Let’s be liberal

Through this column, we invite experts to describe what they think is the most pressing issue in higher education in India.

NEED OF THE HOUR

Prof Indira Parikh

PROBLEM: Lack of ‘liberal’ education. Liberal education has many evolutions that range from confusion and freewill to fun and multiple choices. This ambiguity creates anxiety in students and parents and then pushes education into a highly controlled, siloed and structured environment leaving the existing education space rigid and closed. Students lose interest and look for ways to not be part of such a system.

SOLUTION: Liberal education is a broad concept. For one, it means the creation of a learning environment that provides students with the time and space to grow within and take on responsible adult roles— to be able to differentiate and make choices.

In the context of an academic environment, liberal education allows students to be part of multiple streams and then decide what subject they would like to pursue on a professional level. It’s only possible for youngsters to be certain of a particular path if they are first allowed to experience and participate in the various available options.

A four-year liberal education course provides a differential learning experience because students spend the first two years exploring diverse streams of knowledge. Thus liberal education focuses on each student’s holistic growth. It involves participating in institutional activities where a student’s knowledge base and experience, and the expression of that understanding becomes an integral part of their learning.

Liberal education is also meant to focus on the present day reality of diversity and plurality. Students across caste, community, religion, race, colour and gender are made to live and work in a shared space. This system creates an environment where the meaning of accepting diversity without stereotypes, socio-cultural, historical and political baggage is shed. An understanding of co-existence and respecting differences is an integral part of liberal education.

BY DEFINITION

The Association of American Colleges and Universities describes liberal education as ‘a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement... characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more of a way of studying than a specific course or field of study’.

MEET THE EXPERT

Professor Indira Parikh is the founder president of Foundation for Liberal And Management Education (FLAME), Pune. She was the dean and professor of organisational behaviour at IIM-A from 2002 to 2006. She is the founder member of Samrudhi: The Academy for Human Context and has designed management development programmes in institution building, leadership effectiveness, issues of role and identity, and organisational renewal. She has conducted programmes in Africa, Asia, Dubai, The Netherlands and the USA. Prof Parikh has taught at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France and Texas A & M University, USA. She has co-authored books like Young Managers at Crossroads and Corporate Culture in India. Prof Parikh has won many awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award for Best Teacher in Management by Ascent in World HRD Congress, 2001, and more recently the Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Award for outstanding contribution to teaching by the 19th Business School Affaire and Dewang Mehta Business School.