

Rebuilding universities, degree by degree

Universally, curriculum revision and the semester system are recommended. But those who shirk work will oppose any reform

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ALMOST everyone agrees that education will play a key role in national development. As a bare minimum, it has to create employable human resources; and at their creative best, institutions of learning have to unearth talent which will create new knowledge, and use existing knowledge in a creative manner to solve problems. An overarching theme has to be the creation of a citizenry that is committed to secular and liberal ideals, and has a work ethic and a public consciousness.

The past five years have witnessed a heightened commitment to education, including higher education. Major emphasis has been put on access, equity and excellence. A number of committees and commissions have made very valuable recommendations. The reports by the following four committees are extremely pertinent:

- The UGC committee on academic and administrative reforms.
- The National Knowledge Commission (2006-2009).
- The committee on the renovation and rejuvenation of higher education (the Yashpal committee).
- The committee on restructuring post-school science teaching — from India's three major science academies.

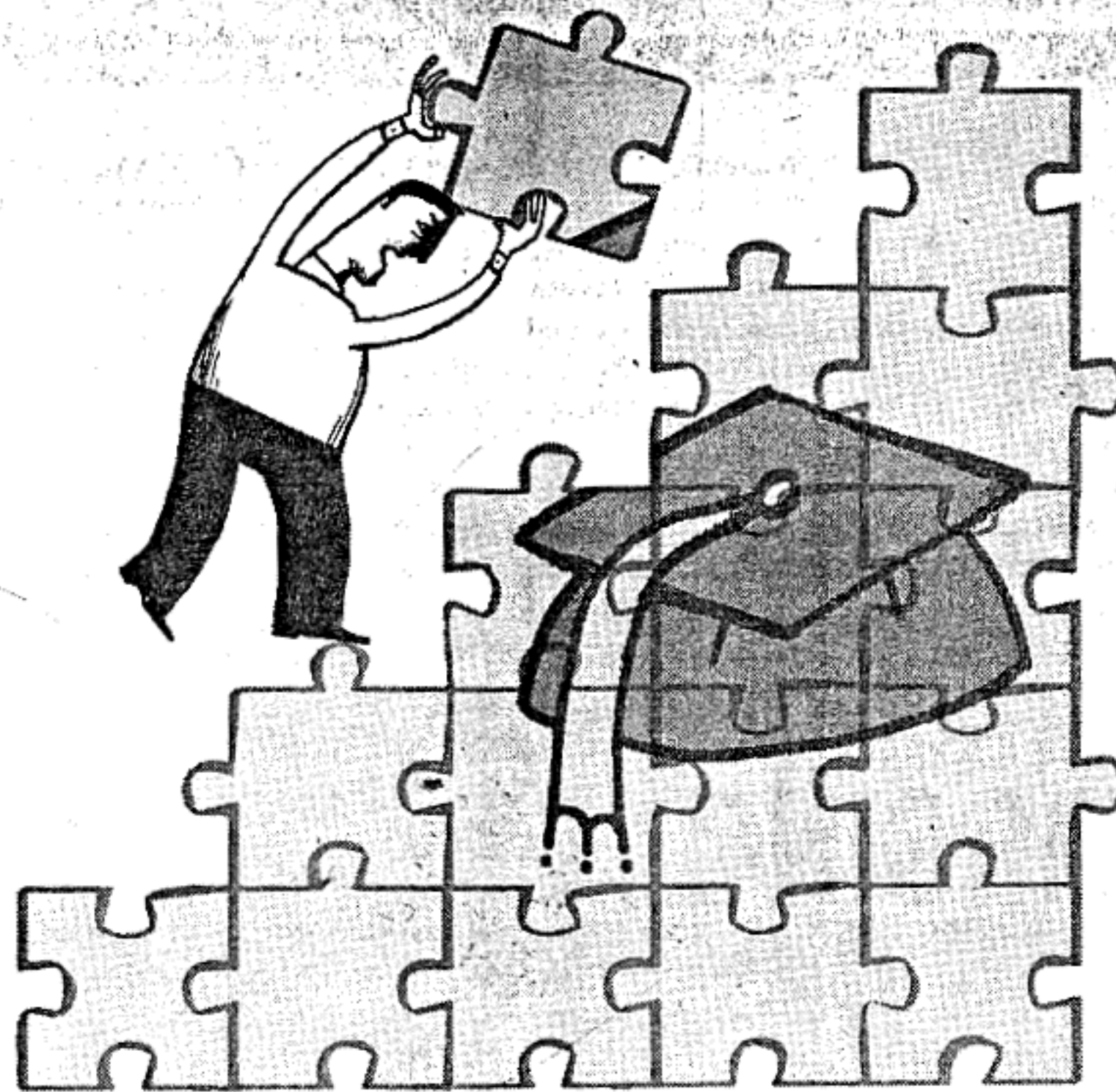
The most critical and important rec-

ommendation of the UGC committee was the adoption of the semester system, and of a choice-based credit system. It emphasised how important it is to revise courses at regular intervals; to have transparent admission procedures; to reform examination procedures so results are declared on time; and to ensure an involved and fair marking system, with some internal assessment.

