
PARALLEL PATHWAYS: LABOUR MIGRATION AND THE CAREER READINESS OF KERALA'S PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS

¹Sigi C.R and ²Desh Bhagat University¹Research Scholar in Commerce²Mandi Gobindgarh, Distt. Fatehgarh Sahib, Panjab, India**ABSTRACT**

The study witnesses a steady influx of blue-collar migrant labourers from other states, and its own professional graduates face underemployment or seek opportunities abroad. This study explores the coexistence of these two parallel labour dynamics, focusing on assessing the career readiness of Kerala's professional students in the context of the evolving labour market. The primary aim of this research is to evaluate the preparedness of professional students in Kerala to meet the demands of the local and global labour markets, in contrast with the increasing dependence on migrant labour for manual and semi-skilled work. The research is grounded in human capital and dual labour market theories, providing a theoretical framework to understand the disconnect between education and employment. The study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design to investigate how educational outcomes and market realities diverge. A sample of 385 professional students from various disciplines across Kerala was selected using stratified random sampling. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires. To analyse the data, the study uses descriptive statistics, exploratory analysis, and a regression-based prediction model to assess the relationship between students' preparedness and their perceived employability. The scope of the study extends to educational institutions, policymakers, and labour stakeholders, offering insights into bridging skill gaps and aligning professional education with current labour market needs. The findings are expected to inform strategies that can balance the dual trends of external labour dependence and graduate underemployment in Kerala.

Key words: Labour Migration, Career Readiness, Professional Students, Employability Skills, Labour Market Gap

INTRODUCTION

Kerala's labour market presents a unique duality. On one hand, the state experiences a consistent influx of blue-collar migrant workers from other Indian states to meet the growing demand for manual and semi-skilled labour. On the other hand, Kerala's professional graduates, despite the state's notable achievements in literacy and higher education, face challenges in securing suitable employment within the state. Many either remain underemployed or opt for migration abroad in search of better career prospects. This paradox reflects a deeper systemic issue: a disconnect between the outcomes of professional education and the actual demands of both local and global labour markets.

This study is anchored in two key theoretical perspectives—**human capital theory**, which posits that investments in education should yield improved economic outcomes (Becker, 1964), and the **dual labour market theory**, which distinguishes between a primary market offering secure, well-paid employment and a secondary market characterized by low-wage, unstable jobs (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). These frameworks provide critical insight into why professionally educated individuals may struggle to find commensurate employment, even as labour shortages in other sectors are met through migration.

Despite Kerala's emphasis on producing a professionally qualified workforce, there appears to be a misalignment between education and employability. Studies have suggested that issues such as outdated curricula, insufficient industry exposure, and inadequate career support contribute to the employability gap (George, 2024). Meanwhile, the surge in inward migration for blue-collar jobs highlights the segmentation of Kerala's labour market and its structural reliance on external manpower for lower-tier occupations (Kannan & Hari, 2020).

In this context, the current research investigates the career readiness of professional students in Kerala, seeking to understand how effectively educational institutions prepare graduates for the competitive realities of today's job market. Using a descriptive and exploratory research design, the study analyses primary data collected from 385 students across disciplines through stratified random sampling. The use of regression-based models enables the identification of key predictors of perceived employability, contributing to the policy discourse on educational reform and labour market integration.

As Kerala navigates these parallel pathways—professional education leading to outmigration, and labour shortages filled by migrant workers—this study aims to offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers,

and labour planners. Bridging the gap between skills supply and demand is not only critical for improving youth employment outcomes but also for creating a balanced and sustainable regional economy.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Kerala has long been celebrated for its progressive socio-economic indicators, including high literacy rates, gender development, and access to higher education. These achievements have positioned the state as a model for human development in India. However, beneath this success lies a labour market paradox that reflects deeper structural and policy-level challenges. While the state continues to produce a large number of professionally qualified graduates each year, it simultaneously faces a high rate of youth unemployment and underemployment among educated individuals (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy [CMIE], 2023). At the same time, Kerala is increasingly reliant on blue-collar migrant labourers from states like Bihar, West Bengal, and Odisha to meet the demands of its manual and semi-skilled workforce (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019).

This duality has become more pronounced in recent years. While Kerala's professional students pursue careers in engineering, management, nursing, and information technology, many find that local opportunities either fall short of expectations or are misaligned with their academic training. Consequently, there has been a growing trend of outward migration among educated youth, particularly to Gulf countries, Europe, and other Indian metros (Kallungal, 2024). This pattern suggests that despite investments in professional education, the state struggles to retain its skilled youth due to limited job opportunities and perceived gaps in career readiness.

