R. W. Alexander Jesudasan

Double the opportunity

A look at the benefits of the recent UGC announcement on allowing biannual admissions in Indian higher education institutions.

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Biannual admissions in higher education has been in vogue in educational institutions abroad for some time. Usually this takes place in July/August (fall semester) and January/February (spring semester). In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) announced last month that universities and colleges will be allowed to offer admissions twice a year from the 2024-25 academic year. The UGC chairman pointed out that not only does this have the potential to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) but will also make India a global study destination for aspiring overseas students.

Early stage
The concept was introduced in 2022-23 for Open and Digital Learning (ODL) and Online Learning (OL) modes. This resulted in nearly two million enrollments in July 2022 and almost 0.5 million in January 2023. These numbers led to the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) allow biannual admissions in their recent statutory meetings. However, this is not mandatory. Student admissions will now be possible in July-August and January-February in keeping with international standards for both online and physical modes.

The aim is primarily to increase student intake and introduce new programmes in emerging fields. Of course, this will necessitate amendments in the existing rules and regulations.

In a recent communication, the AICTE conveyed its commitment to take measures to substantially increase the GER in higher education by allowing technical institutions to admit students twice annually, as this would enable better utilisation of infrastructure in institutions and also promote employment opportunities. Currently, AICTE does not allow institutions to admit students after mid-September. As a result, many seats in technical institutions go unfilled each year. Also, if those pursuing non-technical programmes desire to switch to technical programmes in a short period of time, they need to wait for a year for admission causing unnecessary stress. Admission to the spring semester will bring a substantial number of overseas students to India, as it will be in sync with their domestic timelines. This new approach also gives students more flexibility and allows them to explore more career options.

Benefits
With biannual admissions, students will not have to wait for a year in case they miss the first cycle due to delayed results or personal reasons. As this system is already being followed globally, its adoption by Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) will also help enhance international collaborations and student exchange programmes. The UGC chairman also pointed out another benefit, mainly, better functional flow within HEIs with proper planning of resource distribution such as faculty, laboratories, classrooms, and support services. The move will also allow industries to conduct campus recruitment twice, improving employment opportunities for graduates.

The primary factors that influence the decision of an institution, whether in India or abroad, include lucrative contemporary programmes with relevance to employment prospects, research possibilities, programme quality, availability of the required facilities and affordability. If Indian institutions will look into and take care of these aspects, the exodus of students is likely to be curtailed.

Way forward
While Central, State, and Deemed-to-be universities can adopt the recommendations with suitable amendments by their respective statutory bodies, affiliated colleges will need directions from the university they are affiliated to after due presentation in the Academic Council, Senate and Syndicate. HEIs considering implementation of biannual admissions must carefully study the nuances of this process such as workforce requirement for admissions in two sessions, infrastructure, faculty requirement, scheduling exams for both sessions, declaration of results, convocations and concomitant activities such as placements and facilitating graduates for advanced study programmes.

The writer is Pro Vice-Chancellor, Hindustan Institute of Technology & Science (Deemed to be University) Padur, Chennai.

Laurels

Vanisha Sharma, a B.Des. Jewellery Design student from ARCH College of Design, Jaipur, won the Cultural Fusion Jewellery Design Contest organised by Athah for her collection inspired by Rajasthan.

1M1B has selected five young innovators from Telangana's 1M1B Green Skills Academy to attend the eighth annual 1M1B Activate Impact Summit at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in December. The winners are Meeth Kumar Shah from Vignana Bharathi Institute of Technology, Hyderabad; Narayanam Bhavya, Pemmasani Likhitha Chowdary, and Satyavathi Kolapalli from Malla Reddy College of Engineering for Women, Hyderabad; and Manal Muneer from Deeksha Degree College, Nirmal. The names were announced at the Grand Finale of the Green Skills Academy - Leveraging AI held at Hyderabad.

Make the break count

While a gap year helps one grow personally and professionally, it requires careful preparation and meticulous planning

Aritra Ghosal

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A gap year, traditionally viewed as a break before entering higher education or starting a career, can contribute significantly to personal growth and professional development, especially for those planning to study abroad.

A study by the Indian School Counsellors Association in 2023 found that 72% of counsellors believe students who take a structured gap year return to their studies with increased focus and motivation. This indicates that the effective utilisation of this period requires meticulous planning and careful preparation.

