

Turning Brain Drain into Brain Gain: The Role of Institutional Leadership

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22983102>

Abstract

The persistent migration of highly skilled professionals from developing countries to economically and institutionally advanced countries continues to generate significant concerns regarding human-capital depletion, institutional capacity, and sustainable development. This paper examines the phenomenon of brain drain and argues that it should not be understood solely as the consequence of individual migration decisions or international economic disparities. Rather, it is also shaped by institutional weaknesses, leadership failures, inadequate working conditions, limited career opportunities, poor remuneration, insecurity, corruption, nepotism, and weak governance. Drawing on the Push-Pull Theory of Migration, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Capital and Knowledge Spillover perspectives, the paper demonstrates that unfavorable institutional conditions constitute important push factors, while better remuneration, professional advancement, improved working conditions, security, advanced infrastructure, and professional development opportunities constitute significant pull factors. The paper further examines the economic, organizational, professional, and developmental costs brain drain cost institutions, including the loss of human capital, institutional memory, productivity, research capacity, mentorship, and service quality. However, migration can also generate developmental benefits when institutions deliberately engage their diaspora through knowledge transfer, research collaboration, mentorship, investment, technology exchange, and return migration. A strategic leadership model based on internal talent retention, ethical governance, digital diaspora engagement, sustainable incentives, and effective reintegration of returnees is therefore proposed. The paper concludes that ethical and institutional leadership can transform skilled migration from a process of human-capital depletion into a strategic mechanism for knowledge circulation, institutional renewal, innovation, and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Brain Gain, Ethical Leadership, Institutional Leadership.

Article Information

Article Type:
Research Article

Received:
03 July 2026

Accepted:
14 Sep 2026

Published:
26 Sep 2026



Introduction

The movement of highly educated and skilled professionals from developing countries to more economically and institutionally competitive destinations, commonly described as brain drain, remains a significant socioeconomic and developmental challenge. Skilled migration affects countries of origin through the loss of professionals whose education, training, experience, and expertise are essential to institutional performance and national development. According to Tunji Adausa, in *Independent Newspaper Nigeria*, compiled by Dasho (2025), each year Nigeria loses some of its brightest minds to developed countries. Our university once vibrant centers of innovation and scholarship, now struggle with depleted faculty strength, over stretched academics, poor pay and minimal research funding. And many who leave have no intention of returning, leaving behind institutions struggling to keep pace in an increasingly knowledge driven world. This exodus he noted has a cost far beyond the classrooms because when academic departments are left with too few hands, the quality of teaching and research suffers, laboratories go unused, mentorship opportunities vanish and students are denied the rigorous academic guidance they deserve. The result is a vicious cycle he decried as universities slip further down the global rankings, making them even less attractive to the scholars we desperately need to retain.

The question here is not whether people are moving or why people are moving because the reality is that when institutional environments characterized by weak meritocracy, opaque promotion procedures, limited professional development, poor working conditions, and inadequate procedural justice can reduce organizational commitment and increase employees' willingness to seek opportunities elsewhere. The concern is for institutional leaders to reverse this trend to their advantage, leveraging its global academic diaspora as an engine of progress by turning brain drain into brain gain.

This paper therefore examines the role of institutional leadership and the transformation of brain drain into brain gain. It argues that addressing skilled migration requires more than attempts to prevent professionals from leaving. It requires institutions to reduce avoidable push factors, retain critical talent, maintain productive relationships with professionals abroad, and create conditions under which returning professionals can contribute effectively. Some recommendations made for institutional leaders in leveraging the situation are for institutional leaders to adopt a transformational leadership style which give room for transparency, shared vision, recognition, safety, and fairness. Bridging the talent gap through virtual engagement, sabbaticals and collaboration.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

a. Push-Pull Theory of Migration

The paper is anchored partly in Everett S. Lee's Push-Pull Theory of Migration. Lee (1966) explains migration through the interaction of conditions in the place of origin, attractions in the destination, intervening obstacles, and individual characteristics. This framework is particularly useful for understanding skilled migration because professionals generally respond to a combination of unfavorable conditions at home and perceived advantages elsewhere rather than to a single factor.

