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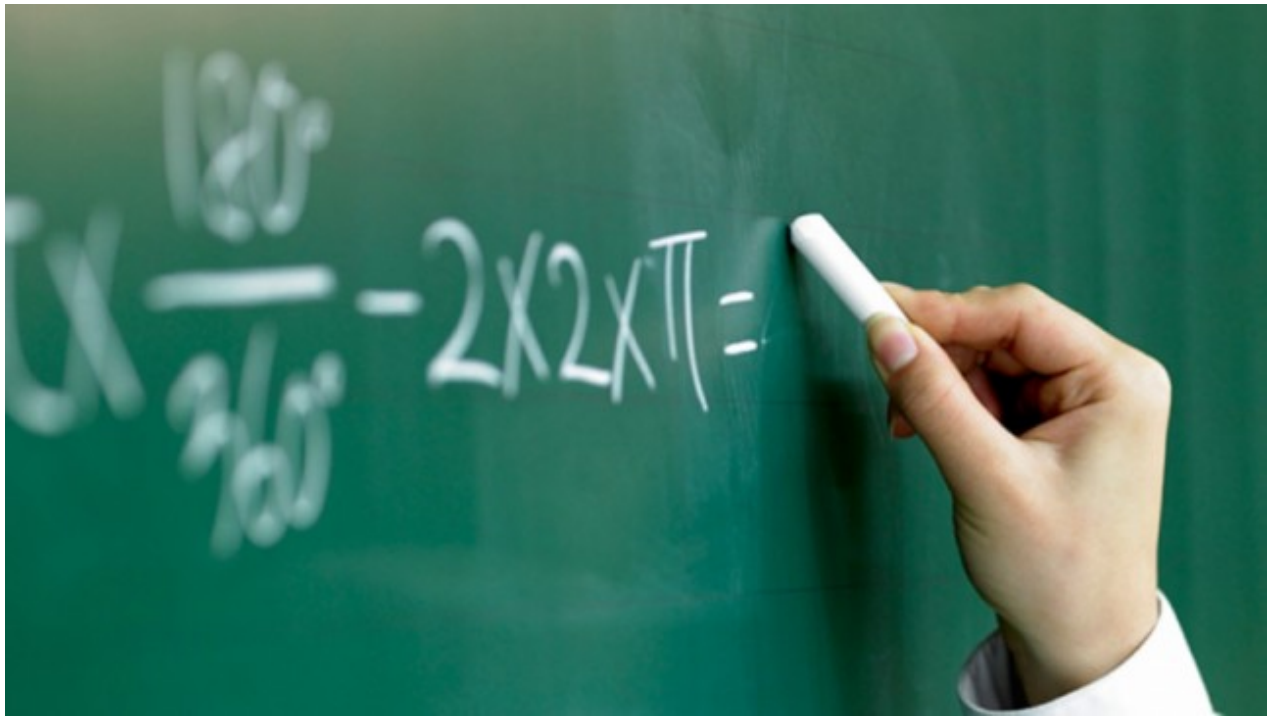
Teaching load: The missing link in higher education quality



SOURCE: degrees.fhi360.org

Syed Saad Andaleeb

Ask faculty members in the country's universities what would motivate them to devote more time to research and you will hear one common answer: decrease present course loads and class sizes. Both factors continue to weigh heavily on their daily toil and pursuit of excellence.

So, how many courses/sections should faculty members realistically teach in a semester? The question has serious implications for the quality of education delivered to university students, especially in an era where employers constantly complain about the deficiencies of our graduating students, when the rate of joblessness among university graduates is growing, when the number of foreign workers in decision-making positions is increasing, and when our ability to compete in a globalised world is seriously threatened.

In private universities, the typical course/section load is four per semester (roughly 30 percent of teachers have typical loads of five or more), which adds up to 12 classes taught per year. If a class has an average of 30 students (some, I know, have up to 50-plus), each teacher is responsible for approximately 120-200 students per semester—give or take a few. In a typical year, a single faculty member is thus responsible for preparing to teach anywhere between 360-600 students in a particular subject.

Many teachers couldn't be bothered about engaging students; others merely process large numbers of students in their classes as efficiently as possible. This means their focus is largely on making students memorise and remember facts, terms, concepts, or answers without necessarily making them understand what they mean.

