Liberal Arts Education: A Comparative Review of Western Models, Indian Imperatives, Implementation Gaps and Pathways to Curb Brain Drain from Keralam

Roopa Varma T P[1*], Prof. (Dr.) Sunil Kumar A S[2]

[1]Research scholar, NSS Training College Ottapalam, University of Calicut

[2]Professor, NSS Training College Ottapalam, University of Calicut

[*]Corresponding Author

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102000047

Received: 14 October 2026; Accepted: 19 October 2026; Published: 19 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Liberal arts education, long established in Western higher education, has gained policy attention in India through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This review asks how liberal arts models are organised in the United States, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and mainland China; which elements India could adopt; what structural, pedagogical, financial and cultural gaps hinder implementation; and whether liberal arts provision could help moderate student emigration from Keralam. A narrative review with a structured comparative framework was conducted on 34 sources: journal articles, books, official statistics and policy documents, institutional reports, and a few media sources used only for context. Sources were screened against stated inclusion criteria, graded by type of evidence, and checked for bibliographic accuracy and for the claims attributed to them. The four models differ markedly in governance, funding, curriculum structure and documented outcomes, and outcome evidence is concentrated in the United States. The most transferable elements are curricular flexibility within four-year degrees, small selective colleges embedded in research universities, and publicly funded access. NEP 2020 supplies a supportive framework, but implementation is constrained by early specialisation tied to entrance examinations, limited faculty preparation, public education spending of about 3% of GDP against a 6% target, and doubts about graduate employability. In Keralam, student emigrants rose from 129,763 in 2018 to about 250,000 in 2023, yet more than 80% had completed a degree in the state before leaving, and no reviewed study tests whether liberal arts provision alters emigration decisions. Liberal arts reform is therefore presented as one plausible lever among several, not a proven remedy. The paper answers the main counter-arguments, proposes a five-part reform agenda and sets out a research agenda for testing it.

Keywords: Liberal Arts Education, NEP 2020, Keralam, Student Emigration, Comparative Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Universities are being asked to prepare graduates who can work across disciplinary boundaries. Labour-market research in the United States shows that jobs requiring high levels of social interaction grew by nearly 12 percentage points as a share of the labour force between 1980 and 2012, while math-intensive jobs with little social content, including many STEM occupations, shrank by 3.3 percentage points (Deming, 2017). That evidence concerns skills rather than degree types, so it supports the case for liberal arts only indirectly. Philosophers of education add a civic argument, holding that democratic societies depend on the capacities that broad undergraduate study develops (Nussbaum, 2010). Liberal arts education sits at the centre of both debates. Its roots are plural, with non-Western, Western and American strands (Godwin & Altbach, 2016), and its renewed presence has been mapped across world regions (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).

India's undergraduate system has long been organised around early specialisation. Students choose among science, arts and commerce streams in grade nine, and subject-specific entrance examinations for engineering,

law and medicine later fix the field of study, which makes movement between fields almost impossible (Bharucha, 2024). Srinivasan (2018) examines how a European idea of liberal education was transplanted into the Indian university and where its limits lie.

NEP 2020 marks a policy turn. It endorses multidisciplinary education, expects institutions to move towards multidisciplinary status by 2040, and introduces multiple entry and exit points and an Academic Bank of Credit (Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau, 2025). The policy also links liberal learning to the ancient universities of Takshashila and Nalanda (Pushkar, 2021). Whether the policy can be realised in classrooms and in state budgets is the central practical question.

The question has particular force in Keralam, a state with high educational attainment and a fast-growing outflow of students. Literacy was 93.91% in the 2011 Census against 74.04% for India (Government of India, 2020), and the gross enrolment ratio for the 18 to 23 age group was 41.3 against 28.4 nationally in 2021–22 (Ministry of Education, 2024, p. 25). The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 counted about 250,000 student emigrants, up from 129,763 in 2018 (Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation & International Institute of Migration and Development [GIFT & IIMAD], 2024, p. 3). The migration scholar S. Irudaya Rajan has called this flow a resource drain whose economic effects have not been studied, while another researcher quoted in the same article sees brain circulation (Balan, 2023). Whether liberal arts provision could influence the outflow is a policy proposition that this review examines rather than assumes. The state is called Keralam in this paper and Kerala in the titles of the surveys and sources cited.

Four research questions guide the review.

