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University of Warwick & NIEPA Research Project

Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches

Kerala State Report

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Accompanying resources for the project

In addition to this report, other resources about the project are available on the project website: www.warwick.ac.uk/WAHEI. This includes various project outputs such as project reports, training materials, and presentations, as well as other information about the project and the people involved.

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About this report

Th is report is a final State Report for the University of Warwick and NIEPA collaborative research project entitled Widening Access to 'Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches' (WAHEI). The WAHEI project explored the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Institutional Leaders, and Faculty Members in enhancing informed choice for young people as they make decisions about higher education. The project focused, in particular, on rurally situated and rural-serving, publicly-funded universities and colleges, given the role of these institutions in providing higher education to socio-economically disadvantaged students. Of key importance has been enhancing the familiarity of the term 'higher education outreach' in the terminology in higher education in India, within the scope of the study, as a key term denoting the activities that HEIs can undertake to guide and inform young people and their families about their higher education choices and admissions processes. WAHEI included a large-scale, multimethod empirical research study to explore existing higher education outreach practices across states and regions of India, followed by the co-development, implementation, and evaluation of a professional learning module for faculty members to learn about higher education outreach, and final dissemination of project findings and recommendations.

Project outputs can be accessed from the WAHEI website: www.warwick.ac.uk/WAHEI . The explanation of the background and rationale for the project can be found in CPRHE-NIEPA Research Paper 20, 'The Role of Higher Education Institutions and Faculty Members in Higher Education Outreach in India': https://cprhe.niepa.ac.in/assets/papers/CPRHE_Research_Paper_20.pdf.

The project is a four-year research project (2022-2026) funded by the Fair Chance Foundation and hosted by the University of Warwick's Doctoral Education and Academia Research Centre (DEAR). The DEAR Centre conducts specialist research on topics relating to doctoral education and the academic profession, with a focus on inequalities and inclusivity (www.warwick.ac.uk/DEAR).

The project has been led by Professor Emily F. Henderson (University of Warwick) and Dr Nidhi S. Sabharwal (NIEPA) as Co-Principal Investigators, and Professor Ann Stewart (University of

Warwick) as Co-Investigator. The project has been coordinated by Matt Phillips and the project has been supported by a number of colleagues, most substantially S. Arokia Mary, Arushi Painuly, Chandrika, Ragini Khurana, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Sejjal, Evan Zheng, Susan Deeb. The project has involved a significant empirical phase across HEIs located in five states of India: Assam, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Kerala, and Maharashtra. In each state, a team of three faculty members has led the empirical component, including collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Each State Research Team has consisted of two faculty members from a State University – the team lead and an early career faculty member, and a faculty member from a college in the same state (publicly-funded or aided, rurally located where possible). The State Research Teams were supported in the process through three two-day residential workshops at NIEPA which focused on (i) instrument development and data collection, (ii) analysis processes, and (iii) presentation and peer review of draft report material. In addition, field visits and monthly online meetings were held to bring together all team members across the central and state teams during the empirical phase.

This report showcases the State Research Team findings as part of a series of five State Reports for the WAHEI project. Links to access the reports include: www.warwick.ac.uk/WAHEI and https://www.niepa.ac.in/. The report has been entirely produced by the State Research Team, based on the empirical research conducted for the WAHEI project. The report structure and contents were guided by the central team to bring continuity between the reports. All chapters of the report have been thoroughly peer reviewed by Professor Emily F. Henderson and S. Arokia Mary, and additionally, a chapter of the report has been reviewed by team members of one of the other State Research Teams. The report was revised in response to the peer review process.

The final contents of the report have been prepared and finalised by the State Research Team, with editing support from Matt Phillips and Emily Henderson, Robyn Shreeve and Ann Stewart, and as such responsibility for the contents therein remains with the report authors.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context of HE Access and Choice at the State Level

Access and choice to higher education may be considered to serve as a mirror to a country's socio-economic realities and aspirations. In India, the emphasis lies in empowering the younger generation with the knowledge and skills needed to drive national development. Facilitating access and creating opportunities for informed decision-making in higher education represent pivotal steps in equipping youth to shape both their individual trajectories and the collective future of society. This report examines the state of access and choice to higher education in Kerala, the southernmost state of India, known for its above-average socio-educational indices compared to the other states and union territories of India.

Kerala presents a unique context for studying access and choice in higher education due to its distinct socio-educational landscape. The state consistently achieves very high pass percentages in higher secondary board examinations, ensuring a steady supply of candidates eligible for undergraduate programs (The New Indian Express, 2024, May 14; The Hindu, 2024, May 09) and reflecting a high demand for higher education, as evidenced by its high Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). This strong demand is deeply rooted in Kerala's cultural and historical trajectory. Early social reform movements and missionary interventions in the 19th and 20th centuries promoted education as a means of liberation from caste stratification and social inequality, establishing education as a right tied to dignity rather than privilege (Jeffrey, 1992). Later, consistent policy emphasis—especially by Leftist governments—on universal access to education and health care reinforced a "pro-poor" development model, which consolidated a broad social consensus around the value of education (Franke & Chasin, 1994). This legacy underpins Kerala's higher socio-economic indices, including relatively high per capita income (Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2023), and explains why education is widely perceived as a pathway to social mobility and professional advancement. Indeed, higher education has historically enabled marginalised communities in Kerala to transcend occupational barriers, fueling aspirations for mobility both within India and abroad (Prakash, 1994).

Kerala has a total enrolment of 10,99,113 students, of which 3,31,244 (30.1%) are in universities and 7,67,869 (69.9%) in colleges. The enrolment in university-level institutions and other categories of colleges totals up to 97,832. The enrolment in State HEIs is 1,001,281, where state universities account for 235,487 students and affiliated colleges account for 765,805 students [All India Survey on Higher Education [AISHE] 2021-22. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2022)].

Kerala has 25 universities, with an average of 50-99 colleges per district, reflecting good institutional density (AISHE 2021-22). There are 1,463 colleges across the state with 46 colleges per lakh population (18-23 years), higher than the national average of 30. Kerala accounts for 10.09 lakh students enrolled in higher education, ensuring gender parity, showcasing strong participation by females. The enrolment of Scheduled Caste (SC) students is 15.3% of the total, closely aligned with national trends. Scheduled Tribe (ST) representation is lower, requiring policy attention. Kerala's GER of 41.3% (Male GER-34.1 and Female GER at 49) exceeds the national average of 28.4%, placing it the seventh highest in the country among the States and UTs. Kerala's Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.44 reflects higher female participation in higher education, with women achieving a greater Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) than men. This trend aligns with Kerala's progressive social indicators and highlights the state's significant advantage in female-to-male enrolment ratios. Enrolment in Arts (34.2%) and Science (14.8%) programmes surpasses enrolment for other programmes, mirroring national patterns (AKHES, 2021-22, p. 6).

The colleges in the state are broadly categorised into Government, Government-aided and Self-Financing. Out of 1,596 colleges, Self-Financing Colleges form the major category comprising 1,064 (66.7%) colleges, 167 (10.5%) are Government-aided colleges and 149 (9.3%) are Government Colleges. There are 24 autonomous colleges, of which 19 are government-aided, 4 are self-financing, and one is in the government sector, comprising 1.5%. The other types of management monitored by the government, but under autonomous bodies or societies, (like Lal

Bahadur Shastri Centre for Science and Technology (LBS), CAPE[1], and IHRD[2]), comprise 86 colleges (AKHES, 2021-22, p. 6). There are 737 Arts & Science colleges comprising 46.2% of the total colleges, followed by Teacher Education colleges - 191(12%), 151 engineering colleges (9.5%) and 138 nursing colleges (8.6%). There are 85 colleges in medical education across the different systems of medicine, comprising 5.3%.

The majority of Higher Education Institutions i.e. 1,210 (75.8%) are situated in rural areas, while 339 (21.2%) are in urban areas. Most colleges in Kerala cater to fewer than 1,000 students, reflecting a decentralised education model prioritising accessibility over scale. A high proportion of universities and colleges in Kerala offer hostel facilities, promoting inclusivity for students from rural and marginalised backgrounds. Kerala has a favourable Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) of 24, meeting national standards. The proportion of female faculty in Kerala (43.4%) reflects efforts toward gender equity, slightly above national averages [AKHES, 2021-22].

One notable trend is the dramatic increase in student migration, with the number of student emigrants nearly doubling in the past five years. Student out-migration is more prevalent among females at 57.8 per cent, whereas the rate of female student return outmigration is lower at 35.8 per cent. This suggests a pattern wherein female students prefer to migrate and remain in the destination states. The migration trends highlighted by the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023, conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (GIFT) with support from the International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), have significant implications for Kerala's demographic composition and economy, requiring myriad policy interventions. These include the loss of young talent, social and mental health challenges from elderly isolation and economic pressures from outward remittances. On the educational side, it has impacted social demand for educational reforms, empowerment of female students, given global exposure to the community as a whole and brought in remittances that can be reinvested. Nevertheless, it also causes brain drain, vacant seats, and quality gaps, along with socioeconomic pressures. Rajan (2024) suggests an urgent need to enhance the state's educational infrastructure.

[1] The Co-operative Academy of Professional Education (Kerala) is an autonomous society under the Co-operation Department of the Government of Kerala formed to establish Educational Institutions in various professional fields to provide facilities for Education and Training.

[2] The Institute of Human Resources Development (IHRD) is an autonomous educational institution established by the Government of Kerala in 1987. Its main role in the state's higher education sector is to manage a wide network of institutions, including engineering colleges, Colleges of Applied Science, and Model Polytechnic Colleges.

The centralised admission process, managed through a single-window common admission portal by affiliating universities, simplifies access for students while nodal officers act as liaisons between institutions and candidates, fostering transparency and efficiency (Mahatma Gandhi University, 2025; University of Calicut, 2025; University of Kerala, 2025). Kerala's high migration rates for education and employment, coupled with the role of Akshaya centres[3] as critical facilitators of public services, including educational assistance for school and college admissions, highlight the need for faculty in higher education institutions (HEIs) to actively engage in outreach initiatives. These efforts are vital in expanding access, guiding informed decision-making, and promoting equitable opportunities for undergraduate education, thereby contributing to the broader mission of social justice in higher education.

Overall, the total number of faculty is 58,255, where the number of female faculty is 36,629 (62.9%) and male faculty is 21,616 (37.1%). The faculty members are predominantly Assistant Professors, comprising 1,269(54.9%). Female faculty were dominant in the designations of Assistant Professor and Contract Teachers, Guest Teachers and Others. In universities and university-level institutions, the faculty count is 3,357. In state universities, the faculty count is 2,312, of which 50.3% comprise females. In affiliated colleges, the total number of faculty across the genders totals 54,898, of which 64.1% of the total teaching staff consists of females, comprising 35,181 individuals, while males constitute 37.1%, totalling up to 19,707. The transgender category accounts for 0.018%.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

A common policy on access and choice in higher education in India must account for the nation's multifaceted cultural and regional diversity. Data from specific states, such as Kerala, with its unique socio-educational context and progressive indicators, can provide valuable insights into local demands and challenges, contributing to the larger national framework. By understanding access and choice in a state with distinct characteristics, such as Kerala, this

[3] public-private partnerships in Kerala, India, that aim to close the digital divide. With more than 2,650 locations across the state, these centres act as key hubs for e-governance, offering a range of services that connect citizens with the government. These centres boost access to information and technology, fostering transparency, socio-economic growth, and digital inclusion, especially in rural communities. They also play a crucial role in education by helping students with online applications for university admissions and other competitive exams. Students can use these centres to register, upload documents, and pay fees easily.

research endeavour seeks to contribute meaningfully to the development of equitable higher education policies across India.

This study specifically probes the crucial role of rural-serving state universities and government colleges in promoting equity and social justice in India's higher education (HE) landscape. Kerala's unique socio-educational landscape, characterised by its above-average literacy rates, favourable gender parity, and decentralised institutional density, provides a fertile ground for exploring widening access to higher education.

HEIs in Kerala, with their faculty and institutional leaders, are positioned to act as HE knowledge hubs interacting with communities in rural and semi-urban areas surrounding HEIs to improve communities' knowledge about HE options. This research aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 for equitable access to quality HE, particularly for students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). This project seeks to explore and enhance the role of higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly through faculty members and institutional leaders, in guiding first-generation students from SEDGs. By fostering informed decision-making, the study aims to support NEP 2020's vision of empowering individuals and communities through equitable HE access.

While India's HE sector has expanded significantly, disparities in access and choice persist, especially for marginalised communities. Affirmative action policies, such as reservation systems, and initiatives like National Policy on Education 1986, Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA[4]) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2013) and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have sought to address these inequities through measures to widen participation, improve equity, and provide academic support. However, barriers remain, including limited awareness of HE opportunities, admission processes, and informed decision-making, particularly among first-generation learners in rural and semi-urban areas.

[4] The Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) was launched in 2013 with the aim of strategically funding state higher educational institutions to improve their quality and ensure equity and excellence in the system.

As Varghese (2015) notes, while India's HE system is in the massification stage, with significant expansion providing opportunities for young people from historically excluded communities, social disparities in access and inequalities in course choices persist, underscoring the need to address these issues for equitable HE access. The NEP 2020 emphasises the need for HEIs to address these gaps, presenting a timely opportunity to explore their role as local knowledge hubs for HE outreach. This study aims to contribute valuable insights to advance policy goals and enhance equity in HE access and choice.

The study aims to explore and evaluate the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kerala in advancing the social justice mission of public higher education. By examining how faculty members and institutional leaders can enhance knowledge dissemination to disadvantaged communities and foster equitable access, the study seeks to address local challenges while informing broader strategies. It further aims to develop and assess professional development initiatives that empower faculty to engage in gender-equitable and socially just outreach activities. Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to scalable and sustainable policy reforms, leveraging Kerala's unique context to inform the wider effort to enhance access and choice in higher education across India.

1.3 Objectives & Research Questions

Project objective:

To document, via meaningful, robust, mixed methods fieldwork across six states of India, current HE outreach practices and the motivations and/or resistance of various HEI stakeholders, such as the faculty members and institutional leaders, to contribute to HE outreach in the local communities surrounding the colleges.

Research questions

RQ1: What is the current and potential role of HEIs based in rural/semi-urban India, their faculty members and institutional leaders, to engage in gender-equitable, socially just HE outreach for students in their local communities?

- RQ1a: Who is delivering HE in colleges and universities in rural and semi-urban locations? Who are the faculty members and the institutional leaders?

- RQ1b: What do faculty members in rural and semi-urban areas currently perceive to be the role of HEIs and their role/s in facilitating access to HE and HE choice in the localities of their workplaces? What are the existing practices of HE outreach?
- RQ1c: What do institutional leaders of rural and semi-urban colleges and universities perceive to be HEIs' role, their role and their employees' role in relation to facilitating access to HE and HE choice?
- RQ1d: Which students are receiving HE in rural/semi-urban colleges? How do they perceive the role of faculty members in facilitating HE access and choice

1.4 Methodology & Sources of Information

To examine institutional approaches to widening access to higher education in the state of Kerala, this study utilised a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data from various sources. The research focused on four anonymised institutions: State University (SU), Government College In-Depth 1 (GCID), Government College 2 (GC-A), and Government College 3 (GC-B). Data was collected through institutional documents, surveys, interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a solicited diary study, providing a comprehensive understanding of higher education (HE) systems, institutional profiles, and strategies to enhance access, particularly for rural and marginalised communities. The solicited diary study was undertaken with 5 Faculty Members (FMs) from each institution, allowing participants to document their experiences and reflections related to their academic roles and the broader HE context. To deepen insights from the diaries, pre- and post-diary interviews were conducted with the same FMs (in SU and GCID), providing an opportunity to explore the emerging themes in greater detail. These sources collectively informed the analysis of institutional strategies and challenges in enhancing access to higher education, particularly in rural and marginalised communities.

The report has been developed from the following sources.

Institutional information

The research focused on four anonymised institutions: State University (SU), GCID, GC-A and GC-B. Institutional information was primarily sourced from official documents, including

accreditation reports from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), institutional websites, and administrative records.

SU, established in 1968, is a prominent public university in Kerala, recognised for its extensive network of affiliated colleges across five districts and its A+ NAAC accreditation, with 34 departments and 406 affiliated colleges across five districts (e.g., 126 in District A, 107 in District B).

GCID, a relatively new government college established in 2013 in a coastal area as part of a state initiative to ensure one college per assembly constituency, is not yet accredited.

GC-A, a government-aided college founded in 2005 in a hilly rural area, is managed by an orphanage and holds an A NAAC accreditation, offering programs in arts, commerce, science, hospitality, and tourism.

GC-B, established in 1981 in a tribal and hilly rural region, has a B+ NAAC accreditation and focuses on humanities, social sciences, commerce, sciences, and computer applications, with a significant proportion of first-generation learners.

Institutional leaders (IL)

One semi-structured interview was conducted at each of the four sampled higher education institutions (HEIs), accompanied by a short IL profile to gather demographic and professional information. The IL group, aged 40–59 years, primarily consists of individuals who have served in leadership roles for 0–5 years and have been at their current institutions for 5–15 years. Three ILs were born and reside in rural areas of Kerala, though one was born in Oman and resides in an urban area. All speak Malayalam as their mother tongue, with English and Hindi commonly known, and one IL also speaks Arabic. All ILs are married, with one or two children, and one IL has a physical disability. Notable characteristics include one IL being orphaned during their schooling, another having international research exposure, and another belonging to the Scheduled Caste category. They hold leadership roles within Institutional Quality Assurance Cells (IQAC), such as IQAC Directors or Coordinators, with designations like Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant Professor. Three ILs were directly recruited, one transferred from another institution, and all hold regular appointments.

Table 1.4.1: IL interview participants – basic information

HEI: (state code_inst code)	Title and Pseudonym	Gender	Caste/Social group	Religion
SU: **4_1**	Dr. Jose	Male	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Christian
GCID: **4_2**	Mr. Jack	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-A: **4_3**	Dr. Shibu	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-B: **4_4**	Dr. Janaki	Female	OBC	Hindu

Faculty Members (FMs)

5 x semi-structured interviews in each sampled HEI, including a short FM profile to gather basic information.

Table 1.4.2: FM interview participants – basic information

HEI: (state code_inst code e.g. 1_2)	Title and Pseudonym	Gender	Caste/Social group	Religion
SU: 4_1_1	Dr. Ponnoo	Female	SC	Hindu
SU: 4_1_2	Dr. Joseph	Male	General	Christian
SU: 4_1_3	Mr. Krish	Male	OBC	Hindu
SU: 4_1_4	Dr. Lathika	Female	OBC	Hindu
SU: 4_1_5	Dr. John	Male	General	Christian
SU: 4_1_6	Mr. Peace	Male	OBC	Muslim
GCID: 4_2_1	Mrs. Alice	Female	OBC	Muslim
GCID: 4_2_2	Mr. Sujith	Male	General	Hindu
GCID: 4_2_3	Dr Mithra	Female	OBC	Hindu
GCID: 4_2_4	Mr Explorer	Male	OBC	Muslim
GCID: 4_2_5	Mrs. Rithika	Female	OBC	Hindu
GC-A: 4_3_1	Ms. Rumi	Female	OBC	Muslim
GC-A: 4_3_2	Mr. Babas	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-A: 4_3_3	Dr. PCF	Female	OBC	Muslim
GC-A: 4_3_4	Mr. Jaisal	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-A: 4_3_5	Dr. Kulva	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-B: 4_4_1	Mrs. Vinesha	Female	SC	Hindu
GC-B: 4_4_2	Mr. Alvin Varghees	Male	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Christian
GC-B: 4_4_3	Dr. Braille	Male	ST	Hindu
GC-B: 4_4_4	Bava	Male	OBC	Muslim
GC-B: 4_4_5	Mrs. Priya	Female	General	Christian

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted at each sampled HEI, supplemented by short FM profiles. A solicited diary study and post-diary interviews were conducted with five FMs from SU and GCID. FM surveys were administered at SU (N=19) and GCID (N=20), and administrative data were consulted to provide contextual insights.

5 x solicited diary study in SU and GCID (with the same FMs as the interview).
5 x post-diary interview in SU and GCID (with the same FMs as the interview and diary).
FM survey has been conducted in SU (N=19) and GCID (N=20).
Administrative data about FMs has been consulted in each HEI.

The FM group, predominantly aged 40–59, is mostly married with one to two children, though some are divorced or separated. All were born in Kerala, with residences split evenly between urban and rural areas, and Malayalam is the predominant mother tongue. All FMs identified themselves as either male or female, with a few FMs opting not to disclose their LGBTQIAP+ status, and one reported a physical disability involving locomotor, visual, hearing, and speech challenges. Professionally, most FMs have 0–15 years of experience at their current institutions. The majority of individuals have between 0 to 5 years of experience (17 people), followed by 14 FMs with 5 to 15 years of experience. They hold positions ranging from Assistant Professor to Professor, with a few serving as coordinators or in other administrative roles. Appointments were typically secured through direct recruitment by the institution or state-conducted examinations, with some FMs having transferred from other institutions. While the majority hold regular appointments, a minority are employed on a contractual basis. The faculty members are distributed across a diverse range of disciplines, with a strong emphasis on Development Studies, English, and the sciences (Botany, Physics, Chemistry, Zoology), alongside substantial representation in Commerce, Business Administration, Computer Applications, and Humanities (Journalism, Arabic, Hindi, Malayalam). Technical fields such as Computer Science and Electronics also contribute to the interdisciplinary expertise within the department.

Undergraduate Students (UGs)

2 x FGDs in SU and GCID (5 students per group), including a short UG profile to gather basic information.

6 x semi-structured interviews with selected FGD participants in SU and GCID, including a short UG profile to gather basic information.

Table 1.4.3: UG FGD and interview participants – basic information

HEI: (state code_inst code e.g. 1_2)	Pseudonym	Gender	Caste/Social group	Religion	Interviewed [Yes/No]
SU: 4_1_1	DHYAN	Male	SC	Hindu	Yes
SU: 4_1_2	PRIYA	Female	OBC	Hindu	No
SU: 4_1_3	RAGHUVENDRA PILLAI	Male	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Hindu	No
SU: 4_1_4	MIA	Female	OBC	Hindu	Yes
SU: 4_1_5	SJ	Male	OBC	Hindu	Yes
SU: 4_1_6	UNNI	Male	OBC	Christian	Yes
SU: 4_1_7	JIMIN	Female	OBC	Muslim	Yes
SU: 4_1_8	KITTY	Female	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Christian	No
SU: 4_1_9	SHIVA	Female	SC	Hindu	No
SU: 4_1_10	NIERANJNN	Male	SC	Hindu	Yes
GCID: 4_2_1	SACHU	Male	SC	Hindu	Yes
GCID: 4_2_2	DIYA	Female	OBC	Muslim	Yes
GCID: 4_2_3	MALU	Female	OBC	Hindu	Yes
GCID: 4_2_4	KUTTU	Female	EWS(Non-SC/ST/OBC)	Hindu	No
GCID: 4_2_5	PAPPY	Female	OBC	Muslim	No
GCID: 4_2_6	DREAMY GIRL	Female	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Hindu	No
GCID: 4_2_7	NASIM	Male	OBC	Muslim	No
GCID: 4_2_8	ANNA	Male	OBC	Muslim	No
GCID: 4_2_9	TOMY	Female	OBC	Hindu	No
GCID: 4_2_10	MAEVE	Female	OBC	Muslim	Yes
GCID: 4_2_11	L.MESSI	Male	General/Non-SC/ST/OBC	Hindu	Yes
GCID: 4_2_12	VASU	Male	OBC	Hindu	Yes

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) with five students each were conducted at SU and GCID, alongside six semi-structured interviews with selected FGD participants. SU had 10 participants primarily enrolled in Development Studies and the Integrated MSc in Bioscience, with a mix of rural and urban backgrounds. GCID had 12 participants across programs such as BBA, BCOM, and BA in Language and Literature, predominantly from rural residences. The majority of these UGs were aged 18–20, born between 2004 and 2006, reflecting a typical age range for

undergraduate students. None of the interview participants reported any disabilities, and all students identified themselves as either male or female, and no student explicitly identified as LGBTQIAP+, with none disclosing information about such sexual orientation. All students were unmarried and reported no caring responsibilities, such as children.

UG surveys were administered at SU (N=68) and GCID (N=176), and administrative data were consulted. UGs are enrolled in diverse programs, including BBA, BCOM, BCA, BA in Language and Literature, Development Studies, Integrated MSc in Bioscience, and BSc in Electronics. Most UGs are aged 18–20 (born 2004–2006), with SU participants (14.71% aged 18, 52.94% aged 19, 23.53% aged 20) and GCID participants (24.43% aged 18, 47.16% aged 19, 22.16% aged 20). The sample is predominantly female (72.06% SU, 64.20% GCID). A small minority reported disabilities: one SU student (1.59%) with a physical disability and six GCID students (3.45%), four with intellectual disabilities and one with a chronic neurological condition. Nearly all are unmarried (98.55% SU, 96.57% GCID) with no children (98.31% SU, 98.25% GCID). One SU student (2.27%) identified as LGBTQIAP+, while none from GCID did. All UGs were born in Kerala, speaking Malayalam as their mother tongue, with most residing in rural areas (68.85% SU, 76.57% GCID).

Administrative data about UGs has been consulted in SU and GCID.

1.5 Chapter Scheme in the Report

This report is structured into eight chapters, each addressing distinct aspects of higher education (HE) access and outreach in Kerala, with a focus on rural and semi-urban institutions, faculty roles, and student experiences.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the context of higher education access and choice in Kerala, highlighting key statistics such as enrolment rates, institutional density, and equity indicators, while outlining the study's rationale, objectives, research questions, methodology, and sources of information. It emphasises the role of rural-serving institutions in promoting social justice and aligns the research with national policies like NEP 2020. The chapter concludes with an overview of the report's structure.

Chapter 2 presents a state-level profile of higher education in Kerala, focusing on equity, access strategies, and the academic profession. It discusses policies targeting disadvantaged groups, such as scholarships and initiatives for SEDGs, gender equity, and regional disparities, alongside outreach activities like centralised admissions and skill development programs. The chapter also examines faculty composition, recruitment policies, and professional development efforts, concluding with challenges and recommendations for improvement.

Chapter 3 profiles the case study institutions, including the State University (SU), Government College In-depth (GCID), and two other government colleges, detailing their establishment, location, facilities, enrolment patterns, and societal contributions. It incorporates institutional documents and administrative data to highlight strengths like research ecosystems and inclusivity initiatives, as well as challenges such as limited collaborations and infrastructure needs. The profiles ensure anonymity while providing context for the study's focus on rural and semi-urban HEIs.

Chapter 4 explores the profiles of faculty members (FMs) and institutional leaders (ILs) in the sampled institutions, drawing from interviews, surveys, and administrative data. It describes their demographic characteristics, professional backgrounds, and social locations, noting variations by institution, such as gender distributions and local affiliations. The chapter synthesises how these profiles influence their potential roles in HE outreach.

Chapter 5 examines perceptions and existing practices of HE outreach among FMs and ILs, based on qualitative data from interviews and diaries. It highlights diverse views on institutional roles in facilitating access and choice, tensions between aspirations and barriers like workload and funding, and the limited formal integration of outreach. The chapter assesses current activities, revealing fragmented efforts primarily driven by individual initiative.

Chapter 6 profiles undergraduate students (UGs) in SU and GCID, using survey, interview, and focus group data to detail their backgrounds, educational trajectories, and experiences with HE outreach. It analyses the presence of rural students, topics needing more guidance (e.g., career pathways), comfort levels in choosing institutions, and existing or potential outreach activities.

The chapter concludes that while rural students are well-represented, institutional outreach is often insufficient, with recommendations for enhanced strategies.

Chapter 7 synthesises findings across research questions, discussing the roles of HEIs, FMs, and ILs in gender-equitable outreach, current limitations, and student perceptions. It offers preliminary views on consolidating faculty contributions through professional development and embedding outreach in policy for sustainable change. The discussion integrates state context with institutional insights to identify gaps and opportunities.

Chapter 8 concludes the report with overarching thoughts on Kerala's HE landscape, emphasising the gap between policy intentions and outreach practices, and noting project-induced changes like increased advocacy within the research team. It provides recommendations for institutions (e.g., formalising outreach, improving infrastructure) and policymakers (e.g., dedicated funding, mandated roles) to enhance future HE outreach potential.

Chapter 2: State Level Profile of HE and Academic Profession

2.1 Introduction

Kerala, a state in southern India, is renowned for its high literacy rate, strong social indicators, and robust higher education system. The state's commitment to education has led to significant advancements in various fields. The state demonstrates strong equity in higher education access, focusing on Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and other socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). State policies actively support marginalised groups through financial assistance, scholarships, special initiatives, and institutional accommodations aimed at increasing participation rates across underrepresented demographics. However, challenges such as equity, access, and quality persist, particularly for marginalised groups. This section delves into the state's higher education landscape, focusing on equity, access and choice strategies, and the academic profession in Kerala state.

Since Kerala's formation in 1956, its higher education (HE) system has undergone significant development, driven by progressive policies, digital innovation, and inclusivity. The Kerala Education Act of 1958 standardised educational administration, enhancing access to HE. The establishment of universities like Calicut (1968) and Cochin University of Science and Technology [CUSAT] (1971), alongside the Higher Secondary Education system in 1990-91, bolstered infrastructure and streamlined transitions to HE. The adoption of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme, promoting interdisciplinary learning. Kerala’s digital transformation, marked by KITE’s (Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education) deployment of 3.74 lakh digital devices, made it India’s first fully digital public education system by 2020 (Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education, 2020). Inclusivity initiatives, such as ASAP (Additional Skill Acquisition Programme) and tribal-focused programs, have driven a 41.3% GER, with 59.47% female enrollment (The Hindu, 2024).

Programs like the Chief Minister's Nava Kerala Post-Doctoral Fellowships are enhancing Kerala's research environment (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). The council's

website and related government documents outline these programs, which are part of a broader strategy to transform Kerala's higher education landscape. Programs like the Chief Minister's Nava Kerala Post-Doctoral Fellowships are enhancing Kerala's research environment (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024).

The "Study in Kerala" campaign aims to attract international students, though challenges like student migration persist, as evidenced by recent surveys (Rajan, 2023). The "Study in Kerala" campaign is part of the government's internationalisation efforts to attract students from abroad. While these programs aim to enhance the state's global standing, challenges like student migration (also known as "brain drain") are acknowledged in various government-affiliated studies and reports. A key example is the Kerala Migration Survey, conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (GIFT) and the Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA) (Rajan, 2023), which quantifies the significant rise in student emigration and highlights the challenges this poses for the state's demographics and economy.

2.2 Profile of the State in Terms of HE and Equity

Kerala’s higher education system is widely recognised for its strong commitment to equity and inclusiveness. With a diverse range of institutions, including universities, colleges, and technical institutions, the state has made notable strides in increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and expanding access to higher education (HE). However, challenges related to equity and inclusion persist, which the state addresses through comprehensive policies targeting socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). The state's robust education system is supported by high literacy rates, proactive social welfare policies, and targeted initiatives that emphasise financial assistance, infrastructure development, and digital access, ensuring broad and equitable access to quality higher education for diverse demographics.

2.2.1 Focus on Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

Kerala’s higher education policies are designed to support a variety of disadvantaged groups, including those from economically backwards backgrounds, marginalised communities, and rural areas. Kerala’s education policies place a significant emphasis on promoting equity and excellence, with a focus on disadvantaged groups such as:

1. **Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST):** Kerala has made substantial progress in increasing the GER for SC and ST students by effectively implementing a 20% reservation quota in educational institutions. In 2021-22, the GER for SC students was 28.3%, with a female GER of 36.8%, surpassing the national average of 25.8% (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 60). Similarly, the GER for ST students was 28.9%, with a female GER of 33.8%, higher than the national average of 21.2% (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 61).
2. **Other Backwards Classes (OBC):** The state implements specific reservations for OBC students, providing them with access to higher education opportunities through quotas and scholarships. (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 215). In Kerala's government and aided arts and science colleges, the reservation policy for undergraduate students from Other Backwards Classes (OBC) is guided by the Kerala State and Subordinate Service Rules (KS & SSR) and state guidelines for socially and educationally backwards classes (SEBC), encompassing OBC communities such as Ezhavas, Thiyyas, Billavas, Muslims, and Latin Catholics. Approximately 40% of seats are reserved for SEBC candidates, with specific allocations like 14% for Ezhavas, Thiyyas, and Billavas, 12% for Muslims, 4% for Latin Catholics/Anglo-Indians, and the remainder for other backward communities as per state policy. Eligibility is restricted to non-creamy layer OBC candidates, determined by parental income (Directorate of Collegiate Education, Kerala, n.d.; Kerala Public Service Commission, n.d.).
3. **Economically Weaker Sections (EWS):** Policies aimed at reducing financial barriers to education focus on students from EWS, offering scholarships and subsidies to support their educational aspirations. 10% seats are reserved for economically weaker sections (EWS). (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 19, 216).
4. **Religious Minorities and Transgender Students:** Kerala's policies include specific provisions for minority communities, including scholarships and reserved seats in courses. Additionally, the state supports transgender students through programs such as Mazhavillu, which offers financial assistance and reserved seats in certain courses (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 50, 215).
5. **Snehapoorvam Scheme:** An initiative to provide financial assistance to orphan students in schools and in higher education who are living in the family to improve their access to education, Kerala Social Security Mission. (n.d.). The scheme encourages families to

keep children within their family setup rather than sending them to orphanages and provides financial assistance to support their education.

6. **Hunger-Free Campus Initiative:** The program addresses food security for economically disadvantaged HE students by offering subsidised meals through Kudumbashree[5] units. This ensures that students facing financial challenges can continue their education without the added stress of food insecurity (Economic Review, 2023, p. 321).

The reservation quotas for SC, ST, OBC, and EWS are part of Kerala's state-level affirmative action framework, directly implementing or adapting central-level reservation policies. However, the scholarship programmes, Snehapoorvam Scheme [6], Hunger-Free Campus Initiative, gender equity measures, regional equity initiatives, ASAP, and KALNET are in addition to affirmative action. These initiatives complement the reservation system by addressing economic, social, and infrastructural barriers to enhance access and retention for SEDGs, rather than relying solely on seat reservations.

2.2.2 Gender Equity in Higher Education

Kerala has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to gender equity in higher education. Kerala has implemented a multifaceted strategy to promote gender equity in higher education. Since the mid-1990s, the state's decentralised planning, a hallmark of the People's Planning Campaign (PPC), has integrated gender-responsive policies by earmarking funds for local self-governments to support women's education and infrastructure improvements, such as gender-specific facilities in colleges (Kerala State Planning Board, 2021; Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2002). To address economic barriers, targeted financial support schemes have been established, including the Snehapoorvam Scheme, which provides monthly stipends to orphaned girls pursuing higher education (Kerala Social Security Mission, n.d.), and the Higher Education Scholarship Scheme, which prioritises female students from economically weaker sections (Directorate of Collegiate Education, Kerala, n.d.). Furthermore, significant

[5] Kudumbashree, translating to 'prosperity of the family,' is a key initiative of the Government of Kerala aimed at alleviating poverty and empowering women through community-based enterprises and self-help groups.

[6] is a welfare initiative by the Government of Kerala. It aims to provide financial assistance to orphaned or vulnerable children living with their families or relatives, rather than in institutional care. The scheme is implemented by the Kerala Social Security Mission (KSSM) and provides financial aid for education, ranging from a child's early years up to professional degree courses.

investments have been made in creating a more inclusive campus environment through improved sanitation facilities and safe accommodation, directly addressing documented barriers to female student retention (GVI, 2021; Keralapadanam 2.0, 2019). Educational reforms, such as the adoption of gender-sensitive curricula under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the introduction of gender studies courses at major universities, aim to dismantle patriarchal norms and challenge gender stereotypes (Mathur & Sharma, 2020). While the state's reservation policies for women in local governance have indirectly influenced educational policy, there are acknowledged gaps in translating educational attainment into equitable outcomes, particularly concerning women's representation in STEM fields and leadership roles within higher education governance, as well as low female workforce participation (Government of Kerala, 2014; Kerala State Higher Education Council [KSHEC], 2012). These interventions collectively reflect a comprehensive effort to foster an equitable educational landscape while highlighting the ongoing need to address systemic challenges. Female enrollment in universities and colleges is notably high compared to national averages, a testament to progressive societal norms and state-level policies that promote women's education. The state's Gender Parity Index (GPI) has consistently improved, achieving a remarkable GPI of 1.41 in 2021-22, indicating higher female enrollment rates compared to males (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 59). The state also reports higher Female GER for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) students, surpassing national averages (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 60-61).

2.2.3 Regional Equity and Access

To address regional disparities in higher education access, Kerala has expanded its educational infrastructure to underserved areas, ensuring equitable opportunities for students regardless of location. Key initiatives include:

1. **Establishment of Government Colleges**

The state has established government colleges in legislative assembly constituencies that lack existing government or aided colleges. This ensures that all residents of the state, including those in rural or underserved areas, have access to higher education (Economic Review, 2023, p. 324).