The semester system is the preferred mode of organising teaching globally. The only exception is Britain and some of erstwhile British colonies, like India. Europe has already implemented a semester system with choice-based credits to encourage mobility and uniformity. In India, the IITs and agricultural universities have had a semester system and credits since their inception.

The science academies document identified major drawbacks in post-school science education. Amongst these were: "compartmentalised teaching/learning of a few sub-disciplines of science; time and energy wasted in sequential admissions to B.Sc, M.Sc and Ph.D programmes; repetitions of topics at B.Sc and M.Sc levels; poor laboratory facilities and consequent poor training of students in experimental methods; little exposure to research methodologies; limited options for movement between science and technology streams." This report suggested a four-year B.S programme, stating categorically that "it is essential that all the existing B.Sc and M.Sc as well as the proposed four-year B.S programmes follow the semester pattern with credit-based courses."

The Knowledge Commission highlighted the importance of increasing the number of universities and keeping these small; emphasised curriculum revisions once every three years; a move-



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ment away from rote-learning; semester-based teaching; a credits system; and encouragement for science and maths in education. The commission also proposed four-year undergraduate degrees and emphasised the training of teachers working at the undergraduate level. A particularly important recommendation was to enhance training in skills to create a well-equipped work force for both the manufacturing and services sectors, and the use of information and communication technology tools.

The Yashpal committee report, meanwhile, tried to bring national at-

tention back to the concept of a university. The report states that "the loss of the primacy of the universities in the scheme of the higher education sector in India, the growing distance between knowledge areas and the isolation of universities from the real world, and crass commercialisation are some of the problems that characterise the growth of the Indian higher education system." The report identified the disconnect between different areas of knowledge, the divide between research bodies and universities, the creation of isolated learning centres, the

erosion of democratic space, narrowly-focused courses and unrevised syllabi, and poor undergraduate education as some of the major reasons for the lack of excellence in higher education. The committee also made a very important suggestion: creating an independent body to regulate education. In the light of recommendations from both the Knowledge Commission and the Yashpal committee, the HRD Ministry has proposed the creation of an independent body — to be called NCHER — to look after all forms of education. This idea now needs implementation.

More recently, a committee of vice-chancellors of Central universities, appointed by the HRD minister, made detailed recommendations on reforms. This was followed by a meeting of the vice-chancellors of state and Central universities at Vigyan Bhavan on March 25 and 26. Some very pertinent recommendations were made, and these have been displayed on the UGC website for comments and critique. The dominant refrain in the meeting was: enough has been written and said; it is time to act.

What are the impediments to reforms? There are many. The Central government currently is occupied with too many issues. There is a sense of perpetual opposition in our democratic system. Almost anything that is brought in for legislation by the ruling party in the states or at the Centre has to be opposed. This is leading to delays and weakening of the institutions which are supposed to legislate and govern. Concentration spans are too short, voices are becoming shriller, and theatrics are in vogue. It is as if we are perpetually seeking attention rather than being creative. Within ministries, there are turf wars. In all

this, reform processes suffer.

There is opposition within universities and colleges to reforms. Years of depletion has led to a loss of appetite for excellence. This stagnation has been exacerbated by the opening of small research institutions. The Yashpal committee saw it true: we seem to be losing the sense of what a university is all about.

Publicly-funded universities must be given more autonomy, and there should be no political interference in appointments, in resource mobilisation and utilisation, and in the research interests of faculty members. In appointments and promotions, merit should be the only consideration. While intellectual freedom has to be the bedrock of a university, parameters of accountability need to be spelled out — and the performance of the faculty needs to be open to scrutiny. Unfortunately, those who have been shirking work and have moved miles away from intellectual rigour want to avoid scrutiny and merit-based promotions. Course revision is anathema to many, as it requires additional effort. Moreover there are teachers' unions to protect non-performers and to oppose reforms.

Society at large must know that reforms and changes suggested by various committees are pertinent and long overdue. Many Asian countries which were way behind the West in higher education are fast catching up. A global movement to strengthen universities is on. If we are serious about our universities and higher education — and the Central government does seem to have such intentions — the time has come to act.

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