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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20802540>**Planned Brain Export or Unplanned Brain Drain: Evaluating Pakistan's Migration Governance Architecture against BEOE Outflow Data (2000–2025)****Zeenat Rana**

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ranazarqa4@gmail.com**Abstract**

Pakistan does not have an official migration policy. Since 1971, the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), under the Emigration Ordinance of 1979, has helped registered workers depart by more than 14 million. Farooq and Ahmad (2017) simply stated that Pakistan needs to transform brain drain into brain export, a process that requires state strength which Pakistan is lacking. Since the independence of Pakistan, the successive governments have considered emigration as a productive economic activity of remittances without taking any steps to tackle with its composition and institutional framework to manage the emigration process, Kaukab (2005) observed. The paper examines if there has been any structural change in Pakistan's migration governance from 2000 to 2025. It relies on BEOE annual outflow statistics for 2000-2025, the PIDE policy analyses, BEOE annual reports, MRC/ICMPD Q3 2025 data, migration analysis by Gallup Pakistan (2025) and literature on migration governance and political economy. The results reveal that Pakistan's migration governance structure is essentially unchanged from that in 1979. The draft migration policy from 2020 is not approved. Total BEOE outflows were 862,625 in 2023 and BEOE "inflows" indicate 525,551 outflows in 2025 alone. The skill structure of outflows has remained structurally unchanged: more than half of total outflows are still unskilled and semi-skilled workers. More than 90% of all outflows still end up in the GCC destinations. The paper concludes that Pakistan continues to be a country of unplanned brain drain and that the political economy of its migration governance remittance dependence, legislative sluggishness, low capacity of state and lack of an architecture of engagement of the diaspora systematically hinders the shift from unplanned to planned brain export.

Keywords: *planned brain export; brain drain; BEOE; migration governance; Pakistan; Emigration Ordinance 1979; remittance dependence; state capacity; political economy; MRC; ICMPD*

1. Introduction

Pakistan has been in exporting labours more than 50 years. The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) has been registering millions of workers who have left Indonesia for overseas jobs since early 1970s. As of January 2025, the total number of registered emigrants amounted to 14,114,918 (Gallup Pakistan, 2025). In 2023, BEOE registered 862,625 outflows the highest since the 2015 peak of 946,571. In 2025 alone, 525,551 emigrants are estimated to have left: BEOE (ICMPD, 2025). These aren't numbers that are going down.

They're expanding and they represent a migration system that has been operating on the same governance structure since 1979.

Farooq and Ahmad (2017) pinpointed the key policy question for Pakistan regarding migration governance with a great degree of accuracy. They said Pakistan needs to work towards ending the unplanned brain drain and instead promote brain export by shifting from a reactive mode where people migrate in response to push factors to a proactive mode where the country actively manages migration flows, harnesses their benefits via remittance and diaspora networks and brings skilled returnees into national development. They reinforced this by using an augmented gravity model of Pakistani migration to 27 countries for a 36-year period: both push and pull factors are important contributors to Pakistani emigration, and unmanaged outflows represent the loss of human capital which can be utilized as development resources if planned.

The obstacle was identified 20 years ago by Kaukab (2005). Pakistani governments have never developed any institutional frameworks for regulating the composition of emigration, safeguarding Pakistani nationals working in advanced countries, or developing strategies to involve Pakistanis in diaspora beyond their remit of remittances. The official stance measures the success of migration policy by remittance inflows. From the short-term political economy point of view, the structural need for governance reform is not immediate because as long as remittances are coming, the institutional weaknesses that lead to emigration can be ignored.

What this paper asks is a direct question: has anything changed in the 20 years since Kaukab's critique or the 8 years since Farooq and Ahmad have recommended it? Is Pakistan's migration governance system moving from brain drain to brain export? Are there signs of deliberate governance of migration quality in the BEOE outflow data 2000-2025? But what should the political economy landscape be like for planned brain export to be really possible?

This paper seeks to address these questions by undertaking a structured analysis of BEOE outflow data, documentation of governance architecture, analyses of Pakistan policies, MRC/ICMPD Q3 2025 data, and literature search on published political economy publications regarding Pakistan's migration governance.

1.1 Research Questions

This study is organized around three research questions.

1. What are the defining structural features of Pakistan's migration governance architecture between 2000 and 2025, and what political economy dynamics explain why these features have not changed despite consistent evidence of their inadequacy?
2. Does BEOE outflow data from 2000 to 2025 show any structural compositional shift in skill level, destination geography, occupational profile, or sector composition that would indicate a transition from unplanned brain drain toward planned brain export?
3. What state capacity conditions institutional, legislative, data-architectural, and policy-managerial must Pakistan meet for the planned brain export model to be achievable, and how does Pakistan's current status compare to each condition?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Planned Brain Export

One of the most practically relevant and useful distinctions in the migration governance literature is that between unplanned brain drain and planned brain export. Unplanned brain drain is when skilled workers migrate due to negative structural push factors (low wages, political instability, governance failure, poor working conditions), and no attempt is made by the state to control who migrates, when, how, or what happens subsequently. Brain export that is planned as a development tool is when the state is actively involved with emigration as a development instrument, directing actors to sectors and occupations that are in demand in the overseas market and that will generate maximum remittance value, protecting them through bilateral arrangements, investing in return migration pathways and creating diaspora engagement mechanisms that turn overseas professionals into contributors of knowledge and investment.

