**[Enabling our youth](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769659/enabling-our-youth)**

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MOST of our university-going youth take up courses chosen by their parents. Making decisions about education and the future without the parents’ consent is unheard of and, in many cases, parents plan the entire educational and career trajectory. The fact is parents don’t always know the wide variety of options available, nor do they have a crystal ball to see which jobs will remain relevant in the future. It is also unfair to expect children to do well in a course that they are not interested in. Taking away their right to make decisions at the threshold of adulthood is also detrimental to their growth in many ways.

Education is a hard battle for our youth. Some find themselves chasing a pipe dream with parents dictating their decisions; others get caught in a trap of teacher incompetence. Sometimes, teachers reject methods used by their students because the newer methods aren’t familiar or the teacher cannot accept that the student is yards ahead. Just like doctors, teachers need to upgrade their expertise to the latest research and keep up with the students who may be more digitally savvy than them.

To keep up with student needs, strategic collaboration among higher education institutes is essential, where faculty and student exchange programmes can propel greater mobility of resources. Students deserve an enriching experience at university — the launching pad for their careers.

Facilitating mobility of skills, talent and expertise gives us more opportunities to educate our youth. Many of them have taken to working independently in the absence of reliable teachers and mentors. This isn’t something they are usually good at — the transition between school and university is challenging, made even more difficult by the lack of direction. Many students are anxious about entering university life, having become accustomed to the teacher-driven environment at school where learning is strictly controlled.

Education is a hard battle for our youth for many reasons.

In fact, there is a huge chasm between the stringent school environment and the demands of university life, where large lecture-style classes translate into very little interaction with the teacher. Very few universities offer tutorials to bring students up to speed. Some engage senior students to help out with juniors, or employ teaching assistants for support beyond class hours.

Tutorials in small groups can do wonders for students, many of whom need extra time and direction. Coaching and mentorship programmes can also keep students connected with their goals. Many universities abroad arrange social and sporting events outside of campus life for students. These events inculcate a sense of belonging to a wider community and develop a sense of camaraderie with peers. Belonging is critical to students’ academic motivation, especially for minority students.

A sense of belonging to the university community begins with teachers who can model inclusive behaviour, helping students feel valued and connected. This could be as simple as a one-on-one conversation during office hours between students and teachers to get to know each other better or a friendly tennis match. If there are various opportunities for students to connect with teachers, students adapt quicker to university life. One of my university teachers had a habit of lending books to students from her personal collection and would discuss the book with them when they came around next. It was one way of motivating students to use office hours to their benefit, and for her to monitor their progress through informal conversations.

A more structured approach to co-curricular involvement of students in activities such as mindfulness, emotional self-regulation and bias awareness may foster an environment of inclusiveness and positivity. In fact, research shows a sense of belonging is a critical factor in student retention. A community where students feel accepted and enjoy a sense of belonging is where they feel they will thrive, and this translates into academic perseverance.

Many universities expect students to find friends and learn to navigate their new world even as they dive deep into academic work. Unfortunately, it isn’t as simple as that. Students need access to communication channels that they can use frequently for help — be it academic information or social, physical and emotional help. Many students course through the days without knowledge of learning opportunities, co-curricular programmes at the university, support groups or competitions that they can participate in. The isolation that results from not knowing what’s ‘out there’ is not only disconcerting but can be thoroughly demotivating.

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