



## The Investigation of International Emigration of the Highly Skilled Bruneians: The National Dilemma

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### ABSTRACT

*Brunei Darussalam, despite its oil-driven prosperity and social stability, faces rising unemployment and limited job diversification, creating a national dilemma: to retain highly skilled citizens for nation-building or allow their emigration to reduce unemployment and boost global competitiveness. This study investigates the international emigration of skilled Bruneians, exploring structural and cultural factors shaping their decisions. The analysis through this research revealed that the potential to the normalization of skilled migration among Bruneians highly depend on the economic performance of the country. However, on the acceptance of migration, although majority of the respondents from this research support the idea of migration due to the domestic challenges, most expressed that they would only consider if it were a short-term migration or a 'temporary learning experience'. This mindset is influenced by few factors such as the sense of patriotism among the Bruneians and as well as the Malay close-knit culture. The study suggests that managed mobility, through policies promoting temporary migration and reintegration, can align skilled migration with Wawasan Brunei 2035, fostering a workforce that is globally competent yet nationally committed in order to enhance and increase the quality of Bruneians.*

**Keywords :** *Brunei Darussalam; Southeast Asia; Skilled Migration; Labour Migration; International Emigration; Unemployment.*



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## INTRODUCTION

The international mobility of highly skilled labour has become a defining feature of the global knowledge economy, influencing patterns of innovation, productivity, and national competitiveness. While many advanced economies actively attract global talent, smaller and resource-dependent states face a parallel challenge: retaining their educated workforce while remaining integrated within global labour markets. Although skilled migration has been extensively studied in large labour-exporting countries, limited empirical attention has been devoted to small states where demographic scale and structural economic constraints magnify the developmental implications of talent outflow.

Brunei Darussalam presents a distinctive and policy-relevant case within this debate. Under **Wawasan Brunei 2035**, the national long-term development vision, the country aims to achieve a well-educated and highly skilled population, a high quality of life, and a dynamic and sustainable economy. Central to this vision is the development and effective utilization of human capital to support economic diversification beyond the oil and gas sector. However, despite sustained public investment in education and scholarship programs, the domestic labour market continues to experience structural concentration, public-sector saturation, and persistent graduate unemployment. Official data indicating thousands of unemployed tertiary graduates and prolonged job-search duration highlight potential misalignment between educational outputs and labour market absorption capacity.

This structural tension generates a critical national dilemma. On one hand, facilitating international mobility may serve as a short- to medium-term adjustment mechanism, allowing highly skilled Bruneians to acquire specialized expertise, global exposure, and professional experience aligned

with Wawasan Brunei 2035's aspiration for a competitive knowledge economy. On the other hand, sustained or permanent emigration risks undermining the very human capital base that the national vision seeks to cultivate. Given Brunei's small population size (445,400 persons in year 2022), even moderate levels of skilled outflow could have proportionally significant long-term effects. Despite the strategic importance of this issue, empirical research examining the determinants and implications of highly skilled emigration in the context of Wawasan Brunei 2035 remains limited. The existing migration literature does not adequately address how small, socially cohesive, and resource-dependent states reconcile global mobility incentives with national human capital retention goals.

By integrating economic self-selection theory with the brain drain–brain circulation framework, this study contributes to understanding whether skilled emigration in Brunei represents a developmental risk or a strategically manageable form of global engagement. In doing so, it situates the investigation of highly skilled emigration within the broader national objective of achieving sustainable human capital development under Wawasan Brunei 2035.

### **Research questions**

There are three main research questions that the research attempts to answer, which are:

1. "How significant is the condition of domestic labour market in Brunei in affecting the emigration of the Bruneians?"
2. "How will the Bruneian's international emigration impact the growth and diversification of industries in Brunei?"
3. and lastly, "With the high rate of unemployment in Brunei, what is the Bruneian perception on expanding their search for working opportunities?"

