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EDUCATIONAL TRANSIT AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES: SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS OF RURAL-TO-URBAN STUDENT MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT

The educational migration from rural to urban areas tends to be either presented as a vehicle for upward mobility or as a "brain drain" for sending areas. This paper will argue that both framings are incomplete. It is a multilevel lens to explore education-motivated migration, including children moving with caregivers; household migration to access urban schools; rural-origin students moving to undertake tertiary education; daily commuters and return or repeat educational migration. The four related mechanisms identified in a narrative synthesis are: the variably distributed geography of educational provision, socioeconomic selection into mobility, inequities in educational experiences and transitions, and the redistribution of human, financial and social resources from origin to destination place. The evidence from China is particularly rich, with comparative evidence from South Africa, the United States, Italy, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Australia, Brazil and other contexts showing some repeated mechanisms and some that are context specific. Mobility can enhance access to educational opportunities and long-term success, but it may only benefit those who have the capacity to take advantage of it, and in the context of school quality, admission policies and post-study labour-market access. Rural schools and communities can also be weakened by selective outflows and destinations can limit student advancement and/or segment students. The paper proposes a place-sensitive policy framework, which features portable education entitlements, population responsive funding, enhanced rural provision, transition supports and regional graduate employment strategies. The goal of the central policy must not be to limit student mobility, but to truly make it a choice and ensure that opportunity is not tied to the capacity of the family to move.

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Introduction

Spatial organization of educational opportunity. Young people and families tend to move towards employment and higher education, which are often located in clusters of schools, colleges, universities, and qualified teachers. However, "rural-to-urban student migration" isn't an identical process. This encompasses children accompanying migrant parents to the schools in their destinations, households moving to a county or regional centre for education, school-leavers leaving home to attend university, daily movements between rural and urban schools and children moving repeatedly due to schooling and examinations. These pathways vary in who is moving, and whom at what stage of the life-cycle, for how long, and what effects?

This paper applies the notion of educational transit as a potential overarching term to describe these education-related movements and the institutional and home-based processes that encompass them. The term points to an action that is not only crossing a rural-urban boundary but is one that is shaped by access rules, the resources of households, school locations, social integration and the potential for converting credentials into employment. It also moves beyond the "brain drain versus opportunity" binary and offers a picture of who gains and who loses from the brain drain and where.

The main thesis is that there is a double and conditional effect of educational transit. It can complement the expansion of a student's educational space in relation to resourcing and choice available in urban institutions, or availability to higher education. However, opportunities are not necessarily equalized as a result of mobility. Place-based eligibility requirements can disrupt progress; place-based inequities in school entry and family's ability to move, and poor-quality schooling at destination, can mitigate the anticipated benefit. The regional-level effects of student absences can shift the distribution of skills and skills demand in the region, and the clustering of tertiary education and graduate jobs in big cities can intensify the pull factors driving students to move to these areas.

The following questions are raised and discussed: (1) what types of education-related mobility should be distinguished; (2) how mobility is selected and mediated; (3) what outcomes and expenses are seen at the student, household and regional level; and (4) what policy architecture can safeguard individual rights and regional capacity. Much of the detailed evidence comes from China, especially with regard to the situation of migrant children and "school-choice" family migration, and studies conducted elsewhere can provide some clues as to what mechanisms are at play outside of one institutional system. This comparison is analytical and not a claim that national contexts can be substituted for one another.

Methods and Scope

This paper is based on a narrative and mechanism-oriented synthesis, not a systematic review or an original empirical study. No primary data, field site or original research protocol were provided. The terms used to find academic literature were combinations of: rural-to-urban student migration,

education-based migration, migrant children's school access, rural-origin higher-education mobility, regional inequality, and sending-region impacts, and were applied in Semantic Scholar, OpenAlex and PubMed on 30 August 2026. Policy implementation, household impacts, student outcomes and return or repeated migration were added to the searches. The synthesis emphasizes reporting of empirical studies and review-level work to inform patterns.

