

Delhi Hardlook: To pursue or not to pursue? Delhi University's undergraduates face a crucial decision on the new four-year degree programme

Come July, DU's undergraduates will have to make a crucial choice — continue with the newly introduced four-year degree or exit after three years. While students make up their minds, colleges are scrambling to put together the necessary infrastructure and resources

Sitting with his juniors, surrounded by the red-brick corridors of St Stephen's College, Delhi University student Adithyan Ajith is clear about his plans for the future — he wants to pursue a fourth year at the varsity.

"It's not just about one more year," he says. "It's about opening the door to places like the London School of Economics."

The 20-year-old History (Honours) student from Kerala will be among the first batch of DU undergraduates who, come July, must choose whether to continue with the newly formalised fourth year under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 or exit with a standard three-year degree.

For Adithyan, who comes from a middle-class family — his father is an engineer and his mother a homemaker — the decision is clear. "I want to build a solid application — dissertation, recommendations, everything. That fourth year gives me the kind of academic depth and research experience that top global universities expect."

DU officials agree. The four-year course under the Undergraduate Curriculum Framework (UGCF 2022), which replaces the three-year system, is more than just an academic extension, they argue. It's a move to ensure students from India's largest central university are no longer turned away from graduate programmes abroad for lack of a "complete" undergraduate degree.

"A four-year BA course is being introduced not only to align with NEP provisions but to ensure a DU student can easily apply to colleges abroad," says a senior DU official.

"Every student admitted in 2022 was enrolled under the four-year framework. It's up to them whether to exit after the third year. If they wish to leave, they have to inform their college, which will issue a transfer certificate."

The final year offers four academic tracks:

Dissertation Writing: For academic research, higher studies.

Academic Projects: Involving fieldwork, data collection, and documentation.

Entrepreneurship: To design business models and develop startups.

Additional Discipline-Specific Electives (DSEs) and Skill-Based Modules: For Programme students, students of the School of Open Learning, and Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB).

Students can choose either option should they opt for the fourth year. They must complete 176 credits to graduate, up from 132 (under the three-year programme).

The DSE track is a recent addition, meant for students pursuing Programme courses. “Not all students want to write a dissertation or build a startup,” says Ratna Bali, Dean of Academic Affairs. “We’ve added a fourth track to make it more inclusive, especially for those in BA (Programme) or from Open Learning backgrounds.”

DU officials say the curriculum for the seventh and eighth semesters was passed by the Academic Council (AC) on May 10 and will be presented before the Executive Council on May 23.

The Indian Express speaks to students, teachers and colleges on the ambitious course and the challenges that come with it.

While Adithyan is clear about the value of a fourth year, many of his peers are not. He says, “In our orientations, professors shared presentations about the various tracks, but the details were vague. Nobody has shown us how it will be implemented.”

Adithyan will complete his required 80 credits by the end of his third year. If he chooses to exit in July, he will receive a BA Honours degree, as per the Undergraduate Curriculum Framework (UGCF) 2022.

If he continues into the fourth year and opts for a research track, he stands to graduate with a BA Honours with Research degree — a distinction that significantly strengthens applications for postgraduate programmes abroad.

For students in Programme courses, however, the course structure doesn’t appear to be in their favour.

Sujeet Gupta, who is studying a BA Programme course in History and Political Science from Sri Venkateswara College, aspires to pursue a PhD.

But the 20-year-old, who hails from Bihar’s Gopalganj, says there is a lot of confusion. “They’ve held multiple orientations, but every time we ask questions, we get different answers. Even the faculty is unsure. I am pinning my hopes on CUET-PG — if I get a good opportunity in counselling, I’ll exit after three years.”

If Gupta does exit at the end of three years, he won’t be eligible for an Honours degree. He will only receive a BA Programme degree.

Under the current framework, students enrolled in the BA, BSc, or BCom Programme courses wanting an Honours-level qualification must accumulate the minimum of 80 core discipline credits by completing the fourth year.

If Gupta continues into the fourth year and completes additional DSEs and two-credit skill-based modules in both semesters, he would be awarded a BA Honours degree — but without the “Research” nomenclature.

This is because, as per DU’s current policy, students in Programme courses are not eligible for the ‘Honours with Research’ tag — even if they undertake academic projects or a dissertation.

“This is unfair, I believe,” says Gupta. “A student who joined in the same year is going to get a research degree after completing four years, but a programme student will not get one!”

“I would prefer to exit and apply for a two-year Master’s degree because in our country, especially in good universities like JNU, PhD seats are limited. And preference is always given to a student who completes a two-year Master’s programme rather than just one year,” he adds.

This is not the first time DU has experimented with a four-year UG programme — nor is it the first time it has divided the academic community.

In 2013, under then V-C Dinesh Singh, the varsity introduced the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), framed as a bold step towards aligning Indian undergraduate education with global standards. It proposed multiple exit points — a certificate after one year, a diploma after two, a general degree after three, and an honours degree after four.

From the start, the programme was met with resistance. The Delhi University Teachers' Association led vocal protests, arguing that the implementation had been rushed, poorly conceived, and carried out without meaningful consultation.

When the BJP-led government took office in 2014, the FYUP was among the first education reforms to be scrapped. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which had initially supported the programme, reversed its position. Then UGC Chairman Ved Prakash ordered DU to roll back the programme just ahead of the admission season.

Speaking to The Indian Express, Dinesh Singh defends the programme: "FYUP introduced at DU was the first major reform at the undergraduate level in India. It steered the curriculum, without academic compromise, towards addressing the needs and challenges of society and the nation. As a result, the university's global rankings surged ahead of several IITs and came very close to breaking into the top 200."

