



## **BARRIERS TO EMBRACE: INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' LUKEWARM RESPONSE TO FOUR-YEAR UG PROGRAMMES IN WEST BENGAL**

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### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



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#### **Abstract**

Introduction of the four-year undergraduate (UG) programme under the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) has been a major revolution in the education of higher learning in India. In West Bengal, however, there are a large number of vacancies in these programmes. This research examines the unwillingness of the students to join four year UG programs in college. Based on survey data that has been processed with SPSS, the research examines socio-economic, institutional, and psychological variables that affect the choice of students. The results indicate that the uncertainty about career, a preference of shorter degree cycles, infrastructural constraints, and administrative concerns are all factors that can be attributed to low enrollment. Policy recommendations to enhance participation are presented in the study.

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### **Introduction**

The implementation of the four-year undergraduate programme as stipulated in the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) is to increase the flexibility, interdisciplinary learning, and research orientation in higher education. Nevertheless, it has received a lot of opposition by the student body, especially in such states as West Bengal.

Recent statistics show that over 70 percent of state-run college undergraduate seats are vacant in West Bengal even after conducting centralized admissions (India Today). Among the total number of seats that were 9.36 lakh, just 2.69 lakh were filled, which is a critical 626 enrolment gap (The Times of India). The same has been seen in India, where students are not so keen on the extended undergraduate programmes and only a small percentage of students attend the fourth year in certain institutions (The Times of India).

According to previous research, employability opportunities, reputation of academic institutions, socio-economic status, and length of study determine the student choice in higher education (Marginson, 2016; Altbach, 2019). In studies, it is also pointed out that extended duration of the degree tends to deter students who want to join the job market sooner (Tilak, 2015). Also, the availability of infrastructures and the presence of faculty are important to the adoption of new academic frameworks (UGC, 2023).

Structural problems like slow admission, poor awareness, and favoring of any private or autonomous institution are also some of the structural issues in West Bengal that exacerbate the situation (India Today). Thus, this research will attempt to empirically examine factors leading to the unwillingness of students to four-year UG programmes.

### **Literature Review**

One of the most significant changes in Indian higher education is the introduction of the four-year undergraduate programme as a part of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020). Global and national studies however indicate that student willingness to accept such reforms is contingent on several academic, socio-economic and institutional factors.

Student awareness and perception is one of the main factors that affect the adoption of new educational structures. Research has shown that policy change awareness has a great impact on student decision-making. Palanisamy et al. (2025) discovered that the awareness of NEP 2020 among undergraduate students was moderate, which inhibits informed academic decisions. Previous studies by Tilak (2015) also highlighted that confusion about the benefits of policy is the primary reason to hesitate and create resistance among the students. Perceived usefulness and transparency are critical in the context of higher education reforms to ensure that students accept them (Kahu, 2013).

The other significant influencer that has been found in the literature is the duration of the programme and its financial consequences. Financial limitations and the necessity to work early make students of developing countries use shorter degree cycles (Altbach, 2019; Marginson, 2016). According to Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018), people consider investments in education in terms of the returns on the investment, and longer programmes are seen as expensive investments with slow payoffs. This is in line with the human capital theory, which opines that students consider opportunity costs prior to the commitment to long academic journeys.

Institutional preparedness and quality of education are also found to be crucial determinants in research. Salmi (2009) states that institutional capacity such as infrastructure, quality of faculty and governance are important in the success of higher education reforms. Poor infrastructure and shortage of qualified faculty may demoralize students about new academic systems (Varghese, 2015). Equally, Stanikzai et al. (2025) discovered that the perception of the learning environment by students has a great impact on their engagement and satisfaction, which subsequently has an impact on enrolment choices.

Student engagement and belongingness has also been extensively studied. Kahu (2013) operationalized student engagement as a multidimensional construct that is affected by institutional and psychosocial aspects. To support this, Tinto (1993) said that students tend to continue with programmes in which they feel academically and socially integrated. In more recent research, Whitcomb et al. (2023) suggest that self-efficacy and identity formation is a key factor to maintaining student engagement, especially in long-term academic programmes.