For this paper, abstracts and bibliographic records were the only types of evidence retrieved; full texts were not retrieved for this synthesis. Study information and results are therefore only reported where indicated by those details, and effect estimates are not combined. They are of different types of sources including longitudinal analyses, quasi-experimental, cross sectional surveys, qualitative case studies, dissertations and preprints. The paper does not claim to be comprehensive, in particular for China where the database results were abundant. Internet resources and official government or regulatory documents were not searched; therefore the policy discussion is not an inventory of existing laws nor it is a guide to compliance in a particular jurisdiction.

Defining Educational Transit: Forms, Stages, and Mechanisms

This is accomplished by breaking down the four overlapping categories of mobility that are possible with a useful analysis. Accompanied schooling migration is the migration with migrant parents and/or other caregivers which typically occurs for work, family, and schooling. A family moves when a caregiver or kid decides to relocate to a nearby town or county centre due to the school that they would prefer. One such pattern in China is what is called "peidu," where an adult takes a child to an urban school and the choice is structured by family socioeconomic status (Teng & Wang, 2024). Independent student mobility is the movement of young people from rural areas to secondary and tertiary education. Circulatory or stepwise mobility covers all trips to and from a registered or home region for examinations or school as well as several moves from one educational stage to another. The example of rural students who travel to cities for higher education, but do not stay there permanently, as in Ceará, Brazil, highlights the issue of sustained mobility in accessing education without permanent migration (Bezerra, 2013). Research on Chinese educational remigration reveals why the binary of origin and destination is not enough: young people who grow up in the city can go back to rural areas for further educational development (Ling, 2017).

These forms are associated with different welfare consequences. A child with parents can attend urban schools, but is constrained by housing or household registration or local school admission. A family relocating for a specified school could be responsible for housing expenses, withdraw the adult labor from the family farm, and experience higher living expenses. The transition to university can be a challenging time for young adults who may have changed their roles and responsibilities to care for others, including family members, as well as be facing new academic and social pressures. A commuting student can maintain links with family and the community, but will be faced with considerable time and transportation expenses. The analytical unit is therefore not just "the migrant student", but is composed of the migrant student, the migrant student's household, the school system, and the receiving locality and the sending locality.

The proposed framework connects structural conditions with mobility decisions, to mediating experiences, and then to distributive outcomes. Structural conditions are the unequal institutional geography, the quality of the schools, the quality of the household resources, and the rules of school admission. The desire to move and the ability to do so are both relevant to mobility choice, and only households with aspirations and the means to execute are able to make mobility a reality, as evidenced by rural Chinese households (R. Wang et al., 2025). The quality and inclusiveness of the destination institution, costs of transition, feeling at home and labour-market access are then key to outcomes. The underlying mechanisms are outlined below in Figure 1.

