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A college student is murdered on her birthday and enters a time loop, and repeats the same day over and over again. That is the storyline of the 2017 black comedy *Happy Death Day*. Many higher education providers find themselves stuck in a similar time loop, endlessly chasing current industry needs but never arriving. Job-specific skills can quickly become obsolete. The acceleration of AI intensifies this cycle. Do we need adaptable individuals who can make sense and create a future, or narrowly skilled workers to boost placement stats? If it is the former, then the traditional focus on immediate job readiness is ill placed.

Skilling, upskilling, and reskilling are essential and urgent. But the relentless focus on job readiness can put education in a reactive cycle. We do not want placement pressure to suppress curiosity and growth, leaving young people anxious and unfulfilled. Instead, we need individuals driven by purpose and a hunger to understand the complexities ahead. The true preparedness comes from three meta-skills: meta-cognitive agility, epistemic flexibility, and transdisciplinary fluency. Big words? Not so when you see them in action as new fluencies needed for the mind.

Transferable skills

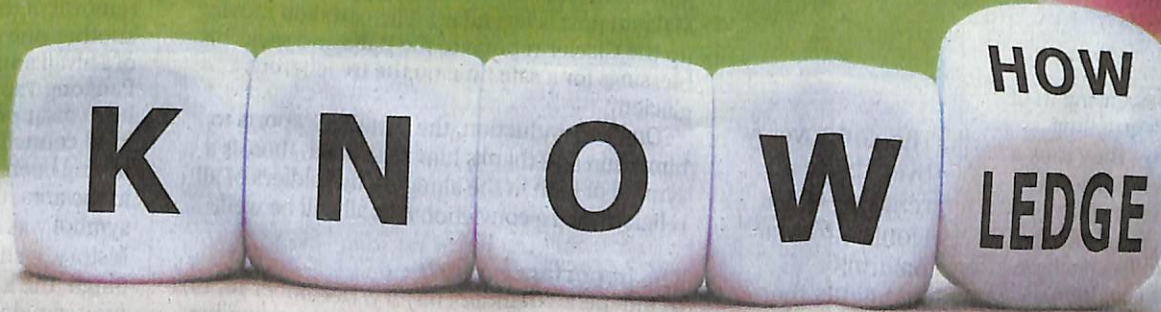
A researcher zooming in and out of a mind map to explore alternative inter-

pretations of methodologies or a musician developing a plan for targeted practice for challenging pieces both show meta-cognitive agility. A biology student, initially believing all life needs oxygen, encounters anaerobic life and revises his beliefs, showing epistemic flexibility. An architect designing a net-zero home for the elderly shows transdisciplinary fluency. These are the qualities of an anticipatory learner. These skills are job-independent and transferable.

Anticipatory learning is about encouraging students to develop the adaptability

Learning for the future

Why higher education institutions must reduce the focus on job readiness and encourage Anticipatory Learning



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to thrive in the future by developing foresight and creating futures rather than simply reacting to current needs. In institutions, anticipatory learning shifts the focus from transactional models that just try to fill immediate skills gaps to transformative partnerships. These collaborations may rely on evolving policy support for flexible pathways, micro-credentials, context-specific industry

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linkages, flexible degree programmes, credit-based modular curricula, and hybrid learning. Using a blend of these, anticipatory learning prepares students for impactful careers, not immediate jobs.

Higher education institutions and the skilling ecosystem must also see the nature and content of jobs. In *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber argues that, despite technological progress, many roles are meaningless. He cites jobs like some receptionists and doormen who exist solely to make others look important, market lobbyists for harmful industries, workers fixing problems that should not ex-

ist such as glitches in poorly designed software, and task-masters inventing unnecessary projects for others to complete. These are illusions of jobs that cause a lot of moral and spiritual damage. These should definitely not be the jobs for which our education needs to prepare students.

Beyond jobs

Many Western universities face pressure to reduce ties with companies engaged in fossil fuels, tobacco, and environmentally damaging practices. It is tricky to balance social responsibility with financial needs and tempting to be myopic. In-

dustry readiness is important, but seeing education solely as job preparation turns learning into an echo chamber. Getting good grades is not a problem but thinking that schools exist just to give grade is definitely a problem. By avoiding such filter bubbles institutions can truly complement the employment ecosystem.

True learning happens when we are passionate about what we learn and free to explore our own interests. Higher education institutions can create this environment where industry readiness is a natural by-product that follows. Job readiness can be a powerful motivator in the short term, but it risks creating narrow, individualistic lives. This is not about rejecting becoming industry-ready but of looking at education only from that lens alone.

As technical skills quickly get dated, the very notion of job readiness is limiting. Educational institutions exist to encourage self-discovery and a sense of wonder. Finding connections, understanding problems, building solutions, and being socially responsible are all outcomes of that discovery and wonder. Anticipatory learning can strike the balance by combining personal growth with career skills to help create more meaningful work. We have more options for organising society and jobs than we realise. So, is it too idealistic to ask for this from all of us?

Views expressed are personal.

The writer is Deputy Secretary, University Grants Commission.