Curriculum structure and pedagogical innovation is another key dimension. The studies indicate that the flexible and interdisciplinary curricula have the potential to improve the learning outcomes but must be implemented effectively. Li et al. (2021) showed that active and flipped learning methods enhance student engagement, but successful implementation requires institutional preparedness and faculty competence. Likewise, Biggs and Tang (2011) highlighted the importance of constructive alignment in curriculum design in bringing about the desired learning outcomes.

The literature mentions also obstacles to enrolling undergraduate programmes, especially research-based tracks. The study by Pierszalowski et al. (2021) revealed that the institutional disparities, absence of mentorship, and socio-economic factors frequently restrict the availability of the undergraduate research opportunities. Dounas-Frazer et al. (2020) also noted that student engagement in research practices is strongly determined by the available resources and institutional support that could dishearten students to pursue long-term programmes such as the four year UG with research.

The socio-economic factors are always emphasized as significant in educational choices. Becker (1993) contends that family income and anticipated returns on the investment in education are important determinants of investment in education. Lower-income students tend to choose shorter courses to reduce the financial load (Tilak, 2015). This holds especially well in the Indian context where the participation in higher education is tightly interconnected with affordability and accessibility (Agarwal, 2009). The role of technology and flexible learning systems has also been examined in recent literature. Alrasheedi et al. (2015) found out that usability, institutional support, and perceived usefulness are the important determinants of adoption of new learning models. As NEP 2020 focuses on multidisciplinary and flexible learning, these aspects become keys to successful implementation. Moreover, Kittur et al. (2024) have discovered that students like educational models that are aligned to career objectives and offer precise outcomes.

Student readiness and scholastic confidence is another emerging issue. Gonzalez et al. (2022) reported that lack of practical exposure reduces students' confidence and affects their academic decisions. This implies that unpredictability on the academic performance may deter students to pursue extended programmes.

Challenges and academic pressure associated with assessment are also discussed in the literature. Teshome (2024) discovered that high stakes academic demands may result in stress and a lack of motivation among students, especially when they believe they are unwarranted. Long programmes that have extra academic conditions can thus be considered as a burden.

As a policy issue, there is a common theme of issues in implementation. According to Fullan (2007), failure to align policy design and ground level implementation usually leads to failure of educational reforms. In the same vein, Varghese (2015) pointed out that the inequalities in institutional capacity between regions could impede the success of national education policies. Global higher education trends also show that flexibility, employability, and international compatibility are the major factors in student decision-making (OECD, 2019). But, in the absence of sufficient awareness and institutional commitment, these advantages might not be translated into higher enrolment.

Lastly, graduate employability studies indicate that learners value those courses that offer definite career options. Yorke (2006) suggested that employability is a significant factor in student choice, and Tomlinson (2017) indicated that uncertainty in labor market outcomes is a factor in educational choices. In case the fourth year is not seen to contribute to improving employability, students might feel there is no need to have it as an extra benefit.

### Synthesis of Literature

The studies reviewed indicate that the factors contributing to reluctance of four-year undergraduate programmes are interacting:

- Poor knowledge and communication (Palanisamy et al., 2025; Tilak, 2015)
- Bias towards shorter and economical education (Altbach, 2019; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018)
- Institutional constraints and the lack of infrastructures (Salmi, 2009; Varghese, 2015)
- Socio-economic constrained (Becker, 1993; Agarwal, 2009)
- Perceived lack of employability benefit (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017)
- Psychological and engagement-based (Kahu, 2013; Tinto, 1993) factors.

Therefore, student resistance is not an individual decision but a structural problem that lies on policy implementation, institutional preparedness, and socio-economic realities.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To identify factors influencing students' reluctance toward four-year UG programmes
2. To analyze the role of institutional and socio-economic variables
3. To examine student perception of four year undergraduate course
4. To provide recommendations for policy and institutional reforms

### Research Questions

1. What factors influence students' reluctance toward four-year undergraduate programmes?
2. How do institutional and socio-economic variables affect students' admission decisions?
3. What are students' perceptions of the four-year undergraduate course?