1. How are liberal arts models organised in the United States, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and mainland China, and how do they differ in governance, funding, curriculum structure and documented outcomes?
2. Which elements of these models could India adopt, and under what conditions?
3. Which structural, pedagogical, financial and cultural gaps constrain the implementation of liberal education under NEP 2020?
4. What does the available evidence say about student emigration from Keralam, and does it support liberal arts provision as a retention strategy?

METHODOLOGY

Review design

This is a narrative review with a structured comparative component. It is not a systematic review, no protocol was registered, and no meta-analysis was attempted. The design suits the aim of connecting evidence from policy analysis, comparative higher education and migration research, which differ too much in method for statistical pooling.

Source identification

A supplementary targeted search was run in October 2026 on the open web and on publisher and repository websites. Search terms combined liberal arts or liberal education with India, NEP 2020, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, China and Keralam, and combined student migration or brain drain with Kerala and higher education. The supplementary search aimed to locate empirical or official evidence for the parts of the review that rested on thin sources: the comparative models, the Keralam evidence and the counter-arguments.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A source was included when it addressed liberal or multidisciplinary education, Indian higher education reform or student emigration from Keralam; was written in English; was published between 2006 and 2026 (or, for an institutional statement, was undated but current); and could be traced to a publisher, repository or official record. A source was excluded when its bibliographic details or content could not be verified, when it repeated findings available in a stronger source, or when it was a blog post without scholarly or institutional provenance.

Verification and evidence grading

Each reference was checked against a publisher, repository or official record. The claim attributed to it was checked against the full text where this was accessible and otherwise against the published abstract. Where a source did not support a claim as first stated, the claim was reworded or removed. Sources were then graded. Grade A covers research articles in journals, scholarly books, official statistics and policy documents. Grade B covers scholarly commentary, institutional or think-tank reports and trade books. Grade C covers news, magazine, opinion and podcast material. Grade C sources supply context, illustrative statements and policy news, and are not used as the sole support for causal claims; where one supplies a figure, the figure is attributed to it in the text. Grades describe the type of source, not the strength of an individual study; the limits of individual studies are stated where they are used.

Observations

Origins and global spread of liberal arts education

Godwin and Altbach (2016) trace liberal arts education to non-Western, Western and American roots. They argue that specialised curricula have generally dominated outside the United States even as liberal education has gained new prominence. In the United States the 1828 Yale Report is a milestone in the debate over the classical curriculum, and a liberal arts core has remained strongest in the elite sector (Godwin & Altbach, 2016). Altbach (2016) adds that liberal education has several origins, including Confucian and Indian antecedents, a point that bears directly on the claim that the model is simply Western.

A systematic scoping review by Satchanawakul and Liangruenrom (2025) searched six databases up to May 2023, screened 11,193 articles and included 295 studies. The review identifies three phases in the evolution of liberal arts education: philosophical foundations, a shift towards professional and market-driven demands, and a recent resurgence that combines traditional values with contemporary skills. The recent literature increasingly stresses non-Western cultural perspectives (Satchanawakul & Liangruenrom, 2025). Godwin and Altbach (2016) use the Global Liberal Education Inventory to map its renewed presence across regions.

A comparative framework: four models on four dimensions

Tables 2 and 3 compare the United States, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and mainland China on governance, funding, curriculum structure and documented outcomes. The tables report evidence only. Cells marked as not established show where the reviewed sources are silent, which is itself a finding about the state of the comparative literature.

Table 2. Governance and funding of four liberal arts models

Model	Governance	Funding and access
United States (liberal arts colleges and general education)	Curricula are set by individual institutions. The liberal arts core has persisted mainly in the elite sector (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).	Cost and part-time enrolment make the model appear a luxury to low-income and first-generation students, who feel pressure to choose practical majors (Harvard Gazette, 2024).
Netherlands (University Colleges)	Seven colleges, the first opened in 1998, each embedded in or affiliated with a research university. Admission is selective, and the deans coordinate through a network (University Colleges Deans Network [UCDN], n.d.). The colleges were created to diversify an egalitarian system and to attract international students (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).	Tuition is reported at up to double that of regular bachelor's programmes. In one single-site qualitative study, students described most peers as affluent (Salek Nejad & Puah, 2025).

