

Why are Malaysian youth migrating? Exploring the factors behind migration

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Abstract

Malaysia has been experiencing serious brain drain for several years, with many highly skilled and educated youth choosing to migrate abroad looking for better opportunities. The study proposes a quantitative approach to investigate the factors driving Malaysian youth to emigrate. A total of 257 responses were collected for data analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-Sem). The findings revealed that the labour market, quality of life and career prospects positively significant at 0.05% influence cultural adaptation, while cultural adaptation positively influences the desire of Malaysian youth to work abroad. Cultural adaptation mediates the relationship between the labour market, quality of life, career prospects and the intention to work abroad. Moreover, cultural adaptation has the greatest impact on the intention to work abroad; career prospects have a medium impact on cultural adaptation; and the labour market and quality of life have a minor impact. The study sheds light on the causes of accelerated brain drain among Malaysian youth and makes various recommendations as well as limitations for the study and future research prospects.

Keywords: Brain drain, career prospects, cultural adoption, decent work, emigration, quality of life

Introduction

Based on the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2024), Malaysia's population is about 34 million in the first quarter of 2024, which is about 14.6 million of the youth population aged 15–40 (about 42%). Generally, in the Malaysian context, young adults are referred to as individuals who are from age 18 to age 39 (Khoo et al., 2022). Malaysian youth are generally well educated, with high enrolment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education. The Malaysian government has also implemented various youth programmes and policies to increase their involvement in employment and entrepreneurial activities. Undeniably, Malaysian youth play a significant role in steering and forming Malaysia's future. However, Malaysia has been experiencing brain drain for

several years, with many highly skilled and educated youth choosing to migrate abroad looking for better opportunities.

Malaysia continues to lose valuable human capital as highly skilled workers migrate abroad in search of better opportunities. Recent surveys show that over 56% of Malaysian graduates intend to work overseas, with 81% believing that career advancement is stronger abroad (Sinar Daily, 2023). Low salaries remain a critical push factor, with 65.6% of graduates in 2021 earning less than RM2,000 per month (Business Today, 2024). The situation is more severe in STEM fields, where underinvestment, inadequate research facilities and limited commercialisation opportunities contribute to the outflow of talent (Business Today, 2024). Furthermore, since 2010, more than 2,800 state-funded scholars have chosen not to return to Malaysia after completing studies overseas, reflecting dissatisfaction with local job prospects and career growth (SCMP, 2025). Beyond wages and opportunities, a perceived lack of meritocracy and political instability further motivates skilled Malaysians to seek more equitable systems abroad (TalentCorp, 2023). Human capital is one of the vital components of a high-income nation. Malaysia's vision to transform into a high-income and knowledge-based economy by 2020 has been impeded due to the severe outflow of highly skilled human capital, with one skilled Malaysian leaving the country for every ten born, which is double the global average (World Bank, 2011). Nonetheless, the outflow of talented, young, and energetic human capital undermines innovations and technological advancement, which are crucial for the country's economic growth and advancement. According to Rais and Peredayanko (2022), persistent brain drain may lead to structural problems, i.e., a weak economy, a middle-income trap, and a lack of job opportunities.

The Human Resource Minister of Malaysia confirmed that in 2023, out of the 1.8 million Malaysians working abroad, 1.13 million (54%) work in Singapore, a neighbouring country, followed by Australia (15%), the UK (5%), and the US (10%) (Afiq Hanif, 2023). The government has taken several initiatives to attract and retain skilled human capital. Talent Corporation Malaysia (TalentCorp) was founded in 2011 to retain local talent and attract international talent to reduce brain drain. However, only 5774 Malaysians have used the Returning Experts Programme (REP). Thus, this study seeks to understand what motivates Malaysian youth to work abroad. Given recent findings that 56% of 37,380 Malaysian graduates in 2023 expressed intentions to pursue careers abroad, with 81% citing better career advancement opportunities overseas as the main driver (Sinar Daily, 2023). Moreover, as of 2022, about 1.86 million Malaysians, or 5.6% of the working-age population, were reported to be working abroad (The Sun, 2022), underscoring the urgency of addressing this persistent brain drain.

