

TAKE TWO: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON PURSUING TWO DEGREE COURSES AT ONCE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The dual degree academic programme, a work-in-progress, and the subject of much litigation for years, has finally been [given legal sanctity by the University Grants Commission](#). The higher education regulatory body's [notified guidelines](#) will enable students to simultaneously pursue two academic programmes at multiple levels except for PhD courses. It has projected it as a logical extension of the [National Education Policy 2020](#), with its emphasis on facilitating multiple pathways to learning using formal and non-formal modes. The UGC has proposed a three-way choice involving a combination of offline only; offline with distance mode; and distance/online only modes for dual programmes. The UGC has done well to mandate that open/distance learning and online mode courses should be pursued only in higher education institutions recognised by statutory bodies. This would also eliminate dubious players in the online education segment.

Granting students the liberty to enhance their skills and scope of employability through an additional degree is welcome. But the guidelines call for critical evaluation given the nature of competition, accessibility and academic-cum-physical infrastructure issues in colleges and universities. The UGC has said a student can also pursue two full-time programmes in physical mode. This is problematic as it might prompt students, who are academically proficient or with the economic wherewithal, to corner seats in two in-demand courses. Such a situation is best avoided in the context of the country's poor college density — colleges per lakh population (in the 18-23 age group). In the All India Survey on Higher Education Report 2019-20, the national average college density stands at 30. The UGC's Furqan Qamar Committee, which a decade ago recommended dual programmes with a second degree in open/distance mode, had ruled out offering simultaneous degree courses under regular mode "as it may create logistic, administrative and academic problems". Against this backdrop, the UGC may reconsider its guidelines for the physical mode option, while implementing the other two choices, strengthening and streamlining the open/distance learning courses in parallel. Alternatively, it may look at its 2004 document for initiation of double/multiple degree programme in engineering disciplines, where it had proposed a "gap" before an engineering degree holder could enrol for an additional or add-on degree course. That approach is pragmatic as it also sought to reduce the duration of the add-on degree by eliminating about 33% to 38% (52 to 60 course credits) of the "common curriculum" of the BE/B.Tech course (a total of 160 credits). This logic could be applied to allied courses in arts and science and reduce the duration of the second degree for students who desire pursuing dual programmes in physical mode. The more practical a policy, the better its results.

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