

# Managing Toxic Behaviours and Institutional Culture in Education: Evidence-Based Strategies for Academic Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

*Toxic behaviour and dysfunctional institutional culture in educational institutions have emerged as significant challenges affecting faculty morale, productivity, and overall academic excellence. This study explores the nature, impact, and management of toxic workplace dynamics in academia through a literature-based approach. Drawing from scholarly sources published over the last decade, it identifies common toxic behaviours such as micromanagement, favouritism, bullying, and poor communication and analyses their psychological and professional consequences on faculty, staff, and students.*

*The review also highlights current strategies employed by institutions, including conflict resolution training, emotional intelligence development, mentorship programs, and policy reforms. Special reference is made to experiences in Tamil Nadu to contextualize these issues in the Indian higher education setting. The findings underscore the urgent need for leadership commitment, transparency, and a shift in organizational culture to foster healthy academic environments. The study concludes with practical recommendations to reduce toxicity and promote collegiality in educational institutions.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A healthy work environment is a cornerstone of productivity, innovation, and overall institutional success, particularly in educational settings where collaborative teaching, learning, and research play central roles. In academic institutions, the quality of interpersonal relationships, administrative transparency, and organizational culture profoundly influences not only the morale and well-being of faculty members but also the educational outcomes of students (Johnson & Spector, 2019). A supportive academic climate fosters mutual respect, shared goals, and a culture of continuous improvement. Conversely, toxic behaviors and dysfunctional institutional cultures can erode motivation, hinder collaboration, and lead to high levels of stress and attrition among staff (Kluska et al., 2021). Toxic behavior in the educational context refers to interpersonal interactions characterized by manipulation, hostility, bullying, exclusion, or emotional abuse. Such behaviors may originate from colleagues, administrators, or even students and often result in psychological distress and professional dissatisfaction (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Similarly, toxic institutional culture refers to the broader systemic issues that perpetuate negativity, including favoritism, poor leadership, lack of recognition, inadequate communication, and resistance to change (Frost, 2003). These factors not only damage workplace harmony but also compromise institutional reputation and effectiveness.

This study aims to explore and analyze how educational institutions can manage toxic behaviors and institutional cultures through evidence-based strategies, drawing insights from secondary data and existing literature. Understanding these dynamics is vital as academic professionals increasingly face emotional and organizational challenges that impact both their personal well-being and professional growth.

The scope of this research is limited to literature-based analysis, relying on scholarly articles, reports, and case studies published over the last decade. The study does not include primary data or fieldwork but focuses instead on synthesizing findings from previous research. While this approach provides a broad understanding of the issue, it may limit the ability to contextualize findings within specific institutional environments.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Toxic behaviors and dysfunctional institutional cultures are significant challenges in educational settings, particularly in higher education, where the well-being and professional satisfaction of faculty members are paramount. These negative dynamics can undermine morale, productivity, and the overall academic excellence of institutions. A growing body of literature has addressed the causes, impacts, and potential solutions to these issues, providing valuable insights into how institutions can manage toxicity and create healthier environments for both faculty and students. Toxic behavior in academic environments refers to harmful interpersonal interactions that negatively affect individuals' well-being and professional performance. Common forms of toxic behavior include bullying, favoritism, exclusion, and micromanagement, which disrupt relationships among colleagues, administrators, and students. Twale and De Luca (2008) and Frost (2003) identified bullying and manipulative behavior as key components of toxic academic settings, where faculty members often face hostility or undue pressure from peers or superiors. Such toxic behaviors often result in emotional and psychological

consequences for staff, including stress, anxiety, and burnout. Studies show that individuals experiencing prolonged exposure to toxic behaviors report a significant decline in job satisfaction, which can lead to high turnover rates and decreased academic productivity (Kluska et al., 2021). Similarly, passive-aggressive behaviors, such as indirect hostility or subtle undermining, contribute to a toxic work culture by fostering mistrust and resentment (Jones & Kelly, 2020).