Push factors are negative conditions that encourage professionals to leave their countries or organizations. In developing countries such as Nigeria, these may include inadequate remuneration, poor working conditions, limited career advancement, weak infrastructure, inadequate research facilities, insecurity, political instability, corruption, poor governance, lack of professional recognition, and non-merit-based promotion.

Pull factors, by contrast, are attractive conditions in destination countries. They include higher salaries, better working environments, advanced research facilities, professional development, career advancement, modern technology, institutional stability, merit-based recruitment and promotion, and professional recognition. Strong institutions in destination countries can therefore attract professionals trained in developing countries.

The framework also recognizes intervening obstacles, including immigration requirements, visa restrictions, financial costs, professional licensing, geographical distance, language differences, and family responsibilities. Globalization, international recruitment, professional networks, and digital communication have reduced some of these barriers for highly skilled workers. Individual characteristics such as age, family circumstances, professional aspirations, financial expectations, values, risk tolerance, and attachment to one's homeland also influence migration decisions.

Institutional leadership is particularly relevant in upholding the conceptual ideas of fairness, transparency, integrity, accountability, merit, and respect to reduce the push factors by strengthening trust and professional satisfaction. Institutions can also encourage retention and return through competitive remuneration, transparent promotion, research support, professional development, mentoring, recognition, and international collaboration.

b. Ethical Leadership

The concept of ethics plays a vital role in leadership as it promotes fairness, integrity, equity, justice etc, because no pattern how a leader might be skillful in the excursion of his roles without ethical consideration, such leader can make a mess of his leadership. Ethics is simply put, doing the right thing at the right time and considering other workers as vital parts of achieving organizational goals. Adejuwon (2024) underscore that ethics is understood in simple terms as the process of determining what is right and wrong or what is good or bad, usually defined in relation to morals and doing of the right as opposed to the wrong and the good in contrast to the bad. In other words, the standards of right and wrong guiding a people, organization, or society are what constitute the ethics of such group. Hence, ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, and concern for employee development, can contribute to organizational trust and commitment while creating environments in which skilled professionals are more willing to remain or contribute through remote and transnational engagement. Conversely, weak leadership can reinforce dissatisfaction, institutional injustice, and professional disengagement

c. Capital and Knowledge Spillover Perspective

The Capital and Knowledge Spillover perspective complements the Push-Pull framework by explaining how migration can generate benefits through the movement of

knowledge, skills, experience, networks, and financial resources. It is more appropriately understood as a combination of human-capital theory, endogenous growth theory, social and network capital, and knowledge-spillover perspectives rather than as a single theory attributed to one scholar.

Endogenous growth theorists subsequently emphasized that knowledge and human capital can generate positive externalities beyond the individuals who possess them (Romer, 1986, Romer, 1990; Lucas, 1988). More recent scholarship similarly recognizes the capacity of human capital to generate knowledge spillovers within and across countries (Ehrlich & Kim, 2020).

However, migrants may acquire advanced expertise, international experience, technological knowledge, professional networks, and financial resources. These resources can subsequently benefit origin countries through return migration, diaspora networks, research collaboration, mentoring, entrepreneurship, investment, and technology transfer. Migration can consequently facilitate knowledge diffusion and innovation across national boundaries (Bahar & Rapoport, 2018; Siar, 2011). This is key to institutional leaders too as they can turn brain drain situation in to brain gain situation through leveraging on scholarly collaboration with migrants to still retain high-quality education and mentorship.

Leadership and Institutional Drivers of Brain Drain

a. Internal Leadership Failures

Internal leadership failures refer to institutional conditions created, reinforced, or left uncorrected by leaders that generate dissatisfaction and increase professionals' intentions to leave. These conditions can become significant origin-country push factors. In Nigeria, skilled migration has been associated with poor governance, inadequate working conditions, weak institutional quality, insecurity, economic uncertainty, and limited career opportunities.

Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) describe the place of institutional ethical leadership for an appropriate conduct, transparency, accountability, integrity, fairness, responsibility, and respect, combined with the communication and reinforcement of ethical standards. Where these principles are absent, employees may perceive institutions as unjust and unpredictable. This is particularly consequential for highly skilled professionals because their qualifications may provide opportunities to obtain employment elsewhere.

