

REIMAGINING KERALA'S HIGHER EDUCATION AMID ECONOMIC CHALLENGES: PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE REFORM

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ABSTRACT

Kerala's higher education system is grappling with significant challenges, including a high number of vacant seats in undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) programs and a growing trend of students migrating to other states and countries for better academic and career opportunities. Additionally, most students in Kerala rely entirely on parental financial support, limiting their independence and hindering economic contributions. This proposal advocates for a transformative approach to address these challenges, focusing on structural reforms in higher education. Key recommendations include restructuring academic schedules to facilitate part-time employment, modernizing the curriculum with multidisciplinary and industry-relevant courses, and revitalizing the "Earn While You Learn" program to foster self-reliance among students. These changes aim to empower students financially, enhance employability, and align education with the state's economic realities. By implementing these reforms, Kerala can not only retain its students but also position its higher education system as a driver of sustainable economic growth, ensuring a brighter future for the state and its youth.

Key words: Higher education challenges - Curriculum modernisation - Financial dependency - Part-time employment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, known for its high literacy rates and educational achievements, is facing a critical turning point in its higher education system. Despite its reputation as an education hub, the state is grappling with two pressing issues: a steep decline in student enrollment and a sluggish economy that limits opportunities for its youth. Although recent initiatives, such as the introduction of four-year degree programs and an increased emphasis on research, mark positive steps forward, they fall short of addressing the underlying structural problems plaguing the system.

One of the most glaring issues is the increasing number of vacant seats in higher education institutions across the state. A recent report by *Mathrubhumi* underscores the severity of the problem: out of 207,115 sanctioned undergraduate (UG) seats in Kerala, 85,552 remain vacant. Similarly, postgraduate (PG) courses, with a sanctioned capacity of 30,825 seats, have 13,047 vacancies. Leading universities such as Kerala University (13,974 UG and 1,727 PG vacancies), MG University (30,352 UG and 5,581 PG vacancies), Calicut University (32,566 UG and 4,122 PG vacancies), and Kannur University (8,660 UG and 1,617 PG vacancies) are struggling to fill their classrooms (*Mathrubhumi*, 2024).

A primary factor driving these vacancies is the growing exodus of students to other states and countries in search of better academic quality, advanced infrastructure, and promising career opportunities. This trend highlights significant inadequacies in Kerala's higher education framework, ranging from outdated curricula to insufficient alignment with industry needs.

Furthermore, the financial dependency of most students on their families exacerbates the problem. With limited part-time work opportunities and rigid academic schedules, students find it challenging to gain financial independence or practical experience during their studies.

This troubling scenario poses a serious threat to Kerala's socio-economic development. The state's inability to retain its students not only drains talent but also widens the gap between education and employability. To address these challenges, a comprehensive and strategic reform of the higher education system is essential.

This proposal identifies the root causes of the current issues and recommends actionable solutions, including flexible academic schedules, integration of industry-aligned courses, and strengthening of programs like "Earn While You Learn." These reforms aim to revitalize Kerala's higher education system, empower students, and create pathways for sustainable economic growth.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To know the financial dependency and engagement of undergraduate students in part-time jobs.
2. To study the challenges faced by undergraduate students, including lack of income-generating opportunities, outdated curricula, and limited career guidance.
3. To propose viable solutions to enhance students employability and overall educational experience.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature and employs both primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered from 200 undergraduate students through structured interviews and surveys. These students were selected from three randomly chosen government colleges under Calicut University, Vadakara Taluk, ensuring representation across various disciplines.

Secondary data were obtained from a range of published and unpublished sources, including institutional reports, academic journals, policy documents, and statistical records related to higher education and student challenges in Kerala.

IV. CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS

Kerala's higher education system, though historically strong, currently faces numerous challenges that impact students on multiple fronts, from financial dependency to limited career opportunities. The migration of students to other states and countries for higher education is a symptom of deeper systemic issues. The major challenges include:

Financial dependency: Financial dependency among students is one of the most critical challenges. The current demographic of undergraduate (UG), postgraduate (PG), and PhD students in Kerala reveals a concerning reality: most students aged 17–24+ rely entirely on their parents for financial support throughout their studies. This dependency restricts their ability to make independent decisions, limits access to additional resources such as online courses or certifications, and places a significant financial burden on families. Moreover, this dependency hinders students' personal and professional growth, affecting the state's economic progress. The table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of 200 students based on their gender and involvement in part-time jobs.

Table 1
Distribution of Students Based on Engagement in Part-Time Jobs

Category	Total Students	Part-Time Jobs	No Part-Time Jobs
Girls	158 (79 %)	3 (1.5%)	155 (77.5%)
Boys	42 (21%)	14 (7%)	28 (14%)
Total	200 (100%)	17 (8.5%)	183 (91.5%)

Source: Sample survey

In the above table Out of the total, 158 students (79 per cent) are girls, while 42 students (21 per cent) are boys. Among the girls, only 3 (1.5 per cent) are engaged in part-time jobs, and the remaining 155 (77.5 per cent) are not. In contrast, a higher proportion of boys, 14 (7 per cent), are involved in part-time work, while 28 (14 per cent) are not. Overall, 17 students (8.5 per cent) are engaged in part-time jobs, whereas the majority, 183 students (91.5 per cent), do not participate in such employment. This table highlights the financial dependency among students, which severely impacts their ability to become self-reliant. This lack of financial independence is a critical factor that stifles their personal growth and the state's economic vitality.