Literature review

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) emphasises the factors that influence actions that are performed consciously (Ajzen, 1991). The theory posits that an individual's actual behaviour in performing certain actions is directly influenced by the person's behavioural intention, which is jointly determined by one's Attitude (AT), Subjective Norm (SN), Labour Market (LM) and Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) towards performing the behaviour in question. A study conducted by Aminah et al. (2022), Tan et al. (2022) and Hameed et al. (2012), found PBC to be a significant factor in predicting behavioural intention and actual behaviour, while Mediran et al.

(2021) and Yurtkoru et al. (2017) in the past have adopted TPB as their theoretical framework on the topic of intention to work abroad.

a) Attitude

Attitude (AT), the positive or negative evaluation of a behaviour and its expected outcomes has been consistently found to predict migration and overseas work intentions. For example, Nigerian health-related students with favourable attitudes toward practising abroad were significantly more likely to intend to migrate (Ajayi et al., 2023). Similarly, Filipino engineering professionals' overseas employment intentions were shaped by expectations and satisfaction derived from prior experiences, as explained through an extended TPB model (Santos et al., 2024). In China, attitudes, together with subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, were shown to significantly predict students' intentions for overseas internships and employment (Chen & Wu, 2022).

Cultural adaptation, defined as a person's ability to adjust to a foreign cultural environment, continues to be influenced by perceived cultural distance. Longitudinal research on international students in Shanghai found that higher perceived cultural distance predicts poorer psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes (Zhang et al., 2024). However, personal resources such as cultural intelligence and career adaptability mitigate these negative effects, helping migrants adjust more effectively in host contexts (Wang et al., 2022). Recent evidence from Malaysia further highlights that social relationships and positive experiences enhance cultural adaptation, while over-reliance on co-ethnic networks can hinder adjustment (Rahman et al., 2023). Furthermore, social contact and relationship building are key to developing belonging in unfamiliar environments. Migrant workers with higher levels of social interaction and host-country relationships reported stronger adjustment outcomes and reduced feelings of exclusion (Rahman et al., 2023). Career adaptability and cultural intelligence also promote a sense of belonging and foster positive integration, dispelling outsider stereotypes and supporting long-term adaptation (Wang et al., 2022).

Therefore, the hypotheses below are introduced:

H1: There is a relationship between attitudes and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H1_M: The relationship between attitude and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

b) Subjective Norms

Subjective Norm (SN) refers to the perceived social pressure from significant others such as family, friends, peers and society to perform or avoid a behaviour. Within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), SN continues to shape behavioural intentions, though its strength varies across cultural settings. Recent meta-analytic work on COVID-19 prevention behaviours shows that SN significantly influences behavioural intentions worldwide, with particularly strong effects in collectivist contexts (Fischer & Karl, 2022). In Malaysia, subjective norms strongly predict green behavioural intentions, highlighting the salience of social approval in collectivist societies (Ogiemwonyi et al., 2023). Similarly, a meta-analysis in the social commerce context revealed that SN is often the strongest determinant of behavioural intention compared to attitudes or perceived behavioural control (Vimalkumar et al., 2022). In China, collectivism was found to moderate the relationship between social norms and behavioural intentions to adopt electric vehicles,

underscoring the role of cultural orientation in strengthening normative pressures (Zhang et al., 2022). In higher education, post-pandemic research shows that academics' intentions to sustain online and blended teaching practices were influenced by peer and institutional expectations, though to a lesser extent than attitudes (Wang & Luo, 2024). Hence, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: There is a relationship between subjective norms and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H2_M: The relationship between subjective norms and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

c) Perceived Behaviour Control

Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) relates to the individual's sense of control over the behaviour's execution (Ajzen, 1991). According to Yurtkoru et al. (2017), additional cultural knowledge must be acquired over time to adequately adapt to a new culture. The greater a person's level of cultural adaptation, the greater their knowledge of the host country and, consequently, their PBC. Schlegel et al. (2021) indicated that cultural adaptation is positively correlated with AT, SN, and PBC. In furtherance, Weerasinghe and Kumar (2014) observed that PCB is the perceived ease; hence, when the perceived ease of acquiring a job overseas is higher, the intention to do so increases. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: There is a relationship between perceived behavioural control and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H3_M: The relationship between perceived behavioural control and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

d) Labour Market

The employment market affects economic and social development (Belchior et al., 2022). The Labour Market (LM) causes a brain drain. Skilled employees may leave bad labour markets for superior ones (Froese, 2012). An organisation's dynamic, global workforce requires significant cultural adaptation (Chen et al., 2011). According to Holtbrügge and Engelhard (2016), employers value emigration abilities, including cultural literacy and adaptation. Due to economic and technological underdevelopment, certain countries cannot efficiently utilise skilled personnel. When they think it's easier to find a job overseas than at home, youth look abroad. Hence, the hypotheses below are proposed:

