

## **Perceptions of International Student Mobility: A Qualitative Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

*International Student Mobility (ISM) is progressively becoming a significant aspect of the higher education scenario. The universal higher education milieu has undergone a tremendous change due to ISM as the number of students going abroad for higher education is growing incessantly with every passing year. Pakistan is a developing country that has experienced increasing ISM in the last forty years. Despite all academic and professional opportunities available to students, they desire to go abroad for higher education and settle down there, causing brain drain in the country. This research study attempts to identify the determinants of international student mobility from the perspective of either students, who are in the process of enrolling in international universities or those who are aspiring to go abroad for higher studies. This study used qualitative research approach based on interpretivism paradigm. A total of 14 students from different public and private sector universities participated, out of which nine were male and five were female with ages between 18 and 24 years approximately. Thematic analysis was used to*

*analyze the subjective data. The findings brought to light key academic, professional and social motivations of individuals for studying abroad. These findings can act as a guideline for higher education institutions and national policy makers to draft policies and strategies that might enable reversal of the vicious phenomena of brain drain.*

**Keywords:** academic motivation, brain drain, international student mobility, professional motivation, social motivations

### **Introduction**

Coupled with the globalization of higher education (Collins, Ho, Ishikawa & Ma, 2017), the last few years have witnessed a dramatic surge in international student mobility (King & Sondhi, 2018). Global changes and developments in higher education infrastructure are the reasons why the higher education scenario has experienced tremendous changes in such a short span of time. From 0.8 million (approx.) in 1975 to 2 million in 2000, the strength of internationally mobile students in the higher education sector rose up to 4.1 million (approx.) in 2013 (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO reports showed that international students mobility is anticipated to propagate to 8 million by the year 2020 (Altbach, 2004)2004. Also, according to OECD (2017) statistics, the number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education programs in OECD countries increased from 0.8 million in the late 1970s to 4.6 million in 2015. The British Council in its report *Postgraduate student mobility trends to 2024* has forecasted that over the decade, six marketplaces (i.e. Australia, Canada, UK, USA, Japan and Germany) will be key destination markets for postgraduate mobility.

The rising trends of international student mobility are driven by various push and pull factors, encouraging outward and inward mobility respectively (UNESCO, 2013). In the past two decades, academia has boomed into a business industry with incredible prospective facilitated by domestic and foreign- national as well as institutional policies. An increasing number of students decide to go abroad to attain higher education because of the high-quality system of education, growth and development opportunities, higher paying careers, and future job security coupled with value-added reward systems, wide range of diverse academic opportunities, immigration, better quality of life, chances to work in global employment industry and many other dynamics. Dearth of academic and professional resources as well as

political, economic and social instabilities in developing nations push students from growing middle class economies to explore educational opportunities in developed nations for personal growth and development (OECD, 2016). For nations of student origin, mobile students might be considered as lost talent, thereby creating a knowledge gap. This leads to brain drain, that is, the migration of skilled human resources for trade, education (World Bank, 2000). . Basically, main outflow of skilled migration is from developing nations like Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka to developed countries (Dodani & LaPorte, 2005). It is high time to take note and identify key issues and provide strategic solutions to develop, attract and retain our own priceless skills.

Home countries get benefits in the form of remittance, international experienced workforce and a globally competitive skill set that fosters the existing system on their return, but on the other hand, the problem gets confounded if these students settle down in the host country. The shifting of talented people from home to host country benefits the host country and creates a knowledge gap and intellectual capital deficit in the home country leading to massive brain drain (De Wit, 2015) by exhausting a priceless and an already limited human capital. Brain drain followed by international student mobility is one of the key issues that prompted the researchers to explore this phenomenon in the higher education scenario in Pakistan. Contextually, host countries are the chief benefactors of overseas students' inflow (Wei, 2013) based on the data of 48 countries and regions from 1999 to 2008, studies the economic and educational determinants of how countries of different types attract international students. The study finds that: the volume of merchandise trade between countries facilitates international student mobility across borders; international students from developing countries put the same weights on educational and economic factors for peer developing countries as potential destinations, while only economic factors are taken into consideration for developed countries as potential destinations. On the other hand, international students from developed countries often value educational factors more for developed countries as possible destinations, while equally weigh educational and economic factors for developing countries as possible destinations. Therefore, countries aiming to attract talents from other countries should pay more attention to attract international students and encourage them to seek working opportunities in local employment markets after finishing study.”,”DOI”:"10.1007/s10734-012-9593-5”,”ISSN”:"0018-1560, 1573-174X”,”title-short”:"An empirical study on