However, before exploring how to optimise a gap year, it is essential to understand why students choose this route. Some students work during this time to gain experience and save money, while others travel to explore new cultures or study for crucial entrance exams.

India's competitive academic environment often leads students to take a gap year to avoid burnout before entering demanding international programs.

A 2023 study by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) found that 38% of Indian students experience burnout before starting higher education. Therefore, a well-planned gap year allows for a structured yet flexible approach to explore new avenues and expand personal horizons.

Here are some strategies to help students make the most of their gap year:

Goal setting: Determine what you want to achieve during the gap year. Whether it's acquiring specific skills, exploring new cultures, or preparation for future studies, having clear objectives will guide your activities and help measure your success.

Budget: Investigate opportunities that align with your goals and interests. Consider the costs associated with different options, including travel, accommodation, and daily expenses. Create a budget that accounts for all potential expenditures and include a contingency fund for unforeseen circumstances.

Guidance: Advice and insights from parents, teachers, mentors, or peers who have taken a gap year will provide practical advice and emotional support and help you navigate your options more effectively.

Flexibility: A gap year often presents unforeseen situations. Being flexible and adaptable allows you to seize new opportunities and manage any challenges that arise.

Preparation: Prepare yourself for the range of experiences the time might bring. Emotional resilience and physical readiness are key to overcome challenges and benefit from your year off.

Globally, studies show that students who take gap years are 10% more likely to be accepted into the universities of their choice.

Choosing the right activities can significantly enhance one's resume and prepare you for future opportunities. Here are some beneficial activities:

Volunteering: Engage in projects that not only enhance your interpersonal skills but also broaden your understanding of global issues. Choose volunteer opportunities that align with your career goals and passions.

Languages: In today's globalised world, being multilingual is a valuable skill. Learning a foreign language not only boosts your resume but also improves your communication abilities in diverse environments.

Sports: Participating in sports or coaching can help develop leadership and teamwork skills, especially if they involve organising or leading teams in different cultural settings.

Internship: Hands-on work experience is crucial to gain practical skills and insights into potential career paths. Internships provide a deep understanding of industry dynamics and offer networking opportunities.

Develop skills: Digital courses allow you to acquire new skills or deepen existing ones in areas like digital marketing, data analysis, or creative design, which are increasingly important in various professional fields.

Hobbies: Pursuing personal interests such as starting a blog, learning a musical instrument, or developing a tech project can lead to significant personal development and showcase your creativity to potential educators or employers.

When considering a gap year, weigh potential benefits against the costs. Reflect on how the activities you plan will enhance your academic readiness, career prospects, and personal growth. With proper planning and the right mindset, a gap year can be a transformative phase in your life.

The writer is Founder and Director of OneStep Global

T.G. Sitharam

K. MURALI KUMAR

THE WAY FORWARD

In the wake of the question paper leaks for the NEET and NET exams, the focus should be on addressing vulnerabilities and restoring trust in the National Testing Agency (NTA)

The leak of question papers for the NEET and NET exams have raised concerns among students, parents and educators, and kept the National Testing Agency (NTA) in the centre of a row. While this is a serious issue, it should be seen as isolated events rather than as a reflection of the agency's overall performance or the integrity of the entire Indian examination system. The focus should be on addressing vulnerabilities and restoring trust in the agency.

Every system is prone to vulnerabilities, but what distinguishes a robust institution is its ability to learn from mistakes and implement stringent measures to prevent future occurrences. Dissolution of the NTA is not the solution. The uproar over the leaks should galvanise the NTA to strengthen its security infrastructure, adopt fool-proof advanced technologies, collaborate closely with law enforcement agencies, and enhance technological defences against cyber threats.

Before the establishment of the NTA in 2017, there was a thorough consultation with educational experts on the need for a standardised testing body. Despite recent challenges, the NTA has a proven track record of conducting large-scale entrance exams with fairness and precision. By bringing standardisation to various entrance exams, it ensured a level playing field for millions of students across diverse backgrounds.

Strategies
Implementing computer-based tests using emerging technologies and creating a distributed physical state of the computer-based testing centres at premier institutes across the country can significantly enhance the the NTA's ability to prevent paper leaks. By leveraging advanced encryption methods, the transmission of exam papers can be secured and unauthorised access and tampering prevented. Having these centres at centrally funded technical institutes (CFTI) will also instil trust among students and parents.