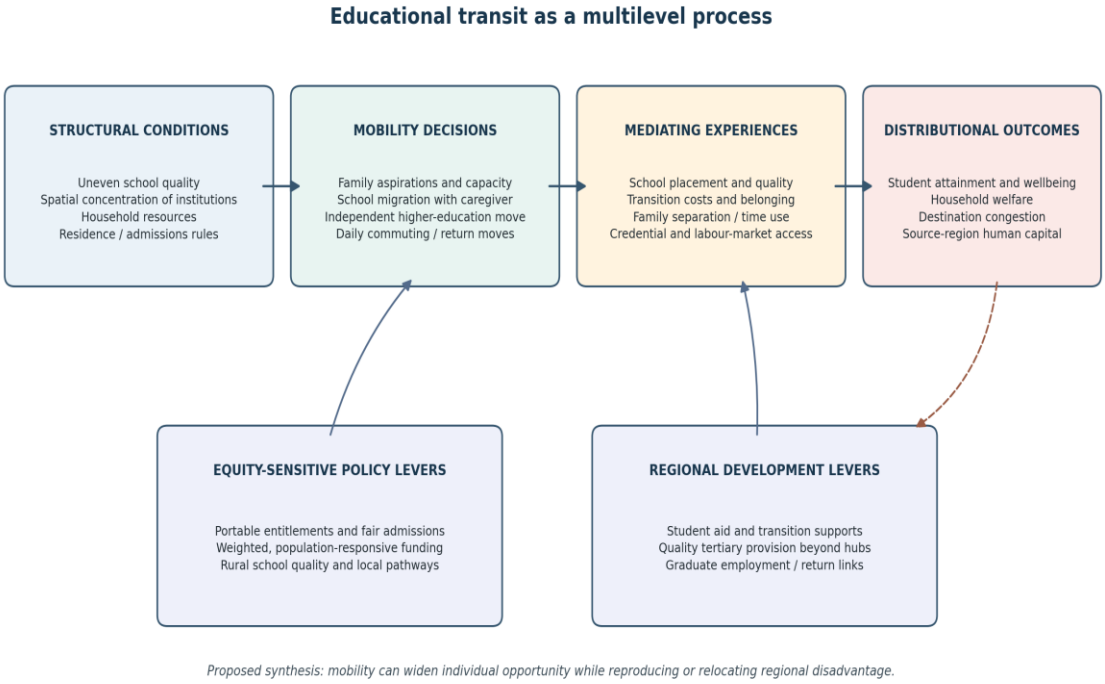


Figure 1. Proposed multilevel framework for educational transit: structural conditions influence mobility decision and experience, which can lead to mobility outcomes which are distributed across the level of student, household, origin community, and destination community; policy levers can intervene at multiple points. The framework integrates evidence of household capacity, school access, social integration and regional spillovers. (Gu & Yeung, 2019; Teng & Tsang, 2025; Viesti, 2019; R. Wang et al., 2025)

Socioeconomic Impacts across Scales

Student Access, Attainment, and Social Incorporation

The biggest possible benefit of educational transport is the greater or more valuable educational opportunity set. There is a strong link between academic performance and migration, but this relationship is not the only link; that is, the relationship between migration and academic performance is not a one-way street: those who migrate out of non-metropolitan areas tend to finish the least education, and those who migrate into them tend to finish the most (Xiao, 2022). The study of a rural population that followed them between 2012 and 2020 in China finds that the short-run human-capital effect of rural–urban migration is negative while the long-run effect is positive, as social integration problems have a negative effect, and the positive effects of superior education quality and family educational processes are exacerbated by the passage of time. (R. Wang et al., 2026). The results warn not to focus on migration at the time of transition only.

The gain is not consistent. The quality of the institution receiving a migrant child is an important factor in urban China. According to a study of a sample of migrant-school students in Shanghai and Suzhou compared with pupils in the school where they come from in their source community, their performance gap is larger than one standard deviation, and school facilities and teacher effects account for this gap (X. Wang et al., 2017). Zhu (2016) conducted a PISA-based analysis of 5,177 15-year-olds from 155 schools in Shanghai, and found that migrant students had poorer performance in mathematics, reading and science than urban students, with achievement differences attributable to differences in student socioeconomic status, and the school-average socioeconomic status accounting for some of the between-school variation. The results correspond to mixed-methods evidence on aspirations for social mobility alongside job precarity, family separation, school segregation and discrimination (Gu & Yeung, 2019). Presence in urban areas is by itself insufficient for education inclusion.

Access may be unequal across migrant groups, too. For migrant children in Shanghai, the public school attendance was correlated with adaptation and access to social relations; family income and parental education, home ownership, and policy restrictions, as well as family resources, influenced who would be able to gain access to public school places (Sun et al., 2019). Evidence on points-based admission also indicates that while policy categories can house a variety of family profiles, advantage in family capital can serve as an indicator for who will be able to go through the process and get access (Bo & Wang, 2025). Therefore, a policy to explicitly "open the door" of the city school could continue to create a typology of access on a school, track and household resource basis.

