

Business

Who gets to study abroad?

Inequalities in student mobility to the Global North

August 2, 2026 1:05 am 0 comment 192 views



Studying abroad has become an aspiration for many young Sri Lankans.

It's more than merely earning a degree abroad. It's about professional advancement, personal independence, international exposure, and the possibility of building a more secure life.

Over the past decade, international student migration from Sri Lanka has increased significantly. In 2023 alone, over 31,000 Sri Lankan students were studying overseas, which is an increase from the 21,000 in 2017, and this number is expected to continue rising.

However, this trend is not unique only to Sri Lanka.

International student mobility has grown rapidly across the world as more young people seek



BY KALARA PERERA

cepa
centre for poverty analysts

educational opportunities overseas. Yet behind these growing numbers lies a question that is rarely asked: who actually gets to study abroad?

While international education is often portrayed as an opportunity available to anyone willing to work hard or with academic merit, in reality, access to it remains shaped by a range of social and economic inequalities.

International student mobility and unequal access

Globally, higher education has expanded drastically. UNESCO estimates that student enrolment in tertiary education enrolment has increased from approximately 100 million students in 2000 to over 260 million in 2023.

Alongside this expansion, international student mobility has also grown rapidly. It has more than tripled over the past two decades, from 2.1 million in 2000 to nearly 7.3 million in 2023. However, studying abroad is still the exception rather than the norm. International students account for only 3% of all students enrolled in higher education worldwide.

Even within this small portion of students, access to international education is not equally distributed. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which include high income countries such as the UK, USA, Australia, Japan, Germany, 67% of international students in OECD countries come from developing countries, but only 3% originate from low-income countries.

The majority come from upper-middle and lower-middle-income economies. These patterns suggest that international education remains shaped by economic capacity as much as academic aspiration.

The Sri Lankan context

Increasing numbers of Sri Lankan students are pursuing higher education abroad. According to UNESCO (2020) most Sri Lankan students are studying in Australia, Japan, the US, Malaysia, and the UK. However, very little is known about who these students are.

There are no comprehensive statistics on the socioeconomic backgrounds of students studying overseas, making it difficult to assess who benefits most from international education.

Nevertheless, access appears to depend on several factors including financial resources, educational opportunities, access to information, and social networks.

Who can afford to study abroad?

Financial barriers remain one of the most significant determinants of international student mobility to the global north. Tuition alone is costly, and this sits alongside accommodation, insurance, travel and day-to-day living costs.

For example, the average undergraduate tuition fee in the UK for international students is about £22,000 per year, but can vary from £11,400 to £38,000. Certain payments are made before commencing their studies such as for English language examinations, visa application fees, health insurance payments and flight tickets. Together, these costs make financial resources a key determinant of access to international education.

Although some European countries are comparatively affordable, with low or no tuition fees, this does not remove the financial barriers associated with studying abroad.

For instance, in Germany, international students are generally required to show at least €11,904 to cover one year of living expenses and in Norway, students must show that they have at least NOK 170,368 for an academic year, in addition to any applicable tuition fees.

These official financial requirements illustrate that even where tuition is low or absent, substantial resources are still needed to access international education.

Can scholarships bridge the affordability gap?

Scholarships can undoubtedly help in bridging this gap, by allowing students to enter universities and countries that would otherwise be unaffordable. Fully funded programs can cover tuition, living expenses and travel, while partial scholarships can significantly reduce the financial burden.

However, scholarships are highly competitive. There are also limited statistics on the number of Sri Lankan students who receive overseas scholarships each year, making it difficult to determine whether scholarships are successfully expanding access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is important to recognise that scholarships do not necessarily eliminate inequalities in access to international education, since certain international scholarships can prioritise academic excellence and leadership potential rather than financial need.

Are student loans an alternative?

Student loans are sometimes presented as the answer to affordability. In Sri Lanka, the government's interest-free student loan scheme has expanded considerably, increasing from 264 beneficiaries in 2017 to 4,664 in 2022. However, this program applies only to approved non-state higher education institutions within Sri Lanka.

Many banks offer education loans for overseas study. Yet there is no publicly available national data on how many Sri Lankan students rely on bank loans to finance international education or how much they borrow. Consequently, many families continue to depend on private savings or personal assets to finance overseas education.

Beyond financial

resources: educational and social capital

Financial resources alone do not determine who is able to study abroad. English language proficiency has also become an increasingly important requirement. Most universities in destination countries require applicants to demonstrate English proficiency through examinations such as IELTS.

Sri Lanka's average General IELTS score remains around Band 6.0 and the country continues to rank in the lower half of the EF English Proficiency Index. It also captures significant differences between Western Province and several other provinces.

These disparities suggest that access to quality English language education itself is uneven, creating another barrier for prospective international students.

Social networks also play an important role. Students with relatives, friends, or mentors in destination countries or even in the home country may receive valuable support before and after migration.

These networks can provide information about universities, scholarship opportunities, accommodation and visa procedures which can reduce the emotional and financial challenges associated with migration.

Access to information represents another important but often overlooked factor. Students who attend schools with strong career guidance services or who have access to education fairs, university representatives, alumni or experienced mentors are often better positioned to navigate complex university applications, scholarship opportunities and visa procedures than those without such support.

International student migration from Sri Lanka to the global North is likely to continue growing in the coming years. Yet increasing numbers alone should not be mistaken for equal opportunity.

Access to international education remains shaped not only by academic merit, but also by financial resources, English language proficiency, access to information and social networks. Understanding these inequalities is essential if international education is to become a genuine avenue for social mobility.

The writer is a Research Professional at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA). Her research focuses on human rights, gender, and international law, with a particular interest in interdisciplinary research and advocacy. At CEPA, she works within the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation thematic area.