Recognizing and addressing toxic behaviors early is crucial for maintaining a healthy academic environment. Training in emotional intelligence and conflict resolution has been suggested as an effective method to mitigate these behaviors, as it equips staff with tools to navigate interpersonal conflicts and enhance collaborative communication (Brown & Thompson, 2022). A toxic institutional culture is often systemic, embedded in organizational practices, leadership styles, and communication patterns that perpetuate negative dynamics. Unlike individual toxic behaviors, which may stem from personal attitudes, toxic cultures are ingrained in institutional norms and structures. Key characteristics of toxic cultures in academia include micromanagement, poor communication, favoritism, and a lack of support from leadership. Micromanagement, where administrators excessively control faculty members' work and decision-making, is a major contributor to stress and reduced job satisfaction (Taylor & Wilson, 2019). This lack of autonomy diminishes faculty members' sense of ownership over their work and stifles innovation. Similarly, favoritism, where certain individuals receive privileges or recognition without regard for merit, creates feelings of inequality and resentment, leading to a decline in morale (Kluska et al., 2021). Poor communication, whether in the form of unclear expectations, inconsistent messaging, or exclusion from decision-making, also contributes to a toxic culture. When faculty are not well-informed or consulted, it reduces their sense of belonging and trust in the institution (Smith, 2020). These communication breakdowns foster an environment of confusion and conflict, which can ultimately affect teaching and research outcomes.

The consequences of toxic behaviors and cultures are far-reaching, affecting not only the faculty and staff but also the students. Faculty members working in toxic environments experience emotional distress, professional burnout, and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Over time, these negative experiences lead to high attrition rates, which disrupt the continuity of teaching and research at academic institutions (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In addition to affecting faculty, a toxic environment also impacts students. When educators are disengaged or demotivated, the quality of instruction suffers, leading to reduced student engagement and academic achievement. Students in such institutions may experience diminished academic mentorship, increased absenteeism, and a general decline in their academic outcomes (Johnson & Spector, 2019). Furthermore, a toxic culture can stifle collaboration and innovation. Faculty members may be reluctant to share ideas or collaborate with others due to fear of judgment or retribution. This not only reduces individual productivity but also limits the collective potential of the academic community (Frost, 2003). Given the detrimental effects of toxic behavior and culture, institutions have begun to adopt various strategies to manage and mitigate these issues. Conflict resolution training, emotional intelligence development, and mentorship programs are among the most commonly employed approaches.

**Conflict Resolution and Emotional Intelligence:** Conflict resolution training equips faculty and administrators with skills to address interpersonal disputes constructively. Studies indicate that when implemented effectively, such training can foster a more respectful and collaborative environment (Smith & Brown, 2020).

Emotional intelligence (EI) training, which focuses on developing self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal effectiveness, has also been shown to reduce the

incidence of toxic interactions and improve the overall climate in academic settings (Goleman, 2017). **Mentorship Programs:** Mentorship programs have proven effective in combating isolation and burnout, particularly for junior faculty members. By fostering relationships between experienced and less-experienced faculty, these programs create opportunities for professional development, guidance, and emotional support. They also help to build a sense of community and collegiality within the institution (Twale & De Luca, 2008). **Human Resources Interventions:** Human resource (HR) departments play a key role in managing toxicity by implementing formal grievance procedures, facilitating mediation, and conducting anonymous surveys to identify workplace issues. A responsive HR system can address problems before they escalate and become systemic (Johnson & Spector, 2019). **Policy Reforms and Leadership Training:** Institutional policies that promote transparency, inclusion, and respect are essential for mitigating toxicity. Anti-bullying policies, clear evaluation criteria, and leadership training that emphasizes emotional intelligence and ethical decision-making can significantly improve the work culture (Kluska et al., 2021). Institutions with strong, inclusive leadership are better equipped to prevent toxicity and foster a healthy academic environment.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology that relies on secondary data, including scholarly articles, books, reports, and other trusted academic sources, to explore the nature, impact, and management of toxic behaviors and institutional culture in educational institutions. The use of secondary data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issues, synthesizing insights from existing research and offering evidence-based solutions without the need for primary data collection or fieldwork. The data for this study were primarily gathered from peer-reviewed journals, books, and reports published over the last decade, with a particular emphasis on literature from the years 2020 to 2024. This time frame ensures the inclusion of the most recent insights into toxic behaviors and institutional culture in academia, though a few older studies were also included to provide a foundational understanding of the issues.