Real-time monitoring of the centres using AI-driven systems can detect anomalies and suspicious activities and reduce likelihood of breaches. Further, the integration of AI in the evaluation processes can automate and streamline assessments, minimise human error and ensure fairness.

Together, these technologies not only strengthen the NTA's security framework but also uphold the trust and credibility of the examination system in India. By implementing secure, transparent, and scalable digital examination platforms, the NTA can uphold the integrity of its testing processes, restore trust among stakeholders, and provide equal opportunities for all aspirants.

The government has also recognised the gravity of the situation and appointed Pradeep Singh Kharola as the new NTA chief. Kharola also heads the National Recruitment Agency (NRA) that will conduct a Common Eligibility Test (CET) for Group C and Group D employee posts in all central government establishments. Further, a committee chaired by Dr. K. Radhakrishnan (former Chairman of ISRO and Chairman, BOG, IIT-Kanpur) has been appointed to recommend reforms to enhance exam processes.

Way forward
The situation must be approached with thoughtful consideration rather than making hasty decisions. First, the agency should be strengthened with a robust infrastructure and manpower to conduct large-scale examination. Robust and rigorous procedures should be created and consultations and evaluations conducted to ensure that the NTA operates with efficiency, transparency and accountability. Continuous enhancement of its processes is crucial and gathering regular feedback from students and educators can pinpoint areas that need improvement and drive necessary changes.

Further, It is vital to establish robust support systems for affected students and ensure that their futures are not compromised due to systemic failures. Such measures are essential to maintain the integrity and reliability of the exam system while safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders involved.

The writer is the Chairman, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and former Director, IIT-Guwahati.

CAREER CUES
Richa Dwivedi Saklani

Path to college

A timeline for students of Classes 9 to 12 on how to prepare for the journey ahead

Getting ready for college might feel like a huge challenge but, with the right plan, it can be a fun and exciting adventure. Whether you're in Class 9 or 12, it's never too late (or too early) to start preparing for higher education and your career path. Here's a simple, easy-to-understand guide to help you along the way.

Class 9: Basics
This year is all about setting the stage for success. Here's what you can do:
Get involved: Join clubs, sports teams, or volunteer organisations. Explore your interests and start building a list of extracurricular activities.
Focus on academics: Develop good study habits and aim for strong grades.
Build relationships: Get to know your teachers and school counsellors. They will be great resources and future recommender.
Think ahead: Consider what you enjoy and what careers might interest you. There's no need to decide now; just start exploring.
Career exploration:
Take career interest surveys or use professional tools like aptitude tests to understand your strengths and interests.

Class 10: Exploration
Sophomore year is about going deeper into your interests and making preliminary plans.
Take challenging courses: Choose electives, additional subjects that challenge you and align with your interests. Consider pursuing online courses. This shows colleges you're serious about your education.
Competitive exams: If you're considering colleges in India, start exploring competitive exams like the JEE (for engineering) or NEET (for medicine) and begin preparation.
Stay involved: Keep up with your extracurricular activities and look for leadership opportunities.
Career exploration: Attend career fairs, shadow professionals, or take a career interest survey. Begin narrowing down your interests.
Seek guidance: Meet your school counsellor or a career advisor to discuss potential career paths.

Class 11: The big year
This is the year when you start putting your plans into action.
Exams: Take the SAT or ACT if you're applying to colleges abroad. For Indian colleges, focus on JEE, NEET, or other relevant exams.
College search: Start researching colleges. Visit campuses physically or virtually, attend college fairs, and meet with representatives.
Academic focus: Grades matte so stay focused on academics.
Recommendation letters: Ask teachers who know you well to write letters of recommendation. Provide them with your resume.
Extracurriculars: Aim for leadership roles in your activities. Colleges love to see leadership experience.
Career tools: Use career exploration tools like interest inventories or job shadowing programmes to gain more insight into different career options.

Class 12: The final stretch
It's now time to wrap things up and get those applications in.
College list: Narrow down your college list and make note of application deadlines.
Applications: Start your college applications early. Write your essays and have them reviewed by teachers or mentors.
Competitive exams: For Indian colleges, intensify your preparation for entrance exams.
Financial aid: Apply for scholarships and understand the packages offered by each school.
Academics: Don't slack off! Colleges will look at your final grades.
Decision time: Once you've received your acceptance letters, weigh your options and decide where you want to go.
Career plan: Revisit your career plan and ensure your chosen college supports your aspirations. Seek internships or part-time jobs in your field of interest.