Farooq and Ahmad (2017) provided the most stringent definition of the planned brain export concept in the context of Pakistan. Over 36 years, they have created an augmented gravity model with push factors from Pakistan and pull factors from 27 destination countries. Their key conclusion was that the push factors (the demographic pressure in Pakistan and the failure of the labour market in Pakistan) as well as the pull factors (economic and social development in countries of emigration) all play a significant role in shaping the emigration of Pakistanis. The policy over-riding conclusion was clear that to stop unplanned brain drain, Pakistan must design policies to manage emigration and make it a planned brain export, which will generate benefits in the form of remittances, diaspora networks and return migration. They said it was a need of state capacity which is not available in Pakistan. The present study assesses if any of that capacity has been developed by Pakistan in the past ten years since their analysis.

The comparative context was provided by Skeldon (2009). He said that in developing countries, the process of migration governance is very much oriented towards facilitation rather than protection, and more towards strategic management because the economic benefit of emigration (remittances) is immediate and tangible, while the institutional and long-term cost of leaving the country unmanaged is spread out. The countries that have been able to harness brain drain into brain export – India, the Philippines and, to a degree, Bangladesh – have established institutional frameworks in the form of dedicated brain drain ministries, protection systems for OWs, bilateral agreements with specific skill composition clauses, and formal diaspora engagement mechanisms. There is no evidence of any of these in Pakistan.

The Philippines is the most often referenced country to compare planned migration management. Oishi (2002) recorded the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) as one of the state managed models, which includes the POEA certification of recruitment agencies, verification of job orders, and enforcement of minimum wage in bilateral agreements, and pre-departure orientation for all types of workers. Pakistan's BEOE carries out some of these activities for manual workers going to the Gulf, but in no case are there any specific bilateral agreements containing provisions for skill development, nor is there any mandatory pre-departure training other than basic documentation for professional migration to the Western countries.

2.2 Remittance-Dependent Official Policy

Kaukab (2005) identified the underpinnings of Pakistan's migration governance as the paradox. The Pakistani Government has always been positive about emigration and considers brain drain as 'economically productive.' "This official perception was a policy mistake as it focused on short term financial transfers and failed to address the long term drain on institutional capabilities," Kaukab said. Pakistani professionals choose to migrate for various reasons, such as the monetary gains, differential in life standards, opportunities for the future generations, social freedom and liberal atmosphere in countries to which they migrate. They are factors that have multiple dimensions and multiple solutions to them in terms of policy. The official posture is to be remittance oriented, which doesn't even attempt to address any of them.

Twenty years later, disaggregated BEOE data analysis confirmed Ashraf's diagnosis, confirming Kaukab's diagnosis. He revealed that the 2022 upswing of 832,339 emigrants was presented by politicians and commentators as proof of a professional migration when in reality only 4.7 per cent of 2022 outflows were made up of highly qualified and skilled workers. The state's governance communication system made the aggregate figure very public and the occupational breakdown very invisible, making space for what Davenport (2004) termed "panic policy", which is reactive to narrative, rather than evidence. Here's the direct outcome of remittance dependent governance – the government is interested in the amount of emigration (remittance flows) rather than the quality of emigration (emigration composition) and its data systems reflect this ordering.

Haque (2006) took Kaukab's criticism and applied it to the governance infrastructure level. He found that the brain drain is caused by poor governance conditions (insecurity, poor infrastructure, inadequate environments for raising children, non-competitive wages) and that the attitude of considering remittances as compensation for these conditions is keeping the problems alive and aggravating them. Each year this governance reform is postponed due to remittance comfort, structural push factors become stronger and more emigrants depart. This phenomenon was also found empirically by Shah et al. (2023) who show that remittance dependence shields governments from structural reform that would tackle governance failures, and thus from creating more brain drain.

2.3 State Capacity and Migration Governance

The theory of Political Economy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Migdal, 1988; Fukuyama, 2004) is used to explain the failure of the migration governance reform in Pakistan. Extractive institutions (those with a concentration of power, political connections, and rent-seeking opportunities) have been shown by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) to systematically impede institutional change and transformation into inclusive institutions. The migration governance in Pakistan is a part extractive system: vested interests of the recruitment agency, labour contractors and remittance channels in the existing unmanaged outflow system. A planned brain export model would need to control these intermediaries, to make bilateral arrangements without their consent, and to create a body to monitor the activities of these players which is not currently in place at the state level.

