

What the 'Kota Factory' suicides say about our education system

BY INVITATION

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A series of suicide incidents in the 'Kota Factory' recently have drawn attention to the pressing issue of mental health within coaching institutions and campuses. Over the past two years

alone, 38 students have taken their lives, underscoring a larger problem. While it's common to solely blame IITs and NEET/JEE exams, multiple factors have contributed to this situation. To comprehensively understand the current landscape of higher education, it's crucial to explore what led us here and potential solutions.

1. Imbalance in demand-supply ratio: With nearly a million students aspiring for engineering annually, there's a dearth of quality seats in reputable institutions. While low-quality colleges have burgeoned, institutions offering genuine quality remain scarce. Parents seek reliable career paths for their children, resulting in high demand for select institutions. Entrance exams serve as elimination tools due to the surplus of high-performing students. Coaching centres help average students prepare, turning coaching into a perceived necessity for a secure future.

2. Disparity between top and other institutions: In the US, the gap between top-tier and lower-ranked universities is narrow. Even secondary universities offer comparable undergraduate education. India's scenario differs; faculty quality and curriculum diminish significantly outside the elite institutions.

3. Media emphasis on high salaries: Sensational reporting of "one crore" salary packages fuels unrealistic expectations. Students and parents focus on cracking entrance exams to secure such lucrative salaries, despite these instances being rare. The actual median salaries at these institutions differ significantly from the hype as just about 1% of students receive such high packages.

4. Lack of resources for expansion: India lags in higher education investments. Budgetary allocation for higher education remains around 0.6-0.7% of GDP, hindering institution growth. Unlike some developed countries, India lacks a strategic approach to raise Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in elite institutions. Limited resources, faculty shortages, and financial constraints impede expansion. Our top institutions are dependent on the government for capital and operational expenditure making it a challenging task to support expansion.

5. Rising lower middle-class aspirations: In India, education's core purpose is often reduced to job acquisition due to the absence of guaranteed minimum living standards. The focus is on securing ad-

missions to ensure a stable future, overshadowing passion and interests. Students and parents prioritise admissions into a good college above all else.

Addressing these issues requires:

Top-tier institution expansion: Established IITs and IISc need to become faculty-training institutions. There is an urgent need to expand on the PhD and undergraduate intake. The average PhD graduation rate per faculty in our top institutions is still below 0.5 students per year, which is low. At the current levels, what it means is, a faculty member in our top institution, on an average, produces one PhD student every two years. It needs to reach one PhD student per year per faculty at least. Investment in higher education and research is necessary to raise PhD graduation rates and maintain quality.

Study now-pay later schemes: Implementing schemes where students pay a portion of tuition during college and the rest after securing employment as a percentage of salary can ease financial pressures on institutions and government. Countries like Australia are successfully running such schemes. The loan repayment kicks in only after the student crosses a threshold income level. Because it's recovered at a fixed percentage

of salary and for a fixed period of time, it also enables students to pursue diverse career interests. While the government will provide capital expenditure needed for expansion, the operational expenditure needs to be generated by the institute through such schemes.

Transparency in reporting pay packages: Institutions should be transparent in reporting salary data to prevent sensationalism and guide realistic expectations. There is a need for enforcing standardisation of the placement data reporting by institutions.

Support for private institutions: Encouraging private institutions offering quality education, with autonomy and limited government intervention, can help expand GER.

Reviving state universities: State universities have a completely different and diverse set of challenges as compared to the centrally funded institutions. It's important for NITI Aayog to initiate measures ranking states based on their support for universities. Peer pressure and a name-and-shame policy alone can resurrect them at this stage.

Implementing these measures gradually, with a focus on excellence and equity, can guide higher education toward a positive trajectory. Although reversing issues neglected for decades takes time, strategic efforts can ensure a bright future for the higher education sector. ■

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Views are personal



ALARM BELLS: Stagnation in the growth of quality educational institutions has led to unrealistic pressure on students