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Beyond the college

By acknowledging alternative pathways and encouraging a skill-based approach, we can better prepare our youth for the challenges of the evolving job market

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Praneet Mungali

For years, the prevailing message by educators has been that higher education is the only path to a secure future. College is celebrated as the gateway to prosperity. However, the Indian labour market tells a different story: higher educational attainment is increasingly linked to higher rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Unemployment rates

A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), drawing on data from the Employment and Unemployment Survey and the Periodic Labour Force Survey, revealed that unemployment among educated youth far exceeds that among their uneducated peers. In 2024, the unemployment rate for graduates was a staggering 29.1% while that for uneducated youth was 3.4% and for those with secondary education it was 18.4%. Factors such as low-quality education, a lack of employment focus, and insufficient emphasis on skill development contribute to this alarming trend.

Similarly, the India Skills Report 2024, which assessed lakhs of final-year students and postgraduates, found that only 51.25% of graduates meet industry employability standards. Although this is an improvement from less than 34% in 2014, experts like former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan warn that this misalignment between education and industry needs poses long-term challenges for India's economic prospects.

Alternate paths

For students capable of gaining admission to top institutions with proven career success, that path remains valuable. However, for those facing admission to lower-ranking or non-employment-focused institutions, alternative pathways may offer a better match for their strengths and the demands of the modern job market. Vocational training, apprenticeships, and specialised certification programmes can provide practical skills and direct access to growing industries.

Consider the story of Meera, a bright coder from Pune who, after failing to enter a top university, enrolled in a local college. After struggling for a year, she dropped out to pursue skill-focused training in coding. Her decision paid off, as she got a good job that valued her skills over a formal degree. This is because companies are increasingly prioritising skills rather than academic credentials. Meera's experience is far from isolated. Many young Indians feel pressured to follow the traditional college route, even when alternative paths might better suit their abilities and career goals. The "college-for-all" mindset has left many graduates underprepared, contributing to both unemployment and underemployment.

Underemployment is another growing concern. Many graduates find themselves in positions that do not fully utilise their abilities, whether through part-time roles, temporary contracts, or jobs that offer little challenge. This often results in low wages, limited career growth, and overall job dissatisfaction.

To avoid these pitfalls, students must explore pathways that align with their individual strengths. Although the college route has historically led to success, the proportion of graduates achieving their full potential is declining. Embracing skill-focused training – supported by internships and hands-on projects – can open doors in industries that no longer prioritise degrees. Many companies, especially in fields like digital marketing, design, and computer coding, are shifting their focus from formal education to demonstrable skills.

Employers also have a role to play by supporting skill development through internships and on-the-job training programmes that help bridge the gap between academic learning and industry requirements. This not only benefits students but also addresses the broader challenges of talent mismatches in the economy.

Career guidance

Educators, too, must reconsider their approach. Moving beyond the "college-for-all" model, they should provide career guidance tailored to a student's capabilities and interests. Recognising that not every student needs to follow a traditional college path is crucial. When students are allowed to develop skills aligned with both their personal interests and market demands, they are more likely to achieve satisfaction and success in their careers.

In summary, while higher education remains a viable path for some, it is no longer the sole route to a secure and prosperous future. By acknowledging alternative pathways – such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and specialised certifications – and by encouraging a skill-based approach to employment, India can better prepare its youth for the challenges of today's evolving job market.

Views expressed are personal

The writer is Trustee and Secretary of the Sanskriti Group of Schools, Pune.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Global Scholarship Programme AIS
Offered by AIS Technolabs
Eligibility: Indian citizens who have completed secondary or high school and at least one term in a higher education course in an accredited institution.
Reward: Scholarship for up to two years plus benefits.
Application: Email at sunnyc@aistechnolabs.com
Deadline: May 15
www.b4s.in/edge/GSPA6

Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Scholarships
Offered by the Newcastle University, the U.K.
Eligibility: Indian nationals with an upper second-class UK Honours degree or equivalent with an offer for a Master's programme in 2025-26 and assessed as international students for fee purposes.
Reward: Up to 50% waiver on tuition fees.
Application: Online
Deadline: May 29
www.b4s.in/edge/VCES1

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Scholarship
Offered by the Department for the Welfare of SC/ST, Government of NCT, Delhi.
Eligibility: SC, ST or OBC students in the final year of a professional or technical degree from a recognised institution in Delhi.
Reward: ₹25,000
Application: Online
Deadline: May 31
www.b4s.in/edge/DBAS1