The situation is further complicated by the long term mobility trajectories. Using Chinese panel data, Hu (2025) shows that permanent migration does not have a negative impact on children's education, while return migration and multiple moves are related to penalties in education, with interprovincial moves being more negatively affecting education than moves within a province, and effects being gender-specific. Return migration is not a "return from exclusion to the city": nationally, frequent return migrations and re-migrations back to the rural areas are recorded, and this tendency is stronger among socioeconomically disadvantaged families around the transition to middle school (Huangfu, 2024). The evaluation of policies should thus be considered along the entire educational trajectory and not at a single enrollment point.

Household Resources and Unequal Capacity to Move

Another strategy for families is to move to other geographic areas for educational purposes. It can help to put children closer to educational resources, but may involve rent, transport, care labour, lost earning and reallocation of labour. That's a choice rural families don't make from a level playing field. Studies show that willingness to migrate is not alone enough: household resources and parental attributes influence the ability to pass through intermediate barriers (R. Wang et al., 2025). However, in South African contexts, the study of 30 low-income rural students at three urban universities reveals that financial pressures and the difficulty of negotiating new higher education environments also have an impact on student wellbeing, despite the students' agency in obtaining higher education (Walker & Mathebula, 2019). Addressing the problems of accommodation, financial pressure, language problems, technology, academic adjustment and social isolation are interlocking problems that were identified in a qualitative study on rural students entering tertiary institutions in Dhaka (Khan et al., 2020).

Household benefits can vary from local benefits. A quasi-experimental assessment of the expansion of higher education in China finds that expansion boosted college enrollment and high-school enrollment, with greater impacts occurring in rural areas, and that households that migrated saw higher per-capita incomes, but some villages saw lower average incomes and worse living standards, suggesting a disparity between household-level gains from migration and the resources that were retained at the place level (Shen & Zhou, 2024). The study on rural–urban student mobility also found reductions in the allocation of agricultural and labour resources, with a disproportionate impact on households that have smaller numbers of labour resources and lower income levels (R. Wang et al., 2024). This does not mean that overall student mobility is a bad thing, indeed the effects on students' outcomes vary by household and economic context.

Sending Regions, Receiving Regions, and Cumulative Disparity

The movement of students can help reinforce the pull of education centers at regional levels. In Italy, documented south-to-centre-north journeys to university are linked with the prospects on the labour-market and with the re-distribution of financial resources and human capital; public policy should aim at mitigating excessive imbalance in space by enhancing the attractiveness of weaker regions (Viesti, 2019). The study of student mobility in the Italian North–South divide further reveals that mobility is socially selective and that the process is particularly prevalent amongst students who experience high grades, high status school tracks and high social status in their school origins (Priulla et al., 2025). This does not necessarily imply that this is a representative sample of local talent; out-migration can be a disproportionate sample of talent that is already geared to use educational access as an advantage.

Likewise, the mechanism is different in other situations where similar dynamics are observed. In Kazakhstan, the students from rural high schools in the areas surveyed were also strongly seeking to further their education in their local cities, in which state scholarships played an important role for them (Kurmangalieva & Abdrakhmanova, 2013). Abankina et al. (2012) conducted a survey of rural school students in five regions of Russia, which showed that there was a strong preference for

higher or vocational education and then to work in the city. In Nigeria, a mixture of proximity preferences and belonging is identified as determinants of choice of University among rural students, with the examination systems and spatial inequalities as determinants of access (Olaniyan, 2025). The evidence here suggests that choice is conditioned: student choices are made in unequal institutional and financial environments, as well as unequal transport and labour-market environments.