Bass & Avolio (1994), asserts that a common defense mechanism deployed by passive institutional administrators in developing nations is the abdication of responsibility, blaming human capital flight entirely on national macroeconomic collapse, insecurity, and systemic corruption. While these macro-factors are undeniably influential, organizational theory demonstrates that institutional leadership possesses significant agency to migrate or exacerbate these external pressures.

Nepotism, favouritism, and weak meritocracy represent additional sources of dissatisfaction. When recruitment, promotion, training, research opportunities, and leadership appointments are based on personal relationships rather than competence and

performance, professionals may conclude that their expertise is undervalued. Poor working conditions further reinforce migration pressures.

For Nigeria, these issues interact with wider economic and political pressures. Inadequate remuneration, poor working conditions, economic uncertainty, corruption, insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, limited career opportunities, and weak institutional quality can reinforce one another. Recent evidence also associates political instability, ineffective public administration, political dysfunction, and inadequate allocation of public resources with migration tendencies (Bassey, et al, 2025).

Nevertheless, leadership failure cannot be treated as the sole explanation for skilled migration as migration is multidimensional and also reflects salary differentials, family circumstances, security, personal aspirations, education, international labour demand, and destination-country opportunities. The appropriate argument is therefore that internal leadership failures constitute important institutional push factors that interact with broader economic, political, and social forces.

b. External Opportunities as Pull Factors

External opportunities include the economic, professional, institutional, technological, social, educational, and quality-of-life advantages available outside an individual's home country or institution. One of the strongest pull factors is higher remuneration. Professionals may migrate when they believe that their qualifications and skills will generate greater financial returns abroad. Higher salaries can improve purchasing power and provide access to housing, education, healthcare, savings, and investment. This is consistent with Human Capital Theory, which views education and professional training as investments expected to generate economic returns (Becker, 1964).

Better working conditions, professional development, and career advancement are also important. Skilled professionals seek institutions with adequate equipment, infrastructure, staffing, administrative support, clear career pathways, specialization opportunities, and continuing education. Technological infrastructure and research opportunities are especially important for academics, and other professionals. Because advanced technologies, research facilities, funding, international collaboration, and innovation ecosystems enables professionals to develop and utilize their expertise. But even though Nigerian situation suggests professional advancement and opportunities to improve knowledge and skills as significant attractions, these are lacking.

Security, political stability, and quality of life constitute additional pull factors. As evident in Nigerian, there are insecurity and kidnap experiences capable to make people relocate to other countries. Basil, & Ehidihamhen, (2026), particularly noted concerning medical professionals, identifies security of life and property, better remuneration, permanent residency, professional advancement, and opportunities to improve knowledge and skills as important migration considerations. Destination countries may also provide better public services, healthcare, education, transportation, infrastructure, and living conditions.

The reality of pull factors may not come to end. Therefore, the strategic response should not focus exclusively on stopping migration, since international mobility will continue. Rather, institutions should create mechanisms that allow migrants to remain connected and contribute through knowledge transfer, research, investment, mentoring, technology exchange, and return migration.

Cost of Brain Drain to Institutions

A major cost of brain drain to institutions is the loss of human capital. Human capital includes knowledge, skills, education, experience, creativity, and competencies (Becker, 1964). When highly trained professionals migrate, institutions lose not only employees but also accumulated expertise and the benefits associated with educational and professional investments. Beine et al. (2008) found that many countries experience net losses from brain drain, particularly where domestic human-capital conditions are weak. The loss is seen in healthcare, where governments and families invest heavily in professional training but may lose both the investment and the services that trained professionals would have provided.

Experienced professionals also possess institutional knowledge that cannot easily be replaced. Their departure can reduce productivity, problem-solving capacity, professional networks, and organizational memory, where remaining workers may experience increased workloads, stress, burnout, reduced morale, and lower job satisfaction.

Brain drain can also weaken mentorship and succession. In education, the departure of academics can affect teaching, research, postgraduate supervision, and institutional development. Nigerian Academic and Institutional Review Board (2024), lamented that the immediate operational consequence of the unmitigated flight of professionals in higher institutions as created an administrative vacuum, resulting in the acute over-burdening of the remaining core personnel, leading to cognitive fatigue and physical exhaustion or burnout, driving the remaining scholars to consider emigration too. He noted that this creates a highly precarious structural vulnerability; the complete disruption of the professional mentorship pipeline. Graduate assistants who are not yet fully grounded in their fields are prematurely thrust into designing and delivering core undergraduate curricula without any close supervision of seasoned experts, which compromises the future foundation of the nation's intellectual system.