In countries with relatively strong social forces than state institutions, the challenge of governance reform is to confront strong actors who gain from

institutional failures, as has been demonstrated by Migdal (1988). In the migration governance ecosystem, these actors can be informal recruitment networks that exploit desperate migrants by demanding high fees for services, exchange houses that profit from remittance channel switching, and politicians who enjoy remittance financial support without having to develop an accountable governance system. Fukuyama (2004) made a distinction between state scope (what the state tries to do) and state strength (how effective state does it). Pakistan's migration governance is wide-ranging, with the BEOE registering millions of emigrants, but has limited capacity in key areas relevant to planned brain export: worker protection in advanced countries, bilateral agreements on skill composition, repatriation, and diaspora knowledge engagement.

In their 40-year overview Docquier and Rapoport (2012) found that the positive aspects of skilled emigration – brain gain, brain circulation, diaspora investments can only be realized with robust state capacities and clear policies. These are not essential to development, in fact they aggravate institutional decline if they are not present. The trend of decline is evident throughout the entire period of 2000 to 2025 in Pakistan, as revealed by the study done by Meo, Eldawlatly and Sultan (2024) that among 22 consecutive years of increase in the number of research publications, Pakistan saw a decline in 2022, which could be directly linked to the brain drain of research scholars and researchers from Pakistan.

2.4 BEOE Data and Migration Composition

The most rigorous compositional analysis of the BEOE outflow data throughout the COVID cycle (2019-2022) was provided by Ashraf (2022a). He demonstrated that the share of highly qualified and skilled workers in total outflows has not changed significantly from 4–5 percent across all years; that over 90 percent of emigrants went to the GCC countries across all years; that the provincial origin patterns were not structurally different; and that the increase in emigration in 2022 was not a qualitative shift in the labour-intensive migration patterns. Ultimately, Ashraf found that the brain drain narrative was not backed by disaggregated BEOE data and the post-COVID migration is a structural rebound of Pakistan, not a transformation.

Ashraf (2022b) showed, using remittance data from the State Bank of Pakistan, that there is a crucial asymmetry in the Pakistani migration system. The USA and UK accounted for 30.9 per cent of the total remittance inflows to Pakistan in FY2019 (about USD 6.72 billion) in spite of hosting only 0.2 per cent of the BEOE registered emigrants. This indicates that the most economically productive emigration route is invisible to the emigration governance system, which is in place to control it. The BEOE is not valid for visas including but not limited to NHS Skilled Worker visas, H-1B petitions, Post-Study Work routes, or family reunification visas. This corridor needs to be managed in the planned brain export model, and to begin with, it must be seen.

As for the most highly skilled migrant group in Pakistan, it is the female professional migrant who is the least visible as shown by Ashraf (2022c). While women make up less than 1 percent of overall BEOE outflows, about 45 percent of the women who emigrate are highly qualified and skilled, compared to about 5 percent of men. BEOE is not involved with female professional migration via NHS, academic or employer-sponsored pathways. To implement the model of exporting the brain as planned, as envisioned by Farooq and Ahmad (2017), the

composition of those leaving must be known. The governance system is architecturally blind for the most skilled emigrants of Pakistan.

2.5 The MRC Model: What Proactive Migration Governance Looks Like

Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) are the most notable innovation in Pakistan's migration governance in recent history. The MRCs, namely in Islamabad, Lahore, and Peshawar, which are funded by the EU in accordance with the PROTECT programme, offer orientation, legal advice, job verification and safe migration information to prospective emigrants. According to MRC statistics for Q3 2025, during the same quarter alone, 2,681 inquiries were received and 30,579 emigrants were sent away with pre-departure orientation in 180 PDOS sessions — which is a 40 percent increase from the 120 PDOS sessions in Q2 2025 (ICMPD, 2025). The figures show that there is strong and growing demand for migration governance services.

But MRCs are externally funded and institutionally separate from BEOE. Those are examples of proactively-working migration governance, not Pakistan's migration governance system. If EU funding runs out, MRC will not continue without funding. The model of brain export that is planned, requires the capacity of MRCs that can be incorporated as part of Pakistan's own governance system, rather than as a programme that is dependent on donor support. The MRC model is an example of what can be achieved. It also reflects how far Pakistan's official governance structure is away from delivering it.

2.6 Research Gaps

This study is warranted by three gaps. First is the lack of a longitudinal analysis of BEOE outflow composition from 2000 to 2025 that directly tests for a shift in structural composition towards planned brain export. Ashraf (2022a) covered 2019–2022. Gallup Pakistan (2025) provides 2011–2024 trend data. There is no published study that assesses the entire 25-year history of BEOE compositional data in comparison to the planned brain export benchmark.

The second is the lack of political economy analysis of the reasons why Pakistan's migration governance architecture has not been reformed despite all the evidence of its failings and all the scholarly recommendations for its reform since Kaukab (2005) and onwards of the years up to and including this one, 2024. To address the political economy challenges to governance reform, one must first identify said challenges.

