[**Barren spaces**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1724909/barren-spaces)

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OF late, there have been protests by students and other stakeholders over the predicament faced by two Karachi education institutes: DJ Science College and Islamia College. Both have contributed significantly to academic life for decades, with many former students going to the top of their professions.

But charged slogans on the streets do not match the internal situation. A visit to the colleges shows the worrying face of this vital tier of education: rowdy students outside classrooms, unconcerned teachers huddled in dingy staff rooms, smug and bored administrative staff counting the minutes to the end of the workday. The tentacles of political parties extend into student common rooms, and quarrels are settled through violence. It is of concern that such scenes should be witnessed in celebrated institutions.

The higher secondary school certificate (HSC) spans two academic years. However, it is a defining time for pupils as it decides their career paths. Scores at this level are the principal factor that decide their eligibility for higher education institutions. For the less privileged youth, the predicament is even more acute as the choices are very few. In most cases, seeking placement in a public-sector institution is the only option.

In the hierarchy of educational opportunities, the numerical strength of students gradually declines with each upward tier. Thus students try hard to obtain admission in professional institutions or at least in university. This overwhelming pressure forces a huge number of them to resort to unethical means of attaining the marks needed. Meanwhile, a thriving business of tuition centres, coaching classes and private tutors ‘guarantee’ high grades. In reality, these outlets extend examination tricks and techniques to score. The objective of education falls by the wayside.

The decline in once celebrated colleges is appalling.

In the past, HSC students enjoyed a full academic life during their two-year study at college. The college faculty took pride in their work despite their very meagre salaries. Time management, diligence and performance monitoring were considered important by teachers to impart their knowledge. Weak or financially deprived students were given extra attention after normal instruction hours. Private tuitions or coaching were nonexistent. The boys’, or girls’, common room was space often utilised for group study by the students themselves. College teachers would drop in to give any kind of advice in case it was needed. Extracurricular activities were organised, including sports, general knowledge competitions, poetry recitals, cultural events, participation in Radio Pakistan’s student programmes and literary activities.

Encouragement received from teachers would motivate students to walk the extra mile to polish their abilities and aim for excellence. Whether students of arts, commerce or science, almost everyone participated in extracurricular activities which were not affected by the gender divide. Many of our noted writers, poets, dramatists, performing artists and singers owe their success to such a positive college milieu. Sadly, the same institutions have become barren spaces.

The low quality of education provided in colleges automatically creates a service demand that is satisfied by coaching centres. A professor who would not ordinarily take his class in college can be found most enthusiastically teaching his high-paying clientele at a coaching centre. Many teachers are also seen as deliberately keeping their teaching standards low in college to up the demand for private tuitions.

Students slowly lose interest in taking classes and are routinely spotted wasting their time in college canteens, common rooms or isolated corners. The ultimate losers are students from the low- and lower-middle-income groups who cannot afford private tuitions or coaching centres. Their only option is college which has very little to offer, dimming the chances of underprivileged children continuing to learn.

An average student from an affluent background usually makes it to a good university through tuition, while those from lower income backgrounds are denied this option. In other words, poor attainment opportunities at the college level perpetuate the status quo and the student without means remains without options.

The objective and purpose of HSC must be revisited. The government must examine its various handicaps. Broad-based consultations must be held where findings and options related to this crucial level of education are deliberated in a pragmatic manner. Some of the issues that demand focus include the background of the teaching faculty, salary structures, performance monitoring, discipline, campus management, curriculum and examination systems. Without such analysis and subsequent action, little will improve.

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*Published in Dawn, December 6th, 2022*