# Kerala Career Interest Survey:
# *A Culturally Relevant Interest-Based Career Guidance Tool for 10th Grade Students*

**Maya Menon**
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology,
Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

**Shiju Joseph**
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology,
Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

**Huda Ameen\***
Research Scholar, Department of Psychology,
Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

**Betsy Baby**
Research Scholar, Department of Psychology,
Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

**Abhilash V. L.**
Research Scholar, Department of Psychology,
University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

## Abstract

Interest-based career guidance tools are essential resources for school students to explore potential career paths aligned with their interests and strengths. Although such tools have been widely studied and applied in Western contexts, their development and use in India remain minimal. This gap demonstrates the importance of culturally relevant tools that can address the diverse aspirations and sociocultural realities of Indian students. This study reports the development of the Kerala Career Interest Survey (KCIS), a culturally relevant, interest-based career guidance tool for 10th standard students in Kerala, India. The KCIS was developed through an iterative process of collaboration with subject experts, resulting in the identification of 20 career clusters relevant to the cultural and occupational context. It was designed as a bilingual (English and Malayalam), self-administered checklist through which students can select items that describe their interests and personality traits, which are then mapped to the career clusters. The KCIS provides career cluster recommendations with associated occupations and higher education options available after 10th grade. Over four years, the KCIS has been administered to more than 8000 students, with consistently positive feedback regarding its relevance and usability. The simplicity, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and cultural relevance of the KCIS make it highly practical for large-scale implementation in school settings.

**Keywords:** career guidance, interest-based assessment, Kerala Career Interest Survey, cultural relevance, career decision-making, career counselling, secondary school students

*Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Huda Ameen, email: hudaameen@gcwtvm.ac.in

## Introduction

Career decision-making is a pivotal process in contemporary educational and vocational landscapes. In India, upon completing the broad curriculum of High School, especially the 10th standard, students are required to choose a specialized stream (science, humanities, commerce, or vocational) for their higher education. This decision is often made at 15 or 16 years of age, when their personal interests, awareness of available opportunities, and understanding of the long-term implications of their choices are still being developed. Family expectations and societal norms strongly influence this decision-making (Arulmani, 2013; Kamraju, 2025).

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of early, informed, and meaningful decision-making in achieving fulfilling and purposeful career paths (Savickas, 2012). These informed career choices are possible only when students are equipped with skills that would help them understand both existing and emerging opportunities, as well as a clear sense of their personal interests (Varghese, 2024; Waghmode et al., 2024). Career guidance tools serve as a valuable resource for facilitating this process of effective career planning.

## Career Guidance Tools

The two primary categories of career guidance assessment tools are aptitude-based and interest-based, each offering distinct advantages and limitations. Aptitude refers to an individual's innate potential to acquire proficiency in specific areas of knowledge or skills through training and experience (Bennett et al., 1982). Aptitude-based tools (e.g., Differential Aptitude Test and David's Battery of Differential Abilities) assess abilities in areas such as logical reasoning, numerical skills, and verbal aptitude, aiming to match individuals with careers suited to their capabilities. However, aptitude-based tools may overlook personal passion, potentially guiding individuals toward careers they may excel in but not necessarily find fulfilling (Waghmode et al., 2024).

In contrast, interests reflect trait-like preferences for particular activities, environments, and outcomes that motivate goal-directed behaviour and achievement (Jones et al., 2020). When these preferences are dispositional (vs situational), they can inform long-term career fit (Low et al., 2005). Interest-based tools guide the individual toward careers that align with their intrinsic motivations, fostering higher job satisfaction, and engagement, which in turn enhances overall well-being and economic success (Holland, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Such alignment also reduces the likelihood of academic or career dissatisfaction and subsequent changes in career direction, thereby optimizing personal and societal resources (Waghmode et al., 2024). However, as individuals develop through adolescence and major life transitions, their personal interests may evolve, potentially reducing the long-term predictive accuracy of these tools. Nevertheless, the convenience and accessibility offered by these tools through self-administration remain a significant advantage (Arulmani, 2014).