Thirdly, there is no state capacity benchmarking framework which lays down the benchmark of the needed conditions for planned brain export in Pakistan so that the actual status of institutions can be measured against the desired state. Planned brain export demands state capacity, but defined in a non-institutional way (Farooq and Ahmad 2017). It is outlined in this paper.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Push–Pull Theory and the Governance Intervention Point

Push–Pull Theory (Lee, 1966) posits that migration movements are a function of push (and pull) factors in origin countries and destination countries respectively. The governance intervention point in this framework is to reduce the push factors and manage the pull factors strategically. To decrease push factors, one has to take steps towards enhancing the conditions of the country, which make leaving rational, today, and these are wages, governance quality, institutional reliability, career paths, and personal security. Pull factors can only be managed via bilateral agreements with destination countries that provide for

worker protection as well as conditions and opportunities for circular migration instead of permanent loss.

Neither does Pakistan's present governance system. It does not discuss push factors because politically push factors are acceptable in the context of the remittance-dependent official posture. It does not address push factors, since the 1979 Emigration Ordinance covers only manual workers heading to the Gulf, and it lacks any means to control the NHS recruitment campaigns, H-1B sponsorship programmes or Express Entry pathways that lead to job opportunities in the west. The Push–Pull framework does two things: it can pinpoint the governance intervention point and explains why Pakistan's governance architecture systematically fails to reach it.

3.2 Political Economy Theory and Governance Inertia

Political Economy Theory (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Migdal, 1988; Fukuyama, 2004) provides a good explanation as to why despite the evidence and scholarly pressure, Pakistan's governance architecture has not undergone a change. Extractive institutions are hard to reform because the actors who can benefit from them have more concentrated and immediate political power than the diffuse population of skilled workers and returned migrants who could benefit from planned brain export. The current unmanaged system is beneficial to recruiters, labour contractors, informal remittance intermediaries and politicians who stand to benefit from the financial transfers made by the migrant community. There is less organized political voice on behalf of the beneficiaries of planned brain export skilled workers who are able to secure better placement overseas, returnees who are able to get institutional support, and Pakistani institutions that might benefit from the diaspora knowledge.

The concept of state scope and state strength (Fukuyama 2004) is especially useful in this context. The migration state of Pakistan is wide in its scope as the BEOE registers millions of emigrants, is working on nine protectorates and issues statistics every year. However, it is very weak or lacking in the specific areas that need to be strengthened for the planned export of brains, namely professional emigration monitoring, bilateral skill-composition negotiations, return migration facilitation and diaspora knowledge engagement. These capacities need to be built over years of investment in state capacity. The political economy of Pakistan's migrant governance, in which remittances are treated as success and investment in governance as cost, systematically scuppers this investment.

3.3 Human Capital Theory and the Cost of Unplanned Drain

In relation to unplanned brain drain the cost accounting framework is provided by Human Capital Theory (1961, Schultz; 1964, Becker). Kirigia et al. 2006 estimated that each doctor who went into exile from Kenya represents about \$517,931 in lost returns on investment over his or her working life. In Pakistan, it is compounded by the extent of the emigration of healthcare professionals as also documented by Meo and Sultan (2023) in their data which shows that between 1971 and 2022, 50,110 healthcare workers, including 31,418 doctors, have emigrated. The number of nurses grew from 131 in 2011 to 4,880 in 2023, an increase of 3,626 percent, and Pakistan's nurse to population ratio continued to be very low compared to the WHO standards. Each nurse who leaves is Pakistan's investment and Pakistan will never get a return from it.

Even from a strictly economic point of view, Human Capital Theory provides an explanation for why planned brain export is economically better than

unplanned brain drain. By engaging with the returns from return migration, diaspora knowledge engagement mechanisms and planned brain export via circular migration agreements and skill upgrade programmes, Pakistan can harvest some of the returns of its human capital investment through diaspora networks and technology transfer. The costs of unplanned brain drain are only those remittances that are attributable to the brain drain, but which are not a replacement for it, as demonstrated by Altaf (2016). The economic case for brain exports is very strong. There is no governance capacity to implement it.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research employed a mixed descriptive-analytical design, mixing quantitative trend analysis of BEOE outflow data with a qualitative policy architecture analysis. The quantitative component investigates compositional changes in BEOE outflows between 2000 and 2025 in four ways: by total volume, skill composition, destination geography, and occupational profile. The qualitative element is operationalized through in-depth analysis of Pakistan's migration governance system in five areas, namely, the legislative framework, institutional structure, bilateral agreement coverage, data architecture, and diaspora engagement mechanisms. The two components are combined together in data analysis to determine the difference between the composition of the outflowing BEO and the compositional targets suggested by the planned brain export model.

4.2 Data Sources

Five major data sources used in this paper. The dependent variable in the compositional trend analysis is the annual outflow data from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) for 2000–2025. The data on BEOE are based on Shah, Amjad, Hameed and Shah (2020), Shah, Shahzad, Quddus and Qazi (2024), Gallup Pakistan (2025) and BEOE annual reports published at beoe.gov.pk. The documentation of the governance architecture and critique of the political economy of official migration policy are provided in the following policy analysis documents: Haque 2006 and Ahsan 2024 from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE). The MRC/ICMPD Q3 2025 report (ICMPD, 2025) offers the latest available quarterly statistics for emigration, destination, emigration inquiry, and participation in pre-departure orientation. Gallup Pakistan (2025) offers the most recent synthesis of BEOE data with the added feature of occupational trend analysis for 2011-2024. The analytical framework and comparative evidence will be from the published literature, including Ashraf 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, Farooq and Ahmad 2017, Kaukab 2005, and Shah et al. 2024.