2. **Cluster of Colleges**

This program optimises resource sharing among neighbouring institutions, promoting equitable access to quality higher education even in remote areas (Economic Review, 2023, p. 324). The Kerala State Higher Education Council's (n.d.) initiative to form college clusters aims to improve access and quality through resource sharing and collaboration.

2.2.4 Scholarships and Financial Support for Equity

Kerala's scholarship programs play a pivotal role in supporting socio-economic inclusion. The state runs various schemes aimed at making higher education financially accessible to students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Notable scholarship initiatives include:

- **CM's Prathibha Scholarship Award:** This scheme provides financial aid to talented yet economically disadvantaged students, awarding scholarships to 1,000 students annually to support their pursuit of higher education (Economic Review, 2023, p. 322).
- **Higher Education Scholarship Scheme:** This scheme supports meritorious students from across socio-economic backgrounds. In 2022-23, over 2,800 students benefited from this scholarship, reflecting the state's strong commitment to financial accessibility (Economic Review, 2023, p. 325).
- **Suvarna Jubilee Scholarships:** The scholarship is for first-year undergraduate or postgraduate students from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families studying in government/aided colleges or university departments, who have scored 50% or above in their qualifying examination.
- **E-Grantz:** This scheme offers a fee concession to students studying in plus two, degree, post-graduation, and polytechnic courses belonging to OBC and General Category students with an annual income below 1 lakh. There is no income limit for SC/ST, OEC students for receiving a fee concession.
- **The Bhinnaseshy Souhrida Scholarship for students with disabilities**: This is initiated by the Government of Kerala, is a pivotal financial aid program designed to support students with disabilities pursuing higher education. This scholarship targets students who are blind, deaf, or physically handicapped, ensuring they have equitable access to educational opportunities in government or aided institutions, such as Arts and Science Colleges, Music Colleges, and Higher Secondary Schools.

- **CH Muhammed Koya Girls' Scholarship:** The State Government of Kerala offers C H Muhammed Koya Scholarship for the first-year degree, PG students and also the students admitted to self-financing professional colleges under merit quota. This is for female students belonging to Muslim, Latin, and converted Christians with an annual income below 6 lakhs.
- **Post-Matric Scholarships for Minorities:** These scholarships offer financial support to students from minority communities, including those from economically weaker sections (EWS) (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 215).
- **The Muslim Girls Scholarship** (Paloli Committee Scholarship) is specifically for Muslim girl students.
- **Fisheries Scholarships:** This scholarship is offered by the Fisheries Department of Kerala for the children of fishermen. The degree students will be granted an amount of Rs. 950, and P.G. students will receive Rs. 1000 per month apart from the course fee (Kerala.gov.in (n.d.).

2.2.5 Skill Development and Economic Equity

The Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP) is a key initiative aimed at enhancing employability among students from weaker economic backgrounds. By providing vocational training, the program bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary education, helping students transition to the labour market with relevant skills (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 327). This initiative is particularly important for students from marginalised communities, offering them viable pathways to economic independence.

2.2.6 Digital Access and Library Resources

To promote equitable access to academic resources, Kerala has introduced initiatives like KALNET (Kerala Academic Library Network), which offers statewide access to academic resources from 147 libraries across 14 universities. This platform is especially beneficial for students from rural and economically weaker sections who may lack access to well-equipped libraries (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 326).

Thus, Kerala's approach to higher education is deeply rooted in equity and inclusion, with a comprehensive range of policies targeting disadvantaged groups across multiple dimensions—socio-economic, gender, regional, and ethnic. From the expansion of infrastructure and scholarships to skill development and digital access, Kerala's higher education system strives

to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to succeed. The state's progressive policies, including reservation quotas and financial aid programs, contribute to narrowing educational disparities and promoting broader access to higher education.

2.3 HE Access and Choice Strategies at the State Level

Kerala has implemented a range of state-level initiatives designed to improve access to higher education (HE) and provide critical information about HE options, targeting students who are not yet enrolled. These strategies aim to promote equity, access, and excellence, addressing the needs of diverse communities across the state. The Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC) plays a vital role in providing training and financial support to institutions, enhancing access, and ensuring equitable educational opportunities.

2.3.1 Key Outreach Strategies and Activities

1. **Cluster of Colleges**

   As a resource-sharing initiative, the Cluster of Colleges program brings together neighbouring institutions to optimise the utilisation of physical and human resources. This approach fosters mutual support among colleges, improving both enrollment rates and the overall quality of education (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 324).

2. **Higher Education Scholarship Scheme**

   Kerala offers an extensive range of scholarships to encourage students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education. These scholarships are designed to promote inclusivity and academic excellence, especially among marginalised groups.

   The state government has committed substantial funding for these scholarships, including ₹59.8 crore in 2022 for both fresh applicants and renewals (Directorate of Collegiate Education (DCE), n.d.; Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 325). Students from economically weaker sections (family income below ₹1 lakh) are eligible for 100% fee waivers (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 215–216). In Kerala, scholarships are advertised through diverse channels to promote inclusivity and academic excellence among economically disadvantaged students. These include official portals like scholarship.kshec.kerala.gov.in and dcescholarship.kerala.gov.in,

college scholarship cells, press releases, local media, and social media platforms like X (Directorate of Collegiate Education, n.d.). Community outreach, biometric authentication camps, and Common Service Centres further enhance accessibility, though rural students may face challenges due to limited digital access (Kerala State Planning Board, Economic Review, 2023). Students are encouraged to monitor official websites and contact institutional scholarship cells for timely updates.

3. **KALNET (Kerala Academic Library Network)**

   Launched in 2021, KALNET provides statewide access to academic resources from 147 libraries across 14 universities. This platform makes it easier for prospective students to explore academic options and access essential resources, further enhancing their ability to make informed choices about their educational paths (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 326). This reaches students through promotions on Kerala's higher education portals, university and college websites, library networks, and local media.

4. **Kerala State Skill Development Project (ASAP)**

   Initiated in 2014, ASAP offers vocational and skill training to higher secondary and college students, helping bridge the gap between secondary education and higher education or employment. This initiative expands choices for students, particularly those considering non-academic higher education pathways (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 327).

5. **Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC)**

   The KSHEC is central to coordinating and formulating policies that ensure equitable access to higher education. It supports outreach efforts, including launching initiatives like the State Assessment and Accreditation Centre (SAAC) and making policy recommendations for increasing access to higher education (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 324). The SAAC, initiated by the Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC), supports higher education outreach by assessing and accrediting institutions to ensure quality and transparency, thereby building trust among prospective students and promoting equitable access through informed policy recommendations

6. **Sasthrayaan**

Sasthrayaan is an open house programme initiated by the Government of Kerala, serving as a crucial bridge connecting young school students with the university environment. This initiative provides a platform for universities and colleges to showcase their research, academic resources, and expertise to the local community, fostering scientific temper and promoting accessibility to advanced knowledge. It is organised by prominent universities in Kerala, notably the University of Calicut and the Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT). This initiative aims to demystify higher education, promote scientific curiosity, and provide a glimpse into the world of research and innovation. It incorporates a variety of interactive and engaging components like Exhibition Stalls, Live Demonstrations and Laboratory and Department Visits and Experts from various fields deliver talks on career guidance, scientific topics, and other relevant subjects. By providing young students with an immersive experience within the university environment, the program fosters scientific curiosity, promotes accessibility to higher education, and provides valuable career guidance.

2.3.2 Higher Education Admission Facilitation

To streamline the admission process and ensure equitable access to higher education, Kerala employs a centralised admission system, supported by Akshaya centres and nodal officers. This system facilitates a transparent and efficient process for students seeking to apply to higher education institutions.

1. **Centralised Admission System**

   The centralised system allows students to register, create profiles, apply to multiple colleges, track application status, and receive allotment notifications through a common portal. This system aims to reduce duplication of effort, enhances transparency, and minimises bias in the admissions process. It ensures that students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have fair and easy access to educational opportunities (Government of Kerala, Higher Education Department, relevant year of admission guidelines).

2. **Akshaya Centres**

   The Akshaya centres, a network of community-based information technology centres established by the Kerala State IT Mission, play a critical role in facilitating access to

online services, including higher education admissions. These centres assist students with online registration and application submission, provide access to computers and the internet for those without these resources at home, and offer guidance throughout the admission process. Akshaya centres are particularly important for reaching students in rural and underserved areas, bridging the digital divide, and ensuring equitable access to higher education opportunities (Kerala State IT Mission, n.d.).

3. **Nodal Officers at Colleges**

   Each college participating in the centralised admission process designates nodal officers who serve as liaisons between the university, the college, and the applicants. These officers assist with providing information about the admission process, verifying documents and eligibility criteria, and coordinating with the university on admission-related matters. This role ensures smooth communication and efficient management of the admission process, benefiting students from both urban and rural areas (Government of Kerala, Higher Education Department, admission guidelines).

Thus, Kerala's state-level outreach strategies aim to enhance access to higher education by addressing barriers faced by students, particularly those from marginalised and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The comprehensive array of initiatives—including the Cluster of Colleges program, various scholarship schemes, the Erudite Scheme, KALNET, and the Kerala State Skill Development Project—ensures that students have access to the resources and information needed to make informed choices. Additionally, the centralised admission process, supported by Akshaya centres and nodal officers, streamlines the application process and promotes equitable access across the state. These efforts reflect Kerala's ongoing commitment to fostering a more inclusive and accessible higher education system.

2.4 State of the academic profession at state level

Kerala demonstrates a strong commitment to enhancing the academic profession through targeted initiatives focused on professional development, research, and equitable faculty deployment. These efforts aim to maintain the quality of higher education while addressing challenges related to access, innovation, and faculty distribution.

The Kerala government has introduced a range of initiatives to support the academic profession, beyond the efforts of central government agencies such as the University Grants Commission

(UGC) and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). These initiatives target faculty capabilities, research engagement, and equitable deployment of faculty across rural and urban regions:

1. **Fostering Linkages for Academic Innovation and Research (FLAIR):** This program connects faculty with national and international research networks, supporting their research and professional growth (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, pp. 321, 326).
2. **Erudite Scheme:** This initiative facilitates interactions between local faculty and renowned global scholars, including Nobel laureates, to promote academic excellence (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 322). By organising events with distinguished scholars, the scheme also inspires and increases awareness about higher education, especially among potential students. The program fosters knowledge exchange, promotes interdisciplinary research, and enhances the global outlook of students and faculty. (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 326). The Erudite Scheme reaches potential students advertised through Kerala's higher education institutions, government portals, and local media to inspire and raise awareness about higher education opportunities.
3. **Performance Linked Encouragement for Academic Studies and Endeavour (PLEASE):** This program incentivises faculty to undertake innovative and complex research projects, enhancing academic output in government institutions (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 322).
4. **Training in Digital Tools:** Kerala's higher education institutions provide extensive training in digital tools, such as learning management systems and virtual classrooms, to help faculty adapt to modern teaching and administrative demands (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 324).
5. **Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Centres (IEDC):** IEDCs in colleges and the Kerala University Business Innovation and Incubation Centre (KUBIIC) empower faculty to take leadership roles in promoting entrepreneurship and innovation (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 324).
6. **Cluster of Colleges Initiative:** This initiative promotes equitable faculty deployment by enabling optimal sharing of academic resources among neighbouring institutions,

including both rural and urban regions (Kerala State Planning Board Economic Review, 2023, p. 324).

The Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC) plays a central role in faculty training and skill development. KSHEC organises workshops on curriculum restructuring, multidisciplinary teaching methods, and fostering research capabilities. The state's emphasis on Outcome-Based Education (OBE) necessitates the continuous upskilling of academic staff (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, p. 4).

2.4.1 Recruitment, Redeployment, and Faculty Composition

The state has implemented policies to ensure equitable recruitment across rural and urban areas, attracting qualified individuals to underserved regions. Faculty qualifications are carefully monitored, with a substantial percentage holding advanced degrees. Initiatives like the Brain Gain program and the Kerala Institutional Ranking Framework (KIRF) support professional development and institutional excellence (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 5–6).

In Kerala, faculty recruitment in government colleges is conducted via the Kerala Public Service Commission, in aided colleges by management with government oversight, and in self-financing colleges solely by management, all adhering to UGC norms. Transfer policies for faculty in colleges affiliated with universities apply primarily to government colleges, managed by the Kerala Collegiate Education Department. Likewise, faculty transfer applies within colleges under the same corporate government-aided managements, subject to government approval. Self-financing colleges lack formal transfer mechanisms due to management-driven employment.

Faculty composition reveals the following important trends:

- Female faculty members are particularly prominent among Assistant Professors aged 30–40, with women representing 64.1% of faculty in affiliated colleges. However, senior academic positions in state universities are still predominantly held by male faculty (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 34, 41). However, the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), does not provide a specific breakdown of teachers by

social category (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes, etc.) for Kerala.

- Among university faculty, 72% hold Ph.D. degrees, compared to 17% in affiliated colleges (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 42-43).
- The state's initiatives have also addressed gender disparities, with a higher proportion of female faculty members in lower ranks. However, the representation of women in leadership and professor-equivalent positions remains comparatively lower, suggesting areas for policy intervention (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 39-40).

2.4.2 Professional Development and Research Incentives

Along with the initiatives discussed to improve access to higher education (HE) for the students, the state encourages research excellence in general and continuous professional development of faculty through several schemes.

- **Nava Kerala Post-Doctoral Fellowship:** This fellowship supports research in cutting-edge areas such as digital science, environmental studies, and commerce. Between 2021 and 2023, over 145 fellows were supported under this initiative (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 226-227). The fellowships provide funding ranging from ₹50,000 to ₹1,00,000 per month (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 226-227).
- **Kairali Research Awards:** These awards recognise excellence in academic and applied research across disciplines. Kerala also focuses on promoting interdisciplinary research to foster innovation in fields such as humanities, sciences, and professional areas (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022, pp. 225-226).

Faculty members are encouraged to engage in a wide array of professional development activities, including workshops, conferences, and training programs. Kerala's higher education institutions emphasise the importance of faculty participation in programs that foster teaching skills, leadership, and innovation.

2.4.3 Welfare and Support for Faculty

The state has also implemented various welfare schemes for faculty members, such as pensions, gratuity, and health insurance, to ensure their well-being and job security. These schemes contribute to maintaining a stable and committed academic workforce.

Thus, academic profession in Kerala is characterised by a diverse faculty pool, consisting of both experienced and young academic staff from a variety of disciplines. The state government's comprehensive approach to enhancing faculty capabilities, ensuring equitable recruitment, and promoting professional development has contributed significantly to the quality of higher education in the state. Policies like the FLAIR program, the Erudite Scheme, and the Nava Kerala Post-Doctoral Fellowship reflect the state's commitment to research and innovation, while initiatives such as the Cluster of Colleges and the IEDCs promote equitable faculty deployment. Despite the challenges of gender disparity and underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, Kerala continues to create a supportive environment for faculty growth and academic excellence, thereby fostering a thriving higher education ecosystem.

2.5 Summary and Conclusion

Kerala's higher education system has made significant strides in terms of access and equity. However, challenges related to the inclusion of marginalised groups and geographical disparities persist. While Kerala's higher education system has achieved notable success in promoting access and equity through robust reservation policies, financial aid, and a high Gender Parity Index, significant challenges in ground-level implementation and targeted outreach persist. Kerala demonstrates a strong commitment to HE outreach through a diverse set of initiatives that enhance access and choice for prospective students, particularly SEDGs. Programmes like Sasthrayaan, Akshaya centres, and the centralised admission system are exemplary, ensuring transparency and support for rural and disadvantaged students. However, challenges persist in ensuring comprehensive inclusion and effective outreach. Many of the policy initiatives, like Cluster of Colleges, Kerala Academic Library Network (Kalnet), Performance Linked Encouragement for Academic Studies and Endeavour (PLEASE), remain at the policy level and are yet to affect the ground-level implementation. The absence of targeted campaigns for specific marginalised groups, comprehensive career counselling, and robust digital or international outreach represents significant gaps. Addressing these through community-specific drives, expanded digital campaigns, and structured transition programmes

that could further strengthen Kerala's HE outreach, ensuring that all prospective students, regardless of background, are well-informed and supported in accessing higher education. Intentional, well-planned, targeted outreach efforts that address academic, logistical, and socio-emotional challenges students may face when entering higher education are particularly crucial for first-generation students, rural students, or those from marginalised communities (e.g., Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, transgender students) who may lack the knowledge, resources, or support to navigate the HE system. Hence, to further enhance the Kerala higher education system, it is crucial to strengthen outreach efforts, provide adequate financial support, and improve the quality of education. Prioritising faculty development and ensuring their well-being is essential for maintaining a high standard of education in the state.

Chapter 3: Profile of the Case Study Institutions

3.1 Introduction to the Institutions

This chapter presents a detailed profile of the four higher education institutions (HEIs) selected for this study: the State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), Government College-A (GC-A), and Government College-B (GC-B). Drawing on institutional documents, accreditation reports, and administrative data, the chapter outlines each institution's establishment, location, facilities, faculty and student composition, professional development opportunities, and outreach strategies. The chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these institutions' roles in promoting equitable access and social justice in higher education, particularly for rural and marginalised communities, aligning with the objectives of the Widening Access to Higher Education in India (WAHEI) project.

The selection of SU, GCID, GC-A, and GC-B was purposeful, reflecting their diverse institutional characteristics and their relevance to the study's focus on rural and semi-urban HEIs in Kerala. SU, a prominent state university, was chosen for its extensive network of affiliated colleges and its role as a major educational hub in a rural district, offering insights into large-scale institutional dynamics. GCID, a newer government college established in 2013, was selected for its focus on serving rural and coastal communities, representing efforts to expand access in underrepresented areas. GC-A and GC-B, both government-aided colleges located in forested and hilly regions, respectively, were included for their emphasis on inclusivity and service to marginalised groups, such as tribal and first-generation learners. These institutions collectively exemplify Kerala's decentralised higher education model, which prioritises accessibility and inclusivity across rural and semi-urban regions, with smaller-scale institutions, most colleges enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, and provides a robust framework for examining institutional approaches to widening access and fostering equity in higher education.

3.1.1. State University (SU)

The State University (SU), established in 1968, is one of the largest and most prominent universities in the state, located in a rural district of Kerala. Initially formed to expand higher education opportunities in northern Kerala, SU is governed under the legislative framework

established by its founding act. With its motto emphasising the importance of integrity and actions in fostering prosperity, SU has successfully navigated challenges to become a leading residential and affiliating university. The institution oversees more than 400 affiliated colleges across five districts, making it a cornerstone of higher education in the state. The campus spans a vast area of over 500 acres and features modern facilities, including state-of-the-art libraries, research centres, and laboratories, supporting academic and research endeavours. Its initiatives for societal impact include programs addressing disaster management, community development, and environmental conservation. An off-campus centre dedicated to tribal students highlights SU's commitment to inclusivity and equity in education. Recent evaluations and rankings underscore SU's academic excellence. The university consistently ranks among the top 100 institutions in India according to the NIRF and holds accolades such as NAAC accreditation with an 'A' grade and recognition in international rankings. SU's focus on interdisciplinary education is evident through its implementation of the choice-based credit system, outcome-based education, and the inclusion of ability-enhancement courses. The university fosters a strong research ecosystem with international exposure, significant publications in indexed journals, and collaborations supported by funding from prominent agencies. Recent global initiatives and workshops have further expanded its reach, enhancing learning opportunities for students and faculty alike. SU's societal contributions extend to infrastructure development in local communities and innovative programs under national schemes for health, sanitation, and sustainability. Its emphasis on digital transformation and e-governance is evident through advanced tele-support services, in-house software development, and a robust data centre. Despite its strengths, SU recognises challenges such as limited international collaborations, fewer campus placements, and the need for industry linkages. However, its strategic location near key historical and biodiversity-rich areas offers unique opportunities for academic and cultural growth. SU remains committed to advancing teaching, research, and outreach while addressing emerging global and local needs.

In the SU campus, teaching departments are focusing on post-graduate programmes, and approximately four years ago, the undergraduate integrated UG-PG programmes were launched on the campus. The colleges are affiliated across six types of management and self-financing colleges account for 46% and aided colleges for 28.3% of enrolment, with 107,085 and 66,087 students respectively.

The SU has the highest enrolment (73.42%) among the universities in Kerala during 2022-23. The majority of students are enrolled in Arts & Science colleges, followed by Engineering & Technology colleges (16.16%), nursing education (3.08%), and Teacher education (2.95%). Female students account for 59.47% of the enrolment, while male students make up 40.511%. The majority of students are enrolled at the undergraduate level (81.6%), followed by the post-graduation level (16.2%). Female enrolment is higher at all levels, with 61% of students being women. There are 111 transgender students and a significant number of women students.

3.1.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

GCID was established in 2013 as a part of establishing new Arts & Science Colleges in Assembly constituencies where there is no Government or Government-Aided College. GCID was founded to address the growing demand for affordable and accessible education in the region, particularly benefiting students from rural and marginalised communities, especially for people from coastal areas. Currently, the college is situated in a temporary arrangement to be shifted to new premises once the permanent building under construction is completed. The college is a few kilometres from the nearest town and GCID enjoys easy accessibility via road and is within a few kilometres of the nearest railway station.

GCID is affiliated with a state university and offers undergraduate and integrated postgraduate programs across a range of disciplines, including arts, sciences, and commerce. Its faculty and academic programs emphasise holistic development, blending traditional education with skill development initiatives aimed at preparing students for modern career challenges.
The campus is equipped with essential facilities such as a library, well-maintained laboratories, and ICT-enabled classrooms. GCID prioritises co-curricular and extracurricular activities, offering opportunities for cultural and athletic engagement, which aligns with its vision of fostering all-around student development.

Recognised for its contributions to higher education in the region, GCID has earned a reputation for promoting equity and inclusion, ensuring that students from all socio-economic backgrounds have access to quality education. Its establishment in 2013 marked a pivotal step

in the region's educational development, helping to bridge the urban-rural educational divide and empowering local communities.

3.1.3. Government College-A (GC-A) and Government College-B (GC-B)

GC-A, established in 2005 by a philanthropic committee, is a distinguished government-aided higher education institution in a forested region of Kerala, focusing on fostering academic excellence and social responsibility. Recognised by the UGC under Sections 2(f) and 12(B) of the UGC Act, 1956, GC-A is also designated as a Minority Educational Institution. It operates under visionary leadership and maintains a commitment to serving underprivileged and marginalised communities. Located on a multi-acre campus in a quiet, rural setting, the institution is a short distance from the nearest small town and is tens of kilometres from the nearest rail and air connections. Its proximity to tribal settlements and teak plantations reflects its connection to the region's natural and cultural heritage. The institution offers a diverse range of undergraduate, postgraduate, and research programs, distinguishing itself nationally by reserving 20% of its courses for orphans. GC-A collaborates with prestigious organisations, including national and international academic, cultural, and social institutions, to enrich the educational experience. The campus is equipped with modern infrastructure, including fully ICT-enabled classrooms, well-stocked libraries, and state-of-the-art laboratories. In alignment with its mission of inclusivity, the campus is *divyang*-friendly (accessible), offering scholarships and financial support to ensure equitable access to education. GC-A's core values include academic excellence, innovation, inclusivity, multilingual proficiency, and environmental stewardship. Its programs emphasise research, social empowerment, and sustainable development, aligning with global educational goals. Collaborative initiatives with entities such as ICPR, NHRC, ICSSR, and UNESCO underscore its global outreach and progressive vision. Despite its strengths, GC-A faces challenges such as higher student enrollment, limited postgraduate offerings, and vulnerability to natural disasters, given its location in a disaster-prone area. The institution continues to address these challenges through innovative strategies, community engagement, and resilience-building initiatives.

By fostering a dynamic learning environment rooted in inclusivity and quality, GC-A remains dedicated to shaping well-rounded individuals capable of contributing to societal and global progress.

GC-B is a renowned institution of higher education located in a hill district of Kerala. Established in 1981, it was founded with the mission of providing transformative education to students in the hilly and tribal-dominated regions of the state. Initially functioning in a temporary facility, GC-B moved to its scenic 25-acre campus in 1983, set amidst lush greenery, offering a tranquil and inspiring environment for academic and personal growth. The campus land was generously gifted by a philanthropic family in honour of a visionary social leader, reflecting the institution's deep-rooted commitment to social welfare and inclusivity. Affiliated with a prominent state university, GC-B offers six undergraduate and four postgraduate programs across disciplines such as humanities, sciences, and commerce. The college takes pride in its impressive gender ratio, with over 80% women enrollment, demonstrating its dedication to empowering women through education. GC-B consistently produces university rank holders and accomplished individuals in academics and sports, highlighting its legacy of academic and extracurricular excellence. The college’s commitment to serving socially and economically marginalised communities is central to its mission. GC-B emphasises accessible, inclusive, and quality education, bridging the educational divide and fostering equity. Essential facilities such as a modern library, state-of-the-art laboratories, and technology-enabled classrooms support its academic endeavours. Beyond academics, the institution actively promotes cultural appreciation, environmental awareness, and leadership development through diverse co-curricular and extracurricular initiatives. Over its 43 years of existence, GC-B has established itself as a cornerstone of educational advancement in the region. By cultivating a culture of academic excellence, diversity, and social responsibility, the college empowers students from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to become self-reliant leaders and lifelong learners who drive positive change in society.

3.2 Profile of Institutional leaders and faculty members: faculty strength and composition

3.2.1. State University (SU)

The strength and composition of the SU faculty who teach undergraduate programmes reflect a diverse yet limited representation across social groups, religions, gender, and locale. Among the 15 permanent faculty members, the majority (10) belong to the OBC category, with minimal representation from SC (1) and ST (1) categories, and the remainder from the General category (3). Religious affiliation indicates a predominance of Hindu faculty members (10), followed by Muslims (3) and Christians (2), with no representation from Sikhs, Buddhists, or other religions. Gender composition reveals a disparity, with nine male faculty members compared to six women, and no individuals identified as differently abled. The locale data shows that most faculty members (11) reside in rural areas, while four are urban-based. Faculty recruitment in the past year (2022-23) included seven new members, primarily from OBC (4), General (2) and SC (1) backgrounds, with a gender distribution of two men and five women. Notably, all faculty members are based in Kerala, and the institution reports no vacant faculty positions, PTA-funded faculty, or visiting faculty.

3.2.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

The faculty composition of the GCID demonstrates a moderately diverse representation across social groups, religions, gender, differential ability status, and locale. Out of a total of 27 faculty members, 17 belong to the OBC category, while SC faculty members number only 2, and no representation exists from the ST or EWS categories. Eight faculty members are from the General category. In terms of religious affiliation, the majority are Hindus (17), followed by Muslims (8) and Christians (2). Gender composition highlights a significant disparity, with 20 women faculty members compared to 7 men. Two faculty members are identified as differently abled. Regarding residence, 18 faculty members reside in rural areas, while 9 are urban-based. A closer look at the roles reveals 23 permanent faculty members, predominantly Assistant Professors (22), with 1 Associate Professor and no Professors, contractual, or visiting faculty. There are four temporary FMs. All FMs are located in Kerala. There were no new recruitments or vacant positions reported in the 2022-23 academic year.

3.2.3. Government College-A (GC-A) and Government College-B (GC-B)

The faculty composition of the GC-A highlights significant trends in terms of social groups, religion, gender, differential ability status, and locale. Out of 63 faculty members, the majority belong to the OBC category (58), with no representation from SC, ST, or EWS categories. Faculty members affiliated with the General category account for 5. In terms of religious composition, 50 are Muslims, followed by 12 Hindus, while Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other religions are unrepresented. Gender distribution is nearly balanced, with 32 women faculty members and 31 males, though no individuals with differential ability status are reported. Geographically, a vast majority (58) of the faculty reside in rural areas, with only 5 based in urban locations. The institution's faculty strength includes 33 permanent members (all Assistant Professors), 15 contractual, and 15 temporary faculty, with all being based in Kerala. There are no Associate Professors, Professors, visiting faculty, PTA-funded positions, or vacancies. Notably, no new recruitments were made in the 2022-23 academic year, maintaining a consistent composition. This distribution reflects a focus on inclusivity within specific dimensions, though gaps remain in representation across several demographic groups.

The faculty composition of the GC-B reveals diverse representation across social groups, religion, gender, differential ability status, and locale. Out of 49 total faculty members, the majority belong to the OBC category (23), followed by the General category (16), with SC and ST members comprising 4 and 6, respectively. Religious affiliations indicate that Hindus constitute the largest group (26), followed by Muslims (11) and Christians (12), with no representation from Sikh, Buddhist, or other religious groups. Gender distribution shows a higher proportion of women faculty (29) compared to men (20), with two faculty members identified as differently abled. Regarding residential location, the majority (35) reside in rural areas, with 14 based in urban settings. The permanent faculty consists of 38 members, including 33 Assistant Professors, 4 Associate Professors, and 1 Professor. Temporary faculty account for 11 members. Notably, all faculty are based in Kerala, and there are no contractual, visiting, or PTA-funded faculty, nor any vacant positions. No new recruitments occurred in the 2022-23 academic year. This composition underscores the institution’s inclusivity efforts while highlighting opportunities to enhance representation across certain social and religious groups.

3.3 Faculty professional development opportunities

This section examines faculty engagement in professional development activities across four institutions: State University (SU), Government College in-depth (GCID), Government College-A (GC-A), and Government College-B (GC-B), to know the role of professional development in supporting higher education outreach. Drawing on data from a faculty member survey, institutional leader interviews, and faculty interviews, the analysis focuses on participation rates, types of activities, organisational venues, and barriers to engagement.

3.3.1. State University (SU)

Jose, the institutional leader of SU, has a rich history of professional development spanning research and teaching. Since 2002, he has completed six major research projects, including the RDI (Research, Development, and Innovation) project funded by the Department of Science and Technology, and has overseen 13 Ph.D. graduates, with eight more in progress. His contributions include establishing and coordinating a research and consultancy service cell at his previous college, facilitating industry-academic collaborations. Jose has over 100 international journal publications and a foreign-published book. While his research activities are extensive, his participation in standard professional development programs has been limited to mandatory activities, including one orientation programme, two refresher courses, and a research skill development programme at a very reputed private HE institution in 2010.

As shown in Table 3.3.1, at the SU, 57.9% of faculty respondents reported accessing professional development opportunities in the past year. These activities were primarily organised within the college/university (31.8%), other institutions (31.8%), and the state HRDC (22.7%), with fewer opportunities accessed through HRDCs in other states (13.7%). Among the types of activities attended, orientation programs (23.07%) and staff training initiatives (20.51%) were the most popular, followed by refresher courses (17.94%), writing and publication workshops (12.82%), and short-term courses and summer/winter schools (12.82% each). Faculty members who did not participate (42.1%) cited work status (37.5%), family responsibilities (25%), and a lack of desire to apply (25%) as the main barriers, with one respondent (12.5%) noting a lack of opportunities. No additional activities were specified beyond the standard categories. These findings reflect moderate engagement in professional

development, with notable participation in programmes aimed at skill enhancement and orientation.

Table 3.3.1. Professional Development Opportunities for FMs in SU

Section and Option	Answer = Yes (N)	Answer = Yes (% of Yes)
Accessed Professional Development	11	57.9
Not Accessed Professional Development	8	42.1
Total	**19**	**100**
Site of Professional Development *(Valid Responses =11 Nos., 100%)*		
In your college/university (not within HRDC)	7	31.8
In another college/university (not within HRDC)	7	31.8
HRDC within the state	5	22.7
HRDC in another state	3	13.7
Total of Answer=Yes	**22**	**100**
Types of Professional Development *(Valid Responses = 11 Nos., 100%)*		
Orientation Programmes	9	23.07
Refresher Courses	7	17.94
Staff Training (FIPs, FDPs)	8	20.51
Writing and publication workshops	5	12.82
Summer/Winter school workshops	5	12.82
Short-Term Courses (STCs)	5	12.82
Total of Answer=Yes	**39**	**100**
Reasons for Not Accessing *(Valid Responses = 8 Nos., 100%)*		
No opportunities were offered	1	12.50
I could not apply due to my work status	3	37.50
I could not apply due to teaching responsibilities	0	0
I could not apply due to family responsibilities	2	25.0
I did not want to apply	2	25.0
Total of Answer=Yes	**8**	**100**

Professional development at SU is characterised by a diverse range of activities, encompassing research skill enhancement, technical training, pedagogical development, and advanced specialised workshops. A significant focus is placed on enhancing research capabilities through participation in research projects, attendance at workshops, seminars, and international conferences, emphasising software and research methodologies. There's also a strong emphasis on IT and data analysis skills development, with faculty engaging in programs covering tools like LaTeX, SPSS, and EViews, often through HRDC centres. Participation in teacher training programs focusing on contemporary pedagogical approaches like Outcome-

Based Education and alignment with new educational policies is also evident. Furthermore, some faculty pursue highly specialised training in advanced scientific fields, such as gene editing. Completion of mandatory orientation, refresher, and teacher learning programs for career progression is a standard practice.

3.3.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

Jack, the leader of GCID, has actively engaged in professional development activities throughout his career. He has completed an orientation program hosted by MHRD, a refresher program, and numerous short-term faculty development programs, focusing primarily on capacity-building workshops for teachers. Additionally, he participated in a faculty development workshop in the United States, which was a pivotal part of his professional growth. Jack's development trajectory emphasizes the importance of building teaching capacity and strengthening educational practices through targeted training opportunities.

As presented in Table 3.3.2, at GCID, 78.9% of faculty respondents reported participating in professional development opportunities over the past year. These activities were predominantly organised through the state HRDC (43.8%), while in-house programmes and external institutions accounted for smaller proportions (18.8% each). HRDCs in other states also contributed (18.8%). Refresher courses were the most attended type of activity (29.03%), followed by orientation programmes (22.58%), staff training initiatives (19.35%), short-term courses (12.9%), and writing and publication workshops (9.68%). An exchange programme was additionally specified under "other activities." Among the 21.1% of respondents who did not participate, family responsibilities (66.67%) and a lack of opportunities (33.33%) were cited as the main reasons. These data highlight GCID's robust faculty engagement in professional development, particularly through HRDCs, and a commitment to diverse training opportunities.

Table 3.3.2. Professional Development Opportunities for FMs in GCID

Section and Option	Answer = Yes (N)	Answer = Yes (% of Yes)
Accessed Professional Development	15	78.9
Not Accessed Professional Development	4	21.1
Total	**19**	**100**
Site of Professional Development *(Valid Responses = 13 Nos., 86.66%)*		
In your college/university (not within HRDC)	3	18.8
In another college/university (not within HRDC)	3	18.8
HRDC within the state	7	43.8
HRDC in another state	3	18.8
Total of Answer=Yes	**16**	**100**
Types of Professional Development *(Valid Responses = 14 Nos., 93.7%)*		
Orientation Programmes	7	22.58
Refresher Courses	9	29.03
Staff Training (FIPs, FDPs)	6	19.35
Writing and publication workshops	3	9.68
Summer/Winter school workshops	2	6.45
Short-Term Courses (STCs)	4	12.90
Total of Answer=Yes	**31**	**100**
Reasons for Not Accessing *(Valid Responses = 3 Nos., 75%)*		
No opportunities were offered	1	33.33
I could not apply due to my work status	0	0
I could not apply due to teaching responsibilities	0	0
I could not apply due to family responsibilities	2	66.67
I did not want to apply	0	0
Total of Answer=Yes	**3**	**100**

At GCID, professional development is closely intertwined with academic pursuits, particularly doctoral studies. Many faculty members balance their Ph.D. work with participation in seminars, orientation, and refresher courses. There's a notable emphasis on scholarly activities like publishing research papers and contributing to academic discourse through reviews and writing. Engagement in subject-related online courses through platforms like Coursera is also observed. Some faculty members pursue professional development through collaborations with IT companies, engaging in hands-on software projects that enhance both their teaching and research capabilities. Completion of mandatory induction training is a standard practice.

3.3.3. Government College-A (GC-A) and Government College-B (GC-B)

Shibu, the institutional leader of GC-A, has prioritised continuous learning and adaptation in his professional development, reflecting his belief in the ever-changing nature of the education

sector. He has participated in faculty development programs hosted by prestigious institutions such as IIM, NIT, and IIT. His training includes workshops on teaching-learning methodologies and administrative practices, which he considers equally critical for his role. Shibu's professional development journey underscores his commitment to enhancing both pedagogical approaches and institutional administration.

Professional development at GC-A demonstrates a multi-faceted approach, combining traditional training with innovative and leadership-oriented activities. Participation in orientation and refresher courses, along with research-related seminars, forms a core component. There's an emphasis on developing specific skills like design thinking through dedicated workshops. Some faculty members engage in programs at premier institutions like IIMs, NITs, and IITs, focusing on faculty development and refresher courses. Leadership and service are also recognised as forms of professional growth, with examples of faculty mentoring student projects and receiving recognition for contributions to extracurricular activities like NSS. Engagement with online learning platforms like SWAYAM and participation in international conferences are also evident.