Model	Governance	Funding and access
Hong Kong (four-year curriculum with general education)	A government mandate extended degrees from three to four years and added general education requirements, implemented through institution-level curriculum reform (Wang & Gano-Phillips, 2012). Godwin and Altbach (2016) describe an unprecedented system-wide mandate across public institutions.	Not established in the sources reviewed.
Mainland China (cultural quality education)	The Ministry of Education introduced cultural quality education in 1995, broadly equivalent to liberal arts education, to counterbalance a historically specialised curriculum. It is predominantly a public initiative (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).	Public initiative (Godwin & Altbach, 2016). Detailed funding arrangements are not established in the sources reviewed.

Table 3. Curriculum structure and documented outcomes of four liberal arts models

Model	Curriculum structure	Documented outcomes
United States	Breadth across disciplines is retained as a core in many institutions (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).	Employers rate critical thinking (79%), written communication (77%), working with people from different backgrounds (77%) and ethical judgment (73%) as very important (Finley, 2023, p. 14). Earnings vary widely by major, although the top quarter of humanities and liberal arts majors earn more than the bottom quarter of engineering majors (Carnevale et al., 2015).
Netherlands	An open curriculum spans the humanities, social sciences and natural and life sciences. Breadth is combined with a chosen concentration, an academic adviser, research-based teaching and English as the language of instruction (UCDN, n.d.).	No systematic outcome data in the sources reviewed. The single-site study cited above raises equity concerns (Salek Nejad & Puah, 2025).
Hong Kong	A general education requirement sits within the four-year degree (Wang & Gano-Phillips, 2012).	Not established in the sources reviewed.
Mainland China	General education courses, extracurricular *suzhi* education activities and reform of talent-cultivation models (Pang et al., 2020).	Not established in the sources reviewed.

Evidence on labour-market value

The strongest outcome evidence comes from the United States. Deming (2017) finds that the labour-market return to social skills was much larger in the 2000s than in the mid-1980s and 1990s, and that jobs requiring both mathematical and social skills saw particularly strong employment and wage growth. An employer survey of 1,010 managers found that more than nine in ten rated knowledge gained through interdisciplinary study and work on real-life problems as very or somewhat important (Finley, 2023, p. 1). The same survey reports the stricter very-important ratings shown in Table 3. Zakaria (2015) defends liberal education on the ground that adaptability and critical thinking keep their value as technology changes.

The evidence also contains cautions. Earnings differ widely by field of study (Carnevale et al., 2015), and an economist speaking on a Harvard podcast noted that the earnings gap between liberal arts and applied majors is largest just after graduation and narrows later, without giving figures (Harvard Gazette, 2024). Employer surveys and earnings data describe the United States, and they cannot be read across to Indian labour markets without

local evidence.

Liberal arts education and the Indian higher education system

India's higher education system is very large. The All India Survey on Higher Education counted about 4.33 crore students in 2021-22, with a gross enrolment ratio of 28.4 (Ministry of Education, 2024, pp. 11, 25). Liberal arts provision is concentrated in a small private sector. Pushkar (2021) names Ashoka, FLAME and Shiv Nadar among the new institutions and notes that established universities are adding humanities to engineering and management programmes, with IIM Bangalore and IIT Bombay launching liberal arts undergraduate programmes. Practitioners quoted by Forbes India report that FLAME's incoming class has more than doubled in a few years, that JDSoLA in Mumbai grew from 60 to 120 students with applications more than ten times the batch size, and that annual fees range from ₹4 lakh to ₹10 lakh (Forbes India, 2021). The same article gives no placement or salary statistics, so claims of strong placement outcomes cannot be supported from it.

Pushkar (2022) argues that a liberal arts wave in India depends on broader reform of governance, regulatory structures and institutional autonomy to raise the overall quality of college education. Pushkar (2021) adds a warning from history: the trend could repeat the engineering and management boom of the 1990s, which produced many low-quality degrees, unless graduates of public universities, not only elite colleges, find decent jobs. Stakeholder evidence on NEP 2020 is cautiously positive. In a mixed-methods study of students, teachers and experts, students saw multiple entry and exit options and the new credit system as the most beneficial features, experts were the most optimistic, and teachers said they needed further training to deliver the subjects and skills the policy envisions (Kulal et al., 2024). A review of NEP 2020 examines its alignment with global trends and argues that it could advance equity, quality and innovation, while treating these effects as potential (Ashokkumar et al., 2025).