Considering the distinct yet complementary nature of interests and aptitudes, contemporary career guidance has adopted a blended approach that integrates interests and aptitudes (Arulmani, 2014, 2015). This perspective provides a more actionable foundation for career guidance. When combined with effective career counseling, these assessments can help students identify their preferences, strengths, and passions. Students can thus align their educational pathways with their aspirations, fostering the development of relevant skills (Gashi et al., 2023).

Several standardized assessments have been developed over the years to operationalize these constructs and support career decision-making. Internationally used interest assessments

such as the Strong Interest Inventory (Strong, 1935), Self-Directed Search (Holland, Powell, & Fritzsche, 1997), and Campbell Interest and Skill Survey (Campbell, Hyne, & Nilsen, 1992), have demonstrated their effectiveness in helping Western student populations identify compatible career paths. John Holland's Theory of Career Choice (1997), or the RIASEC model, serves as the theoretical foundation for most of these assessments. This framework categorizes careers and personal preferences into six types: Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), and Conventional (C). This theory emphasizes that people experience more satisfaction and productivity when their work environment is congruent with their personality type (Holland, 1997).

There are concerns about the framework's capacity to capture the cultural nuances of student populations from different cultural backgrounds (Leong et al., 1998). Recent research demonstrates the growing trend of developing culturally sensitive career guidance tools across different countries, which may improve the efficacy of career counselling programs (Bagaskara et al., 2023; Putri & Susanto, 2023; Hartono & Soedarmadji, 2018; Thammaiah et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2015).

Designing career guidance tools for regional cultures in India poses unique challenges. The career expectations of Kerala are mostly influenced by familial aspirations, societal norms, and local industries (Krishnan & Lasitha, 2019; Sharma, 2024). For example, career options such as agriculture, fisheries, and administrative careers within the government sector, which are more relevant in Kerala, may not be adequately represented in assessments developed in the Western context (Salam et al., 2022; George & Maruthi, 2024). The RIASEC model does not inherently address these region-specific priorities. This cultural disconnect, along with the limited adoption of career guidance tools in Indian educational systems, necessitates a more focused and streamlined approach tailored

to the needs of Indian students. The present study addresses this gap by developing an interest-based career guidance tool specifically designed to meet the cultural, educational, and linguistic needs of 10th standard students in Kerala, India.

## Development of Kerala Career Interest Survey (KCIS)

The Kerala Career Interest Survey (KCIS) was therefore conceptualized as a culturally tailored interest-based career guidance tool for 10th standard students in Kerala, India. Its structure and components evolved through an iterative process discussed in the following sections. The initial stage focused on integrating insights from established frameworks of career guidance assessments.

### Review of Existing Models

A comprehensive review of existing career inventory models informed the initial design of the tool. Key features have been identified in widely used international assessments, such as the Oklahoma Career Cluster Interest Inventory, the RIASEC inventory, the O*NET Interest Profiler, and the Strong Interest Inventory. Most of these tools assess interests through preferences in activities, school subjects, and personal qualities and map those responses to occupational codes or career clusters using Holland's RIASEC theory.

Many of these assessments were built upon the U.S.-based States' Career Clusters Initiative (2007), which organizes careers into 16 broad clusters. Additionally, the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) of the U.S. Department of Labor served as a common resource for occupational descriptors including skills, abilities, work activities, and interests (O*NET Resource Center, 2016). While such frameworks offered structural guidance, a culturally relevant tool for India requires alignment with its own official occupational classification system. Therefore, the National Classification of

Occupations (NCO-2015) was referenced to understand career options and pathways within the country's occupational landscape.

This integration of international assessment frameworks with context-specific occupational data served as the foundation for the present tool. Building upon this, the next phase focused on designing the tools' content (items, output, and language), tailoring it as a conceptually sound and contextually appropriate assessment for students in Kerala.