Janaki, the leader of GC-B, has faced challenges in balancing professional development with administrative responsibilities. Since her appointment in 2006, she has been consistently vested with significant leadership roles, including serving as the HOD and senior-most faculty. Despite her administrative commitments, she has completed mandatory orientation and refresher courses up to the associate professor level. However, limited publications and time constraints have hindered her progression to the professor level. Janaki's experience highlights the difficulties of prioritising professional development amid the demands of institutional leadership.

Professional development at GC-B is characterised by a blend of academic advancement, practical skill development, and engagement with professional communities. Several faculty members are actively pursuing doctoral studies, often aligning their research with their professional development activities, such as attending workshops and FDPs on relevant topics like natural language processing. Participation in in-service training, seminars, and networking through professional organisations is common, particularly for those in fields like journalism.

There's also evidence of faculty engaging in community-focused work, integrating their professional roles with leadership and training within community organisations. Presenting papers at professional conferences and contributing to academic publications are also regular activities.

Jose from SU has a strong emphasis on research-oriented professional development, completing multiple major projects, mentoring Ph.D. scholars, and publishing extensively, but his participation in standard faculty development programs is limited to mandatory activities. In contrast, Jack from GCID balances research with capacity-building initiatives, actively participating in workshops, refresher courses, and an international development program, reflecting a focus on enhancing teaching capabilities. Shibu from GC-A prioritises continuous learning, attending prestigious programs at IIM, NIT, and IIT, with a dual emphasis on teaching-learning methodologies and administrative practices. Janaki from GC-B, however, reports minimal engagement in professional development due to extensive administrative responsibilities, restricting her participation to mandatory orientation and refresher courses.

A comparative analysis of faculty professional development opportunities at SU and GCID highlights differences in access, organisation, and participation types. Among valid respondents, 57.9% of SU faculty accessed professional development opportunities, compared to 78.9% at GCID. The primary venues for these activities at SU included the college/university itself (31.8%) and other institutions within the state HRDC (22.7%). In contrast, GCID faculty participation was highest within the state HRDC (43.8%), followed by in-house programs (18.8%). Types of professional development activities varied, with SU faculty predominantly attending orientation programs (23.07%) and staff training initiatives (20.51%), while GCID faculty showed a preference for refresher courses (29.03%) and orientation programs (22.58%). Writing and publication workshops were less common at both institutions, with 12.82% participation at SU and 9.68% at GCID. Notably, SU reported no responses under "other activities," whereas GCID included exchange programmes under this category. Among those who did not participate, reasons at SU included work status (37.5%) and family responsibilities (25%), whereas GCID faculty cited family responsibilities as the primary barrier (66.67%). These findings underscore greater engagement and broader institutional support for

professional development at GCID relative to SU, with opportunities to address participation barriers at both institutions.

SU focuses on research and technical skills, GCID emphasises academic pursuits and online learning, GC-A promotes leadership and engagement with premier institutions, and GC-B encourages community involvement and networking through professional organisations.

3.4 Student strength and composition

This section utilises administrative data collected from the institutions regarding the UG student population.

3.4.1. State University (SU)

All students are women, and their academic focus ranges across science and humanities streams, specifically in disciplines like Bio-Science, Physics, Chemistry, and Development Studies. The students come from a range of social groups, with the majority being from the Other Backward Classes (OBC), followed by Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and General category students. A significant portion of the students practice Hinduism, while others follow Islam. None of the students in the sample are persons with disabilities (PWD). The majority of the students reside in urban areas, with all hailing from Kerala, a state located in the southern part of India. The students' annual family incomes vary widely, ranging from as low as ₹10,000 to over ₹1.6 million, indicating a diverse socio-economic background. Academic performance in the 12th class shows that students have strong academic records, with most achieving high percentages, generally above 80%. The students attended a mix of school types, including government, aided, and private institutions, with the majority following the State syllabus, although some have completed their schooling under CBSE or other syllabi. The medium of instruction at the school level was predominantly English, though some students studied in Malayalam. This demographic snapshot provides insights into the diverse social and economic background of the student population, with a clear urban concentration and strong academic foundations across various disciplines.

3.4.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

The student population at GCID primarily consists of individuals from the state of Kerala and presents a diverse array of demographic, social, and locational characteristics. A majority of students reside in rural areas, reflecting the broader regional distribution of educational institutions in the state. The students come from various social groups, including OBC (Other Backward Class), SC (Scheduled Caste), ST (Scheduled Tribe), EWS (Economically Weaker Sections), and the General category, with a prominent representation from the OBC group. Religious diversity is also notable, with a mix of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian students, highlighting the multicultural nature of the student body. While the majority of students are not classified as Persons with Disabilities (PWD), there is a notable presence of students who face such challenges, contributing to the institution's inclusive environment. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the students vary widely, with annual family incomes ranging from as low as 1,000 INR to over a million INR, which indicates a significant variation in economic conditions within the student body. In terms of educational background, students come from both government and private schools, with the medium of instruction largely being Malayalam or English, depending on the region and the school type. The diverse student population reflects a range of academic streams from humanities, science, and commerce, further enhancing the institution's rich academic and cultural milieu.

3.4.3. Government College -A (GC-A) and Government College-B (GC-B)

Administrative data concerning the undergraduate student population at GC-A and GC-B could not be collected for this study. This gap in data collection restricts the ability to provide a comprehensive profile of the undergraduate student body at these institutions. However, based on the institutional profiles, in section 3.2.3, it can be inferred that GC-A and GC-B serve diverse student populations, particularly from underrepresented communities such as tribal and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, given their emphasis on inclusivity and social responsibility.

3.5 Existing Institutional HE outreach strategies and activities

This section presents evidence from available documents from institutional websites and where available, from the Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR) regarding institutional outreach strategies or activities designed to assist with or provide information about HE access and choice for prospective students.

While all four institutions studied (SU, GCID, GC-A, and GC-B) exhibit a positive culture of community outreach and support for current students, there is a lack of documented evidence regarding specific HE outreach strategies aimed at facilitating access and choice for prospective students. No specific information regarding existing institutional higher education outreach strategies and activities was accessible from authentic documents. The only available insights were idiosyncratic oral reports on such practices, provided by institutional leaders and faculty members.

While specific documentation on higher education (HE) outreach strategies, such as activities designed to assist with or provide information about, HE access and choice for prospective students, is limited, anecdotal evidence and institutional practices suggest a strong culture of community engagement and support for current students across the institutions. However, these activities primarily focus on enrolled students or broader community outreach rather than targeted HE outreach for admissions.

SU has a culture of community outreach through initiatives like disaster management programmes, especially during floods and landslides, environmental conservation efforts, and infrastructure development in local communities, including through the National Service Scheme (NSS). Anecdotal reports from faculty suggest that SU organises open days especially for students and their friends and relatives, and academic fairs like Sastrayaan, where prospective students and parents can visit the campus and interact with faculty, but these are not formally documented.

Similarly, for GCID, no formal documents detail specific HE outreach activities. The institution's focus on serving rural and coastal communities suggests a culture of inclusivity. GCID faculty occasionally visit local schools to discuss higher education opportunities, but these efforts are informal and not systematically recorded. Such activities reflect a commitment to community engagement but do not fully align with targeted HE outreach for prospective students.

Likewise, GC-A's emphasis on inclusivity, particularly for orphans and tribal communities, is well evident through its reservation in admissions for orphans and its divyang-friendly

(accessible) campus. GC-A is known to distribute informational pamphlets in nearby tribal settlements to raise awareness about its programmes, but these efforts are not formally documented. While these activities indicate a positive culture of outreach, they are not specifically tailored to assist with HE access and choice for prospective students.

For GC-B, no formal records of HE outreach activities could be gleaned. Its commitment to serving hilly and tribal-dominated regions, along with high women enrollment and focus on empowering disadvantaged communities, reflects an inclusive spirit. The community events hosted by GC-B where local leaders and alumni discuss the benefits of higher education, can, however, potentially influence prospective students. These efforts, though, are more aligned with community engagement and support for current students rather than structured HE outreach strategies.

3.6 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, the four institutions under study, the State University (SU), Government College in-depth (GCID), and two government colleges (GC-A and GC-B) were analysed for their institutional leader, faculty and student strengths. SU, established in 1968, stands as a prominent residential and affiliating university with a broad array of facilities, a commitment to societal impact, and international recognition. GCID, founded in 1980, caters to rural and marginalised communities, offering a range of programs that emphasise holistic development. GC-A and GC-B, with their focus on inclusivity and social responsibility, stand out for their commitment to underserved communities, particularly in forested and hill regions. A comparative analysis of faculty demographics reveals notable differences in terms of social groups, gender, disability status, and rural residency across the institutions. Faculty professional development opportunities examined highlight differences in engagement at SU and GCID, with the latter showing greater institutional support for faculty development. The student populations across these institutions are diverse in terms of socio-economic background, academic performance, and religious affiliations, with a significant representation of rural, OBC, and female students.

The four institutions demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering educational opportunities for diverse student populations, particularly from underrepresented and marginalised communities. While SU stands out for its research focus and global reach, GCID, GC-A, and GC-

B emphasise inclusivity, community engagement, and local development. Despite facing challenges such as limited international collaborations, campus placements, and industry linkages, these institutions continue to advance their educational missions, providing a wide range of academic programs that address local and global needs. Faculty professional development opportunities, though varied across institutions, play a critical role in ensuring academic excellence, with GCID providing more extensive growth opportunities. The demographic diversity of students across these institutions further reinforces their role in contributing to the region's educational landscape by providing accessible and high-quality education to students from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

Chapter 4: Who are the Faculty Members?

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the Research Question:

> *1a: "Who is delivering HE in colleges and universities in rural and semi-urban locations? Who are the faculty members and the institutional leaders?"*

The demographic and professional backgrounds of institutional leaders (ILs) and faculty members at State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and other government colleges (GC-A and GC-B), within rural and semi-urban contexts, are examined. The analysis explores key demographic factors, including age, gender, caste/social group, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, relationship status, caring responsibilities, place of birth, mother tongue, residence, commute patterns, educational history, and family background.

Data were collected primarily through Faculty Member (FM) surveys (N=39), IL interviews (N=4) and FM interviews (N=21), providing a comprehensive view of the individuals shaping higher education in these select institutions. This chapter aims to delineate the characteristics of those delivering higher education, focusing on their diversity and experiences, to provide a nuanced understanding of the academic workforce in these specific settings.

4.2 Demographic background of faculty members

The diversity and representation within the faculty significantly impact the quality and inclusivity of higher education delivery (Sabharwal, Henderson and Joseph, 2020). This subsection is primarily based on data collected from Faculty Member (FM) surveys conducted in State Universities (SUs) and Government College in Depth (GCID) and provides a detailed analysis of the demographic profiles of faculty at these institutions. This includes examinations of age distribution, gender composition, caste/social group representation, religious affiliations, disability status, sexual orientation, relationship status, caring responsibilities, place of birth, permanent residence, and mother tongue. By delineating these demographic variables, this section aims to illuminate the diversity and composition of the faculty in the studied institutions.

4.2.1. State University (SU)

FM survey data of SU (4_1), with N=19 valid responses, reveal that the faculty members at State University (SU) represented a diverse demographic background. In SU, 47.4% of faculty

members fall into the 31–40 age group, followed by 31.6% in the 41–50 age range. Only 10.5% are between 20–30 years, and another 10.5% are in the 51–60 range. The gender composition of the faculty in SU is predominantly men, with 73.7% representation, while women account for 26.3% and no respondents identified as transgender. In terms of caste or social group of faculty members at SU, Other Backward Classes (OBC) dominate the demographic at 73.7%, while those from the General category make up 21.1%. Scheduled Castes (SC) are underrepresented at 5.3%, and there is no representation from Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). The religious diversity at the SU is moderately diverse. Hindus form the majority at 47.4%, followed by Muslims at 31.6% and Christians at 21.1%, reflecting the demographics of the geographic region[7]. None of the faculty members in SU reported being differently abled, and LGBTQIAP+ representation in SU is 6.25% identifying as such. Most faculty members (94.7%) are married, while 5.3% identified as unmarried or in a relationship. None reported being divorced or separated. Most Faculty members at SU (84.2%) have children, with an average of 1.56 children per faculty member. The entire faculty cohort at SU was born in India and is native to Kerala, identifying Malayalam as their mother tongue. They reside predominantly in rural areas (68.4%), with the remainder (31.6%) in urban areas.

The administrative data for State University (SU: 4_1) complements these demographics. The total faculty count is 15, with a significant majority belonging to the OBC social group (10, 66.67%), followed by General (3, 20%), SC (1, 6.67%), and ST (1, 6.67%), indicating a dominant OBC representation. Religiously, Hindus constitute the largest group (10, 66.67%), with Muslims (3, 20%) and Christians (2, 13.33%). Gender distribution leans toward men (9, 60%) compared to women (6, 40%), with no differently-abled faculty reported. Geographically, the faculty is predominantly rural-based (11, 73.33%) with a smaller urban presence (4, 26.67%), and all are domiciled in Kerala.

4.2.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

The faculty members at Government College In-Depth (GCID) represented a diverse demographic profile. FM Survey in GCID shows (N=20) the majority of faculty members (47.4%)

[7] As per 2011 Census of India figures the region's census data for Malappuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Palakkad, and Thrissur districts in Kerala, have an aggregate religious composition of Hindus at 50.0%, Muslims at 40.7%, and Christians at 9.0%,

are in the 31–40 age range, followed by 42.1% in the 41–50 group. A smaller proportion (5.3%) were between 20–30 years and 51–60 years, respectively. Regarding gender composition, GCID has a predominantly women faculty, with 75% women and 25% men. No transgender individuals are reported. The caste and social group distribution indicated that OBC faculty members constitute 65%, while the General category accounts for 25% and SC for 10%. There is no representation from ST or EWS groups. In terms of religious affiliation, these faculty include 50% Hindus, 45% Muslims, and 5% Christians, reflecting the geographic location of the GCID and its demography. Differently-abled faculty constitute 10% of the GCID workforce, all reporting physical disabilities. No faculty members identified with intellectual disabilities, mental illness, or chronic neurological conditions. No respondents identified as LGBTQIAP+. 95% of faculty members are married, while 5% are divorced or separated. Most faculty members (90%) have children, with an average of 1.89 children per individual. Ninety-five per cent of GCID faculty members were born in Kerala, while one individual (5%) was born in the UAE. Faculty are evenly split between rural (50%) and urban (50%) residences. All GCID faculty members identified Malayalam as their mother tongue.

The administrative data for faculty members (FM) at Government College In-Depth (GCID: 4_2) aligns closely with the FM survey. Among the 27 faculty members, OBC is dominated with 17 members (62.96%), followed by General with 8 (29.63%), and a small representation from SC with 2 (7.41%), with no ST or EWS members. Religiously, Hindus form the majority with 17 members (62.96%), followed by Muslims with 8 (29.63%) and Christians with 2 (7.41%). Gender distribution shows a significant women majority with 20 members (74.07%), compared to 7 men (25.93%), and no differently-abled faculty are reported. Geographically, all faculty are domiciled in Kerala, with 18 (66.67%) residing in rural areas and 9 (33.33%) in urban areas.

4.3 Demographic background of institutional leaders

Demographic analysis of Institutional Leaders (ILs), drawn from semi-structured interviews covering both personal and professional attributes, reveals the following. The Institutional Leader (IL) group comprises individuals primarily aged between 40–59 years, with their roles spanning 0–5 years, and their tenure at current institutions ranging from 5 to 15 years. While three ILs were born and reside in Kerala and rural areas, one was born in Oman and resides in an urban location. Malayalam is their mother tongue, with English, Hindi, commonly spoken and

Arabic also known for one IL. All four ILs are married and have one or two children. One IL identifies as having a physical disability. One of the institutional leaders belonged to the category of orphans from the school stage. He was admitted to an orphanage until the 10th class because his family was struggling financially to manage daily life. This admission was facilitated by a local teacher and social worker who helped him and six other students from his village join an orphanage about 45-50 km away. The orphanage provided mentoring and support that shaped his ambitions, including aptitude programs that guided him toward the humanities and social sciences. He credits the orphanage for enabling him to reach his current position as an IL. Another is an accomplished researcher with international research exposure; his family background data shows limited formal education among immediate family members, with the highest levels typically reaching 9th to 12th grade. The lack of advanced education in the family contrasts with this IL's accomplishments, indicating a self-driven path to success. One of the ILs belongs to the scheduled caste category, and she likely overcame socio-economic or educational limitations in her family to reach her leadership position, possibly through self-motivation. They serve in leadership roles within Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQAC), such as IQAC Directors or Coordinators, holding designations of Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant Professor. Three were directly recruited to their current institutions, with one transferring from another HEI, and all hold regular appointments. This group reflects a blend of diverse personal experiences and professional backgrounds.

4.4 Institutional Leaders and Faculty Members: residence and commute information

The residential and commuting patterns of institutional leaders (ILs) and faculty members (FMs) at higher education institutions provide critical insights into the logistical and lifestyle factors influencing their professional lives. This section examines key variables, including split or single residence patterns, location of residence, distance and travel time between residence and institution, and modes of transport. The data were collected through interviews with institutional leaders (IL Interview), surveys of faculty members (FM Survey), and interviews with faculty members (FM Interview), offering a comprehensive view of how ILs and FMs at State University (SU), Government College In-depth (GCID), and other government colleges navigate their residential and commuting arrangements.

4.4.1. State University (SU)

The institutional leader at State University (SU) resided in university quarters during the workweek and travelled to his primary residence located 95 kilometres from the university on weekends. This required a commute of approximately 120 minutes. To travel between locations, the IL at the SU relied on a personal car. So, the IL stayed within the university during the workweek while maintaining a separate permanent residence for weekends.

In the SU, 21.1% of faculty members reported staying in more than one residence during the workweek, while 78.9% maintained a single residence. Among those with split residences, 50% lived on campus during the workweek, while the remaining 50% resided in the same town as the institution. For weekends and vacation periods, among the faculty members with split residences, 66.67% moved to a different district within the same state, while the remaining 33.33% stayed in the same town.

Regarding location, among faculty members who maintained a single residence, 60% lived within the same town as the university, 26.67% resided within the same district but outside the town, and 6.66% lived in a different district within the same state. A minority (6.66%) stayed on campus.

The average commuting distance from the primary weekly residence to the SU was found to be approximately 25.22 kilometres. However, the distances varied significantly among respondents, with some living as close as 1 kilometre and others commuting from distances as far as 180 kilometres.

In terms of travel time, the mean duration for faculty members to commute from their weekly residence to the SU was recorded as 36.47 minutes. Individual commute times ranged from as little as 5 minutes for those residing nearby to 180 minutes for those travelling from more distant locations.

Faculty members employed various modes of transportation to reach SU. The most frequently used methods included personal motorcycles (36.67%) and personal cars (23.33%). Additionally, 13.33% relied on buses or minivans, while 10% commuted by walking. Other

methods included trains (10%), rickshaws or autos (3.33%), and bicycles (3.33%). Notably, no respondents reported using metro services or tractors for their commute.

Faculty members (FMs) at State University (SU) provide diverse perspectives on residence and commute through interview data. Residence patterns vary: Ponnoo and John maintain a single residence (rented house and own house, respectively), while Dr. Lathika splits time between an apartment near the university and another location. Krish, Peace, and others like Dr. Joseph also report single residences, with occasional visits to native places. Location of residence includes proximity to the institution (e.g., John at 2 km, Dr. Lathika at 6 km) or further afield (e.g., Krish at 180 km). Distances range from 2 km (John, 5 minutes) to 180 km (Krish, 180 minutes), with Dr. Joseph at 20 km (40 minutes) and Ponnoo at 3.5 km (10-20 minutes). Modes of transport differ: John uses his own vehicle, Peace a motorcycle, Dr. Lathika and Dr. Joseph cars, Ponnoo a private bus or auto rickshaw, and Krish a combination of railway and bus, reflecting a mix of personal and public options tailored to their commute needs.

4.4.2. Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

4.4.2.1 Government College In-depth (GCID)

Based on the survey and interview data, Faculty members and institutional leaders (ILs) at Government College in-depth (GCID) exhibit a higher tendency to split their time between multiple residences. For example, IL in GCID reports split residences. IL commutes 40 km from their weekday residence to the college, with a travel time of 75 minutes by train. On weekends, they travel to their permanent residence. The commute and residential patterns for GCID FMs are more distributed; 40% of FMs report having split residences. During the working week, they tend to live in the same town or district as the college, while weekends are spent in other districts. For FMs without split residences, 44.44% reside in a different district but within the same state, while 22.22% live in the same town or district.

GCID FMs travel an average of 50.72 km to work, with an average commute time of 87.5 minutes. Buses are the primary mode of transport for 37.04%, followed by trains (25.93%) and personal vehicles (14.81%).

4.4.2.2 Other Government Colleges

ILs in other government colleges exhibit more localized residential patterns. For example, one IL commutes 1 km using an electric scooter, while the other travels 20 km in 30 minutes by car. The proximity of their residences to their institutions reflects the availability of convenient housing options near the colleges, minimising commuting challenges.

The residential and commuting behaviour of FMs in other government colleges varies significantly: Some FMs live close to their colleges, commuting less than 5 km and relying on walking, bicycles, or scooters. Others travel longer distances, such as 25 km or more, using cars or bikes. The average commute time ranges from 10 to 60 minutes, depending on the distance and mode of transport.

4.5 Institutional Leaders' and Faculty Members' Background

This section covers educational and family background, as well as schooling and higher education history of ILs and FMs.

4.5.1 Educational and family background

The educational and family backgrounds of faculty members in academic institutions provide critical insights into the socioeconomic and educational contexts that shape their professional journeys. This section draws on data from interviews with institutional leaders (IL), faculty members (FM) surveys, and FM interviews in both State Universities and government colleges.

4.5.1.1 State University (SU)

The educational background of faculty members' families in the State University reveals a mix of formal education levels. Most faculty members' mothers and fathers have completed basic schooling, with many attaining education only up to the 9th or 10th class. A small proportion of parents have completed degree-level education, and there are no records of postgraduate qualifications among parents. Spouses are well educated, most of them are postgraduate and a few are graduates. A few have M Phil /Ph D qualifications also. Grandparents generally had limited or no formal education. In fact, most of them reported that they do not know of their grandparents' education at all. Among siblings, the highest education levels varied widely, with a significant portion (26.09%) holding a degree, while others have completed postgraduate studies (15.22%), and a smaller number have MPhil and/or PhD qualifications (6.52%). A

considerable number of siblings have also completed education up to 9th-10th class (19.57%) or 11th-12th class (17.39%).

In terms of occupational backgrounds, the majority of mothers were homemakers, while fathers were engaged in farming, business, or daily wage work. A few faculty members reported their parents working in government service or skilled professions. Spouses had varied occupations; a few were professionally employed, and most were in varied jobs. The average monthly family income for faculty members ranges from ₹50,000 to ₹100,000, with most households supporting around four people.

An overwhelming 84% of faculty members in State Universities are the first in their families to work as faculty members, emphasizing the significant leap in professional and educational attainment within their family contexts.

4.5.1.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

The family educational background of faculty members in GCID and other government colleges mirrors that of State Universities, with slight variations. Many faculty members reported their parents' education levels as basic, often limited to 9th or 10th class. Grandparents, in most cases, lacked formal education. Spouses are well educated with degree education or more in most cases. The siblings of faculty members displayed higher levels of educational attainment, with the majority having completed postgraduate studies (33.33%) or a degree (26.67%). A small number have completed education up to 9th-10th class (26.67%) or 11th-12th class (10%).

Occupationally, mothers of FMs in GCID and other government colleges were predominantly homemakers (70%), while fathers were into varied jobs, including business, skilled work, government service or daily wage jobs. Spouses were into varied jobs and a few were in teaching. The average monthly family income showed a similar range, with a concentration in the ₹75,000–₹100,000 bracket. These households generally supported fewer individuals (approximately three per family) compared to State Universities.

In terms of professional lineage, 80% of faculty members in GCID and other government colleges are the first in their families to work as faculty members. However, a small proportion

reported having relatives, such as cousins or parents, who were involved in academia or related fields.

4.5.2 Schooling history

Understanding the educational backgrounds of the stakeholders is critical to addressing HE outreach practices and the motivations or resistance of HEIs to engage in community outreach. The data for this section is drawn from multiple sources, including Institutional Leader (IL) interviews, Faculty Member (FM) surveys, and FM interviews, offering a comprehensive view of the educational trajectories of FMs and ILs, which may influence their perspectives on higher education outreach and their roles in facilitating access to HE in their local communities.

4.5.2.1 State University (SU)

Institutional Leader (IL) in SU reported a mix of schooling backgrounds. They studied in English medium schools, attended schools in rural areas during their early years, later moving to a municipal area. Faculty Members (FMs) in SU predominantly attended rural schools during their early years, with a declining rural trend in higher grades. For example, 84.2% attended rural primary schools, but by senior secondary school, this dropped to 52.6%, with 42.1% attending urban schools. The majority of FMs studied in co-educational schools (84.2% for secondary and 73.7% for senior secondary). Regarding school management, most FMs attended government-aided schools (63.2% for secondary and 47.4% for senior secondary), followed by government and private unaided schools. The majority of faculty members (FMs) pursued the state syllabus, with 89.5% for secondary education and 73.7% for senior secondary education, while only a small number chose CBSE, and none opted for the ICSE syllabus. The medium of instruction was primarily the regional language in lower classes (79.0% in secondary), shifting to English in higher classes (78.9% in senior secondary). Science was the most common stream choice (63.2%), followed by arts and humanities (31.6%). The residence pattern for FMs during senior secondary school showed that 89.5% lived at home as day scholars, with a small percentage (10.5%) residing in school hostels.

4.5.2.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

Institutional Leaders (IL) in Government College in-depth (GCID) reported diverse schooling experiences. One IL attended a private school in Muscat until the 8th standard and then shifted to India for the 9th standard, attending an urban private school under the CBSE syllabus with

English as the medium of instruction. Other ILs reported rural schooling with the Malayalam medium of instruction.

FMs in GCID followed a similar trend as SU, with rural schools dominating early education (60% for primary, dropping to 40% in senior secondary) and a gradual shift to urban or semi-urban schools in higher grades. Co-education was common (75% for secondary and 80% for senior secondary), and most FMs attended government-aided schools (60% for both secondary and senior secondary). Most FMs in GCID studied the state syllabus (90% during secondary and 95% during senior secondary), and none of them took the ICSE syllabus during their school education. The medium of instruction shifted from the regional language (70%) in lower grades to predominantly English (95%) in senior secondary. Science was the most chosen stream (57.9%), followed by commerce (26.3%) and arts/humanities (15.8%). The residence pattern during senior secondary school showed that 85% of FMs lived at home as day scholars, with 10% in school hostels.

Data for other government colleges aligns closely with GCID trends. FMs generally started schooling in rural or semi-urban settings before transitioning to urban schools for higher education. Co-education remained prevalent across all levels, and government-aided schools dominated the management type. English was the preferred medium of instruction for higher grades. Stream choices leaned toward science, though commerce and arts were also selected by a notable minority. Residence during senior secondary school mirrored the patterns of GCID, with most FMs living at home as day scholars.

4.5.3 Higher education history

The pursuit of higher education (HE) in India, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, familial, and institutional factors. Understanding the motivations, institutional choices, and subject preferences of faculty members (FMs) and institutional leaders (ILs) provides critical insights into the dynamics of HE access and decision-making, especially in contributing to community outreach. This section explores the HE background and the enrollment process for undergraduate and other qualifications of ILs and FMs, drawing on data from IL interviews, FM surveys, and FM interviews. The data explores key aspects of HE engagement, including who motivated FMs and ILs to pursue HE, who assisted in

selecting institutions, and who influenced their choice of study subjects. It covers details of academic programmes, focusing on the subject studied, type and location of the higher education institution (HEI), and funding sources, whether FMs and ILs cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET) or State Level Eligibility Test (SLET), and whether they availed reservations, including the specific categories of reservation.

4.5.3.1 State University (SU)

The decision-making process of the IL regarding the pursuit of higher education, the selection of an institution, and the choice of subject was largely motivated by personal interest and convenience. The decision regarding the institution for undergraduate and postgraduate education was driven by convenience and the prestige of the institution. The individual chose a prominent college located in an urban area, which was not only one of the leading colleges in the state but also conveniently located near their residence, making daily commuting feasible. This college offered both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the field of botany. For doctoral studies, the individual pursued a PhD at a Central University in a metropolitan city, further emphasising the importance of attending reputable institutions in urban centres. For undergraduate and postgraduate education, the individual received a state merit scholarship. For the PhD program, a Research Fellowship from the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) provided essential funding. IL did not get external guidance or specific motivations from others regarding the selection of the institution, indicating that it was a personal choice driven by the quality and location of the institution. IL did not mention any specific reservations availed for higher education study, such as caste-based reservations or disability accommodations. The individual demonstrated a strong passion for specific subjects, which guided IL's subject selection. The institution choice was based on proximity and reputation, with significant support from scholarships and fellowships throughout the IL's academic career.

For their bachelor's degree, FMs at SU attended mostly affiliated colleges (84.21%) and government-aided/private-aided (68.42%). The location distribution showed a mix, with 47.36% attending institutions in rural areas, 36.84% in urban areas, and 15.80% in semi-urban areas. Funding was primarily self-funded (63.16%), with limited reliance on freeships (22.22%) or scholarships (16.67%). However, for their Master's degree significant portion of FMs at the SU attended affiliated colleges (57.89%), and universities made up the remainder of institutions

(42.11%). Most institutions were government-run (63.16%). In terms of location, for masters, 63.16% were in urban areas, followed by rural (21.05%) and semi-urban (15.79%). Funding sources included self-funding (61.11%), scholarships (16.67%), and freeships (22.22%). All SU FMs for their M. Phil, attended universities (100%), which were exclusively government institutions. Most of these institutions were located in urban areas (85.71%), with a small portion in rural regions (14.29%). Funding came primarily from fellowships (42.86%) and scholarships (42.86%). Most FMs at the SU pursued their PhDs at universities (93.75%) that were government-run. Regarding location, 50% were urban, 25% rural, and 12.5% each semi-urban and overseas. Fellowships were the primary funding source (75%), with additional reliance on scholarships (12.5%).

For SU respondents, family and teachers were significant influences in pursuing higher education. Family members supported aspirations, such as becoming professors or civil service professionals, while teachers motivated students by discussing opportunities in higher education and research. Financial constraints also played a role, leading some to choose nearby colleges to reduce costs. Institutions were primarily universities or government-aided colleges in urban or semi-urban areas. Funding was largely self-financed, though scholarships under SC or OBC categories were utilized by some.NET was a key milestone for many SU respondents, reflecting their academic focus and preparedness for teaching roles. SLET, however, was less commonly pursued. Reservations under the SC and OBC categories provided financial and admission support for some SU respondents. One FM noted using such support throughout her academic journey. However, some respondents relied on merit-based opportunities and did not require reservation benefits. Higher education was viewed as a necessary pathway to career advancement. Some respondents adjusted their subject preferences to align with broader career goals, such as preparing for competitive exams.

4.5.3.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

The motivation for faculty members (FMs) and institutional leaders (ILs) at GCID to pursue higher education (HE) reflects a blend of family influence and personal initiative. Survey data from (N=20) respondents yielded 61 affirmations, with fathers (26.23%) and mothers (21.31%) playing significant roles, alongside self-motivation (19.67%). College/university teachers (9.84%) and friends (9.84%) also contributed, indicating a supportive network.

Jack's, the IL at GCID, decision to pursue higher education (HE) was influenced by discussions with his relatives, who encouraged him to choose an arts subject due to his visual disability, as he was unable to pursue engineering. He opted for a Functional English course at a prominent, aided college in his home district, located in an urban area, as it was the closest option. His family, particularly his uncles, supported his educational aspirations. Jack chose the subject of Functional English out of convenience, with minimal prior inquiry or strong personal preference. He later completed his post-graduation and B.Ed. in the same city and institution. Jack received no specific financial aid but cleared the UGC NET after his post-graduation. He is currently pursuing a PhD independently. Jack did not avail of any reservations for his HE studies.

Shibu's, the IL at GC-A, journey into higher education was significantly shaped by his time in an orphanage, where he received mentoring that guided his academic ambitions. He was encouraged to pursue a humanities-focused course in his higher secondary school, which led him to select economics as his undergraduate subject at a government college. Shibu's decision to study economics was also influenced by his aspiration to become a civil servant, a goal he felt was supported by the subject. He was mentored by his teachers at both the orphanage and the government school, with significant guidance throughout his educational path. Shibu was awarded scholarships from NGOs and a university JRF, which supported his postgraduate studies. He completed his post-graduation at a nearby university and his research at another university far away from home. Shibu did not mention any reservations for his HE studies, and he did not express any intention of not progressing in his educational journey.

Janaki's, the IL at GC-B, educational path was shaped by various challenges, including the difficulty of studying in a science group during her pre-degree education due to her background in Malayalam medium schooling. Her teachers at the time advised her to pursue a Teacher Training Course (TTC), but when that option was temporarily discontinued, she instead enrolled in a private college for teaching. Janaki’s family, especially her father, provided significant support throughout her educational journey. Despite initial struggles with economics, particularly due to her unfamiliarity with its terminology, she later grew to appreciate the subject. Janaki's father and school teachers were her primary motivators, offering advice on courses and institutions. She joined a nearby aided college to pursue a BA in economics after completing her

pre-degree. Janaki later went on to complete her MA and eventually earned a PhD in economics from a major university in Kerala, studying part-time. Throughout her higher education, she received no specific reservations or concessions, but her father's consistent encouragement played a crucial role in her academic progress.

Survey data (N=20) reveals that Institutions, where the FMs at GCID pursued their undergraduate programme, were predominantly affiliated colleges (90%), with a majority being government-aided or private-aided (60%). In terms of location, 45% of institutions were rural, 40% urban, and 15% semi-urban. Funding was mainly self-funded (63.16%), with minor reliance on scholarships (10.53%) or freeships (5.26%). However, for their Master's degree, FMs at GCID were split between affiliated colleges (60%) and universities (40%), with government-aided/private-aided institutions making up 30%. Locations were primarily urban (40%), rural (35%), and semi-urban (25%). Self-funding (63.16%) was the dominant funding source, followed by fellowships (15.79%) and scholarships (10.53%). out of the two FMs who did M. Phil, one each did it at a university and an affiliated college (50% each), 50% government and 50% private. The locations and funding sources were also evenly distributed. for their PhD, most FMs at GCID attended universities (90%) that were government-run (80%), primarily from urban (77.78%), with some in rural and semi-urban areas (11.11% each) institutions. Fellowships (50%) and self-funding (37.5%) were the primary funding mechanisms for PhD.

The selection of HE institutions for FM at GCID helped heavily on personal connections, as evidenced by survey data showing 35% self-involvement from 40 affirmations across 20 responses, with mothers (20%) and fathers (20%) also playing key roles. IL Jack's institution choice lacked specific guidance, though his subject decision was teacher-influenced. FMs like Sujith benefited from his father's friend's recommendation of a nearby government college, while Dr. Mithra relied on a school teacher for logistical support in institution selection. Other FMs, such as Alice, Explorer, and Rithika, made independent choices with minimal external input, underscoring a trend toward self-reliance or family guidance in this process.

Choosing a subject of study, FMs at GCID was predominantly a self-directed effort, with 56.67% of 30 affirmations from 20 survey responses attributed to personal decision-making. Fathers (16.67%) and mothers (10%) provided secondary influence, with minimal input from teachers or

peers. IL Jack's subject choice was shaped by school teachers suggesting English, while FM Sujith's decision was indirectly influenced by his father's friend. Dr. Mithra's course was selected by her father and school teacher based on her academic profile. Other FMs showed little faculty involvement, relying on personal or friend-based decisions.

In summary, GCID respondents identified family support, teacher guidance, and personal interests as key motivators for higher education. Teachers often guided respondents toward specific courses and career paths, while parents encouraged education as a means of success. Personal aspirations, such as a passion for literature or commerce, also drove decisions. Funding was typically self-financed, although some utilised reservations under the OBC category. Scholarships were rarely accessed. Reservations under the OBC category were availed by some respondents, particularly during admissions. Others relied on their academic performance to secure admission without reservation benefits. Career-focused choices, such as pursuing commerce for broader opportunities, were common among GCI respondents. Financial constraints or family obligations also influenced decisions regarding higher education progression.

For GC-A respondents, teachers, family, and personal ambitions played crucial roles. Teachers often inspired further studies, while family members provided logistical and emotional support. Friends and social networks also influenced decisions, especially regarding institutions and courses. Funding was primarily self-financed, though OBC reservations were sometimes used for admission.NET qualification was a notable achievement for some respondents, while SLET was not commonly attempted. OBC reservations facilitated access to education for some respondents, although scholarships were less frequently accessed. Many relied on personal resources or family support to finance their education. GC-A respondents often evaluated career opportunities alongside academic goals. Some transitioned from initial subject choices to more promising career-oriented programs based on advice from teachers and peers.