the determinants of international student mobility”, ”language”: ”en”, ”author”: [{ ”family”: ”Wei”, ”given”: ”Hao” }], ”issued”: { ”date-parts”: [[ ”2013”, 7 ] ] }, ”schema”: ”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”. Skilled migration fills the knowledge gap in the developed economies, leaving behind a vacuum in developing countries such as Pakistan, which is a major area of concern for not only the education sector, but also the economy. As per HEC (2011) statistics, approximately 4986 scholars were sent overseas funded in different programs for MS, PhD and post-doctoral study. Only 2375 successfully finished their education and returned to serve Pakistan (Kayani, Ahmed & Shah, 2015). Based on this statistic, more than 50% of students came back while the rest of them stayed abroad in the host country. These empirical evidences strongly validate the phenomena of brain drain in Pakistan. If such outflow of intellectual capital and skill without adequate replenishment persists, our GDP will fall drastically as outflow of skill can have an unfavorable impact on the economy (Sajjad, 2018).

Skilled, educated and productive citizens contribute to increased economic output for the private sector and improved governance in the public sector. The principal tool for developing human capital is education. Despite the crucial role of highly educated human capital for innovation and progress in economic development and growth (Nelson & Phelps 1965; Schultz 1979), the area of international student mobility has been greatly neglected. Therefore, this paper is predominantly focused on identifying determinants of international student mobility (from the perspective of the university students in Pakistan who are desirous to study abroad), which may lead towards skilled migration and brain drain from Pakistan. The findings give practical implications to concerned academia and policy makers to prevent both, as skill shortage in a nation can lead towards seriously disastrous effects on the national economy. Lowering of standards should not be accepted; instead, local conditions should be reviewed and revamped.

## **Problem Statement**

International student mobility causes migration of intellect, talent and skill from source countries, which lead towards intellectual capital deficit or brain drain; thereby, creating knowledge and skill gap, which can cause disastrous effects on the economic situation of Pakistan.

## Literature Review

The term ‘International mobile student’ is define in UNESCO (2015) report as follows:

*“An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.”*

The past few years have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of students going abroad for obtaining higher education for an international degree; thereby, increasing international student mobility.

### Factors of International Student Mobility

The movement of students worldwide has been documented as an enormously significant constituent of international migration system (Szelényi, 2006). Different factors of international student mobility have come to light from related literature. A study by Zheng, (2014) on dynamics of international student mobility established that the factors influencing students’ wishes for studying abroad could be categorized as economic (29%), educational (27%), student’s personal (15%), social (13%), cultural (9%) and political (7%) factors. Zheng also established that economic, educational and personal influences were very significant determinants of students’ motives for studying abroad.

In a study by Oliveira & Soares (2016), academic motivation was indicated by some of the students as being the second most important motivation and by some as the main motivation for studying abroad. Many scholars have indicated that international education programs enable scholars to grow academically, develop intellectually such as enhanced knowledge, attainment of problem resolving and linguistic skills (Severino, Messina & García, 2014).

Social factors that impact the selection of student’s desire to study abroad are basically the social network. Social network of students denotes their relationships with the people around them, whether physically present or not. The students’ social network associations include relationships with family, friends and academicians.

(Mazzarol & Soutar, 2000; Pimpa, 2003). Furthermore, outbound mobility provides exposure to Pakistani students to diverse and new situations and make them global citizens (Kayani, Ahmed & Shah, 2015).