Courtesy: Buddy4study.com

OFF THE EDGE
Nandini Raman

Choose the right path

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

I am a full-stack developer in an MNC. My guardians want me to take the government exams. I feel I can clear the KPSC but am confused about whether this is what I should do. Sukruta

Dear Sukruta,

The decision depends on your priorities and aspirations. Consider the trade-offs and make an informed decision that aligns with your long-term goals. Your current job has given you valuable experience in a high-demand field, financial security and opportunities for professional growth in the private sector and helped build marketable skills. KPSC will offer job security, social status, and the opportunity to serve the public. But preparation involves commitment and success is not guaranteed. The work environment, job role, and pace are very different from the tech industry.

Consider your motivation. Are you satisfied with your current job? Do you find your work engaging, challenging, and rewarding? Are you drawn to public service or are you considering it only due to family pressure? Think about the long and demanding preparation and the cost of leaving your current job and income. What will you do if you don't succeed? What truly matters to you: financial security, social impact, intellectual stimulation, or work-life balance? Talk to people working in the government sector about their experiences and challenges. Flesh out the pros and cons before you decide.

I am in Class 12 (Science stream). My dream is to be a commercial pilot but I cannot afford flying schools. Are there any scholarships? Alaina

Dear Alaina,

There are scholarships for pilot training in India such as the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Uran Akademi (IGRUA) Scholarship, that is based on performance in the entrance exam. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation Scholarship is also an option. Check their eligibility criteria. IndiGo and SpiceJet have Cadet Pilot programmes that offer financial assistance or cover the cost of training in exchange for a bond to work for the airline after graduation. But the selection process is rigorous.

Some State Governments also offer scholarships for professional courses, including aviation. Check with your State's Education Department for available schemes. Several private organisations and trusts offer aviation scholarships. Look up websites like Buddy4Study or WeMakeScholars. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment provides financial assistance to students from OBC categories pursuing Commercial Pilot License (CPL) courses. Also consider taking an educational loan. Flying clubs also offer training at lower costs compared to large commercial flying schools. In case you are considering studying abroad, make sure that the license is recognised in India before signing up.

I am in Class 9. I want to research wildlife or marine life. What should I study? Which colleges are the best? Karthik

Dear Karthik,

Take the Science Stream in Class 11 with Biology as your core and Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and English. For wildlife research, opt for a B.Sc. and M.Sc. in Zoology, Wildlife Biology, Wildlife Science, Forestry, or Ecology. A Master's degree is required for research positions. For marine life research, a B.Sc. in Zoology, Marine Biology, Marine Science, Fisheries Science and a M.Sc. in Marine Biology, Marine Science, Oceanography, Marine Biotechnology will be good.

Some of the best colleges in India for wildlife research are Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun; Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Mumbai; Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS), Bengaluru; Forest Research Institute (FRI), Dehradun; and Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), Coimbatore. For marine life research, look up National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), Goa; Department of Marine Sciences, University of Calcutta, Kolkata; Faculty of Marine Sciences, Annamalai University, Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu); Department of Oceanography, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT), Kochi; Department of Marine Biology, Goa University, Goa, and Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE), Mumbai.

I am in the final year of B.Com Computer Applications and confused about whether to do CA, MBA or MCA. I am under pressure, as my parents are considering marriage if I don't decide. Ruqaiya