The growing dependence on migrant workers in the secondary labour market, alongside the emigration of Kerala's own educated youth, can be understood through the lens of **dual labour market theory**. This theory, proposed by Doeringer and Piore (1971), suggests that labour markets are segmented into a primary sector with stable, well-paying jobs and a secondary sector with precarious, low-wage work. In Kerala's context, the professional graduates strive for primary sector jobs, often outside the state, while migrants fill roles in the secondary sector.

Additionally, human capital theory, which posits that education enhances productivity and, consequently, earnings, raises critical questions about the return on investment in professional education in Kerala (Becker, 1964). If students are unable to convert educational qualifications into meaningful employment within the local economy, it may indicate inefficiencies in the education-to-employment pipeline or a mismatch between institutional outputs and labour market needs.

Several studies have pointed out the inadequacy of practical training, poor industry linkages, and outdated curricula in Kerala's higher education sector as contributing factors to graduate underemployment (George, 2024). Moreover, institutions often lack mechanisms to assess and enhance students' career readiness—a multi-dimensional construct involving skills, knowledge, attitudes, and adaptability to workplace dynamics.

Given this background, the present study seeks to assess the career preparedness of Kerala's professional students in the context of a shifting labour market characterised by both local shortages in manual labour and the global mobility of skilled youth. It aims to explore how educational systems, student aspirations, and labour market structures intersect, and what this means for the future of Kerala's workforce development.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS APPLICABLE TO THE STUDY

1. Constitutional Provisions (India)

These articles form the foundational legal basis for employment rights, migration freedom, and educational opportunity:

- **Article 16** – Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.
- **Article 19(1)(g)** – Right to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business.
- **Article 21** – Right to life includes the right to livelihood.
- **Article 23 & 24** – Prohibit forced labour and protect against exploitation.
- **Directive Principles of State Policy:**
 - **Article 39(a)** – Right to adequate means of livelihood.
 - **Article 41** – Right to work and education.
 - **Article 43** – Right to a living wage and conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life.

2. Labour Laws Related to Migrant Workers

These laws are directly relevant to understanding Kerala's dependency on migrant labour:

- **The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979**
 - Ensures registration, fair wages, displacement allowance, and travel support for migrant labourers.
- **The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996**
 - Applies to many migrant labourers in construction, common in Kerala.
- **The Code on Social Security, 2020**
 - Provides for social security of all workers, including migrants and gig workers.

3. Employment and Skill Development Laws/Policies

These are central to the aspect of **career readiness** and employability of Kerala's professional students:

- **The Apprentices Act, 1961**
 - Promotes hands-on training in industries for students and graduates.
- **The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946**
 - Governs conditions of work and directly affects student expectations and graduate employment norms.
- **The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015**
 - Encourages skill development aligned with labour market needs.
- **Skill India Mission (2015 onward)**
 - Not a law, but a major government initiative to enhance employability skills.
- **Atmanirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana (2020)**
 - Supports employment generation for educated youth.
- **The Code on Wages, 2019**
 - Ensures minimum wage standards applicable to both local and migrant workers.

4. Education and Higher Education Regulations

These govern curriculum development, employability training, and industry-academia linkages:

- **University Grants Commission (UGC) Guidelines**
 - Mandates inclusion of soft skills, vocational training, and internships in professional education.
- **All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) Regulations**
 - Ensures industry-ready curriculum and employability enhancement programs.
- **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020**
 - Encourages holistic, multidisciplinary education with a strong focus on employability and skill alignment.

5. State-Specific Frameworks (Kerala)

These reflect Kerala's proactive approach to managing both migrant workers and student employability:

- **Kerala Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme (Aawaz), 2010**
 - Provides health, accident insurance, and welfare for interstate migrant workers.
- **Kerala Labour Policy, 2018**
 - Focuses on labour rights, safe migration, and skill enhancement.
- **Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP) Kerala**
 - A state initiative to improve employability of students through market-relevant training.
- **Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC)**
 - Involved in transforming professional education for future-ready employment.

