



FIRST COLUMN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Educators serve as mentors and guide, empowering students to become responsible citizens



SAKSHI SETHI

Education is not merely the transfer of knowledge. It is the shaping of minds, the fostering of growth and even more the cultivation of potential. As educators, the role extends far beyond delivering lectures or grading assignments. It encompasses mentoring, inspiring and empowering individuals to become critical thinkers and responsible citizens. Reflecting on our roles allows us to embrace our responsibilities more consciously and adapt to the evolving needs of learners and society. In contemporary education, the role of the educator has shifted from being the sole source of knowledge to a facilitator of learning.

This transition underscores the importance of guiding students to explore, question, and construct their understanding. It is about creating an environment where students feel safe to express their thoughts, make mistakes and grow from them. The role of an educator becomes especially significant when working with board students. When talking about them, the educator's primary responsibility is to ensure a strong understanding of the curriculum, including breaking down complex concepts, identifying and addressing knowledge gaps and providing effective study strategies.

Beyond teaching content, educators must help students develop time management and exam techniques to perform confidently under pressure. The role demands subject expertise and a keen awareness of the examination format and trends. Today, the modern educational landscape for board students includes challenges such as increasing competition, societal expectations, and the rapid integration of technology in learning. Educators need to stay adaptable, leveraging digital tools



to make learning engaging and accessible by recognising diverse learning styles employing strategies to meet those needs, and ensuring that every student feels included and valued. Additionally, acknowledging the diverse learning needs of students and personalising instruction whenever possible is also crucial for ensuring their success. There is no denying that students are at a critical juncture in their academic journey, preparing for examinations that often determine their future educational and career paths. Reflecting on our roles as educators in this context reveals the need for a balanced approach that combines academic rigour, emotional support, and life-skill development.

One of the most vital roles of an educator is to be a lifelong learner. Education is a dynamic field, and staying updated with pedagogical advancements, cultural shifts, and technological innovations is essential. This commitment to personal growth will not only enhance teaching effectiveness but will also model the value of continuous learning for students. Teaching values such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability prepare students for challenges beyond the examination hall. It is essential to emphasise that education is about equipping them with skills for life, not just marks on a report card. Reflecting on our roles as educators highlights the immense responsibility and opportunity, we have in shaping young lives. It requires academic expertise, emotional intelligence, and unwavering dedication. By nurturing not just the intellect but also the spirit of our students, we as educators can guide them toward success in their exams and, more importantly, in life. By embracing our multifaceted roles with passion and purpose, we can create transformative experiences for our students and leave an enduring legacy of knowledge and wisdom.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

How skill-based degrees are redefining India's future



DINESH SOOD

By aligning with industry needs and empowering individuals with practical expertise, the nation is paving the way for a more inclusive and dynamic workforce



India's education system is undergoing a quiet revolution. As the global job market evolves, the emphasis on traditional degrees gives way to skill-focused education tailored to the demands of a dynamic economy. A prime example is the introduction of degree courses in salons, spas, beauty parlours, and other vocational domains. These courses signify a paradigm shift in how we perceive education, employment, and entrepreneurship in 'Viksit Bharat.' This development addresses critical challenges. It aligns with the growing aspirations of India's youth, caters to burgeoning private sector industries, and equips individuals with skills for self-employment, entrepreneurship and opportunities abroad.

Growing Demand for Vocational Expertise

The global wellness industry, valued at over \$4 trillion, continues to expand, with India emerging as a key player. The beauty and wellness sector alone is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18 per cent over the next five years. The personal grooming industry demands nearly 1.3 million professionals annually, significantly surpassing the 3-4 lakh jobs the software industry adds yearly. This boom has created immense demand for skilled professionals, from hairstylists and spa therapists to salon managers and beauty wellness consultants. Recognising this, regulatory bodies like the UGC and AICTE have integrated skills courses into the education system. Indian universities now collaborate with training institutes to offer structured programmes like the Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Beauty and Wellness. These programmes cover skincare, makeup artistry and salon management.

Other universities offer diplomas and degree programmes in wellness and hospitality sectors, designed with industry leaders. Globally, institutions such as the London College of Beauty Therapy (UK) and the Australian Academy of Beauty Dermal and Laser offer world-class programmes. These courses adhere to international standards, providing globally recognised certifications that enhance employability abroad.

before they arise. Indian police have applied similar strategies during political rallies and cultural events, engaging community leaders to ensure peaceful outcomes.

Leveraging Technology:

Technology is transforming protest management globally. In countries like Singapore and South Korea, drones with high-resolution cameras monitor crowd density and movement, while artificial intelligence (AI) tools analyse data to predict potential flashpoints. This enables law enforcement to allocate resources proactively and prevent crises. Indian police are increasingly adopting these tools. Drones were deployed during the farmers' protests and other large-scale events, offering real-time monitoring of crowd dynamics.