Brown & Treviño (2006) affirms that persistent professional migration may weaken research and innovation capacity, because universities, hospitals, research institutes, and technology organizations depend on skilled professionals for research, grant acquisition, innovation, technology development, and international collaboration. Human-capital flight can therefore have consequences beyond individual institutions, affecting broader economic and development capacity. Including, public finances and society as Governments may incur additional expenditure through recruitment, outsourcing, importing expertise, or sending citizens abroad for services that could otherwise be provided domestically.

The alternative to these consequences is strategic institutional responsiveness, rooted in competitive and equitable remuneration, improved working conditions, transparent promotion, professional development, research funding, mentorship, succession planning, diaspora

engagement, return incentives, and knowledge-transfer programmes can help preserve and multiply human capital.

Strategic Leadership Model for Converting Brain Drain into Brain Gain

To address these challenges effectively, institutional leaders must undergo a paradigm shift, transitioning from framework of retaining human capital defensively to an offensive strategy of brain circulation. This is because today's technology, geographical barriers are no longer insurmountable. Nigerian Academic and Institutional Leadership Review Board (2024), asserts that brain circulation recognizes that while physical relocation may be driven by macroeconomic factors, intellectual capital can remain fluidly accessible across borders through strategic technology – driven networks. The proposed Strategic Leadership Model does not assume that all professionals can or should be prevented from migrating. Instead, it proposes a cycle of retention, connection, circulation, reintegration, and institutional transformation. This is consistent with the World Bank's migration framework, which emphasizes integrating migration into development strategies, facilitating diaspora knowledge transfer, and supporting migrants upon return (World Bank). The model is based on three mutually reinforcing pillars:

a. Internal Retention Through Ethical Governance

The first pillar involves creating institutional conditions that encourage competent professionals to remain and develop. Retention goes beyond salary. It includes fairness, professional recognition, career development, participation, supportive working conditions, institutional trust, and opportunities for innovation.

Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) conceptualize ethical leaders as both moral persons and moral managers. Brown and Treviño (2006) further emphasize the influence of ethical leadership on employee attitudes and behaviours. And as stated by Adejuwon (2024), “the moral expectation on leadership involves being inter – personally involved with others in an acceptable manner as dictated by the norms of the organization.” This will motivate workers to put in their best without necessarily consider the pay. Ethical governance should therefore incorporate integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, merit, participation, respect, responsibility, and justice.

Strategic retention requires merit-based recruitment and promotion, competitive remuneration, employee welfare, professional development, research support, innovation, and participatory leadership. Objective performance assessment and transparent appointments can strengthen employees' confidence that their contributions are valued.

Compensation should reflect qualifications, responsibilities, experience, workload, and market conditions. Welfare should include healthcare, retirement benefits, leave, and professional support. Career development should involve training, scholarships, postgraduate opportunities, mentoring, research support, and leadership development.

Investment in laboratories, digital infrastructure, research funding, innovation centres, and international partnerships can also make domestic institutions more attractive. Ethical leadership

therefore becomes not only a personal quality but an institutional governance system (Brown et al., 2005).

b. Diaspora Engagement and Mobilization

Internal retention cannot eliminate all skilled migration. Professionals will continue to move because of international labour markets, career opportunities, education, family considerations, security, and personal aspirations. Migration should therefore not sever relationships between professionals and their home institutions. The World Bank thus recommends engaging diaspora and returnees to promote knowledge transfer and strengthen integration into the global economy (World Bank). Diaspora professionals should also be holders of expertise, research experience, technology, managerial knowledge, international networks, entrepreneurship, and institutional relationships.

Effective engagement requires talent databases, professional networks, virtual platforms, mentoring, research collaboration, and investment opportunities. Institutions should identify professionals' qualifications, expertise, research interests, willingness to mentor, and interest in temporary or permanent return. Research on Nigerian diaspora intellectuals indicates that informal mechanisms such as mentorship, conferences, research networks, and co-authored publications already provide important channels of knowledge transfer, although formal mechanisms remain less developed ((Ndiangui, 2020)..