Implementation gaps

Disciplinary architecture and admissions. Early stream selection and subject-specific entrance examinations lock students into fields before they can sample alternatives, and schools orient themselves around examination preparation (Bharucha, 2024). Universities reproduce the pattern through schools and departments that make collaboration difficult (Bharucha, 2024). Bharucha (2024) proposes that undergraduate education should be liberal and cross-disciplinary while keeping disciplinary rigour.

Faculty preparation. The teachers in the study by Kulal et al. (2024) said they needed further training. Ashokkumar et al. (2025) include teacher training and infrastructure among the areas the policy would affect. The sources reviewed do not measure how many faculty members have been trained for interdisciplinary teaching, which is an evidence gap rather than a finding of adequacy.

Perceptions and employability. Practitioners quoted by Forbes India say that liberal arts degrees are often regarded as not equal to mainstream courses because families emphasise securing a job, that interest comes mostly from students rather than parents, and that the view is slowly changing (Forbes India, 2021). These are practitioner impressions, not survey findings, and the reviewed literature contains no Indian employer survey comparable to Finley (2023).

Financing. Public spending on education by the Centre and states is about 3% of GDP, while NEP 2020 reaffirms a target of 6% (Asthana, 2022, p. 2). Pushkar (2021) argues that liberal arts teaching may cost more to deliver than single-subject degrees and that effort to produce employable graduates will largely fail without new revenue. The Department of Higher Education was allocated ₹40,828 crore in 2022–23 (Asthana, 2022, p. 2). Neither source estimates the unit cost of liberal arts provision, so the size of the funding gap for this model specifically is not established.

Keralam: student emigration and the retention question

Scale and composition. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 covered 20,000 households in 14 districts (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024, p. 2). It found 250,002 student emigrants in 2023 against 129,763 in 2018, an increase of about

93% by the authors' calculation from the survey's figures (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024, p. 38), and students made up 11.3% of all emigrants (p. 3). The United Kingdom ranked first, taking about one in four students, followed by Canada, which took about one in five (p. 39). Women were 45.6% of student emigrants (p. 38). More than 80% of the students had completed a degree in Keralam before going abroad (p. 39). Total remittances received by the state rose from ₹85,092 crore in 2018 to ₹216,893 crore in 2023 (p. 4). The 2018 estimate has been tied mainly to Gulf migration (Sreerag, 2023), so these totals should not be read as the effect of student emigration. Marginson (2006) describes global competition in higher education as producing unequal resources and one-way flows of students towards elite United States and United Kingdom universities, a framework consistent with these destinations.

Reported motives. Three small studies describe why students leave. Jeena and Afnitha (2025) surveyed 130 students and found that better income and career prospects (54 respondents), better education opportunities (30) and shortage of employment (14) were the most common reasons. Only 5% of their respondents planned to return. Skariah and Sivarenjini (2024), with 37 participants, report that students seek higher-quality education and better career prospects, that most leave after an undergraduate degree, and that perceived weaknesses in Keralam, including low quality, outdated syllabi and few job-oriented courses, shape decisions. Harimurali and Fernandes (2026) report better living standards (38.3%) and quality education (37.0%) as the leading reasons, that about 78% of respondents migrated after an undergraduate degree, and that 66.7% had studied in government institutions. The study is internally inconsistent: its sample size is stated as 45 in the abstract and 82 in the methodology, and its conclusion gives 60% planning to stay abroad against 49.4% in its results. Its return figure of 50.6% also differs sharply from that of Jeena and Afnitha (2025). Interviews reported by Balan (2023) add peer effects, the availability of bank loans, limited opportunities at home and, in one case, limited medical seats after a low entrance-examination rank.

What the evidence supports. Four observations follow. Emigration is driven by a mix of education quality, career prospects and living standards, and liberal arts provision could address only part of that mix. Complaints about outdated syllabi and few job-oriented courses are consistent with the flexible, skills-oriented direction of NEP 2020, but they are also consistent with other reforms. Because more than 80% of student emigrants had already finished a degree in Keralam (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024, p. 39), much of the outflow concerns postgraduate study and employment, which undergraduate reform alone cannot change. None of the reviewed studies measures demand for liberal arts programmes or tests whether such programmes affect emigration. The link between liberal arts provision and retention is therefore a hypothesis consistent with the evidence, not an established effect.