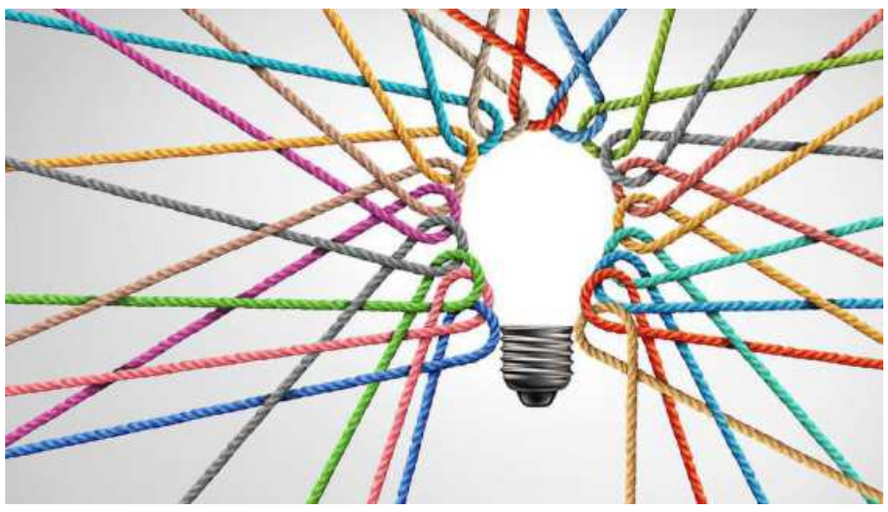
Dear Ruqaiya,

Do you understand the career paths CA, MBA or MCA will throw up? Use a career assessment and talk to your college guidance and placement counsellor for jobs. Identify a teacher you are comfortable with and seek his/her mentoring. Choosing a career path is an important decision. Don't rush into it due to external pressure. Take your time, research thoroughly, and prioritise your own goals and aspirations.

CA requires clearing the exams conducted by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI). It is a challenging but prestigious qualification with high earning potential in accounting, finance, and auditing. The exam process is rigorous and time-consuming. An MBA provides a broad business management education with specialisations in areas like finance, marketing, human resources, IT, and so on. It enhances your career prospects in management and leadership roles across various industries. MCA focuses on advanced computer applications and programming skills. It is ideal if you want to delve into software development, database management, or computer networking. You can have a good career in the IT field. You could leverage your undergraduate degree to explore job opportunities in IT companies, software development firms, or data analysis roles immediately. Upgrade your skills with certifications in Java, Python, or cloud computing. Talk to your parents about the need to choose the right path. Marriage shouldn't be a decision based on your career choice.

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



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Find those connections

The human experience shapes and informs every discipline. Therefore, one cannot disregard that all disciplines are interconnected in their knowledge

Atri Nautiyal

In a world fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity and problems such as the infiltration of AI, degradation of the environment, wars and global humanitarian crisis, we need individuals who can critically analyse real-world problems and work towards practical, sustainable solutions. It is in this context that one needs to recognise the necessity of integrating the Humanities and the STEM disciplines.

The discourse around combining STEM and the Humanities is relevant as well as imperative because it allows us to recognise the intersections in various disciplinary trainings. Each field has its own advantages, and bringing together the knowledge from across can help foster a more comprehensive, intellectual collaboration. While STEM focuses more on analytical and technical skills directed towards problem-solving, the Humanities help nurture creativity, critical thinking, and thoughtful as well as incisive communication. The complex nature of the problems we face in today's world mandates that we see them from multiple rather than unidimensional perspectives.

Need for partnerships

To be able to trace the connections between various problems and arrive at innovative solutions, partnerships between different disciplinary knowledge bases and expertise need to be forged. For example, urban planning today is more than infrastructure building thanks to climate change. Designing sustainable, climate resilient urban spaces is about identifying environmental as well as social vulnerabilities and adapting a community-based plan. This requires a collaboration between urban planners, architects, engineers, environmental scientists, as well as economists and policy-makers. In fact, transdisciplinarity is at the very heart of sustainability. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) recognises how global problems often cross neat disciplinary boundaries. So, it is important that empirical, data-driven research be merged with an understanding of ethics, philosophy, economics, socio-cultural and historical backgrounds to arrive at more nuanced and inclusive solutions.

In this regard, Higher Education institutions (HEIs) are best positioned to initiate and take forward conversations on disciplinary collaborations. Key to this is drafting of curriculum that can encourage students to seek knowledge beyond their primary domain of interest. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with its focus on flexibility and multidisciplinarity, aims to do precisely that. The possibility to major and/or minor in more than one discipline opens the space for intersectional, interdisciplinary discussions, prompting students to think and reason beyond conventional methods.

Unfortunately, the number of takers for degrees in the Humanities has been dwindling, with most students and parents viewing them as not suitable for landing high-paying jobs after graduation. While professional security is frequently given more importance, it is important to recognise that lasting professional success depends on a variety of skills and not merely the subject pursued. Employers are looking for well-rounded, curious individuals who can meet challenges, communicate effectively, and be analytical and creative when it comes to problem-solving. Professional environments are all about working with and managing people and, therefore, one needs to develop interpersonal skills. This is the kind of training one can acquire from an exposure to multidisciplinary approach to teaching learning.