H4: There is a relationship between the labour market and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H4_M: The relationship between labour market and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

e) Quality of Life

Quality of Life (QL) refers to an individual's overall life satisfaction and well-being, often linked with lifestyle, personal fulfilment, and socio-economic stability. Recent studies show that QL remains a major pull factor influencing international migration decisions, especially among

younger generations seeking better living standards, peace, and personal freedom (Sustainability, 2025). Migrants' health-related QL has been found to be significantly shaped by working conditions, social integration, and access to healthcare (BMC Public Health, 2023). Cultural adaptability also plays a central role in helping migrants reduce cross-cultural conflicts, build meaningful relationships, and enhance happiness (Comparative Migration Studies, 2024). Cognitive and socio-cultural adaptation skills provide migrants with psychological resources to navigate multicultural environments and improve their overall life outcomes (BMC Public Health, 2023). Moreover, migration impacts not only the migrants themselves but also their families, as research highlights that women left behind in origin countries experience both positive and negative changes in life satisfaction due to remittances and altered family dynamics (Comparative Migration Studies, 2024). Therefore, this research introduces the following hypotheses:

H5: There is a relationship between quality of life and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H5_M: The relationship between quality of life and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

f) Career Prospects

Career Prospects (CP) are expected opportunities for progress associated with a specific career. Le et al. (2022) indicated that career prospects depend on employee opinions of their employment and that cultural flexibility boosts career prospects. Migrant workers have lower professional networks due to cultural differences (Keeves & Westphal, 2021). Because of several impediments, Le et al. (2022) stated that migrant workers must be culturally adaptable to work in a multicultural or cross-cultural workplace. Chen et al. (2011) stated that cultural competency and expertise lessen culture shock and improve work experience. CP is the leading cause of brain drain for 70% of Malaysians (World Bank, 2011). Hence, the hypotheses below are introduced:

H6: There is a relationship between career prospects and cultural adaptation to work abroad.

H6_M: The relationship between career prospects and intention to work abroad is mediated by cultural adaptation.

g) Cultural Adaptation

Cultural Adaptation (CA) is an individual's capacity to effectively adjust to a foreign culture when faced with unfamiliarity. Contemporary research frames CA as a multidimensional and ongoing process that encompasses psychological, sociocultural, and behavioural adjustments. In Malaysia, migrant workers' adaptation has been shown to depend largely on positive experiences and the quality of social relationships, while overreliance on familiar cultural circles may hinder adaptation (Rahman et al., 2024). For international students in China, academic and social adaptation are positively associated with psychological well-being, and friendships serve as a key moderator in strengthening sociocultural adjustment (Wu et al., 2022). In Türkiye, acculturation strategies among international higher education students highlight the critical roles of social support, cultural capital, self-esteem, and trust in facilitating successful cultural integration (Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025). In Malaysia's higher education sector, international students still face sociocultural adaptation challenges related to language, communication styles and interactions with local communities (Sandaran, 2024). Finally, behavioural and experiential indicators such as initiating

social interaction and participating actively in host cultural practices have been identified as strong predictors of acculturative advantages (Han, 2022). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H7: There is a relationship between cultural adaptation and an individual's intention to work abroad.