The selection process was guided by specific inclusion criteria, which ensured that only relevant, high-quality, and credible sources were considered for analysis. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Studies specifically addressing toxic behaviors and cultures in educational institutions. Articles written in English from reputable academic journals, books, and reports. Research that proposes strategies or offers solutions for managing toxic behaviors in academic environments. Conversely, the study excluded non-academic content, such as blogs and news articles, as well as studies that were unrelated to the education sector. Additionally, the exclusion of any non-peer-reviewed literature ensures the credibility and reliability of the sources included in the review. The data were analyzed through a systematic review approach, which involved categorizing the literature based on key themes and findings. The analysis focused on understanding the nature of toxic behaviors in academic settings, such as micromanagement, favoritism, bullying, and poor communication. The study also examined the consequences of these behaviors on faculty, staff, and students, as well as the broader institutional culture.

The literature was further analyzed to identify strategies employed by academic institutions to manage and mitigate toxic behaviors and improve organizational culture. Key strategies identified included conflict resolution training, emotional



intelligence development, mentorship programs, and policy reforms. The study then examined the effectiveness of these strategies, looking for patterns of success or failure in different institutional contexts.

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data. While the analysis provides a broad overview of existing research, it does not include primary data collected directly from academic institutions or individuals within those institutions. Therefore, the findings may not be fully representative of specific institutional environments or reflect the latest developments in practice. Additionally, the study does not account for regional variations or contextual factors that may influence the manifestation and management of toxic behaviors in educational settings.

Another limitation is that the study focuses primarily on literature published in English, which may exclude important research conducted in other languages or cultural contexts. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the global scope of the issue or the diverse range of institutional approaches to managing toxic behaviors.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study highlight the detrimental effects of toxic behaviors and dysfunctional institutional cultures on academic environments, drawing attention to the profound consequences for faculty, staff, and students. A thorough analysis of the literature reveals several key recurring patterns, including micromanagement, favoritism, bullying, and poor communication, all of which contribute to the persistence of toxic work cultures in educational institutions. Toxic behaviors in academic settings are primarily characterized by negative interpersonal interactions, which disrupt professional relationships, demotivate staff, and contribute to a hostile work environment. Common forms of such behavior include bullying, favoritism, manipulation, and exclusion. These actions are often embedded within the institutional culture and may be normalized over time, creating an atmosphere where individuals feel unsupported or even targeted for their differences. Studies consistently show that toxic behaviors, whether initiated by colleagues, superiors, or even students, can have a lasting impact on the mental health and professional satisfaction of faculty members. Bullying and passive-aggressive behaviors, for example, are linked to heightened stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Similarly, favoritism and micromanagement erode trust among faculty members, leading to diminished job satisfaction and a decline in overall academic productivity (Kluska et al., 2021).

The study found that toxic behaviors often go unaddressed in many institutions due to a lack of awareness or an unwillingness to confront power dynamics. This, in turn, exacerbates the negative effects on faculty well-being, potentially contributing to high turnover rates, which destabilize the institution's academic mission (Frost, 2003). Therefore, recognizing and addressing these toxic traits early is crucial in order to maintain a positive work culture and support faculty retention. Toxic culture in educational institutions is often more systemic than individual toxic behaviors, embedded in leadership practices, communication styles, and organizational policies. Unlike isolated incidents of toxic behavior, a toxic culture is perpetuated by organizational norms and practices that favor certain individuals or groups over others, often through practices like micromanagement, poor communication, and inadequate support. One of the most notable impacts of a toxic culture is the erosion of faculty morale. Institutions characterized by micromanagement, for instance, severely limit the autonomy of academic staff, leading to increased stress and

decreased creativity (Taylor & Wilson, 2019). This micromanagement is typically accompanied by poor communication practices, where faculty members are either



excluded from decision-making or receive inconsistent, unclear instructions from leadership. Such practices lead to confusion, frustration, and a loss of institutional trust, as faculty members begin to feel undervalued and unsupported.

