

EDUCATIONPLUS

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Yugank Goyal

Each year, several Indian students leave their small-town homes to pursue higher education in major Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Pune, as most universities and colleges are located in urban areas. About 32% of Indian colleges are located in just 6% of the nation's districts, with over a thousand colleges in Bangalore Urban alone, according to the AISHE Report 2021-22. As a result, a few concentrated urban centres have come to represent the future of higher education in India and has become so embedded in our cultural fabric.

However, this trend lacks any logical planning or necessity. A university's calibre does not necessarily depend on where it is located. In fact, for the longest time, small towns in this country were home to some of the most revered educational institutions including Nalanda and Takshashila. Even modern universities of today like Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton, Caltech, Stanford, Yale, Leiden, Warwick, Heidelberg, Duke, and Dartmouth have flourished outside of urban cities.

For far too long, Indian universities have been viewed as urban centres of knowledge that are cut off from the country's mainland. The tremendous sociocultural, ecological, and intellectual wealth found in India's



Learning from the land

By embedding universities in the country's smaller districts, we could unlock a transformative potential that currently remains untapped

smaller districts has been disregarded by this model. If we were to embed universities in these districts, where real action and change are happening, we could unlock a transformative potential that

currently remains untapped.

Why it works

Here are four compelling reasons why this alternative vision is not just desirable but necessary for India's future:

First, it allows for knowledge creation in local realities. The purpose of any university is to produce knowledge that benefits society. A university becomes a key part of a district com-

munity when it is situated within this ecosystem. This allows our academic institutions to come in direct contact with the difficulties and challenges faced by the local communities at a grassroots level, whether it is the scarcity of water in Rajasthan or the rise in tourism in Uttarakhand. By being in close proximity with district communities, universities can problem-solve creatively and collaboratively. It also allows our country's brightest minds to collaborate with the local communities and embrace indigenous knowledge and wisdom, thus expanding the horizons of global understanding.

Second, it will help retain local talent. Most students move to bigger cities each year to pursue higher education, which is depleting the intellectual capital from our rural and semi-urban communities. This also causes students to become disconnected from their cultural roots, causing cultural deterioration and a feeling of estrangement from their own communities. In the context of faculty, universities in metropolises have overshadowed and stunted the rise and recognition of local intellectuals. Decentralising universities would help reverse these trends.

Third, education spaces across districts of India can help vitalise local economies. Universities are significant economic drivers. Consider the cities of Aligarh, Kharagpur, and Pilani, where educational institutions serve as

the hub of local markets, promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, investment, and the creation of jobs.

Fourth, this will serve as a meaningful academia-industry and academia-government dialogue. In large cities, universities are often not connected to the local industries or governments that they are meant to impact. Hence, positioning them in districts would encourage direct engagement with the District Magistrate's office or local MLAs to solve pressing issues. Universities will also establish stronger connections with local businesses, which will help develop curricula that address current demands and helps in local hiring.

Looking ahead

Although this seems like a long-term goal, we need to consider this shift. That way, universities would no longer be remote establishments bound to major cities and will be community-centred, problem-solving engines that drive economic development and prevent cultural drain-age. Over time, they can develop niche expertise that benefits both local communities and the nation as a whole. This approach ensures that universities take regions as the syllabus and not as a site. In a country as diverse and dynamic as India, we need to realise that polycentralising education is not a choice but a necessity.

Views are personal

The writer is a faculty of public policy and director of the Centre for Knowledge Alternatives, FLAME University.

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OFF THE EDGE
Nandini Raman

I finished Class 10 (ICSE) and am now in Class 11 (CBSE) with PCM. I am not strong in Science and Maths but my goal is NDA. I hear that the CBSE board exams are close to JEE level. Will this affect my board exam marks? Vismay

Dear Vismay,

Choosing PCM in Class 11 and 12 is a good decision because Maths is compulsory for the NDA entrance exam, and both the Air Force and the Navy wings require Physics and Maths in Class 12 level. As far as CBSE board exams are concerned, Maths and Physics focus on conceptual clarity.

You don't need to be a genius for NDA. You need to do well in your written exam. Focus on NCERT Maths and Physics. Practise daily for 30-45 minutes to build confidence and speed. Work on the General Aptitude Test with English and GK.

Work on your physical fitness and building your personality and prepare well for the SSB, which are also crucial.

I am in the final year of B.Com (Taxation) and have been placed in TCS. I am also preparing for the Federal Bank recruitment. My long-term aspiration is to clear the UPSC exams. Should I gain work experience at TCS, pursue opportunities in the banking sector, or focus on UPSC prep? Grace

Dear Grace,

The decision between job security, financial stability, and full-time UPSC preparation is not easy. You need to be honest

Stay focussed

Uncertain about your career options? Low on self-confidence? This column may help

with yourself. How important is the TCS job in terms of financial independence? Can you manage without an income for some time? What level are you in in terms of UPSC prep? Will working at a job add to your stress? Do you study better with structured routines?

List the pros and cons for the various paths ahead. Consider your risk appetite. The TCS job will bring financial independence and possibly career growth. But the MNC work culture will not give you time and energy for the UPSC prep. The Federal Bank job will be public facing and closer to governance and finance and, hopefully, offer a better work-life balance than IT. However, as a private bank, you will face sales targets and constant pressure. Again, this might not fully align with your UPSC prep.

While focusing on the UPSC will help you attempt the exam with full strength, you need to decide how long are you going to pursue this and work on a Plan B. There will be no financial back up here and it can get stressful if you do not clear the exam.

If you are still at the beginning stage of preparation, consider taking up a job and use the year to build your UPSC foundation and see if you can balance work and studies. If you are in the intermediate stage, take the risk of full-time exam preparation.