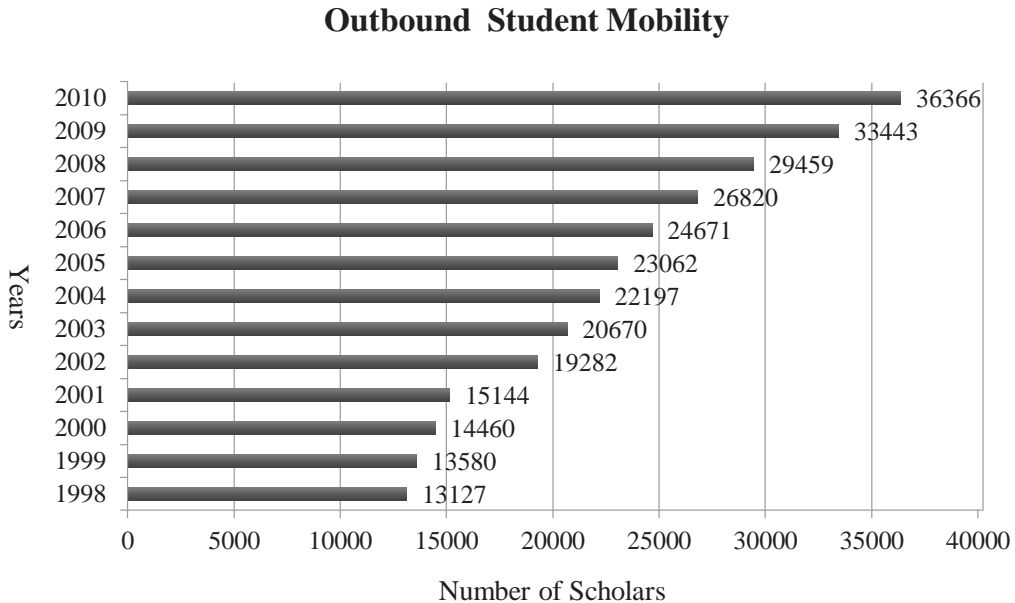
On professional grounds, (Phang, 2013) connection between industry and university were considered as one of the important factors influencing student's decisions of going abroad. Some students stated that their international study experience was helpful in obtaining their first job (Bracht et al., 2006; 1990 Maiworm & Teichler 1996; Opper et al.). Paralleling international and local students, (Teichler, 2012) established that the former ones also had a smoother transition to employment than the latter.

### **Recent Trends of International Student Mobility**

**Perspective of Pakistan.** Being the sixth most-populous country on earth, Pakistan is projected to have a populace growth of approximately 300 million individuals by 2050. In spite of a very low existing percentage (only 5.1%) of 18-24 year olds in tertiary education domain, the call for university degrees is increasing as is the mandate for overseas learning. In its report labeled Postgraduate Student Mobility Trends to 2024, the British Council elucidates why Pakistani outbound student mobility of Pakistani students is on its way up. According to the report, growth of the tertiary-aged population in Pakistan will be 0.2% per annum (between 2014 and 2024) and amongst the countries enclosed in the report, annual growth in outbound mobility at the postgraduate level will average to 6.4%. The big gap amongst these two growth projections highlights Pakistan as a strong outbound market.

### **Outbound Mobility of Students from Pakistan**

Over the years, Pakistan has witnessed a growing trend of international student mobility. According to British Council report (2014), by 2024 the highest annual average growth in outbound student mobility at postgraduate level will occur in Nigeria (+8.3%), India (+7.5%), Indonesia (+7.2%), Pakistan (+6.4%) and Saudi Arabia (+5.2%). The figure of students studying abroad has augmented sharply from 13127 to 36366, within 1998 to 2010 as seen in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Outbound student mobility from 1998-2010 (Source: Institute of International Education, IIE Open Doors 2011)