## Design of the Present Tool

The research team observed that students from regional cultural backgrounds often struggled to relate to the clusters and items presented in Western tools. To address this, cultural relevance was operationalized through a multifaceted approach including

a)    adopting the National Classification of Occupations, 2015 framework to list relevant careers options
b)    aligning the academic preferences to Kerala school curriculum and higher education options
c)    generating and modifying items based on familiar activities and aspirations
d)    developing the tool bilingually

Each of these aspects was developed through an iterative process involving consultation with a three-member expert panel. This panel consisted of a psychologist, an educationist, and a career consultant, selected for their extensive experience in adolescent career guidance and familiarity with the educational and occupational landscape of Kerala. The first author met the panel five times across key stages of tool development, including the initial design, item review, translation verification, mapping of items to career clusters using the National Classification of Occupations (NCO, 2015) and Holland's RIASEC model (Holland, 1997), and designing the output format.

The recommendations from each meeting were consolidated and integrated into successive revisions. Consensus on item–cluster mapping was achieved through systematic reference to the NCO (2015) and the O*NET career clusters. This interdisciplinary, iterative process ensured the theoretical soundness, contextual relevance, and practical applicability of the final assessment tool.

## Identification and Refinement of Career Clusters

The process began with shortlisting occupations with reference to the National Classification of Occupations 2015 (Directorate General of Employment, 2023). The research team further grouped them into career clusters of shared knowledge and skill sets, guided by the O*NET and National Career Clusters Framework (O*NET Resource Center, 2016). The proposed list of clusters was iteratively reviewed and refined in collaboration with the expert panel to ensure its comprehensiveness. For instance, two initially separate clusters, Computer Hardware and Electronics, and IT and IT-enabled Services, were merged into an integrated cluster: Computer Hardware, Electronics, IT, and IT-enabled Services, to avoid overlapping academic prerequisites and career paths. Similar refinements were performed for the other clusters. Finally, the clusters were retrospectively mapped to Holland's RIASEC model to facilitate theoretical interpretation,

## Generation and Cultural Adaptation of Items

After compiling the career clusters, items were generated to reflect the state's cultural and vocational landscape. Item generation followed a multi-source approach. It included direct adaptation from existing Western tools, as well as generation by the research team through brainstorming sessions. These items were revised multiple times, informed by common adolescent activities, Kerala's school curriculum, and NCO-2015. These

items captured students' academic preferences, current and prospective interests and personal characteristics. This structure was advantageous in providing both contextual relevance and a future-oriented perspective.

Initially, a list of subjects relevant to each career cluster was shortlisted from the Kerala State curriculum for high school and higher secondary education. A list of activities was then generated in clear and simple language. For instance, while Western tools phrase activities like 'Handle money with accuracy and reliability,' the KCIS rephrases them in more relatable terms to Class 10 students, such as 'Collecting and managing money for common purposes in class.' Furthermore, the list of career clusters was phrased in familiar language, such as "civil services" instead of "administration and governance." This approach aligns with the cultural preparedness model (Arulmani, 2015), ensuring alignment with formal occupational classifications without compromising understandability for the target users.

Personal characteristics suitable for each cluster were identified by referring to the National Career Clusters Framework and O*NET. The research team revised this list multiple times to retain the most accurate descriptors for every cluster. This component comprises the abilities, characteristics, and values suitable for each career cluster. Research suggests that job requirements and personal characteristics lead to greater happiness, productivity, and teamwork (Miller, 2003). The KCIS instructs students to select the personal characteristic descriptors (e.g., paying attention to detail, public speaking, physical coordination, etc.) that best describe them.

## Translation of Items

The KCIS was originally developed in English and later translated into Malayalam to minimize the linguistic barriers. The Malayalam version was back-translated into English by a bilingual consultant.

Through joint review sessions, discrepancies in nuances were reviewed and resolved by prioritizing conceptual accuracy in the Malayalam language. These collaborative efforts resulted in minor refinements to the final version of the tool. The English and Malayalam versions were printed separately and provided to the students according to their requirements.