Central to all disciplinary studies is the human. Be it Literature, Biology, Chemistry, Sociology or Psychology, it is the human experience that shapes and informs every discipline. Therefore, one cannot disregard that disciplines are interconnected in their knowledge. Data and facts are not inseparable from values, ethics or history. Exploring how they are linked together can deepen scientific inquiry and help bridge gaps between theory and praxis. STEM and the Humanities can and do complement each other, and HEIs have to aid in that dialogue.

It is easier for universities to coordinate and bring together faculty members, researchers, and students from different disciplines and have them work towards specific problems. Such holistic engagements allows students to reason, deliberate and innovate, and work meaningfully with others towards a common goal of problem-solving. By encouraging academic versatility, universities will promote inclusivity and adaptability among students. It is therefore imperative for HEIs to rapidly transform their approach towards education and work towards a seamless integration of the STEM and the Humanities.

The writer is the Director, School of Liberal Studies and Media, UPES.

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Hold AI accountable

The question now is not whether AI belongs in education but how we ensure it responsibly serves students, educators, and institutions

Bruce Dahlgren

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping education, offering personalised learning, efficiency, and accessibility. For students, AI provides individualised support; for faculty, it streamlines administrative tasks allowing them more time to focus on student success. While it holds great promise it also raises critical ethical concerns, particularly regarding fairness, transparency, and accountability. Educators and institutions must implement AI thoughtfully, ethically, and inclusively to harness its potential without compromising equity or integrity.

Building trust

Ensuring trust in AI goes beyond compliance. It requires confidence from students, faculty, and institutions that AI is a tool to enhance education. One of the greatest concerns in AI adoption is the 'black box' problem. This refers to a situation where faculty and students lack insight into how AI-driven decisions are made. In other words, AI should be explainable, interpretable, and understandable, not something that makes decisions without clear reasoning.

To address this challenge, human oversight is essential to ensure that AI remains a transparent and accountable tool rather than an opaque decision-maker. Institutions and faculty should retain full control over how AI influences instruction, grading, and student support. Importantly, students should always be informed when AI shapes their learning experience. By embedding fairness, transparency, and accountability into AI adoption, institutions can ensure AI is a force for student success, faculty autonomy, and institutional integrity.

Strategies for educators

Educators play a pivotal role in shaping how AI is used in the classroom. Many faculty members remain cautious about AI's growing presence, yet students are already using these tools. With clear strategies, educators can take a leadership role in responsible AI integration, ensuring they retain control over how AI influences learning and assessment.

AI should enhance learning, not substitute deep engagement. For example, instead of students passively accepting AI-generated summaries, faculty can require them to refine, compare, and critique AI-generated content. Encouraging meta-cognitive reflection – where students evaluate AI's effectiveness – ensures that AI remains a tool for learning rather than a shortcut.

Educators can and should play a role in reducing bias in AI-driven assessments and analytics. When using AI-powered grading or feedback tools, faculty must cross-check results against qualitative student insights to ensure fair outcomes. This means that faculty should not simply trust AI-generated results, but rather critically evaluate them to ensure they align with their understanding of the students' work and abilities.

As AI becomes deeply embedded in industries and daily life, AI literacy is now essential for students. Faculty should not just teach with AI; they should teach about AI. This includes helping students understand AI's limitations, recognise bias, and critically evaluate AI-generated content. One effective strategy is requiring students to validate and cite AI-generated material, treating it as they would any academic source.

Additionally, students should discuss AI ethics. By embedding critical AI literacy into coursework, educators can equip students with the skills they need for the AI-driven workforce.

With AI reshaping how students complete assignments, authentic assessment is more important than ever. Faculty must design assignments that demand creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving; areas where AI struggles. Rather than assigning traditional essays that AI can quickly generate, educators can implement the following:

- Reflective writing where students connect personal experiences to course concepts.
- Project-based learning that requires collaborative problem-solving.
- Case studies and simulations that demand adaptive thinking and decision-making.

Assignments should require higher-order skills that AI cannot easily replicate, reinforcing academic integrity and critical thinking. By thoughtfully integrating AI into pedagogy, ensuring fair and diverse assessments, and equipping students with AI literacy, faculty can create an environment where AI enhances rather than replaces human insight. The question now is not whether AI belongs in education but how we ensure it responsibly serves students, educators, and institutions.