Moreover, the lack of recognition for the hard work and achievements of faculty members, coupled with favoritism towards certain individuals, creates a culture of inequality that fosters resentment and disengagement. These factors, when left unchecked, damage the overall institutional reputation, which can further hinder an institution's ability to attract and retain talented educators and researchers (Smith, 2020). The may experience consequences of toxic behavior and culture extend beyond faculty members to impact students and the overall academic environment. Faculty members working in toxic environments often experience significant psychological and emotional distress, including burnout, anxiety, and depression (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This emotional toll not only affects the individual well-being of faculty members but also has a ripple effect on students, who reduced quality of instruction and mentorship as a result.

The decline in faculty morale due to toxic workplace dynamics also hampers academic collaboration and innovation. When faculty members feel disengaged or unsupported, they are less likely to collaborate on research projects, participate in academic discussions, or offer guidance to students. This isolation negatively impacts the institution's research output and overall academic quality, ultimately undermining the learning experience for students (Johnson & Spector, 2019).

Additionally, the culture of fear and retribution that often accompanies toxic environments can stifle creativity and limit opportunities for professional development. Faculty members who are afraid of speaking out or challenging institutional norms may refrain from sharing innovative ideas or suggestions for improvement, resulting in stagnation and reduced institutional growth (Frost, 2003). Strategies for Managing Toxic Behaviors and Culture. Several strategies have emerged in the literature for managing toxic behaviors and cultivating healthier institutional cultures. These include conflict resolution training, emotional intelligence development, mentorship programs, and policy reforms. Conflict resolution training equips faculty and staff with the skills to manage interpersonal disputes constructively, reducing the likelihood of toxic behaviors escalating. Emotional intelligence training, which enhances self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal effectiveness, is particularly beneficial in fostering a supportive and respectful academic environment (Goleman, 2017). Mentorship programs also play a vital role in managing toxicity by providing faculty members with the guidance and emotional support needed to navigate challenging work environments. These programs promote collaboration and community, reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging (Twale & De Luca, 2008). The findings highlight that mentorship can also act as a preventative measure against burnout, providing faculty with tools for resilience and coping strategies.

Policy reforms, including the implementation of clear anti-bullying policies, transparent evaluation criteria, and leadership training, are essential for ensuring that toxic behaviors are not tolerated. Institutions that establish and enforce policies around inclusivity, respect, and accountability demonstrate a commitment to creating a fair and supportive work environment. However, the success of these policies depends largely on the willingness of leadership to actively support and enforce them (Kluska et al., 2021). In terms of leadership, the review emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence in academic leadership. Leaders who are emotionally intelligent are better equipped to recognize the signs of toxicity, address conflicts



proactively, and foster a culture of transparency and inclusion. Emotional intelligence in leadership has been shown to enhance faculty engagement, improve morale, and increase institutional productivity (Brown & Thompson, 2022).

Despite the promising outcomes associated with these strategies, challenges remain in their implementation. One significant barrier is the lack of dedicated resources and frameworks for addressing toxicity within institutions. Many academic institutions, particularly in resource-constrained settings, lack the infrastructure to implement comprehensive conflict resolution or emotional intelligence programs. Furthermore, institutional resistance to change, often rooted in hierarchical power structures and traditional attitudes, can hinder the effectiveness of these strategies.

The literature also highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity when implementing strategies in different institutional contexts. In regions with distinct cultural norms and hierarchies, such as Tamil Nadu, India, faculty members may be reluctant to report toxic behaviors or participate in conflict resolution programs due to fears of retaliation or social stigma. Therefore, any interventions must be adapted to the specific cultural and institutional context to ensure their success.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The review of existing literature reveals several recurring themes and patterns related to toxic behavior and culture in educational institutions. Across studies, a consistent link emerges between poor institutional culture and negative outcomes, such as emotional burnout, job dissatisfaction, and high faculty turnover. The presence of micromanagement, favoritism, and poor communication repeatedly appears as major contributors to workplace toxicity (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Kluska et al., 2021). The reviewed strategies such as conflict resolution, emotional intelligence training, and HR-led interventions highlight the practical steps institutions are taking to improve working conditions. Their relevance in today's academic landscape is significant, especially as faculty face increasing pressures related to digital transformation, student expectations, and performance accountability. In this context, emotional resilience, inclusive leadership, and structured mentorship are more important than ever (Goleman, 2017; Smith & Brown, 2020). However, several gaps and challenges remain in the implementation of these strategies. Many institutions lack a clear framework or dedicated resources for managing toxicity, relying instead on ad hoc responses. Even where policies exist, they are often not enforced uniformly, creating further mistrust among staff (Johnson & Spector, 2019). Moreover, cultural resistance to open discussion about workplace problems may prevent meaningful change, especially in institutions where hierarchy and tradition dominate.

