

To revive a syllabus, just rope in a student

USER-GENERATED Student feedback is now playing a bigger role in universities and institutes. It's making courses sharper and more relevant, and gets both faculty and pupils to be more engaged

Lavina Mulchandani & Prakruti Maniar
@lavina.mulchandani@ht.com

India's top-down approach to education is changing. Students are no longer considered passive recipients, taking notes unchallenged. An increasing number of universities and institutes of higher education are not only keeping taking feedback from their students, many are also giving them stronger roles in designing and executing curriculums. This means students get a say in what they are being taught and how — a move that institutions hope will make courses more contemporary and relevant to fast-changing needs.

Among the places incorporating students' inputs are Mumbai's SP Jain School of Global Management, Ramnarain Ruia College and Jai Hind colleges; the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati; and the Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurugram. Current and former students are helping decide which modules to add to courses and

which new certificate programmes to offer. "Students are now partners in decision-making here," says Gautam Biswas, director of IIT-Guwahati. "They are either part of our curriculum validation panels or are asked to send in their feedback on the curriculums."

At SP Jain School of Global Management, students are encouraged to have discussion the quality assurance team that to ascertain if the curriculum and course content is relevant. "It helps students in understanding the course better and it gives



ILLUSTRATION: SUDHARSHETTY

them a greater stake in what they're studying," says Anitha Ramanna Pathak, the institute's manager of quality assurance.

MY OPINION COUNTS

Many would say that it's the advancements in technology, and the ease of obtaining feedback

that have helped the move. In reality, it's simply that more colleges are realising that they can't afford to be out of the loop about

student requirements and the world outside campus. "Institutes now want to know if a particular course is effective enough, if it serves the intended purpose," says Umashankar Venkatesh, director of the postgraduate programme in management (PGPM) and professor of marketing at Great Lakes. "Having a discussion instead of written feedback helps us understand the students' perspective better," adds Pathak. At SP Jain for the last three terms, postgraduate management students have been suggesting the idea of a student boardroom, a place for where they play CEOs and COOs. "We now have a digital platform called Socrates, where the whole class can leave comments and respond to hypothetical business situations based on case studies," Pathak says.

The system has been adopted

CONTINUED ON P 14

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CONTINUED FROM P 13

for the postgraduate students, and will also be introduced at the undergraduate level, eventually.

At Ruia, they started taking feedback on all curriculums three years ago. "We would hold discussions with student representatives, collate the responses and send them to the University Grants Commission (UGC)," says Jessie Pius, coordinator of the college's internal quality assurance cell and an assistant professor of botany. "This took time, and didn't always yield results."

Last year, the college got autonomy. "As per UGC guidelines on autonomy, each department should have existing students on its board of studies," says Pius. "Sometimes, changes are incorporated as quickly as the

next semester." A demand for research at the undergraduate level in the Science and Arts streams, for instance, has led to the inclusion of a paper on research methods in the second year and a research paper in the final year (from 2018-19).

Jai Hind college has student representatives on the board of studies for the Bachelors in Management Studies (BMS) and Bachelors in Mass Media (BMM) programmes. "The result has been tie-ups with industry partners for modules on data analysis, risk management and stock markets," says principal Ashok Wadia. "Students also asked for certificate courses on forensic science and Indian heritage, which we introduced."

Open-ended feedback can help

add value to existing systems. "After each semester, we fill in a form on how each subject was taught," says Tanuj Abrol, a PGPM student at Great Lakes. "One component is on the weekly guest lectures. In a PGPM programme, everyone has some work experience, so this kind of feedback can expose the batch to diverse fields."

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Students don't always know what to ask for. "They may be overly influenced by trends such as social media marketing, for instance," says Biswas of IIT-G. "One way of getting a better response is to ask them to refer to curricula of best international universities and come up with suggestions." Sometimes, they

may also go to an unfeasible extreme. "Last year, postgraduate students from the science stream wanted an entire semester on projects only," says Pius of Ruia. "We had to explain that some foundation concepts, some theory is essential."

How feedback can be incorporated also depends on the subjects and stream. "For our PG programme in data analytics and data science, designing a curriculum needs a panel of experts from industry and experienced faculty," says Venkatesh. "Student feedback, in that case, doesn't play a major role. We ask students for a feedback at the end of the course, which is then reviewed by professional bodies. Technical courses need to be tightly controlled after all."