[**Exporting talent**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1728998/exporting-talent)

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PAKISTAN is one of the few countries that pushes its top talent to leave their motherland. This has been happening since independence but the year 2022 has witnessed the highest number in the country’s 75-year history.

It is estimated that around 765,000 people left Pakistan in 2022, including 92,000 highly educated individuals such as doctors, engineers, computer scientists, business executives, and young people with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees.

It is expected that more than a million young Pakistanis would fly out in the year 2023. A recent survey by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics shows that close to 40 per cent of Pakistanis wish to leave the country.

One argument we often hear by those at the helm is that these people will send back remittances that will help Pakistan earn more foreign exchange. But at what cost? Do we realise the intellectual, economic, political and social vacuum this brain drain creates?

Young Pakistanis graduating from top-tier engineering universities, medical colleges, and business schools are poised to leave the country in droves, the very people who have the potential to build this country’s economy and society.

But, the state prefers them to become ‘overseas Pakistanis’. Consecutive governments take pride when overseas Pakistanis give charity here and there. What the state has failed to recognise is the actual contribution these people could have made by being active citizens of the country they have lived in.

The space for freedom is shrinking with every passing day.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is what makes these brilliant minds leave their ageing parents, caring siblings, childhood friends, the streets they played in, the food they love, the languages they spoke all their lives, the spirituality of the azan, the festivals they enjoyed, the chaiat dhabas, the people they care for the most, and above all the motherland they always wanted to serve.

Scarcity of economic opportunities is one of the major reasons, but this is not the only factor. The space for freedom is shrinking with every passing day. Not having complete liberty to practise one’s religion, curtailed freedom to express one’s genuine views without any fear of consequences, the absence of independence an adult needs, and restricted physical mobility, especially for women, are driving genius out of Pakistan.

Educated youth get more frustrated when they step out of college and start interacting with government functionaries. From something as simple as getting CNICs or domicile certificates to buying property, complex government processes and the importance of ‘connections’ to get work done drives the last nail in the coffin.

The more they visit government offices, the harder they are pushed to bribe officials for anything that is their fundamental citizenry right. On the other hand, they see their influential peers turning things around on a ‘phone call’, without even visiting an office.

Safety of life and security of property also drive people out of Pakistan. For instance, this month a young undergraduate student was killed right in front of his academic institution in Karachi. There have been similar incidents as the crime graph goes up. The state has been unfair to this country’s most talented and dedicated young citizens.

Foreign scholarship programmes for graduate studies are good opportunities for younger people, especially for those who are not able to afford such an education otherwise.

However, in the long run, a large number of the recipients of these scholarships from the US, the UK, Germany and Europe prefer not to stay in Pakistan, even though the scholarships being awarded to provide these young people schooling and training can help them build their country. But after graduating from the programmes, these same students do not see any value in staying here.

Remittances can be good for our country, but this alone cannot be a permanent solution to our economic problems. The real hope for Pakistan lies in retaining its trained brains and educated youth.

No civilised nation exports its top talent just to attract some forex. We live in a country where more than half of the children of school-going age will never see the inside of a classroom.

Almost 95pc of the ones who are lucky enough to get enrolled in public or low-cost private schools drop out before they reach the undergraduate level. Imagine what is left in Pakistan when those graduating from the top schools, colleges and universities are departing for good. The country needs to act if it wants a vibrant citizenry, thriving democracy and a growing economy.

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