## Brain Drain

Brain drain refers to the global migration of human capital assets and it applies particularly to the migration of fairly educated individuals from non-industrialized nations to industrialized ones. It relates mainly to the migration of high-professionals such as engineers, physicians, scientists, IT personnel and others usually with a university education mostly to evolved nations (Ahmed, Rizwan, Ahmad & Haq, 2014). In global scenario, skilled migration is an important precursor of globalization (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Home countries may include both developing and developed nations. Beine, Bertoli & Moraga (2016) identified that emigration of workers generated brain drain effect in home country in the form of exhaustion of prevailing human assets that consequently impact the nation's GDP. As discussed in previous literature and Docquier and Rapoport (2011) claimed that migration of human capital leads to two outcomes:

The first is the exhaustion of prevailing human assets in the source country, leading to the so-called brain drain effect. The second outcome is a secondary effect, resonated by an inducement influence for unqualified people to obtain greater

returns due to an international education, after returning home. This is referred to brain gain effect. Opportunities for overseas study are in reality likely to produce both these impacts; however, their virtual magnitude cannot be forecasted.

### **Research Gaps**

Primarily, the objective of this study is to provide a qualitative inquiry of students' perceptions based on some leading factors, which contribute towards leaving the home country for international education. Ample research is available on the scholastic and economic dynamics of international education. However, research on recognizing determinants of studying abroad is apparently deficient. Another research gap identified by the researchers is the lack of qualitative studies in this domain; almost all studies are quantitative in nature. Therefore, this study intends to bridge this gap by capturing the subjective experiences of respondents regarding the phenomenon in hand and analyzing it thematically.

The study also focuses on perceptions and first hand experiences of postgraduate and undergraduate students of Pakistan on international student mobility, which we believe has not been conducted before in this context. Previously, several researchers established theories and connections on why students go abroad to study; others discussed the phenomenon of brain drain and detailed it with host and home country perspectives. However, this study is an attempt to establish a link between perceptions of studying abroad and the dynamics of brain drain.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this study is to reveal the true essence of international student mobility based on students' perceptions and identify the key social, academic and financial influences that shape their decision to go abroad for studying. Additionally, this study also aimed at providing recommendations for host country policy makers and also management scholars and administrative lobbies to take necessary steps in their areas for decreasing skill out flow and brain drain from Pakistan. With focus on research objectives and identifying research gaps, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key academic determinants that influence an individual's decision of studying abroad?



2. What are the key professional determinants that influence an individual's decision of studying abroad?
3. What are the key social determinants that influence an individual's decision of studying abroad?

To conclude, numerous studies have identified factors which influence students to study abroad. For instance, choice of host country, family pressure, social interaction and many more have been observed as dominant factors highlighted by various leading researchers in this domain. This study is an attempt to gather several new factors within the context of Pakistan.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is as follows:

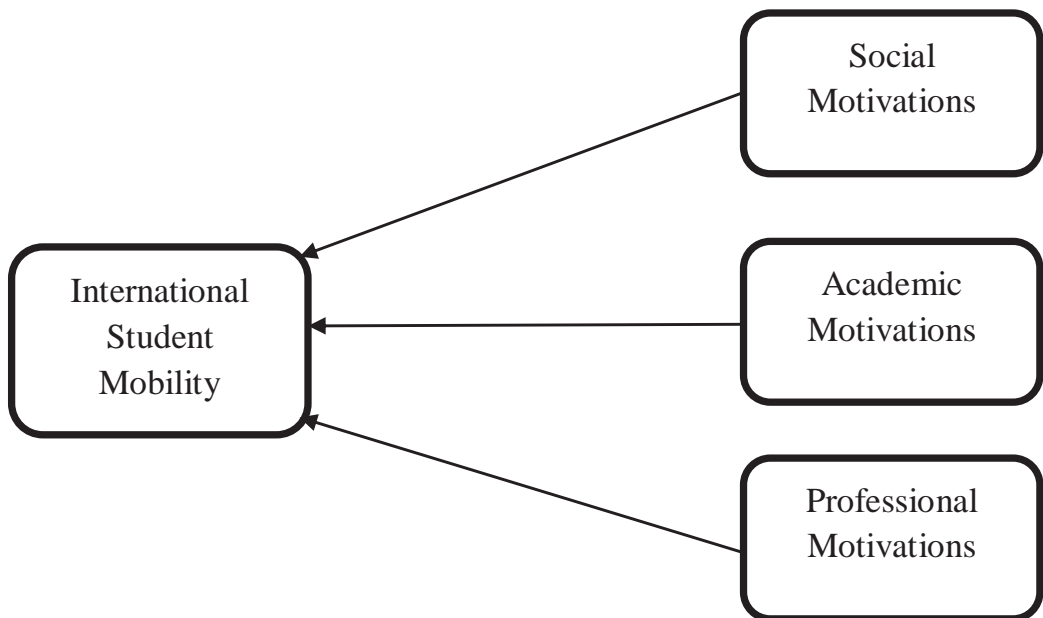


Figure 2. Theoretical framework

### Methodology

The current study aspired to understand students' perceptions of determinants of international student mobility. This study used qualitative research approach based on interpretivism paradigm. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined qualitative

research as an approach to social science research that focuses on collecting descriptive data in natural settings, with the help of inductive thinking, and emphasizes on understanding the subject's point of view Corbin underscored the importance of research questions in selecting the methodological approach. Among the five important research approaches as suggested by Creswell, Clark, Gutmann and Hanson (2003), case study approach was chosen for this study to unearth the subjective experiences of the participants on international student migration and to develop themes on the basis of these shared experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was performed through semi-structured interview questions that were designed using the main objectives of the study. The interviews comprised of open-ended questions, conducted in a conversational style and each interview lasted between 35 to 50 minutes. Participants were encouraged to share their subjective experiences in any they preferred to do so. As suggested by Demir and Abell (2010), the idea of asking open ended questions was to further develop a thematic structure and to reveal the complex meanings through the experiences of the interviewees.

### **Participants**

Participant selection strategy for this study was based on purposive sampling because it focuses on all the participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). A total of 14 students from different public and private sector universities participated in the study, out of which nine were male and five were female with ages between 18 and 24 years approximately. The sample size of 14 participants was preferred owing to time constraints and availability of participants for sharing their experience. For confidentiality purposes, each participant details are coded as respondent number 1 to 14. Table 1 provides demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1  
*List of Participants from Public/Private Universities*

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Age</b>
Respondent 1	Male	MBA	22
Respondent 2	Male	MBA	23
Respondent 3	Female	B.Com	19
Respondent 4	Male	BBA	21
Respondent 5	Female	MBA	20
Respondent 6	Male	BS	21
Respondent 7	Male	BS	19
Respondent 8	Female	BS	20
Respondent 9	Female	MBA	23
Respondent 10	Male	BS	20
Respondent 11	Male	MBA	24
Respondent 12	Female	MBA	23
Respondent 13	Male	BBA	21
Respondent 14	Male	BS	22

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and the entire written transcripts were read several times to attain complete sense of them. In order to derive meanings from rich textual information, content analysis was used by the researchers. Powers and Knapp (2010) described content analysis as a systematic coding approach to determine the pattern of words used and their frequency and trends from large amount of textual information. In this study, NVIVO 12 software was used for analysis because this software facilitated researchers in assigning codes to each transcript by using complete coding method (Zamawe, 2015) and key statements were identified that were observed to be related to the phenomenon.

## **Findings**

Themes that manifested student's perceptions about the determinants of international student mobility were mainly social, academic and professional motivations. Excerpts from interviews and perceptions of participants are included in discussion of themes derived from the data. Various themes encompassing social, academic and professional motivations were found. Out of these themes, only those themes are explained that were strongly perceived by the participants.