My daughter has completed BBA-LLB and enrolled as an advocate. She cleared the Foundation paper for

Company Secretary course but failed one paper in both modules of the Executive level. She is now wondering whether to practise as an advocate or retake the CS exams. Name withheld on request

Dear Parent,

The choice depends on your daughter's interests, long-term goals, and tolerance for the nature of each profession.

If her personality fits structured work, compliance, corporate processes, and she values stable income and balance, CS is the right path. Skills required are precision in compliance, company law, regulations, SEBI, ROC filings and she could become a Senior CS, a legal head, Compliance Head, CFO, or end up in board-level positions.

If she enjoys arguments, court cases, public speaking, and dynamic client interaction, then law will be better. But stability fluctuates based on clients and experience. Skills required are argumentation, public speaking, drafting, negotiation and career growth depends on whether you are in independent practice, work with senior counsel, or a partner in a firm.

Let her identify her interests. She can choose one path or try to combine both, as a BBA-LLB + CS is a highly powerful combination in the corporate world. Roles are available in legal departments of corporate firms or in the compliance divisions of law firms and in consultancies that offer

legal and CS services.

I am in Class 9 and interested in Physics research. Which college would be best for my UG and PG so that I can do my Ph.D. from one of the best foreign universities? Sreerenjini

Dear Sreerenjini

Identifying your path so early puts you miles ahead of others. Stay focused and you can achieve your goal. Focus on building a strong foundation in Maths and Physics, and participate in science competitions and Olympiads, as this will be a huge boost for college and Ph.D. applications.

For your UG (B.Sc.) + PG (M.Sc.) in Physics in India, consider institutions such as IISc-Bangalore; IISERs in Pune, Kolkata, Mohali (which have a five-year BS-MS dual degree); Chennai Mathematical Institute (CMI); ISI Kolkata; St. Stephen's College Delhi University; Presidency University, Kolkata; Ashoka University, Sonapat; and the IITs in Kanpur, Mumbai and Chennai. Research exposure and strong recommendation letters are crucial for a foreign Ph.D. Institutes like IISc, IISERs, and CMI have the strongest pipelines to international Ph.D. programmes.

For your Ph.D., aim at MIT, Caltech, Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, UC Berkeley in the U.S.; Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College London in the U.K.; ETH Zurich, EPFL, Max Planck Institutes, Paris-Saclay in Europe; National University of Singapore (NUS), or the University of Tokyo in Asia.

Disclaimer: This column is merely a guiding voice and provides advice and suggestions on education and careers.

The writer is a practising counsellor and a trainer. Send your questions to eduplus.thehindu@gmail.com with the subject line Off the Edge



Beyond a quick fix

With students leaving their homes to pursue higher education, campuses need to go beyond emergency fixes and make emotional support an essential service

Anita Patankar

Still remember the first time a student broke down in my office. It wasn't over grades, or deadlines, or missed classes but because she felt completely, deeply alone. Thousands of miles away from home, surrounded by unfamiliar food, languages, and faces, she had no one who truly understood. And no one had asked. That moment stayed with me and made me realise how easy it is for students to slip through the cracks when emotional well-being is seen as optional, rather than essential.

Crisis on campus

In 2025, India was shaken awake by a sobering reality: a sharp rise in student suicides prompted the Supreme Court to set up a National Task Force on Stu-

dent Mental Health. Over a decade, suicide rates on campuses had risen by 64%. A staggering 12.3% of students reported suicidal thoughts; 5.2% had attempted it. These are not just statistics. These are young lives, that have been bearing their burdens for too long in silence.

The crisis didn't appear overnight. Most campuses still treat mental health as a crisis response mechanism, offering a counsellor or two, hidden behind closed doors. But what students need is not just support services. Support shouldn't feel like a last resort. It should be part of a student's everyday rhythm, a quiet constant that reminds them they're not alone.

What can be done

If universities are to move forward, we must ask what

real care looks like. It starts before a student even enters the classroom. This involves

Proactive onboarding: During orientation, mental health resources should be introduced as naturally as course outlines.

Peer mentoring: Students often talk to friends before they ever approach faculty. Training senior students as emotional first responders like Hong Kong's Wellness Ambassadors can bridge the gap between crisis and care.

Faculty as gatekeepers: A simple "Are you doing okay?" from a professor can change everything. Faculty who know how to listen, notice, and refer can be a lifeline.

Early-warning systems: AI-powered tools can flag chronic absences, disengagement, or distress, without breaching

privacy. Using data sensitively can help institutions act before it's too late.

Taking this thought ahead, for students in multicultural cities or those studying abroad, the emotional strain intensifies. They're not just adjusting to college, but to new holidays, new norms, new everything. Homesickness isn't just missing home, it's losing your rhythm, your flavour, your language. In such situations, mental health support must be culturally rooted and community driven.

For example, Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) is setting a powerful example by asking a simple but transformative question: *Are your students okay?* With this as foundation, they have formulated the Mental Wealth Framework and well-being audits. KHDA holds universities accountable not just for performance, but for emotional safety. Buddy systems, multilingual counselling, daily mindfulness sessions, and campus-wide cultural celebrations are now integrated into university life and create belonging. When students belong, they don't just cope. They grow.

Lessons for India

India now stands at a similar crossroads. With UGC's "well-being cell" guidelines and the upcoming 2026 review, institutions have a choice: build systems that check boxes or build communities that truly care. True well-being systems aren't built with policies alone, but by people. Students need familiar languages, cultural connections, and faculty who lead with compassion, not just instruction. Mental health must be part of daily life, not emergency protocol. Because when care becomes culture, students stop hiding and start healing.

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