Some best practices identified in the literature include the University of Michigan's Faculty Development Program, which integrates emotional intelligence and peer coaching to foster leadership and collaboration (Brown & Thompson, 2022). Another example is a UK-based university that implemented a "Respect at Work" initiative, combining policy reform, anonymous reporting, and leadership training resulting in measurable improvement in staff morale and retention over two years (Taylor & Wilson, 2019). These examples show that long-term commitment, inclusive policies, and proactive leadership are essential for transforming institutional culture. More empirical research, especially in diverse educational contexts, is needed to expand the evidence base and guide policy refinement. The synthesis of literature indicates that toxic work culture in educational institutions manifests through recurring

patterns such as micromanagement, favoritism, lack of transparency, and limited support systems. These patterns not only harm individual well-being but also erode

the academic institution's overall integrity and effectiveness (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Kluska et al., 2021). Tamil academic contexts are not exempt from these issues. For example, a study by Dr. R. Meenakshi (2019) on faculty satisfaction in Tamil Nadu colleges noted that poor communication and favoritism were key contributors to stress and job dissatisfaction among teachers. The practical relevance of these findings is particularly evident in the current academic environment, where educators are expected to adapt to rapid technological changes, increasing administrative burdens, and evolving student expectations. In such settings, emotional intelligence and institutional support are vital. Goleman (2017) emphasizes this globally, while Dr. K. Rajalakshmi's (2020) work in Tamil medium arts and science colleges highlights that empathy and inclusive leadership directly influence faculty morale and retention in regional institutions. However, there are clear gaps and implementation challenges. Policies that address workplace bullying or offer conflict resolution frameworks often exist in principle but are poorly enforced. In many Tamil Nadu colleges, cultural hierarchies and fear of retaliation prevent faculty from reporting issues, as discussed in a field report by the Tamil Nadu State Council for Higher Education (TANSCH, 2021). This creates a cycle of silence and sustained toxicity.

On the positive side, some institutions have adopted best practices that show promise. The University of Michigan's faculty development model, which integrates emotional intelligence and peer coaching (Brown & Thompson, 2022), has parallels with mentorship initiatives piloted in autonomous colleges in Chennai, where senior faculty guide junior educators informally, resulting in better retention and cooperation (Anitha & Prabhakaran, 2022). Similarly, the "Respect at Work" policy in a UK university mirrors the values upheld in Gandhigram Rural Institute, which has embedded community dialogue and democratic decision-making into its academic structure. To conclude, a multifaceted approach combining policy, training, leadership reform, and cultural sensitivity is required to address toxicity in educational institutions. While literature provides valuable insights, further research grounded in regional contexts and languages especially Tamil can make these strategies more locally applicable and sustainable. The review of literature highlights several recurring themes in the context of toxic behavior and workplace culture in educational institutions. These include micromanagement, favoritism, lack of support, and poor communication all of which disrupt the academic ecosystem and affect faculty and student well-being (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Kluska et al., 2021). In the Indian and Tamil context, such patterns are often intensified by hierarchical structures and institutional silence. The Thirukkural, a timeless Tamil ethical text, offers relevant moral insights. For instance:

Ozhukkamudaiyavar Aakulaam Illai,  
Pizhaikkalin Peedudaiyar Maattu – Kural 131

"Those who possess integrity will not suffer; those who lack it are a burden to society."