Social media monitoring cells track misinformation and narratives, enabling swift corrective measures. Law enforcement enhances its situational awareness and credibility by integrating technology with traditional methods.

Non-Lethal Methods:

Germany sets a global benchmark for using non-lethal tools like water cannons, sound devices, and barricades to manage large gatherings. Officers trained in crowd psychology focus on isolating disruptive elements while respecting the rights of peaceful protestors. In India, non-lethal methods have been employed during sensitive protests, such as barricading roads to control crowds or using water cannons to disperse tense gatherings. The

Parity Between B Voc and BSc Degrees

An essential aspect of this transformation is recognising the equivalence of Bachelor of Vocation (B Voc) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) degrees. While BSc focuses on academic learning, B Voc emphasises hands-on, industry-relevant training. Recent policy reforms place these degrees on par, ensuring vocational education is no longer seen as secondary but as an equally credible academic pathway. This parity allows B Voc graduates to access the same opportunities as BSc graduates in employment, higher education, or competitive exams. It underscores the value of skills and practical expertise in driving economic growth.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and National Credit Framework

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) further strengthens this integration. RPL allows individuals to earn formal recognition for previous informal training or work experiences. When aligned with the National Credit Framework, credits earned in schools, vocational training institutions, or universities become seamlessly transferable across sectors. This fosters flexibility in education, empowering individuals to personalise their learning journeys and reduce redundancy. By integrating RPL with skill-based programmes, India's education system becomes more inclusive and adaptable. Employment and Entrepreneurship Opportunities Skill-based degree programs unlock diverse career pathways:

- 1. Private Sector Jobs:** Luxury wellness brands, fitness chains, and beauty franchises seek trained professionals. Graduates can secure jobs in high-end spas, salons, and wellness centres with lucrative salaries and career growth.
- 2. Self-Employment and Freelancing:** These courses

empower entrepreneurial individuals to establish businesses.

Graduates can run boutique salons or offer personalised wellness services, catering to niche markets.

3. Government Jobs: Recognising vocational degrees has expanded opportunities in government roles. Graduates are eligible for positions in wellness centres and initiatives under schemes like Skill India and PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana).

4. Global Opportunities: Programmes often include internationally recognised certifications, enhancing employability abroad. For instance, graduates from LCBT in the UK find opportunities in European markets, while Australian academy-trained professionals thrive in Asia-Pacific regions.

Breaking Stigmas Around Vocational Careers

Vocational careers have long been viewed as secondary options. Introducing structured degree programs challenges these stereotypes. Formal education in salons, spas, and beauty parlours combines technical skills, business acumen, and industry exposure, positioning these professions as aspirational.

This shift is especially empowering for women, who form a significant portion of the workforce in these fields and now gain access to recognised qualifications that enhance professional credibility. **Challenges in Implementation** India's higher education system, often criticised for being theory-heavy, struggles to improve practical skill sets. Initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and platforms like SWAYAM aim to modernise education, but challenges remain:

- 1. Quality Assurance:** Maintaining high standards and industry relevance requires collaboration with established industry players.
- 2. Awareness:** Many students and parents remain unaware of these

opportunities, favouring traditional careers. Awareness campaigns are crucial.

3. Infrastructure and Faculty: Vocational education requires specialised infrastructure and trained faculty. Institutions must invest in state-of-the-art facilities and continuous professional development for educators.

4. Recognition and Accreditation: Further integration into academia and government recruitment processes will enhance vocational degrees' credibility.

Vision for the Future Skill-based degree programmes signify societal reform, recognising youth aspirations and aligning education with market realities. By formalising careers through structured courses, India creates a skilled and confident workforce. These reforms reflect a commitment to inclusivity, providing pathways for diverse socio-economic backgrounds to pursue rewarding careers.

India is on the brink of an educational revolution. Skill-based degrees in fields like salons, spas, and beauty parlours redefine education. These programmes bridge the gap between aspiration and opportunity, equipping students with skills to thrive globally. As these initiatives gain momentum, scaling them, ensuring quality, and destigmatising vocational careers are imperative. With parity between B Voc and BSc degrees and the integration of RPL into the National Credit Framework, India's education system is transforming into a flexible and robust framework. These changes will meet today's demands and shape a prosperous future for the nation.

(The writer is co-founder and MD of Orane International, a training partner of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and a network Member of India International Skills Centres, an initiative of GoI. The views expressed are personal)



THE BEAUTY AND WELLNESS SECTOR ALONE IS PROJECTED TO GROW AT A COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE (CAGR) OF 18 PER CENT OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Balancing rights and order: Innovations in protest management

Protests are the lifeblood of democracy. For law enforcement, it must carefully balance between public safety and democratic freedoms

Thousands of people gather, holding banners and chanting slogans, their voices echoing through the streets. For law enforcement, these aren't merely demonstrations but skill, strategy, and restraint tests. Managing protests today demands more than enforcing law and order; it requires innovation, preparation, and trust.

