Fostering A Liberal Credit System

Traditionally, Indian schools, colleges and universities follow a definitive "pass" or "fail" system. Sometimes, students are allowed to move on to the next class, or semester, on the condition that they sit for all papers that they fail to clear.

But the University Grants Commission has been pushing Indian universities to adopt a more liberal system. In January 2006, it sent out letters suggesting a host of reforms. One was to initiate a "choice-based credit system"—in conjunction with the semester and grading systems. This has the potential to improve the Indian higher education system. So far, universities appear reluctant to embrace the reforms. Perhaps, this unwillingness to reform the traditional system of learning could be attributed to a lack of understanding.

A Steady System

The credit system requires that a student progresses in her academic programmes not in terms of time (years, or semesters), but in terms of courses. Each course, or module, is assigned a certain credit, depending on the estimated effort put in by a student. When the student passes that course, she earns the credits associated with that course. If a student passes a single course in a semester, she does not have to repeat that course in the future—a fair system.

The definition of "credits" can be based on various parameters—such as the student's workload, learning outcomes and contact hours.

One advantage of the credit system is that a student can earn credits at her own pace. If, in a semester, a student falls ill or cannot cope with the academic load, she can decide to study a fewer number of courses, earning fewer credits. She can compensate for the so-called loss in the next semester, or put in an extra semester of work to complete a course.

This flexibility to study at one's own pace is important in today's world, especially in India's increasingly liberalised economy, where more youth are seeking work experience at an earlier age, and then going back to school to specialise in their area of study. The credit system allows the recognition of learning, wherever it is achieved.

Helping Students To Decide

The credit system also allows a student to study in the sequence that she prefers—putting her interests first.

Of course, there are pre-requisites; that is, some courses can be taken only after a basic course has been completed. This flexibility allows students to specialise in a topic and then seek out short projects, or internships in that sector. It treats them as individuals who have a specific career path that they wish to follow.

The credit system also facilitates flexibility. Instead of a single 40-lecture course, a subject can be taught in two 20-lecture modules, allowing a

teacher to improvise lessons accordingly. Short courses also permit an institute to invite experts from the industry and other institutions as adjunct faculty.

Otherwise, it is impossible for an expert, particularly one working in the corporate sector, to commit to teaching a 40-lecture course over a semester. Allowing industry experts to participate in the education process means that they also have a fair idea of the "quality" of students (essentially; their future employees) and the level of expertise at an institution.

Collaborations Unlimited

Finally, a credit system that enables shorter courses also permits universities to collaborate via academic programmes. It helps them offer a wider choice to the students as far as subjects and topics are concerned, particularly at a time when most institutions are facing serious faculty shortage.

A robust credit system that allows easy transfer of credits also enables student-exchange programmes to flourish—provided the two universities agree on all terms. Through such pro-

system improves curriculum design and consequently, the quality of education.

Mobile, Global Students

Not every student can get through an IIT. But, the credit-based system allows students to aspire to study at one of the IIT programmes at least for a semester.

Overseas institutes have already understood the necessity of providing "mobility" to their students as far as topic, institute and programme choices are concerned. If this student happens to be a working professional specialising in a certain area, these choices become more important.

Typically, a part-time MTech programme takes three years to complete. A working professional may not want to give up his work and location opportunities for that long. To be able to carry one's credits earned and use them for a degree elsewhere is a huge advantage for such professionals.

It encourages professionals to opt for part-time postgraduate programmes that enhance knowledge, and it improves programme qual-

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grammes, universities can promote interesting interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary courses, tailored to student needs and interests.

The traditional system of learning compartmentalises programmes in terms of degrees. The credit system, on the other hand, works as a cafeteria model of learning, where the credit-based curriculum serves as a cafeteria menu. Students can select courses according to their aptitude, tastes and preferences.

Often, certain streams in a relatively new university take time to reach critical mass as it struggles to build resources and confidence in the programme. Bio-technology programmes were slow to start in IITs (even though the institutes were of "repute"). This predicament could have been solved had the institutes collaborated with others that specialised in such topics and allowed students to study in the specialist institutes— through the transfer of credits. In this way, the

ity as well—because professionals are motivated learners.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has been designed with such a goal—to create the truly international student. Through the system, a student can start his programme in one university and move to another (either temporarily, or permanently) through lateral admission in order to avail either a better, or a more specialised and suitable programme. The system also allows a student to study at a specialist school (perhaps far from home) and then return either to her home town, or closer home, to finish the rest of the course.

If established, this system can enhance the vibrancy and dynamism of higher education. To summarise, a credit system can function only when we start to see our students as mature individuals, capable of making their own decisions. ◼EDU

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