The writer is the CEO of the ed-tech company Anthology.

Be the best you

With social media amplifying the frequency of comparison, the way we respond to them matters

THINK
Aruna Sankaranarayanan

Though schools may not explicitly announce ranks of all students very early on, children imbibe the message that they're competing with one another. We can't blame students for comparing their grades with their peers because, in today's rat race, a difference of a fraction of a percentage can determine which college or programme you enter.

Such obsession with comparing marks spills into other arenas of life as well. Who is the fastest athlete in class? Who has won the most medals at inter-school competitions? Who is the most popular kid in class?

Further, with social media providing 24/7 benchmark of likes, for trivial and significant posts, social comparison has scaled new peaks.

In an article in *Psyche*, philosopher Wojciech Kaftański notes that social media has "amplified the frequency" of our social comparisons. Further, the likes we receive can be "addictive", fuelling an unhealthy need to keep checking whether our posts are garnering attention.

As a result, instead of engaging in social comparisons once in a while like we used to do earlier, this behaviour is becoming *habitual*. Our continual focus on superficial connections stops us from nurturing close and meaningful relationships.

Kaftański points out that social media can feed a slew of negative emotions ranging from "jealousy and anger" to "self-loathing, hopelessness and boredom."

In another article in *Psyche*, Joel Minden writes that social comparison is an integral aspect of the human condition. Both Minden and Kaftański observe that, while comparisons can weigh us down, they may also buoy us to better ourselves.

Minden argues that comparisons, by themselves, are not insidious. It's the way we respond to them that matters. A 'neutral' observation of the differences between you and others is not harmful per se.

However, the thoughts and emotions that follow those assessments can by self-defeating and even toxic.

How to cope

Instead of trying to shy away from making comparisons, Minden coaxes us to be mindful of how we respond. Are my thoughts making me feel jealous? Do I feel belittled?

Am I feeling dejected? Then examine your thoughts to uncover biases and assumptions. Minden suggests that you use the tools of cognitive behaviour therapy to help you respond to social comparisons in more balanced and salubrious ways.

If you notice that your old schoolmates seem to have more vibrant social lives than you, observe the automatic thoughts that pop into your head. If the first thought is, "I will never have as many friends as them," you need to examine it more critically. You may even choose to write down the thought and then try to provide evidence for and against the thought as objectively as possibly. When you do this exercise, you may realise that you value deep and close relationships more than many superficial ones. Alternatively, you may discover that you have not had time to connect with your friends of late, and you need to invest more time into nurturing these relationships.

Either way, you are replacing a negative and unhelpful thought with a more positive and proactive one.

Kaftański also provides pointers to minimise the deleterious effects of social comparisons.

Being aware of the harmful effects of constant social comparisons can help us be more mindful. Next, you may also observe yourself as you engage in comparisons. Who do you tend to compare yourself with most? What kinds of feelings do you experience as you make these comparisons? Are there any patterns that emerge?

You may also involve yourself in a healthier form of comparison by pitting your present self against your past and future selves. How have you morphed over time? What changes do you wish to see in yourself?

Finally, you need to exercise self-compassion and accept yourself with all your flaws and frailties. And know that everyone, even those with Utopic social media posts, is a human being with their share of wins and woes.

The writer blogs at www.arunasankaranaryanan.com and is the author of Zero Limits: Things Every 20-Something Should Know.

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What's the right path?

Tips to choose the correct engineering specialisation

Diwakar Chittora

Engineering has long been one of the most popular professional choices. According to a *TeamLease* report, nearly 1.5 million engineers graduate every year. As engineering is an extensive subject with several divisions and specialisations, it becomes critical for students to select the right school and specialisation that aligns with their interests, career objectives and aptitudes. Engineering provides diverse options, each requiring a particular set of abilities. No vocation is intrinsically greater or worse; the key to success is matching one's abilities to the chosen sector. Every discipline, whether it's a fascination with machines, circuits, algorithms, or infrastructure, has its appeal and promise. Here is a guide to important engineering areas and tips to help students match their goals with the best options.

Computer Science Engineering: The digital revolution has transformed Computer Science into a domain that draws problem solvers, logical thinkers and individuals who like deciphering technology riddles and are interested in algorithms, programming, and the complexity of artificial intelligence (AI). Software development, data science, cybersecurity, and machine learning are among the most active fields. Moreover, as per a NASSCOM report, India's technology sector will require more than one million engineers with advanced capabilities in AI and other advanced technologies in the next 2-3 years. Also, the demand-supply gap for technical skills is expected to reach nearly 30% by 2028.