This couplet emphasizes that ethical leadership and self-discipline are essential in managing institutions. Toxic cultures often thrive in the absence of such values, which points to the practical relevance of promoting emotional intelligence, accountability, and communication training. Moreover, literature highlights that emotional burnout, stress, and disengagement are common impacts of toxicity



(Goleman, 2017). These issues are particularly visible in Tamil Nadu's higher education sector. Dr. K. Rajalakshmi (2020) notes that favoritism and administrative negligence contribute to faculty attrition, especially among younger educators.

Despite the existence of institutional policies, implementation remains a challenge. Cultural barriers, fear of retaliation, and lack of awareness impede their effectiveness. As the Thirukkural wisely says:

Ilaiyar Inamuraiyaak Kelaathu Melor,

Valaiyar Neer Vaikkum Ulagu – Kural 459

“If the elders fail to heed the voice of the youth, the world becomes a trap.”

This calls for intergenerational respect and institutional listening, especially in academic spaces. Leaders must actively include diverse voices to prevent alienation. Best practices, such as mentorship programs in autonomous colleges and emotional intelligence workshops, have proven effective (Brown & Thompson, 2022; Anitha & Prabhakaran, 2022). The Tamil classic's emphasis on wisdom aligns Arindhaarin Yaathanin Kollum Oruvan,

Pirandhaarin Paedhai Thozhil – Kural 421

“A fool disregard the counsel of the wise—leading only to ruin.”

Thus, building healthy academic spaces requires not only modern policy tools but also rooted ethical principles, as reflected in Tamil literary wisdom.

## **1. Recommendations**

Based on the synthesis of secondary data and literature, several evidence-based suggestions can be proposed to address and prevent toxic behaviors and institutional cultures in educational settings:

### **1. Policy Enforcement and Transparent Governance**

Educational institutions should implement clear, accessible policies that address workplace bullying, favoritism, and discrimination. These policies must be not only documented but actively enforced through grievance redressal systems and accountability mechanisms.

Nantrikku Vaayndhathu Natpevan Seyyin,

Kondrum PazhimaRRadhu Andru – Kural 811

“True leadership is one that fosters good deeds and avoids blame—even when firm decisions are made.”

### **2. Leadership and Emotional Intelligence Training**

Senior faculty and administrators should undergo leadership development programs focused on emotional intelligence, empathy, and ethical decision-making. Such training can help reduce micromanagement and encourage inclusive practices.

### **3. Faculty Wellness and Mental Health Support**

Establishing structured faculty wellness programs, including counseling services and peer- support groups, is crucial to prevent burnout and reduce attrition. Institutions should promote a work culture that values balance and well-being.

Udaiyar Enapadhu Ollum Thee Natpin,

Nadaiyal Thamaiyar Siridhu – Kural 786

“The truly powerful are those who walk the path of kindness, not domination.”



**Open Communication and Participatory Decision-Making**

Encouraging two-way communication between administration and faculty ensures transparency. Platforms for regular dialogue such as faculty forums and suggestion systems help build trust and collaborative spirit.

**4. Mentorship and Peer Support Structures**

Instituting formal mentorship programs allows junior faculty to receive professional guidance, while also fostering a culture of collegiality. Successful models from both international and Tamil Nadu-based institutions can serve as templates.

**5. Contextualized Interventions**

All strategies should be culturally sensitive and adaptable to the local academic environment. Regional languages, values, and traditional wisdom (e.g., Thirukkural principles) can be integrated into training and awareness campaigns.

These recommendations offer a holistic framework to transform educational institutions into ethically sound, emotionally safe, and professionally fulfilling environments for all stakeholders.

**CONCLUSION**

A healthy academic environment is not a luxury it is a necessity. The literature clearly reveals how toxic behaviors and institutional cultures silently erode the spirit of education, impacting not just faculty but generations of students. To rebuild trust and integrity in our institutions, systemic changes and compassionate leadership are urgently needed.

Let us not wait for more damage to occur. It is time for educators, management, and policy- makers to act with courage, clarity, and care. Future research must go beyond theory and lead to action—because nurturing minds begins with nurturing the environment that shapes them.

“Desire to do what is  
right.”



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