Research methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design, which is widely used to examine relationships between constructs and test hypotheses in a systematic and objective manner. Quantitative approaches with relatively large sample sizes strengthen the reliability and validity of findings, as they allow for statistical generalisation to the population of interest (Bhandari, 2020). A purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure that the respondents matched the research objectives. The target population comprised Malaysian youth aged 18 to 40 years residing in the Klang Valley, as this region represents Malaysia's most urbanised and economically dynamic area, where migration intentions are particularly relevant. A total of 257 valid responses were collected, which falls within the acceptable range for PLS-SEM analysis and exceeds the minimum threshold suggested by sample size estimation guidelines. This enhances the robustness of the model testing and provides sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through both online (Google Forms) and face-to-face methods to maximise reach and minimise sampling bias. All variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), which allows for greater sensitivity in capturing respondents' perceptions. The measurement items were adapted from established and validated scales to ensure content validity. Specifically, six items measuring intention to work abroad, nine items for attitude, and three items each for subjective norm and perceived behavioural control (PBC) were adopted from Weerasinghe and Kumar (2014). Labour market perception was measured with five items drawn from Baruch et al. (2007). Five items each for quality of life and career prospects were adapted from Lim et al. (2016). Finally, eleven items measuring cultural adaptation were adopted from Chen (2019). The collected data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected because it is suitable for predictive modelling and for analysing complex relationships between latent constructs, particularly when the sample size is moderate and the data distribution is non-normal.

Results

Demographic profile

The total number of collected and usable responses in this study is 257. Respondents were predominantly female (57.6%) and male (42.4%), with an age range of 18–25 years old (94.5%), 26–30 years old (3.5%), 31–35 years old (1.2%), and 36–40 years old (0.8%). Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic profile.

Table 1. Demographic profile (N=257 respondents)

Gender			Working experience		
Male	109	42.4%	Below 5 years	243	94.5%
Female	148	57.6%	5 – 9 years	9	3.5%
Total	257	100%	10- 14 years	3	1.2%
			15 years and above	2	0.8%
			Total	257	100%
Age			Education level		
Below 18 years old	4	1.5%	Diploma or below	164	63.8%
18–25 years old	239	93.0%	Undergraduate	75	29.2%
26–30 years old	9	3.5%	Postgraduate	18	7.0%
31–35 years old	3	1.2%	Total	257	100%
36–40 years old	2	0.8%			
Total	257	100%			

Measurement model analysis

By using the criteria established by Ramayah et al. (2018) and Hair et al. (2016), an evaluation of the measurement model was carried out to confirm the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument. Figure 1 presents the proposed framework for measurement model analysis.

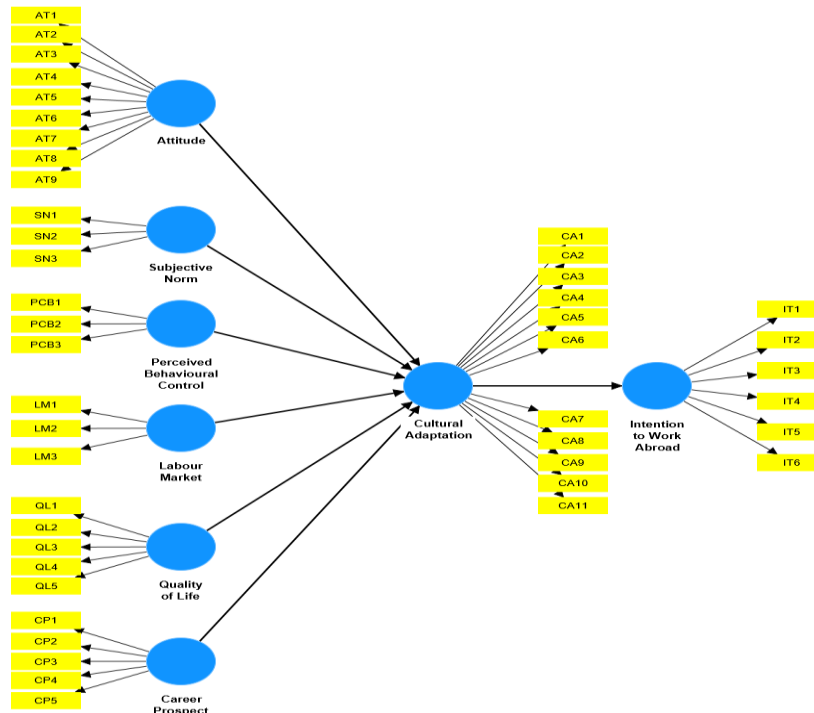


Figure 1. Proposed framework for measurement model analysis

Four items, QL2, QL3, CA5, and IT5, were removed to achieve satisfactory loadings and AVE. According to Hair et al. (2016), not more than 20% of the model's components may be