GC-B respondents attributed their higher education decisions to family encouragement, teacher influence, and personal goals. Teachers played a critical role in guiding subject choices, while family members provided financial or emotional support despite constraints. Accessibility to learning resources, such as Braille, was a deciding factor for some respondents.

Institutions were primarily government-aided colleges in semi-urban areas. Funding support came from SC or OBC reservations, with scholarships like hostel grants playing a significant role for some respondents. Some respondents successfully cleared NET and JRF, while SLET participation was rare.SC and OBC reservations enabled access to higher education, particularly for financially constrained respondents. Financial challenges and logistical concerns shaped decisions about higher education. Respondents often balanced personal aspirations with practical considerations, such as proximity to institutions and family responsibilities.

4.5.4 Involvement of Faculty Members in HE Access

The involvement of faculty members in facilitating access to higher education (HE) and supporting undergraduate choices is a critical aspect of understanding the dynamics of HE outreach in rural and semi-urban colleges in India. This section draws on data from institutional leader (IL) interviews, faculty member (FM) surveys, and FM interviews. The data specifically examines the extent to which faculty members influence undergraduate choices, the nature and timing of their involvement, and how connections with faculty members are established.

4.5.4.1 State University (SU)

The involvement of faculty members in undergraduate higher education (HE) choices of FMs at State University (SU: 4_1) appears limited, as indicated by survey data where only 4 FMs reported (21.05%) of (N=19) respondents reported FM involvement, with the majority (78.95%) making decisions independently. This trend is corroborated by IL Jose and FMs Ponnoo, Joseph, Lathika, John, and Peace, who relied on personal preference or family guidance, with minimal faculty input, even for post-graduate aspirations, as seen with Krish's tutor suggestion. The lack of structured support is evident in Lathika's reflection on the era's limited teacher knowledge and internet access, relying instead on newspapers for scholarship information. For the 4 respondents who experienced FM involvement, connections were primarily established during college visits (33.33%) or admissions processes (66.67%), with involvement occurring during HE choice-making (66.67%) and admissions (33.33%). Their contributions included advice on HE versus other options (22.22%), course/subject selection (33.33%), admissions guidance (11.11%), document checking (11.11%), and college visits (11.11%), reflecting a supportive yet narrow role. Their involvement was mainly giving advice on whether to go for higher education

or other options, and on the choice of courses/subjects. John's remarks during the interview underline this.

> "*When I informed my teachers that I got interview cards from all these... they told me that I don't need to go for any more...you just go directly to university*".

Pre-enrollment activities among 19 respondents showed 38.71% visited the campus, 12.90% explored other institutions, 6.45% consulted staff, 9.67% used brochures, 12.90% read newspapers, 3.23% sought local administration input, and 16.13% engaged in none, indicating a reliance on physical exploration over digital or formal channels.

4.5.4.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

Faculty member involvement in undergraduate higher education (HE) choices of FMs at GCID was reported by 20% of (N=20) survey respondents, with 80% indicating no involvement, suggesting that most decisions were self-directed or family-driven. Demographic analysis of those with FM involvement indicates that FM influence may be more common among urban, women respondents. Connections to FMs were formed through family members (33.33%), community groups (33.33%), or college/university visits (33.34%), highlighting informal and direct engagement channels. Involvement primarily occurred during the process of making HE choices (100%), with no mentions of admissions-stage input in the 3 valid responses. The nature of FM contributions, from 10 affirmations across 3 respondents, focused on advice about whether to pursue HE or alternatives (40%), choice of colleges/universities to apply to (20%), course/subject selection (10%), admissions processes (10%), tuition/funding options (10%), and entry exam preparation (10%), demonstrating a holistic but advisory role without deeper administrative support like document checking or special programs (e.g., reservations). Pre-enrollment activities among all 20 respondents emphasized physical visits to the chosen campus (38.71%), newspaper readings (22.58%), brochure references (12.90%), comparisons with other institutions (9.67%), and staff discussions (6.45%), with one respondent noting college fairs (3.22%) and 6.45% reporting no activities, reflecting a reliance on traditional, in-person exploration over digital tools like online platforms or social media, which saw zero usage. Interview data reinforces this, with IL Jack receiving suggestions from humanities teachers during the school-to-college transition, emphasising English for civil service; FMs Sujith and Dr.

Mithra benefited from a father's friend and a local teacher for institutional and course guidance, respectively, while Alice, Explorer, and Rithika reported no FM role, aligning with the survey's majority trend of independence.

In other government colleges (GC-A: 4_3 and GC-B: 4_4), faculty member (FM) involvement in undergraduate HE choices were evident primarily through qualitative interview insights, as aggregated survey data is unavailable for these specific sites, though patterns from similar institutions suggest modest engagement comparable to GCID's 20%. Interview narratives indicate varied involvement. Interviews reveal informal interactions, such as Rumi's (GC-A) history teacher motivating TTC during plus two classes and interactive sessions, Jaisal's (GC-A) one-hour faculty meeting before applying to discuss course uniqueness and job opportunities, and Braille's (GC-B) pre-degree teachers advising on English or Political Science based on marks. These occurred mainly during decision-making or pre-admission dilemmas. FM contributions focused on motivational advice, subject direction (e.g., Rumi's job-oriented TTC push, Jaisal's scope explanation, Braille's confidence-building based on performance), and institutional recommendations, though without mention of funding, exams, or reservations. Pre-enrollment activities are not surveyed separately, but interviews imply limited structured exploration: Rumi noted only five government TTC options without specific college interest, Jaisal visited the department for inquiry, and others like Babas (GC-A), Kulva (GC-A), Vineesha (GC-B), Alvin Vargees (GC-B), and Bava (GC-B) emphasised self or friend-based decisions with no FM role, suggesting reliance on discussions rather than visits or media. PCF (GC-A) received post-graduation JRF guidance but not for undergraduate, indicating FM influence often emerges later. Overall, FM involvement was selective and advisory, supporting ambitious or undecided students, while most (e.g., Babas, Kulva, Vineesha, Alvin, Bava) navigated independently, reflecting a less formalised access process in these colleges.

4.6 Faculty Members' Professional Trajectories

The professional trajectories of faculty members in higher education institutions (HEIs) located in rural and semi-urban areas of India play a critical role in understanding the dynamics of higher education outreach. This section details the professional trajectories of faculty members (FMs) at State University (SU), Government College in-depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges, drawing from data collected via institutional leader (IL) interviews, FM surveys, and FM

interviews. It focuses on the length of career to date (rounded to the nearest 5 years), number of institutions worked in, current position/designation, leadership responsibilities, duration working at the current institution, and nature of appointment at the current institution.

4.6.1 State University (SU)

Faculty members at State University (SU) present a diverse range of career trajectories, encompassing both early-career academics and seasoned professionals. Data collected from N=19 valid survey responses, supplemented by insights from interviews with institutional leaders (IL) and faculty members (FM), reveal a multifaceted profile of the university's academic workforce. The length of career to date varied significantly, with 42.10% of respondents having less than 5 years of experience, 31.58% having 5-10 years, and 26.32% cumulatively having over 10 years, including one individual with over 30 years. This distribution was supported by interview data, such as the IL at SU, who began his career in 2001 (approximately 25 years), and an FM at SU, who started in 2023 (approximately 5 years). Regarding institutional mobility, 73.68% of faculty members reported working at multiple institutions, with a mean of 2 institutions among those who had worked elsewhere. This trend was further illustrated by interview data, indicating varying levels of institutional movement among faculty members.

The current positions held by faculty at SU were predominantly Assistant Professor (89.47%), with a smaller proportion holding the title of Associate Professor (5.26%) or other designations (5.26%). This finding was consistent with interview data, which highlighted the prevalence of Assistant Professors within the institution. In terms of leadership responsibilities, a significant majority (72.22%) of faculty members reported having no leadership roles, while a smaller percentage held positions such as Head of Department (16.67%) or other responsibilities (11.11%).

This trend was further exemplified during the interview by the contrasting experiences of Jose, IL at the SU, who held significant administrative roles, and Krish, an FM at SU, who had no leadership responsibilities. The duration of employment at SU was relatively short for most faculty members, with 94.74% having worked at the institution for less than 5 years. This finding was supported by interview data, which indicated that many faculty members were recent hires. This has to be read in the context that undergraduate programmes at this SU started only 5 years back.

During the interview, Ponnoo commented on this as:

> *"I joined the university on the basis of an interview. The University of Calicut started a new course that is an integrated PG program in Development Studies"*.

Finally, the nature of appointments at SU varied, with 42.10% being regular appointments, 26.32% being contractual, 26.32% as guest lecturers, and 5.26% falling under other categories. So, the data illustrate a faculty profile that is characterised by a mix of career stages, high institutional mobility, and a predominance of recent hires, with a notable portion holding temporary appointments. At the SU, thus, there exists a wide range of career experiences, from early-career academics to seasoned professionals with extensive leadership roles.

4.6.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

This section presents an analysis of faculty demographics and professional experiences at Government College In-Depth (GCID) and other government colleges (GC-A and GC-B), drawing from 20 valid survey responses from GCID and interview data from faculty and institutional leaders across these institutions. The length of career to date among GCID faculty exhibited variability, with 35% having less than 5 years of experience, and a distribution spanning up to 20-25 years. This pattern was mirrored in the interview data, which revealed a range of career durations, from Jack's 17 years to Alice's 8 years at GCID, and similar variations at GC-A and GC-B. Regarding institutional mobility, 70% of GCID faculty reported working at multiple institutions, with a mean of 1.86 institutions for those with prior experience. This finding was consistent with interview data, which highlighted diverse career paths involving multiple institutions.

The predominant current position held by GCID faculty was Assistant Professor (95%), with a small percentage holding other positions, like Guest Faculty. This trend was reflected in the interviews, where most faculty members held the Assistant Professor designation. In terms of leadership responsibilities, a notable 58.82% of GCID faculty reported holding the Head of Department position, contrasting with 41.18% reporting no leadership roles. Interview data further detailed specific leadership experiences, such as Jack's role as IQAC Coordinator, and the absence of such roles for other faculty members. The duration of employment at the current institution showed that a majority of GCID faculty (70%) had worked there for less than 5 years, with 30% having worked there for 5-10 years. This pattern was supported by interview data,

which indicated relatively recent appointments for many faculty members. The nature of appointments at GCID was primarily regular (90%), with a small percentage holding contractual or guest lecturer positions. Interview data confirmed this trend, highlighting the prevalence of regular, public service commission (PSC) appointments[8], and instances of transitions from temporary to permanent positions. The faculty profile at GCID, thus, is characterised by a significant proportion of recent hires, high institutional mobility, and a strong presence of faculty holding leadership roles, particularly Head of Department, within these government colleges.

4.7 Summary and Conclusion

The faculty across SU, GCID, GC-A, and GC-B exhibit diverse demographic compositions, with SU predominantly featuring men faculty from OBC categories and GCID showing a women-dominated workforce, also with significant OBC representation. Both reflect the regional and religious diversity. Age distribution is largely concentrated within the 31–50-year range, and most faculty members are married with children.

Institutional leaders, primarily aged 40-59, demonstrate varied professional tenures and diverse personal histories, often marked by upward social mobility. Their educational trajectories reveal a common shift from rural to urban schooling and a transition to English-medium instruction in higher grades. Higher education pursuits were influenced by familial and personal factors, with limited direct guidance from faculty.

Commute and residence patterns underscore the logistical challenges faced by faculty, with many maintaining split residences and relying on public transportation, indicating a need for improved infrastructure. Professional trajectories highlight a workforce characterised by recent hires and high institutional mobility, with GCID showing a strong presence of faculty in leadership roles. These findings collectively illustrate the diverse profiles of those delivering higher education in rural and semi-urban settings, revealing both the heterogeneity and the common challenges that shape their professional lives, directly addressing the research question.

[8] The PSC (Public Service Commission) appointment process in Kerala recruit candidates for government positions, including faculty roles in colleges. Candidates must meet eligibility criteria, apply for advertised posts and undergo a written test followed by an interview. Successful candidates are placed on a rank list, from which appointments are made based on vacancies and reservation policies, often leading to permanent positions after a lengthy selection timeline.

Chapter 5: Institutional Leaders, Faculty Members and HE Outreach: Practices and Perspectives

5.1 Introduction

Faculty members (FMs) play a pivotal role in widening access to higher education (HE) by serving as frontline mentors and advisors who bridge informational and socioeconomic gaps, particularly for underrepresented groups such as rural and first-generation learners. FMs are expected to contribute to equitable HE participation through personalised guidance on course selection, employability prospects, and admission processes, often extending beyond formal institutional duties into community-based outreach that fosters aspiration and informed decision-making among prospective students from marginalised backgrounds. Within Kerala, where rural students constitute a significant proportion of enrollment in public institutions—ranging from 70% to 90% in the higher education institutions taken for this study—FMs are instrumental in addressing barriers like limited awareness of HE pathways, financial constraints, and cultural factors such as early marriage, thereby enhancing student comfort, retention, and transition into HE through proactive initiatives like career counseling and social media engagement.

This chapter responds to the following research questions:

> *RQ1b: What do faculty members in rural and semi-urban areas currently perceive to be the role of HEIs and their role/s in facilitating access to HE and HE choice in the localities of their workplaces? What are the existing practices of HE outreach?*
>
> *RQ1c: What do institutional leaders of rural and semi-urban colleges and universities perceive to be HEIs' role, their role and their employees' role in relation to facilitating access to HE and HE choice?*

This chapter examines the perspectives and practices of Institutional Leaders (ILs) and Faculty Members (FMs) in facilitating access to Higher Education (HE) for rural students at State University (SU), Government College in-depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges. The chapter explores motivations for widening participation, perceived roles of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the ILs, and FMs, existing outreach practices, and obstacles to these efforts.

Data is drawn from IL interviews, FM surveys, and FM interviews, focusing on rural and semi-urban contexts in Kerala.

5.2 Facilitating access to HE: institutional level

Drawing on data from IL interviews, FM interviews, and FM surveys, this section discusses the perceived comfort level of rural students within HEIs, especially the areas where institutions could provide more guidance to attract and assist rural students, and the activities institutions undertake to enhance rural student enrollment and provide insights into institutional practices, stakeholder perceptions, and the support needs of rural students. It also considers the representation of rural students in these institutions.

5.2.1 State University (SU)

The data from the interview and survey suggest that the State University (SU) effectively creates a welcoming environment for rural students, primarily due to its affordability, inclusive culture, and adequate hostel facilities. This general perception from the interviews is supported by survey findings, where 94.74% (18 of 19 FMs) of faculty members (FMs) believe rural students are comfortable at the institution, with only 5.26% (one FM) expressing a different view. The IL's observation at the SU that approximately 75% of the student population is from rural backgrounds, with many being first-generation learners, further emphasises the SU's role in serving the rural and semi-urban students.

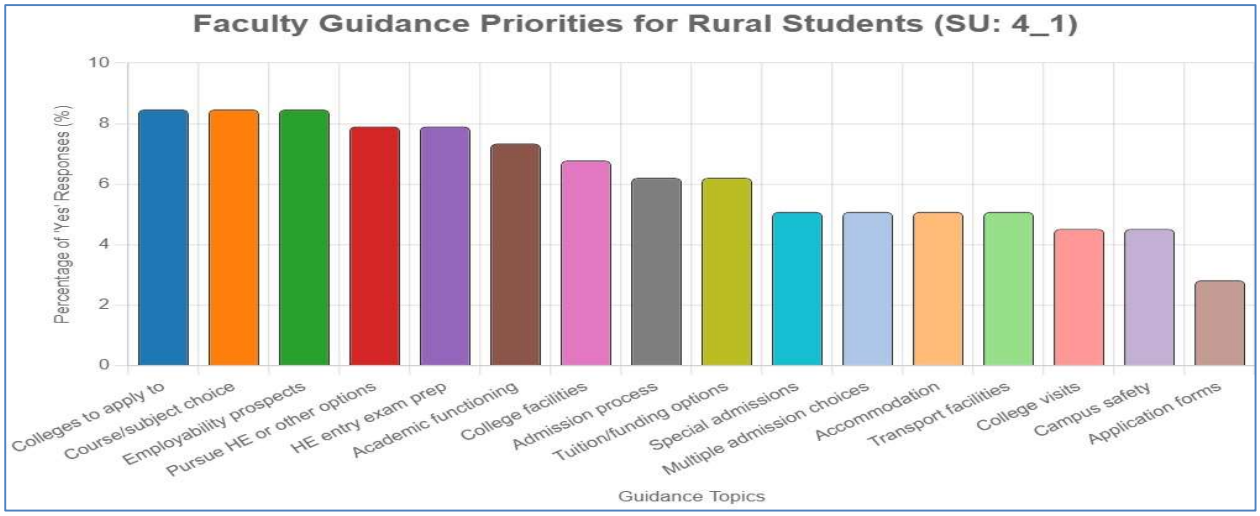
While a comfortable environment for the students at the SU is evident, there is a recognised need for enhanced guidance. Interviews with FMs and the IL highlighted challenges faced by rural students, including difficulties with communication, adaptation to university life, and navigating higher education options.

> *John (FM) commented that the students coming from a structured and conservative rural environment to a relatively open campus culture struggle to fit into the new environment and often feel embarrassed in the new-found freedom.*
>
> *Krish (FM) comments reiterates by supplementing this argument by stating that "in the initial stage they may have some icebreaking issues".*

Joseph (FM) remembered an instance where a student (Krishna) who could not come in the rank list of her course of choice, was disheartened about her career prospects but later made it into another reputed institution in Pune with his guidance.

Survey data reinforces this, with faculty members identifying key areas where students need more support (see Figure 5.1). The top topics for which the university could provide guidance on, to attract rural students and help them with higher education choices (N= 177 "Yes" responses) were: the choice of which colleges/universities to apply to (8.47%), the selection of a course/subject (8.47%), and information regarding employability prospects (8.47%). Following closely are guidance on whether to pursue higher education versus other options (7.91%) and preparation for higher education entry exams (7.91%). Guidance concerning the academic functioning of colleges/universities is also significant (7.34%), as is information about college facilities, activities, and provisions (6.78%). Aspects related to the admission process (6.21%) and covering tuition expenses/funding options (6.21%) receive similar levels of attention. Several areas garner moderate interest, including special admissions programs/processes (5.08%), the choice between multiple offers of admission (5.08%), advice on accommodation (5.08%), and information about transport facilities (5.08%). Less frequently provided guidance involves organising college visits (4.52%) and information on campus safety and security (4.52%). The least common guidance activity is checking application forms or other documents (2.82%). The observed prioritization of academic and career guidance by FMs underscores a perceived need for clarity on higher education pathways and outcomes for rural students.

Figure 5.1: Faculty Guidance Priorities for Rural Students



Information on activities to attract rural students presents a mixed picture. Interviewees offered varying perspectives, with the IL at the SU stating that specific activities are unnecessary due to sufficient existing awareness. However, other FMs mentioned general outreach programmes like science exhibitions and the "Sastrayan[9]"Programme and the Public Relations Offices' recent use of Instagram for advertisements. On whether colleges/universities are conducting activities to attract rural students, data from the SU indicate that just over half of the FMs at the SU reported such efforts. Out of 18 valid responses from SU, 55.56% (N=10) reported undertaking activities aimed at attracting rural students. Conversely, 44.44% (N=8) of the FMs at SU indicated the institution is not currently conducting specific activities for this purpose.

Thus, the faculty largely feel the SU is a comfortable place for rural students, mainly due to low costs and a lack of discrimination. Interestingly, they see a big need for HEIs to offer more guidance to these students, especially on things like choosing courses and colleges, understanding job prospects, and preparing for HE entry exams. While some outreach exists, the institution relies more on its inherent appeal—low costs and rural proximity—than on proactive recruitment activities tailored to rural populations.

Jose (IL) says that there is no need to conduct any activities for attracting rural students:

[9] *Sastrayan is an open house event organized by the University of Calicut. It is an annual event where the university showcases its various departments and facilities to the public, typically including students and faculty from other institutions. The event usually features exhibitions, demonstrations, and interactive sessions related to science and technology*

> “I felt they (students) are very comfortable here because the expense is very less here. ..... Secondly, there is no discrimination, that is what I have seen. ..... so, they feel very comfortable and they don't need to spend much, either for the hostel or for the tuition fees. ...there was no need to attract rural students. As I told earlier, they have a good awareness of this. So automatically from applications we will know they are from the inner interior places. All remote places we are getting applications. So, we don't need to do that.”

When it comes to their own role, some faculty have reported trying to attract rural students through science events, programmes like Sastrayan, and even social media outreach for postgraduate courses, but not in the context of undergraduate courses. The SU has started UG programmes only since the 2021 admissions. However, the IL and at least two faculty members of the SU faculty observed that the SU is not involved in specific outreach, and the actual outreach practices seem limited and spread out without any focus.

5.2.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

The comfort of rural students at the GCID is influenced by the proximity, infrastructure, and support systems, with interview statements of the IL and FMs showing mixed experiences and the survey data providing broader confirmation. The IL at GCID stated that the majority of students, often first-generation learners from poor backgrounds, find the college comfortable if they are day scholars, appreciating a unique academic system and technology access, but those from farther rural areas feel discomfort due to no hostel facilities. Sujith (FM) reported that most students (70-80% rural) are comfortable because of fee concessions, approachable teachers, and a tutor system, despite lacking infrastructure like a good campus. Another FM (Rithika) noted that 75% of students are rural and they prefer government colleges for scholarships (covering 99% of students), subsidised lunch facility (at Rs 10), and study tour allowances. Yet another FM (Explorer) said 80% of students are rural and they are comfortable due to the college’s location, proximity and commuting convenience, though a temporary building limits physical comfort. But another FM (Dr. Mithra) from here argued that over 60% of students are rural and they are not comfortable without hostels, as commuting to challenging and unpleasant home environments hinders focus, though they relate well to the faculty here

and feel comfortable. In a similar tone, another FM (Alice) estimated over 90% rural students but suggested they might prefer urban colleges for exposure. Possibly, the estimates of rural students are broad guesses based on limited perceptions. Survey data from the GCID substantiates this mixed picture, with 16 of 19 FMs (84.21%) affirming comfort for rural students, while 3 (15.79%) disagree, aligning with concerns about infrastructure and housing raised by two of the FMs.

The IL and FMs at the GCID identified areas where rural students lack support, and survey data reinforce academic and entry-related needs as key guidance topics. The IL at GCID observed that many rural students choose courses out of compulsion or chance, often relying on internet café staff for decisions, and only realize course importance after joining, indicating a gap in programme awareness. It was added that rural students cope with technology despite initial unfamiliarity. An FM (Dr. Mithra) at GCID mentioned that over 40% of rural students face financial issues, affecting their ability to focus or continue studies and emphasised the necessity of residing on campus to focus on learning. Another FM (Explorer) noted financial problems in families and early marriage among Muslim girls as barriers to programme completion, with some male students also stopping education post-marriage.

Interviewees present varied perspectives on rural students' comfort at the GC-A and GC-B, largely tied to accessibility, affordability, and social adjustment. IL at GC-A stated that nearly 80% of students are rural and comfortable choosing the college due to its location in a tribal belt with road and railway access, aligning with the forest region where most hail from. FM at GC-A (Rumi) reported 90% rural students, including tribal ones, who are comfortable after initial adjustment challenges are addressed through mentoring and hostel support, enabling graduation completion. Another FM (Baba) at GC-A estimated over 75% rural students and noted comfort due to easy accessibility in a village Panchayat and impressive facilities like buildings and landscapes. Another FM (PCF) at GC-A suggested that over 80% rural students find the institution comfortable due to a uniform dress code, reducing inferiority complex, though tribal students face ongoing inclusion issues. Two other FMs (Jaisal and Kulva) highlighted comfort for their 80-90% rural students from quality education at low cost and good infrastructure, despite minor bus connectivity issues.

The IL at GC-B (Janaki) reported over 80% rural students (75% female) are comfortable due to proximity to rural areas, government benefits like scholarships, and low fees (Rs. 3600). But an

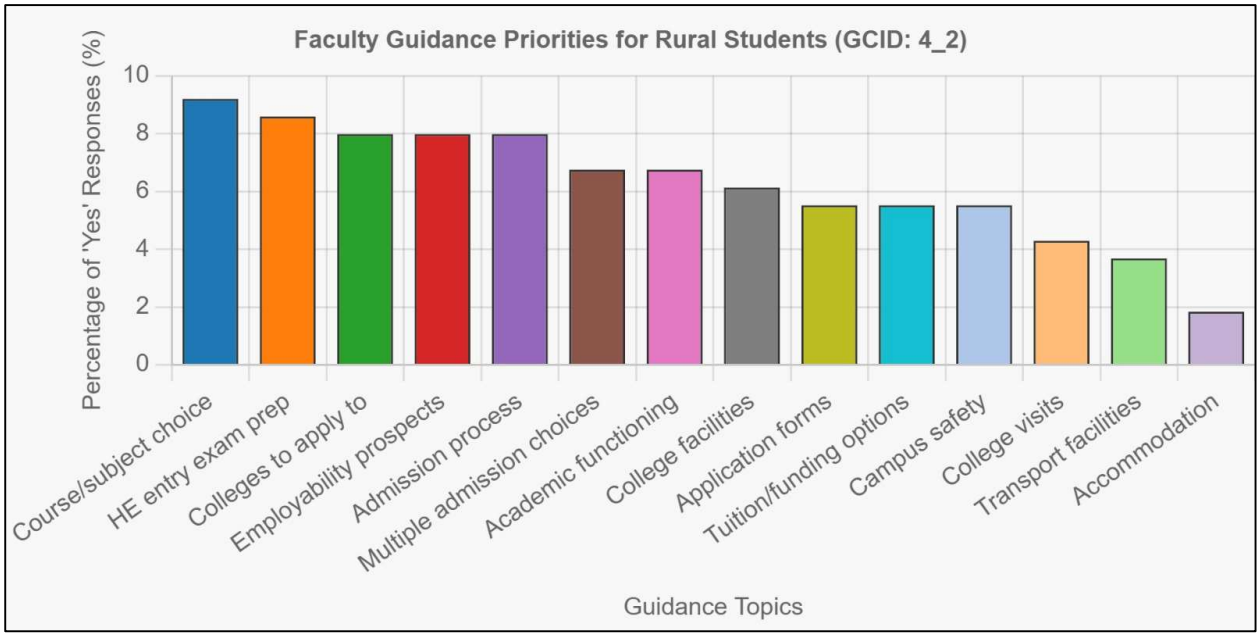
FM (Vineesha) at the GC-B said 100% rural students feel comfortable with travel conditions augmented with a feel of belongingness to the institution of their own locality. Conversely, another FM (Alvin Varghese) noted 50% rural students face discomfort from long travel (e.g., 6:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.), despite scholarships and subsidized lunch (Rs. 10). Estimates of rural students at GC_B (Braille) vary for other FMs, possibly 100% rural to 70-80% rural (Baba and Priya) and cited travel difficulties, limited hostels, and limited choices in courses as discomforts, though low fees and lunch schemes help.

GC-A and GC-B are comfortable for most rural students due to affordability and proximity, but discomfort persists for those needing hostels or facing social adjustment issues.

5.2.2.1 Which Topics Could the Institution Provide More Guidance on to Attract/Assist Rural Students?

Survey data on topics for which the GCID could provide guidance on, to attract rural students and help them with higher education choices (from 163 “Yes” responses) aligns with these concerns (see Figure 5.2). The top needs are picking a course or subject (15 students, 9.20%), preparing for entry exams (14 students, 8.59%), choosing colleges to apply to (13 students, 7.98%), learning about job prospects (13 students, 7.98%), and understanding the admission process (13 students, 7.98%). Other needs include deciding between multiple college offers (6.75%) and checking if a college has good academics (6.75%). Students also want help with college facilities information (6.13%), checking application forms (5.52%), finding funding options (5.52%), and knowing about campus safety (5.52%). Fewer students prioritise organising college visits (4.29%), transport facilities (3.68%), or accommodation (3 students, 1.84%), even though two faculty members noted hostel problems.

Figure 5.2: Faculty Guidance Priorities for Rural Students



Interview statements reveal several areas where rural students could benefit from additional guidance, primarily around providing for education awareness, adjustment, and practical challenges. The IL at GC-A implied a need for foundational education support, as students visit rural areas to teach basic mathematics and English, suggesting rural students may lack prior preparation. An FM at GC-A noted initial reluctance among 90% rural students to continue education due to environmental shifts, requiring mentoring to build confidence. Another FM at GC-A mentioned that rural students with reservations (e.g., SC category) are unaware of opportunities, pointing to a need for education and job prospect awareness. Another FM at GC-A highlighted tribal students' insecurity and inferiority complex, suggesting guidance on inclusion and coping with social differences is needed to ensure course completion. An FM at GC-B stated that only 25% of rural students in GC-B choose courses intentionally, with most continuing assigned courses, implying a lack of informed decision-making about programmes. Another FM at GC-B noted that most rural students are first-generation graduates. A third FM at GC-B emphasised limited course options (especially social sciences) and internet connectivity issues for study materials, indicating guidance on course selection and digital access could assist rural students from humanities streams. Thus, rural students need more guidance on course selection, academic preparation, and social integration to enhance attraction and success, with financial and digital support as lesser concerns.

5.2.2.2 Activities the Institution Is Conducting to Attract Rural Students

The GCID conducts few activities to attract rural students, relying largely on its inherent appeal, with survey data confirming limited efforts in this regard. The IL at the GCID stated there are no activities, as admissions are university-managed with no college advertising. One of the FMs (Alice) confirmed that no programmes exist to attract students, noting it's a government college with over 90% rural enrollment, naturally. Another FM (Rithika) also reported no specific efforts, citing government benefits like scholarships and lunch as sufficient draws for 75% rural students. Another FM (Rithika) also did not mention any activities, focusing instead on infrastructure issues. Another FM at GCID mentioned the English department's grammar classes for school children on holidays and Saturdays, plus NSS (National Service Scheme) book distribution, as activities to attract rural students. Yet another FM (Explorer) recalled posters designed for a specific programme (BSc Electronics) last year to address unfilled vacancies. But there are some other courses attracting 3,000-4,000 applications for 40 seats. The FM opines that there are no specific approaches to attract rural students. Survey data substantiates this, with 5 of 15 FMs (33.33%) reporting activities to attract rural students and 10 (66.67%) noting none, supporting the interviewees' emphasis on minimal targeted activities to attract rural students and reliance on the existing appeal of the GCID for the same.

Many rural students, especially day scholars, feel comfortable at the GCID due to its supportive academic environment, access to technology, affordable fees with concessions, and approachable faculty. However, issues like inadequate hostel facilities and financial difficulties hinder their comfort and academic focus. Survey data reflects this mixed perspective, with most faculty confirming rural student comfort, though a significant minority disagrees, and one faculty member noted that some rural students seek urban exposure. Both faculty interviews and survey results emphasise a strong need for better guidance on course choices, higher education pathways, and career opportunities. The GCID's efforts to attract rural students are minimal, relying on its natural appeal rather than active outreach.

The institution's efforts to attract rural students range from active outreach to minimal intervention, as per interviewees. The IL at GC-A described programmes like Digi Dreams [10]and

[10] *A program to provide mobile phones to students to facilitate e learning through sponsorship during covid times.*

ENLI[11], where students tutor tribal and rural children in mathematics and English, alongside HOPE [12] counseling sessions and evening classes at tribal residential schools, fostering connections that may attract students. An FM at GC-A detailed extension activities across departments, including training neighborhood women in computer skills, awareness seminars, and tribal school classes, aiming to highlight education and job opportunities. Babas, another FM at GC-A echoed similar socially connected programmes, surveys, and seminars to raise awareness, leveraging social media and news presence to draw applications. Another FM at GC-A mentioned NSS volunteer programmes with local schools before admissions to build ties. Kulva, FM at GC-A, cited activities like FIFA World Cup events with special impressions for SC/ST students to attract rural applicants. Conversely, Janaki the IL at GC-B stated no activities are needed, as university-managed admissions and high demand (nine students per seat) suffice for over 80% rural enrollment. Vineesha, FM at GC-B, was unsure of activities, while Alvin Vargees (GC-B: 4_4) relied on low fees, rare courses like journalism, and subsidized lunch (Rs. 10) as natural draws, not specific efforts. Braille (GC-B: 4_4) noted NSS/NCC camps and SC/ST cell programmes during UG studies, not for recruitment, and Bava and Priya (GC-B: 4_4) mentioned general events like food fests shared on social media, which might indirectly attract rural students. The GC-B relies on inherent appeal, like low costs rather than targeted activities, with some outreach indirectly raising rural awareness but lacking a specific recruitment focus.

Summarising the viewpoints from interviews of the ILS and FMS from GC-A and GC-B, it is evident that both institutions cater to a significant rural student population, with estimations ranging from 70% to 90%. GC-A particularly emphasises its accessibility and support systems, citing road and railway connections, low fees, scholarships, mentoring, guidance, and dedicated counselling services as key factors contributing to student comfort. counseling services (HOPE counseling centre). Uniform system reducing the appearance of socioeconomic differences. The college also boasts a significant representation of tribal students (Cholanaikkans [13]) and orphans, with specific seat reservations for other marginalised groups (OBC and Muslims). GC-B, similarly, highlights its proximity to rural areas and financial

[11] *Support program to learn English and Mathematics for tribal school students which includes motivation and counselling sessions.*

[12] *A counselling centre run by Psychology department of GC-A with regular outreach connection with schools in rural and tribal areas and providing in-reach opportunities to visit the college for those school students.*

[13] Cholanaikkans are tagged as 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group' by the Government of India primarily inhabiting the caves of the western-ghat regions of Kerala , and are one of the last remaining hunter gatherer tribes.

affordability, offering e-grants, minimal fees, and a subsidised lunch programme. However, GC-B faces challenges related to transportation and hostel availability, issues less prominently reported at GC-A.

Regarding additional support for rural students, GC-A respondents emphasised the need for increased awareness of educational and job opportunities, especially for marginalised students. They suggested focusing on career guidance, basic education support, and improved inclusion for tribal students. In contrast, GC-B respondents indicated that the university's centralised admission process minimises the need for extra institutional recruitment. Instead, they pointed to the necessity for better transportation, expanded hostel facilities, a wider range of social science courses, improved internet connectivity, and more active school outreach.
Both colleges engage in activities to attract and support rural students, though their approaches differ. GC-A implements more proactive community engagement strategies like students tutoring tribal and rural children in mathematics and English, conducting educational support programmes and counselling in rural and tribal areas, conducting evening classes, collaborating with tribal residential schools, and organising various extension activities. They also leverage social media (e.g., food fests) and news coverage for outreach. GC-B, while also engaging in NSS and NCC programmes, SC/ST cell activities, and extracurricular events, primarily relies on the university's admission process and the college's affordability as its main attraction. They also provide lunch at a subsidised rate. GC-A demonstrates a more comprehensive and community-focused approach, while GC-B leans more heavily on its government-funded status and the university's admission system.

GCID, GC-A and GC-B make their efforts to attract rural and needy students for admission to undergraduate programmes in their own ways. We can see that the focus of GC-B is especially on post-admission support to enrolled students. The support activities offered to enrolled students, though primarily focused on student retention, in turn communicate positive vibes for aspiring future student candidates. Thus, an active institutional culture for current students does attract prospective students to the college.

5.3 Facilitating access to HE: Institutional Leaders

This section explores the roles of Institutional Leaders (ILs) at State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges in facilitating access to Higher Education (HE) for undergraduate (UG) students, particularly from rural backgrounds. It addresses two key aspects: ILs' personal guidance to students on HE enrollment and their efforts to organise staff for HE outreach. Data is drawn from IL interviews, with supplementary context from FM surveys and interviews.

5.3.1 State University (SU)

The IL at SU who was the director of admissions previously, frequently provided guidance to prospective students and their parents regarding undergraduate higher education options. He received numerous personal inquiries, particularly from parents concerned about their children's future. This IL emphasised the importance of excelling in any chosen field, advising students and parents to prioritize the student's interests while considering available programmes. He noted that parents were more likely to seek advice than students, often due to accessibility and perceived expertise. He also observed a trend of students favouring less intellectually demanding courses, lacking the dedication for rigorous programmes like CA or CMA. While he conducted presentations at some colleges, his direct interaction with students was limited due to the university's centralised admission process. He primarily communicated through college nodal officers, who then relayed information to students. The IL at SU acknowledged instances where teachers and nodal officers influenced student choices, sometimes to fill less popular programmes, such as B.Voc. He did not specifically mention providing pre-admission advice to rural students separately, but his role as Director of Admissions would have included all students seeking admission, not only to the undergraduate programmes within the university but to all programmes in every affiliated college. He had not conducted any specific activities to facilitate access to undergraduate education. He explained that due to the university's central role in the admission process, there was no necessity to conduct such activities. The university admission process to all affiliated colleges is done at the apex level. He communicated with nodal officers from individual colleges, and they were the ones who interacted with the students.

