

Contemporary Career Orientations: An Empirical Study among Student Migrants from Kerala

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Career growth has become both an opportunity and a challenge in the rapidly evolving world of today. Traditional career orientations, characterized by linear advancement within a single organization, have progressively transitioned to more dynamic, self-directed career paths. Protean and boundaryless career orientations are the most prominent among various contemporary career orientations. Migration patterns are increasingly shaping labor markets and educational landscapes. The study of migrant students' career orientations is highly relevant in today's globalized context. The present study aimed to understand the contemporary career orientations, especially the protean and boundaryless career orientations, among student migrants from Kerala. 200 international students from Kerala participated in the study. The study results indicate that the student migrants have a strong inclination toward proactive career orientations. The findings provide valuable insights into various dimensions, such as self-direction, value-driven behavior, boundaryless mindset, and the organizational mobility preferences exhibited by student migrants. The study also carries practical implications for enhancing the career development of student migrants.

Keywords: contemporary career orientation, protean career, boundaryless career, student migrants, kerala

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1. Introduction

The shifts in the workplace over the last several decades have led to an increase in the number of studies investigating modern career patterns. Increased self-directedness, flexibility, and the pursuit of subjective career success distinguish these kinds of careers. Career orientation is described as *"the features of work that defines one's career goals, reflecting an individual's self-concept regarding his or her self-perceived values, interests, experience, skills and abilities (Bravo et al., 2017, p. 503)"*. The literature frequently characterizes career orientations as either traditional and organisation-centred or new and self-centered, which is consistent with the primary differentiation between "traditional" and "contemporary" or "modern" career forms. Traditional careers primarily feature upward steps in the organizational hierarchy. Employers are considered responsible for employee career management and job security in traditional careers. In contemporary career orientations, transitions between employment, organizations, and occupations are frequent. Individuals are responsible for their own career management. Therefore, individuals who prioritize employment security and advancement within a single organization tend to exhibit a traditional career orientation, while those who prioritize self-direction and frequent organizational changes demonstrate a contemporary career orientation. The most commonly discussed contemporary career orientations are the 'protean career' (Hall, 2004) and the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001).

Student migrants are a vulnerable population, facing challenges related to cultural and language barriers, homesickness, and various cross-cultural transition issues (Sherry et al., 2010), which can hinder their integration into the workforce. Migrants frequently struggle to adjust to a new cultural setting, limiting their capacity to form networks, understand job markets, and access resources. Many student migrants do not have access to culturally relevant career coaching that pertains to their specific backgrounds and future paths. Migrants frequently experience economic difficulty, making it harder for them to pursue education and employment prospects. Overall, their professional progress may be challenging.

The majority of student migrants may have a strong inclination towards contemporary career orientation, particularly protean career orientation, in response to the challenges and changes in their surroundings.

A protean career orientation prioritises self-fulfillment and personal growth, allowing students to concentrate on their own values and self-determined success instead of rigid external contexts. This is especially attractive to student migrants, who frequently move through various cultural and professional environments that necessitate ongoing learning and adaptability. Boundaryless careers, marked by mobility across various organisations and industries, enable migrants to seek opportunities beyond traditional career boundaries. Both these approaches match with student migrants requirements for adaptability and self-direction in a progressively globalised and unpredictable employment market. Student migrants can enhance their career management by adopting these orientations, aligning their objectives with evolving global trends, and addressing challenges such as geographical and cultural transitions.

The process of student migration has become increasingly predominant among young individuals from Kerala. Despite Kerala's high literacy rate, better educational aspirations and career opportunities abroad drive youth migration. Contemporary career orientations, such as protean and boundaryless, give an idea of how an individual perceives and manages their career in a host country. Few studies have explored the career orientations of these student migrants in this context. This study aims to fill this gap by identifying the contemporary career orientations among student migrants from Kerala. The study findings could inform educational institutions, career counsellors, and policymakers about the specific needs of student migrants, enabling them to provide improved support for their career development.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Career Orientations

Career orientations are attitudes that reflect an individual's overall intentions and influence career-related decisions (Maier et.al., 1994).

