

Marks are not enough

We need to re-visit and re-define excellence in terms of students' ability to navigate the complex challenges of life



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

During admission season, marks, grades and percentiles are the talk of the town. A staggering number of students have scored very high marks and outstanding grades. Some have managed to score centum even in arts subjects. But this raises a question: is there a strong correlation between marks and competencies? Sadly, the answer is no.

Problems

Where is the gap and how should it be addressed? Most teachers, including those in colleges and universities, are generous in awarding marks and grades so that they do not invite criticism that their students have not performed well in exams. The assessment pattern itself also subtly promotes high grades. Most questions are remember-recall questions that only test rote memory. There are hardly any higher order questions that test the ability to think, analyse, evaluate and apply concepts and theories learnt in classrooms to real life. In many institutions, the Continuous Formative or Internal Assessment, which accounts for close to 40% of the total marks, is not rigorous. Teachers generously award anywhere between 70-90% on the argument that students need to be helped to come out in flying colours.

The key question, therefore, is: do CGPAs help students progress to higher

studies or in their employment prospects? Many students who score excellent marks are unable to secure admission in premier institutions for their Master's and research programmes or crack job interviews. This is a reflection of their cognitive capabilities and the educational system. Their CGPAs have given them a false sense of excellence.

Strategies

How can this be set right? By creating and promoting an ecosystem with a decent correlation between student competencies and grades.

Bloom's Revised Taxo-

nomy talks about six levels of knowledge and question papers should deal with all of them. Higher order questions that talk about analysis, critiques and evaluation and the translation of concepts and theories into realities are crucial. When confronted regularly with challenging questions that are not memory-based, students will be forced to think and sharpen their cognitive capabilities.

Certain key education outcomes such as multiculturalism and adaptability cannot be quantified and assessed using traditional benchmarks of excellence but they are vital to one's

growth and societal development.

Students should be helped to think beyond CGPAs and transition to the real world where skills and competencies, both cognitive and meta-cognitive, matter. They should realise that critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills and emotional intelligence are crucial to navigate the complexities of life. They should be encouraged to go beyond textbooks, exams, and grades and step into the real world where they will be assessed not by their marks and grades but by their cognitive capabilities and humane

qualities.

This requires student-centric classrooms that promote thinking skills with an emphasis on analysis, interpretation and application and offer adequate space to raise questions and express diverse points of view on academic and non-academic topics. The obsession with marks and grades should be replaced by a focus on life-skills that will prepare future-ready citizens who can contribute to making the world a better place to live in.

In the final analysis, higher educational institutions should promote an ecosystem that weans students away from a memory-based educational system and nurtures their thinking capacities. Administrators, teachers and parents should realise that there should be a transition from classrooms to the real world fraught with multiple challenges. The whole exercise calls for a re-think on the notion of excellence. Traditionally, excellence in academic circles was equated with enviable CGPAs where students were graded on the basis of predetermined criteria. We need to re-visit and re-define excellence not so much in terms of marks and grades but in terms of students' ability to navigate the complex challenges of life. This obviously calls for going beyond marks, grades and percentiles.

The writer is an Emeritus Professor, Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed- to-be University. Email josephdorairaj@gmail.com