4.3 Analytical Approach

The quantitative trend analysis goes through three steps. Firstly, the BEOE total outflow volumes are analyzed for 2000-2025 in terms of structural breaks, period-on-period trends and the post-COVID dynamics. Second, the composition of skills of BEOE outflows is analyzed for all available years from 2000 to 2025, and especially for whether the share of highly qualified and skilled emigrants has structurally increased. Third, the geographical concentration of Pakistanis in the GCC has been evaluated to see whether it has been reduced and shifted to the west countries or expanded into alternative corridors of the emerging markets, suggesting planned brain export.

The policy architecture analysis is carried out by measuring Pakistan's governance structure against 5 benchmarks derived from the brain export literature prepared for this plan: modern legal framework; professional emigration monitoring system; bilateral agreements with skill-composition; return migration facilitation mechanism; and diaspora knowledge engagement beyond financial transfers. The paper reflects Pakistan's current status of meeting each benchmark as fully met, partially met or not met.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 BEOE Outflow Volume Trends: 2000–2025

Table 1 shows the annual outflow volume and the changes of BEOE for the entire period of 2000-25, and five sub-periods of the period which corresponds to different political economy phases of Pakistan's modern history.

Table 1

BEOE Annual Registered Outflows from Pakistan and Period Averages, 2000–2025

<i>Period</i>	<i>Years covered</i>	<i>Period average (N)</i>	<i>Peak year (N)</i>	<i>Change vs. prior period (%)</i>
<i>Early 2000s</i>	2000–2004	173,011	217,418 (2004)	Base period
<i>Gulf boom phase</i>	2005–2010	428,694	454,302 (2007)	+147.8
<i>Post-2010 peak</i>	2011–2015	698,924	946,571 (2015)	+63.1
<i>COVID cycle</i>	2019–2022	492,932	832,339 (2022)	–29.5
<i>Post-COVID surge</i>	2023–2025*	748,059 (est.)	862,625 (2023)	+51.8

Note. Sources: Shah et al. (2020, 2024); Gallup Pakistan (2025); ICMPD (2025). *2025 figure based on BEOE data cited in ICMPD (2025) showing 525,551 departures by mid-September 2025. Period averages are arithmetic means of annual outflows within each period. Change vs. prior period is based on period average comparison.

The general trend of BEOE outflows during the entire 25-year period is increasing, except for the COVID-19 shock of 2020, as indicated in Table 1. The period average of the post-COVID surge period (2023-2025) is the highest of any period; there were 862,625 departures during 2023 and in mid-September 2025, the estimated number of departures for that period was 525,551. Most importantly, these volumes have not been matched with institutional change in the governance structure over them. The 1979 Emigration Ordinance is working as it did in 2000, with more workers migrating under the same conditions, via the same nine protectorates to the same destinations in the Gulf, in the same skill categories. Governance improvement is not a growth of volume.

5.2 Skill Composition of BEOE Outflows: Has Anything Changed?

Table 2 shows the skill composition of BEOE outflows for the years of available data from 2000-2025. A planned brain export benchmark would assume that the proportion of highly qualified and skilled outflows would increase with time, as a result of explicit policy management of the quality of migration.

Table 2

Skill Composition of BEOE Registered Outflows, Pakistan 2000–2025 (Percentage of Annual Total)

<i>Year</i>	Highly qual. + skilled (%)	Skilled (%)	Unskilled + semi-skilled (%)	+ Total outflows (N)	Note
2000	~3.5	~45.0	~51.5	152,521	Est.
2005	~4.0	~44.0	~52.0	142,139	Est.
2010	~3.8	~46.2	~50.0	363,604	Est.
2015	~4.2	~43.8	~52.0	946,571	Est.
2019	4.1	45.8	50.1	625,876	BEOE
2022	4.7	41.7	53.6	832,339	BEOE
2023	8.0	36.5	55.5	862,625	BEOE

Note. Sources: Shah et al. (2020, 2024); Ashraf (2022a); Gallup Pakistan (2025). Pre-2019 figures are estimates based on available published BEOE statistical summaries and academic synthesis. 2019–2023 figures are from Ashraf (2022a) and Shah et al. (2024). The slight increase in highly qualified + skilled percentage in 2023 reflects absolute growth in total migration rather than a deliberate policy shift.

There is no evidence of structural change in the composition of skills over 25 years (Table 2). The highly qualified and skilled category has also been in the range of 3.5 to 8.0 percent of total outflows for the entire period, which is similar to the range of random annual variation around a stable structural mean of 4 to 5 percent, as confirmed by Ashraf (2022a) for the years 2019 to 2022. As the total volume of migration increased, the 2023 figure of 8.0 percent may seem high, but it is instead due to the absolute growth of the groups. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers also grew in absolute numbers and constituted 55.5 percent of total outflows in 2023. This is the opposite of what planned brain export would produce.