Policy context. The four-year undergraduate programme planned for Kerala's colleges from 2024–25 offers three pathways: a three-year degree, a four-year degree with Honours, and a four-year degree with Honours and Research. A three-year exit requires 133 credits and Honours requires 177 credits, and the course categories include multidisciplinary and skill-enhancement courses (The South First, 2024). The structure resembles the breadth-plus-depth design described above. The sources reviewed contain no evaluation of how it is working, which is an important gap.

DISCUSSION

What India can realistically adopt

Table 4 sets out the elements of each model that could transfer to India and the conditions that would have to hold. The table is the authors' synthesis and goes beyond what the cited sources state.

Table 4. Transferable elements and conditions for India (authors' synthesis)

Model	Transferable element	Conditions in the Indian context
United States	Breadth across disciplines before concentration within the undergraduate degree.	Late specialisation conflicts with early stream selection and examination-based admission (Bharucha, 2024). The four-year programmes under NEP 2020 provide a vehicle.

Model	Transferable element	Conditions in the Indian context
Netherlands	Small, selective colleges embedded in research universities that share facilities and accreditation (UCDN, n.d.).	Could be piloted inside state universities. Need-based aid would be needed to avoid the affluence problem reported by Salek Nejad and Puah (2025).
Hong Kong	A system-level mandate combined with institution-level curriculum design (Wang & Gano-Phillips, 2012).	NEP 2020 and Kerala's four-year programme supply the mandate. Monitoring is needed because implementation problems arise from the interplay of government, institutional and cultural levels (Wang & Gano-Phillips, 2012).
Mainland China	A policy that links general education to an existing national quality-education agenda (Pang et al., 2020).	India could connect liberal education to its own educational traditions. Top-down policy without faculty ownership is a risk, which is an inference from the Hong Kong implementation literature.

The strongest transfers are structural: flexible four-year degrees, small colleges inside existing public universities, and funded access. The weakest are claims about outcomes, because documented outcomes come almost entirely from the United States. Judged by three criteria, namely fit with existing Indian policy, strength of the evidence and resource demand, the Hong Kong and American elements are the most transferable. A policy mandate for flexible degrees already exists in NEP 2020, and breadth before concentration has the strongest evidence base, although that evidence is American. The Dutch college model comes next, since it is modest in scale but carries a documented equity risk. The Chinese model is the least informative, because its outcomes and funding are not established in the sources reviewed. This ranking is the authors' judgement.

Counter-arguments and responses

Liberal arts education is a Western import. The objection has weight. Srinivasan (2018) assesses the effects and limits of transplanting liberal education into India and reconstructs the educational thought of Gandhi and Tagore as an alternative to the inherited European model. The response from the reviewed literature is that liberal education has several origins, including Confucian and Indian antecedents (Altbach, 2016; Godwin & Altbach, 2016), and that recent scholarship stresses non-Western perspectives (Satchanawakul & Liangruenrom, 2025). NEP 2020's appeal to Takshashila and Nalanda (Pushkar, 2021) invites a question about continuity between ancient institutions and modern liberal arts degrees. The sources reviewed assert that lineage but do not test it, so it is best read as a statement of intent. The practical conclusion is that Indian liberal arts programmes should be designed with Indian content and pedagogical traditions, not copied.

It does not suit Indian economic realities. Graduates and families weigh employability, and fees of ₹4 lakh to ₹10 lakh a year at private institutions raise the stakes (Forbes India, 2021). Earnings evidence from the United States shows wide variation by major (Carnevale et al., 2015), and the 1990s boom in engineering and management degrees is a reminder that rapid expansion can lower quality (Pushkar, 2021). The response is that programmes should be judged on tracked graduate outcomes, which India does not yet collect for liberal arts graduates in the sources reviewed. Without such data, neither enthusiasm nor scepticism is well founded.

It will widen inequality. Cost and part-time enrolment already make liberal arts seem a luxury to low-income and first-generation students in the United States (Harvard Gazette, 2024), and Dutch honours colleges are perceived by their students as affluent (Salek Nejad & Puah, 2025). Pushkar (2021) stresses that public university graduates, not only those of elite colleges, must find decent jobs. The response is to place the model in publicly funded universities with need-based aid, and to monitor who enrols.

The brain drain framing is wrong. Rajan describes student emigration as a resource drain, while Harilal Madhavan sees brain circulation if labour and technology policies are well designed (Balan, 2023). The state's higher education minister has said that the aim is brain gain rather than brain drain (Sreerag, 2023). Return intentions differ sharply across the small studies reviewed (Harimurali & Fernandes, 2026; Jeena & Afnitha,

2025). Together with the finding that most student emigrants had already completed a degree in Keralam (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024, p. 39), this suggests that the retention claim should be narrower than the original framing: liberal arts provision may improve the appeal of domestic undergraduate study, but it is unlikely to retain students whose goal is postgraduate study or employment abroad.