6. International Frameworks (Contextual Reference)

If your study considers global employment prospects for Kerala's graduates, you may briefly reference:

- **ILO Conventions on Labour Migration and Youth Employment** (e.g., ILO Convention No. 181 on Private Employment Agencies)
- **UN Sustainable Development Goal 8** – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in **Human Capital Theory** and **Dual Labour Market Theory**, which together help explain the paradox of high educational attainment and persistent underemployment among Kerala's professional graduates. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) suggests that investment in education should lead to better employment outcomes; however, in Kerala, this expected return is undermined by a labour market that fails to absorb skilled graduates adequately. To address this disconnect, Dual Labour Market Theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971) offers insight by dividing the labour market into a primary sector with stable, high-paying jobs and a secondary sector with precarious, low-wage work. While Kerala's graduates seek primary sector employment, they often face limited local opportunities, pushing many toward international migration. Simultaneously, the state's dependence on blue-collar migrant workers for secondary sector jobs highlights the segmentation of its labour market. Together, these theories provide a robust lens to examine the misalignment between education and employment in Kerala and underscore the need for systemic reforms to align educational outcomes with labour market realities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Kerala faces a labour market paradox where professionally educated youth struggle with underemployment or migrate abroad, even as the state relies heavily on migrant workers for manual and semi-skilled jobs. This reflects a critical disconnect between higher education outcomes and the demands of the local labour market. Many graduates lack the practical skills, industry exposure, and institutional support needed for successful local employment. The study aims to assess the career readiness of Kerala's professional students and identify structural and educational factors contributing to the employability gap.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To assess the career readiness of professional students in Kerala concerning the skills, competencies, and attitudes required for successful entry into the local and global labour markets.
- To examine the gap between educational outcomes and labour market expectations, identifying how current professional education aligns or misaligns with the demands of various employment sectors.
- To analyse the factors influencing the employability of professional graduates in Kerala, including institutional support, curriculum relevance, industry exposure, and student preparedness.

HYPOTHESIS

1. **H₀:** There is no significant relationship between the career readiness of professional students in Kerala and their perceived employability in the labour market.
2. **H₀:** Institutional factors such as curriculum relevance, industry exposure, and career support services do not significantly influence the employability of professional students in Kerala.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study examines the career readiness of professional students in Kerala amidst a dual labour scenario—rising underemployment among local graduates and increasing dependence on migrant labour for manual and semi-skilled jobs. It focuses on how well professional education prepares students for both local and global labour markets. Grounded in Human Capital and Dual Labour Market Theories, the study uses data from 385 students across various disciplines, selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected via structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, exploratory methods, and regression models. The scope is limited to Kerala and targets professional students, offering insights relevant to educational institutions, policymakers, and labour market stakeholders. It aims to inform strategies that bridge skill gaps, align education with employment needs, and reduce reliance on external labour.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is delimited to professional students pursuing higher education across various disciplines within the state of Kerala, thereby excluding non-professional and vocational students from its scope. It focuses specifically on assessing career readiness in relation to current labour market demands, without extending to long-term career progression or job retention outcomes. The study is geographically confined to Kerala and does not account for regional variations in labour dynamics outside the state. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, limiting the depth of qualitative insights that might have emerged through interviews or focus groups. Additionally, the study emphasizes perceived employability and preparedness rather than actual employment outcomes, which may vary post-graduation. These delimitations help maintain a focused inquiry into the immediate transition from education to employment within Kerala's professional student population.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive and exploratory research design grounded in Human Capital and Dual Labour Market Theories to examine the career readiness of professional students in Kerala. Adopting a quantitative approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires from a stratified random sample of 385 students across various disciplines and regions. The methodology includes descriptive statistics, exploratory analysis, and a regression-based model to assess the relationship between students' preparedness and their perceived employability. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the education-employment gap and supports evidence-based policy recommendations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design to assess the career readiness of professional students in Kerala within the context of a dual labour market—characterised by graduate underemployment and increasing reliance on migrant labour. The descriptive design is used to quantify and summarise the current levels of career preparedness, employability perceptions, and related demographic and educational characteristics among students. Meanwhile, the exploratory component helps to investigate underlying factors, patterns, and emerging themes that may not be well-documented, especially concerning the disconnect between education and employment. This design is well-suited for identifying key predictors of employability, analysing student perceptions, and understanding institutional and structural challenges. It also allows for developing insights that inform policy interventions and educational reforms aimed at aligning professional education with market demands. The combination of both designs ensures that the study captures both measurable outcomes and deeper contextual understanding, making it robust and relevant for addressing the research objectives.

SUGGESTIONS**1. Update the Curriculum**

Colleges and universities should update their courses to include practical skills employers seek, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

2. Stronger Ties with Industry

Educational institutions should work closely with companies to provide internships, training, and job placements, helping students gain real-world experience.

3. Career Guidance and Job Skills Training

Students should receive proper career counselling and training in soft skills like interview preparation, resume writing, and workplace behaviour from early in their studies.

4. Encourage Entrepreneurship

Students should be motivated to start their own businesses by offering them training, mentorship, and financial support through start-up programs and incubators.