A person's career orientation reflects their attitudes toward various job opportunities, circumstances, and career types. There is a lot of uncertainty about work paths and expectations these days because the job market is unstable and unpredictable (Briscoe et al., 2012). To deal with this lack of clarity, jobs are now more controlled by the person than by the company, and they are influenced by personal values rather than outside factors." The "boundaryless career" (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and the "protean career" (Hall, 2004) are two of the most well-known contemporary career orientations.

Protean Career Orientation

As a promising way to understand the careers and lives of contemporary employees, protean career orientation (PCO) (Briscoe & Hall, 2006) shows a renewed focus on people as "agents of their own career destinies" (Inkson & Baruch, 2008: 217). PCO comes from Hall's (1976) idea of the "protean career." It means that a person tends to create a career that is focused on their own subjective success through self-managed career management. PCO is based on two important ideas: (1) a self-directed approach to career management in which the person takes charge of their career development by exploring career options and making career decisions; and (2) a values-driven orientation in which the person pursues personally meaningful (rather than socially imposed) values and goals that guide their career decisions and set the standards for psychological career success.

A robust PCO correlates with significant career outcomes, including enhanced career authenticity (Briscoe et al., 2006) and career success (De Vos & Soens, 2008). Higher perceived employability positively influences perceived marketability (De Vos et al., 2011) and well-being. It also assists students in navigating the complex transition into the workforce. Research indicates that adopting a protean career orientation (PCO) can enhance perceived employability among students, facilitating their navigation of the contemporary career landscape. Applying the PCO may facilitate the development of career competencies among students (Baruch et al., 2019). Research indicates that protean careers are associated with various career benefits such as enhanced life balance (Direnzo et al., 2015; Briscoe et al., 2006), proactive career behaviors, work engagement,

career planning and career exploration (Herrmann et al., 2015) among students and employees.

A lack of a protean career orientation may reduce employee interest in the job or assignment, negatively impacting productivity, effectiveness, satisfaction, and cross-cultural adjustment, according to a study by Sathish et al. (2024) among Indian self-initiated expats.

Boundaryless Career Orientation

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) first proposed the idea of a boundaryless career. A protean career perspective emphasizes agency, whereas a boundaryless orientation emphasizes opportunity (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). A boundaryless professional orientation emphasizes psychological and physical mobility throughout one's life and career. Arthur & Rousseau (1996) used two different dimensions to operationalize a boundaryless career orientation. Psychological mobility refers to an individual's tendency to look for work activities and relationships outside of departmental or organizational bounds. Physical mobility refers to the ways in which a person's career progresses beyond one workplace.

The new "proactive career orientation" was created after a thorough study of the four protean and boundaryless components (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). It focusses on self-driven, goal-directed work behaviour and combines the self-directedness and values-driven components from the protean career orientation with psychological mobility from the boundaryless orientation. The 'independent career orientation' combines components of both the protean and boundaryless career orientations and is distinguished by a positive attitude towards frequent organizational changes and a commitment to oneself rather than the employer (Gerber et al., 2009). Gerber et al. (2009) discovered that those with an independent career orientation had the highest levels of employability, whereas those with a traditional career orientation had the lowest levels of employability.

We propose the following hypotheses based on the detailed literature review.

Career Orientations and Gender

Hall (2004) argues that gender is unrelated to an individual's career.

Kostal and Wiernik's (2017) meta-analysis further validated the gender similarities in protean and boundaryless career orientations. Some scholars have observed that contemporary women are progressively adopting self-directed jobs, indicating a shift toward protean career adoption. A substantial amount of data indicates that women are inclined to embrace protean career behaviors, whereas men are more likely to display conventional career patterns (Hall, 2004). Women typically conceptualize careers differently than men. Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 1a(H1a): The protean career orientations of men and women differ significantly.

