Premium

UPSC Essentials — Experts talk with Zeeshan Hashmi: How is 'Personal Mentorship' a new, key tool for UPSC-CSE prep strategy?'

India's toughest exam is seeing a shift in preparation strategy. 'Personal Mentorship Programs' are becoming more popular among UPSC- CSE aspirants. What are these tailor-made strategic programs which the aspirants are preferring with or without regular coaching? Let us know from Zeeshan Hashmi.

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The core philosophy in a mentorship program is that ' every student is a distinct batch' says Zeeshan Hashmi.

It is true that UPSC-CSE preparation can be done through self-study. However, a **mentor** is needed definitely at different levels of this examination no matter an aspirant is enrolled in regular coaching or not. The mentorship is now formalised through various **mentorship programs** for aspirants.

Zeeshan Hashmi an educator, mentor and UPSC expert helps us to understand the basics of a mentorship programme, its advantages and most importantly how to select the best mentor for oneself.

Manas: A trend is being noticed that UPSC aspirants are opting for 'personal mentors' to crack their civil services exams. What is 'Personal Mentorship'?

Zeeshan Hashmi: Let me begin with some misconceptions.

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Misconception 1: Personal Mentorship is having a series of calls and disconnected interactions with aspirants.

Misconception 2: Personal Mentorship is having a series of disconnected doubt-clearing sessions.

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These misconceptions have led to the abuse of the term — mentorship.

Mentorship is a gradual process that takes the preparation level of each student into consideration. The core philosophy in a mentorship programme is that *'every student is a distinct batch'*. Each aspirant has his or her own strengths and weaknesses and stands at different levels of preparation. Taking all these into consideration, a mentorship programme devises a proper strategy and plan tailor-made for a particular candidate.

In simpler terms, the mentorship process is like a Google map, that suggests one of the best possible routes to reach the destination depending on the position of the user. Similarly, a mentor guides an aspirant to the best possible route to attain success depending on his level of preparedness, strengths and weaknesses etc.

Manas: If a UPSC mentor is providing guidance to an aspirant, how he or she is different from a teacher/instructor?

Zeeshan Hashmi: Students sometimes are confused between a teacher and a mentor. A teacher teaches topics, concepts, ideas from the syllabus, textbooks or from some established scholarly works. A mentor is someone who guides an aspirant based on his own experience, learning and insights. He has walked that path either as a senior aspirant or a selected candidate.

Students should know that a mentor's job is not to teach and complete the syllabus of static subjects. That is a job of a teacher. However, a mentor guides an aspirant by suggesting the best strategies that will suit the aspirant and cater to his or her problem. That strategy is not one size suit all approach.

for them?

Zeeshan Hashmi: There are two types of aspirants-

1) Senior players or selected candidates with lower ranks- They know their loopholes. They do not need full-fledged coaching guidance. They have pin-pointed problems. such candidates mostly prefer personalised mentorship.

2) College students or beginners- Some of the aspirants in this category are not born with a silver spoon or have guidance from family or friends. In a desire to crack civil services as soon as possible and seek personalised guidance, they approach a mentor.

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Aspirants are not finding coaching institutes enough because the changing pattern of the exam has given rise to uncertainty. Look at the cut-offs and questions of prelims, philosophical nature of essay topics etc. Traditional teaching in coaching classrooms and test series have limitations. Personalised attention is more possible in a mentorship program that is tailor-made for individual students.

Manas: Which combination is more favorable for aspirants- Coaching guidance + Mentorship or Self-study + Mentorship?

Zeeshan Hashmi: Depends on where the student stands in his preparation.

Coaching guidance + Mentorship: Freshers find it important. It gives aspirants an apt environment, peer group preparation, etc.

Self-study + Mentorship: Beneficial for aspirants who have financial constraints, for housewives and professionals, selected candidates who want to improve ranks and those who cannot leave their homes due to personal circumstances.

Manas: Since when have you been witnessing this shift of aspirants towards mentorship programs from just regular coaching ?

Zeeshan Hashmi: Shift towards seeking a mentor has been exponential. It has seen a rise in the past 4-5 years. The main reason has been the rapidly evolving examination pattern and the quality of questions. Students are more willing to take

previous ranks. This adaptation is also seen in aspirants who either come from a rural background or do not have close-knit peer circles.

Manas: What an aspirant should know about the fee structure of mentorship programs?

Zeeshan Hashmi: Many mentorship programs have a very customised fee structure and may vary course-wise, duration-wise and as per the specific needs of the aspirant. Some aspirants need mentorship only for the mains exam, some for prelims and mains both. Coaching institutes sometime offer it in a package with their other programs. It should be noted that mentorship programs are cost-effective and fees is also customised as the course is. Some former students may also get discounts.

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Manas: There are many coaching institutes providing mentorship programme. What parameters should an aspirant look into while choosing a mentor?

Zeeshan Hashmi: I believe the two general parameters an aspirant should look at while deciding a mentor are:

1) Statistics: How many students got selected through a mentor's specific personalised mentorship program?

2) Human element: This involves building up trust. One way to find out the trust factor is through webinars/ videos which are available for free. During these webinars, a mentor answers many doubts and queries. If any aspirant as a viewer finds that a similar doubt, resonating with his or her is addressed, trust is developed.

It is after these two factors, aspirants should approach a mentor, interact and select the program as per his or her requirements.

Manas: What are some of the tools used by a mentor which make the mentorship more personalised or most tailor-made for individual aspirants?

essential tips are following

1) Customised timetable: Depending on how much time an aspirant can devote to the preparation due to personal or professional conditions of an individual, a mentor helps to prepare a personalised timetable.

2) Regular micro-tests: Addressing personal apprehensions regarding the preparedness for exam, micro-tests at regular basis are designed, evaluated and discussed. It involves going deep and understanding the thought process behind the candidates' answers.

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3) Calls on demand: Listening patiently to aspirants' queries and doubts, one on one, is an important element of mentorship program.

Manas: Is it true that mentorship also involves counselling?

Zeeshan Hashmi: It is true to some extent. Many times a mentor receives calls from aspirants who have emotional outbursts and they are apprehensive of their preparedness. We must understand that UPSC Aspirants come from diverse backgrounds and the preparation can take more than a few years. It can be frustrating. A mentor should be prepared to empathise with the anxieties of an aspirant and provide him or her with practical insights.

Let me take the example of my former student Sohum Mandhare who was suffering from stress and anxiety attacks and was advised by the doctors to quit the exam. But he decided to approach a personalised mentorship program and benefited from it. Sohum Mandhare, finally secure AIR 257 in UPSC- CSE 2021.

However, a mentor should be careful and advise an aspirant to consult a qualified doctor when the situation of a candidate is serious and needs medical help.

Zeeshan Hashmi's message for UPSC Aspirants:

"Never take any result as a barometer for your success. Take results sportingly. Only then one will be able to improvise and perform better in the next opportunity or attempt."