The most striking empirical result of this paper with regard to RQ2 is that there is no evidence of improvement in composition over 25 years. It outright denies any notion that Pakistan's migration management has turned into the planned brain export of its citizens. There would be more and more skilled and professional migrants, fewer and fewer unskilled migrants, more and more migrants going to Western knowledge economies, and bilateral agreements with skill composition provisions would be present. All of these trends are not represented in the BEOE 2000-2025 data.

5.3 Destination Geography: Still Gulf-Centric After 25 Years

In Table 3, the geography of BEOE outflows for some important years between 2000 and 2023 are shown. This is what the benchmark of brain exports would have anticipated, as Pakistan is making efforts to move towards the higher dollar destinations with more professional jobs.

Table 3

Destination Geography of BEOE Registered Outflows, Pakistan 2000–2023 (Percentage of Annual Total)

<i>Destination</i>	2000 (%)	2010 (%)	2019 (%)	2022 (%)	2023 (%)
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	~55.0	~52.0	53.2	61.9	~60.0
<i>UAE</i>	~22.0	~26.0	33.8	15.4	~18.0
<i>Other GCC (Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain)</i>	~14.0	~16.0	~9.0	~18.6	~13.0
<i>Total GCC share</i>	~91.0	~94.0	~96.0	~95.9	~91.0
<i>United Kingdom</i>	~0.1	~0.2	0.1	0.4	~0.5
<i>USA</i>	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
<i>Other (incl. Malaysia, Iraq, Europe)</i>	~8.9	~5.8	~3.9	~3.7	~8.5

Note. Sources: Shah et al. (2020, 2024); Ashraf (2022a, 2022b); Gallup Pakistan (2025). Pre-2019 GCC and destination shares are estimates from BEOE statistical summaries and CIMRAD Pakistan Migration Reports. UK appears low because NHS Skilled Worker and other professional pathways bypass BEOE registration (Ashraf, 2022b). USA does not appear in BEOE top-10 destination lists in any year 2000–2023.

Table 3 indicates that the concentration of GCC over the past 25 years has not decreased. In 2000, around 91 percent of BEOE outflows went to the GCC, and in 2023, around 91 percent of BEOE outflows went to the GCC. This composition change within GCC has been observed in the past few years, with Pakistan's share rising to 61.9 per cent in 2022 and UAE's share dropping significantly to 15.4 per cent, which is partly due to the policy changes in GCC countries (Saudi Arabia expanded recruitment efforts, whereas UAE tightened visa requirements) and not due to Pakistan-side governance management. The UK's BEOE share of 0.4 to 0.5 per cent seriously underestimates the proportion of Pakistanis working in the UK, as Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated via the proxy of remittance inflows, the UK accounts for 14 to 16 per cent of Pakistan's total remittance inflows in spite of having 0.4 per cent of registered emigrants.

The MRC/ICMPD (2025) Q3 data indicate that inquiries are increasingly diversifying, with 36 percent of cases going to emerging destinations in Central Asia and Africa, 31 percent to Europe and 33 percent to the GCC region. No diversification in BEOE outflow has been achieved as yet as a result of this diversification in inquiry behaviour. It could be that there are more obstacles to traditional destinations to GCC countries, such as increased costs for Saudi visas, tougher requirements on UAE visas, and Oman's nationalization policy, than there is proactive destination diversification governance. The demand for new destinations is not a governance one, but a migrant one.

5.4 Governance Architecture Assessment: Five Benchmarks

Table 4 evaluates the performance of the migration governance framework in Pakistan on five benchmarks based on the planned brain export literature.

Table 4

Pakistan Migration Governance Architecture Assessment Against Planned Brain Export Benchmarks

Benchmark	What planned brain export requires	Pakistan's current status	Assessment
<i>Legislative framework</i>	Modern legal framework covering all migration types including professional Western emigration	1979 Emigration Ordinance unchanged; draft policy unapproved after 3+ years (Shah et al., 2024)	Not met
<i>Professional emigration monitoring</i>	Data system capturing professional emigration through all visa pathways including NHS, H-1B, Post-Study Work	BEOE blind to all non-registered pathways; USA not in BEOE top-10 in any year (Ashraf, 2022b)	Not met
<i>Bilateral skill agreements</i>	Bilateral agreements with destination countries specifying skill composition, worker protection, and return provisions	Gulf agreements cover manual workers only; no bilateral framework with UK NHS; no skill composition provisions (Ashraf, 2022b; Raghuram, 2009)	Partially met for Gulf only
<i>Return migration facilitation</i>	Systems to track returnees, facilitate re-employment, and direct returning skills into national development	Return migration not measured; no returnee employment facilitation programme; BEOE records outflows only (Shah et al., 2024)	Not met
<i>Diaspora knowledge engagement</i>	Formal mechanisms engaging diaspora professionals in knowledge transfer, research collaboration, and investment beyond financial remittances	Roshan Digital Account for financial investment only; RDA net investment turned negative in FY2022–23; no virtual faculty programme; no diaspora advisory boards (Ashraf, 2022b; Shah et al., 2024)	Not met

Note. Sources: Shah et al. (2020, 2024); Ashraf (2022a, 2022b, 2022c); ICMPD (2025); Gallup Pakistan (2025). Gulf bilateral agreements partially cover manual worker protection but lack skill composition provisions, return pathway requirements, and professional category management.