The concept of brain drain due to rural-to-urban migration is not necessarily sound. In the United States, longitudinal studies show that migration has a positive effect on the education earned after moving, in addition to its effect on before-the-move education, which suggests that it is not just about selection (Xiao, 2022). An increase in high school completion rates is associated with a higher likelihood of leaving rural areas, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and education is a link between individuals' education and their willingness to migrate (Sørensen & Holm, 2025). The wage premium for non-metropolitan to urban migration in Australia does not materialise immediately and unobserved motivation and aspirations make up a significant proportion of that premium (Rowe et al., 2017). These results highlight the importance of not using destination earnings or outflow itself as evidence of a causal migration impact.

Meanwhile, the costs of the source region are not only demographic. Rural school choice migration can lead to stratification when middle to high-income families choose to attend urban schools, with the most disadvantaged students remaining in poorer schools and driving school degradation (Teng & Wang, 2024). The findings of fieldwork and questionnaires in one county in China reveal educational migration as a factor contributing to the loss of various community members and leaders, less social bonding, and a decrease in collective activity (Teng & Tsang, 2025). The research on the capacity of local schools also indicates that population flows impact not only on the demand for services in their receiving schools, but also on the viability of services in their sending schools (Migration and Reallocation of Educational Resources in China – from the Perspective of Educational Resource Capacity, 2016). Thus the regional effect is not just determined by the number who leave, but whether they are reinvesting, returning or whether there is an opportunity for local education.

Table 1. Illustrative Studies and the Distinct Evidence They Contribute

Study	Setting and design	Main contribution to the synthesis	Citation
County-based mixed-method study	One Chinese county; 128 interviews, 814 parent/guardian questionnaires, and interviews with more than 100 teachers, villagers, and officials	Examines educational migration as a community-level process and documents reported consequences for village social and economic development.	(D. Wang & Yuan, 2022)

Rural school-choice study	Rural China; questionnaires and interviews	Shows that "peidu" migration for school choice is socially stratified and may deepen rural school disadvantage.	(Teng & Wang, 2024)
Mixed-method migrant-child study	Urban China; multilevel modelling and field research	Describes interacting family, school, and discrimination-related barriers despite strong educational aspirations.	(Gu & Yeung, 2019)
Life-course cohort study	China; CFPS cohort observed from 2012 to 2020; endogenous switching model	Reports short-term and longer-term human-capital effects and mechanisms involving integration, school quality, and family processes.	(R. Wang et al., 2026)
Migration-trajectories study	China; CFPS panel data, 2010–2018	Distinguishes permanent, return, and repeated moves; finds outcome heterogeneity by trajectory, distance, and gender.	(Hu, 2025)
Source-community comparison	China; matched comparison of migrant and rural public-school pupils	Reports a large achievement gap between migrant private schools and rural public schools and identifies school facilities and teachers as contributing factors.	(X. Wang et al., 2017)
Rural college-enrollment analysis	United States; High School Longitudinal Study	Finds rural college-enrollment gaps concentrated among low- and middle-SES students and greater SES inequality in rural geographies.	(Wells et al., 2023)
Rural student interview study	South Africa; two interview waves with 30	Shows how rurality and low income shape student wellbeing and the	(Walker & Mathebula, 2019)

	students at three urban universities	navigation of unfamiliar institutions.	
Regional student-flow analysis	Italy; regional mobility flows for 2007–2018	Documents south-to-centre-north university mobility and argues that policy should address territorial imbalance and destination labour-market concentration.	(Viesti, 2019)
Higher-education expansion analysis	China; cohort-based difference-in-differences using census and village/household panel data	Contrasts household income gains among migrant-sending families with adverse average changes in some villages after higher-education expansion.	(Shen & Zhou, 2024)

The studies listed in Table 1 are not comparable estimates. They vary in life stage, population, definition of "movement," country institutions, and outcome measurement, and are not ranked by effect sizes—the table lists mechanisms and designs.