## Design of Output Format

A self-explanatory result form was developed to transform students' responses into actionable guidance. Initially, 20 career clusters were listed as an output of KCIS. Later, upon discussion, stakeholders (career counselors, school teachers, parents, and representatives from the Kerala Education Department) emphasized that the survey output should extend beyond the identification of suitable clusters. In response, the KCIS was redesigned to inform students about major occupations associated with each cluster and the immediate higher study options (higher secondary courses, technical courses, and brief courses) available in Kerala after Class 10. The output thus facilitates students to have an informed communication with a career counsellor, if needed. A disclaimer was also provided towards the end of the survey, informing participants about the tentative nature of the results and acknowledging the possibility of evolving interests over time (Arulmani, 2015). Students are advised to seek guidance from a career counsellor for a better understanding of the results and better guidance.

## Structure and Scoring of the Final Tool

This section describes the final KCIS instrument, including its organization into career clusters, the components assessed, item format, scoring procedure, and interpretation of results.

## Career Clusters in KCIS

The KCIS focuses on 20 career clusters, rather than short-term jobs, to facilitate

long-term educational and vocational planning for students. Each cluster in the KCIS is marked by a certain set of knowledge and skills required for occupations in that domain. The clusters were categorized into two groups. Clusters 1-15 are groups of careers mostly dependent on certain mainstream educational qualifications, such as engineering and technology, medical sciences, law and politics, and the like. These career clusters have been retrospectively mapped and classified under Holland's RIASEC framework (Holland, 1997). For example, Medical Sciences aligns with the Investigative type, while Management, Sales and Marketing correspond to the Enterprising type, and so on.

Clusters 16–20 were not tied to specific academic subjects but instead represented broader domains, such as sports, research, civil service (administration and governance), entrepreneurship, and teaching. These domains often extend beyond the RIASEC types and reflect aspirational career interests.

Thus, the KCIS framework incorporates both traditional (Engineering, Medicine, Law, Teaching etc.) and emerging professional paths (Entrepreneurship, IT, and IT-enabled Services, Culinary Arts, Beauty and Fashion, etc.), enabling a comprehensive exploration of career options. A full list of clusters is provided in the Appendix.

## Assessment components and item structure

Each cluster is assessed through three key components designed to capture a student's interests, academic preferences, and personal qualities relevant to that career domain.

1. Activities: This section lists activities that the student likes to do in the present and in the future. This helps to link their hobbies and interests to suitable career options.
2. Personal characteristics: Career-relevant abilities, characteristics and values.
3. Subjects: This section was divided into two parts: school subjects that the students enjoy studying presently and those they wish to pursue in the future. This will help connect academic preferences to potential career paths.

The tool provides clear instructions on how to approach the survey. Respondents are encouraged to read the instructions clearly and respond honestly to the items. Brief descriptions of the types of items are provided. They were instructed to mark the items that suited them. They are assured that there are no right or wrong choices.

The survey content is then organized into sets corresponding to specific career clusters. For the first 15 clusters, each set presented a structured table of activities, personal characteristics, and subject preferences that collectively represent that cluster (see Table 1 for a model).

**Table 1.**
*Model of a Set in KCIS (for Clusters 1-15)*

| Activities that describe what I like to do: | Personal qualities that describe me: | Subjects I liked to study in school: | Subjects I wish to study in future: |
|---|---|---|---|
| Presently<br>1. Gardening<br>2. Rearing pets/fishing/maintaining an aquarium<br>3. Watching TV programs on nature/farms/animals<br>In future<br>1. Identifying, modifying, protecting various species of plants<br>2. Raising and marketing vegetables, grains, and animals | 1. Physical coordination<br>2. Flexibility<br>3. Persistence/hard-working nature<br>4. Decision-making ability<br>5. Optimism | 1. Biology<br>2. Chemistry<br>3. Math | 1. Agriculture<br>2. Zoology<br>3. Botany |

For clusters 16-20, the format shifts to direct, experience-based questions related to the field concerned. This allows students to reflect upon these roles without being constrained by specific components (see Table 2 for a model).

**Table 2.**
*Model of a Set in KCIS (for Clusters 16-20)*

Set 16:
1. Have you made achievements in sports?
2. If so, in which item? At which level?
3. Do you want to continue as a sportsperson in the future?