Reflecting on this evolving role, a senior officer once remarked, "Our goal isn't to silence dissent but to ensure it unfolds safely for everyone involved. Effective protest management is about enabling expression while maintaining peace." This philosophy increasingly shapes how law enforcement approaches public demonstrations globally



O P SINGH

and in India.

Dialogue Policing: Dialogue policing, extensively practised in Sweden and Norway, prioritises proactive communication between police and protest organisers. Liaison officers meet organisers before demonstrations to discuss routes, safety measures, and mutual expectations. This approach fosters trust and de-escalates tensions

Dialoguing about the safety of protesters and protest organisers. Liaison officers meet organisers before demonstrations to discuss routes, safety measures, and mutual expectations. This approach fosters trust and de-escalates tensions



focus remains on proportionality—ensuring responses are measured, harm is minimised, and democratic freedoms are respected.

footage to ensure compliance with established protocols. In India, body-worn cameras have been introduced in several states, particularly during sensitive operations.

Multi-agency coordination for Large Protests

Managing large-scale demonstrations often requires multi-agency collaboration. In the United States, unified command centres integrate local police, state law enforcement, and federal agencies for cohesive responses. These centres streamline resource sharing and operational alignment, which is critical for complex events. India's law enforcement regularly employs similar coordination during significant events, such as farmers' protests, political rallies, and national festivals. Central para-

military forces often supplement state police, ensuring adequate workforce and resources. Clear protocols and seamless coordination are the backbone of these efforts.

Comprehensive Training:

Training is a cornerstone of effective protest management. Canadian police emphasise de-escalation, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution, with officers undergoing practical simulations to prepare for high-pressure scenarios. In India, the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) has introduced advanced modules covering non-lethal tools, technology integration, and crowd psychology.

Ethical Policing:

Ethical considerations are central to managing protests.

Globally, technologies like drones and AI are governed by protocols that protect privacy and civil liberties. Similarly, the principle of proportionality—using the minimum force necessary—guides actions to ensure demonstrators' rights are respected. In India, police increasingly emphasise ethical practices. Engaging community leaders, addressing grievances, and prioritising dialogue reflect a commitment to balancing public safety with democratic freedoms. The shift towards a restrained, people-centric approach underscores the evolving role of law enforcement in a modern democracy.

(The writer is Director General of Police and Head of the Haryana State Narcotics Bureau; views are personal)

Praggnanandhaa defeats Harikrishna; Gukesh, Erigaisi draw in second round of Tata Steel Chess

PTI ■ WIJK AAN ZEE

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa defeated compatriot P Harikrishna, while Arjun Erigaisi settled for a draw in the second round of 87th Tata Steel Chess Tournament here. This was after world champion D Gukesh played out a draw with Russian-turned-Slovenian Vladimir Fedoseev while Leon Luke Mendonca lost another game, this time to Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan. The 19-year-old Praggnanandhaa's win over Harikrishna was a master-class on defence and counter-attack. Playing white for the second time in as many days, Harikrishna could not find his magical touch even though he performed slightly better in the middle game. The younger Indian took him to the ropes and eventually the endgame, which should have been drawn. Harikrishna faltered when it

was necessary to put up resistance and Pragnanandhaa made the most of it to emerge victorious. Erigaisi pressed hard against local hero Anish Giri, who was almost winning against Gukesh in the opening round. The battle took a steep turn with both players fighting for advantage in the rook and knight endgame but as it turned out, the draw was a result that most experts expected. Fabiano Caruana was the player of the day as he gradually crushed second best Dutchman Jorden van Foreest right from the early middle game. It was an innocuous London system that Caruana started with and then capitalised on an unforced error to win a pawn which proved decisive. Earlier, after a tension filled game against Giri, Gukesh relaxed with his black pieces and was never in any problem against Fedoseev,



who is perceived as a strong opponent at all levels. With black, Gukesh was looking only optically worse but the Indian equalised without much trouble



leading to an endgame with rook and four pawns apiece where the draw was a just result. For Mendonca it was a bad day in office as he chose to

play the French defense and faced some new ideas by the Uzbek, who has been constantly working to get positions in which he can out-calculate his opponents. The early middle game saw both players castling on opposite flank and it was Mendonca's king that came in to scrutiny soon. Abdusattorov is a fierce attacker and he pounced on his chance to score his first victory. This was the first game to end in the day. In the challengers' section, R Vaishali was forced to split the point with 14-year-old Chinese sensation Miaoyi Lu after an intense battle with white pieces. Divya Deshmukh also opened her account in this section drawing with top seed Nguyen Thai van Dam of Czech Republic. After her first-round loss, this was an easy comeback for Divya, who is having her second stint here.