Hypothesis 1b(H1b): The boundaryless career orientations of men and women differ significantly.

Career Orientations and Type of Employment

Because of differences in work commitment, career flexibility, and personal aspirations, part-time and full-time employees have different protean and boundaryless career orientations. Studies reveal that those with a self-directed PCO are more likely to actively explore career options and take up new abilities to identify desired employment, thus boosting their confidence in their employment possibilities. Therefore, it is likely that self-directed students perceive greater opportunities to acquire jobs that match with their qualifications (Cortellazzo et al., 2020). Based on these assumptions, we propose:

Hypothesis 2a(H2a): There is significant difference in protean career orientation among different type of employment categories such as full time and part time.

Hypothesis 2b(H2b): There is significant difference in boundaryless career orientation among different type of employment categories such as full time and part time.

Career Orientations and Educational Qualifications

According to several studies, people with more education typically have a more flexible job preference. Advanced education often encourages self-directedness and emphasizes personal values, which are essential to protean attitudes. Higher-educated graduates are more likely to take charge of their job growth and look for fulfilment at work.

Individuals with lower education levels may prioritize job stability over self-directed growth, which limits their inclination towards protean attitudes. Educated individuals are more likely to adopt boundaryless career orientations. Exposure to diverse networks, globalised job markets, and skills for navigating various organisations promotes this attitude. Individuals with lower education levels frequently encounter structural constraints, including limited mobility options and dependence on traditional career patterns, which diminishes the boundaryless orientation. Based on this argument, we propose:

Hypothesis 3a(H3a): There is significant difference in protean career orientation among different education levels.

Hypothesis 3b(H3b): There is significant difference in boundaryless career orientation among different education levels.

3. Research Methodology

The present study is cross-sectional in nature. The sample comprised 200 student migrants from Kerala. The whole sample was selected from four different countries: Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The study included students who studied overseas between 2020 and 2023, including those who held employment. We distributed the questionnaire via various social media platforms.

Evaluated protean and boundaryless career attitudes among student migrants using an adapted version of the protean and boundaryless career attitudes scale (PBCA; Porter et al., 2015). The participants were asked to rate each item's reflection of their feelings on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 5 represents strong agreement. Higherscore signified a stronger affinity for the tested concept.

4. Analysis and Interpretation

SPSS 22 was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics determined the demographic profiles and career orientations of the respondents. We used statistical tests like the independent T test and the analysis of variance to provide evidence for multiple hypotheses.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Among 200 responses, 101 (50.5%) were female and 99 (49.5%) were male. We identified the qualifications of a group of 200 individuals into three unique levels: Undergraduate (UG), Postgraduate (PG), and Above Postgraduate. 30.5% are undergraduates, 60.0% are postgraduates, and 9.5% hold qualifications exceeding the postgraduate level. This distribution reveals a highly educated demographic, primarily made up of individuals with postgraduate degrees, indicating a workforce or culture that values advanced education and specialised knowledge highly. While the majority (65%) of respondents work full-time, a significant minority (35%) works part-time. This means that more of the respondents from Kerala are now working full-time.

Descriptive Statistics: Protean Career Orientation

Protean career orientation measured using two different constructs such as self -

directed and value driven. The results of the descriptive statistics are given below,

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of protean career orientation

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
Self- directed		
Responsible for own career success or failure	4.13	.925
Very much my own person when it comes to my work	3.74	.973
Free choice of career is important	4.21	.7931
Value- driven		
Don't care what other people think about my career	4.00	.9873
Prioritizing own feelings than employers	3.39	1.0359
Own feelings of career success are important	3.85	1.016

The dimension of self-directedness consists of three statements. Derived from the average of three means, the overall mean score for self-directedness is 4.03; the standard deviation of 0.895 is computed as the average of the standard deviations. This indicates a strong inclination among respondents to assume responsibility for their career paths, therefore suggesting that they view themselves as empowered and liable for their professional results. The high mean scores—exceeding 4—on the first and final questions show that the respondents value autonomy in their job choices highly and admit their responsibility in determining their success or failure.