Policy Frameworks: From Access to Balanced Capability

Two mistakes should be avoided in a policy response: the first is to assume that mobility is a problem to be halted, and the second is for formal permission to move to be an adequate indicator of equity. The evidence indicates that there is a five-part framework of mutually reinforcing components.

Make Educational Entitlements Portable across Places

The ability of parents or carers to meet residence-based criteria, to pass through the discretionary selection process and to move constantly should not affect a child's access and progression. In the Chinese evidence, local variation and the rules which rely on registration can lead migrant students to end up in low-quality schools or to be forced out of school at critical transition points (Ling, 2017; Montgomery, 2012; "Understanding Migrant Children's Education in Beijing", 2013). A portable-entitlement system would allow for ongoing access to enrollment, exam, credential and student services as they move. The criteria for eligibility should be clearly stated, easy to appeal, and should not be a burden on administration. This is a policy principle, and not a statement of the current availability of such portability in a specific jurisdiction.

Provide fund education based on students' location

Fixed allocation according to registered populations can be ill-equipped to address the needs of students when they change address. Origin communities should be protected from the decline of

provision as enrolments change and destination districts should be provided with timely funding for classrooms, staffing, language or transition support and services for students. Funding formulas should be based on the actual number of enrollee students and incorporate weights for poverty, disability, remoteness and extra support. Meanwhile, minimum-service contracts and small-school provision or networks can safeguard against the prospect of population reduction becoming abandonment. This does so to both aspects of the spatial mismatch found in research on the educational-resource capacity and migration (Migration and Reallocation of Educational Resources in China – from the Perspective of Educational Resource Capacity, 2016) and research on the effects on the rural communities (Teng & Tsang, 2025).

Improve Local Opportunity without Restricting Choice

To decrease involuntary migration, it takes more than just encouraging students not to move away from home. Rural communities require trusted access to good quality primary and secondary education, pathways to vocational education and training, better digital and transport connectivity, career guidance, and more diverse tertiary education opportunities. Local provision should be assessed on its educational quality and not just as a token school system. Extension of nearby institutions must not be regarded as a replacement for student choice with specialist programmes or employment opportunities still being concentrated. The policy goal isn't about increasing retention at any price, it's about increasing the range of potential options, like mobility.

Support Transitions and Belonging at Destination Institutions

Transition supports should include academic preparation, financial support, housing, mentoring, mental health support, and assistance in navigating the admissions and student services processes. Rural-origin students experience material and institutional challenges of navigating, in addition to academic gaps, as demonstrated by the evidence from the South African urban universities and Dhaka (Khan et al., 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019). In the school environment, the inclusion of children and young people needs to be accompanied by action to tackle discrimination, by placing children and young people in segregated groups, and by providing them with access to enrichment and/or advanced provision which is unequal to that for segregated groups (Gu & Yeung, 2019; Zhang & Luo, 2016). Differences within pupil groups from rural and immigrant backgrounds should be identified and taken into account when deciding on appropriate targeting, rather than assuming that they have the same needs.

Link Educational Mobility to Regional Employment and Return Options

Policies to increase student mobility but not skilled labour in mosharraf areas can increase the territorial inequality. Regional universities and colleges must be adequately funded and have quality protections; public and private employers in less developed areas must be incentivized and prepared to support the recruitment of graduates; and return must be an option, not a requirement, in the form of service penalties. Educational mobility can be transformed into education-based circulation of skills and knowledge through the use of student aid, educational placements, internships, interregional partnership based research and alumni networks. The Italian evidence on

labour-market pull and spatially unbalanced student flows serves as an argument for the need for a focus on higher-education policy and regional demand for skilled labour (Viesti, 2019). Further, the evidence on wage gains following migration for youth indicates that moving does not always and immediately yield an economic return, and that this return varies by youth (Rowe et al., 2017).