### **Significant of research**

The significance of this research study can be observed in its contribution to a number of areas. Firstly, there has not been any researches done in relation to the stated issue. With that so, the findings of this research will contribute greatly to the economic outlook of Brunei Darussalam, especially in predicting the stability of the country's labour market's growth and policies implementation. Moreover, the discussion on international emigration and its correlation to education will help policy makers to better improve national policies, especially on education-employment correlation and employment initiatives for local Bruneians. Although the effect may seem minimal, there are futures studies indicating the possibilities of the issue escalating further and thus it is also important to investigate the effectiveness of emigration as a solution to consider minimizing the national unemployment rate and to combat the issue. Furthermore, with the research study and the acknowledgment of emigration as an alternative solution, it is hoped that this research study will serve as a future reference for researchers to get insights on the emigration of highly skilled Bruneians. It is also important to understand and make clear on the perception of 'emigration' which are often negatively stigmatize and avoided. Hence, the focus of international emigration of Bruneians should not be taken lightly. With that said, it is hope that this research study will offer an alternative perspective and in-depth understanding to the situation.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is theoretically grounded in neoclassical migration theory, World Systems theory, and the Network theory to explain the international emigration of highly skilled Bruneians within a small-state economic context. These theoretical perspectives, divided into two specific focusses which are economic and social, collectively inform the identification of key variables and their interrelationships, while situating the research problem within established migration conditions.

On economic analysis of emigration, Neoclassical migration theory argues that migration decisions are primarily driven by wage differentials and employment opportunities between origin and

destination countries. Extending this approach, Borjas' economic model emphasizes self-selection, arguing that individuals migrate when the expected returns to their skills are greater abroad than domestically (Borjas, 1987; 1999). Closely related, the Roy model of income distribution suggests that migration outcomes depend on relative skill returns across labour markets, resulting in either positive or negative selection (Roy, 1951). These models are particularly relevant in the Bruneian context, where limited industrial diversification and graduate unemployment may compress domestic returns to tertiary education. In this study, structural labour market constraints are therefore conceptualized as the primary independent variable influencing migration intention.

However, on social analysis through World Systems theory and the Network theory further conceptualizes migration as an investment decision in which individuals weigh expected benefits against costs (Massey et al, 1993). There are two identifications of international migrants in the World Systems Theory; the first one is the skilled foreign workers dominated the upper tier which has migrated from their home country and the second one is the native workers in the middle-tier which are "clinging" to their jobs and are expected to migrate out of the country. Furthermore, the Network Theory concerns with the interpersonal ties as a way to help ease the process of migration, especially in connecting migrants, former migrants or interested individuals to migrate from their origin country to destination country. Accordingly, migration intention functions as the dependent variable, while perceived income differentials, employment growth prospects, and career advancement opportunities represent key explanatory factors. In this study, these socio-cultural variables are conceptualized as moderating factors that condition the relationship between labour market constraints and outward mobility.

Despite the extensive application of migration theory in large labour-exporting countries, limited research has examined how these frameworks operate within small, resource-dependent economies characterized by high public-sector employment and strong social cohesion. The theoretical gap addressed by this study lies in integrating economic self-selection models with socio-cultural moderating mechanisms to explain skilled emigration as a national dilemma rather than a purely market-driven outcome. By situating Brunei within this integrated framework, the study contributes to extending migration theory into underexamined small-state contexts where talent retention and global mobility incentives coexist. Generally, through the research, it will be evident which factors plays a more significant role in the decision making of Bruneian migrants; economic factors or social factors.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant research design supported by complementary quantitative evidence to investigate the international emigration of highly skilled Bruneians. A mixed-methods orientation was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors influencing migration decisions, while also capturing broader societal perceptions regarding skilled mobility. Such a design is appropriate for migration studies that require both contextual institutional analysis and individual-level attitudinal assessment (Lowell & Findlay, 2001; Ullah, 2018).

Both secondary and primary data sources were utilized to ensure methodological triangulation and analytical robustness. Secondary data were collected from official government publications, national labour force reports, policy documents, regional institutional frameworks, and peer-reviewed academic literature. These materials provided contextual foundations regarding Brunei Darussalam's labour market structure, unemployment trends, educational attainment patterns, and regional skilled migration initiatives (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics [DEPS], 2017–2020; Musa & Idris, 2020; Rizzo et al., 2016). The secondary data served to situate the empirical findings within broader economic and policy developments, particularly in relation to ASEAN skilled mobility dynamics (Kikkawa & Suan, 2019; Chia, 2010).

