and an imagined sense of belonging, and that these do not occur in isolation. The texts reviewed here suggest that they are intertwined: economic reasoning is conducted on the basis of incomplete, socially filtered information, intrinsic aspiration often dominates or reframes economic reasoning, and confidence in one's adaptive capacity is shaped less by realistic appraisal than by the emotional attraction of the destination itself.

Thematic Synthesis II – Boundary Conditions That Shape the Pathway

This section focuses on conditions which are external to the individual student and these conditions enable or hinder the transformation of aspiration into a clear migration intention. These conditions include relational networks in which students are situated, and the structural and policy landscape of the prospective countries of migration.

Relational embeddedness

Migration aspiration research shows that people do not form migration aspiration in isolation, but instead family, peers and community expectation play a significant role in forming migration aspirations and perceived viability of migration ([Carling & Collins, 2018](#)). [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) discovered that destination selection for Bangladeshi and Nepali students was far more dependent on informal peer networks (seniors, friends, alumni, and digital networks) than on formal networks (the university, or the government). One of the students in their study said that when they hear stories from friends and seniors, “it becomes compelling,” a telling way of understanding how relational validation, instead of formal information, makes a destination imaginable and attainable.

Notably, [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) also discovered that these same networks conceal as much as they reveal, as migrants' retrospective narratives highlighted that “people mostly post success stories,” while hardship – such as cramped housing, extended isolation, and the unknown nature of one's employment prospects – are often not disclosed. This generates what could be termed a selective-visibility effect: relational embeddedness reduces the psychological barriers to developing migration intentions, making mobility look both normal and attainable, while not appropriately shedding light on the hardships connected with the settlement phase abroad.

Family operates on a parallel basis; though, the family environment varies depending on class, gender, and – in the South Asian context in particular – caste. While India remains one of the largest countries sending students abroad, the desire to migrate, as well as the ability to do so, is determined by the uneven influence of class, caste, gender and regional disparity, with financial considerations and family tolerance for uncertainty serving as filters before students begin formal application procedures

(Anjanappa, 2026). Collectively, these studies indicate that relational embeddedness functions as a critical boundary condition; it can enhance the transition from aspiration to intention when family and peer networks are supportive and resourceful, or it can curtail the transition when such networks are risk-averse, financially limited, and gendered such that a particular student's mobility is discouraged.

Structural and Policy Volatility

The second boundary condition concerns the changing immigration policy environment across major destination countries and it is extremely relevant in contemporary contexts in the study of migration. International student numbers have been viewed as a clear benefit for receiving governments, for the universities, for the local economy, and for the transfer of knowledge over time, for much of the last 20 years (Collett, 2025). This consensus has now clearly frayed. In a report for the Transatlantic Council on Migration, Collett (2025) outlines that as the international education sector recovered from the pandemic, heightened political concerns have arisen in various key international education receiving nations, especially pressure on the housing market, and how different governments have responded to these issues by taking proactive measures to restrict student numbers.

Timsina et al. (2026), provide firsthand empirical evidence of what this policy tightening implies for aspiring and early-career students on the ground by conducting 20 IDIs of early-career Nepali graduates working in different Australian states, an online survey of 50 prospective Nepali students willing to go abroad, and 5 KIIs of educational counsellors. While studying Nepali graduates and prospective Nepali students navigating Australia's downsizing, they discovered that policy contraction by Australia significantly altered students' aspirations; it did not extinguish migration aspirations but redirected them. Potential Nepali international students increasingly thought of alternative destinations instead of withdrawing from migration aspirations completely. Theoretically, this finding is important, because it implies that structural and policy volatility is not just a closing gate that prevents the aspiration and intention to migrate, but a re-directive process that redirects aspiration toward more stable or welcoming destinations, and this new direction is actively renegotiated by prospective migrants in near real-time as policy signals change – a nuance that a static push-pull differential model would not capture. In the Indian context, an empirical signal similar to the aforementioned is recorded by Anjanappa (2026): in 2022 and 2023, the rates of visa rejection for Indian candidates for Canada climbed to 41% and 36% respectively, notwithstanding persistent elevated demand. This reflects how policy contraction and aspirations can exist together and even intensify in the short term before redirection takes place.

Taken together, relational embeddedness and structural and policy volatility are the two main boundary conditions found in the recent literature, one operating primarily through information and social validation, the second through shifting institutional gatekeeping, both operating, importantly, through the same informal channels that were identified (Section 4) as integral to how students formulate their preliminary economic assessments and imagined sense of belonging. Finally, these threads are connected together by this synthesis into a well-crafted process-oriented conceptual model, designed specifically for the Pakistani case (Section 6).