Make summers count
Summers are a fantastic opportunity to get ahead and make your college application stand out.
Internships and part-time jobs: Gain real-world experience in fields that interest you. This not only boosts your resume but also gives you a taste of potential careers.
Volunteer: Get involved in community service. Volunteering demonstrates commitment and compassion – qualities colleges value.
Summer programmes: Enroll in summer courses or camps related to your interests. These can enhance your skills and show your dedication to learning.
Self-led projects: Undertake personal projects or research in areas you are passionate about. This initiative can set you apart from other applicants.
Test prep: Use the summer to prepare for competitive exams like JEE, NEET, SAT, or ACT. Focused study during this time can significantly improve your scores.

General tips
Stay organised: Use a planner or digital calendar to keep track of important dates and deadlines.
Seek help: Don't hesitate to ask for help from teachers, counsellors, or family members. There are plenty of resources available.
Be yourself: Colleges want to see the real you. Be genuine in your applications and pursue what you're passionate about.
Self care: Maintain a healthy balance between school, activities, and personal time. Don't forget to relax and enjoy high school!
Take it one step at a time, stay true to yourself, and enjoy the ride.
With inputs from Anjana Anand

Take it one step at a time, stay true to yourself, and enjoy the ride.

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FREEPIK

Stop and read

Students must be encouraged to use the libraries and find the information required from the books contained in them

M.S. Mathivanan
M. Balamohan
N. Gokarneshan

Once, libraries in colleges were filled with students and teachers and much of the learning process happened in this place. However, with the advent of the Internet, libraries in colleges are almost empty and students spend most of their time browsing the Web. Apart from a lot of this being not useful or unproductive, it has also affected their attention span.

Browsing the Internet and reading a book in the library are very different from each other. On the web, one tends to get distracted by the many options on display and the suggestions for related sites. Whereas, a library offers a tranquil and serene environment conducive to concentration and focus and stimulates inherent learning skills. Reading the book in a quiet place and taking down important points helps enhance one's memory and learn effectively. This helps the student's performance in a test or exam.

Role model
The teacher also has a role to play in encouraging library use. Teachers must serve as role models by using the library for their work. Though most educational institutions have mandated a library hour, students either do not go there or they sit in the room chatting or playing on their mobile phones. Therefore, it is important that gadgets such as mobile phones and laptops are not allowed into the library allowing students to focus on the task in hand.

There is a great difference between studying in the classroom, in one's home and in the library. The latter offers the greatest impact and teachers need to emphasise the subtle difference to students and encourage them to cultivate the habit of using the library regularly. This can be done by giving assignments that will involve students referring to specific books in library. This will also nurture the habit of reading something that is not on a screen.

Reading need not be confined to the curriculum. Teachers must encourage students to read for their professional requirements and for developing oneself and to spend time in the library after college hours. For those students who are preparing for competitive exams such as the GATE or the UPSC Civil Services Exams, this will be of tremendous help.

Today, there is a general belief that all information is available on the Internet. But the importance of libraries cannot be understated even in this digital age.

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FREEPIK

Shweta Agarwal

For independent learners, learning a new language can be beset with fear and a lack of motivation. But there are several resources and hacks to get the most out of the process. Here are some tips to help you.

Purpose
One problem is that many language learners do not have a clear purpose. Are you learning French to communicate with colleagues? Or studying Spanish to watch movies without subtitles? Once you have the reason, put it up in your room. This will give you the intrinsic motivation to learn the language.

Routine
Consistency is key. Set aside a specific time to learn the language and stick to it. Having a dedicated time allocated will help you progress and make language learning a part of your routine.

FREEPIK

On the tip of your tongue?

Tips to help students while learning a new language

Set goals
A difficult chapter in grammar or vocabulary may make you feel demotivated. The best way to overcome this is to split your learning task into small, measurable goals.

For instance, instead of piling up pronunciation lessons and learning them together, splitting them into parts and spending an hour daily helps.

Monitor progress
Tracking your progress against your goals will help you get a feeling of achievement. Did you crack your goal of learning 100 words a day? You deserve to feel good.

Reward yourself
Treat yourself when you reach a milestone. This keep you on track to complete the rest.