Digital technologies can further facilitate online lectures, mentoring, research supervision, consultancy, and collaborative research. Physical absence therefore does not necessarily mean institutional absence. Diaspora networks can provide capital, technology, information, and business networks (World Bank). Alausa as compiled by Dasho (2025), asserts that institutional leaders should encourage joint projects where foreign – based scholars work hand in hand with local academics. Such partnerships would build research capacity, expose Nigerian universities to global best practices, and open doors for joint publications, grants and international recognition.

c. Returnee Talent Reintegration

Returned migration does not automatically produce brain gain. Returning professionals require institutions capable of utilizing the knowledge and skills they have acquired abroad. The reintegration system should include recognition of international qualifications, appropriate professional placement, adequate resources, professional autonomy, meaningful responsibilities, research opportunities, and opportunities for innovation and leadership. Research on Nigerian diaspora knowledge transfer indicates that successful transfer partly depends on institutional absorptive capacity (Wang, Azumah, & Wang, 2024).

Returnees can contribute through the introduction of technologies, management practices, international standards, research methods, quality-assurance systems, and professional networks. Their contribution can be multiplied through mentoring, staff training, postgraduate supervision, curriculum development, research, and technology transfer.

Circular migration mechanisms can also be valuable. Visiting professorships, short-term fellowships, technical consultancy, joint appointments, and periodic professional service can sustain knowledge circulation where permanent return is impractical. The World Bank identifies return migration and diaspora engagement as complementary strategies for maximizing the developmental benefits of high-skilled mobility (World Bank, 2023).

Other strategies identified are:

d. Sabbaticals in Nigeria

Institutional leaders should create opportunities for Nigerian scholars abroad to spend sabbatical periods teaching and conducting research in Nigeria universities which will transfer expertise to students and junior faculty (Dasho, 2025). This is vital as it will also breed cross cultural knowledge which enhances performance for both students and faculty members.

e. Implementation of non-monetary Total Rewards Frameworks

The World Bank emphasizes that local public and private institutions cannot compete directly with Western base salaries, so leadership must leverage alternative value propositions. This includes offering accelerated institutional promotion tracks, institutional funding for local research publications, structured mental health support systems, and the provision of subsidized essential amenities such as continuous solar power or institutional housing within university and hospital campuses (2023).

f. Aggressive Deployment of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to modernize local infrastructure because of the primary driver of migration among top-tier consultants and researchers according to Eze & Amadi (2025) is the profound frustration of operating in broken technological landscapes where treatable patients die due to lack of diagnostic equipment, or scientific experiments fail due to grid instability. By bypassing slow government funding structures, innovative leaders can secure private investments to equip diagnostic laboratories, build independent solar micro grids, and digitize medical records and university administrative processes. Providing professionals with a modern, functional space to practice their craft eliminates a major psychological driver of the emigration urge.

Policy Recommendations for Institutional Leaders

Transforming brain drain into brain gain requires Nigerian institutions to move from reactive responses to skilled migration toward proactive human-capital strategies. Three interconnected priorities are particularly important: operational transparency, digital diaspora infrastructure, and sustainable incentive systems.

i. Operational Transparency

Recruitment, promotion, appointments, resource allocation, research funding, procurement, and disciplinary procedures should be based on clear and consistently applied criteria. Ethical leadership requires not only ethical behaviour by leaders but also systems that make ethical conduct visible and enforceable (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

Institutions should publish recruitment and promotion criteria, strengthen financial and administrative accountability, establish grievance and whistle-blowing mechanisms, and

communicate regularly with employees about institutional priorities and decisions. Transparent systems can reduce perceptions of nepotism, corruption, favouritism, and arbitrary decision-making.

Transparency should also apply to diaspora programmes. Nigerians abroad should have clear information concerning opportunities, selection processes, institutional responsibilities, and mechanisms for managing their contributions. The OECD (2023) emphasizes the importance of accessible and clear information in transparent institutional and incentive systems.

ii. Develop Digital Diaspora Infrastructure

Nigeria should develop stronger digital systems for connecting diaspora professionals with universities, hospitals, research institutions, businesses, professional associations, and government agencies. National and institutional diaspora portal could provide information on research opportunities, fellowships, mentoring, virtual teaching, consultancy, investment, return and reintegration programmes, and institutional skills gaps. Secure diaspora talent databases should identify professional expertise, research interests, institutional affiliations, mentoring capacity, willingness to collaborate, and interest in temporary or permanent return. Such systems must respect privacy, security, and data-protection principles, consistent with OECD (2022) guidance.

