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STUDENT RELUCTANCE TOWARDS TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN WEST BENGAL: CAUSES AND REMEDIAL STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT
West Bengal has witnessed a growing reluctance among the students to enroll in the traditional three year undergraduate (UG) programmes, with many state run colleges reporting large numbers of vacant seats and declining intake. This article analyses the socio-economic, institutional, and psychological factors underpinning this trend, drawing on recent admission data, policy reports, and field level observations. It then proposes a package of demand side and supply side interventions—curriculum modernization, improved career orientation, financial support, and governance reforms—to revitalize interest in traditional UG education in the state.
KEYWORDS: *Reluctance, traditional course, crisis, economy*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional undergraduate education in West Bengal, usually comprising B.A, B.Sc., and B.Com programmes offered through state affiliated colleges, has historically served as a major route to upward mobility for rural and semi-urban youth. However, recent years have seen a sharp drop in student applications, with reports indicating that over 70% of UG seats in many state-run colleges remained vacant in the 2025 admission cycle. The current UG programmes in West Bengal, aligned with NEP 2020, and effective from 2023-24, offer a flexible structure with multiple entry-exit window. It offers 1 year certificate degree, 2 year diploma course, 4 year Honours/ 4 years honours with research degree along with the existing 3year multidisciplinary degrees. But even after such flexible offers and opportunities, the disinclination to opt for this UG programme is as clear as a fingertip. This reluctance is not merely a reflection of demographic decline; it stems from a complex interplay of economic fragility, trust deficits in the education-job linkage, and procedural inefficiencies in the admission system. Understanding these causes and designing targeted corrective measures is critical for the state's educational and socio-economic future.

Key Reasons for Students' Reluctance

- Perceived Poor Return on UG Education

Many students and families now view the conventional honours degree as a "low yield" investment, given the weak job prospects for humanities, some science streams, and general commerce graduates. The spate of scandals around teacher recruitment (the so called "SSC scam") has particularly discouraged students from pursuing teaching oriented honours subjects such as Bengali, history, and education, as they fear that even securing a degree will not guarantee an honest or secure government job. This has led to a visible shift toward professional and skill based courses or direct entry into informal or semi-skilled work.

- Economic Hardship and Financial Constraints

Poverty and post-pandemic financial stress have pushed many households to priorities immediate income over multi-year degrees. Field studies on dropout patterns in higher education in West Bengal show that students from low income families often abandon or avoid UG studies because of tuition fees, commuting costs, and the need to support family income. In many rural and semi-urban areas, students who could potentially enroll instead take up small scale jobs or migrate to other states in search of work, reducing the pool of candidates for traditional UG seats.

- Institutional and Administrative Weaknesses

Delays and legal complications in the admission process—such as disputes over reservation lists and the centralized admission portal timeline—have created uncertainty and eroded trust among students. When the admission window is delayed or the seat allocation system appears rigid, students increasingly opt for autonomous colleges, private institutions, or out-of-state universities where procedures seem faster and more predictable. At the college level, outdated infrastructure, faculty shortages, and limited research or internship opportunities further dim the appeal of conventional UG programmes.

- Shift Towards job-oriented and non-traditional Pathways

There is a growing societal preference for "quick," job-oriented qualifications such as diplomas, certificate courses, and online skill-based programmes. Many students now favor professional subjects (engineering, management, paramedical, and IT-related courses) or vocational training over traditional arts and science streams, which are often perceived as theoretical and disconnected from the labor market. This mindset is reinforced by the job-centric messaging of higher-education expansion and private-sector hiring patterns, which privilege domain-specific skills over generalist degrees.

- Political and Psychological Factors

In addition to material constraints, political interference in recruitment and an atmosphere of job-market uncertainty have created anxiety among students. Studies from South Asia on "reluctance towards learning" highlight that perceptions of political favoritism,

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corruption in public employment, and a lack of merit-based advancement can demotivate students and reduce their interest in formal education. This psychological load is compounded by unclear career guidance and limited counselling support at the school and college levels, leaving students without a clear map of how a traditional UG degree fits into their life goals.

Strategies to Overcome Reluctance

- Curriculum and Pedagogy Reforms

To enhance the perceived value of UG education, traditional honours programmes should be redesigned to integrate:
Skill-based electives (communication, data literacy, digital tools, basic programming) within the core curriculum.
Interdisciplinary and NEP-aligned structures, such as multiple entry-exit options, minor subjects, and embedded internships or project work, to make degrees more flexible and relevant.
Problem-based and research-oriented learning experiences, including community projects and collaborations with local NGOs or small industries, to demonstrate real-world applications of academic knowledge.

- Strengthening Career Linkages and Employability

Colleges must forge stronger partnerships with industry, government agencies, and micro-enterprises to:
Organize regular career counselling sessions, placement-oriented workshops, and alumni networks that showcase pathways from traditional UG degrees to diverse job sectors.
Introduce embedded vocational modules or "plus" certificates (e.g., freelancing, content creation, basic accounting) that can be added to existing B.A/B.Sc./B.Com. programmes without compromising academic depth.
Create industry-linked short-term internships of 1–2 months, especially in rural and semi-urban colleges, to help students build portfolios and employer connections early in their UG journey.

- Financial and Welfare Support Mechanisms

To tackle economic barriers, the state and central governments can:
Expand merit-cum-means scholarships and student-assistance schemes, including targeted support for first-generation and economically weaker students enrolled in traditional UG programmes.
Provide transport and hostel subsidies in districts with long commutes to colleges, to reduce opportunity costs and travel-related attrition.
Allow part-time work or paid internships within college premises (e.g., library assistance, lab support, tutoring) so that students can earn while studying, easing the financial burden on families.

- Transparency, Governance, and Admission Reforms

Improving trust in the system requires:
Timely and transparent admission processes, with clear communication about reservation policies, cut-off procedures, and seat-allocation timelines to prevent students from losing confidence and opting for alternatives.
Decentralised or semi-autonomous admission windows for certain categories of colleges, so that students are not forced to choose only a few "top" institutions in a highly competitive common-seat system.
Independent monitoring of teacher-recruitment and placement-related processes to reduce perceptions of corruption and political interference, thereby restoring faith in public-sector jobs linked to UG qualifications.

- Psychological and Social Support

To address motivational and mental-health dimensions of reluctance, colleges should:
Establish student-counselling cells with psychologists or trained counsellors who can help students manage anxiety, career uncertainty, and academic stress.

Promote peer-mentoring and alumni-led mentoring programmes that connect senior students and graduates with new entrants to share coping strategies and success stories.

Build inclusive campus environments (better hostels, gender-sensitive facilities, and safe transport) so that students from marginalized backgrounds feel socially and emotionally secure.

CONCLUSION

The reluctance of students in West Bengal to join traditional undergraduate programmes is a multidimensional problem rooted in economic vulnerability, institutional inefficiencies, and shifting labour-market expectations. While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. By combining curriculum modernization, stronger career linkages, targeted financial support, admission-process reforms, and enhanced psychological support, policymakers and college managements can re-establish the credibility and desirability of traditional UG education. If implemented coherently, such measures can transform the current crisis of low enrolment into an opportunity to make West Bengal's undergraduate system more inclusive, responsive, and future-oriented.

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