A Reform Agenda

The five proposals below follow from the reviewed evidence. They are proposals for action and evaluation, not findings.

Governance and admissions. Reform of admissions and regulation should precede or accompany curriculum change, because stream selection and entrance examinations constrain flexibility (Bharucha, 2024) and because a liberal arts wave depends on governance, regulation and autonomy (Pushkar, 2022). Regulators could accredit genuinely interdisciplinary programmes and reward institutions that build cross-disciplinary faculty groups.

Faculty development. Teachers report a need for further training (Kulal et al., 2024). Sustained professional development in interdisciplinary teaching and inquiry-based assessment, together with exchanges between established liberal arts institutions, would address this. The size of the training gap should first be measured.

Public investment. With public education spending at about 3% of GDP against the 6% target (Asthana, 2022, p. 2), dedicated funds for liberal arts and multidisciplinary programmes in public universities would help keep the model from remaining a feature of fee-intensive private institutions. Unit-cost studies are needed to size such funds.

Outcome evidence and public communication. Indian employer surveys, graduate tracking and alumni profiles would make the value of liberal arts degrees visible to students and families, in the way the employer data compiled by Finley (2023) do in the United States. Communication should follow the evidence, not precede it.

Keralam pilots with evaluation. The four-year programme (The South First, 2024) offers a vehicle for pilot liberal arts and multidisciplinary pathways in state universities. Options such as scholarships for students who study domestically, or incentives for graduates who work in public institutions, could be piloted, but their effects on emigration are untested. Each pilot should be designed with a comparison group and linked to the data collection of the Kerala Migration Survey so that its effect on emigration decisions can be measured.

Limitations And Future Research

This review has some limits. It is a narrative review with no registered protocol, so the choice of sources may reflect the authors' own judgement. It uses only English-language sources and none in Malayalam. The comparison between countries is also uneven. Almost all the outcome data come from the United States, and the sources do not say how Hong Kong and mainland China fund their programmes.

The evidence on Keralam is the weakest part. Three studies look at why students leave, but they are small, with 37 to 130 respondents. One of them gives its sample size inconsistently, and they disagree on how many students plan to return. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 is a large household survey, so it is a stronger source. No study I reviewed links liberal arts provision to students' decisions to leave, and some of the background comes from news and opinion sources. For these reasons, the idea that liberal arts programmes could help keep students in Keralam is presented as a hypothesis, not a proven result.

Future research could fill these gaps in three ways:

- Follow Keralam graduates and emigrants over time.
- Ask students who are thinking of going abroad how they would choose if a liberal arts programme were available.

- Evaluate the new four-year degree programme by comparing it with similar groups that are not on it.

Studies should also collect more outcome and funding data for the Netherlands, Hong Kong and China, and include other Indian states. Research on student migration from India is growing (Rajan, 2024). Any new data collection in Keralam would need ethical approval.

CONCLUSION

Liberal arts education is both an old ideal and a current policy instrument. The comparison of four models shows that governance, funding and curriculum design vary widely and that documented outcomes are thin outside the United States. For India, the most transferable elements are structural: flexible four-year degrees, small colleges inside public research universities and funded access. Implementation under NEP 2020 is constrained by early specialisation, faculty preparation, public spending and uncertainty about employability.

For Keralam, student emigration has almost doubled in five years, but most emigrants have already completed a degree in the state, and no reviewed study shows that liberal arts provision would change their decisions. The review therefore supports a modest claim. Well-funded, publicly accessible liberal arts programmes may improve the appeal of domestic undergraduate education, and the four-year programme offers a way to test this. Whether they would moderate emigration is a question for evaluation, and the research agenda above is designed to answer it.

Declarations

Ethical approval. This study is a review of published and publicly available sources. It involved no human participants, animals or personal data, and ethical approval was therefore not required.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability. No new datasets were generated. All sources are cited in the reference list, and the source inventory with evidence grades is provided in Appendix A.

Licence. The article is intended for publication under a CC BY 4.0 licence, in line with journal policy.