Digital platforms can facilitate virtual mentorship, joint research, postgraduate supervision, seminars, collaborative grant writing, professional training, and technical consultation. This would allow professionals in the other countries to contribute without immediately relocating. The World Bank (2023) similarly identifies diaspora knowledge transfer as an important means of increasing the developmental benefits of migration. Digital infrastructure should therefore be regarded as brain-circulation infrastructure, not merely as an administrative convenience.

iii. Establish Sustainable Incentive Systems

Financial remuneration remains important, but salary increases alone cannot solve the brain-drain challenge. Professionals also value career progression, research opportunities, recognition, autonomy, infrastructure, fairness, and meaningful professional contribution. Nigerian institutions should combine financially sustainable remuneration with performance-based incentives, career-development opportunities, professional recognition, research grants, and incentives for diaspora knowledge transfer. Contributions such as mentoring, virtual teaching, joint research, technical assistance, consultancy, and professional training should receive formal institutional recognition (Mugimu, 2011).

Incentives should strengthen institutions rather than create isolated privileged individuals. For example, returning researchers should receive not only personal support but also research assistants, equipment, administrative assistance, and opportunities to transfer knowledge to colleagues and students. OECD (2023) emphasizes clear objectives, transparent procedures, accessible information, and evaluation in incentive systems. The establishment of sustainable incentive however is not concentrated on migrate professionals and returnees alone but those laboring, so that the urge of leaving will be minimized.

Conclusion

This paper examined skilled human-capital migration and the role of ethical and institutional leadership in transforming brain drain into brain gain. It established that brain drain is not merely a migration phenomenon but is closely connected to leadership quality, governance, institutional conditions, economic opportunities, and professional environments.

The analysis demonstrates that skilled migration results from interacting push and pull factors. In Nigeria, significant push factors include inadequate remuneration, poor working conditions, limited career advancement, weak infrastructure, insecurity, corruption, nepotism, weak governance, inadequate research opportunities, and insufficient professional recognition. Pull factors include better salaries, advanced technology, professional development, research opportunities, job security, political stability, and improved living conditions.

Institutional and leadership failures are particularly important because they can intensify dissatisfaction and turnover intentions. Where professionals experience unfairness, weak accountability, non-meritocratic promotion, limited participation, poor welfare, and inadequate professional development, their organizational commitment may decline. This can create a cycle in which institutional injustice produces dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction contributes to migration, and migration further weakens institutional capacity.

The paper also highlights the costs brain drain to institutions. The departure of experienced professionals can result in the loss of human capital, institutional memory, research capacity, mentorship, productivity, succession, and service quality. These costs are particularly significant in healthcare, education, research, engineering, and public administration. Diaspora engagement is central to this transformation. Digital technology provides an important mechanism for this engagement. Virtual teaching, mentoring, research collaboration, consultancy, conferences, and professional training can enable diaspora professionals to contribute without immediately relocating. Digital infrastructure can therefore reduce the effects of geographical distance and facilitate continuous knowledge circulation.

The central lesson is therefore not that skilled migration must be eliminated, but that institutions must become sufficiently ethical, transparent, innovative, connected, and absorptive to ensure that human-capital mobility contributes to national development. When professionals remain, institutions should provide conditions that enable them to flourish. When they migrate, institutions should maintain productive relationships with them. When they return, institutions should provide the resources and autonomy necessary for them to transfer and multiply their knowledge.

Brain drain can thus become brain gain when ethical governance, strategic leadership, diaspora engagement, digital connectivity, talent retention, and effective reintegration operate together as parts of a coherent institutional strategy. In this sense, the future of skilled migration should not be defined only by how many professionals leave or return, but by how effectively institutions transform the knowledge, networks, skills, and experience associated with human mobility into sustainable institutional and national development.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **Globenix Multidisciplinary Journal**, ISSN 3139-0870 (Online). In Volume 2, Issue 5 (September - October) – 2026. The journal is published and managed by **Globenix Publisher**.

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

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