### **Theme 1: Experience of a New Culture**

Exploring the new culture, language and value is one of the central social motivations that were described by the respondents. For example, the importance of knowing another culture was explained by respondent 2 as following:

*“I will gain a better understanding of foreign cultures and values by living and studying in the country of my choice. This will help me in becoming more independent, self-confident and self-reliant as I learn to adjust in a new environment.”*

### **Theme 2: Immigration Opportunities**

Foreign degree is considered as a gateway to foreign countries and most of the people have aspirations to settle down there permanently. Respondent 1 reported the same aspiration as following:

*“Well, I know that foreign graduates are regarded as better qualified by our society. In my case, my social circle consists of realistic people like me and they know a foreign degree is beneficial for immigration purposes. Rest it may not be of any good as the cost is higher than the value.”*

### **Theme 3: Better Quality of Education**

Better education quality in a foreign country was perceived as one of the strongest determinants of international student mobility. Respondents mostly compared the quality of education in home country with host country and came up with the following opinions. For instance, respondent 2 explained:

*“Education quality can be evaluated through faculty qualifications, quality of students, administrative supports and academic features that is far better in the universities of developed countries than our local universities.”*

### **Theme 4: Reputation of University**

Reputation of the university is highly perceived as an avenue to improve knowledge base. The results show that majority of the respondents have no particular

university in mind. What more important for them is the affordable fees and a good reputation and ranking of a university. For instance, respondent 5 expressed his views and stated:

*“A degree from a university of academic repute improves my knowledge base and builds a strong professional network.”*

### **Theme 5: Professional Recognition and Growth**

Students who studied from abroad have an advantage when looking for jobs in local and global markets. Foreign degree enhances the employability in a highly saturated job market and also impacts future job offers. For instance, respondent 11 voiced:

*“I would prefer to share intellectual discussions with high class professionals, who would help me reach new horizons and push me to the best of my capabilities. All the international exposure and advanced training will give me an upper hand in my professional life compared to those who have only been confined to national programs.”*

### **Theme 6: More lucrative Pay**

In Pakistan, most of the students have the perception that foreign degree would provide a bright future for them and earn attractive salary packages. Students perceived that jobs in foreign countries are well paid, but in Pakistan they are not. For example, respondent 7 shared perceptions about well paid jobs in foreign country as follows:

*“I would love to work abroad because it is rewarding and pays well.”*

In the same way, respondent 10 reported:

*“More paying and respectful jobs than Pakistan”*

As seen from the above themes, this study provides deep insights into the escalating phenomenon of international student mobility through views of the

participants thus generating a rich set of findings. The study suggests that students' decisions of going abroad were driven by different factors. In order to comprehend meanings from the given set of information, the themes corresponding to the perceptions of students were categorized into three broad categories namely social, academic and professional motivations as mentioned in the proposed framework.

From the interviews and analysis of interview data (using NVIVO 12), the emerging themes and sub-themes are presented as follows:

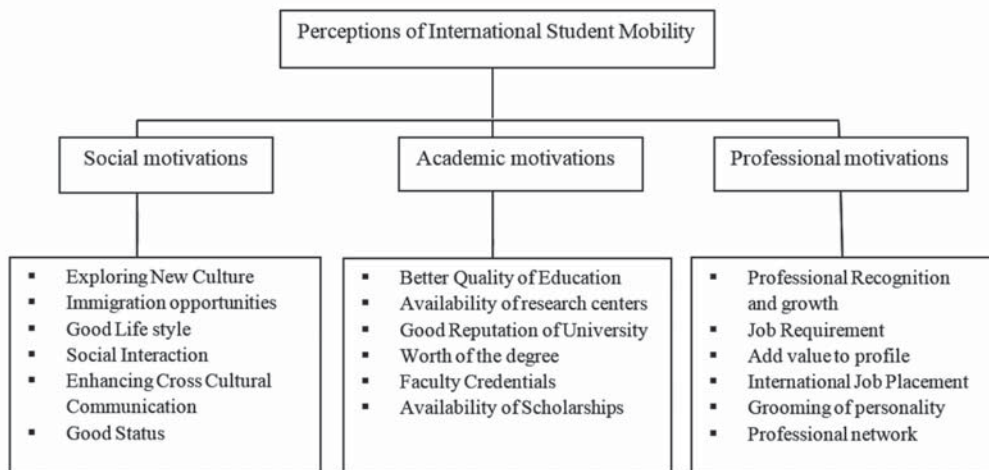


Figure 3. Emerging themes and sub-themes

### Discussions

Keeping in mind the research questions and integrating literature with data analyzed from participating students' interviews, this discussion is focused on key areas of findings namely *social*, *academic* and *professional* motivation. Also, this discussion will focus on participants' viewpoints and perceptions of determinants of international student mobility.