At the university level, direct student interaction was minimal, and hence, the IL at SU relied on guidance through college nodal officers, indicating a disconnect from students. This IL actively

guided parents as Director of Admissions, emphasising student-driven choices, but lacked a rural-specific focus and had not organised staff outreach.

5.3.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

The IL at GCID provided course selection advice to relatives and former students and positioned himself as a facilitator. For example, his cousin, directionless after high school, sought his guidance. He recommended BA Functional English, highlighting its diverse career prospects. This proved transformative; the cousin not only excelled but also secured an exchange programme to the US. The IL also conducted sessions for higher secondary students, highlighting opportunities within and outside India, particularly in the humanities. He ran an "Access English" programme where he was able to guide high school students. Students interested in language studies were connected to the linguistics department at a language university within the state. The approach was to identify their aptitudes and bridge them with relevant experts in the field. This IL had not organised workshops for pre-admission guidance in his current institution. While not organising internal workshops, this IL actively participated in external initiatives, guiding teachers and students on higher education and scholarships and was invited to guide teachers and students in other institutions regarding graduation and scholarship opportunities.

The IL at GC-A more proactively provided foundational guidance to undergraduate students from their first day, focusing on career progression and planning. He actively engaged in pre-admission guidance through NGO programmes in rural areas, extended his guidance beyond the institution in rural areas and orientation programmes in his institution's neighbourhood. He conducted sessions for SSLC and plus two pass-outs, providing information on diverse educational and career pathways. This IL reported that they regularly organise internal professional development programmes, but not specifically pre-admission guidance programmes.

The IL at GC-B, with experience on university UG and PG Boards of Studies, provided informal advice to students and parents in her locality. Her role was deeply rooted in her community. As a respected professional from an agricultural background, she became a go-to advisor for local students and parents. Parents, often agricultural labourers, sought her counsel on course

selection and career progression. She shares her own academic journey, demystifying higher education. She addressed course selection and career pathways, noting that contemporary students have more access to information and clearer ambitions. However, she observed a disparity in information access and a lack of engagement from tribal students, who rarely sought pre-admission guidance. She also noted that better-off tribal groups have their own sources of information. For example, though tribal, Kuruma and Kurichya [14] communities had well-educated people within their communities, and thus did not seek guidance from the college, other tribal groups like Paniya and Kattunaika do not have educated community people to support and hence only seek guidance often on the minimum marks required for certain programmes. This IL encouraged teachers to engage in external teaching opportunities, but no formal pre-admission guidance programmes were organised, though individual faculty members provided guidance on their own initiatives.

5.4 Facilitating access to HE: Faculty Members

This section draws on multiple data sources that include FM interviews, diaries, post-diary interviews, and surveys to provide insights into the types of advice offered by FMs, such as guidance on college and course selection, admissions processes, and employability prospects. It also captures the settings of these interactions, whether within personal or professional networks, and the motivations driving FMs to provide such guidance and the FMs' awareness of other college or university members offering similar support, as well as the demographic profiles of advisees, particularly those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. These elements are critical to understanding how FMs contribute to HE access and choice, especially for underserved populations, and how their efforts align with fostering gender-equitable and socially just outreach practices.

5.4.1 State University (SU)

The Faculty Member (FM) survey data from the State University (SU: 4_1), reveals a high level of engagement in facilitating access to undergraduate higher education (HE), with 94.74% (18/19) of FMs providing pre-admission advice. This high participation, particularly among rural-based FMs (66.67%), male FMs (72.22%), and those from OBC backgrounds (77.78%), underscores

[14] The Kurichiya and Kuruma are two distinct tribal communities primarily found in the Wayanad district of Kerala.

SU's critical role in guiding students. This high involvement suggests FMs act as key resources for rural students.

The types of advice given focus primarily on choosing colleges/universities (15%) and courses/subjects (15%), followed by admissions processes (12%) and employability prospects (10%), based on 100 total "Yes" responses from 17 valid respondents. Moderate priorities include funding options (8%), checking application forms (7%), and entry exam preparation (6%), while special admissions programs like reservations (2%) and accompanying college visits (1–2%) are less emphasised. This distribution highlights FMs' focus on helping rural students make informed choices about HE institutions and programs.

Table 5.4.1: Types of advice rendered on undergraduate higher education options and processes before admission by the SU faculty

Option	Answer = Yes (%)
1.Advice on whether to go for higher education or other options	14
2.Choice of which college/universities to apply to	15
3.Choice of course/subject	15
4.About the admissions process	12
5.About covering tuition expenses/funding options	8
6.Checking application form/other documents	7
7. Choice of which college/university to enrol in if selected in more than one	9
8. Advice on preparing for HE entrance exam	6
9. Contacting college/university on behalf of applicants	4
10.Accompanying for a visit to the college/university where you work	2
11.Accompanying for a visit to another college/university	1
12.Advising via social networking e.g., WhatsApp	5
13. About special admissions programmes/ processes (e.g. Reservations)	2
Total of Answer (Yes)	**100**

Advice is provided through both personal and professional networks, with personal networks accounting for 64 "Yes" responses, primarily to neighbours (25%), extended family (23.44%), and community groups (15.63%), reflecting FMs' embedded roles in rural communities. Professionally, 37 "Yes" responses across 12 respondents highlight contexts like students visiting colleges (27.03%), community settings (18.92%), and open days (16.22%), indicating structured outreach efforts like science exhibitions. This shows FMs' commitment to widening HE access through social and professional responsibilities.

Through systematic analysis of nine valid diary entries submitted by five FMs at the State University (SU), it is evident that faculty members (FMs) played a substantive role in guiding students toward enrolling in higher education (HE). The diary entries, supported by post-diary interviews, detail the contexts, recipients, and content of guidance offered by FMs in both formal and informal capacities. Ponnoo, Joseph, Krish, John, and Peace documented various advisory interactions, primarily situated within their personal and professional networks.

The diary analysis reveals that SU FMs offered guidance across a spectrum of situations and recipients. Most interactions occurred in informal, pre-admission contexts, often initiated by individuals within the FMs' communities—relatives, neighbours, or acquaintances—such as Ponnoo's encounter at a railway station or Krish's advice to a student during a remedial session at home. John's activities, in contrast, took place within structured outreach programmes at rural higher secondary schools, reflecting a more formal, proactive approach. FMs provided advice on a range of HE-related topics, with the most frequent being whether to pursue higher education (nine entries), course or subject selection (eight entries), and employability prospects (seven entries). Other areas included choice between institutions, understanding admission procedures, and navigating campus life. Notably, John also offered guidance on visa processes and letters of recommendation, extending support beyond admission to aspects of transition and access to HE abroad.

The nature of advice varied by circumstances and recipients. Faculty members like Joseph and Krish addressed specific queries related to course content (e.g., MBBS, B.Sc. Economics, law, forensic science), employability, and institutional recommendations. They also provided tailored suggestions based on students' aptitude, interest, or geographic limitations, such as Krish's advice to a rural student regarding the lack of quality law colleges in her area. The recipients of guidance ranged from current students and university staff to children of staff, neighbours, and acquaintances seeking help for relatives. Quantitative data confirm that students (n = 5), neighbours (n = 3), and university staff (n = 1) were the primary recipients.
Guidance settings were diverse, including the FM's home (four instances), college departments (one instance), public spaces (e.g., a railway station), and unspecified locations. In two cases, digital communication was used. The motivations behind offering advice included a combination of professional responsibility, personal interest in student development, and

social commitment. John was repeatedly invited to rural schools for career talks because of his background in secondary education, while Krish and Peace cited their long-standing academic experience as a reason why they were frequently approached.

Four out of six diary entries with background details identified advisees as coming from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, Joseph supported a student from a nearby rural area, and Krish advised a student constrained by limited access to quality institutions. These entries highlight how FMs at SU not only addressed individual informational needs but also helped bridge structural barriers to higher education, making them vital community-based agents in expanding access.

In conclusion, the Faculty Members (FMs) at State University (SU) play a pivotal role in enhancing access to higher education, particularly for rural and disadvantaged students. Through a blend of personal and professional networks, FMs provide critical guidance on college and course selection, admissions processes, and employability prospects, tailoring their advice to the unique needs and circumstances of their advisees. The diary analysis underscores their dual engagement in informal community interactions and structured outreach efforts, such as career talks and science exhibitions, which collectively bridge informational and structural barriers to higher education. By leveraging their academic expertise and social connections, SU FMs serve as essential catalysts in empowering students to navigate the complexities of HE enrollment, thereby fostering greater educational equity and opportunity within their communities.

5.4.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

The Faculty Member (FM) survey data for Government College (GCID: 4_2) reveals a high level of engagement in facilitating access to undergraduate higher education (HE), with 94.74% of FMs (18/19 valid respondents, 95% of sample) reporting having provided pre-admission advice. The demographic profile of advice-givers shows a predominance of female FMs (72.22%, 13/18) compared to males (27.78%, 5/18), with the single non-advice-giver being female. Residence-wise, 55.56% of advice-givers are rural (10/18) and 44.44% urban (8/18), with the non-advice-giver urban.

Table 5.4.2: Types of advice rendered on undergraduate higher education options and processes before admission by the GCID faculty

Option	Answer = Yes (%)
1. Advice on whether to go for higher education or other options	17.78
2. Choice of which college/universities to apply to	15.56
3. Choice of course/subject	15.56
4. About the admissions process	11.11
5. About covering tuition expenses/funding options	4.44
6. Checking application form/other documents	5.56
7. Choice of which college/university to enrol in if selected in more than one	10.00
8. Advice on preparing for the HE entrance exam	8.89
9. Contacting the college/university on behalf of applicants	1.11
10. Accompanying for a visit to the college/university where you work	1.11
11. Accompanying for a visit to another college/university	1.11
12. Advising via social networking e.g., WhatsApp	7.78
13. About special admissions programmes/ processes (e.g. Reservations)	0
Total of Answer=Yes	**100**

The types of advice provided (17 valid responses, 90 total "Yes" responses) prioritize foundational HE decisions, with the top areas being advice on whether to pursue HE or other options (16 responses, 17.78%), choice of colleges/universities to apply to (14, 15.56%), and choice of course/subject (14, 15.56%). Moderate priorities include the admissions process (10, 11.11%), choosing colleges for enrollment (9, 10%), HE entry exam preparation (8, 8.89%), and advising via social networking like WhatsApp (7, 7.78%). Lower priorities include checking application forms (5, 5.56%), funding options (4, 4.44%), and contacting colleges or accompanying visits (1 each, 1.11%). Notably, no FMs reported advising on special admissions programs (e.g., reservations, 0%).

In personal networks (16 valid responses, 40 "Yes" responses), FMs primarily advise extended family (15, 37.5%) and neighbors (13, 32.5%), followed by domestic staff (4, 10%), faith-based settings (3, 7.5%), and community groups or tutoring/coaching (2 each, 5%). In professional roles (11 valid responses, 15 "Yes" responses), school visits are the primary context (5, 33.33%), followed by asking current students to advise others (4, 26.67%), community settings (3, 20%), open days (2, 13.33%), and meeting visiting students (1, 6.67%). The heavy reliance on family and neighbour networks reflects GCID's embedded role in rural Kerala communities, but the

lower professional outreach (15 responses) suggests limited institutional support for structured programs.

Faculty interview and diary analysis at GCID shows that Faculty Members (FMs) played an instrumental role in facilitating student access to higher education (HE), particularly for students from disadvantaged, rural, or first-generation learner backgrounds. According to the diary and interview data, all five FMs from GCID—Alice, Sujith, Dr. Mithra, Explorer, and Rithika—engaged in individualised guidance during the pre-admission phase. Their support often responded to personal inquiries and emerged from existing familial, institutional, and neighbourhood networks. Guidance was primarily given at home (nine out of ten diary entries), and less frequently via phone/digital platforms (three entries), on campus (one entry), or during public events (one entry). Diary data reveal that 90% of the students advised by GCID FMs came from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. Dr. Mithra and Explorer, for instance, counselled rural students, while Sujith assisted individuals whose families lacked academic awareness. Rithika's support of a neighbour from a non-HE background exemplifies the faculty's focus on first-generation learners.

The types of advice given were diverse and tailored. FMs provided course-specific recommendations (e.g., Alice on aviation; Explorer on accountancy courses like CA), career guidance (e.g., Rithika on IT after BCA), and stream selection (e.g., Sujith's suggestion of commerce over science based on aptitude). This guidance often required faculty to research unfamiliar academic pathways to ensure accuracy. FMs also addressed broader concerns such as employability, funding options, admission procedures, and the suitability of HE compared to alternative pathways. Notably, five diary entries mentioned support related to reservations and special admission categories, and four included assisting with application documentation.
According to diary data, the recipients of this advice were largely students (n = 6), neighbours (n = 5), and relatives (n = 2), demonstrating a focus on those within the faculty's social or professional orbit. For example, Alice advised her niece and other relatives; Sujith supported a student's sister; and Dr. Mithra offered guidance to a neighbour, a student, and a relative. The nature of the support was shaped by the social relationships and trust built over time, with students often approaching FMs due to their perceived academic authority and accessibility.

The motivations behind the faculty's involvement were multifaceted. FMs were driven by concern for the student (e.g., Dr. Mithra's efforts to counter gendered social conditioning), professional duty (e.g., Explorer and Sujith's roles as educators), social responsibility, and a personal interest in supporting others. These motivations intersected with the reasons students approached them, such as recognition of the faculty's expertise, institutional association, and prior positive experiences. Overall, GCID faculty members provided critical, context-sensitive, and often emotionally nuanced support, actively expanding access to higher education for underserved populations through trusted, informal networks and personalized academic counselling.

Faculty Members (FMs) at Other Government Colleges (GC-A: 4_3 and GC-B: 4_4) play a pivotal role in facilitating access to higher education (HE) and guiding HE choices in rural and semi-urban areas, as evidenced by specific instances of advice and counselling detailed in the provided data. FMs demonstrate diverse outreach practices tailored to local needs, particularly for disadvantaged and rural students. At GC-A, one FM had a "Vazhikaatti[15]" programme that trains students to counsel rural high schoolers on undergraduate options, while her phone-based guidance helped psychology aspirants navigate admissions. Jaisal supports BTHM applicants like Mufeeda, overcoming familial resistance by aligning her travel interests with course prospects, and extends guidance through community programmes for Plus Two graduates. Babas resolves neighborhood disputes over course choices, addressing financial barriers, and Rumi clarifies the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP) structure for confused students, enhancing course selection.

At GC-B, Vineesha, as a residence association vice president, promotes programmes in government college due to low fees and local proximity to rural students, though she faces resistance from communities that prioritise early marriage. Alvin Vargees motivates a student to pursue BA in Journalism, leading to her postgraduate success, and sustains another student's journalism studies, resulting in her career as a newspaper professional and author. Braille advises a neighbour to study commerce and supports visually challenged students, enabling their degrees and advanced studies at institutions like Hyderabad University and TISS.

[15] Vazhikatti literally means a guide who shows the way.

Bava delivers career guidance classes in remote areas, such as at the Dragon Boys Club[16] and counsels a Public Service Commission (PSC) rank holder, while Priya guides neighbours and students from remote areas to enrol in history and other programmes, leading to careers in police department and teaching.

These cases reflect FMs' perceived role as facilitators of HE access, bridging informational, economic, and cultural gaps through informal advising, structured programmes, and community engagement. Despite challenges like high ST student dropout rates and community resistance, these outreach efforts significantly enhance HE participation, aligning with the needs of rural and semi-urban localities.

To summarise, the diary analysis reveals that the types of advice varied based on the recipient's proximity with the FM and context, with FMs commonly advising school students, current or former university students, and staff regarding admissions, course selection, and opportunities for further study. These interactions were often initiated through personal networks, academic relationships, or community outreach activities. The data highlight the FMs' role as accessible advisors in both institutions, using formal and informal means to support educational access, especially for students from rural or underrepresented backgrounds.

GCID FMs provide informal, personalised guidance within personal networks, focusing on course and career clarity without a rural-specific lens. In contrast, GC-A and GC-B FMs blend informal advice with proactive, structured outreach, prioritising rural and marginalised students through programmes and community engagement. While all emphasise interest-based guidance, GC-A and GC-B's broader scope and rural focus highlight a more systemic approach compared to GCID's individualised, reactive support, reflecting diverse strategies to enhance HE access.

5.5 HE Outreach: current challenges and future opportunities

This section explores current challenges and future potential for HE outreach in the SU and Government colleges from the IL and FM perspectives.

[16] A nearby culture club in community settings to promote arts and sports among youth.

5.5.1 HE outreach: current challenges

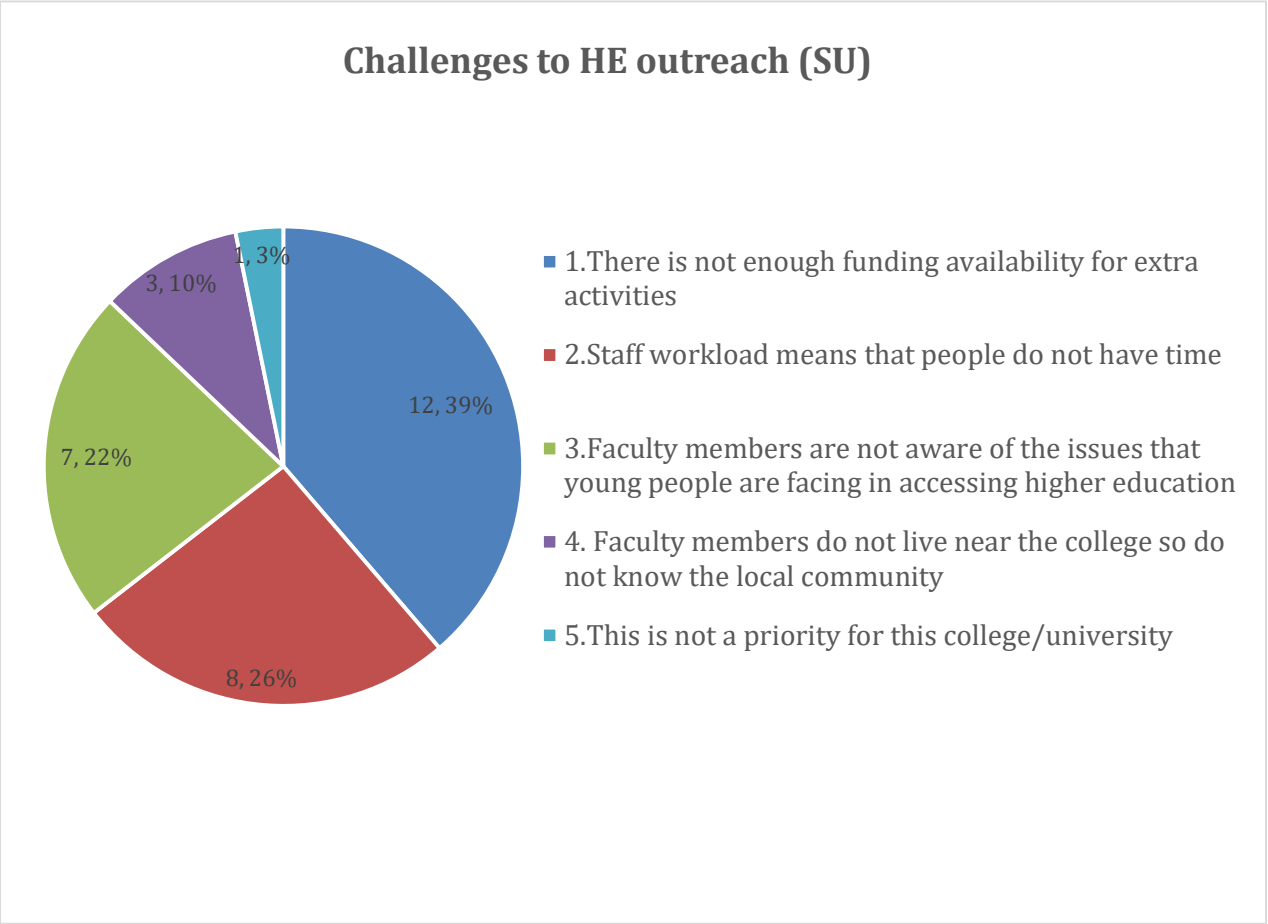
This section examines the challenges and barriers to Higher Education (HE) outreach at State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges (GC-A and GC-B), focusing on undergraduate (UG) access. Data is synthesised from Institutional Leader (IL) interviews, Faculty Member (FM) surveys, and FM interviews, with suggestions for overcoming these barriers. The analysis highlights systemic, institutional, and community-specific obstacles, alongside actionable solutions.

5.5.1.1 State University (SU)

Challenges in Higher Education Outreach

State University (SU) faces multifaceted challenges in effectively conducting higher education outreach. Quantitative data from the Faculty Member (FM) survey indicates that a primary obstacle is insufficient funding for outreach activities, cited by 38.71% of respondents. Faculty workload also presents a substantial impediment, with 25.81% of faculty members reporting time constraints that limit their capacity to engage in outreach. A notable proportion (22.58%) of faculty members expressed a lack of awareness regarding the challenges faced by young individuals in accessing higher education. Furthermore, 9.68% of respondents suggested that faculty members' limited connection to the local community hinders outreach efforts. A minority (3.22%) perceived that higher education outreach is not a priority for the university.

Figure 5.3: Challenges in Higher Education Outreach reported by FM at SU



Qualitative data supplements the above-mentioned findings. The perception that outreach is outside of the faculty workload, and concern about difficulties with the timely dissemination of pre-admission information, are also reflected in the interviews. Interview data shows that SU don't actively guide students unless there's a felt requirement of guidance and advice about HE. This is compounded by students' inadequate awareness of course offerings. Interview data reveal a few relevant challenges in HE outreach with respect to lack of outreach, lack of preadmission guidance and lack of prioritizing.

> *Krish says "Major challenge is we are not going to school. We have to plan how we can reach school, how we can give career guidance to school students so they can properly select a course without any biases."*
>
> *Dr Joseph (FM) identifies the absence of pre-admission guidance culture as the primary obstacle in HE system. Additionally, he*

highlights the limited prospects of traditional courses. "Programs that the University is offering today is minimal … and there are no job opportunities"

A few FMs do not prioritize the need for HE outreach for instance the IL (Jose) remarks "since we have not felt the need for that, we don't have an initiative in that line,".

Overcoming challenges/barriers to engaging in HE outreach

To mitigate these challenges and enhance higher education outreach, several strategies have been proposed. There is a consensus on the need for universities to improve publicity and dissemination of information about their programmes, extending outreach efforts beyond the immediate geographic area to other states and nations. A proactive approach, involving university visits to schools for programme promotion and career guidance, is strongly advocated. The establishment of career guidance centres within schools and fostering collaborations among schools, universities, and industries are identified as key strategies. To broaden access, universities are encouraged to organise education fairs, particularly targeting rural communities, and to consider establishing university sub-centres in these areas to reduce information asymmetry. Addressing faculty-related barriers, recommendations include providing faculty training on new career options and integrating outreach activities into faculty workload by adjusting tutorial hours. Recognising the importance of student preparedness for informed choices, improving students' technical literacy and providing technical support for application processes are highlighted as necessary steps.

5.5.1.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

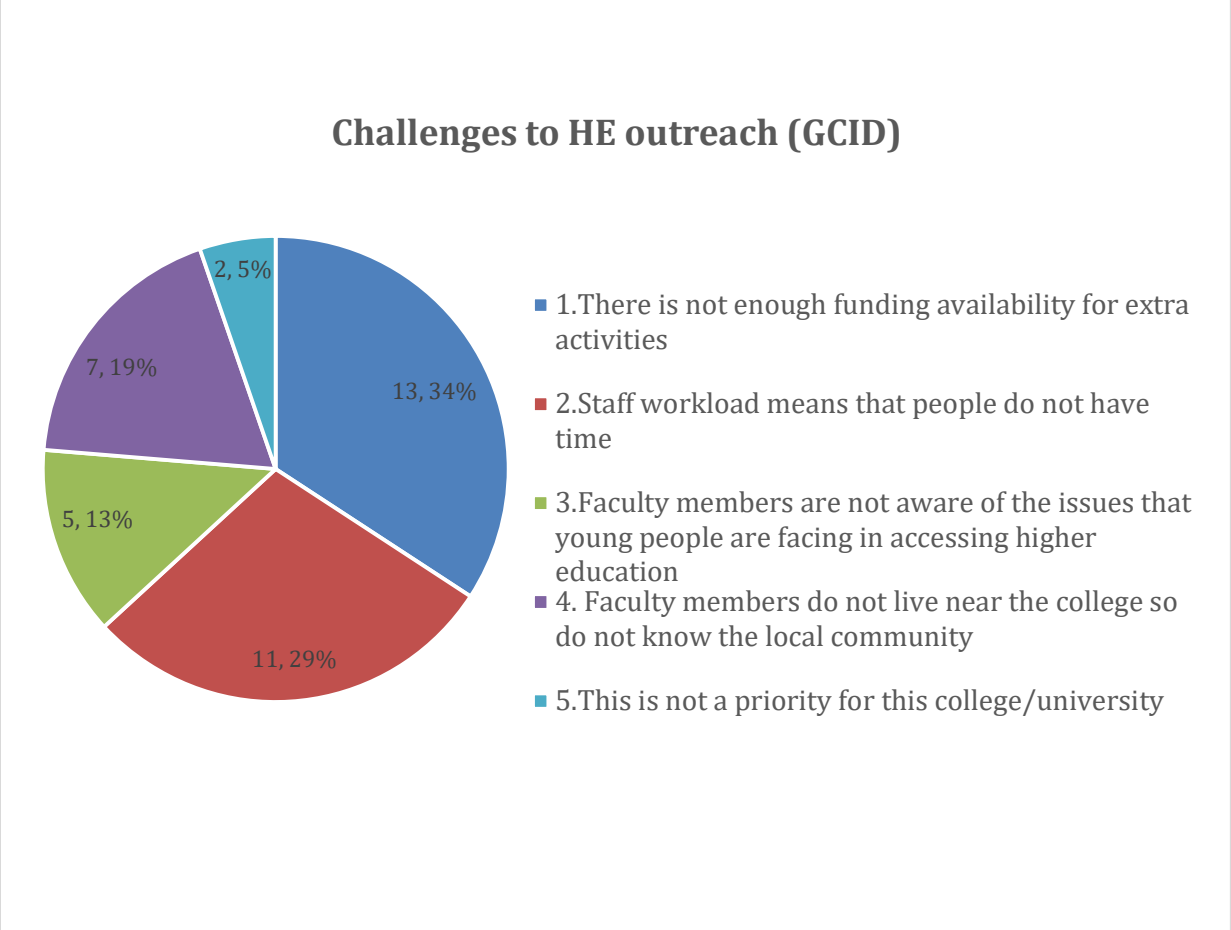
Challenges in Higher Education Outreach in Government Colleges

Government colleges, including Government College In-Depth (GCID), GC-A, and GC-B, encounter several obstacles in their efforts to provide effective higher education outreach. Similar to the State University, GCID faces challenges related to funding and faculty workload, with 34.21% of respondents citing insufficient funding and 28.95% highlighting staff workload as significant barriers.

Jack the FM says: "… and the main hindrance that we have is related to the funding process."

Sujith (FM) opines "Time limitations prevent FMs from conducting outreach, due to university exams, internal assessments, and administrative duties."

Figure 5.4: *Challenges in Higher Education Outreach reported by FM at GCID*



However, in contrast to the State University, a larger proportion of GCID faculty members (18.42%) indicated that faculty members' lack of proximity to the local community poses a challenge. Qualitative data from interviews and surveys reveal further context-specific challenges across these government colleges. For GCID, these challenges include students' lack of awareness about available courses and facilities and a disconnect between colleges and rural communities. Faculty members at GCID also report time constraints due to heavy workloads and administrative duties, which impede their involvement in outreach. GC-A experiences difficulties in mobilising students from rural areas for guidance programmes, a lack of parental motivation, and societal stigma surrounding higher education, including early marriage among Muslim students, contributing to dropouts. GC-B highlights time management

issues stemming from heavy teaching loads and administrative responsibilities, limiting their capacity for pre-admission guidance in higher secondary schools. GC-B faculty members note that government colleges often lack the advertising and promotional activities employed by self-financing colleges, potentially disadvantageous in attracting students. Across these government colleges, there are shared concerns about students' limited awareness of course options and the need for enhanced guidance on higher education pathways.

> *Jack views that: "For faculties they should attend a little bit more training programs like awareness programs, capacity building programs with regard to the different scopes that are available for students."*

Suggestions for Enhancing Higher Education Outreach in Government Colleges

A range of targeted strategies are possible for Government Colleges to address these challenges and improve higher education outreach in government colleges. For GCID, suggestions include increasing school-level seminars to raise awareness of courses and facilities, strengthening connections with rural communities through outreach programmes and collaboration with local authorities, and adjusting faculty workload to accommodate outreach activities. GCID also recommends early engagements with the school, including pre-result school visits, and provision for programmes with local need and demand. GC-A emphasises the importance of community-level orientation programmes involving religious leaders and panchayath-level community platforms to motivate parents and students. Enhancing scholarships and providing financial incentives for economically weaker families to prioritise education are also recommended by GC-A.

GC-B suggests relieving FMs of administrative work to free up time for guidance, collaborating with schools to deliver pre-admission guidance, and utilising social media and other forms of advertisement to promote the college and its programmes.

Across the colleges, there is a general call for universities and colleges to adopt a more proactive role in providing career guidance, organising education fairs, and offering faculty

training on new career choices and courses. Addressing students' technical illiteracy and providing technical support for application processes are also considered important steps.

Faculty Members (FMs) at government colleges in rural and semi-urban areas help students access higher education (HE) and make informed choices, despite challenges like low awareness, limited resources, cultural barriers, and time or knowledge gaps, especially for disadvantaged groups. FMs offer personal guidance, such as advising rural students on affordable local colleges or supporting career goals despite family opposition. They also run structured programs, like career counselling for school students, and provide community-based support, helping remote or underrepresented students, including those with visual impairments, pursue degrees and careers.

Training for FMs, partnerships with other institutions, and outreach through different channels can increase awareness. Community programs and local partnerships address cultural issues. Extra staff and reservation policies help with time and historical gaps. These rural-focused efforts—personal advice, community support, and better resources—help FMs ensure marginalised students succeed in higher education. Ongoing institutional support is key to a bigger impact.

5.5.2 HE Outreach: future potential

This section explores the future potential for Higher Education (HE) outreach at State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges (GC-A and GC-B), focusing on undergraduate (UG) access. It synthesises ideas for future outreach initiatives and draws inspiration from activities reported at other institutions, emphasising strategies to enhance rural student engagement.

5.5.2.1 State University (SU)

Based on the data discussed, to enhance HE outreach, State University (SU) should prioritise providing comprehensive publicity about its courses, extending information dissemination not only within the state but also to other states and nations. There is a need for the university to proactively engage with schools, offering guidance on various programmes and their associated career prospects. This initiative could involve establishing career guidance centres within schools to facilitate a smoother transition for students. Collaboration between the university,

schools, and industries is crucial to align academic programmes with current market demands and ensure students are equipped with relevant skills. The university should also consider organising education fairs to reach a broader audience and promote the value of higher education.

Furthermore, providing training programmes through Akshaya centres and other computer centres, which play a significant role in the admission process, can ensure that students receive accurate and helpful guidance. To address the diverse needs of students, universities should offer add-on courses that enhance employability and provide opportunities for internships to gain practical experience. SU's future outreach potential lies in proactive seminars, digital publicity, guidance centres, and modernised curricula. Rural centres and targeted approaches implemented by other universities could guide SU to overcome complacency and expand its rural reach.

5.5.2.2 Government College in-depth (GCID) & Other Government Colleges

Government colleges, including GCID, GC-A, and GC-B, can focus on raising awareness of their programmes and facilities by conducting seminars and workshops at the school level. These institutions can also actively seek to strengthen connections with rural communities through outreach programmes and collaborations with local authorities. To support students from rural areas, colleges can offer part-time job opportunities or online programmes, recognising the importance of balancing education with financial needs. Providing urban exposure to rural students, like visits to premier institutions and industries, is suggested. Enhancing funding for the outreach and policy of workload balancing for the faculty is also suggested. GC-A specifically emphasises the need for massive orientation programmes at the community level, involving religious leaders and community platforms to motivate both parents and students. Enhancing scholarships and providing incentives for families to prioritise education can further encourage participation in higher education. GC-B suggests leveraging social media and creating videos to promote the college and its programmes, thereby reaching a wider audience. To improve outreach effectiveness, government colleges can learn from self-financing colleges by adopting their strategies for student outreach and engagement.

Inspiration from Other Institutions

While specific examples of other institutions' outreach activities are limited, there are some indications of practices that can be adopted or adapted. Several institutions utilise press releases to announce vacancies and provide information about their offerings. The concept of an "open day" is mentioned by FM at GCID (Jack) as a strategy to attract students. Collaborating with other colleges, municipalities, and panchayats is identified as a way to enhance outreach and connect with communities. Some institutions organise house visit programmes and use local media for advertisements to reach potential students.

5.6 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter explored the varied perspectives and practices of Institutional Leaders (ILs) and Faculty Members (FMs) at State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Other Government Colleges (GC-A and GC-B) concerning their roles in facilitating Higher Education (HE) access and choice for students from rural and semi-urban areas. Drawing on interview and survey data from ILs and FMs, alongside FM diary entries, this chapter addressed perceptions of HEIs' and individual roles, current outreach practices, motivations for engaging in widening participation, and the prevalent obstacles.

Faculty members in rural and semi-urban areas generally perceive their institutions, particularly SU and GC-A/GC-B, as relatively comfortable environments for rural students, largely attributable to affordability, inclusive culture, and proximity. However, a significant need for enhanced guidance on critical aspects of HE access and choice was widely recognised across institutions. FMs identified key areas requiring more support, including selecting colleges and courses, understanding employability prospects, and preparing for entry exams. Existing outreach practices appear mixed. While some FMs reported engaging in general outreach like science exhibitions or social media use, the data suggest that at SU and GCID, proactive outreach activities specifically tailored to rural populations are limited, with institutions often relying on their inherent appeal (e.g., low cost, location). In contrast, GC-A demonstrated more proactive, community-embedded strategies, such as tutoring and counselling in tribal and rural areas.

Institutional Leaders across the surveyed institutions acknowledged their role in facilitating HE access, although their approaches and perceived responsibilities varied. The IL at SU, while previously active in guiding prospective students through personal inquiries as Director of Admissions, did not perceive a necessity for specific university-led outreach activities due to the centralised admission process and the university's existing reputation. Guidance at SU was largely channelled through college nodal officers, indicating a potential disconnect between the university leadership and direct student interaction in rural areas. Conversely, ILs at the Government Colleges, particularly GCID and GC-A, demonstrated more direct personal engagement. The IL at GCID offered informal advice to relatives and former students and participated in external initiatives, while the IL at GC-A proactively engaged in pre-admission guidance through NGO programmes and community orientation sessions. The IL at GC-B provided informal community-based advice, leveraging her local standing.

Across these colleges, formal organisation of dedicated pre-admission outreach programmes was less evident, often relying on individual faculty initiative. Motivations for FMs' contributions to widening participation, particularly evident in their guidance activities, stemmed from a blend of professional responsibility, personal interest in student development, and social commitment. FMs acted as accessible advisors within their personal and professional networks, bridging informational and, at times, structural barriers to HE access. While GCID FMs' guidance was often reactive and situated within personal networks, GC-A and GC-B FMs exhibited a more proactive stance, combining informal advice with structured outreach targeting rural and marginalised students.

Despite the above-mentioned motivations and efforts, significant obstacles hinder HE outreach and widening participation. Common challenges identified across institutions include insufficient funding, heavy faculty workload leading to time constraints, and a lack of awareness among some faculty regarding the specific challenges faced by rural youth in accessing HE. Furthermore, qualitative data pointed to systemic issues like the perceptions that outreach falls outside core faculty duties and difficulties in the timely dissemination of information. Context-specific barriers included a disconnect with rural communities, a lack of awareness about courses, a lack of parental motivation, societal stigma, early marriage, and limited institutional advertising compared to private colleges.

While suggestions for overcoming these barriers ranged from improving publicity and organising education fairs to integrating outreach into workload and strengthening community ties, the current landscape reveals that institutional strategies are often reactive or rely on inherent strengths rather than systematic, well-resourced outreach programmes. The findings underscore that while individual ILs and FMs are often motivated and engaged in facilitating HE access through informal channels, systemic challenges, resource constraints, and a lack of formalised, targeted outreach strategies, particularly from the institutional leadership level at SU and GCID, significantly limit their collective impact on widening participation for rural and semi-urban students.

Chapter 6: Who are the students and what is their experience of and perspectives on HE outreach?