A member of the 70-member task force that helped implement the FYUP says, "We saw graduates from top DU colleges doing well in exams but failing to secure jobs — not because of poor scores, but because they couldn't communicate in basic English or demonstrate critical thinking. FYUP was designed as a necessary intervention to change that. UGCF 2022 under NEP 2020 is essentially the same idea, only with a different name..."

Even though the four-year programme has come into force now, DU still has several challenges ahead. With over 70,000 new undergraduate students each year across 70+ affiliated colleges, accommodating a fourth year will strain already limited resources.

To prepare for the student influx, colleges have begun expanding their campuses.

At Aryabhatta College, expansion is in full swing. The college is adding around 40 more classrooms and 20 labs to accommodate the academic load of the fourth year. "This is the youngest college of Delhi University, and this is how we are gearing up for the fourth year," says Principal Manoj Sinha.

At Ramjas College, Principal Ajay Arora says similar efforts are on. "We just finished constructing a fifth floor in one of the buildings for incoming students," he says. "All we need to do is add some furnishing and wiring in these rooms. We have come up with six big rooms which can be converted into 12 classrooms and two seminar halls."

As per official college data, Ramjas currently has 83 classrooms, 32 labs, and 26 washrooms for over 5,000 students.

"Beyond the 9-to-5 time structure, if colleges are not in a position to add physical infrastructure, they will have to create flexibility in the timetable," Arora says, referring to the University Grants Commission's "8 to 8" policy that allows class scheduling from 8 am to 8 pm to optimise space.

"Teacher requirements will increase. All colleges will be approaching the funding agency for sanctioning of additional posts for both teaching and non-teaching staff," he adds.

At Hindu College, the current infrastructure includes 45+ classrooms and over 20 labs, but Principal Anju Srivastava says even that may fall short.

"In today's situation, we can't accommodate all students. More teachers are required, and labs will have to be modified accordingly," she says. "We had meetings with teachers even in April to discuss the new curriculum. Now that CUET-PG results are out, we'll get a clearer picture of how many students might opt to stay on [for the fourth year]."

Srivastava estimates that approximately 35–40% of the college's 5,000 students will likely continue into the fourth year. "Around 5–10% of students are interested in research, especially those who want to apply for prestigious scholarships like Rhodes."

On the residential front, the girls' hostel accommodates around 150 students, while the boys' hostel, previously capped at 250, is being expanded to 500. There are also plans to double the girls' hostel capacity.

At Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC), infrastructure includes approximately 34 classrooms and seven labs, but the college faces unique constraints.

Located within walking distance of the Rajpur Cemetery, the final resting place of soldiers who died in the 1857 revolt, SRCC falls within a heritage-regulated zone. The campus is governed by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010; the Delhi Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 2004; and the MCD bylaws.

These laws prohibit any alteration to buildings within 100 metres of a heritage site, limiting SRCC's ability to construct new blocks or expand vertically.

Principal Simrit Kaur says, "We estimate that around 30-40% of students will return for the fourth year, while the rest may opt for placements. The modalities are still being worked out — workload is being divided, and we are awaiting a concrete plan. There is going to be a faculty resource crunch, and apart from increasing teaching hours, we don't see any other way out."

Miranda House, too, is undergoing spatial restructuring. The college currently has 78 classrooms, six computer labs, and 10 research labs, with a student strength of over 4,000.

"At least 60% of students will stay back for the fourth year," says Principal Bijayalaxmi Nanda. "Around 5–10% of our students go abroad for higher education every year. We are waiting for the master plan approval. They wanted a new hostel; now we're planning to add a floor to the existing hostel building instead."

To meet immediate space demands, Miranda has added two porta cabins on the top floor of one of the buildings and started holding classes in them. "We are freeing up areas, emptying storerooms, and reorganising spaces to accommodate teaching," Nanda adds.

The girls' hostel currently accommodates around 450 students, with plans to double this capacity in the long term.

As colleges scramble to expand physical space, recruit teaching staff, and restructure timetables to accommodate a new academic year, faculty members across institutions remain divided — not on the merits of the fourth year, but on the feasibility of implementing it meaningfully.

Dr Maya John, faculty at Jesus and Mary College and elected AC member, says, "What bureaucrats... conveniently will not tell you is that an additional year of UG teaching comes without additional funds and faculty..."

She warns of systemic failure unless additional resources are provided: "Without increased funding and sanctioned teaching positions, we are looking at a scenario of chaos, compromised quality of UG-level research, and reinforced inequality."

John also points to the lack of awarding 'Honours with Research' designation for BA, BSc, and BCom Programme students in both regular and distance modes. "This amendment comes in light of the administration's reluctant recognition that current faculty cannot supervise scores of dissertations. But to make such a change after students were admitted amounts to cheating..." she says.

Dr Harendra Nath Tiwari, faculty at SRCC and member of DU's Standing Committee on Academic Affairs, voices support for the structural goals of the four-year programme — though he too acknowledges infrastructural and funding constraints. "It introduces students to research, allows them to complete their master's in a year... It also aligns students with global postgraduate systems — no bridge course is required abroad."

Tiwari urges the government to step up with resources. "We are already demanding that the government provide additional funds and sanctioned posts."

He says these demands were raised at the AC meeting on May 10. "We flagged the need for more infrastructure, expansion of research labs, and faculty hiring — both teaching and non-teaching — to make this rollout successful. The vision is good, but we need real support to implement it."

For now, students are at the juncture of pivotal academic decisions.

"Maybe the system will become clearer for future batches," says Gupta. "For us, it feels like we're experimenting with it."