Considering interviewees' perceptions about the *social* determinants of international student mobility, it was illustrated in the findings that most participants perceived studying abroad as a means to experience new cultures and to enrich their social experiences. Furthermore, the participants perceived that foreign degree is a ladder for getting residence in their desired country of destination. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) support the results of our analysis by expressing their views that

experience of new cultures, immigration possibilities, cross culture communication and better education quality are significant determinants of international student mobility.

Seeking immigration opportunities were also viewed as one of the central motivations of international student mobility. The respondents shared their views that poor salary structure in their country tends to increase migration of students and also deemed to ensure the stay of students in host nation once they complete their education. Out of the total population of international student migration, a small group of students come back home with intended education level to serve their homeland. According to Gallup surveys (2015), two-third of Pakistani population wish to leave Pakistan (Ali, 2016). The same line of thinking was supported by a study conducted by Bessey (2012) in Germany in which the results showed that student migration took place under two conditions a) lack of educational facilities in the country of origin and b) migration under the student visa provides an avenue to stay in host country to escape low return in home country.

In terms of *academic* motivations, the research results indicate that the growing trend of international student mobility is due to the perceived value of prestigious foreign institutions. Students are aware of the quality difference between the foreign and local institutions through the publication of university rankings. In the same line, academic quality is perceived to accelerate mobility as students from developing countries are moving towards developed countries for the sake of quality education (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Some of the previous studies that incorporate prospective international students as their unit of analysis also validate the fact that perceived discrepancy in education quality between domestic and foreign degree is one of the motivations that stimulate students to go overseas (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998; Szelényi, 2006). Hence, the above-mentioned analysis provides an important insight into the academic motivations of students in Pakistan for going abroad to study. The perceived value of foreign institution, dynamic learning environment and quality of teaching abroad among others are key criteria for national students when selecting their country of destination (Marconi, 2013). In addition, great emphasizes was laid on experienced and knowledgeable faculty (Jianvittayakit, 2012).

Among professional motivations, the desire to have an international career,

lucrative jobs and learn new ways of doing business were perceived as important determinants. People perceived that international mobility will open gateways to international careers and provide professional recognition. Moreover, the desire to have an international experience, develop academic career, and form a network with international researchers reinforces professional motivation exhibited by the individuals. As a matter of fact, a foreign degree is deemed prestigious and a prerequisite for career stability. Van Der Meid (2003) mentioned that studying abroad is perceived as a platform for experiential learning, fostering practical knowledge and developing liaison with international scholars and creating professional network.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

International student mobility is an issue of growing concern in developing nations like Pakistan as it translates into a substantial and unaffordable loss of invaluable human resources that is much needed for country's economic growth, development and national progress. Based on the subjective experiences of students, this study has concluded that international student mobility from Pakistan is mostly seen due to several social, academic and professional motivations such as search of quality education, improved standard of living and quality of life, higher incomes and job stability, exploring newer cultures and many others. These findings have serious implications for academic practitioners and policy makers both on national and international grounds. There is a need to understand the political, social, financial and economic motives underlying the exodus and to provide opportunities to promote growth and development domestically. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers propose the following recommendations:

1. Keeping in view the growing trends of international student mobility, the higher education institutions in Pakistan should focus on provision of high-quality education and relevant training and development opportunities for students to compete in a highly globalized market.
2. Universities should sign MoUs with leading international universities for students' exchange programs which would dynamically impact students' academics and cross-cultural relationships. Transcontinental education, online degree programs, research collaborations, business partnerships are few systems that facilitate local students to have exposure to international



markets and thereby increase their knowledge base and skills. These practices would lead to project a soft image of Pakistan in the world.

3. The availability of local scholarships should be improved and should be offered in greater number to students for studying in prestigious institutes of Pakistan to retain our brightest talent.

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