The UGC’s most significant recent effort to reform higher education is the new guidelines issued for the introduction of a choice-based credit system (CBCS) in colleges and universities across the country. The guidelines apply to “all undergraduate and postgraduate level degree, diploma and certificate programmes,” offered by “Central, state and deemed-to-be-universities in India.” The UGC wants institutions to implement the new system from the 2015-16 academic year.

There is no doubt that significant curricular reform is needed in higher education, particularly at the undergraduate level. For decades, undergraduate education has been focused on a single-discipline approach. Under the new CBCS, students will be able to select courses from a range of disciplines and have them count towards their degree.

The new system also opens up the opportunity for student mobility, allowing students to transfer credits earned in one institution to another; and for programme portability, allowing movement from one degree programme to another. These will be achieved through the introduction of a uniform system of counting credits (which replaces the “papers” system), a uniform evaluation system based on grade points (replacing the “marks” system), and a uniform semester-based academic year (which replaces the “year-long” pattern). This establishes parity within and across institutions; between Indian higher educational institutions and many international ones. In principle, this new system should also provide employers and postgraduate institutions better standards to compare undergraduate students and their institutions.

But three significant structural changes are imperative: First, degree completion requirements need to be made “credit-based” and not “time-based.” Current UGC regulations stipulate the minimum number of three years to complete a degree in arts and the sciences. However, after the FYUP controversy, the UGC has interpreted its own guidelines as setting the maximum number of years required to complete a degree and has attempted to shut down programmes that require four years. Rather than focusing on the number of years, the CBCS should focus on the minimum number of credits required to obtain a degree. Such flexibility will give students real opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, which will often require more than three years of study.

Second, the UGC must clarify how and under what circumstances students will be allowed to take courses at other institutions. Will a student enrolled in a degree programme in a college be allowed to take courses at another college affiliated to the same university? Will she be allowed to take courses at a college affiliated to a different university? Will she be allowed to transfer to another college/university in a different state?

Third, the national accreditation process must be made mandatory for all institutions covered by the CBCS. For credit transfer to be effective and meaningful, we must have some measure of the relative quality of the institutions participating in the system.

To make such fundamental changes, detailed preparations are essential. These include issues such as determining the number of hours of classroom and lab instruction required for a course, ensuring that the course material is consistent with the stipulated credit hours, etc.

Institutions will need to determine the appropriate teaching-load for their faculty. They will also need to implement effective student advisory systems to guide students. Academic advising is a key component of successful CBCS and most Indian institutions have little experience in this area. The UGC, however, needs to assess the readiness of our universities and colleges before requiring them to introduce the CBCS.

The most positive aspect of the CBCS is its student-centricity. It recognises the importance of individual learning, whereby and whenever it is achieved. This is the defining idea behind the new system. It treats students as individuals who have independent academic needs and interests, and CBCS, if properly implemented, has the potential to empower them.

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