Toward a Refined Conceptual Model for Pakistani Student Migration

The synthesis in Sections 3-5 suggests that migration aspiration is neither an automatic manifestation of push-pull differentials nor an undifferentiated wish, but it is a psychologically complex and relationally conditioned process that evolves through five intertwined dimensions: an economic calculation of the migration options, using partial and socially filtered information; an intrinsic well-being aspiration that often exceeds and reframes that economic calculation; an imagined sense of belonging that is least tested; relational embeddedness that enables or hinders the formation of such aspirations as well as selectively hides the hardships of settlement; and structural and policy volatility that redirects rather than silences aspirations. This section places that synthesis in the local structural context of Pakistan, where each of these five dimensions plausibly operates with distinctive local inflection. Pakistan is not a peripheral case in migration literature, but it is a leading case, albeit an under-investigated one. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), Pakistan has about 0.115 million outbound internationally mobile tertiary students – a number smaller than that of India, larger than that of Bangladesh, and comparable with that of Nepal. However, unlike Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, Pakistan is largely absent from the qualitative literature based on fieldwork (FGDs/IDIs/KIIs). This is not because of the relative unimportance of the country concerning this issue, but it reflects an evident gap in the literature.

In the Pakistani scenario, the economic-calculus dimension (Section 4.1) is likely to be exacerbated by a context that is much more challenging than in the comparator studies. Recent economic updates show that Pakistan has witnessed a substantial surge in skilled

emigration. A survey by Gallup Pakistan and Gilani Foundation revealed that nearly one in three Pakistanis below the age of thirty wanted to work abroad, a figure that went up to just over half among university-educated youth ([Gallup Pakistan & Gilani Foundation, 2022, as reported in The Express Tribune, 2023](#)). Furthermore, the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment figures recorded over 7,27,000 Pakistanis registering for overseas employment in 2024 ([Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment \[BEOE\], 2025](#)), and over 7,62,000 in 2025 ([BEOE, 2026](#)). It suggests that the aspiration base in Pakistan, overall, might already be unusually wide and economically saturated, relative to aspiration base in the Bangladeshi and Nepali samples. In Bangladesh, aspiration was more specifically linked to institutional opacity and in Nepal to the devaluation of credentials ([Rahman et al., 2026](#)), whereas in Pakistan, to acute currency and inflation instability ([Cheema et al., 2025](#)).

This suggests a refinement to the economic-calculus dimension for the Pakistani case specifically. While Bangladeshi participants in the study by [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) articulated migration as an escape from politicized institutional unpredictability, and Nepali participants articulated it as a response to credential devaluation, the Pakistani case, based on the evidence of recent economic and policy reporting, plausibly combines both mechanisms with a third, more acute driver: currency devaluation and inflation functioning as an active, ongoing erosion of any locally held asset or income, thereby making migration function less as an aspirational project and more as what recent commentary has termed “financial insurance” against persistent domestic instability ([The Friday Times, 2026](#)). This reframes the intrinsic well-being aspiration dimension (Section 4.2) as well: the desire for “dignity, predictability, and future security,” identified by [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) in the Bangladesh-Nepal case may, in Pakistan, be even more tightly fused to sheer economic survival than in either comparator context, complicating any clean analytical separation between the economic and intrinsic dimensions this synthesis has otherwise found useful to distinguish. This constitutes an important research gap in the Pakistani context and warrants further qualitative investigation through fieldwork.

The dimension of relational-embeddedness (Section 5.1) is also worth taking a special note for Pakistan. Gendered mobility norms are likely to be more noticeable in the context of Pakistan as well, as documented by [Anjanappa \(2026\)](#) as a general boundary condition for the Indian context, where family gatekeeping regarding women’s international migration is well established in the broader Pakistani sociological literature, but has not yet been analyzed in relation to the aspirations-capabilities lens that has been reviewed in this article. This highlights a clear gap and demands further qualitative field research.

Lastly, the structural and policy volatility dimension (Section 5.2) is likely to play a different and plausible role in relation to Pakistan’s brain-drain concern, although it would require extending this dimension beyond its destination-country origins in the comparator literature. While [Timsina et al. \(2026\)](#) observed that policy tightening by Australia rerouted migration aspirations of Nepali students towards other destinations instead of suppressing them (a destination-side mechanism), the case of Pakistan shows that structural and policy volatility can originate from origin-country also. Pakistani policy discourse has started to re-orient the discourse on emigration in highly polarized terms – recent debates are discussing competing “brain drain” and “brain gain” framings within Pakistan. Some officials portray remittances as a blessing for Pakistan, which were valued at Rs \$38.3 billion in fiscal year 2024-25 ([State Bank of Pakistan data, as reported in Business Recorder, 2025](#)), whereas the economic analysts calculate billions of dollars of opportunity cost for Pakistan every year because of emigration ([The Express Tribune, 2025](#)). This domestic moral-economy framing closely mirrors what [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#) mentioned in their Bangladesh-Nepal study, with the theme being “brain drain as lived moral economy,” suggesting a dimension where Pakistani findings may resonate with the comparator literature closely, but it is also a dimension where Pakistan’s particular policy response, including reported tightening of departure controls, introduces a distinctly coercive, origin-side structural dimension not present in the other cases in this comparator literature review (Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Vietnam). This indicates that the structural and policy volatility dimension needs to be expanded in future theoretical work to incorporate not only destination country but also origin country.