The three statements disclose a value-oriented aspect. This dimension has a mean of 3.74 and a standard deviation of 1.013. This indicates that personal values hold greater significance than external opinions in the context of employment decisions. The lower mean score for prioritising personal feelings over employers indicates a possibility of improvement in expressing personal beliefs within the workplace.

Descriptive Statistics: Boundaryless Career Orientations

Boundaryless career orientation measured using two different constructs, such as boundaryless mindset and organizational mobility preference. The results are shown below.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of boundaryless career orientation

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
Boundaryless mindset		
Like to work beyond own department	3.60	.9078
Enjoy working with people from other departments	3.95	.878
Looked for opportunities that allow to work outside the organization	3.54	1.016
Organizational mobility preferences		
Feel very lost if couldn't work for current organization	2.95	1.097
Like predictability of working continuously for same org.	2.69	1.034
Prefer to stay in a familiar company	2.905	1.123

The initial three statements describe the dimension of the boundaryless attitude. With a standard deviation of 0.934 (the average of the three means), the boundaryless mindset has an overall mean score of 3.70. This shows a somewhat high desire among respondents to adopt a boundaryless approach to their employment, defined by a readiness to collaborate across departmental lines and search for chances outside their present company.

The fairly high mean score for liking working with people from other departments (3.95) suggests that participants value working with people from other departments and are open to different points of view in their work. This is consistent with modern organisational theories stressing the need of cross-functional cooperation in promoting creativity and flexibility in the dynamic workplaces of today. Moreover, the mean score of 3.54 for looking for prospects outside the company shows a proactive attitude towards professional development,

implying that participants are not only happy in their present positions but also actively search for chances for professional development that might exceed their current organizational setting.

The last three statements measure the organizational mobility dimension of boundaryless career orientation. The mean score for organizational mobility choices is 2.85, with an average standard deviation of 1.088. This indicates that respondents have a diminished desire for upward mobility within the organization. This implies that many individuals find comfort and stability in staying in their current positions.

The diminished mean scores (all below 3) indicate that individuals generally want predictability and familiarity in the workplace. This indicates that individuals may experience uncertainty or hesitation during career or organizational transitions. This aligns with traditional notions of career development, which emphasize employment security and stability as crucial elements in maintaining employee happiness and satisfaction.

Protean and Boundaryless Orientation across Gender, Educational Qualification, and Type of Employment

The results of the hypothesis test are given below:

Table 3: Results of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Test used	Analysis	Result	Interpretation
H1a	Independent T test	$t = 1.456$, Sig. = 0.147	failed to reject the null hypothesis.	There is no significant difference in the PCO among male and female student migrants.
H1b	Independent T test	$t = 1.631$ Sig. = 0.104	failed to reject the null hypothesis.	There is no significant difference in the BCO among male and female migrant students.
H2a	Independent T test	$t = 2.222$ Sig. = 0.027	Rejecting null hypothesis	There is statistically significant difference in PCO among student migrants working as full time and part-time employees.
H2b	Independent T test	$t = .9376$ Sig. = 0.332	failed to reject the null hypothesis	There is no statistically significant difference in BCO among student migrants working as full time and part-time employees.

H3a	Anova	$F = 1.955$ Sig. = 0.144	failed to reject the null hypothesis.	There is no significant difference in the PCO across different educational qualifications among student migrants.
H3b	Anova	$F = 0.789$ Sig. = 0.456	failed to reject the null hypothesis.	There is no significant difference in the BCO across different educational qualifications among student migrants.