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the demographic profile and higher education (HE) experiences of undergraduate (UG) students at State University (SU) and Government College In-Depth (GCID) in Kerala, India, addressing the question:

> *Which students are receiving HE in rural/semi-urban colleges? How do they perceive the role of faculty members in facilitating HE access and choice?*

It provides a comprehensive analysis of the students' socio-demographic characteristics, educational and familial backgrounds, residence and commute patterns, and their pathways to HE, with a particular focus on the role of faculty members (FMs) in shaping their access and choices. Drawing on data from the UG Student Survey, student interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs), the chapter highlights the diversity of the student population, their motivations, and the institutional factors influencing their HE decisions.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section 6.2 details the demographic background of UG students at SU and GCID, covering age, gender, caste, religion, disability, and other socio-economic indicators, with comparisons to administrative records and state demographics. Section 6.3 explores students' residence and commute patterns, analysing split/single residence status, distances, travel times, and transport modes. Section 6.4 delves into students' educational and familial backgrounds, schooling histories, and HE trajectories, including motivations, subject choices, and funding sources. It also examines the extent and nature of FM involvement in HE access and choice, alongside pre-enrolment activities. Section 6.5 evaluates current HE outreach efforts, students' comfort levels, and suggestions for improving outreach to rural students. Finally, Section 6.6 summarises key findings and conclusions, emphasising the implications for equitable HE access in rural and semi-urban contexts.

6.2 Demographic background of Undergraduate Students

Understanding the demographic composition of undergraduate students in higher education institutions (HEIs) located in rural and semi-urban areas is critical for addressing research questions related to equitable access to higher education (HE) and the role of HEIs in facilitating such access. This study draws on data from the UG Student Survey to examine the demographic characteristics of undergraduate students at State University (SU) and Government College in Depth (GCID) in Kerala. The survey collects data on key demographic variables, including age (derived from year of birth), gender, caste/social group, religion, disability status, sexual orientation/identity, relationship status, caring responsibilities, place of birth, permanent residence, and mother tongue. To ensure the reliability of the survey findings, administrative records from SU and GCID are consulted, where available, to assess the alignment of survey results with institutional data.

6.2.1. State University (SU)

State University (SU) has a survey sample of 69 UG students, though valid responses vary by question. The demographic profile highlights a young, predominantly female, and rural-origin student body, reflective of the SU's regional context in Kerala. The majority of the 68 undergraduates are 19 years old (52.94%), with a mean age of approximately 19.37 years, reflecting a typical young adult population aged 18-20. The gender distribution is notably female-dominated, with 72.06 per cent identifying as female and 27.94 per cent as male, and no reported transgender or other gender identities.

The student population is predominantly composed of Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 63.8 per cent, followed by General category students (18.8%) and Scheduled Caste (SC) students (11.16%), while Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students are minimally represented at 4.3 per cent and 1.4 per cent, respectively. By religion, 60.9 per cent of the 69 undergraduates are Hindu, 34.8 per cent are Muslim, and 4.3 per cent are Christian, with no other religions reported.

Kerala's 2011 Census shows a religious composition of 54.73% Hindus, 26.56% Muslims, 18.38% Christians, and 0.33% others (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011), reflecting a diverse population with regional variations. In contrast, the sample of

69 undergraduates, with 60.9% Hindus, 34.8% Muslims, and only 4.3% Christians, significantly overrepresents Hindus and Muslims while underrepresenting Christians compared to the state's demographics. This deviation may partly arise from regional factors, such as the institution's location in North Kerala, where Muslims constitute a higher proportion in the district (70.24%) compared to a smaller proportion of Christians in the district (1.98%) or from programme-specific preferences of students (Census of India, 2011).

The occurrence of disabilities is extremely low, with only 1.59 per cent (1 out of 63 students) reporting a physical disability. Sexual orientation data (N=44) indicates that 93.18 per cent do not identify as LGBTQIAP+, with only one student (2.27%) identifying as such and two students (4.54%) preferring not to say. Nearly all students (98.55% of 69) are unmarried, with only one student reporting being married, and caring responsibilities are minimal, as 98.31 per cent of 59 students have no children, with just one student reporting one child. All undergraduates (N=62 for place of birth, N=61 for residence) were born in Kerala, India, with 68.85 per cent residing in rural areas and 31.15 per cent in urban areas, and their mother tongue is exclusively Malayalam (N=67), underscoring a linguistically and regionally homogeneous student population rooted in Kerala's cultural and geographic context.

The survey results for SU align closely with the administrative records across most demographic categories. Survey results on gender, caste/social group, religion, and place of residence show high consistency with administrative records, with minor variations likely due to sample size differences or slight underreporting in the survey. The most significant discrepancy is in the differently abled category, where the survey underreports PWD students (1 vs. 3). Overall, the administrative data corroborates the survey findings, suggesting reliable data collection, though the survey's lower response rates for some questions may introduce minor biases.

To put it in a nutshell, SU's UG students are predominantly young (18–20), female (72.06%), OBC (63.8%), Hindu (60.9%), rural-origin (68.85%), and Malayalam-speaking (100%). Disability, diverse sexual orientation, and caring responsibilities are minimal, suggesting a relatively uniform socio-demographic profile geared toward traditional UG pathways.

While the high representation of female and OBC students suggests progress in gender and caste-based inclusion, aligning with Kerala's social policies, the overrepresentation of Hindus (60.9% vs. 54.73%) and Muslims (34.8% vs. 26.56%) as in Kerala's 2011 Census against underrepresentation of Christians (4.3% vs. 18.38%) compared to state demographics points to higher representation of local students in the SU. The absence of students with disabilities, diverse sexual orientations, or caring responsibilities further suggests that SU's UG pathways may not adequately accommodate or attract students from these marginalised groups, potentially due to institutional barriers and subject preferences. This lack of representation could limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences, hindering a fully inclusive educational environment.

6.2.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

Government College in Depth (GCID) has a larger survey sample (178 students), with high response rates (e.g., 176 for age and gender, 178 for caste). Its demographic profile mirrors SU's but shows greater rural representation and diversity in age and religion. The undergraduate students at the GCID exhibit a distinct demographic profile, reflective of its regional and cultural context in Kerala.

The age distribution of the 176 undergraduates is centred around 19-year-olds (47.16%), with 93.75 per cent aged 18-20 and a mean age of approximately 19.20 years, indicating a slightly younger population compared to SU but reflecting a traditional-age group for UG programmes. The gender distribution is predominantly female (64.20%), with a higher male representation (35.80%) than SU, and no reported transgender or other gender identities. The student population is overwhelmingly dominated by Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 74.7%, followed by Scheduled Caste (SC) students at 14 percent, with smaller proportions of General (6.2%) and Economically Weaker Section (EWS) categories (5.1%), and no Scheduled Tribe (ST) representation, highlighting a more pronounced OBC demographic than SU.

Based on religion, among 177 students, 53.67 per cent are Muslim, 44.63 per cent are Hindu, and 1.69 per cent are Christian, with no other religions reported, reflecting a Muslim-majority student body. Disability prevalence is slightly higher than SU, with 3.45 per cent of 174 students

reporting disabilities, primarily intellectual (80% of disabled cases), with one case of a chronic neurological or blood disorder, and 96.55 per cent reporting no disabilities.

Sexual orientation data (N=121) shows 97.52 per cent do not identify as LGBTQIAP+, with no students reporting such identities, 2.48 per cent preferring not to say, and a moderate response rate suggesting potential sensitivity or underreporting. The relationship status of 175 undergraduates is predominantly unmarried (96.57%), with 3.43 per cent reporting being married, indicating a slightly higher proportion of married students than at SU but still consistent with a young demographic. Caring responsibilities are minimal, with 98.25 per cent of 171 students reporting no children, and three students (1.75%) each having one child.

All undergraduates (N=161 for place of birth, N=175 for residence) were born in Kerala, with 76.57 per cent residing in rural areas and 23.43 per cent in urban areas, reflecting a strongly localised and more rural-leaning demographic than SU. The mother tongue of all 175 undergraduates is exclusively Malayalam, underscoring a linguistically homogeneous student body aligned with their Kerala origins.

The survey results for GCID closely match the administrative records across all compared demographics. Gender, caste/social group, religion, and residence show minimal differences (<1% in most cases), likely due to the survey's smaller sample size (176–178 vs. 199). The PWD category is consistent, though the survey slightly underreports (6 vs. 7 students), possibly due to non-response.

In summary, both SU and GCID serve young (18–20), Malayalam-speaking, Indian-born Keralite students, predominantly female and from rural areas (68.85% SU, 76.57% GCID). OBC students dominate (63.8% SU, 74.7% GCID), reflecting Kerala's social structure. SU has a higher female ratio (72.06% vs. 64.20%) and a Hindu majority (60.9% vs. 44.63%), while GCID has more Muslim students (53.67% vs. 34.8%) and a broader age range. GCID's rural focus is more pronounced, with no ST students compared to SU's minimal representation (1.4%). The gender and caste distributions align with Kerala's HE trends (e.g., female dominance, OBC prevalence). SU and GCID cater to rural, female, OBC, and Malayalam-speaking students, with GCID showing a stronger rural and Muslim profile.

6.3 Undergraduate Students: residence and commute information

This section examines the residence and commute patterns of undergraduate (UG) students at State University (SU) and Government College In-Depth (GCID), based on data from the UG Student Survey and UG Student Interviews. The analysis covers split/single residence status, location of residence, distance and travel time between residence and the higher education institution (HEI), and modes of transport.

6.3.1. State University (SU)

The survey and interview data for State University reveal undergraduate students' residence and commute patterns. Approximately half (49.28%, 34 of 69 respondents) have split residences, most of whom are living on campus (82.35%) during the week. During weekends or vacations, they travel to homes in the same town (25%), district (21.88%), or different districts in Kerala (43.75%); and one student resides in a different state. The other half (50.72%, 35 students) maintain a single residence, primarily residing on campus (54.84%) or in a different district within Kerala (22.58%).

The mean distance of the SU students from weekly residence to the institution is 48.96 km (56 valid responses), with an average travel time of 111.88 minutes (53 responses). Interviews highlight shorter commutes (0.3–6 km, 3–40 minutes) for hostel residents due to proximity.

Out of 97 valid responses from 69 students, about commute information, students primarily use public buses or minivans (46.39%, 45 students) to travel to the institution, followed by walking (27.84%, 27 students) especially among hostel residents, and smaller numbers using bikes/scooters (11.34%), trains (7.22%), or other modes like rickshaws or cars. The data indicate that while many students benefit from on-campus living, those commuting from farther districts face longer travel times, relying heavily on public transport. This suggests a diverse commuting experience shaped by residence location and transport availability.

Regarding the SU students, there is a balanced split between single and dual residences, significant on-campus living during the week, and varied commuting patterns influenced by proximity to higher education institutions and transport options.

6.3.2. Government College in-depth (GCID)

At GCID, the survey and interview data outline undergraduate students' residence and commute patterns. Most students (95.86%, 162 out of 169) live in a single residence, typically at home, mostly in the same district (50.45%) or town (34.23%). Only 4.14% (7 students) split time between residences like hostels or homes during the week. For those with split residences, 50% stay on campus during the working week, and 50% live in the same district but not the same town. During weekends or vacations, these students often return to homes in the same town (28.57%, 2 students), same state but different district (28.57%, 2 students), or on campus (28.57%, 2 students).

Regarding the location of residence, 76.57% (134 out of 175) live in rural areas, and 23.43% (41) live in urban areas, with all students domiciled in Kerala. The average distance from their usual weekly residence to the college is 18.25 km (152 responses), with travel times averaging 52.19 minutes. Interview data shows distances ranging from 1.5 km to 55 km, with travel times from 7 to 120 minutes. The primary mode of transport is public buses, used by 75.39% (144 out of 191 responses), followed by walking (12.57%, 24 students), bikes/scooters (6.28%, 12 students), and trains (5.75%, 11 students). Interviews revealed that a few rely on buses for longer commutes (25–55 km), while a few still walk for a shorter distance (1.5 km).

In summary, both SU and GCID cater to distinct residence and commute profiles—SU with flexible, campus-centric living and GCID with stable, rural commuting—shaping their HE access dynamics in Kerala's context. SU shows a balanced split/single residence pattern (49.28% vs. 50.72%), with heavy on-campus reliance (82.35% during the week), while GCID is overwhelmingly single-residence (95.86%), off-campus, and district-based (50.45%). This reflects SU's broader regional appeal vs. GCID's local, rural focus. SU's survey mean distance (48.96 km) and time (111.88 minutes) far exceed GCID's (18.25 km, 52.19 minutes), though SU interviews suggest shorter hostel-based commutes (2 km, 14 minutes), contrasting with GCID's consistent moderate range (21.83 km, 51.17 minutes). Buses dominate at both (46.39% SU, 75.39% GCID), but SU has more walking (27.84% vs. 12.57%) due to on-campus living, while GCID's bus reliance reflects off-campus commuting. SU's dual-residence and on-campus trends suggest better hostel infrastructure, appealing to students from farther places, while

GCID's single-residence, bus-dependent profile aligns with a rural/semi-urban student base reliant on public transport.

6.4 Undergraduate Students' Background

6.4.1 Educational and family background

This section presents a comparative analysis of the educational background of undergraduate (UG) students' family members from the SU and GCID institutions. The focus is on the highest educational levels attained by the students' mothers, fathers, maternal and paternal grandparents, based on student survey responses. The students have counted their own parents as legal guardians, and hence, this data may not reflect the technically correct meaning of legal guardianship; and hence, the data on this variable is not analysed. The findings offer critical insight into the familial educational environment shaping students' perspectives and access to higher education (HE).

6.4.1.1 State University (SU)

Highest Educational Level

In SU (N = 69), as per the UG survey, the educational attainment of mothers revealed a relatively high proportion with formal education beyond secondary schooling. The highest educational level for most mothers (30.43%, N=21) is an undergraduate degree (e.g., BA, BSc), followed by 20.29% (N=14) with postgraduate education and 20.29% (N=14) with 11th to 12th class education, and 5.8% with a diploma (ITI/ITC). Only 18.84% (N=13) reported their mother's education as 9th to 10th class, and smaller percentages reported lower levels, such as 1st to 5th class (1.45%, N=1) or no formal schooling (1.45%, N=1). One student reported their mother having an MPhil or PhD (1.45%, N=1).

The educational profile of fathers in SU (N = 67) followed a similar trend, though slightly more skewed toward secondary education. The majority had completed 9th–10th class (25.37%), followed by 11th–12th class (20.90%). A notable proportion of fathers were graduates (17.91%) or postgraduates (14.92%), with 2.98% holding MPhil or PhD qualifications. Very few had only primary education (up to 8th class; 11.94%), and none lacked formal education.

Maternal and paternal grandparents in the SU group largely lacked higher educational qualifications. Over half of the students did not know their maternal grandmother's (55.93%) or grandfather's (56.67%) educational attainment. Among those who responded, primary education (1st–5th class) was the most common for grandmothers (8.47%) and grandfathers (6.67%), while 15% of grandfathers had completed up to 10th class. Only a few grandparents had a degree (3.39%–5%) or postgraduate (up to 7.02%) education.

Interview insights from SU students further illustrate this range and provide individual context. For instance, Dhyan's mother and father had pre-degree (12th grade) education, and his elder brother was pursuing a B. Tech, reflecting the upward trend in the younger generation. Unni's parents had an ITI qualification (mother) and a BSc Nursing degree (father), showcasing attainment in technical and professional fields. Jimin's parents both held postgraduate level degrees (B. Tech and MBA), indicating a higher educational background that aligns with the upper end of the survey's reported attainment. Niranjan's parents had pre-degree (mother) and degree (father) qualifications, with a sibling who had completed a PG degree, again underscoring generational educational progress. These individual accounts from interviews thus corroborate the survey findings by providing specific examples of the educational diversity and progress observed within the families of students in the SU group.

The survey shows higher educational attainment among parents, compared to GCID, with 52.17% of mothers and 35.81% of fathers holding a degree or higher. Grandparents, particularly grandmothers, have lower educational levels, with over 55% unknown or minimal schooling. Siblings show strong educational progress, with 68.75% pursuing or completing a degree or postgraduate education. Interviews confirm varied parental education, from basic to professional degrees, and highlight siblings pursuing higher education.

Figure 6.1: Percentage of post-secondary education among SU students' family members.

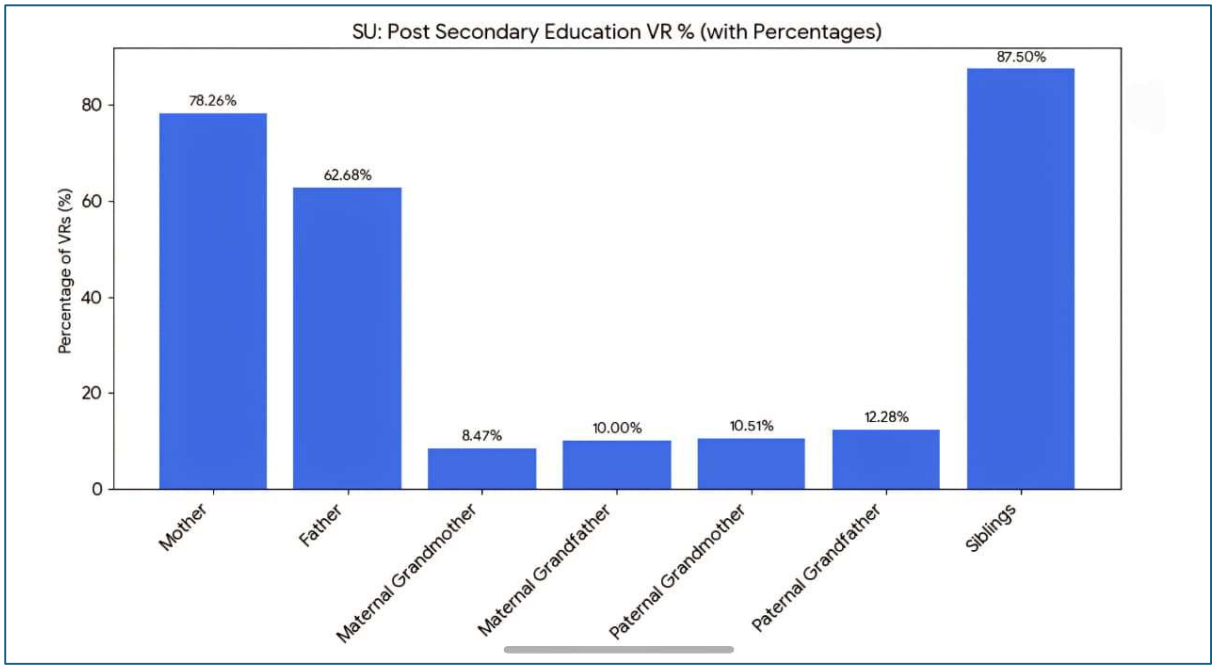


Figure 6.1 illustrates the percentage of post-secondary education attainment among different family members of SU students, with siblings and mothers having the highest rates and grandparents having the lowest.

Occupation of Parents

Data from the student survey at the State University (SU) reveal significant variation in the occupational profile of students' family members.

Table 6.4.1: Distribution of Parents' Occupations in SU

Occupation	Mothers		Fathers	
	(N=58)	(% of VRs)	(N=57)	(% of VRs)
Home Maker	21	36.21	0	0
Teacher / Professor	15	25.86	7	12.28
Daily Wage	4	6.90	15	26.32
Govt Service	3	5.17	7	12.28
Nurse	3	5.17	0	0
Clerk	3	5.17	0	0
Accountant	2	3.45	0	0
Skilled worker	1	1.72	1	1.75
Bank service	1	1.72	0	0
Manager	1	1.72	0	0
Business	0	0	12	21.05
Driver	0	0	4	7.02
Paramedical & Health	0	0	3	5.26
Farmer	0	0	2	3.51
Police	0	0	2	3.51
Doctor	0	0	1	1.75
Merchant Navy	0	0	1	1.75
Others	4	6.90	2	3.51
Note: The following professions, which are represented among the GCID parents, are absent among the SU parents: Abroad, Fisherman, and Unemployed.				

Table 6.4.1 reveals that within this sample of 58 individuals, there is a strong concentration of mothers in either domestic roles or the education sector, which together account for over 60% of the recorded occupations. Among mothers (N = 58), a notable proportion were employed in professional or public sector roles. Approximately 25.86% were teachers or professors, and 5.17% worked in government service. In contrast, 36.21% were homemakers. Other occupations included daily wage labourers (6.90%), clerks (5.17%), and nurses (5.17%), with small percentages in skilled work, bank service, managerial, and accounting roles. Notably, no students reported their mothers as farmers, businesspersons, or in overseas employment.

Based on Table 6.2, it can be inferred that in this specific sample of 57 individuals, a large proportion of fathers are engaged in either self-owned businesses or manual labour-based occupations, rather than professions such as salaried white-collar jobs.

The occupational profile of fathers (N = 57) at SU further suggests a mixed socio-economic background. The most frequently reported occupation was daily wage labour (26.32%), followed

by business (21.05%). A combined 24.56% of fathers were employed in professional roles (12.28% in teaching and 12.28% in government service). Other occupations included farming (3.51%), skilled work (1.75%), driving (7.02%), paramedical and health services (5.26%), and a small representation in the merchant navy and police. These figures indicate that, while some students come from professional or salaried families, a substantial segment comes from labour-intensive or self-employed backgrounds. No students at SU reported a spouse's occupation, indicating the absence of married students in the sample.

Thus, Mothers are predominantly homemakers or teachers, while fathers are more likely to be daily wage workers or in business. Legal guardians show a mix of business and daily wage occupations, reflecting economic diversity. The interview data does not provide extensive occupational details but supports the survey's indication of varied family roles. Interview insights from specific occupational details are limited, but Jimin mentions an aunt as a Hindi teacher and uncles working in Dubai, indicating diverse family occupations.

Average Monthly Family Income

Data from the student survey at the State University (SU) reveal important insights into the economic background of undergraduate students. Among the 56 valid responses (81.16%), a significant proportion of students (44.64%) reported an average monthly family income of less than ₹25,000. A further 21.43% fell in the ₹25,001–₹50,000 range, while relatively fewer families reported higher income brackets: 5.36% in the ₹50,001–₹75,000 range, and 14.29% each in the ₹75,001–₹100,000 and above ₹100,000 categories. These figures suggest a diverse but predominantly lower- to middle-income student demographic.

In terms of household dependency, the number of people supported by this income was relatively modest. The majority of SU families (44.64%) have incomes below 25,000 INR, indicating economic constraints. However, 28.58% of families earn above 75,000 INR, suggesting some economic diversity.

6.4.1.2 Government College in-depth (GCID)

Highest Educational Level of Family Members

In GCID, from the survey data (N = 161), mothers' educational attainment was predominantly concentrated in lower secondary levels. The largest share (60.87%) had completed 9th–10th class, followed by 17.39% with 11th–12th class education. A small number had completed 6th–8th class (9.32%). Very few had attained a degree (4.97%) or postgraduate education (1.24%). Notably, 4.35% of students reported not knowing their mother's education level.

Fathers' education levels in GCID (N = 162) mirrored this pattern, with 57.40% completing up to 10th class and 14.20% completing 6th–8th class. Only 4.93% had degree-level education, and 1.23% had postgraduate qualifications. A few students did not know their father's educational status (6.79%), and two students (1.23%) indicated the category was not applicable.

For maternal grandparents, over half of GCID students did not know the educational level of their grandmothers (55.73%) or grandfathers (60.83%). Among those who did respond, the majority had received only primary or lower secondary schooling. Approximately 27.05% of maternal grandmothers and 22.5% of grandfathers had completed 1st–5th class, while very few held degrees (less than 1%) or postgraduate qualifications (around 1%). The educational profile of paternal grandparents followed a similar pattern, with 59.16% and 61.40% of students unaware of their paternal grandmother’s and grandfather’s education levels, respectively. Most of those who responded reported only primary or lower secondary schooling, and postgraduate attainment was rare (0.83%–1.75%).

Educational attainment in GCID families is predominantly low, concentrated at primary and lower secondary levels (6th–10th class) for parents and guardians, and even lower (primary or less) for grandparents. Higher education (degrees or postgraduate) is rare across all groups of family members, and a significant proportion of students are unaware of their grandparents’ education, suggesting limited intergenerational knowledge or discussion about schooling. Interview insights from GCID students illustrate these patterns of educational attainment within families. Sachu reported parents with 10th and 4th standard education, providing qualitative support for the prevalence of lower secondary or primary schooling among parents in this group. Similarly, Diya's parents had completed 9th and 7th standards, reinforcing this trend. Interview data also confirmed very basic educational levels for grandparents, such as Diya's maternal grandparents with 3rd and 1st standard education. Malu's account, reporting grandparents with

4th and 10th standard education, further exemplifies the lower attainment prevalent in older generations. Consistent with the survey finding of a high proportion of unknowns regarding grandparental education, L. Messi/Vasu's interview provided limited data, largely stating "Don't know" for family members' education.

Although not explicitly detailed in the GCID survey data provided, the overall sample data indicated significant educational progress in the sibling generation (68.75% pursuing or completed a degree/PG). Interview data from GCID supports this, with Sachu having a sister who completed BBA and a brother in 10th grade, and Diya having an elder sister who completed Plus-Two and a brother in his second year of degree studies, indicating a clear upward trend in educational attainment in the current generation compared to their parents and grandparents. These interview accounts collectively provide specific examples that reinforce the survey findings regarding the educational levels across generations within the GCID student population, illustrating a general pattern of lower parental and grandparental attainment alongside educational advancement in the students' generation.

The survey indicates lower parental education compared to SU, with 60.87% of mothers and 57.40% of fathers educated up to 9th–10th class. Grandparents have minimal education, with over 55% unknown or limited to 1st–5th class. Siblings show progress, with 46.15% in 11th–12th class and 35.90% in degree programs. Interviews confirm lower parental education (often 10th or below) and siblings pursuing higher education.

Figure 6.2: Percentage of post-secondary education among GCID students' family members.

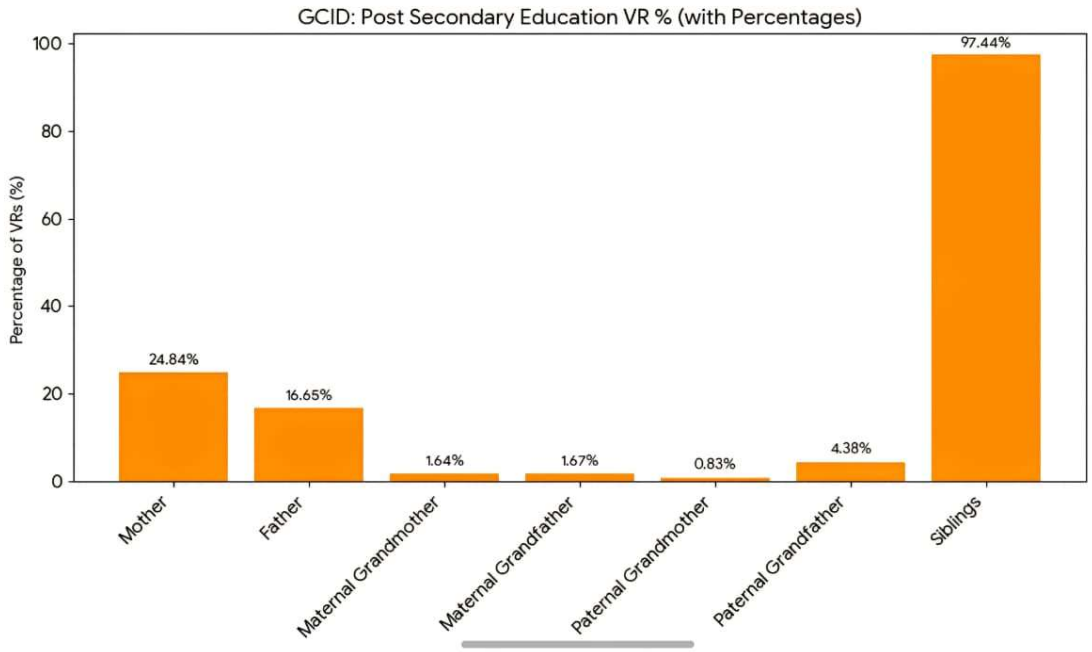


Figure 6.2 shows that post-secondary education attainment is highest among siblings, mothers and fathers have low attainment, and grandparents have the lowest rates.

Occupation of Parents

The occupational background of students' families within the Government College in Depth (GCID) is described primarily through survey data, as specific occupational details were not provided in the interview insights for GCID respondents. The survey data for the GCID reveal a concentrated pattern in parental occupations, largely centred on labour-intensive and lower-income roles.

Table 6.4.2. Distribution of Parents' Occupations in GCID

Occupation	Mothers		Fathers	
	(N=133)	(% of VRs)	Fathers (N=128)	(% of VRs)
Home Maker	115	86.47	0	0
Daily Wage	9	6.77	66	51.56
Teacher / Professor	2	1.50	2	1.56
Skilled worker	1	0.75	9	7.03
Govt Service	1	0.75	1	0.78
Accountant	1	0.75	1	0.78
Unemployed	1	0.75	0	0
Bank service	1	0.75	0	0
Business	0	0	15	11.72
Driver	0	0	14	10.94
Fisher Man	0	0	8	6.25
Abroad	0	0	7	5.47
Farmer	0	0	2	1.56
Paramedical & Health	0	0	1	0.78
Others	3	2.26	2	1.56
Note. The following professions, which are represented among the SU parents, are absent among the GCID parents: Clerk, Doctor, Manager, Merchant Navy, Nurse, and Police.				

Table 6.4.2 reveals that mothers are predominantly engaged in domestic roles and are not formally employed. The very low percentages for all other occupations further support the inference that paid employment is an exception rather than the norm for mothers in this specific group. Among the 133 valid responses regarding mothers' occupations, an overwhelming majority (86.47%) reported their mothers as homemakers. Very few mothers were reported in professional or formal employment sectors, with only 1.50% identified as teachers, 0.75% as government employees, and small numbers engaged in daily wage labour (6.77%) or skilled labour (0.75%). This indicates a limited presence of formally employed or professionally active mothers among the families surveyed at GCID.

Table 6.4.2 reveals high concentration of fathers in a few specific work sectors. Over half of the fathers (51.56%) are involved in Daily Wage work, followed by Business (11.72%) and Driver (10.94%). Fathers' occupations (N = 128) in the GCID show a strong concentration in roles requiring physical labour or involving small-scale business. More than half (51.56%) of fathers were engaged as daily wage labourers. Other significant categories included business owners (11.72%), drivers (10.94%), and skilled workers (7.03%). Farmers constituted a small percentage (1.56%). A notable proportion of fathers were employed overseas (5.47%).

Professional roles like teaching (1.56%) and government service (0.78%) were minimally represented among fathers' occupations. Other occupations, such as fishing (6.25%) and accounting (0.78%), were reported in smaller numbers, reflecting some localised economic activities. These survey findings collectively suggest that the majority of GCID students originate from families where parents or guardians are primarily engaged in informal, subsistence-level, or labour-intensive occupations, with very limited representation in professional or government employment sectors.

These findings highlight a notable contrast in the educational, socio-economic and occupational backgrounds of students attending GCID compared to the SU. At SU, a relatively higher proportion of parents, especially mothers, have higher educational qualifications, and parents were professionally employed, which may have implications for understanding students' perceptions of and support within higher education.

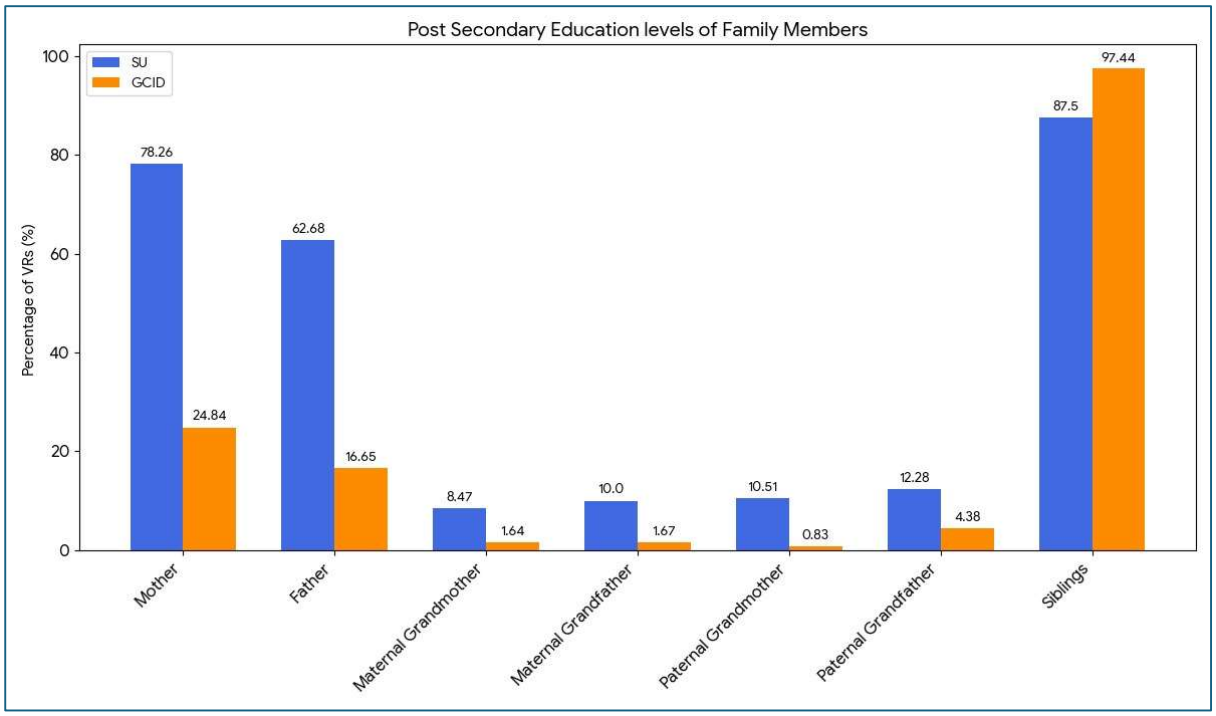
Average Monthly Family Income

At the GCID, the economic background of undergraduate students is markedly skewed toward lower income levels. Out of 152 valid responses, a substantial majority (80.92%) reported an average monthly family income of less than ₹25,000. A smaller fraction of the student population reported incomes in higher brackets: 11.84% in the ₹25,001–₹50,000 range, 3.95% in ₹50,001–₹75,000, 1.32% in ₹75,001–₹100,000, and only 1.97% above ₹100,000. These figures underscore a clear concentration of economically disadvantaged students accessing higher education at GCID.

Both at SU and GCID, students generally come from small household units, which may influence financial decision-making and educational investment patterns. These findings collectively illustrate the critical need for continued and targeted higher education outreach and support, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts where students come predominantly from low-income families. The vast majority (80.92%) of GCID families earn less than 25,000 INR, indicating significant economic hardship compared to SU. Only 3.29% earn above 75,000 INR.

As we compare the percentage of post-secondary education among the family members of two groups, SU and GCID, we see that SU consistently has higher rates for parents and grandparents, while GCID has a significantly higher rate for siblings.

Figure 6.3: Comparison of Post-Secondary Education Levels Among Family Members in the two Study Groups (SU and GCID)



Analysing Figure 6.3, the inference is that for the SU group, post-secondary education is more prevalent in the parental generation, whereas for the GCID group, it is overwhelmingly concentrated in the current generation (siblings).

6.4.2 Schooling history

This section summarises the schooling history of undergraduate students who are currently studying in the SU and GCID. The survey data provides insights into the locations (rural, urban, semi-urban) of schools attended by SU students across different educational stages.

6.4.2.1 State University (SU)

The SU students predominantly attended rural schools across all educational stages, reflecting their largely rural backgrounds. Attendance at rural schools was highest at pre-primary (62.68%) and primary (52.94%) levels, decreasing slightly to 47.83% in middle school and stabilising at 45.59% for both secondary and senior secondary levels. Urban school attendance grew modestly in higher grades, peaking at 36.76% in senior secondary, while semi-urban schools

consistently had the smallest share, never exceeding 20%. This suggests a gradual shift toward urban education as students progressed, possibly due to better access to specialised institutions in urban areas. Interview data underlines this with most students (Dhyan, Mia, Jimin) attended urban schools, while Sj and Niranjan had mixed rural and semi-urban experiences, and Unni attended exclusively rural schools.

Precisely 90.48% of SU students at their secondary and 90.63% in senior secondary attended co-educational schools, and the single-sex school attendance comprised less than 10% at both levels. This preference for co-educational settings aligns with the broader trend in rural and government-run institutions. The interview shows that all interviewees attended co-educational schools, indicating a uniform experience of co-educational schooling.

Among SU students, 49.25% at secondary and 52.24% at senior secondary levels attended Government schools, and 34.33% and 38.81%, respectively, attended Government-aided schools. Attendance at Private unaided schools, while less common, showed a slight increase from 16.42% in secondary to 19.40% in senior secondary, indicating a small but growing preference for private institutions at higher levels. The reliance on government and aided schools underscores the accessibility and affordability of public education for SU students during their school years. As per interview data, government and government-aided schools are common (4/6 respondents: Dhyan, Unni, Mia, Sj), with Jimin exclusively in private unaided schools and Niranjan transitioning to an aided school for plus-two.