Connections
Online resources, audio-books, videos are all available but nothing works like a human-to-human interaction. Don't feel uncomfortable or afraid of talking to native speakers of the language. This will help build your skills.

What works?
With different ways and resources to learn languages, figure out what works best for you!

If you enjoy watching TV shows or movies, turn off the subtitles and see if you can understand the dialogue.

If you are a bookworm, read a book in the new language.

If you love cooking, try a recipe in the new language.

Label the groceries in the language that you are trying to learn. Try to make the process exciting and engaging.

Integrate the learning activities with your favourite hobby, so it doesn't feel like an extra burden to your routine.

Be flexible
Though it is important to have a disciplined schedule, allow yourself to be flexible.

Don't beat yourself if you miss an activity or online session. Keep reminding yourself that you can always do it the next day and stay motivated.

Try an online course
Online resources and self-learning work for the basics. When it comes to advanced lessons, you may require expert guidance.

Also, courses offer a structured lesson plan that helps you progress quickly. As they demand a specific time slot, your commitment to learning improves. The assignments and tests will help fast-track your language goals and milestones.

The writer is the Founder of WordBridge Language School

Gregory J. Dunn

Creating innovative and captivating products is essential for success today. Most MBA programmes, unfortunately, rarely emphasise the crucial intersection between management, technology, and design. While traditional approaches often prioritise functionality over user experience, companies increasingly recognise and value human-centred design. At its core, this approach prioritises people and end-user satisfaction when developing products, resulting in offerings that both meet functional needs and forge enduring emotional connections with consumers.

Putting people first
The foundation for human-centred design is to understand the people who will use the end product. Instead of developing an outcome that begins with the company's objectives and assumptions, end-user experience is put front and centre in product design. This runs counter to the traditional approach to product development, which starts with the company's goals and imposes these on consumers. The alternative involves deep diving into real-life situations of the intended users and identifying their needs and preferences and developing solutions that make a difference in people's lives, and often lead to entirely new product ideas and directions for the company.

Take Apple, as example of a company that follows this approach. Its products, like the iPhone and MacBook, are well-known for their ease of use and intuitive design. This is directly associated with Apple's dedication to putting human needs first by focusing on user research and iterative testing. Apple's designers are deeply integrated in the company's decision-making process, leading to business decisions that arise naturally from user experience and preferences.

Understanding users
User-centred design requires designers to use multiple techniques, such as interviews, observations, and surveys. With the help of these methods, businesses can understand human behaviour patterns when using products; their reactions and psychological states can be determined, along with all the difficulties they experience.

Human-centred design enables designers to "feel" users' experiences. By simulating their perceptions and reactions, designers can empathise with users' challenges and desired solutions. This approach requires ongoing testing and refinement. Design engineers make prototypes of the product and later solicit consumer feedback, which they then use to refine and improve the quality of their output.

For instance, Amazon ensures extensive product experimentation and engagement with real customers at each phase of the development process. This approach has resulted in several ideas such as the "One-Click" ordering system and the Alexa voice assistant.

Why it matters
Implementing human-centred design can be lengthy and costly, but it carries many tangible, long-term benefits for businesses. By ensuring that products best represent user preferences, companies are able to both increase their revenue and win customer loyalty and brand recognition. Loyal customers who make repeat purchases comprise the heart of sustainable business and grant these companies a powerful competitive advantage.

Human-centred design also facilitates innovation and opens new markets. When companies understand product user desires and problems, they can tailor products to address user needs, sometimes creating entirely new, previously-unimagined industries in the process.

This is referred to as Blue Ocean Strategy, in which companies are able to generate value by identifying markets that had previously not existed. By effectively leveraging human-centred design, product managers and designers are able to escape cutthroat competition and create innovative new products that add tremendous customer value.

Integrating this human-centred product development approach into the MBA curriculum helps students understand the complexities businesses face while also improving their ability to apply creative thinking to real-world business challenges. Students emerge as skilled product managers and business leaders who can assist companies in identifying often-overlooked aspects of product development, and are further able to apply design thinking principles to solve complex business dilemmas. A human-oriented mindset is both rare and valuable to businesses and consumers alike, and the product managers and executives who are able to leverage this skillset are much more likely to succeed in a rapidly-evolving global business environment.

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Design to delight

Why human-centred approaches to product innovation needs to be integrated into the MBA curriculum