eliminated. After the deletion of four items, all loadings are greater than the threshold of 0.7, except for LM1. LM1 will be kept for further analysis because the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of the construct is greater than 0.5 (Ramayah et al., 2018). Next, all the values of Composite Reliability (CR) are greater than the threshold of 0.7, all the values of AVE are greater than the threshold of 0.8, and all the values of Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) are less than the threshold of 0.3. The measurement instrument used in this study achieved reliability and validity and is appropriate for further analysis. The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion was used to test the discriminant validity. All the values of the HTMT criterion are below the threshold of 0.85, confirming sufficient discriminant validity among the variables. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceed the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50, establishing convergent validity. Multicollinearity was also assessed, and all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 3.3, indicating no critical collinearity issues.

Structural Model Analysis

Table 2 indicates that the hypotheses of H4, H5, H6, and H7 are supported by a threshold t-value > 1.645 and a p-value < 0.05 (Hair et al., 2016). The opportunities provided by the labour market in foreign countries, perceived quality of life overseas, and career prospects for working abroad positively influence the cultural adaptation of Malaysian youths. Besides, cultural adaptation positively influences the intention of Malaysian youths to work abroad.

Table 2. Path analysis

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Confidence Interval		Results
					LL (2.5%)	UL (97.5%)	
H1: AT -> CA	0.049	0.065	0.762	0.446	-0.080	0.173	Not supported
H2: SN -> CA	-0.066	0.063	1.035	0.301	-0.184	0.068	Not supported
H3: PBC -> CA	0.087	0.069	1.265	0.206	-0.044	0.230	Not supported
H4: LM -> CA	0.172	0.061	2.811	0.005	0.057	0.297	Supported
H5: QL-> CA	0.212	0.069	3.060	0.002	0.071	0.340	Supported
H6: CP -> CA	0.402	0.072	5.610	0.000	0.258	0.542	Supported
H7: CA -> IT	0.498	0.05	9.904	0.000	0.401	0.596	Supported

Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.540 and 0.248 is above the threshold value of 0.19 as suggested by Chin (1998), which shows the model has a sufficient level of predictive accuracy. Effect size (f^2) explains the effect of an independent variable on a certain

dependent variable, and the thresholds of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate the levels of small, medium and large correspondingly (Ramayah et al., 2018). The effect size (f^2) of cultural adaptation (0.33) has the largest effect on intention to work abroad; career prospects (0.164) have a medium effect on cultural adaptation; the labour market (0.037) and quality of life (0.045) have a small effect on cultural adaptation. Lastly, the Stone-Geisser predictive relevance (Q^2) values obtained are 0.30 and 0.195. Since Q^2 values greater than zero indicate predictive relevance, the results confirm that the independent variables contribute to predicting the dependent variables. Based on the benchmarks suggested by Hair et al. (2016) substantial (0.75), moderate (0.50) and weak (0.25) the value of 0.30 indicates weak predictive relevance, while the value of 0.195 is marginal but still acceptable, showing that the model demonstrates meaningful predictive capability. According to Hair et al. (2016), any value above zero (0) demonstrates that the model possesses predictive relevance, thereby confirming that the model demonstrates meaningful predictive capability, although its strength ranges from weak to marginal.

Mediation analysis

The mediation effect of cultural adaptation was tested. Results of Table 3 exhibit that cultural adaptation mediates the influence of the labour market, quality of life and career prospects on the intention of Malaysian youths to work abroad, which is supported by the threshold t-value > 1.645 and p-value < 0.05 (Ramayah et al., 2018).

Table 3. Mediation analysis

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Confidence Interval		Results
						LL (2.5%)	UL (97.5%)	
AT -> CA -> IT	0.025	0.026	0.033	0.743	0.457	-0.040	0.092	Not supported
SN -> CA -> IT	-0.033	-0.032	0.032	1.027	0.305	-0.093	0.034	Not supported
PBC -> CA -> IT	0.043	0.046	0.035	1.241	0.215	-0.021	0.117	Not supported
LM -> CA -> IT	0.086	0.089	0.032	2.685	0.007	0.028	0.154	Supported
QL -> CA -> IT	0.106	0.106	0.038	2.806	0.005	0.035	0.182	Supported
CP -> CA -> IT	0.2	0.2	0.04	4.959	0.000	0.125	0.284	Supported