Primary data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and a structured survey questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 key informants, including

policymakers, institutional representatives, and academics with expertise in labour market governance, education policy, and migration issues. The interviews were designed to gather informed perspectives on domestic employment challenges, the potential normalization of skilled emigration, and policy considerations concerning talent retention and mobility. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, dominant narratives, and areas of convergence and divergence among stakeholders.

To complement institutional perspectives, a survey targeting Bruneian respondents was administered to assess public attitudes toward international employment mobility. The survey, collected 53 responses, gathered instrument included demographic questions, employment background items, and Likert-scale statements measuring perceptions of migration motivations, perceived challenges, and the acceptability of skilled migration as a response to domestic labour market constraints. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to summarize response distributions and identify prevailing attitudinal trends, consistent with quantitative approaches used in regional migration studies (Ullah et al., 2019).

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data strengthened the validity of the study through methodological triangulation. By combining expert insights with broader societal perceptions, the methodology enabled a comprehensive assessment of both structural conditions and individual-level considerations shaping highly skilled emigration in Brunei Darussalam, consistent with contemporary brain drain and brain circulation research frameworks (Asian Development Bank, 2017; Lowell & Findlay, 2001).

## **RESULTS**

This study examined whether domestic labour market conditions significantly influence the emigration considerations of highly skilled Bruneians and whether skilled mobility is perceived as a viable response to unemployment pressures. To address these hypotheses, the research combined semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders and a structured survey of Bruneian respondents. The survey sample consisted primarily of tertiary-educated individuals, with representation across gender, age groups, and employment status.

Reports by the Labour Force Report (Brunei's Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, 2017 – 2022) provide important contextual grounding for the empirical findings. Brunei's unemployment rate have remained above 5% from 2017 (9.3%) until 2022 (5.2%). Of the unemployed population in 2022, 3,579 individuals possessed tertiary-level qualifications, compared to 5,570 with secondary-level education and 408 with primary-level education. Furthermore, 28.2% (3,230 individuals) of the unemployed had been actively seeking employment for at least 24 months. These figures indicate that unemployment and labour underutilization remain structurally significant, particularly among educated youth.

Survey findings demonstrate that a clear proportion of respondents (47.2%) expressed willingness to consider seeking employment abroad, to which this answers and provides the indepth explanation of perception for RQ3. Among those indicating interest in working overseas, the dominant motivations were higher income prospects, expanded career advancement pathways, and opportunities for specialization in industries perceived as underdeveloped domestically in Brunei. The responses received also provide the supporting arguments to answer RQ1, especially in understanding the condition of the domestic labour market in Brunei in affecting the decision making to consider emigration. Respondents selecting "Yes" or "Maybe" to overseas employment consideration outnumbered those selecting "No," suggesting a measurable openness toward external labour markets. The research also investigate the preferences in region, whereby regions most frequently identified as preferred destinations included Middle East countries such as United Arab Emirates, Dubai and Qatar and as well as East Asia with Japan being the only country specifically mentioned. As for resonings behind selection, factors are such as due to perceived wage differentials, technological advancements and stronger professional ecosystems. At the same time, socio-cultural constraints were statistically visible in response patterns.

A significant share of respondents who expressed hesitation cited family obligations, long-term settlement uncertainty, and attachment to national identity as limiting factors. Importantly, even among respondents interested in migration, majority indicated preference for short-term or contract-based employment rather than permanent relocation.

Interview data corroborated these quantitative patterns. Institutional informants acknowledged persistent skills mismatch and limited private-sector absorption capacity despite policy interventions such as apprenticeship programmes. While temporary international exposure was viewed as potentially beneficial for skills enhancement, permanent outmigration was consistently framed as a policy concern as it was identified that when identifying the policies and initiatives in relation to encouragement of skilled migration during the interview session, it can be concluded that due to pragmatic reasons, there is no specific policies and initiatives that are implemented by Brunei Government in relation and to support Bruneian skilled migration.