In each of these components, policy measurement should monitor distributional results, not just "enrollment". Core indicators include access and progression by origin and socioeconomic status; school quality and student wellbeing; household costs; return and repeat migration; destination capacity; and geographic distribution of graduate employment. Evaluation designs should clearly separate who changes from what movement, rely on longitudinal data, specify clear eligibility criteria, and, if possible, rely on implementation studies that compare.

Methodological Assessment and Research Gaps

Evidence is methodologically heterogeneous. Longitudinal studies of the U.S. NLSY and China Family Panel Studies offer a means to isolate the process of mobility and later attainment, while instrumental-variable, difference-in-differences, matching, and endogenous-switching designs attempt to deal with selection into mobility or schooling (Hu, 2025; Shen & Zhou, 2024; R. Wang et al., 2026; Xiao, 2022). These methods enhance causal interpretation but are limited by their identification assumptions, populations and institutional contexts. While some differences can be seen in cross-sectional comparisons, these comparisons cannot necessarily rule out the possibility of migration effects being different from pre-existing differences in family resources, ability, school access and/or migration timing. Qualitative and mixed-method studies provide insight into the operation of policy rules, family strategy, social exclusion and lived transitions, but the findings from case studies should not be generalised as prevalence estimates for a nation (Gu & Yeung, 2019; Teng & Tsang, 2025).

There are some points that need to be made after this comparison. First, there is a need for more research that tracks students throughout the entire pathway from rural school to migration, to tertiary or vocational education, to entering the labour market and to returning to the school (if they do). The current work typically focuses on one stage or uses a cross-section, which is why, as pointed out by Hu (2025), it is unable to see cumulative penalties in the evidence presented on the repeated moves. Second, outcomes from the household and place should be measured in combination. Evidence of a decline in the welfare of local households while regional development improves illustrates that individual and/or household welfare is not an adequate measure of regional development (Shen & Zhou, 2024). Third, evidence remains highly skewed to China for accompanied schooling migration and access based on hukou, and comparative studies frequently rely on non-equivalent migration definitions. Greater cross-national work needs to identify the institutional context within which they function and to examine mechanisms (such as funding portability, access to school, student support and labour-market geography) to compare rather than aggregate nationally.

Fourth, there is a need to make explicit study of outcomes by gender, class, ethnicity, disability and remoteness. There is some emerging evidence of socioeconomic selection, gender variation in

migration trajectories, and the interaction of rurality and low income, but the available studies do not provide clarity about the nature of the interaction between these dimensions across a wide range of national systems (Hu, 2025; Walker & Mathebula, 2019; Wells et al., 2023). Fifth, a stronger evidence base regarding the implementation of policy is required to understand what happens in practice when policies are changed, in terms of changing access, school quality, progression and wellbeing over time. Finally, future research needs to differentiate between student and household labour migration as well as measure commuting, return and circular migration consistently. If there is no conceptual and measurement clarity, then seemingly conflicting estimates can just as easily be about different types of "educational transit."

Conclusion

It is not always advantageous to rural development to have rural people move to urban areas for education. It is a multi-level process influenced by educational geography, family resources, admission institutions, destination-school quality, social belonging and regional labour markets. The evidence presented here suggests that the benefits of moving can include increased attainment and opportunity, though there are gains that are uneven and dependent. For some, education is better; for others, it is worse, with the quality of education, progression, or moving home being poor and the ability to bridge learning into secure work lacking. The results for sending households and regions can be positive and negative.

The primary policy implication is to preserve the freedom to move, but also to reduce the dependence on moving to opportunities. Portable entitlements, population responsive funding, quality local provision, transition support and viable regional employment are all part of a coherent framework to do so. Such measures should be evaluated based on whether their effect is to increase students' substantive options and to aid in improving results in both origin and destination—not just whether they increase the number of students in the city or decrease the number of students leaving the rural areas. If mobility is not necessary to access quality education, and if the benefits of mobility is not just concentrated in already privileged centres but can also flow between them, then mobility becomes more of an opportunity, and not an obligation, which makes educational transit more equitable.

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