Discussion and implication

To understand the effects of attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, labour market, quality of life and career prospects on cultural adaptation, the first six hypotheses were developed. The findings of this study support the contention that the labour market ($f^2 = 0.037$),

QL ($f^2 = 0.045$) and CP ($f^2 = 0.164$) have a significant and positive impact on CA among Malaysian youth. The finding is consistent with Bozionelos et al. (2015), who found that the LM has a significant impact on CA. The study also discovered that QL has a considerable impact on CA (Mediran et al., 2021) and CP (Yurtkoru et al., 2017). However, there was no support for AT, SN, and PBC (Wen et al., 2018; Yurtkoru et al., 2017). The study found a significant relationship between CA and the intention to work abroad ($f^2 = 0.330$, $p = 0.00$). Past research by Bayram Özdemir et al. (2021) has proven that individuals with a high level of CA have stronger intentions to work abroad and that the distance between their host country and targeted country is insignificant.

H1_M, H2_M, and H3_M investigated the effect of CA as a mediator between AT, SN, perceived PBC, and the intention to work abroad. The result shows that CA has no mediating effect ($p = 0.457$, $p = 0.305$, $p = 0.215$) on the association between AT, SN, PBC, and intention to work abroad. This study's findings are consistent with Sun et al. (2020). Given that most of this study's respondents are young adults, the negligible effect of CA may be acceptable given that today's youth have strong CA. According to Bayram Özdemir et al. (2021), Malaysian adolescents growing up in a diverse community demonstrate a high level of CA, which could explain why there is no mediation effect for the AT, SN and PBC.

H4_M, H5_M, and H6_M examined the mediating role of CA between LM, QL, and CP and the intention to work abroad. The results indicate that CA significantly mediates the relationship between LM, QL, CP and the intention to work abroad. The results for H4_M are consistent with those of Ramalu et al. (2023). According to Mediran (2021), CA has a substantial mediating relationship with intention, QL and CP. These variables are considered push and pull factors, so the benefits of working abroad result in a strong desire to do so and a high degree of CA.

This finding showed that the labour market, career prospect, quality of life and cultural adaptation have a significant impact on Malaysian youths' intention to work abroad. The intention to work abroad is strongly influenced by cultural adaptation. This shows that Malaysian youths are drawn to a higher quality of life, career prospect and labour market that is better suited to their expectations and needs. High-income countries attract more workers for their better career prospect compared to their home country. In the case of Malaysian youth, the lack of job prospects in fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), low salaries, political instability, a lack of research opportunities and a perceived lack of meritocracy are some of the causes of brain drain. In addition, the high cultural adaptability of Malaysian youth in Singapore has resulted in 1.13 million Malaysians (54%) working in Singapore alone. This proves that it is time for policymakers to address the issue threatening the nation's economic growth. Based on the findings, it is crucial for policymakers to scrutinise the issues related to quality of life, the labour market and career prospects.

Conclusion and recommendation

This study investigated the intention of young Malaysians to work abroad by examining attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, labour market, career prospect, quality of life and cultural adaptation. The results revealed that only labour market, quality of life, career prospect, and cultural adaptation significantly influenced the intention of Malaysian youth to seek overseas employment. Theoretically, this study contributes by extending the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with socioeconomic and contextual variables, showing that structural realities such as career opportunities, labour market conditions and cultural adaptability play a stronger role than

psychological factors in shaping migration intentions. This integration enriches the migration literature by highlighting the importance of combining behavioural and structural perspectives.

In terms of practice, the findings suggest that policy-makers should focus on strengthening domestic job creation in high-demand fields, ensuring competitive wages and building transparent merit-based systems to retain young talent. Educational institutions should embed career guidance, international exposure and cultural adaptability training into their curricula, while employers need to provide attractive career pathways, research opportunities and fair promotion structures. At the same time, youth-focused organizations can offer mentorship and platforms to address quality of life concerns and career aspirations. Future studies should broaden the scope to include middle-aged professionals and incorporate political stability, national security and global risks as additional factors influencing migration intentions, thus offering a more holistic understanding of Malaysia's talent mobility.

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