

# EXPRESS OPINION

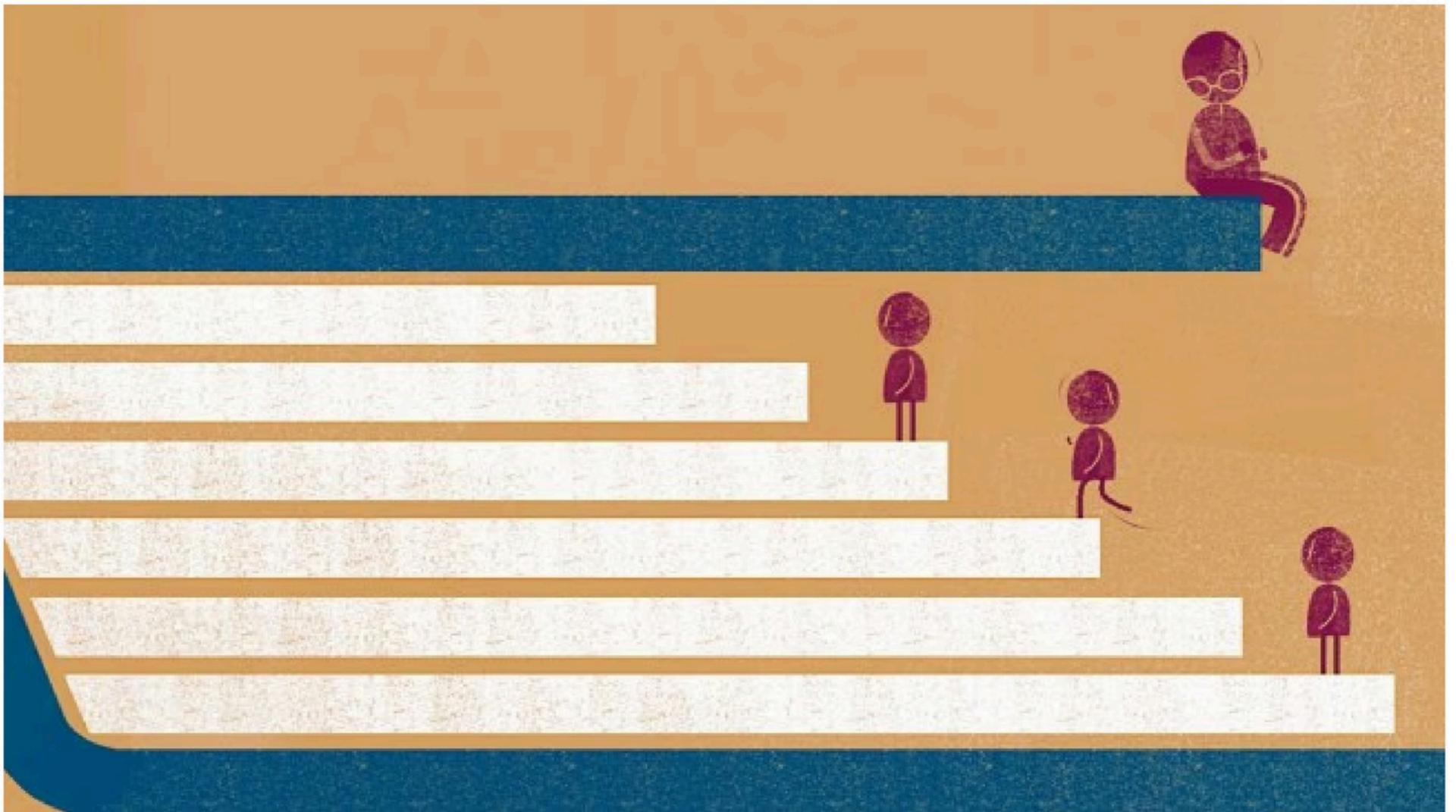
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EDITORIALS

COLUMNS

## Classroom teaching is essential to academic rigour. HC ruling misses that

*Today, universities have drifted from their core mandate, and the faculty are called upon by the state and regulators to play roles for which they were never trained*



The Delhi High Court's latest verdict removes obligations to attend classes. Classroom teaching is essential to academic rigour. Teaching today faces a challenge from AI.



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Peter Fleming's *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* offers valuable insights into the forces that undermine institutions. There are at least three disturbing developments that seem to be affecting the idea of a university in India today. One, the increasing traction of the argument that academic rigour and academic schedules are a source of stress to students in higher educational institutions (HEIs). Two, the requirement of minimum discipline in an HEI is being seen as antithetical to student creativity. Three, requiring students to attend a minimum number of classes is being seen as stressful. In November, the Delhi High Court ruled that no law student in the country should be barred from taking examinations due to insufficient attendance.

Before analysing these issues, let us go back to the idea of a university and its objectives.

In his classic 19th-century work, *The Idea of a University*, John H Newman emphasised that a university is a transformative space where knowledge, freedom, and purpose combine to create enlightened individuals who can steward the transition to a just society. He argued that the autonomy of an institution is best left to its leader. The creation of original knowledge and the larger public good should be the key idea of a university.

Today, universities have drifted from their core mandate, and the faculty are called upon by the state and regulators to play roles for which they were never trained. These include the policing of students. Requiring the faculty to perform such roles leads to what Fleming calls the bureaucratisation of universities. Dealing with such matters taxes the energy of faculty members. Failure to perform such tasks can lead to a fair amount of backlash against faculty members, especially from parents. At times, institutions that judge universities lack insight into how universities work now.

The social milieu today is exerting pressure on students, and, indeed, academic environments often exacerbate mental health issues. While universities generally have a basic infrastructure to deal with such issues, they do not yet have specialised arrangements. They become easy scapegoats for student stress.

At the same time, regulators expect universities to follow an ambitious curriculum. Continued classes, assignments, and an effective evaluation system are needed for academic rigour. For a variety of reasons, some students are often unable to cope with this schedule. The choice before universities, then, is to either lower the bar or push students to meet the requirements. Neither option is ideal. The university, then, becomes an easy target for what is a systemic and social problem. In several institutions, this takes a toll on academic rigour.

The [Delhi](#) High Court's latest verdict removes obligations to attend classes. Classroom teaching is essential to academic rigour. Teaching today faces a challenge from AI. However, AI can never provide the personalised attention to a student that an empathetic teacher can. The online mode will especially be insufficient for students of highly technical subjects like law. The attendance relaxation mandated by the HC will, however, encourage the online mode.

***The writer is vice chancellor, National Law University Delhi. Views are personal***