

Academic measures for de-stressing higher education system in India

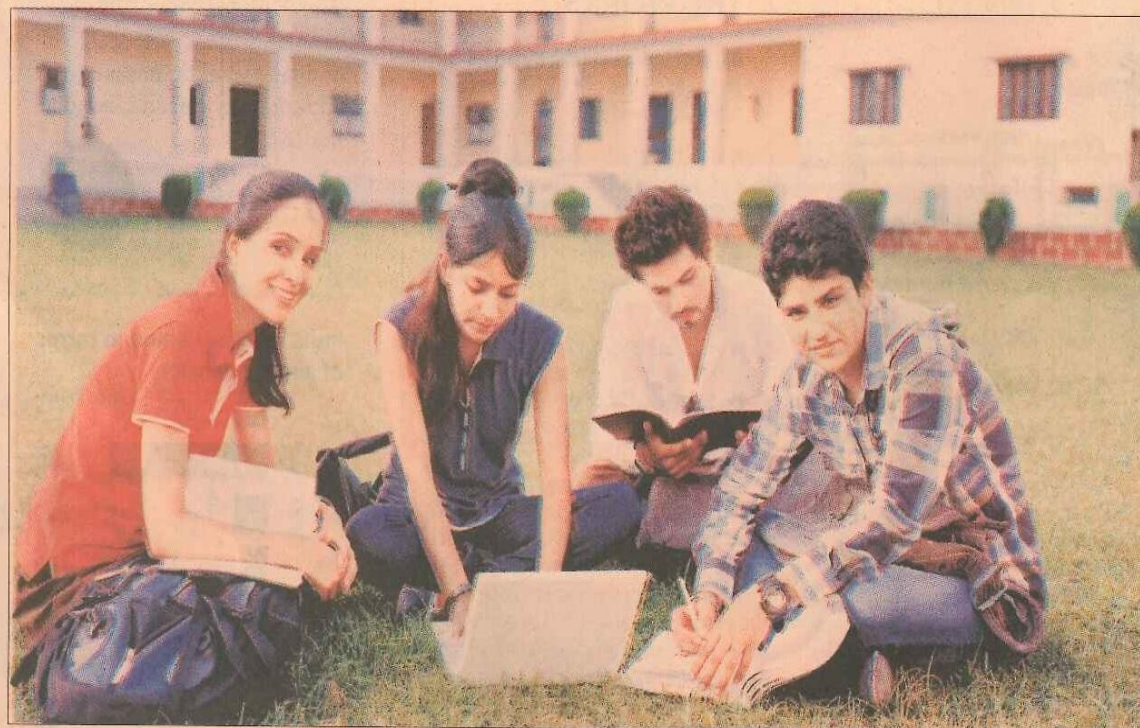
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have to be made more open, collaborative, skill-oriented



Sanjay Dhande

AS ECONOMIC CONDITIONS in India have improved, the aspirations of people have also become higher. Families want their children to be financially well off. Upward financial journey of an individual depends upon the selection of a profession and job career. Both these aspects also depend upon the quality and nature of education and training one has undergone in the formative years. Hence, families want to ensure that their children go to the best schools, colleges and universities. The student strength has grown exponentially, but the number of quality academic institutions, unfortunately, has not grown proportionately. As a result, 'stress' in the education system is increasing every year. Add to this the issues related to entrance examinations, reservations, fees, peer expectations, etc. All in all, stress in the education system, in general, and particularly stress on students, is resulting in tragic situations like suicides.

To address the problem of suicides, educational institutions are taking steps such as counselling services, advising parents, cultural activities, etc. However, in spite of these efforts, the unfortunate cases of suicides continue. The situation is particularly serious at elite educational institutions. While one of the ways to address this situation is by undertaking remedial measures and reducing stress in the system, one question relates to the academic model being followed by higher educational institutions—the curriculum is at least 50 years old, the pedagogy is still the same in spite of many technological developments, and there are no major



changes in the assessment approach. Clearly, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have to be made more open, collaborative and skill-oriented. This can reduce stress in the system.