SU students during their schooling followed *the Kerala State syllabus* (85.29% in secondary and 88.06% in senior secondary levels). A minority (14.71% in secondary; 11.94% in senior secondary) studied under the CBSE board, often associated with urban or private schools. No students reported ICSE, reflecting its limited presence in the region. Interview data supported the predominance of the State syllabus among interviewees. The state syllabus dominates (4/6 respondents: Dhyan, Sj, Unni, Niranjan), with Mia exclusively on CBSE and Jimin transitioning from CBSE to the state syllabus.

English was the primary medium for 61.76% of SU students in secondary and 65.67% in senior secondary schooling, reflecting a preference for English-medium education, often linked to

better career prospects. The regional language was less common but still significant, especially in rural government schools. No students reported Hindi as a medium, consistent with the regional linguistic context. Interview data suggested that Malayalam medium is common (Sj, Unni, Niranjan), with English medium used by Mia and Jimin throughout and Dhyan transitioning to English after 4th grade. Mixed language use is noted for Sj in plus-two.

Survey data from 69 valid responses showed a strong inclination toward the Science stream, with 68.12% (47 students) choosing it, followed by 23.19% (16 students) in Arts/Humanities and only 7.24% (5 students) in Commerce. This preference for science may reflect aspirations for professional courses like engineering or medicine, common in competitive academic environments. Interview data reveal Humanities is the most common stream (3/6), followed by Commerce, Science, and Biology-Math (1/6 each), reflecting diverse academic interests.

At SU, the majority of students were day scholars residing at home during their 11th and 12th standards (94.20% -65 out of 69 - of survey respondents). Only a small minority (5.80%, or 4 students) reported staying in school hostels. None of the students reported residing in rented accommodations, with relatives/friends, or in paying guest arrangements. This pattern was consistently supported by interview data. All six student interviewees from the SU confirmed that they were day scholars during their higher secondary schooling. This indicates that, in the SU context, students predominantly accessed higher secondary education while residing in their family homes, with limited reliance on school-based or alternative accommodations.

6.4.2.2 Government College in-depth (GCID)

Based on survey and interview data, the prior educational trajectories of students within the Government College (GCID) at the school level reflect distinct patterns related to their geographic and institutional contexts. GCID students predominantly attended rural schools across all levels, exhibiting an even stronger rural schooling trend than observed in the SU. Attendance at rural schools was 82.93% at pre-primary and 72.89% at primary levels, decreasing but remaining substantial through secondary (58.18%) and senior secondary (57.06%). Urban school attendance remained below 25%, peaking slightly at the senior secondary level, while semi-urban schools were the least attended. This higher rural attendance compared to SU (e.g., 82.93% vs. SU's 62.68% at pre-primary) suggests GCID students' deeper

roots in rural communities and potentially less access to urban educational infrastructure. Interview data support this finding by noting that GCID students predominantly attended rural schools (5 out of 6), aligning with the survey's demographic picture.

Co-educational schools were the norm for GCID students during their secondary (96.36%) and senior secondary (94.77%) education, with attendance slightly higher than observed in the SU. Single-sex schools were attended by less than 10% of students, a pattern similar to SU. The marginally higher co-educational preference at GCID than at the SU reflects the characteristics of rural settings where single-sex schools are less common. The interview proves that all the students attended mixed schools from 1st to 12th grades. This aligns with the survey finding of predominantly co-educational institutions.

Government schools were the most prevalent type attended by GCID students, accounting for 55.62% at the secondary and 58.86% at the senior secondary levels, higher than those for SU students (49.25% and 52.24%, respectively). Government-aided schools were also significantly represented, attended by 39.65% and 40% of students at secondary and senior secondary levels. Notably, attendance at private unaided schools was considerably lower than in the SU group, at 4.73% in secondary and declining further in senior secondary. This marked contrast (4.73% in secondary compared to SU's 16.42%) underscores the greater reliance on the public education system among GCID students, likely influenced by economic constraints prevalent in rural areas. Interview data is consistent with this survey finding, government and government-aided schools are prevalent (4/6 respondents: Sachu, Diya, Maeve, Vasu), with Malu and L. Messi attending private unaided schools for part of their education. L.Messi's Navodaya experience is unique as a central government institution.

GCID students during their schooling nearly exclusively followed the State syllabus (97.63% in secondary and 98.30% in senior secondary), a significantly higher proportion compared to SU's 85.29% and 88.06%. Attendance at schools following the CBSE syllabus was minimal (under 3%), and no students reported ICSE, mirroring the pattern at SU but with even less. Interview data supported this as the state syllabus is dominant (Sachu, Diya, Maeve, parts of Malu and Vasu), with CBSE appearing for Malu (early years), L. Messi (6th to 12th), and Vasu (early years), reflecting a mix of syllabi with a state syllabus bias.

During their schooling, the regional language, Malayalam, was the dominant medium of instruction for GCID students (73.68% in secondary and 56.25% in senior secondary), in sharp contrast to the SU group, where English was preferred by the majority. Attendance at English-medium schools was considerably lower for GCID students, at 26.32% and 43.75% in secondary and senior secondary, respectively. No students reported Hindi as a medium. Interview data confirms this as English medium is common in later years (Malu, L. Messi, Vasu, and plus-two for Diya, Maeve), with Malayalam medium prevalent in early years for Sachu, Diya, and Maeve. Mixed language use is noted for plus-two in some cases.

Among 176 valid responses regarding stream choice at the senior secondary level, 60.23% (106 students) pursued Commerce. This represents a significant deviation from the SU's strong preference for science and indicates that Commerce was the most popular stream among GCID students. Science was chosen by 23.86% (42 students), and Arts/Humanities by 15.91% (28 students). This dominance of the Commerce stream suggests a distinct academic priority compared to SU's Science-heavy profile. Interview data shows the presence of Commerce (Sachu and Diya) and Biology Science (Maeve, Vasu), with Computer Science chosen by L. Messi. Malu’s stream is unspecified.

Consistent with the pattern observed in the SU, the vast majority of GCID students were day scholars residing during their 11th and 12th standards, as reported by 96.45% (163 out of 169) of survey respondents. Only a small minority (2.96%, 5 students) lived in school hostels. No students reported utilising rented accommodation, living with relatives/friends, or opting for paying guest arrangements. The interview narratives strongly reinforced this survey finding. Five of the six student interviewees from GCID—Sachu, Diya, Malu, Maeve, and Vasu—explicitly stated they were day scholars, typically commuting relatively short distances from their homes to school. L. Messi reported residing in the school hostel while attending Navodaya School for several years, including senior secondary. The high day-scholar rate among GCID students, slightly exceeding SU's 94.20%, underscores the accessibility of local schools within the rural settings from which these students originate.

In summary, Government schools are the most common at GCID (55.62% in secondary, 58.86% in senior secondary), followed by government-aided schools (39.65% and 40.00%). Private

unaided schools are minimal (4.73–1.14%), significantly lower than at SU (16.42–10.42%). Co-educational schools dominate at GCID (96.36% in secondary, 94.77% in senior secondary), with single-sex schools being rare (3.64–5.23%). GCID has a slightly higher preference for co-educational schools than SU, especially in secondary education. GCID students predominantly attended rural schools, with the highest proportion at the pre-primary level (82.93%). Rural attendance decreases in higher grades (57.06% in senior secondary), while urban and semi-urban attendance increases (24.71% and 18.23% in senior secondary, respectively). Compared to SU, GCID has a higher rural school attendance across all levels.

6.4.3 Higher education history

This section analyses the higher education (HE) history of undergraduate students at the SU, covering aspects like motivation to apply for HE, assistance in selecting an institution, involvement in choosing the subject of undergraduate study, details of the subject, institution type, location, and funding, reservations availed for HE studies, and any options considered for not progressing to HE.

6.4.3.1 State University (SU)

Students at State University (SU) reported varied influences on their decisions regarding higher education, encompassing motivation to apply, choice of institution, choice of subject, characteristics of their undergraduate programme, utilisation of reservations, and considerations regarding not progressing to HE.

Motivation to Apply for Higher Education

Survey data indicated that parental influence, particularly from mothers (19.09%) and fathers (16.60%), was a primary external motivator for students to apply for higher education. However, the most frequently cited individual factor was self-motivation, reported by 19.92% of respondents. The influence of siblings (sisters and brothers each at 6.64%) and friends (6.22%) was less pronounced, while school teachers (4.15%) and college/university teachers (1.66%) played more limited roles. The extended family had minimal involvement. Interview insights also corroborated the prominence of self-motivation and parental support. Students like Dhyan, Mia, Unni, Jimin, and Niranjan consistently cited self-interest and personal career aspirations as key drivers. All interviewees mentioned parental encouragement and family support, reinforcing the

survey finding that immediate family, particularly parents, played a crucial role, even in families with varying educational backgrounds.

Choice of Institution for Higher Education

In selecting an undergraduate institution, mothers were the most involved influence according to the survey (28.48%), followed closely by the students themselves (25.95%) and fathers (20.25%). Other family members, including siblings (sisters: 5.70%; brothers: 3.80%) and extended relatives, had less influence. School teachers (3.80%) and friends (3.80%) played minor roles. Interview data aligned with the survey's emphasis on self-reliance and parental involvement in this decision. Students like Mia and Niranjan confirmed choosing SU with parental guidance and their own research. Dhyan reflected on the programme prospects alongside advice from his elder brother, adding nuance to the role of siblings. Unni considered low expenses and the availability of admission. Jimin's case illustrated significant parental involvement, particularly given their highly educated background, combined with aspirations.

Choice of Subject for Undergraduate Study

Survey results indicated that students at SU displayed a strong sense of agency in choosing their undergraduate subject, with the largest proportion (33.86%) making the decision themselves. Mothers were the next most involved (25.98%), followed by fathers (19.69%). Sibling influence (sisters: 5.51%; brothers: 4.72%) remained relatively modest, and teachers played limited roles. Interview data confirmed the prioritisation of personal interest and self-direction in subject selection, as indicated by the survey. Dhyan chose B. Tech based on personal interest, supported by his brother's advice. Mia selected BSc Chemistry due to her interest in science, with parental support. Unni chose BSc Nursing out of his own interests for career prospects, with validation from teachers. Jimin and Niranjan also emphasised choosing out of their own interests with parental encouragement. These accounts demonstrate how students' interests, aligned with career prospects and family/teacher validation, drove their subject choices, reinforcing the survey finding of high self-involvement.

Undergraduate Subject, Institution Type, Location, and Funding

At SU, the undergraduate students (N=69) were primarily enrolled in science-oriented integrated programs. The distribution of enrolment was as follows: Integrated MA in Development Science (34.8%), Integrated Bioscience (24.6%), Integrated Physics (20.3%), and Integrated Chemistry (20.3%). The overall subject area distribution shows 65.22% in science, 18.84% in social sciences, and 14.49% in humanities/arts. Interview data also presented examples of students pursuing science or professional science-related streams, consistent with the survey's findings. The SU, located in northern Kerala, is situated approximately 25 kilometres from a city, nestled in a rural setting near the scenic shores of the Arabian Sea. This unique positioning contributes to a mixed geographic context, with 38.46% of students attending in a semi-urban location, 35.38% in an urban, and 26.15% in a rural context. Regarding funding, the majority of students (77.94%) reported that their families bore the full cost of their education. A minority benefited from scholarships (5.88%) or supported fees through employment (4.41%). Interview data corroborated family funding as the primary source, with specific cases like Mia and Unni indicating that scholarships supplemented costs for some students, aligning with the survey's finding of a minority receiving such support.

Reservation Status

Among 59 SU students who responded regarding reservations, 37.29% reported availing reservations during admission. The majority (62.71%) accessed HE without reservation-based admissions. Among those who utilised reservations, the most common categories were Other Backward Classes (OBC; 44.44%), Scheduled Castes (SC; 27.78%), and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS; 16.67%). Smaller proportions used the Muslim (5.56%) and Physically Handicapped (PH; 5.55%) categories. During the interview, S.J. and Unni reported availing caste-based reservations, illustrating the survey's SC/OBC categories, while Mia mentioned a merit-based scholarship, which could align with alternative forms of support. Dhyan, Jimin, and Niranjan reported not using reservations, consistent with the survey's majority who did not. These interviews confirm that affirmative action policies and scholarships support access for a segment of SU students, although most rely on non-reservation-based entry.

Data on occupational status implied that for the majority of SU students, progression to higher education was a clear and uninterrupted path, with 83.33% identifying as full-time students not

engaged in employment. A small minority reported part-time employment (9.09%) or involvement in family business, household work, or tuition (each below 3%). Interview data strongly supported this finding, indicating that not progressing to HE was generally not considered a viable option. Students like Dhyan, Unni, Jimin, and Niranjan explicitly stated they did not consider alternatives, viewing HE as essential for career advancement and aligning with personal goals or family expectations. S.J. and Mia were the only interviewees who mentioned briefly considering not progressing due to financial constraints, but ultimately pursued HE with family and/or scholarship support, illustrating that while challenges exist, the default trajectory for most in this group was towards higher education. This aligns with the survey data showing a vast majority focused solely on being a student.

6.4.3.2 Government College in-depth (GCID)

Motivation to Apply for Higher Education

In the GCID context, both survey and interview data highlight a broad network of motivators for students pursuing higher education. Survey results identified mothers (16.45%) and fathers (15.54%) as prominent motivators, with a considerable portion of students (13.05%) also indicating self-motivation. Siblings (sisters: 9.79%; brothers: 7.18%), friends (7.70%), and school teachers (6.53%) also played noteworthy roles, suggesting a broader support network compared to SU. College/university teachers (2.35%) and senior students (1.44%) had a lesser but still present influence. Interview insights corroborated and provided qualitative depth to these findings. Students frequently cited parents, like Sachu and Diya, emphasising the parental encouragement focused on securing good jobs and a better life. Self-motivation was also prominent in interviews, with students like Nasim and L. Messi expressing personal ambition and a desire for fulfilment and employment. Siblings and cousins, as mentioned by Diya and Malu, also provided influence and served as examples. Interviewees like Vasu noted societal expectations as a motivator, adding another layer to the influencing factors. In general, the interview data support the survey's indication of a diverse motivational landscape, where both internal drives and external support from family, educators, and peers contributed to the decision to pursue higher education.

Choice of Institution for Higher Education

In selecting their undergraduate institution, GCID students reported significant involvement from mothers (20.28%) and fathers (18.18%), alongside a considerable proportion who made the decision themselves (20.05%). Siblings (sisters: 10.96%; brothers: 6.99%) and friends (6.29%) also played important roles, with sibling influence being more substantial than in the SU group. Influence from extended family, schoolteachers (2.33%), and college/university teachers (1.63%) was more limited. Interview insights reinforced the key roles of parents and self in institution selection, while providing specific reasons for choosing GCID. Sachu and Meave's parents chose GCID primarily due to its government status and affordability. Diya's parents also considered proximity and reputation. Students like Anna and Vasu made independent decisions based on their research into the college's government status and affordability. Teachers were influential for Nasim and Tomy, recommending GCID for its academic reputation and unique courses. Siblings and cousins, as seen with Diya and Malu, also provided recommendations, sometimes based on their own experiences with the higher education institution. Interviews collectively illustrate the complex decision-making process, supporting the survey findings that emphasise self-reliance and parental guidance alongside input from a broader network, including siblings, teachers, and peers.

Choice of Subject for Undergraduate Study

At GCID, students demonstrated considerable autonomy in choosing their undergraduate subject, with 32.14% identifying themselves as the primary decision-makers in the survey. Parental involvement was present but less dominant than self-direction, with fathers involved in 13.39% and mothers in 7.44% of decisions. The influence of siblings (sisters: 10.42%; brothers: 8.93%) and friends (6.85%) was more substantial in subject choice compared to institution choice and higher than sibling influence observed at SU. Teachers also played a notable role (3.87%). Interview data strongly supported the survey finding of high student autonomy, with many students citing personal interest as the primary driver. Sachu chose BBA due to interest in business, Nasim picked BCA due to passion for computer science, and Anna based her choice on career aspirations. Parents influenced some decisions, as seen with Malu's parents preferring BA Economics for job prospects. Teachers like those who recommended BSc Computer Science to Tomy and BCA to Nasim also played a role in guiding students towards subjects with perceived job market demand. Siblings and cousins also provided input, often

based on their own experiences, as reported by Diya and Malu. The interviews demonstrate how personal interest often initiated subject choice, which was then discussed or validated within a supportive network including parents, teachers, and peers, aligning with the survey's findings of self-direction alongside broader influences.

Undergraduate Subject, Institution Type, Location, and Funding

The undergraduate students at GCID (N=178) were enrolled in a more diverse array of academic programs compared to SU. Major courses included Commerce (21.9%), BBA (20.2%), BCA (17.4%), BA English (16.3%), and Integrated MA Malayalam (14%). Subject area data (N=175) confirmed the dominance of commerce (30.86%), followed by humanities/arts (26.29%), management (16.57%), science (9.14%), and engineering/technical sciences (7.43%). Unlike SU's mixed geographic catchment, GCID is located in a predominantly rural area, reported by 78.26% of students, with smaller proportions in urban (10%) and semi-urban (11.76%) settings. Interviewees like L. Messi and Tomy noted the college's relative obscurity, consistent with its rural location. Regarding funding, survey data indicated a significant proportion (50.27%) of GCID students received scholarships, a much higher percentage than at SU. Families fully paid fees for 38.5% of students, and partially for 10.7%, with very few (0.53%) working to pay fees. The emphasis in interviews was on parents prioritising HE for job prospects and affordability as a key factor in choosing a government college, indirectly supporting the importance of financial considerations.

Reservation Status

Based on survey data from 146 respondents, 21.23% of GCID students had availed of reservations during the admission process. The large majority (78.77%) had not accessed reservations. Among those who used reservations, the most common categories were OBC (35.71%), SC (25%), and EWS (21.43%). Other categories included PH (7.14%), Sports (3.57%), Community (3.57%), and Nair (3.57%). While reservations provide access for a segment, the majority of students at GCID entered HE through non-reservation-based processes or did not report using them.

Option of Not Progressing to Higher Education

Survey data suggested that most GCID students transitioned directly into higher education without significant deviation into alternative occupational paths, with 83.33% reporting being full-time students not working, a figure consistent with SU. Smaller proportions were employed part-time (6.55%) or engaged in domestic responsibilities (6.55%). Interviews also indicated a clear inclination towards continuing education and generally not considering alternatives to HE. Students' narratives consistently highlighted HE as the expected path for career advancement and personal fulfilment, often driven by parental and societal expectations. For instance, Diya's sister advised continuing education, and Malu received encouragement from parents and teachers, with no indication of considering other options. Students like Nasim, Anna, and Meave expressed clear ambitions for HE without mentioning alternatives. The interviews underscored that despite socio-economic backgrounds that might necessitate work, the prevailing perspective among GCID students was that higher education was the primary and necessary step after senior secondary schooling.

In summary, these patterns suggest that while both SU and GCID students are largely full-time enrollees in higher education, their academic backgrounds, funding sources, and use of reservation policies differ, reflecting the distinctive institutional and socio-economic contexts of SU and GCID. Faculty outreach and systemic support, like scholarships, appear more visible in rural GCID, possibly impacting HE access pathways differently than in SU.

6.4.4 Involvement of Faculty Members in HE Access

This section is on the involvement of faculty members in shaping students' HE decisions, drawing on data from undergraduate surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted at SU and Government Colleges to document current HE outreach practices and the motivations or resistance of HEI stakeholders, such as faculty members, in contributing to HE access within local communities. Specifically, it concerns the current and potential roles of faculty members in rural and semi-urban HEIs in facilitating gender-equitable, socially just HE access and choice, as well as how students perceive faculty involvement in these processes. key aspects, including the extent of faculty involvement in students' undergraduate college choices, the nature of students' relationships with these faculty members, the timing of their involvement, and the specific forms of guidance provided, students' pre-enrollment activities,

such as visiting colleges or engaging with informational resources, are presented to understand how faculty influence intersects with other factors in shaping HE decisions. Sources include survey responses (SU: N = 68; GCID: N = 171), interviews, and FGDs, which provide insights into the diverse ways faculty members contribute to students' decision-making processes.

6.4.4.1 State University (SU)

Faculty Involvement in Undergraduate Choices

At State University (SU), faculty members played a varied but significant role in shaping students' undergraduate higher education choices, as evidenced by student surveys, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Survey data from SU (N = 68 valid responses) indicated that approximately one-third of student respondents (29.41%, n = 20) reported some level of involvement from college or university faculty members in their undergraduate college choices. This involvement often stemmed from pre-existing personal connections. Students reported knowing these FMs primarily as family members (43.48%) or through family connections (21.74%). Other connections included knowing FMs as neighbours (17.39%) or through their roles in tuition or coaching institutes (8.70%). A smaller number of students met FMs during a college visit (4.35%) or the admission process (4.35%).

Interview and FGD at State University confirmed no involvement of faculty members in the higher education choices of most students. However, school teachers were reported by many UGs for their involvement and support in selecting HE courses. The nature of this involvement ranged from direct course recommendations to general inspiration about prestigious institutions, with some students receiving no faculty guidance. This diversity reflects the uneven but impactful role faculty played in guiding students toward their undergraduate programmes. Four out of six students interviewed (Mia, Sj, Jimin, Niranjan) and participants in both FGDs reported school teacher involvement, which ranged from direct course recommendations to entrance exam guidance and inspirational discussions about university campuses.

> *"There were some (school) teachers who told me about NIT campus, IIT campus etc. When they told me a lot of things, I felt like I should study there. So, those dreams come from there ... They mostly talked*

about the campus. They used to say that everyone should go to such campuses." Jimin at SU

"I had a (school) teacher in my economics class. She was a big support to me. She even recommended some courses for me. I have a skill in drawing pictures. I used to show my drawings to this teacher. She advised me to go with that. She had advised me to go for a course to become an art teacher. But I was not financially stable to afford that course. She was very fond of me. When I got admitted here, I called her first. She gave me so much inspiration." Niranjan at SU

However, two students, Dhyan and Unni, reported no faculty involvement, relying instead on personal or familial resources. The extent of faculty influences varied, with some students receiving personalised advice while others were inspired by general discussions about higher education opportunities.

How and When FMs Were Involved, and What Their Involvement

Direct course recommendations were a key form of faculty involvement for several students. For instance, Mia was advised by a school teacher about a specific course at SU after expressing interest in studying abroad or pursuing a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), which was unavailable at the institution. The school teacher's advice against self-financing courses due to cost, coupled with Mia's personal research, led her to enrol in the course. Similarly, Niranjan's economics teacher recommended courses aligned with her drawing skills, such as art teacher training, though financial constraints limited her options. This teacher's encouragement was pivotal, culminating in Niranjan contacting her after admission. In FGDs, Kitty cited a PhD-holding family member recommending the course, and Raghavendra Pillai's class advisor encouraged choosing SU over a college 99 km away, assuring it was a better option.

Faculty also provided general guidance and inspiration, particularly through discussions about higher education opportunities. Jimin, for example, was inspired by schoolteachers who discussed prestigious campuses like NIT and IIT during classes, fostering aspirations to pursue higher education, though this was not personalised guidance. In FGD 2, Jimin reiterated that schoolteachers and seniors recommended courses and discussed prominent campuses,

influencing his aspirations. Sj benefited from structured guidance, as school and tuition teachers informed him about course options (BCom, BBA) and the Common University Entrance Test (CUET). Tuition teachers, including university students, shared their experiences and provided motivational support through orientation classes organised by the District Panchayath council, which covered the CUET syllabus over two months.

However, faculty involvement was not universal, and some limitations were evident. Dhyan and Unni reported no faculty involvement in their HE decisions, indicating that not all students relied on or had access to faculty guidance. Additionally, Mia noted in FGD 1 that her teacher was unaware of the specific course at SU, forcing her to rely on a cousin's information from a newspaper clipping. This suggests that faculty knowledge about certain programs may be limited, potentially hindering their ability to provide comprehensive guidance. Despite such gaps, faculty members often served as motivators, with Sj's tuition teachers offering ongoing support through WhatsApp groups and calls to alleviate exam-related fears, and Niranjan's teacher providing emotional encouragement.

The timing of the faculty involvement reported in the survey was most commonly during the broader decision-making phase about higher education (57.14%), followed by involvement during the admissions process itself (42.86%). The nature of this involvement, according to survey respondents, primarily involved receiving advice on whether to pursue higher education (35.71%), the choice of colleges/universities (21.42%), and courses/subjects (21.42%). Some students also received guidance on the admission process (17.85%) and entry exam preparation (3.57%). Notably, no students reported receiving help with funding, special admission processes, or documentation from these faculty members. These survey findings indicate that for a minority of SU students, primarily connected through their informal networks. FMs provided guidance on initial HE decisions and the application process, but not financial or administrative aspects.

Activities Engaged in Before Enrolling for Undergraduate Study

Survey data indicated that SU students engaged in a variety of pre-enrolment activities to inform their HE choices. A minority physically visited their future college (14.49%) or other colleges for comparison (9.42%). Engagement with informational resources was more notable, with 12.32%

watching videos, 12.32% reading newspaper articles, 12.32% browsing online platforms, and 10.14% consulting brochures. Only a small percentage (4.35%) reported taking none of the listed actions.

Students engaged in several activities before enrolling, often influenced by faculty guidance. Sj attended tuition classes in her village and participated in CUET orientation classes at various centres, which provided syllabus coverage and motivational support. Mia conducted personal research after faculty advice, while Raghavendra Pillai consulted his class advisor to confirm his decision to switch institutions. Niranjan discussed course options with her economics teacher, and Priya (FGD 1) learned about the course through her mother, a university staff member. Although campus visits were not explicitly mentioned, these activities—consulting faculty, attending orientation programs, and gathering information from family or media—were critical in shaping students' enrolment decisions.

In summary, students at SU were significantly influenced by FMs' involvement, occurring primarily during or after the 12th grade through direct recommendations, inspirational discussions, or structured support like CUET orientation. While some students received no faculty guidance or encountered teachers with limited knowledge, the overall impact of faculty was notable, complemented by external support from tuition centres, family, or personal research. These findings underscore the importance of faculty in guiding students toward undergraduate programs, though the extent and nature of their involvement varied widely.

6.4.4.2 Government College in-depth (GCID)

Faculty Involvement in Undergraduate Choices

At Government College in Depth (GCID), the involvement of Faculty Members (FMs) in students' undergraduate college decision-making was notably lower compared to the State University (SU). Survey data from GCID (N = 171 valid responses) indicated that only a small proportion (8.77%, n = 15) of students reported FM involvement in this process. Among this limited group, students most often knew the involved faculty members through family ties (36.36%). Other connections included knowing FMs as neighbours (9.09%) or through their roles in tuition centres (9.09%). Compared to SU, GCID students reported knowing involved FMs more often through community or NGO involvement (13.64% and 4.55% respectively) and during college

visits (9.09%), suggesting a slightly broader, more community-based exposure when interaction did occur.

Interview and FGD data strongly reinforced the finding of limited direct FM involvement in influencing students' initial enrolment decisions at GCID. Students rarely cited FMs as primary influencers in choosing their programmes or institutions. Instead, decisions to join GCID were predominantly driven by factors such as the college's status as a government institution, the availability of specific desired courses (e.g., BCA, BBA), and logistical considerations like proximity and affordability. L. Messi's statement, "When I saw that it was a government college, I thought it was a good one, so I gave the first option," exemplifies how institutional reputation superseded direct FM influence in the decision-making process for many.

For the few GCID students who reported FM involvement in the survey, it most commonly occurred during the process of making college choices (66.67%), while others reported involvement during admissions (33.33%). The nature of this limited involvement primarily consisted of offering advice on course or subject selection (36.84%) and the admissions process (21.05%). Less frequently, guidance was provided on college choice (10.53%), financial matters (5.26%), entry exam preparation (5.26%), application/document review (5.26%), and even physical accompaniment to college visits (5.26%). Notably, no GCID student reported receiving advice on whether to pursue higher education at all from FMs. This suggests that the limited FM involvement captured by the survey at GCID was more instrumental and logistical, focusing on the 'how' rather than the 'why' of pursuing HE, and was much less prevalent than the somewhat more frequent, often motivation-focused, involvement reported at SU.

How and When FMs Were Involved, and What Their Involvement

Interview data further clarifies that FM involvement at GCID was minimal, primarily indirect, and largely restricted to the post-admission phase. Students rarely mentioned FMs as sources of pre-enrolment information; instead, information was typically sought from school teachers, family, peers, or online resources. Explicitly, interviewees highlighted a striking lack of awareness programs conducted by the college or its faculty to attract students. Tomy's experience of locals being unaware of the college's existence until he got admission further supports the absence of proactive, visible outreach.

Five of six individual respondents (Sachu, Diya, Maeve, L. Messi, Vasu) and both FGDs reported involvement of School teachers, with only Malu indicating no such guidance. Faculty contributions ranged from direct course recommendations to general encouragement and structured career guidance, often delivered through personal interactions, career classes, or digital platforms like WhatsApp. This widespread involvement highlights the critical role faculty played in shaping students' decisions, though the nature and extent of guidance varied.

Faculty engagement primarily occurred during or after the 12th grade, tailored to students' academic backgrounds and personal circumstances. Sachu's plus-two class teacher and earlier-grade teachers, aware of her due to her mother's role as a school helper, consistently encouraged continued education, frequently inquiring about her study plans. Diya's Business Studies teacher, recognising her communication skills, recommended a BBA course during plus-two and provided detailed explanations post-admission. Maeve's class teacher shared BSc Electronics vacancy details via a WhatsApp group, prompting her to apply during supplementary allotment. L.Messi's computer science teacher suggested a BCA course, inspired by a soldier's success, aligning with his tech and army aspirations. Vasu's teacher, acting as a career guidance agent, shared college and course details via WhatsApp, though focused on private institutions. These interactions shaped students' choices during the critical transition from school to college.

In FGDs, faculty influence was similarly diverse. In FGD 1, Diya's accounting teacher recommended BCom or BBA, emphasising commerce opportunities, while both Diya and Pappy noted teachers' encouragement for Muslim girls to prioritise studies over early marriage. In FGD 2, Vasu received career guidance through a teacher's WhatsApp updates, Maeve acted on her class teacher's BSc Electronics recommendation, Nasim was guided toward BA English by a higher secondary teacher, and L. Messi's computer science teacher provided ongoing support about tech courses and exams like JEE. These efforts, often motivational, included structured guidance through career classes (Diya, Nasim) and digital platforms, ensuring students were informed about their options. However, limitations existed, such as Vasu's teacher omitting government colleges and Malu's lack of faculty guidance, indicating uneven access.

Activities Engaged in Before Enrolling for Undergraduate Study

Survey data indicated that GCID students engaged in significantly fewer pre-enrolment activities compared to their counterparts at SU, and a large proportion undertook none of the listed actions. Only a small percentage had physically visited their future campus (11.26%) or other institutions (6.62%). Use of online and media resources was also considerably lower than at SU, with 9.93% watching videos, 5.30% browsing online platforms, and 5.30% consulting brochures. Notably, over one-third of GCID students (36.42%) reported taking none of the listed pre-enrolment actions, suggesting a more passive or less resourced approach to HE decision-making compared to the SU.

Interview and FGD data strongly reinforced the survey finding of limited pre-enrolment activities, particularly physical college visits. Students' narratives indicated that they did not typically visit GCID before enrolling. L. Messi's account of using Google Maps after admission and even locals being unaware of the college's location highlights the challenges and the rare occurrence of planned visits before admission.

Instead of relying on college visits or direct FM interaction, students relied on external sources such as school teachers and peers for information. They also utilised online resources like Google to research options independently, rather than through FM-led outreach. Application decisions were often based on the college's reputation as a government institution, the availability of specific courses, and affordability, rather than engagement in pre-enrolment activities or direct interaction with college FMs. The explicit statement in the FGD that the college does not conduct activities to attract students, coupled with student suggestions for needed initiatives like webinars and career guidance for plus-two students, further confirms the absence of FM-led pre-enrolment outreach. This evidence collectively supports the survey's finding that GCID students engage in significantly fewer pre-enrolment activities, often relying on external factors and taking no action, reflecting the limited proactive outreach from the institution and its faculty.

6.4.5 HE Outreach: current and future opportunities

This section analyses the outreach efforts of State University (SU) and GCID to attract and support rural students, based on data from student surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The analysis covers the presence of rural students, topics requiring more guidance, comfort levels of rural students, current outreach activities, activities by other institutions, and potential activities to enhance outreach.

6.4.5.1 State University (SU)

Presence of Rural Students

According to interview data, SU has a substantial proportion of rural students, with estimates ranging from 20–30% to 70–80% across respondents. Mia reported that 16 out of 28 students in her class (approximately 57%) are from rural areas, many within her friend circle. Sj estimated 20–30% rural students, noting a majority from semi-urban areas. Unni corrected an earlier estimate, suggesting less than 50% are rural, while Jimin and Niranjan estimated 65–70% and 70–80%, respectively. These varying estimates confirm a significant rural student presence, likely over half the student body, identified through personal interactions and class compositions.

Comfort of Rural Students in Choosing the University

Survey data showed that 61 of 64 respondents (95.31%) believed rural students would be comfortable choosing SU. Interviewees and FGD participants attributed this to low fees, minimal ragging, supportive faculty, and good facilities (e.g., hostels, transportation). Rural students generally find SU welcoming due to its affordable fee structure, supportive environment, and available facilities. Dhyan highlighted that rural students are comfortable with the current education system, low fees, and ample facilities. Mia emphasised the absence of discrimination or ragging, with a comfortable fee structure and overall positive atmosphere. Sj noted low fees, minimal ragging compared to other colleges, and high educational value. Unni echoed the affordability of fees, food, and accommodation. Jimin pointed to hostel facilities, transportation (including a bus from hostel to class), scholarships, and non-discriminatory teachers. Niranjan praised hostel facilities, affordable fees, scholarships, well-equipped departments, libraries, labs, and supportive teachers and seniors. However, some FGD participants noted that limited awareness about courses and facilities could hinder comfort

levels if not addressed. Essentially, these factors create a conducive environment, though some students noted that awareness of these benefits needs wider dissemination.

Topics Where the University Could Provide More Guidance

Survey responses (N = 69) highlighted several areas where SU students believe the university could enhance guidance provision, particularly concerning issues relevant to rural students transitioning to HE. The highest guidance is reported for advice on whether to pursue higher education (50.7%, 35 students) and campus safety/security and course/subject choice (both 47.8%, 33 students). However, lower guidance levels are evident in critical areas such as checking application forms/documents and choosing which college to enrol in if selected by multiple institutions (both 11.6%, 8 students), as well as organising college visits and employability prospects (both 23.2%, 16 students). Special admissions programmes/processes (e.g., reservations) (26.1%, 18 students) also received low guidance.

Students identified a need for better guidance on higher education opportunities and course details, particularly for rural students and their parents. Mia suggested that the university should provide detailed course information to rural communities, especially for tribal students interested in the humanities, to uplift their communities. Jimin emphasised the lack of university-led career guidance, noting that rural students and parents often lack knowledge about higher education benefits. Niranjan called for career guidance programmes to inform students about course scopes after Plus Two. Dhyan and Unni advocated for outreach to schools to share information about university schemes, facilities, and opportunities. Sj stressed the need for more academic activities, such as seminars and talks by external experts, to enhance guidance. The primary gap is the lack of proactive university-led outreach to rural areas, leaving students reliant on external sources or personal networks.

Existing Activities to Attract Rural Students

Survey responses (Q7.3) indicated that 37 of 63 respondents (58.73%) believed SU conducts activities to attract rural students, though specific examples were limited. SU has a relatively proactive stance in rural outreach compared to the GCID, where fewer students reported such activities. Although the survey did not specify the nature of these activities, interview data provides a more nuanced picture of these "existing activities, suggesting they may be limited or unsystematic.

FGDs and interviews revealed mixed perceptions. Dhyan (FGD 1) mentioned fine arts events, and Priya noted unique certificate courses (e.g., Developmental Studies, language training), but most participants, including Jimin, Unni, and Niranjan (FGD 2), reported no targeted activities. Unni mentioned social media posters by student organisations before admission, but these did not effectively reach rural audiences, only becoming visible post-enrolment. Mia criticised limited publicity, such as brief newspaper announcements, and SJ noted an event (Saastrayan) aimed at the general public, including students from all walks rather than rural students specifically.

This suggests that while students may perceive some level of institutional activity directed at attracting them, these efforts might be less structured or targeted than implied by the survey percentage, potentially contributing to the challenges in guidance provision noted earlier.

Activities by Other Institutions

Private colleges employ aggressive marketing strategies to attract rural students. Jimin, Unni, Kitty, and Niranjan observed that private institutions use social media (Instagram, YouTube), distribute brochures, and make direct calls to students, often collected from schools. Mia cited a college under a university in central Kerala promoting placement opportunities, while Sj mentioned universities in the neighbouring state using placement-focused advertisements and scholarships. Priya mentioned an Autonomous College's cultural events with celebrities like film stars, musicians and social influencers. Raghavendra Pillai (FGD 1) described private colleges conducting school visits, quiz competitions, and alumni talks, targeting plus-two students with brochures and campus tours. These strategies contrast sharply with the limited efforts of the SU, which rely on passive methods like newspaper notices.