**Response Format and Scoring**

KCIS employs a checklist style format and a simple sum of selection scoring method to identify student's highest scoring clusters. Within each set (Clusters 1-15), students have to select items that best describe their interests from a maximum possible score of 16 selections per set. After completing all sets, the students total the number of selections within each set.

All selected items in a set equally contribute to the total score. The sets with the highest number of selections represent the student's most suitable career clusters. The table below represents the scoring process with a worked-out example from Management, Sales & Marketing cluster, where selected items are marked with a 'x' mark. The total selections for this example could be calculated as 8.

**Table 3.**
*Example of Scoring in the Management, Sales and Marketing Cluster of the KCIS*

| Activities that describe what I like to do: | Personal qualities that describe me: | Subjects I liked to study in school | Subjects I wish to study in future | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presently<br>☐Collecting and managing money for common purposes in class<br>☒Leading/ motivating/ convincing friends and others<br>☐Volunteering to lead a team<br><u>In future</u><br>☐Improving the profit of a company<br>☒Directing and coordinating administrative functions of an organization | ☒Verbal communication<br>☐Working well with others<br>☒Handling stress<br>☐Cheerful<br>☒Persuading | ☐Languages<br>☐Social Science<br>☒Maths | ☒Business administration<br>☐Hotel management<br>☒Sales and Marketing | 8 |

This process is repeated for all 15 sets to identify the top three suitable career clusters. For the sets 16-20, students answer direct Yes/No questions, where positive responses are counted. These scores are not numerically compared to the primary 15 cluster scores; rather, they are presented as additional career possibilities.

The KCIS framework prioritizes maximum mapping across clusters over identifying inconsistencies within or between items and clusters. This keeps the scoring a straightforward tally, preserving the simplicity of the self-administered checklist. Output and Interpretation

Following the scoring, students receive a self-explanatory result form that helps them identify their suitable career clusters. The result form has a structured table of 20 career clusters with a brief description of the career clusters, major occupations, and immediate higher study options available in Kerala after Class 10. The students can also note their scores of the last 5 clusters. The output can also facilitate students to have an informed communication with the counsellor.

For example, a student who scores high in the Nature and Agriculture cluster can refer to the following guidance:

| Cluster | Description | Plus Two (Higher Secondary) courses |
|---------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| Nature and Agriculture | Production, processing, marketing, distribution, financing, and development of agricultural commodities and resources, including food & raising livestock/animals | Plus two science stream, preferably with Agriculture (KEAM entrance, if Agricultural Engineering is preferred) |

To ensure appropriate interpretation, the form includes a disclaimer noting the tentative nature of the results, as interests may evolve over time (Arulmani, 2015). Students are advised to seek guidance from a career counsellor for the best understanding of results and better guidance.

In its final form, the KCIS comprises seven pages, with two pages dedicated to the output. It takes approximately 15–20 minutes to complete the survey. This version was then evaluated through pilot testing for possible refinement of contents.

**Pilot Testing and Refinement**

The KCIS underwent two phases of pilot testing to evaluate its overall usability, language and clarity. Students' feedback was collected during post-assessment discussions based on the following questions: 'Were the instructions clear and easy to follow?', 'Did you find any words or phrases difficult to understand?', 'Was the layout of the survey easy to navigate?' and 'How long did it take you to complete the survey?'. Responses were noted and summarized to inform subsequent revisions to items and layout.

The first draft was administered to a purposive sample of 30 students who had recently completed their SSLC examination and were actively exploring higher studies options. They provided feedback on the design of the tool and language difficulty, resulting in refinement to items, simplifying them into either words or short phrases.

A second try-out with a sample of 420 students from Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala, stratified in terms of locality, led to further minor refinements in items and an improved layout of the tool. For instance, in the Counselling, Helping & Human Services cluster, a broad and abstract activity 'Helping others solve their personal problems' was refined into three specific, relatable actions: Caring about people, their needs, and their problems; participating in community services and/or volunteering; Observing/ Listening to others. Similar revisions across the tool enhanced the cultural and developmental relevance for the target group.