Table 3 indicates that there is no significant difference in Protean Career Orientation (PCO) and Boundaryless Career Orientation (BCO) among student migrants based on gender and educational qualifications, including undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels. However, the protean career orientation varies between part-time and full-time employees. Full-time employees exhibited a higher mean of 3.95 compared to part-time employees, who had a mean of 3.75. In the context of boundaryless career orientation, there is no significant distinction between full-time workers (3.29) and part-time workers (3.22).

5. Discussion

The present study assesses protean career orientation using two components: self-direction and value-driven principles. Student migrants demonstrate a robust protean career orientation, with a mean score of 4.03 for self-directedness and 3.74 for value-driven components. This indicates that these individuals actively manage their careers and prioritize personal values throughout their professional journeys. The elevated mean score for self-directedness aligns with earlier research, emphasizing the necessity of self-management in professional development, particularly among young professionals and students. According to Hall (2004), the individuals with a protean career orientation show control over their career path. They may adapt to changes in their environments. They identify various opportunities that align with their specific objectives. Karimi et al. (2024) identified a positive correlation between protean career orientation and both career adaptability and career decision self-efficacy.

Self-starting expatriates, such as student migrants, may encounter various challenges in their career progression. Based on the research, we can say that despite the challenges faced by student migrants, their strong pro-active career orientation aids them in managing these changes. Furthermore, the notable variations in protean career orientation between full-time and part-time employees imply that full-time employees could have superior means or drive to actively control their careers. This result fits Akkermans et al. (2013), who found that full-time workers typically had easier access to chances for professional growth, thereby strengthening their protean orientation.

Further the study enquired about the boundaryless mindset of student migrants. With an average score of 3.70, the boundaryless mindset shows that respondents are ready to work with people from other departments and look for new experiences. The student migrants received a lower score (2.85) for organisational mobility choices. This shows that they like flexibility and working with others, but they also need stability in known work environments. This result is consistent with previous research indicating that individuals still prioritize job security and familiarity over other factors, despite the increasing popularity of boundaryless jobs in today's job market (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001).

Based on the research findings, the researcher concludes that the student migrants from Kerala exhibit proactive career behaviour which combines psychological mobility element of boundaryless career orientation and self-directed, value-driven elements of protean career orientation. This strongly supports the assertion that student migrants have a significant tendency for a protean career orientation.

6. Implications of the Study

The current study investigates the career orientations of student migrants, particularly those from Kerala. It has significant implications for educational institutions, careers counsellors, and policymakers. The student migrants are comparatively new to the place, and they may face some educational challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and an unfamiliar education system.

In order to overcome such challenges, educational institutions should tailor career development assistance to meet the needs of student migrants. The tailored career guidance can ensure improved social and economic integration and enhance equity and social inclusion. Institutions can provide support with proactive job planning and develop self-management behaviors there by employability and career adaptability can foster among student migrants. Student migrants show less inclination toward organizational mobility preferences, and the career counsellors should motivate the students to balance their careers with mobility and stability.

Policymakers can significantly contribute to the career development of migrant students by implementing policies that foster collaboration between organizations and educational institutions. Such programs will provide student migrants the chance to find internships that fit with their skills and goals. Such programs help students gain real-world experience, and organizations can hire students from different backgrounds.

More research can conduct on how migrants' preferences for organizational mobility evolve over time. In order to assist the migrants, it may be helpful to understand why they prioritize security over advancement. Future research can extend to areas such as the type of work student migrants prefer, cultural effects on career goals and preferences, etc.

7. Conclusion

This study attempted to clarify the current career orientations of student migrants from Kerala. This study highlights the proactive characteristics of student migrants. The findings indicate that student migrants want stability in familiar organizational environments, despite their inclination toward self-direction and value-driven professional methods. The examination of modern career orientations among migrant students highlights the dynamic interaction between globalization, labour market demands, and personal career objectives. The research illustrates that student migrants often adopt a proactive professional outlook, prioritizing adaptability, self-direction, and continuous skill enhancement to improve their employability in international markets.

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