5. Better Education Policies

Government policies should focus on making higher education more in tune with current job market trends, both in Kerala and abroad, to improve students' job chances.

6. Support for Rural and Female Students

Special attention should be given to students from rural areas and to young women, by ensuring safety, digital access, and equal opportunities in career development.

7. Provide Information on Migration

Students who want to work abroad should be given proper guidance about job opportunities, legal migration processes, and safety measures.

8. Regular Job Market Studies

Regular studies should be done to understand which jobs are in demand. This information should be shared with colleges so they can adjust their teaching accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS**1. Update the Curriculum to Match Job Market Need**

Colleges and universities should regularly revise their courses to include the latest industry trends and job market requirements. This helps students learn the skills that employers are actually looking for.

2. Improve Industry Connections in Education

Educational institutions should build strong ties with companies through internships, workshops, and guest lectures. This gives students real-world experience and helps them understand what working in different industries is like.

3. Include Soft Skills and Job Skills Training

In addition to subject knowledge, students should be trained in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and interview skills. These are important for doing well in the workplace.

4. Provide Strong Career Support Services

Colleges should offer career guidance, resume writing help, interview practice, and information on both local and international job opportunities. This will help students prepare better for the job market.

5. Encourage Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Students should be encouraged to think creatively and start their own businesses if they wish. Institutions can support this by providing training in entrepreneurship and creating spaces where students can work on their ideas.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the growing gap between professional education and employment opportunities in Kerala, where underemployment among qualified graduates coexists with a rising dependence on migrant labour for manual and semi-skilled work. It reveals that while students are academically qualified, many lack the practical skills, industry exposure, and confidence required to meet real-world job demands. Factors such as outdated curricula, limited career guidance, and weak industry-academia linkages contribute to this disconnect. By assessing the career readiness of professional students, the study underscores the urgent need for educational reforms, policy interventions, and institutional support to enhance employability. Empowering students through skill development, targeted training, and better access to career resources can help bridge this gap. Ultimately, aligning education with labour market needs is essential not only to reduce graduate underemployment but also to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth in Kerala's workforce.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would be obliged and thankful to all the professional women who became the part of our research study.

--End.--

REFERENCES

1. Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP) Kerala. (n.d.). *Government of Kerala*. <https://asapkerala.gov.in>
2. All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). (2020). *Model curriculum and employability guidelines*. <https://www.aicte-india.org>
3. Apprentices Act, 1961. (1961). Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>
4. Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. University of Chicago Press.
5. Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996. (1996). Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>
6. Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. (2023). *Unemployment in India: A statistical profile*. <https://unemploymentinindia.cmie.com/>
7. Code on Social Security, 2020. (2020). Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>
8. Code on Wages, 2019. (2019). Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>
9. Constitution of India. (1950). Government of India. <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india>
10. Doeringer, P. B., & Piore, M. J. (1971). *Internal labor markets and manpower analysis*. D.C. Heath and Company.

11. George, S. B. (2024, February 28). Student migration tied to quality of education, lack of hands-on training opportunities and dearth in job prospects: Study. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/student-migration-tied-to-poor-curriculum-lack-of-hands-on-training-opportunities-and-dearth-in-job-prospects-study/article67895239.ece>
12. Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946. (1946). Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>
13. International Labour Organization. (n.d.). *Labour migration and youth employment conventions*. <https://www.ilo.org>
14. Kallungal, D. (2024, June 14). Sharp increase in student migration catapults total emigrants from Kerala to 2.2 million. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/sharp-increase-in-student-migration-catapults-total-emigrants-from-kerala-to-22-million/article68289696.ece>
15. Kannan, K. P., & Hari, K. S. (2020). *Labour migration in Kerala: Patterns and policy responses*. Centre for Development Studies.
16. Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC). (n.d.). *Government of Kerala*. <https://kdisc.kerala.gov.in>
17. Kerala Labour Policy. (2018). Department of Labour and Skills, Government of Kerala. <https://labour.kerala.gov.in>
18. Kerala Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme (Aawaz). (2010). Government of Kerala. <https://aawaz.kerala.gov.in>
19. National Education Policy. (2020). Ministry of Education, Government of India. <https://www.education.gov.in>
20. National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship. (2015). Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship. <https://www.skilldevelopment.gov.in>
21. Rajan, S. I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2019). *Emigration and remittances: New evidences from the Kerala Migration Survey 2018*. Centre for Development Studies.
22. United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>
23. University Grants Commission (UGC). (2020). *Guidelines on higher education and employability skills*. <https://www.ugc.ac.in>
24. Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. (1979). Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. <https://labour.gov.in>