Overall, the results support the hypothesis that domestic labour market constraints significantly influence migration considerations among highly skilled Bruneians, while simultaneously demonstrating that socio-cultural embeddedness moderates permanent emigration intentions. Both survey and interview findings indicate that respondents are open to accepting migration as long as it contributes to the nation's human capital development and is balanced with mechanisms that encourage eventual return. This reinforces the notion that skilled migration among Bruneian is not perceived merely as a loss, but as potential cycle of temporary mobility that if effectively managed could transform into a long-term benefit for national development.

## DISCUSSIONS

The findings directly illuminate the national dilemma underlying the international emigration of highly skilled Bruneians. On one hand, the empirical evidence highlighted the relevance of neoclassical migration theory in explaining outward orientation among educated cohorts. Consistent with Borjas' economic model, migration intentions are responsive to income differentials and disparities in employment growth between Brunei and more diversified economies. Within a human capital investment framework, higher wages, stronger industry specialization, and clearer merit-based advancement pathways abroad increase the expected returns to migration. These dynamics form the economic core of the dilemma: retaining talent in a structurally concentrated economy versus allowing outward mobility to maximize individual returns.

Yet, the data simultaneously complicate a deterministic brain drain interpretation. Although openness toward overseas employment is measurable, respondents predominantly favor temporary or contract-based migration rather than permanent relocation. This suggests that highly skilled emigration from Brunei is not necessarily a zero-sum loss of national talent but may function within a brain circulation equilibrium. The strong moderating influence of family obligations, patriotic sentiment, and socio-cultural embeddedness reduces the elasticity of migration responsiveness to wage gaps. In other words, economic incentives alone are insufficient to trigger large-scale permanent outflow. This moderating effect lies at the heart of the national dilemma: economic rationality encourages mobility, while socio-cultural and identity-based attachments were among factors that reinforce retention of Bruneians.

The importance of these findings lies in demonstrating that labour market pressure does not automatically translate into irreversible human capital depletion. Unlike contexts such as the Philippines or Malaysia, where sustained outward migration has become structurally embedded, the Bruneian case reflects a more conditional migration regime. However, the sustainability of this balance depends heavily on domestic absorptive capacity. If sectoral diversification and private-sector expansion remain limited, temporary migration may gradually transition into permanent settlement abroad, particularly among positively selected high-performing graduates.

Alternative explanations must also be considered. Migration interest may reflect generational shifts in global career aspirations, signaling value attached to international exposure, or perceptions that foreign labour markets reward performance more transparently. Moreover, reliance on attitudinal survey data limits the ability to distinguish between expressed intention and realized migration behaviour. Without longitudinal tracking, it remains uncertain whether temporary aspirations will materialize into sustained emigration flows.

From a policy perspective, the findings frame the national dilemma not as a binary choice between restriction and liberalization, but as a governance challenge. Managed mobility strategies such as facilitating temporary migration, structured reintegration, and skills transfer may enable Brunei to convert potential brain drain into brain gain. However, absent structural economic reform and improved alignment between education output and labour demand, even circulation-oriented mobility could evolve into long-term talent attrition. Thus, the investigation reveals that the future trajectory of highly skilled emigration in Brunei will depend less on migration intention itself and more on the state's capacity to enhance domestic opportunity structures in parallel with global engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This article relatively explores a new perspective in seeing the idea of migration among Bruneians, it revealed a nuanced and evolving perspective on international skilled emigration among highly skilled Bruneians. While many respondents expressed positive attitudes toward seeking opportunities abroad; driven by higher wages, career advancement, limited local opportunities, and slow economic growth, there remains a strong sense of nationalism. Emigration is largely viewed as temporary or contractual, with the expectation of returning to contribute to national development. This tension between individual aspirations and the state's need to retain talent encapsulates Brunei's national dilemma.

The findings suggest that international skilled migration should not be viewed solely as a threat, but also as a potential avenue for knowledge transfer, skills enhancement, and global exposure. To address this, stronger alignment between education and economic planning is essential, particularly through closer collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance and Economy to ensure curricula meet labour market demands and international standards.

Ultimately, transforming brain drain into brain circulation requires policies that balance global mobility with structured pathways for return and reintegration. Strengthening industry diversification, career progression, incentives, and professional environments aligned with international standards will be critical. Such strategies support the aspirations of *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, positioning skilled migration as a strategic asset rather than a long-term liability.

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