Mechanical Engineering: Ideal for people who are fascinated by how machines function and their complicated designs, it unites creativity and technological expertise. From developing advanced cars to constructing robotics systems, this area connects theory with hands-on problem-solving. It appeals to people who value the harmony of Physics and innovation, with career opportunities in aerospace, automotive, manufacturing and energy.

Electrical Engineering: It requires logical thinking and accuracy and appeals to those interested circuits, electronic systems and the technology that powers daily lives such as mobile phones, power grids and renewable energy systems. This specialisation has immense potential for innovation in fields like telecommunications, embedded systems, and renewable energy. The progress of technology guarantees that electrical engineers will remain important. Furthermore, the Bureau of Labour Statistics has anticipated 3% employment opportunities in this area by 2029..

Civil Engineering: The cornerstone of infrastructure development, where creativity meets structural innovation, this specialisation blends an eye for spatial design with project management abilities, allowing experts to envision and build structures that influence society. Civil engineering – whether developing eco-friendly buildings, new roadways, or sustainable communities – provides an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy by shaping the physical foundation of the future. According to a Grand View Research report, the Civil Engineering market will reach $12.08 trillion by 2025.

Chemical Engineering: It connects science and industry, making it ideal for people who are passionate about Chemistry, Maths, and problem-solving. It creates potential for innovation in fields such as biology, energy, and new materials and is suitable for people who like refining raw resources into useful goods.

But what if you don't know which is the right discipline for you? It's all right. Engineers can shift domains after the first year. Even if you discover your interest after graduating, many engineers work in domains unrelated to their primary discipline. Their adaptability makes them more appealing to employers. For instance, when developing software for electric cars, who is a better fit: a computer science engineer who understands coding or a mechanical engineer who also knows coding? In the end, there are no correct or incorrect answers.

The writer is the CEO of Intellipaat.

Pick your legal journey

How to choose between LL.B. and B.A. LL.B.

Aniruddha Ram

Legal aspirants must invariably choose between two pathways: a three-year LL.B. and an integrated five-year B.A. LL.B. Both qualify one to practise law but differ quite considerably in structuring, duration, schedule of studies, and career path.

Structure

B.A. LL.B. is a five-year programme that prepares students in disciplines like Political Science, Sociology, and History, alongside Legal Studies. It is an integration of the Humanities and Law at the undergraduate level. This integrated approach gives students a wider perspective of law and its interaction with social, political, and economic contexts. The LL.B. is a three-year specialised and more intensive course with a law-centred curriculum.

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Eligibility

B.A. LL.B. is meant for students who have completed Class 12, as it combines undergraduate and legal studies. For LL.B., the entry requirement is a Bachelor's degree. Thus, an aspirant will have to go through six years of study – three of undergraduate and three of LL.B. – before entering the profession.

Curriculum

The B.A. LL.B. covers multidisciplinary aspects to give students an understanding of the social context of laws and prepares students for careers related to public policy, academics, and others that deal with societal concerns. An LL.B. involves more rigorous and targeted applications of legal compositions, case laws, and intricacies of legal principles.

Opportunities

Graduates of both programmes can take the All India Bar Examination (AIBE) to practise law in India and also work in corporate legal departments, law firms, or as individual lawyers. The B.A. LL.B. also opens avenues for civil services, academia, and public policy, owing to its twin focus. LL.B. graduates with degrees in commerce, science, or management, may have an easier entry into specialised areas like intellectual property law, tax law, and business law.

Placement

The B.A. LL.B. is recognised at most law schools and offers placement options among top law firms, corporations, and government organisations. Most institutions are well-equipped with recruitment cells, providing students with abundant exposure and internships.

LL.B. graduates from reputed institutions have promising placement opportunities. Other graduates, however, struggle with networking and internships, as not all colleges are equal.

The choice between B.A. LL.B. and LL.B. depends on individual backgrounds, career choices, and inclinations. B.A. LL.B. offers an all-around education, while LL.B. goes down a direct, specialised corridor of legal practice. Both programmes lead the way to different options in law and other related areas. Consider all factors before deciding which one is best for you.

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