Table 4 reveals that Pakistan has failed to achieve any of the five benchmarks and only achieved a partial score on only one of the benchmarks, namely bilateral agreements, for manual workers travelling to the Gulf. This assessment addresses RQ1: Pakistan's migration governance framework has not structurally evolved in any aspect relevant to planned brain export between 2000 and 2025. The 1979 Emigration Ordinance continues to be the legal basis. Professional

emigration goes unnoticed. There are no agreements for bilateral skill composition with destination countries in the West. Unmeasured unmanaged return migration. Diaspora knowledge engagement is not limited to financial instruments which have become governance-sensitive and are diminishing.

6. Discussion

The governance architecture analysis through the Political Economy Theory framework. No reform in the migration governance has taken place as the political economy of remittance dependence does not make migration reform politically useful and institutional viable for the actors who run the system. This phenomenon was recognized 20 years ago by Kaukab (2005). It has been confirmed as still in operation by Shah et al. (2023) in 2023. The BEOE handles millions of registrations and creates regulatory fees. Recruitment agencies work in a framework that was established in 1979. Labour contractors have the advantage of the unregulated placement. Informal remittance channels benefit from exchange rate disparities that could be diminished by formal governance reform. Each of these actors has an interest in not having the institutional changes that planned brain export would demand.

The draft migration policy which is not approved is the most concrete evidence of this. A draft policy has already been prepared for over 3 years, it is yet to be approved by the Cabinet, says Shah et al. (2024). This is not a slip-up in administration. It is a political economy result: Groups of actors who would be required to carry out the new policy (and whose operating space would be altered by the new policy) have enough power to stall the new policy indefinitely. In the context of extractive institutions, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) demonstrated that reform is difficult because the short-term costs of reform lie with concentrated and politically powerful beneficiaries, while the long-term benefits lie with diffuse populations that lack political power. The theoretical prediction is borne out by Pakistan's 25 year history of migration governance inertia.

Ahsan (2024) validated his analysis of brain drain in Pakistan in his PIDE analysis where he stated that the same structural factors were mentioned by Haque (2006) that are still prevailing in Pakistan such as lack of governance infrastructure, insecurity, lack of facilities and lack of competitive wages. The diagnosis has not changed over 20 years between the two PIDE analyses and this is due to the lack of change in governance response. This is the political economy trap: Remittances can be enough to keep the political pressure for reform at bay, and the actors who benefit from the status quo can be enough to keep reform at bay when it is formally proposed.

Tables 2 and 3 combined reveal that there is no evidence of any structural change towards planned brain export in the BEOE outflow data of Pakistan for 25 years (2000–2025). No increase in the highly qualified and skilled share of outflows has been observed and the rate is held at 3.5-8 per cent, around a structural mean of 4-5 per cent. The unskilled and semi-skilled share has been consistently above 50 per cent and in 2023, it rose to 55.5 per cent. The concentration of Gross Capital Formation (GCC) has not decreased, the share of GCC in 2023 is close to the share of GCC in 2000. The volume of destination shares in the western countries is still very low in BEOE data, which is in line with the architectural blindness of BEOE to professional migration to the west; but on the contrary it is not reflective of the size of Pakistan's professional migration to the west.

The MRC/ICMPD (2025) data indicate that the behaviour of migrants in investigating is becoming more diverse, with a growing number of migrants seeking information from European destinations (31 percent of the inquiries in Q3 2025), emerging routes (36 percent) and increasingly professional channels (legal and procedural inquiries increasing from 9 to 21 percent of the total inquiries in a single quarter). However this diversification is not governance-driven but demand-driven. Not because Pakistan's governance system is managing their destination choices, migrants are exploring new paths due to the increasing barriers to entry in the GCC region, such as Saudi visa fees, tightening up in UAE, and nationalization in Oman. That diversification would be achieved by a planned brain export system via bilateral agreements and strategic recruitment partnerships. It is being reacted to in the current system of Pakistan.

The 2022 surge has been found to be a return of the structural patterns which were previously observed and is not a qualitative change (Ashraf, 2022a). Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated that the model of planned brain export in Pakistan needs the professional diaspora to take a greater part and the professional diaspora is invisible in BEOE. In fact, the most skilled emigrants from Pakistan are its most governance-invisible, that is, female professionals, some of which emerged from the study by Ashraf (2022c). These three findings provide a strong confirmation that not only is there no shift in the composition, but the data system Pakistan is using to monitor migration is structurally incapable of capturing a shift in the composition if they have occurred in the professional categories that are most relevant to planned brain export.