Lack of Income-Generating Opportunities: Another challenge is the lack of structured part-time work opportunities for students. Unlike in many developed economies, students in Kerala often cannot supplement their education with part-time jobs. Academic schedules in most institutions are rigid, leaving little to no time for students to explore income-generating activities. This deprives students of financial support, prevents them from gaining practical experience, and inhibits the development of self-reliance and confidence.

Migration for Better Prospects: A significant number of students leave Kerala to pursue higher education in other states or countries. They cite better infrastructure, advanced academic programs, and superior career opportunities as reasons for migrating. This trend has led to a substantial number of vacant seats in Kerala's universities, with 85,552 undergraduate and 13,047 postgraduate seats remaining unfilled. This outmigration reflects a perception that Kerala's higher education institutions fail to meet students' aspirations, especially in terms of quality education and employability.

Limited Industry Exposure: The traditional syllabi followed by most institutions in Kerala are often outdated and fail to align with the needs of modern industries. This lack of alignment limits students' exposure to practical, real-world scenarios, making it difficult for them to acquire skills relevant to emerging industries such as data science, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy. As a result, many graduates find themselves underprepared for the competitive job market.

High Cost of Living and Educational Expenses: The cost of living, particularly in urban centers where major universities are located, poses a significant challenge for students from lower-income families. While tuition fees in government institutions may be relatively affordable, additional expenses such as accommodation, transportation, and study materials create financial barriers, deterring many students from pursuing higher education locally.

Limited Opportunities for Research and Innovation: Despite some progress in research, opportunities for students to actively engage in innovative projects or research activities remain limited in Kerala. This lack of exposure often pushes students to seek institutions

elsewhere that are better equipped with modern research facilities and funding, further exacerbating the problem of outmigration.

Inadequate Support for Career Development: Kerala's universities lack robust career guidance and placement services. Many students graduate without a clear pathway to employment or further education. This lack of career support leaves students unprepared for the transition from academics to the workforce, further diminishing their chances of success in a competitive job market.

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive overhaul of the higher education system, with a focus on Creating opportunities for financial independence by encouraging part-time work and flexible academic schedules, modernizing curricula to align with global and industry standards, investing in research infrastructure and innovative programs, and strengthening career guidance and placement services. By tackling these challenges head-on, Kerala can retain its talented youth and transform its higher education system into a cornerstone of economic and social development.

V. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

To address the challenges faced by students and revitalize Kerala's higher education system, the following solutions are proposed:

1. Flexible Academic Schedule and Part-Time Employment

Adjusting the academic schedule to accommodate part-time employment opportunities can empower students financially and professionally. By restructuring the academic day to run from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., students can engage in productive work during the afternoons. This approach offers several benefits:

- **Income Generation:** Students can earn money to support their education and personal expenses.
- **Self-Reliance:** This model would foster a sense of independence and financial responsibility among students.
- **Confidence Building:** Engaging in part-time work would help students build confidence and life skills.
- **Understanding the Dignity of Labor:** Students would gain a deeper appreciation for the value of work, while simultaneously contributing to the state's economy.
- **Bright Future:** Students can more easily identify their educational pathways, select appropriate courses, and achieve career goals through broader social interactions.
- **Retention of Talent:** Providing a sustainable study-work balance can reduce the outmigration of students to other states and countries.

By adopting this model, students will experience immediate financial relief, enhanced self-reliance, and a direct contribution to Kerala's economic growth.

2. Structural Reform in Education as an Economic Strategy

To tackle student outmigration and financial dependency, Kerala's education system requires a holistic overhaul. Flexible academic schedules must be combined with the introduction of multidisciplinary, industry-aligned courses to meet modern job market demands. Key initiatives include:

- **Modern Programs:** Introducing courses in fields such as artificial intelligence, climate studies, renewable energy, and data science.
- **Industry Collaborations:** Partnering with industries to offer hands-on training, internships, and job placements.
- **Infrastructure Enhancement:** Upgrading university facilities to align with global standards, making institutions more competitive and attractive.
- **Strengthened Placement Cells:** Establishing robust career support services to connect students with both local and international job opportunities.

These reforms aim to enhance employability, attract more students to Kerala's universities, and position the state as a hub for quality education and skilled professionals.

3. Strengthening the "Earn While You Learn" Program

Kerala's existing "Earn While You Learn" initiative has significant potential but has suffered from poor implementation. To make the program impactful, the following measures are essential:

- **Institutional Partnerships:** Universities should collaborate with local businesses and industries to create structured part-time job opportunities.
- **On-Campus Employment:** Offering roles such as teaching assistants, lab assistants, library staff, or administrative support positions within institutions.
- **Skill Development Programs:** Providing training in soft skills, technological tools, and industry-specific competencies to enhance employability.
- **Digital Platforms:** Developing a centralized online portal to connect students with part-time opportunities, ensuring transparency and accessibility.

A revitalized "Earn While You Learn" program would equip students with practical experience, financial stability, and a sense of independence, further contributing to the local economy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Kerala's higher education system is at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges but also presenting opportunities for meaningful reform. The increasing outmigration of students for higher studies, financial dependency, and the prevalence of vacant seats highlight the urgent need for a transformative approach to education.

By implementing measures such as restructuring academic schedules, promoting part-time employment, modernizing curricula, and revitalizing initiatives like the "Earn While You Learn" program, Kerala can build an education system that fosters financial independence, enhances employability, and retains its talented youth.

These reforms have the potential to address the immediate challenges while establishing a strong foundation for a vibrant and sustainable higher education sector that actively contributes to the state's economic and social development.

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