As a whole, this synthesis proposes an elaborated process model relating to translation of migration aspirations into intentions in the case of Pakistani student migration: an economic calculus that is heightened by acute currency instability and persistent inflation, feeding into an intrinsic well-being aspiration; an imagined belonging that is constructed with limited testing before leaving home; relational embeddedness that plausibly functions through more entrenched gender-based barriers than in the comparator literature; and structural and policy volatility that in the case presented here is possibly shaped as much by domestic policy and public discourse in Pakistan as by the host country’s immigration policy. These are all presented as propositions for future fieldwork-based qualitative research in Pakistan specifically, and not as evidence-based findings – a limitation acknowledged in Section 8.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Higher Education, and Future Research

The synthesis presented here resonates with three audiences: policymakers focusing on human capital retention, higher education institutions experiencing challenges with student mobility, and researchers with a stake in building on the work presented here through primary research in Pakistan.

For Policymakers

The most direct implication is that policy initiatives to address Pakistan's growing skilled migrant outflows will fail to be effective if they view the desire to migrate merely as a reaction to wage differentials. The synthesis in Sections 4 and 5 indicates that students and early-career professionals seek dignity, predictability, and future security. These are the needs which remittance-centered “brain gain” framing does not address and only wage-focused retention schemes are not likely to fulfill (Rahman et al., 2026). Policy measures based on improving transparency within institutions and the perceived fairness of domestic career advancement opportunities are likely to have greater leverage on formation of migration aspirations than remittance-celebratory rhetoric, which is also acknowledged by recent Pakistani commentary by mentioning that remittance cannot be a substitute for domestic intellectual capital (The Express Tribune, 2025). Similarly, the finding that destination-country policy volatility leads to rerouting of migration aspirations rather than inhibiting them shows that it is unrealistic to expect that more restrictive visa policies by the destination countries will extinguish outbound aspirations (Timsina et al., 2026). Therefore, there is a need to take holistic, all-encompassing policy measures that address all relevant aspects of the issue.

For Higher Education Institutions

The findings concerning relational embeddedness point to specific and actionable implication for universities. Pakistani universities have an important role to play in pre-departure advising by actively highlighting the informal networks' biased representation of settlement hardship, as these networks appear to be the primary source of settlement information for those choosing to move abroad for study or work (Rahman et al., 2026). The universities possess the capacity to meaningfully counter this selective-visibility effect and it is recommended that they must play their part in this regard. This should not be seen as an attempt to discourage migration aspirations, but as a way of enhancing the information base on which the “economic calculus” dimension builds, and to diminish the disconnect between the anticipatory imaginaries of those who aspire to migrate and the lived realities of migrants.

For Future Research

It has been made clear from the beginning that this article is a synthesis of recent qualitative, conceptual, and documentary literature on international student migration; therefore, in Section 6, the refined conceptual model is presented as a set of propositions instead of findings. There are three particular gaps that need to be accorded priority for future qualitative fieldwork.

First, the interplay between Pakistan's acute currency instability and sustained inflation, and the intrinsic well-being aspiration dimension needs to be more closely intertwined than in the comparator cases from Bangladesh-Nepal or Vietnam-Japan. A direct investigation through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions will prove beneficial in this regard to determine whether the analytical distinction between the two dimensions is drawn, or resisted, by Pakistani students themselves. Second, the gendered aspect of relational embeddedness – family gatekeeping around women's international migration – has not been investigated in the Pakistani context by employing aspirations-capabilities lens, as it has been identified as significant in the comparable Indian context (Anjanappa, 2026). Finally, the domestic framing of the brain drain issue in Pakistan's policy and public discourse in terms of moral economy, which includes reports of increased restrictions on departure, adds an extra distinctively coercive structural layer that is not found in comparative literature and warrants qualitative inquiry (FGDs, IDIs, KIIs) to exactly find out how students view and respond to this domestic policy environment, dissociated from destination-country policy volatility.