Design thinking

Towards that, 'design thinking' is an approach that can be used for revamping the higher educational curriculum. Rather than teaching through only formal lectures and tutorials, one can learn from the concept of the 'collaboratory', as done by the Olin College of Engineering. This small institute in Massachusetts, US, is now one of the most sought after undergraduate institutions in that part of the world. The entire approach of education there is far different as compared to formal engineering institutes. The curriculum allows students to explore, rather than force-feed—students explore the concepts through projects. Students out there know that some concepts have to be learnt since a project cannot be completed unless mastering concepts.

Most projects are team efforts. Students start learning about each other both in

terms of strengths and weaknesses. Teachers work as coaches, developing confidence and skills of students. The entire student-faculty interaction is at an altogether different level as compared to regular colleges. Academic association helps a lot. Classroom and laboratory environments are fused. Students are provided ample supplies and other tools. In fact, the library not only issues books, but also issues tools and supplies.

When students complete a project, they have not only learnt concepts, but also developed the skills of solving a problem by actually working on it. The teamwork, the real-world connect, the exploratory nature of activity provides ample opportunities for students coming from different backgrounds to melt into a pot.

Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) is another institution that focuses on similar pedagogical tools. SUTD has central facilities like a design centre and a prototyping facility. Every classroom and discussion room has a 3D printer. Students can create a concept and get it printed. If the product is physically big, they can transfer the concept to a central facility and get it

printed there. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is a collaborator of SUTD.

Aalto University of Finland is another interesting academic experiment. The design factory at Aalto University has fabrication facilities within the classrooms. Students end the class or a session with a fabricated model in a team. The action forms the learning—real learning.

Grade waiver policy

Moving beyond design thinking, another important academic concept that can reduce stress in the system is waiver of grades in the first year. Many well-known academic institutions will give a letter grade of a course in the first year. However, this grade is not taken into account while arriving at the CGPA, or cumulative index of student performance. It will not be used while considering warning or probation or dismissal of a student. Failure is the biggest fear. This fear drives many students to the extreme case of suicide.

Not giving CGPA in the first year is a very important step in terms of removing the fear of failure. It may be mentioned that

passing a course in the first year is mandatory. In case a student has failed the course, he or she has to repeat it or take some remedial measures to pass that course. However, the letter grade of the course does not enter in any calculation or consideration. Such a measure will reduce the stress from the minds of new students. The university or college system is intimidating for many students. Also, the parental or family cover of protection is not there when students enter the tertiary education phase.

Handling of distractions is important. Access to emails, internet, gaming, college festivals, club activities and even fears such as ragging have to be handled in a way that the academic load in the first year is manageable for students. Academic institutions must see to it that not more than 20 credits are provided during the first two semesters.

Courses during the first year should have some exposure to liberal and creative arts—no matter what professional specialisation a student wishes to pursue later on. Such courses broaden a young person's thinking.

In India, intense competition, over-regulatory regimes, hierarchical categories of institutions and complex mechanisms of academic administrations in universities and institutions generally prevent freedom of experimentation for teachers and students. This results in a stuffy atmosphere, so much that even though tragic incidents such as suicides continue, no concrete steps are being taken to correct the situation.

Proliferation of affiliated colleges has created a highly central system in universities. The elaborate structure of boards of study, the academic council or senate and the politicisation of these bodies has resulted in reducing the freedom in academics. The powerful lobbies of teachers also add to this rigid framework. The recent experiment of four-year undergraduate course by Delhi University is a classic example of how experimental initiatives are being rolled back. If freedom has to be provided to students, universities and colleges and teachers will have to work hard.

The author is chief mentor & chancellor, Avantika University (Maharashtra Institute of Technology Pune campus at Ujjain). Views are personal