Implementation

Between 2021 and 2025, the KCIS was administered to more than 8,000 students across multiple intervention contexts, including individual counselling, school-level assessments, and career guidance programmes. One such implementation was reported in Kerala Kaumudy (2024). Qualitative feedback obtained during post-assessment discussions with stakeholders in large-scale assessment settings indicated that the tool could be efficiently administered to large groups of students in school environments. Stakeholders highlighted the usability, accessibility, and

cost-effectiveness of the KCIS as key strengths.

## Discussion

The development and initial implementation of the Kerala Career Interest Survey (KCIS) demonstrate the feasibility of creating a culturally relevant career guidance tool for the Indian context. By combining simplicity, accessibility, and cultural relevance, the KCIS has the potential to make career guidance practices in Kerala more inclusive, effective, and practical. This potential stems from its adherence to established career development principles such as reducing access barriers, promoting self-awareness, and contextualizing guidance to local educational and occupational frameworks (Arulmani, 2015). It is anticipated that aligning students' interests and personal characteristics with suitable career clusters may help reduce career indecision and career dissatisfaction and promote long-term fulfillment, as supported by longitudinal studies on career development (Helwig, 2004). This approach supports career counseling, curriculum design, and skill development initiatives, supporting more effective career development strategies.

## Future Directions

The Kerala Career Interest Survey will undergo periodic updates and revisions to maintain the relevance of the tool over time. This planned process involves expert reviews, systematic documentation of feedback from stakeholders, and integration with real-time labor market trends. Such iterative revisions and integration with emerging technologies, such as AI-driven applications and virtual workplace simulations, and current labor market trends could further enhance the KCIS's effectiveness in preparing students for the evolving global workforce. Moreover, developing a digital or app-based version of the KCIS could expand its reach and accessibility, particularly in remote regions of the state and across the country. Through this ongoing revision, the KCIS can evolve into a model for culturally grounded career guidance.

## Conclusion

The Kerala Career Interest Survey (KCIS) is a practical and culturally relevant tool designed to support Class 10 students in Kerala in making informed career choices. By integrating students' interests, personality traits, and academic preferences, the KCIS is intended to reduce career indecision and dissatisfaction, encouraging students to pursue paths aligned with their goals and abilities. The tool is self-administered, quick to complete, bilingual, and cost-effective, making it suitable for large-scale implementation in schools.

By offering personalized and contextually appropriate career guidance, the KCIS contributes to building a self-aware, vocationally prepared student population and a more skilled and satisfied workforce. This initiative also provides a replicable model for developing culturally adapted career guidance tools in other regions of the world. It also demonstrates how global career theories can be effectively adapted to meet specific sociocultural and educational requirements.

**About the authors**

**Maya Menon** is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. She is a clinical psychologist by training. Her research interests include child development, student mentoring, counselling, school psychology. She has a particular interest in the development and design of mentoring and guidance programs for children and the youth. Email: mayamenon@gcwtvm.ac.in

**Shiju Joseph** is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. He is a clinical psychologist by training. His research interests include social and cultural psychology, youth mental health, and educational psychology. He has been actively involved in the development of career guidance tools and aptitude assessments for indigenous and culturally diverse populations. Email: shijuoseph@gcwtvm.ac.in

**Huda Ameen** is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology, Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. She worked as a research associate in the project on development of various aptitude assessment platforms. Email: hudaameen@gcwtvm.ac.in

**Betsy Baby** is a Psychologist at KIMSHEALTH, Trivandrum, and a part-time PhD scholar at the University of Kerala, India. Her areas of interest include Neuropsychology, Research and Development, Neurodevelopmental Conditions, and rehabilitation of people with various neurological conditions. Email: betsysct27@gmail.com

**Abhilash V** L is a psychologist and educator based in Kerala, currently serving as Head of Psychology at The International School Bangalore, where he also serves as a facilitator for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) Psychology. His academic and professional interests include neurodevelopmental disorders, parental stress, adolescent wellbeing, and counselling. Email ID: abhilashvl009@gmail.com

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