Methodologically, the qualitative design employed by Rahman et al. (2026) – pairing aspiring students who are still in the home country with migrants already living abroad – will be especially useful and relevant for Pakistani study, as it is this paired design that enabled the Bangladesh-Nepal study to highlight the gap between anticipatory and retrospective narratives that this synthesis has frequently drawn upon (Section 4.3). A study conducted in Pakistan with a similar design that specifically addresses the three gaps outlined above would both evaluate the conceptual model proposed in Section 6, and significantly advance the qualitative migration literature related to a leading yet underrepresented sending country.

Limitations

This article is a narrative synthesis of the literature, not a primary empirical work, and is therefore subject to a number of limitations.

No new data from Pakistan

One important limitation is that this synthesis is based on secondary and comparator literature from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Vietnam with no firsthand qualitative fieldwork undertaken with Pakistani students. The conceptual model that has been developed in Section 6 is thus a set of propositions derived from the literature, not empirical findings, and for this reason should be interpreted as such until primary qualitative research is conducted in the Pakistani context specifically.

Non-exhaustiveness and Selection Judgment

This article is written with the intention of a critical narrative review following [Grant and Booth's \(2009\)](#) typology, and is not a systematic or scoping review, nor is it claiming to have found all relevant sources. The corpus has been carefully formed by the researchers and they have decided how to structure the findings thematically ([Grant & Booth, 2009](#)).

Heterogeneity of underlying Methods

The primary studies that are included in this synthesis differ in their methodology – FGDs and IDIs by [Rahman et al. \(2026\)](#), IDIs by [Nhi \(2025\)](#), a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design (20 IDIs, 5 KIIs, 50 Surveys), by [Timsina et al. \(2026\)](#), and secondary data is used by [Anjanappa \(2026\)](#). [Popay et al. \(2006\)](#) describe this type of methodological variation as one of the key challenges that narrative synthesis has to overcome, because even when the findings from various designs seem to be “thematically converging” they are not necessarily commensurable. [Dixon-Woods et al. \(2007\)](#) in their review of published qualitative syntheses also recognize that many such syntheses are not completely explicit about how differing source methods were reconciled during synthesis – a point this article has attempted to address through the transparent, dimension-by-dimension organization of Sections 4 and 5, but it cannot be completely resolved.

Transferability across National Contexts

This type of qualitative synthesis is analytic rather than a statistical generalization ([Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007](#)). The intent is to build a plausible, theoretically coherent synthesis instead of claiming that findings about Bangladesh, Nepal, India, or Vietnam are equally applicable to Pakistan.

Conclusion

This article sought to fill a gap which is consistently identified by migration research but not fully explained, particularly in the case of Pakistan: how and under what circumstances migration aspirations of university students are translated into migration intentions. Drawing on multiple foundational strands of scholarship, beginning from Lee's (1966) push-pull model, through Carling's (2002) aspiration-ability distinction, and Carling and Collins's (2018) layered account of aspiration, to de Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework, this synthesis organized recent qualitative and documentary literature from the countries of origin – Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Vietnam – around five recurrent dimensions of that translation process: economic calculus, intrinsic well-being aspiration, imagined belonging, relational embeddedness, and structural and policy volatility.

The outcome of this synthesis is a picture that is far more complex than can be achieved by push-pull theory alone. Students do not make a simple cost-benefit analysis against opportunity in destination country; they consider dignity, predictability, and future security along with or, even before, the economic benefit. Their confidence in adapting overseas undergoes limited testing prior to departure and is frequently revised, sometimes quite significantly, post-arrival. They believe in the possibility of reaching certain destinations based on more informal peer narratives which reliably frame success and mask struggle. Once developed, their aspirations turn out to be robust and hard to extinguish due to policy contraction in a destination country, but rather they are shifted to other destinations and are not forsaken.

Contextualizing the synthesis within Pakistan's structural context, a country grappling with currency instability, growing domestic brain-drain debate, and a level of student emigration amenable to comparison with other South Asian countries, but largely not studied through fieldwork-informed qualitative work (FGDs/IDIs/KIIs), section 6 advanced a refined conceptual model for the future qualitative fieldwork. The aforementioned five dimensions should not be viewed as mutually independent; rather, they interact in complex ways. Additionally, in the case of Pakistan, the blurring of economic and intrinsic aspiration in times of acute economic crisis, gendered relational embeddedness, and domestic policy discourse on brain drain are three local inflections that need to be studied empirically in detail.

Throughout this article it has been made clear that it is not an empirical, but rather a conceptual and synthetic contribution: a theoretically anchored map of the terrain, not a survey of it. Its importance resides in translating a sensed but loosely defined gap in the literature into a well-defined research agenda. As for the specific propositions presented in Section 6, it is not known whether they hold true for Pakistani university students; it is a question for the qualitative fieldwork (FGDs/IDIs/KIIs) to answer.

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