

Extended abstract

Introduction

Highly skilled migration represents a rapidly growing and increasingly substantial component of global migration. While the migration of skilled workers has become increasingly prominent within the overall migration literature, the specific issues connected to skilled migration have so far been largely neglected in the Pacific migration literature. This may partly be attributable to the fact that skilled migrants make up a relatively small proportion of the migration flows out of Pacific Island countries. In Fiji, for instance, 8,669 of the 75,800 emigrants between 1987 and 2001 were professionals. Their proportion remains low compared to some countries where professionals make up a larger proportion of emigrants. This paper examines the context and reasons for teacher migration from Pacific Island countries to the Pacific Rim countries and discusses the consequences of this migration for Pacific Island countries. While the main focus is on Fiji, some comparisons will be drawn with Vanuatu and Tonga. Based on these findings, policy options for Pacific Island sending countries are discussed.

Data

Apart from an analysis of migration statistics and discussions with Government departments, the paper is based on a survey of secondary school principals in Fiji and in-depth interviews with teachers in four secondary schools in the capital city Suva and the remote island of Lakeba. This is part of a larger project, funded by the Australian Research Council, in which the context and consequences of teacher migration in Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu are compared. This research is the first extensive study on the inter-relationship between skilled migration, education systems and sustainability in the Pacific Island Region.

Teacher migration from Fiji to the Pacific Rim

The number of emigrants from Fiji increased rapidly in the wake of the 1987 military coups and has remained high until today. Approximately 90% of migrants are Indo-Fijians, leaving Fiji for reasons of political instability, the unresolved land issue and economic measures by which they feel discriminated against. In addition to these general political and economic factors, skilled workers including teachers leave Fiji due to low remuneration, lack of continuing educational opportunities and training facilities, poor working and living conditions, particularly in remote regions. Among the skilled migrants from Fiji, teachers are the single largest category, making up almost one third of skilled migrants. The number of teacher emigrants increased from 173 in 1991 to 367 in 2001 while the current teacher stock is approximately 8,000.

The main resettlement countries are the developed countries of the Pacific Rim with Australia and New Zealand being favoured due to their geographical proximity. Australia is home to some 50,000 Indo-Fijians and some 10,000 ethnic Fijians.

The situation in Fiji, where political issues are underlying emigration of Indo-Fijians, will be compared with Tonga and Vanuatu. Tonga has long experienced substantial emigration while Vanuatu is predominantly characterized by internal migration. The growing shortage of teachers has also contributed to increased intra-Pacific migration

with workers migrating to countries offering better work conditions and salaries, such as Fijian teachers migrating to the Marshall Islands and Kiribati.

The consequences of teacher migration in Pacific Island sending countries

Even though sufficient numbers of teachers remain in Fiji, the education system in Fiji has been adversely affected by the emigration of teachers. The most highly qualified and the most experienced teachers are most likely to migrate, thus leaving less qualified or unqualified teachers and new graduates in charge of students. Turnover of teaching staff is high, teachers regularly leaving in the middle of the term. Schools in remote areas face the most serious difficulties, retaining teaching staff. The Ministry of Education is concerned with this situation as it has adverse effects on the quality of education and as such, long-term effects on Fiji's human resource development. These negative effects far outweigh the few positive effects of emigration such as remittances.

Policy options

The Government in Fiji has not sought to intervene in emigration. It has not tried to curb the loss of skilled workers, to put in place any mechanisms to attract return or circular migrants, or to increase the potential benefits of fostering linkages with emigrants. Bonding of students who study on government scholarships has been the only policy directed at (temporarily) retaining qualified people, including new teacher graduates. Given that Australia and New Zealand face shortages of certain teachers, such as science teachers, teacher migration from Pacific Island countries will continue. Since the issue of brain drain has become a concern to the Fiji Government, policy options will be discussed with a view to retaining skilled workers in general and teachers in particular.

Discussion

Based on the discussion of the context and consequences of teacher migration in Pacific Island countries, the paper emphasizes the need to investigate further the issue of skilled migration in Pacific Island countries and to address the issue on a political level. So far, few studies have focused on skilled migration in Pacific Island countries. Given the specific circumstances and development challenges of small island states, such as limited human resource bases, remoteness and insularity, general theories on skilled migration do not adequately capture the specific issues of small island states. There is therefore a need for a theory on effects of skilled migration and policy options for small island states.