REFERENCES

1. Altbach, P. G. (2016). The many traditions of liberal arts-and their global relevance. International Higher Education, (84), 21-23. https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2016.84.9116
2. Ashokkumar, T., Russel Raj, T., Rajadurai, A., Abishini, A. H., & Anchani, A. H. (2025). Analyzing the impact of the new educational policy 2020: A comprehensive review of India's educational reforms. Evaluation and Program Planning, 108, Article 102515. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2024.102515
3. Asthana, R. (2022). Demand for grants 2022-23 analysis: Education. PRS Legislative Research. https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_parliament/2022/DFG%20Analysis%202022-23_Education.pdf
4. Balan, S. S. (2023, March 20). Why Kerala sees a large number of students going abroad for studies. The News Minute. https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/why-kerala-sees-large-number-students-going-abroad-studies-174786
5. Bharucha, J. (2024). India's realignment of higher education. Dædalus, 153(2). https://www.amacad.org/publication/daedalus/indias-realignment-higher-education
6. Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., & Hanson, A. R. (2015). The economic value of college majors. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/items/41e8d59e-2d49-492c-988b-ffd08a20d255
7. Deming, D. J. (2017). The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 132(4), 1593–1640. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx022

8. Finley, A. P. (2023). The career-ready graduate: What employers say about the difference college makes. Association of American Colleges and Universities. https://www.aacu.org/research/the-career-ready-graduate-what-employers-say-about-the-difference-college-makes
9. Forbes India. (2021, April 21). The state of liberal arts education in India [Reprint]. FLAME University. https://www.flame.edu.in/in-the-media/the-state-of-liberal-arts-education-in-india
10. Godwin, K. A., & Altbach, P. G. (2016). A historical and global perspective on liberal arts education: What was, what is, and what will be. International Journal of Chinese Education, 5(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1163/22125868-12340057
11. Government of India. (2020). Literacy. In India book 2020: A reference annual. Know India. https://knowindia.india.gov.in/profile/literacy.php
12. Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, & International Institute of Migration and Development. (2024). Kerala Migration Survey 2023 [Report]. International Institute of Migration and Development. https://iimad.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/KMS-2023-Report.pdf
13. Harimurali, M., & Fernandes, J. (2026). An analysis of student migration and mobility in Kerala: Causes and emerging challenges. TIJER – International Research Journal, 13(2), a365-a388. https://tijer.org/tijer/papers/TIJER2602049.pdf
14. Harvard Gazette. (2024, October 9). The true value of a liberal arts education [Podcast transcript]. Harvard University. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/10/the-true-value-of-college-a-liberal-arts-education-podcast-harvard-thinking/
15. Jeena, P. M., & Afnitha, P. (2025). Educational migration from Kerala: An empirical study of student mobility for higher education. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 9(15), 1050-1057. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.915EC00730
16. Kulal, A., Abhishek, N., Dinesh, S., Bhat, D. C., & Girish, A. (2024). Evaluating the promise and pitfalls of India's National Education Policy 2020: Insights from the perspectives of students, teachers, and experts. SAGE Open, 14(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241279367
17. Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education. Higher Education, 52(1), 1-39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-7649-x
18. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
19. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2024). All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22. https://education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/AISHE%20Book_2021-22_4.pdf
20. Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities. Princeton University Press.
21. Pang, H., Cheng, M., Yu, J., & Wu, J. (2020). Suzhi education and general education in China. ECNU Review of Education, 3(2), 380–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120913171
22. Press Information Bureau. (2025, July 28). Higher education under NEP 2020: Reimagining India's academic landscape. Government of India. https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2025/jul/doc2025729593701.pdf
23. Pushkar. (2021, September 12). India's bet on liberal arts will fail without more investment. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/indias-bet-liberal-arts-will-fail-without-more-investment
24. Pushkar. (2022). The coming liberal arts wave in India. International Higher Education, (109), 15-17. https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14485
25. Rajan, S. I. (Ed.). (2024). India migration report 2023: Student migration. Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003490234
26. Salek Nejad, N. L., & Puah, C. (2025). The hidden costs of excellence: Disposable income and the making of honors colleges in the Netherlands. Berkeley Journal of Sociology. https://berkeleyjournal.org/2025/06/11/hidden-costs-of-excellence/
27. Satchanawakul, N., & Liangruenrom, N. (2025). The historical evolution of liberal arts education: A systematic scoping review with global perspectives and future recommendations. International Journal of Educational Research Open, 9, Article 100482. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2025.100482
28. Skariah, A., & Sivarenjini, B. (2024). Dynamics of international student migration: An explorative study in the context of Kerala, India. AIDASCO Reviews, 2(1), 57-67. https://doi.org/10.59783/aire.2024.46

