Pandemic and Academic Future

What is the issue?

- The pandemic gave administrators an opportunity to re-examine the education system, but nothing has changed.
- With the second wave of the pandemic, it is crucial to reflect on the past gaps and make appropriate course corrections.

How was the response?

- Bureaucrats and administrators associated with educational institutions came up with notifications and circulars.
- They were supposedly designed to enable academic activity.
- But these orders disregarded the distress experienced by the academic community.
- The unrealistic 'one order fits all' approach established the distress as a new feature of educational institutions.
- The response should have helped institutions, faculty and students overcome the uncertainties.
- But the biggest failure of the administrative response was that instead of doing the above, the focus was on unnecessary bureaucratic centralisation.

What was the lost opportunity?

- The pandemic offered an opportunity to initiate sustainable reforms in the structure of the academic term and the nature of continuous assessment.
- It provided an opportunity to -
    i. work with teachers to address their concerns
    ii. encourage better student-teacher interactions
    iii. develop a better framework to determine the qualificatory grade for students to move to the next stage of study
- But instead, the administrators showed rigid insistence on rote learning.
- They refused to recognise the fact that marks obtained in exams are not the only markers of a student's capabilities.
- They also showed reluctance to engage with fellow academicians and teachers to nurture academic engagement.
- All these ended up becoming a source of public distress.
- The exam system, which has been crying out for significant overhaul, could

have been reformed, but was missed.

- The revised academic calendars introduced in 2020 undermined proper and constructive academic interaction between teachers and students.
- While teachers conducted online classes daily, administrators were obsessed with monitoring them.
- They showed little interest in enquiring about the health and difficulties of their colleagues and staff.
- They failed to consider initiatives to assess the mental health of teachers, non-teaching staff and students.
- At times it seemed as if they did not fully understand the qualitative and operational differences between online and offline classes.
- The practice exposed the outdated understanding of technology and lack of understanding of the contemporary challenges of classroom interactions.

What is the challenge now?

- The second wave is now occurring at a time when students in schools and higher educational institutions transition from one level to another.
- This has exposed the administrative inadequacies of the past year.
- It is becoming obvious that the pandemic would disrupt the academic schedule for more than 2 years.

What is the way forward?

- There is a pressing need for bureaucratic administrators to consult academic stakeholders and move ahead.
- It is time for institutions to reconsider their approach towards exams and grading.
    - The need is to reduce the pressure on the students and discourage them from memorising to prepare for set and repetitive exam questions.
    - Attention should be given to continuous assessment and evaluation of students.
    - A system geared to assess the students' understanding rather than ability to memorise and reproduce should be in place.
    - School boards and universities need to alter the pattern of question papers.
    - The idea of open book examinations needs to be developed.
- The decision-makers in educational institutions will need to display administrative acumen and show willingness to learn from mistakes.
- The bureaucracy must recognise that universities and schools have their own academic considerations.
- They should understand that the standardisation of academic requirements, calendars, and teaching and learning processes are not feasible.

- The decisions should not be knee-jerk responses such as cancelling and/or postponing exams and remaining fixated with the completion of the academic term.
- Decisions taken should help secure the academic future of students, teachers and institutions.

Source: The Hindu