How do you train so many minds well? The fact is: you don't! To teach well, it takes serious effort to engage students in active learning, a complex process involving cognitive, emotional, and sensory domains that require higher-order thinking. Many of our teachers are not concerned about this challenge. A lot of them are simply unaware of how adults learn and, therefore, couldn't be bothered about engaging them; others merely process large numbers of students in their classes as efficiently as possible. This means their focus is largely on making students memorise and remember facts, terms, concepts, or answers without necessarily making them understand what they mean. Grading is also easy as it involves a simple count of the facts recounted.

For real learning to take place, each individual learner must be understood in his or her context and taken through various cognitive and related stages. Exemplified by Bloom's taxonomy, the diagram tells us where most of academia's teaching-learning methods are focused: at the bottom of the pyramid where memorisation, recalling, defining and remembering are stressed. The practice of engaging students at higher levels of the learning hierarchy is rare. No wonder Einstein emphasised, "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think, something that cannot be learned from textbooks."

Talking to students even in the better known private universities, it is painfully evident that their higher cognitive skills are hardly being challenged; consequently, their analytical, evaluative and creative skills remain seriously under-developed. The price? They are unable to perform well when real life calls upon them to address ambiguity and solve

actual problems. I might even recall my own days in college and engineering university where experiments were done by lab assistants; we merely noted the readings and did some formula-based calculations!

Many students have also been attuned to the notion that the purpose of university education is to get a certificate, something many so-called universities are delighted to provide. What the students are learning and the extent to which they are prepared to meet and shape the real world is not their concern.

The truth is that competent, inspiring and informed teachers, trained to facilitate adult learning, can markedly influence student achievement. Teachers such as these, both new and experienced, must be developed to provide professional, problem-solving, and interactive learning opportunities in the classroom and beyond. These teachers must also be in constant training. With current course loads and tonnes of exam scripts and homework to grade, where is the time for such training? Where is the time to engage with students individually, care for them and touch their minds, hearts and souls?

These same faculty members are also expected to do research. In a competitive world, where rankings have become commonplace, academic research must conform to certain standards—publishing in indexed journals (SCOPUS and the like), citation rates, impact factors, H-index, etc. If the research does not meet these standards, it is not valued as such, especially by the ranking agencies. As more universities in Bangladesh are taking cognisance of these developments, stringent research ought to become an imperative. But such research requires time, training and resources—all in short supply.

In addition, faculty members are expected to be involved in other institutional activities: coordinating club activities, supervising admission tests, organising various departmental programmes, attending workshops and graduation ceremonies, delivering seminars, advising students, and playing a role in governance (disciplinary committee, recruitment committee, planning committee, research committee, curriculum committee, and many more).

In flesh and bone, with emotions and feelings, as family persons and social beings, and as cultural and spiritual entities, work-life balance is a constant challenge that shadows faculty members. For lack of alternative opportunities, many remain mute and sullen at their high-load predicament as teachers, some of them bearing it with fortitude and resignation. Others find ways to cut corners. The underlying frustrations and antagonism that many keep suppressed deep in their hearts make teaching load a subject of serious behavioural research.

My personal view is to install a nine-course teaching cap for an academic year as the norm for all teachers, regardless of seniority, and whether they teach within or outside the university. From this base, additional course releases ought to be availed to those who add further value to the university—researchers, grant writers, mentors, department heads, programme organisers, heads of centres and/or institutes, industry relationship developers, intrapreneurs, peer-evaluators and others. At this reduced load level, however, higher-order engagement of students must be demanded of the faculty.

The cap must be enforced, especially for "teachers" who have made teaching a money-making enterprise by teaching at various institutions. Students dislike the teachers who are only available during the class period, offer no consultations, never explain the grades, and act in student-unfriendly ways. Other teachers are likely to be unhappy with course caps as they seek extra load to make more money. They must realise that there is a tradeoff between the number of courses taught and the quality that can be delivered. Savvy students and their parents, today, must demand higher-order learning, not just a certificate.

From a financial perspective, costs will certainly go up. If the administration is irked or outraged at this suggestion, let them calculate how much money each teacher generates and how much they actually take home. Let them also note that universities are not meant for profit; they are there for enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation.

Good teachers are great nation-builders. They are in short supply. Armed with modern teaching (andragogical) skills, they can be the changemakers of changemakers that this nation needs badly. With the right training, teaching loads and related incentives, not only will it attract much better, competent and creative souls to embrace the teaching profession but will also mean that students will get more attention, think creatively, engage in problem-solving, and will be prepared for an evolving, and possibly volatile, future. The gains for society are likely to be immense.

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