

Princess's journey and the promise of skilled migration

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A worker who invests months mastering Japanese grammar does so in hopes of passing a government-administered exam that unlocks a specific visa category. If that visa falls through, those skills have little value elsewhere.

Economists call this a market failure: the private incentive to invest in these skills is too low, even though the social benefits—future networks, remittances, and knowledge spillovers—are high. This is why families like Princess's make extraordinary sacrifices: they are betting against the odds, without insurance, in the hope that opportunity abroad will justify the risk. A model that works this is where public-private partnerships like *Onodera User Run* (OUR) come in. OUR's "Straight Through" model removes the financial risk from trainees by offering free Japanese language and vocational instruction. The company is reimbursed by their clients: employers in Japan who pay only after trainees pass the required exams and are successfully placed at their work site. The approach has proven both ethical and profitable: thousands of Filipino, Indonesian, and Myanmar youth have already secured stable jobs abroad through the programme.

Recognising this success, the Bangladesh government signed a



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Classroom for nursing home training to prepare elderly care workers. Training conducted in Japanese.

Memorandum of Understanding with OUR in April 2025 to replicate the model domestically. This is a true public-private partnership: The Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) maintains a network of training centres that OUR can use as their training facilities, and OUR will have to recruit proper Japanese language trainers, and bring in skilled staff who can provide vocational training. The partnership was championed by economists and policymakers who saw the potential to transform skilled migration into a sustainable pathway for youth employment. Under this arrangement, Japanese employers co-finance training, while Bangladesh provides regulatory support and facilitates worker protections.

If implemented effectively, this model could do more than create jobs abroad—it could help professionalise Bangladesh's migration sector, curb exploitation, and align labour supply with the real demands of global markets.

Beyond "brain drain"

Skeptics often raise a familiar concern: if skilled workers leave, won't the home country suffer a "brain drain"? Decades of evidence suggest otherwise. Recent research I published in *Science*—co-authored with other leading migration economists from Cornell, The World Bank, UC San Diego, and others—shows that migration opportunities generate more "brain gain" than "brain drain." When migration pathways open, more people invest in education and skill-

building, knowing that global mobility is possible. The result is a net increase in human capital, not a depletion.

Princess's story makes this theory human. Her younger sister, still in school, watches her study Japanese verbs each night and dreams of her own future. Migration, in this sense, is not abandonment—it is aspiration multiplied.

There is also an ethical question worth asking: why should it be Princess's duty to stay behind and "develop" her country? Why must individual youth bear the burden of systemic failures in job creation? Development should not be a test of endurance for the young—it should be a promise of opportunity. If nations truly want to retain talent, they must first make life at home livable,

dignified, and full of potential.

Until then, helping young people move safely, skillfully, and voluntarily across borders is not a loss—it's an act of empowerment.

The stakes for both sides

For Japan, the stakes are equally high. Without foreign caregivers and service workers, the country's ageing population faces higher mortality rates in nursing homes and declining productivity in key industries. Restricting immigration may appear politically popular, but it comes at a profound social and economic cost. The truth is that migrants like Princess are not taking jobs from locals—they are filling essential roles that sustain entire systems of care and commerce.

A shared future

The sight of 900 trainees at the OUR academy in Davao city greeting me in unison with "Konnichiwa" and "Mabuhay" was both inspiring and sobering. Their energy filled the room—the sound of hope spoken in two languages. Soon, I hope to hear "Konnichiwa" from classrooms in Dhaka and Chittagong, too. It symbolised a bridge being built between two nations, but also the weight of hope resting on each young shoulder. These are not charity cases; they are pioneers of a new labour geography—ambassadors of skill, discipline, and ambition.

Princess will soon fly to Japan to begin her new life. Her story should inspire us to imagine a Bangladesh where every young person has a fair chance—whether at home or abroad—to use their talents fully. That is how we will truly honour the promise of our youth and the spirit of the July Uprising.

If Bangladesh and the Philippines can show that ethical, well-regulated migration benefits everyone involved—the workers, the families, the employers, and the states—then Princess' small study room in Davao may one day be remembered as part of a much larger story: the story of how South Asia's youth helped rebuild the ageing economies of Asia, while rewriting their own destinies in the process.



Classroom for food service training to prepare restaurant workers. Training conducted in Japanese.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

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