Suggested Activities the University Could Conduct

Students proposed several strategies to enhance SU's outreach to rural students. Dhyan, Mia, Jimin, Unni, Niranjan, and FGD participants suggested direct engagement with schools through career guidance workshops, seminars, and campus visits for plus-two students. Mia and

Raghavendra Pillai emphasised collaborating with local organisations like Kudumbashree [17]to inform parents, particularly mothers, about affordable courses. Social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) and newspapers were frequently recommended for broader reach, with Mia suggesting Facebook for older audiences and Raghavendra advocating for full-page newspaper ads in regional languages. Sj proposed district-level programmes similar to a district council's CUET classes, while Jimin and Niranjan recommended forming university teams to conduct rural seminars and workshops. Priya and Kitty stressed improving publicity for unique courses and using social media platforms.

In Conclusion, SU hosts a significant rural student population (20-80% by various estimates), who find the university comfortable due to affordable fees, supportive faculty, and good facilities, though awareness of courses is often gained post-enrolment. The university conducts minimal targeted activities, relying on limited newspaper notices and general events like Saastrayan, which do not specifically address rural audiences. In contrast, private colleges use aggressive marketing, including social media, school visits, brochures, and placement promises, to attract rural students. To improve, SU could adopt direct school engagements, collaborate with local organisations, enhance social media presence, and use regional-language newspaper campaigns to inform rural students and parents about its affordable, high-quality programs. These efforts would bridge the awareness gap and strengthen rural student access.

6.4.5.2 Government College in-depth (GCID)

This section examines the landscape of Higher Education outreach at the GCID from the students' perspective, integrating insights from survey data with qualitative details from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) regarding the presence and comfort of rural students, guidance needs, existing activities, perceptions of other institutions' efforts, and suggestions for future initiatives.

[17] Kudumbashree, launched in 1998 by the Kerala government, is a women-centric poverty alleviation program operating through a three-tier community structure of Neighborhood Groups, Area Development Societies, and Community Development Societies. It empowers over 4.5 million women by promoting microfinance, sustainable livelihoods, and social development initiatives like health and education. Recognized globally, it fosters women's leadership and financial inclusion while integrating with local governance for broader impact.

Presence of Rural Students

Rural students constitute a substantial portion of the student body at GCID, with estimates ranging from 50% to 80%. Sachu and Malu estimated around 70% and 80% rural students, respectively, while Diya and Maeve noted over 50%, attributing this to the college's rural location, which attracts students from nearby areas. Vasu estimated 60-70%, and L. Messi confirmed a significant rural presence without a specific percentage. Students identified rural peers through social interactions and class demographics, noting that the college's proximity to rural areas and government status make it a natural choice for many. The high proportion reflects the college's accessibility to local rural communities.

Comfort of Rural Students in Choosing the University

In sharp contrast to the high comfort levels perceived at SU, survey data from GCID revealed a divided perception regarding the comfort of rural students in choosing the institution; only 58.64% affirmed comfort, while a significant 41.36% responded negatively. This lower perceived comfort at GCID compared to SU suggests the presence of potential barriers that hinder rural student integration or comfort. Interview and FGD data provided detailed qualitative insights into the reasons behind this divided perception, centring on issues of awareness, infrastructure, and facilities.

Students like Sachu, Malu, Diya, and L. Messi pointed to the college's low visibility and lack of awareness, even among local residents, as factors that could make rural students hesitant to choose it. Furthermore, interviewees consistently highlighted significant infrastructure issues as negatively impacting comfort levels. Malu mentioned the presence of counselling psychologists at the college as comforting, especially to rural students. Vasu, Meave, and Anna specifically mentioned the lack of a proper college building, insufficient classrooms, labs, and the absence of hostel facilities, lack of transport facilities, as major deterrents, suggesting that rural students who may expect or require better facilities could experience discomfort. While affordability due to its government status was acknowledged as a positive draw for rural students with limited financial resources, the lack of adequate facilities and low visibility appear to undermine the college's overall appeal and perceived comfort for this population.

Topics Where the College Could Provide More Guidance

GCID respondents (N = 176) identified several areas where they perceived a need for more guidance from the college, highlighting concerns particularly relevant to students potentially transitioning from rural environments or with limited prior exposure to HE complexities. Survey results highlighted key areas where rural students need more guidance: campus safety and security (87 responses, 49.4%), advice on whether to pursue HE or other options (67 responses, 38.1%), and course/subject choice (65 responses, 36.9 %). Other areas included the admission process (64 responses, 36.4%), employability prospects (55 responses, 31.3%), entry exam preparation (51 responses, 29%) and the choice of which HEI to apply and as well as about facilities and activities within these HEIs (27.8%).

Compared to SU students, GCID students placed a relatively higher emphasis on safety and employability, potentially reflecting greater concerns about the transition from rural life to a college environment and future post-graduation outcomes in a developing district context.
Interview and FGD data strongly supported these survey findings, consistently highlighting a significant gap in the provision of career and higher education guidance. Students like Sachu, Malu, and Diya expressed a lack of awareness about HE options, career paths, the scope of various courses, and how they align with career goals. Specific guidance needs identified in interviews included detailed information on career pathways for various courses (e.g., BCA, BBA, BSc), options for postgraduate and professional courses (e.g., MBA, CA, ACCA), preparation for entrance exams, and clearer explanations of course structures and benefits, particularly for plus-two students making initial HE choices. This underscores that GCID students, likely many with rural backgrounds, require more structured and comprehensive information to navigate their HE and career decisions effectively.

Existing Activities to Attract Rural Students

Survey data indicated that only a small minority (27.78%) of GCID respondents believed the college undertakes activities specifically aimed at attracting rural students, while a large majority (72.22%) reported no such activities. This finding points to a significant lack of perceived institutional effort in rural outreach.

Survey responses indicated that only 45 of 162 respondents (27.78%) believed GCID conducts activities to attract rural students, significantly lower than SU. Interviews and FGDs consistently reported no specific activities. GCID conducts minimal targeted activities to attract rural students, with most respondents reporting no specific programmes. Sachu, Diya, Maeve, Malu, Vasu, L. Messi, and both FGDs consistently noted the absence of dedicated outreach efforts. Diya mentioned limited social media posts about courses, but these are insufficient. L.Messi and FGD 2 participants highlighted the college's low visibility, with many unaware of its existence even locally, as evidenced by L. Messi's friend's lack of awareness and difficulties locating the college via Google Maps. Malu noted that current students informally share course information, but there are no formal college-led initiatives. General programs like college day, sports, arts, and union events exist, but these are not specifically aimed at attracting rural students, indicating a significant gap in targeted outreach.

Activities by Other Institutions

Interview and FGD data from GCID students provided insights into the types of proactive outreach they observed or believed other institutions engage in. Private and self-financing colleges employ proactive strategies to attract rural students, as reported by interviews and FGD transcripts. Sachu, Malu, Diya, Vasu, and FGD participants described private institutions distributing posters, brochures, and notices at schools, often detailing courses, fees, and career prospects. L.Messi and Anna noted that these colleges collect student contact details from schools to send personalised messages or create WhatsApp helpdesk groups, offering scholarships and placement promises. Maeve and Nasim highlighted social media campaigns (e.g., Instagram reels) and events like college days with celebrities to boost visibility. Kuttu (FGD 1) and L. Messi (FGD 2) cited examples of private colleges offering add-on courses (e.g., ACCA, machine learning) alongside degrees, attracting students with promises of quick employability. Anna mentioned a nearby cooperative college using helpdesk groups to inform rural students. In contrast, respondents like Diya and Pappy noted that government colleges, including GCID, rarely undertake such efforts, leaving rural students uninformed about available opportunities.

Suggested Activities the GCID Could Conduct

Students viewed faculty members as essential but underutilised in facilitating HE access. Vasu and Nasim suggested faculty-led initiatives to enhance outreach, including career guidance classes in schools. Malu and Pappy stressed involving parents through community meetings or organisations like Kudumbashree to address financial concerns and highlight affordable education. Social media (YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp) and newspaper advertisements in regional languages were frequently suggested by Malu, Vasu, and FGDs to improve visibility. L.Messi and Anna advocated for infrastructure improvements (e.g., hostels, labs) to make the college more appealing, alongside faculty-led school visits to promote courses like BCA. Dreamygirl and Sachu (FGD 1) proposed peer-to-peer outreach, where current students inform rural school students, while L. Messi suggested add-on courses (e.g., machine learning) to enhance employability. The interview and FGD-based suggestions directly address the guidance gaps and comfort issues identified in the survey data, offering a clear roadmap for GCID to implement proactive, community-integrated outreach strategies aimed at enhancing visibility, improving facilities, and providing essential information to attract and better serve rural students.

6.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter investigated the profile of undergraduate students and their higher education experiences in rural and semi-urban colleges in Kerala, India, focusing on State University (SU) and Government College In-Depth (GCID). The analysis, based on survey, interview, and focus group data, reveals that while both institutions serve a similar core demographic, they also exhibit distinct differences that shape student access and choice.

The student populations at both SU and GCID are predominantly young, with a mean age of around 19. They are overwhelmingly female and exclusively from Kerala, speaking Malayalam as their mother tongue. Other Backward Classes (OBC) form the largest social group at both colleges, reflecting Kerala's social structure. However, there are notable contrasts in religious composition, with SU having a Hindu majority and GCID a Muslim majority. A significant rural-origin student body is present at both institutions, though GCID has a more pronounced rural demographic.

Familial and socioeconomic backgrounds also show key differences. Students at SU generally come from families with higher parental educational attainment, with a considerable proportion of parents holding degrees or postgraduate qualifications. Their family occupations are more diverse, including professional and government service roles alongside daily wage and business occupations. Family incomes at SU vary, but a notable segment is in the higher income brackets. In contrast, GCID students are more likely to come from families with lower parental education, often limited to the lower secondary level. Parental occupations are heavily concentrated in labour-intensive and lower-income roles, and family incomes are markedly skewed toward the lowest bracket, with the vast majority reporting less than ₹25,000 per month. This suggests that while both colleges serve a low-to-middle-income demographic, GCID caters to a more economically challenged population.

Furthermore, student pathways and experiences differ between the two colleges. SU students show a preference for English-medium instruction. Their residence patterns are also more flexible, with many opting for split residences and significant on-campus living during the week, leading to a more campus-centric model. In contrast, GCID students predominantly use a regional language medium and prefer Commerce streams. They maintain single residences at home and have longer commutes, relying primarily on public buses. This pattern aligns with a stable, off-campus, and rural commuter profile.

While both institutions provide higher education access to a young, female, and OBC-dominant population from rural backgrounds, GCID's student body is more strongly connected to rural schooling and exhibits lower parental education and income levels. The differences in subject preference and commuting habits further highlight the distinct profiles of the student populations they serve. These findings have significant implications for understanding the needs of students in rural and semi-urban colleges and underscore the importance of targeted and proactive outreach initiatives to enhance equitable and informed higher education access.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises findings from the preceding chapters of Kerala State Report of the Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches (WAHEI). The report aims to answer the overarching question regarding the current and potential role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) based in rural and semi-urban India, their faculty members, and institutional leaders in engaging in gender-equitable, socially just HE outreach for local students. Drawing upon data examining the profile of faculty and institutional leaders (Chapter 4), their perceptions and practices related to HE outreach (Chapter 5), and the characteristics and outreach experiences of students (Chapter 6), this chapter integrates these insights. It will discuss the current pattern of HE outreach in rural and semi-urban Kerala, evaluate the perceived roles and actual contributions of HEIs, FMs, and ILs, analyse student experiences, and explore implications for enhancing fair access and choice for the student community.

7.2 Synthesis of RQ1a: who are the faculty members and institutional leaders?

Faculty members (FMs) and institutional leaders (ILs) in the rural and semi-urban colleges in Kerala comprise a heterogeneous professional group, differentiated by their institutional type, disciplinary background, experience, and social location. FMs represent a mix of junior and senior academics across arts, sciences, and commerce streams, while ILs include principals and quality assurance coordinators. Demographically, FMs exhibit varied gender distributions across institutions (State University [SU] predominantly male, Government College In-Depth [GCID] female-dominated) and consistent, significant representation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), aligning with state-level equity policies. Their age is generally concentrated in the 31-50 range, reflecting a settled professional phase, with most being married with children. ILs are typically older (40-59) and often possess diverse professional histories, sometimes indicative of upward social mobility, influenced by their educational paths from potentially rural origins to higher studies. Notably, the retirement age in Kerala influences career stages: FMs in colleges retire at 56, while those at SU retire at 60, allowing SU faculty potentially longer tenures (Jose & Sekher, 2021).

Comparatively, SU faculty often have more advanced academic qualifications (e.g., PhDs) and research-oriented roles due to the university's focus on postgraduate education and research, whereas government college FMs (GCID, GC-A, GC-B) are more teaching-focused, balancing heavy teaching loads with community engagement. This divergence is expected given SU's centralised structure and broader academic mandate compared to the localised, accessibility-driven mission of government colleges, which primarily serve rural and disadvantaged students (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). ILs at government colleges often have longer tenures at their institutions (5–15 years) compared to SU ILs, fostering deeper community ties but also exposing them to resource constraints typical of rural HEIs.

Beyond these profiles, many FMs and ILs demonstrate deep-rooted local affiliations, with some being first-generation learners or alumni of their institutions, fostering a unique orientation towards community engagement. Faculty in government and Government-Aided colleges often balance roles as educators and community anchors. For instance, GC-A's faculty includes individuals with rural roots who actively participate in community programs like NSS camps, contrasting with SU's faculty, who are less engaged in local outreach due to their research focus. However, a tension exists between professional ideals and systemic constraints (Chapter 5), with ILs navigating complexities shaped by institutional histories and resource disparities.

While FMs and ILs hold varied perceptions and exhibit mixed engagement in HE outreach, their direct involvement in facilitating student HE access and choice, particularly pre-enrollment, is limited, as students often report relying on family, peers, or self-directed efforts rather than institutional guidance (Chapter 6). This gap is particularly pronounced at SU, where the centralised admission process reduces perceived need for outreach, and at GCID, where resource constraints limit proactive engagement, compared to GC-A, which demonstrates more community-embedded outreach. This variation aligns with expectations given SU's established reputation and urban proximity versus the rural focus of government colleges, but it underscores an under-utilised potential for faculty-driven outreach across all HEIs.

7.3 Synthesis of RQ1b & RQ1c: what do institutional leaders and faculty members perceive to be the role of HEIs in HE outreach?

Institutional Leaders (ILs) and Faculty Members (FMs) in rural and semi-urban colleges in Kerala hold diverse and sometimes conflicting perceptions regarding their institutions' role in Higher Education (HE) outreach. Broadly, HEIs are perceived as agents of local transformation, particularly in areas marked by economic precarity and social constraints aligning with Kerala's high literacy and progressive social indices (Economic Review, 2023). In Kerala's context, where the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 41.3% exceeds the national average and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.44 reflects strong female participation, HEIs are seen as critical to sustaining educational equity, especially for first-generation learners and Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). Many FMs view outreach not merely as an add-on but as intrinsic to their public service role. ILs often echo this commitment, sometimes linking outreach to the college's historical mission or university mandates.

However, perceptions regarding the necessity and nature of specific outreach activities vary significantly. At State University (SU), the IL perceived a limited need for targeted university-led outreach, relying on the university's established reputation and centralised admission process, which simplifies access through a single-window portal but may overlook the specific needs of underserved groups like SC (15.3% enrollment) and ST students, whose representation remains low (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). The SU IL opined that providing informed choices for potential students was not a high priority, as the university's academic prestige and centralised system were deemed sufficient to attract students, potentially underestimating the need for proactive guidance for rural and marginalised communities. In contrast, ILs and FMs at Government College In-Depth (GCID) and Other Government Colleges (GC-A, GC-B) demonstrated a greater perceived need for institutional engagement, recognising the challenges faced by their predominantly rural and often disadvantaged student body. They acknowledged the necessity for enhanced guidance on course selection, employability, and HE entry processes. GC-A, in particular, showed a perception among its leadership and faculty that the college should engage in proactive, community-embedded strategies.

Despite these varying perceptions, a significant tension exists between these aspirational views and operational realities. HEI's outreach role is often constrained by significant practical barriers, such as insufficient funding, heavy faculty workload, and the widespread view that HE outreach falls outside core duties. In Kerala, where 75.8% of HEIs are in rural areas and faculty face a Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) of 24, these constraints are exacerbated by competing demands of teaching and administrative tasks (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). Faculty members recognise the importance of supporting marginalised students and countering social biases, but express frustration over a lack of institutional support, recognition, and time. HE outreach is widely perceived as necessary but under-prioritised in policy and funding structures.

While a normative commitment to HE outreach exists among many FMs and ILs, particularly in government colleges serving more disadvantaged populations, structural limitations hinder its full institutionalisation. This leads to a disconnect where the perceived role, while sometimes aligned with the HEI's mission of social responsibility, is often constrained by practical barriers. Students' reports of minimal proactive FM involvement support this, indicating that the HEI's role in active outreach is not fully actualised from the student perspective. Consequently, there is no uniform or strongly embedded perception across these institutions that proactive, comprehensive, and resourced outreach is a core function, either at the institutional level or as a recognised part of FMs' workload, leading to reliance on inherent appeal or fragmented, individually driven efforts rather than a systematic approach to facilitating informed HE access and choice. This is particularly evident in the lack of outreach integration into IQAC objectives or faculty performance evaluations, which could otherwise formalise and incentivise such efforts (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024).

7.4 Synthesis of RQ1b (second part): How much HE outreach activity is already happening?

In Kerala, a state with a high Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 41.3% and a decentralised education model with 46 colleges per lakh population (18–23 years), higher education (HE) outreach remains fragmented and uneven, largely driven by individual faculty initiative rather than cohesive institutional strategy (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). While a

range of outreach practices does exist—such as mentoring at-risk students, school visits, and student orientation sessions—these are typically sporadic and informal. Such efforts are more common in institutions with a legacy of community engagement but are rarely institutionalised or integrated into formal structures. As documented in the previous chapters, outreach activities are frequently absent from institutional development plans, Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) objectives, or routine academic responsibilities. Where outreach aligns with accreditation demands (e.g., NAAC criteria for community engagement or NIRF metrics for social responsibility), such as organising NSS camps or public lectures to demonstrate societal impact, it is often reactive rather than strategically planned (National Assessment and Accreditation Council [NAAC], 2023; National Institutional Ranking Framework [NIRF], 2025). For instance, NAAC encourages HEIs to document extension activities like community service, while NIRF includes outreach in its 'Perception' and 'Outreach and Inclusivity' parameters, prompting some colleges to conduct one-off events to meet these requirements. Resource allocation and accountability for sustained engagement remain minimal.

The data from both the State University (SU) and Government College In-Depth (GCID) indicate a limited presence of systematic, proactive outreach specifically tailored to rural populations. Among government colleges, Government College A (GC-A) stands out as an exception, demonstrating more community-embedded and proactive strategies. However, this is not representative of broader institutional practice.

Students' accounts corroborate these limitations. While a few benefit from informal faculty support, many report limited awareness of higher education options during the decision-making phase. Most pre-enrollment activities involved self-directed online search or consultation with family and peers rather than engagement with college faculty or institution-led outreach initiatives. Particularly at GCID, students explicitly noted the absence of awareness programs or targeted efforts to attract them to the college. These gaps align with faculty and institutional leaders' accounts of barriers to outreach, including lack of funding, competing academic workloads, and insufficient prioritisation at the institutional level.

The findings reflect Kerala's unique context, where high literacy (96.2%) and strong social recognition of education drive HE demand, yet persistent challenges like low ST representation

and student out-migration (57.8% female) highlight the need for targeted outreach to underserved groups (Economic Review, 2023; Rajan, 2024). The reliance on geographic proximity and affordability of government colleges, combined with informal social support, suggests that rural and disadvantaged students access HE despite limited institutional outreach. This divide between policy goals and institutional practice underscores a significant implementation gap. While the policy environment in Kerala, supported by NEP 2020 and state initiatives like Akshaya centres, promotes equity and access, the realisation of these objectives at the institutional level remains constrained by structural, procedural, and motivational barriers (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; Kerala State IT Mission, n.d.).

Consequently, there is no uniform or strongly embedded perception across these institutions that proactive, comprehensive, and resourced outreach is a core function, leading to reliance on inherent appeal or fragmented, individually driven efforts rather than a systematic approach to facilitating informed HE access and choice. To strengthen HE outreach, there is a need for deliberate institutional scaffolding through strategic planning, policy incentives, resource allocation, and professional development.

7.5 Synthesis of RQ1d: who are the students and what are their experiences/perceptions of HE outreach?

Students enrolled in the rural and semi-urban higher education institutions (HEIs) studied—namely the State University (SU) and Government College In-Depth (GCID)—represent a critical demographic for examining equity in access to higher education (HE) in Kerala. The student population is predominantly young (18–20 years), female (around two-thirds), and from rural, socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many are first-generation college-goers, with a high proportion identifying as members of Other Backward Classes (OBC). GCID students, in particular, face more acute socio-economic challenges, often coming from families with low parental education and income levels, and whose parents are engaged in labour-intensive occupations. These structural disadvantages shape both their access to HE and their experiences within it.

Educational trajectories across the student sample show continuity in state-funded schooling, typically government or Government-Aided schools following the Kerala State syllabus. While

SU students tend to pursue science streams and have English as the medium of instruction during schooling, GCID students are more concentrated in commerce and typically studied in the regional language schools. Most students live at home and travel as day scholars using public transport. Their decision to enter HE is driven by a combination of self-motivation and parental encouragement, particularly from mothers and fathers focused on employment outcomes. The choice of institution and subject is often made collaboratively, influenced by personal interest and familial advice.

Students' perceptions of HE outreach are marked by significant variation and reflect the unevenness of current institutional practices. In cases where outreach exists—such as school visits, mentoring, or community awareness efforts—students report feeling supported and better equipped to navigate HE systems. They particularly appreciate faculty members who clarify admissions procedures, explain course structures, and help address the stigma associated with caste or gender. These forms of engagement contribute to greater student confidence and a sense of inclusion.

Students' accounts corroborate the limited presence of systematic, proactive outreach specifically tailored to rural populations, as mentioned by the FMs in the previous section. While a few benefit from informal faculty support, many report limited awareness of higher education options during the decision-making phase. Most pre-enrolment activities involved self-directed online search or consultation with family and peers rather than engagement with college faculty or institution-led outreach initiatives. Particularly at GCID, students explicitly noted the absence of awareness programs or targeted efforts to attract them to the college. These gaps align with faculty and institutional leaders' accounts of barriers to outreach, including lack of funding, competing academic workloads, and insufficient prioritisation at the institutional level. However, for a substantial number of students, especially at GCID, structured outreach is either absent or insufficient. Many students report having had little or no exposure to college-organised awareness programs during their school years. Their access to HE was shaped more by personal or family networks than by institutional guidance. Students expressed a need for clearer, earlier information on whether to pursue HE, how to choose a subject or institution, and how to finance their education. The gap between institutional intent and outreach practice is further underscored by faculty members and institutional leaders (FMs and ILs), who cite

barriers such as insufficient funding, heavy workloads, and a lack of institutional priority for outreach.

Students also critique superficial or one-off outreach efforts that fail to address systemic issues. Their experiences suggest that the transformative potential of HEIs is not being fully realised due to limited, fragmented engagement. The findings underscore the importance of sustained, culturally responsive, and student-centred outreach embedded within institutional practice.

7.6 Preliminary views on RQ2: How can the potential contribution of rural and semi-urban college faculty members to fair HE access and choice be consolidated and maximised?

Faculty members (FMs) in rural and semi-urban higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kerala—particularly in the studied institutions of the State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Government Colleges A and B—communicated a personal commitment to facilitating higher education (HE) access for marginalised and first-generation learners. However, their potential contribution to equitable HE access and choice is constrained by systemic, institutional, and contextual challenges. Consolidating and maximising this contribution requires a shift from informal, individualised practices to coordinated, well-supported, and strategically embedded outreach systems.

Currently, many FMs act as accessible advisors within their personal and professional networks. Their engagement in HE outreach is largely informal and driven by personal motivation, including a sense of social responsibility and concern for student development. While some institutions like GC-A show promising community-embedded outreach practices, such as organising NSS camps and school visits to promote HE awareness among rural students, outreach activities at SU and GCID are limited and ad hoc. For example, SU relies on its centralised admission portal and academic reputation, with minimal faculty-led initiatives like pre-enrollment counselling, while GCID's outreach is constrained by resource shortages, resulting in sporadic mentoring sessions rather than structured programmes. These efforts often depend on individual initiative and are not integrated into institutional planning, workload allocation, or performance evaluation systems. In several cases, FMs' contributions are reactive—providing.

Institutional leaders (ILs) at the government colleges show greater personal involvement in outreach activities than their counterparts at SU. However, across institutions, formal mechanisms for organising outreach remain weak. Barriers such as insufficient funding, high faculty workload, and lack of institutional visibility in rural communities further limit the scope of outreach. Additionally, outreach is not always recognised as a formal component of faculty roles, and many institutions lack structures for training or supporting faculty in these tasks.

To maximise FMs' contributions, the findings suggest the need for systematic professional development initiatives that equip faculty with skills for socially just, gender-sensitive, and community-oriented outreach. Training should include modules on inclusive pedagogy, communication strategies for rural and disadvantaged communities, and awareness of reservation policies, financial aid, and course selection pathways. Moreover, institutional mechanisms must formally recognise outreach as part of faculty workload, supported through administrative relief, dedicated outreach cells, and resource allocation.

Drawing from proposals by ILs and FMs, effective strategies include organising school visits, digital publicity, partnerships with NGOs, municipal collaborations, and education fairs. GCID and GC-A propose leveraging platforms like NSS camps, while GC-B emphasises the need for faculty release time and structured outreach mandates. SU could replicate successful models such as rural counselling centres used by other universities in Kerala.

7.7 Preliminary views on RQ3: How can a consolidated HE access/choice role for faculty members be embedded at a policy level to ensure sustainable change?

Faculty members across the studied institutions—State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Government Colleges A and B—expressed willingness and commitment to supporting student access, particularly among disadvantaged communities. However, their outreach efforts are not formally recognised within institutional or state-level policy frameworks. Outreach activities are not typically integrated into workload planning, appraisal systems, or quality assurance mechanisms such as IQAC objectives. This lack of formal acknowledgement discourages consistent engagement and limits the scalability of outreach practices.

The current absence of policy mechanisms to structure, evaluate, and support faculty-led outreach is a key barrier. Faculty and institutional leaders (ILs) reported a need for clear policy directives that mandate outreach responsibilities and offer institutional support. Embedding outreach roles within official job descriptions, institutional development plans, and faculty performance evaluations could provide legitimacy and accountability. This would require state higher education authorities to issue guidelines recognising outreach as a core institutional function, alongside teaching, research, and extension.

Policy interventions could also include the establishment of dedicated outreach cells within colleges, staffed with coordinators and supported by trained faculty. Institutions could be incentivised through accreditation, funding, and recognition schemes to develop and implement outreach plans aligned with equity and access goals. Government funding schemes specifically earmarked for rural outreach initiatives—such as school interface programs, admission guidance camps, and awareness drives in low-enrolment areas—would enable colleges to operationalise their commitments.

Suggestions from faculty and ILs include strengthening the IQAC's role in documenting and evaluating outreach, institutionalising partnerships with local governance bodies and NGOs, and ensuring that outreach efforts are recorded in the academic audit process. There is also a need for coordination between state education departments and the affiliating universities to support outreach as a cross-cutting priority, particularly in regions with persistent access gaps. Finally, embedding this role in policy will require integrating outreach expectations into teacher training and professional development. Faculty need to be equipped with knowledge of HE pathways, reservation policies, and the specific challenges rural students face. Policies must reflect the contextual realities of rural and semi-urban HEIs and create enabling conditions—financial, administrative, and pedagogical—for faculty to act as informed facilitators of HE access.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Conclusions

The Kerala State Report of the Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches (WAHEI) project examined the current and potential roles of higher education institutions (HEIs), faculty members (FMs), and institutional leaders (ILs) in rural and semi-urban areas in advancing gender-equitable and socially just higher education (HE) access. Data from the State University (SU), Government College In-Depth (GCID), and Government Colleges A and B reveal a fairly normative commitment among FMs and ILs to higher education (HE) outreach, yet current practices remain informal, fragmented, and insufficiently supported by institutional structures or policy frameworks.

Students across these HEIs are predominantly first-generation learners from rural, lower-income, and socially marginalised communities, including a high proportion from Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Their access to HE is often facilitated by geographic proximity, affordability, and family encouragement —particularly from parents emphasising employment outcomes—rather than structured institutional outreach. FMs often serve as informal guides and mentors, especially for disadvantaged students in their personal networks, but these efforts rely heavily on personal initiative and lack systematic institutional support. ILs in government colleges show greater personal engagement in HE outreach compared to SU, yet institutional planning and resources for such activities remain limited.

The findings highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and the implementation of HE outreach. National policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes equitable access for socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) through reservation systems and academic support, and state-level initiatives like Kerala's centralized admission process via a single-window portal, aim to promote equity (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020; Government of Kerala, Higher Education Department, 2021). However, these generic policy intentions are neither defined in concrete terms nor are they realised at the institutional level due to structural barriers, including insufficient funding, high faculty workloads, and limited training for HE outreach. Students frequently report minimal

exposure to institution-led awareness programmes, relying instead on self-directed research or family networks, underscoring the absence of proactive HE outreach.

To address this gap, the report emphasises embedding faculty-led HE outreach into institutional planning, quality assurance frameworks like the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), and state and national policy frameworks such as NEP 2020 implementation and the All-Kerala Higher Education Survey (AKHES) guidelines (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2024). Recommendations include establishing dedicated HE outreach cells, implementing school–college interface programmes, and fostering collaborations with local governance bodies to enhance community engagement. These strategies aim to align with NEP 2020's vision of empowering HEIs as knowledge hubs for SEDGs.

Participation in the WAHEI project catalysed institutional and personal transformations within the Kerala research team. By engaging with the lived experiences of students and faculty, the team developed a deeper awareness of the systemic inequalities that impact access to higher education. This heightened understanding led team members to a renewed commitment to institutional advocacy, initiating discussions within their own HE institutions on formalising HE outreach and building faculty capacity.

The project's collaborative framework not only fostered professional networks but also provided a platform for shared reflection on the social responsibilities of higher education institutions. This collective insight inspired team members to advocate for policy reforms at both the state and institutional levels. Furthermore, the collaborative research process enhanced the team's understanding of the methodologies involved in planning, structuring, conducting, and monitoring large-scale research projects, with a particular emphasis on intentional networking. Maintaining a diary of outreach activities and participating in voluntary interviews specifically provided a share of the FM participants with valuable awareness into the potential roles and responsibilities of faculty members in their institution's outreach efforts.

8.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches (WAHEI): Kerala State Report, the following recommendations are derived to

enhance the potential of HE outreach to facilitate equitable access and informed choice for students in rural and semi-urban communities, aligning with state and national policy frameworks.

8.2.1 Recommendations for HEIs

Institutions based in rural and semi-urban areas can enhance their HE outreach potential by implementing the following strategies, aligning with student needs and addressing identified barriers, drawing from suggestions from ILs, FMs and UG students:

- Formalise and Integrate HE outreach: Embed HE outreach as a core institutional function by integrating it into development plans, faculty workloads (e.g., adjusting tutorial hours), and performance evaluations. Provide administrative relief and establish dedicated HE outreach cells with specialised personnel to support FMs in increasing programme and course visibility.
- Enhance Information Provision for HE Outreach: Improve timely dissemination of information about courses (including Four-Year Undergraduate Programmes [FYUGP] minors/add-ons), admission processes, funding options, and employability prospects as part of HE outreach. Utilise print, local media, advertisements, and digital platforms (e.g., webinars, social media like Twitter/X, Facebook, digital brochures) to extend outreach beyond the immediate district/state. Integrate Akshaya centres, Kerala's public service facilitators, to provide technical support for application processes and disseminate HE information to rural communities (Kerala State IT Mission, n.d.).
- Implement Proactive School and Community HE Outreach: Systematically organise regular school visits to conduct awareness sessions, promote UG programmes, and provide career guidance, particularly before higher secondary examinations. Facilitate community-level orientation programmes by involving religious and community leaders, leveraging platforms like National Service Scheme (NSS) camps and municipal collaborations. Explore house visit programs and engage local representatives to enhance HE outreach to tribal communities.
- Develop Targeted HE Outreach Programs: Design education fairs, proactive seminars (including pre-examination awareness), and webinars specifically for rural

communities. Establish university guidance centres or sub-centres in rural areas to support HE outreach.

- Strengthen Collaborations for HE Outreach: Foster partnerships with local schools for career counselling and course information, leveraging teachers' influence. Collaborate with NGOs, municipalities, and industries to enhance the reach and relevance of HE outreach initiatives.
- Address Infrastructure and Visibility for HE Outreach: Prioritise infrastructure improvements (e.g., college buildings, classrooms, labs, hostels) to enhance institutional appeal and accommodate students from distant areas, thereby supporting HE outreach efforts.
- Provide Faculty Training for HE Outreach: Equip FMs with skills in career guidance, understanding rural student challenges, using digital tools for HE outreach, and knowledge of modernised courses and career options.
- Modernise Curriculum to Support HE Outreach: Update traditional courses with add-ons and internships to enhance job readiness, and promote these modernised programmes during HE outreach to highlight employability. Collaborate with industry for curricular inputs and campus recruitment, linking HE outreach with career guidance to attract rural students.
- Leverage Internal Resources for HE Outreach: Appoint student ambassadors to visit schools and utilise NSS camps for HE outreach in remote areas. Relieve FMs of clerical duties to allocate time for guidance.
- Learn from Other HE Outreach Models: Adapt successful strategies from other institutions, such as rural counselling centres that can reach the unreached and underreached, self-sponsored summer programmes, science lectures, online workshops, open days, NSS collaborations, and private college tactics (e.g., TV ads, school orientations, local media ads, soft skills training).
- Support FMs' Role in HE Outreach by Addressing Commuting Challenges: Provide on-campus or nearby housing for ILs and FMs, particularly in rural colleges like GCID, to reduce commuting barriers and enable more time for HE outreach. Enhance public transport connectivity, offer flexible schedules or remote work options for FMs with split residences, and ensure commuting safety to support sustained engagement in HE outreach activities.

8.2.2 Recommendations for Policymakers

State and national policymakers have a crucial role in embedding a consolidated HE access and choice role for FMs and ILs to ensure sustainable change:

- Allocate Dedicated Funding for HE Outreach: Establish sufficient funding streams for HE outreach initiatives in rural and semi-urban HEIs to address resource constraints (MHRD, 2020).
- Mandate and Formalise HE Outreach: Implement policies mandating HE outreach as a core function of public HEIs, aligning with NEP 2020 to move beyond ad-hoc efforts towards a recognised responsibility (MHRD, 2020).
- Integrate HE Outreach into Policy Frameworks: Develop state and regional HE outreach frameworks, such as those supported by Kerala's Higher Education Department and NEP 2020, to guide institutional efforts and formalise FM/IL roles with clear guidelines for workload allocation and performance evaluation.
- Support Professional Development for HE Outreach: Fund comprehensive programs to train FMs and ILs in equitable, context-specific HE outreach strategies, including digital tools and career guidance, along with NEP (MHRD, 2020) implementation.
- Facilitate Collaboration for HE Outreach: Encourage formal collaborations between HEIs, secondary schools (mandating school visits, career guidance sessions), with local government bodies (municipalities/panchayats), and NGOs to create structured HE outreach pathways.
- Address Infrastructure and Commuting Disparities: Implement policies to address infrastructure gaps (buildings, labs, hostels) in rural HEIs as identified by students as a barrier. Include a policy for improving commuting infrastructure and safety for FMs/ILs serving these areas.
- Promote Policy Alignment with Equity Goals: Adjust policies to include rural seat reservations within Kerala's centralised single-window admission system, which streamlines applications through a unified portal, to counter biases and prioritise rural access. Ensure state-level policies for SEDGs, as outlined in NEP 2020, are translated into practice through funded HE outreach mandates (MHRD, 2020; Government of Kerala, Higher Education Department, 2021).

- Ensure Policy Implementation and Monitoring: Strengthen mechanisms like IQAC to document and evaluate HE outreach, incorporating these efforts into academic audits to ensure alignment with state and national policies.
- Collect Student Feedback to Enhance HE Outreach: Regularly gather feedback from enrolled students on their program and college choices to assess the effectiveness of HE outreach and identify innovative strategies for improvement, ensuring outreach addresses student needs and perceptions.
- Support Knowledge Sharing for HE Outreach: Promote inter-institutional learning and sharing of best HE outreach practices across Kerala, supported by state policies

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