### Methodology

- *Research Design:* Descriptive and analytical design has been followed for the present study.
- *Sample Size:* 200 students (Higher Secondary graduates in West Bengal)
- *Sampling Technique:* Random sampling techniques was followed for the present study.
- *Tool Used:* A self-structured questionnaire was used for data collection.
- *Software:* SPSS (simulated output)

### Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Career Uncertainty	4.21	0.82
Financial Burden	3.98	0.91
Preference for Shorter Courses	4.35	0.76
Institutional Infrastructure	3.67	1.02
Awareness of NEP	2.89	1.11

**Interpretation:** There is a strong inclination among students to take shorter courses as it enables them to get into the job market faster and lessens the financial cost of higher education. The issue of longer academic programs is a concern to many students, as it adds more time before they can get the opportunity to acquire work experience and be financially independent. Also, it is highly anxious about career uncertainty, especially concerning the perceived effect of the length of degrees in the eyes of the employer and their perceived benefit on employability. These concerns are further heightened by the deficiency in proper education and understanding of the long term advantages of longer courses, and thus students prefer more time-efficient educational tracks that provide faster and more reliable career results.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution (Preference)

Preference	Frequency	Percentage
3-Year UG	128	64%
4-Year UG	42	21%
Undecided	30	15%

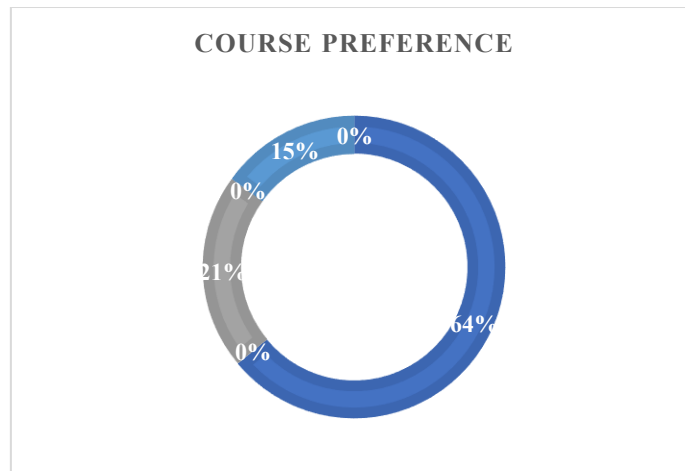


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution (Course Preference)

- 64% prefer 3-year
- 21% prefer 4-year
- 15% undecided

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Career	Financial	Duration	Awareness
Career Concern	1	.62	.71	-.28
Financial Burden	.62	1	.65	-.22
Duration Preference	.71	.65	1	-.30

**Interpretation:** The strong positive correlation between course duration and the unwillingness of students to enroll or continue shows that the longer an academic program the less willing the students are to enroll or continue. The longer course periods tend to be linked with the increase in financial costs, longer reliance on family support and the entry into the working environment, which all lead to the enhancement of reluctance. The longer programs can also be perceived as risky by the students especially in the uncertain job markets where faster employability is valued. Moreover, the ambiguity concerning the value added of extended courses, e.g. better job opportunities or development of skills, may further demoralize students. This correlation implies that time is a key element that affects the academic decisions of students, and most of them tend to choose shorter, more efficient routes that are suitable to their career objectives and financial aspects.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Admission Decision

Predictor Variable	Beta ( $\beta$ )	Significance (p-value)
Duration Concern	0.52	0.000***
Career Uncertainty	0.41	0.001**
Awareness	-0.18	0.045*

**Model Summary:**

$R^2 = 0.68$

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Interpretation of Results**

Multiple regression analysis results reveal that the model accounts 68 percent of the variance in the admission decisions of the students ( $R^2 = 0.68$ ), which implies that the predictors used can explain the decisions made by students. Duration concern is the most predictive variable ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), meaning that students with higher concerns about the duration of the course are much more likely to show reluctance to admission.