The assessment of the five conditions given in Table 4 found that Pakistan is achieving zero of the five conditions for planned brain export to be attainable. The conditions and their current state present a sequenced reform challenge: conditions build on one another and progress in the sequence cannot happen without starting with the legislation:

The gateway is the first one, which is legislative modernization. The 1979 Emigration Ordinance needs to be replaced with a system that encompass professional emigration, through all visa pathways, as well as requiring data collection on return migration, introducing a mandate for engagement with a diaspora, and giving legal powers for bilateral ethics recruitment agreements with an NHS England and other professional recruiters. The long pending policy awaiting Cabinet approval since at least 2021 needs to be approved. All other reforms are without force of law and institutional support if they are not backed by legislative changes.

To be able to satisfy the second condition, professional emigration monitoring, the Pakistani High Commissions and Embassies in London, Washington, Toronto and other major cities of the Pakistani diaspora should gather information on the Pakistani professional emigrants who have obtained visas by following different categories, occupation and what type of employer they have and in which city they are going to work. Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated that 25 to 31 percent of remittances received by Pakistan are from less than 0.5 percent of registered emigrants, who are mostly professional Pakistani emigrants in the USA and UK. It is impossible to engage, manage, or plan for brain export resources from this diaspora until it becomes visible.

The third condition bilateral skill agreements with the western countries of destination is possible to achieve by diplomatic discussions and doesn't require

long-term institutional development. Ashraf (2022b) suggested that the bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and UK follow the UK-India and UK-Philippines ethical recruitment agreements. Such an agreement would be made by negotiating flow limits for the recruitment of Pakistani nurses on the NHS, the return pathway for NHS-trained nurses and NHS investment in capacity building of nursing in Pakistan. Nursing has experienced the greatest growth in BEOE registrations of 3,626 per cent between 2011 and 2023, and the governance of nurse emigration is the highest priority bilateral negotiation item.

Facilitate return migration involves connecting BEOE departure records with international arrival data to get the identification of the returnees, and introducing questionnaires about the returnees into the regular Pakistan Bureau of Statistics household surveys. Net migration can only be calculated once return migration is measured, brain circulation can only be assessed once the migration process of the brain has been measured, and the mechanisms of engagement with the diaspora that are proposed in fifth condition will be ineffective if return migration is not measured.

To fulfil the fifth condition, diaspora knowledge engagement, the HEC must develop a Virtual Diaspora Faculty Programme, health and education ministries must set up formal diaspora advisory boards with clear policy input requirements, and the Roshan Digital Account must be revamped with USD denominated instruments, which will remove exchange rate risk for diaspora investors. Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated governance-sensitivity, with capital outflows increasing by 37.7 percent in FY2022 with worsened conditions, while USD 883 million was invested via RDA in FY2020-21 when the conditions were better. Once the governance signals are credible, the diaspora will invest. Signaling credible action is a governance reform issue and not a financial product design issue.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the possibility of an unplanned brain drain and a planned brain export in Pakistan's migration governance framework over the last 25 years (2000-2025). The answer is no. There is no 25-year structure compositional improvement seen in the BEOE outflow data. More than half (55 percent) of outflows remain of unskilled or semi-skilled workers. More than 90 per cent of emigrants still go to GCC countries. The proportion of highly qualified and skilled category has consistently been 4-5 per cent of all outflows during the period. According to the governance architecture assessment, the governance architecture in Pakistan does not meet any of the five benchmarks that are essential for planned brain export. The Emigration Ordinance 1979 is the basis of the law. The data system does not know about professional emigration. There are no bilateral skill agreements with destination countries in the West. There is no measure of return migration. Diaspora knowledge engagement is not possible without financial instruments which are in themselves in decline.

This is explained in the political economy manner, similar to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) and Kaukab (2005). Governance reform is not a political necessity, because of remittance dependence. The existing unmanaged system benefits certain groups of people, which means that they have enough political leverage to block the implementation of the reform, even if it is presented as a proposal. The institutional form of this political economy trap is the draft

migration policy, which has been waiting for Cabinet approval since at least 2021.

As revealed in the MRC/ICMPD data, the demand for managed and informed migration is increasing at a rapid pace among the Pakistani workers, as 525,551 emigrants were registered during 2025 and 30,579 in the pre-departure orientation were registered in Q3 2025, with the legal inquiry rate doubling from 9 to 21 percent during the same time period. It's not being addressed by Pakistan's own governance system, but by external funding of MRCs. Once EU funding is no longer provided, the governance gap will re-emerge. The export of brain has to be institutionalized within the governance system of Pakistan, allowing people to acquire what MRCs can do is possible.

Eight years later after Farooq and Ahmad's (2017) recommendation, it still holds true that Pakistan should transform its unplanned brain drain into planned brain export. One thing that remains the same is the state capacity needed to do it. The institutional way forward for this conversion is the sequenced reform framework: Legislative modernization, professional emigration monitoring, bilateral skill agreements, return migration facilitation, diaspora knowledge engagement. There is no technical reason why none of the five steps is impossible. All need to break the political economy momentum that has stalled the process of migration governance reform in Pakistan for 25 years. It's inertia, not technology that's the limiting factor.

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