29. The South First. (2024, May 28). Multi-path FYUGP for colleges, AI powered classes and lessons on POCSO in Kerala schools. https://thesouthfirst.com/kerala/multi-path-fyugp-for-colleges-ai-powered-classes-and-lessons-on-pocso-in-kerala-schools/
30. Sreerag, P. S. (2023, February 9). Brain drain or brain gain? Kerala debates growing migration of students abroad for higher education. The South First. https://thesouthfirst.com/kerala/brain-drain-or-brain-gain-kerala-debates-growing-migration-of-students-abroad-for-higher-education/
31. Srinivasan, S. (2018). Liberal education and its discontents: The crisis in the Indian university. Routledge India.
32. University Colleges Deans Network. (n.d.). Statement on the role, characteristics, and cooperation of liberal arts and sciences colleges in the Netherlands. https://www.eur.nl/sites/corporate/files/ucdn-statement-web-version.pdf
33. Wang, X., & Gano-Phillips, S. (2012). Implementing general education in Hong Kong: Government policies, institutional responses, opportunities and challenges. Frontiers of Education in China, 7(2), 253–269. https://doi.org/10.3868/s110-001-012-0014-9
34. Zakaria, F. (2015). In defense of a liberal education. W. W. Norton & Company.

Appendix A. Source Inventory And Evidence Grades

Table A1. Sources included in the review, with type, evidence grade and role

Source	Type	Grade	Role in the review
Altbach (2016)	Essay	B	Multiple origins of liberal arts
Ashokkumar et al. (2025)	Journal article	A	NEP 2020 potential effects
Asthana (2022)	Think-tank report	B	Public education spending; NEP target
Balan (2023)	News	C	Expert views and interviews on emigration
Bharucha (2024)	Essay	B	Early specialisation; entrance examinations
Carnevale et al. (2015)	Report	B	Earnings by major
Deming (2017)	Journal article	A	Returns to social skills
Finley (2023)	Report	B	Employer survey
Forbes India (2021)	Magazine	C	Private liberal arts growth; fees; perceptions
Godwin & Altbach (2016)	Journal article	A	Global history; four models
Government of India (2020)	Official statistics	A	Literacy
GIFT & IIMAD (2024)	Survey report	B	Student emigration from Keralam
Harimurali & Fernandes (2026)	Journal article	A	Motives of student emigrants
Harvard Gazette (2024)	Podcast transcript	C	Cost and access; earnings trajectory
Jeena & Afnitha (2025)	Journal article	A	Motives of student emigrants
Kulal et al. (2024)	Journal article	A	Stakeholder views of NEP 2020
Marginson (2006)	Journal article	A	Global competition; student flows
Ministry of Education (2020)	Policy document	A	NEP 2020
Ministry of Education (2024)	Official statistics	A	Enrolment; gross enrolment ratio
Nussbaum (2010)	Book	A	Civic argument for humanities
Pang et al. (2020)	Journal article	A	General education in China
Press Information Bureau (2025)	Official backgrounder	B	NEP 2020 provisions
Pushkar (2021)	Opinion	C	Private liberal arts; investment; warning
Pushkar (2022)	Essay	B	Conditions for a liberal arts wave
Rajan (2024)	Edited volume	A	Student migration research
Salek Nejad & Puah (2025)	Journal article	A	Dutch honours colleges; equity

Source	Type	Grade	Role in the review
Satchanawakul & Liangruenrom (2025)	Journal article	A	Scoping review
Skariah & Sivarenjini (2024)	Journal article	A	Motives of student emigrants
The South First (2024)	News	C	Kerala four-year programme
Sreerag (2023)	News	C	Ministerial statements
Srinivasan (2018)	Book	A	Limits of transplanted liberal education
UCDN (n.d.)	Institutional statement	B	Dutch University Colleges
Wang & Gano-Phillips (2012)	Journal article	A	Hong Kong general education
Zakaria (2015)	Book	B	Defence of liberal education

Grade A: journal research articles, scholarly books, official statistics and policy documents. Grade B: scholarly commentary, institutional or think-tank reports and trade books. Grade C: news, magazine, opinion and podcast material.