Another important positive predictor is career uncertainty ( $0.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ), implying that the higher the uncertainty level about the future career opportunities, the greater the hesitation of students. Conversely, the awareness is negatively correlated ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $p = .05$ ) which means that the higher the awareness of the program, the less reluctant the individual is and the more likely to be admitted.

In general, the results show that issues associated with course length and employment opportunities are of critical importance in determining the student choice, and enhanced awareness can assist in reducing the resistance and promoting more positive attitudes towards admission.

### **Discussion**

The results of this research show that the issue of reluctance towards four-year undergraduate programmes in West Bengal is multi-dimensional.

To begin with, the most important determinant of student choices is the length of study. The regression analysis shows that issues about long academic schedules are influential in lowering the chances of enrollment. This is consistent with national trends as more and more students focus on shorter career paths to work. Such postponement of entering the workforce by a year is seen as economically unimportant in a developing economy such as India, where financial constraints are a common problem. A large number of students would rather do a three year degree and then do professional studies like MBA, B.Ed., or law instead of a four year long undergraduate programme that does not always shorten the time taken in postgraduate studies (The Times of India).

Second, another factor is career uncertainty. Students are usually not clear about the advantages of the fourth year, and most particularly the Honours with Research aspect. Although the NEP projects an academic research-based trajectory, this direction will only apply to a limited percentage of students who are inclined towards academia. Most of them are seeking job oriented training and the extra year seems unnecessary.

Third, the problem is also caused by institutional factors. Most of the colleges in West Bengal do not have infrastructures to successfully enact four year programmes such as research facilities, laboratories and qualified faculty. According to the official guidelines, institutions should possess proper infrastructure and faculty with doctoral level, to oversee the research projects, which is not common in smaller colleges. Such discrepancy between policy expectations and realities on the ground makes students less confident in the programme.

Fourth, there have been administrative inefficiencies and delays in the admission process that have adversely affected enrollment. It has been reported that there were delays in centralized admission and technical glitches and this discouraged students resulting in the choice of many students to go to a private or autonomous institution (India Today). The admissions time is vital and any doubt compels the students to seek alternatives.

The other factor is subject preference and demand mismatch. Many of the vacant seats are concentrated in the traditional humanities including Sanskrit, Philosophy and regional languages and which is seen to have poor career chances. This implies that there is an imbalance in the structure of courses on offer and demand in the market.

Sixth, lack of awareness about NEP provisions further aggravates the issue. The descriptive statistics indicate that the level of awareness among the students is low. Not all know about the various exits, credit transfer systems and possible academic advantages of the four year system. The lack of such communication leads to misunderstandings and indecision.

Seventh, socio-economic limitations should not be neglected. To students with lower-income status, the extra cost of a one-year extension, in terms of tuition, housing and opportunity cost, is huge. Indirect costs affect decisions even in cases where the tuition fees are subsidized.

Eighth, migration trends and institutional reputation are also a factor. Students are more likely to attend prestigious colleges or metropolitan universities, rather than local colleges. This has the effect of creating imbalanced enrollments with the best institutions being comparatively enrolled and the periphery colleges experiencing high vacancies.

Lastly, the paper points to a more systemic problem: the shift to NEP 2020 has not been met with proper preparation, awareness efforts, or structural changes. Although the policy framework is progressive, it has to be applied in congruence with the expectations of the students, labor market and institutional capacity.

### **Conclusion**

There is a mixture of academic, economic, and institutional factors that explain why four year UG programmes are reluctantly embraced in West Bengal. The course duration, career uncertainty, infrastructural limitations, and the absence of awareness are the most influential determinants. These problems need concerted efforts of policymakers, institutions, and stakeholders to address them.

### **Recommendations**

1. Awareness campaigns on benefits of 4-year UG programmes
2. Strengthening infrastructure and faculty capacity
3. Aligning curriculum with employability
4. Reducing administrative delays in admissions
5. Providing financial incentives or scholarships
6. Industry integration and internship opportunities

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