Results round 2: Masters: Vladimir Fedoseev

(Slo, 1) drew with D Gukesh (Ind, 1.5); Erigaise Arjun (Ind, 0.5) drew with Anish Giri (Ned, 0.5); P Harikrishna (Ind, 1) lost to R Pragnanandhaa (Ind, 1.5); Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 1.5) beat Leon Luke Mendonca (Ind, 0); Vincent Keymer (Ger, 1.5) drew with Max Warmerdam (Ned, 1); Fabiano Caruana (Usa, 1.5) beat Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 0.5); Alexey Sarana (Srb, 1) drew with Wei Yi (Chn, 1).

Challengers: Divya Deshmukh (Ind, 0.5) drew with Nguyen Thai van Dam (Cze, 1.5); R Vaishali (Ind, 1.5) drew with Miaoyi Lu (Chn, 1.5); Nodirbek Yakubov (Uzb, 1.5) drew with Nodirbek Kazybek (Kaz, 0.5); Benjamin Bok (Ned, 1.5) beat Ediz Gurel (Tur, 1); Arthur Pijpers (Ned, 0.5) drew with Aydin Sulemanli (Aze, 1); Svane Frederik (Ger, 1.5) beat Oro Faustino (Arg, 0); Irina Bulmaga (Rom, 0) lost to Erwin LAmi (Ned, 1.5).

Satwik-Chirag eye first title of season, Lakshya Sen aims to bounce back

PTI ■ JAKARTA

Star Indian men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty will be eyeing its maiden title of the year while Lakshya Sen will look to put behind a disappointing start to the season when the Indonesia Masters Super 500 tournament gets underway here on Tuesday. The world No 9 duo of Satwik and Chirag has been in a fine form, reaching semifinals of the last two tournaments — Malaysia Open Super 1000 and India Open Super 750 — over the last as many weeks and will be keen to cross the final hurdle. Satwik-Chirag had lost each of the two semifinals in straight sets and their aim would be to go the distance in the upcoming tournament. They will open their campaign with a round of 32 clash against Chinese Taipei's Chen Zhi-Ray and Yu Chieh



Lin. The challenge, however, would be greater for India's singles players Sen and PV Sindhu when they take the court here. The 23-year-old Sen, who had finished fourth in last year's Paris Olympics has lost twice in the first round over the last two weeks, will be determined to put his best foot forward in the round of 32 clash. Priyanshu Rajawat will also begin his campaign at the same stage, taking on Japan's

player Gregoria Mariska Tunjung. Sindhu lost in the quarterfinals of the India Open and the two-time Olympic medallist Indian star will be keen to make amends. In women's singles qualification, Isharani Baruah will face compatriot Rakshitha Ramraj while Tanya Hemanth will clash against Chinese Taipei's Tung Ciou-Tong. Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa will begin their women's doubles campaign in round of 32 against Thailand's Ornricha Jongsathapornparn and Sukitta Suwachai. Tanisha will team up with Dhruv Kapila for their mixed doubles' round of 32 game against Indonesia's Adnan Maulana and Indah Cahya Sari Jamil. In the same round, Rohan Kapoor and Ruthvika Gadde will face off against England's Gregory Mairs and Jenny Mairs.

Skater Shruti Kotwal hopes to qualify for Winter Olympics through AWG

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian skater Shruti Kotwal has set her sights on the Asian Winter Games (AWG) in Harbin, China, next month as a platform to qualify for the 2026 Winter Olympics to be held in Italy. Kotwal, who is training in the United States, will be leading the country's 41-member athlete contingent in the AWG to be held from February 7 to 14. Kotwal said the AWG will be a big opportunity for her to test herself against the best skaters in the world. "I'm focusing on the 500m and 1000m events for Olympic qualification. The timing requirements are incredibly challenging - sub-40 seconds for the 500m and under 1:20 for the 1000m. My Indian national record is 41.97 seconds and I need to skate under 40 seconds to qualify," Kotwal told SAI Media. This will be Kotwal's



second appearance in the AWG after 2017, when the Asian meet was held in Japan. "Countries like South Korea, Japan, and China consistently produce strong skaters who are technically and physically exceptional. I've faced some of these competitors in previous events and understand their strengths. It's a tough field," said the 33-year-old from Pune. Several Indian speed skaters are training in Korea

Singapore signs Anup Sridhar as additional singles coach



PTI ■ SINGAPORE India's Asian Championships bronze-winning former shutler Anup Sridhar was on Monday roped in as a singles coach by the Singapore Badminton Association (SBA). However, South Korean Kim Ji-hyun will continue to be the head coach for SBA's men's and women's teams. "We do not have a start date as it is dependent on the work visa approval, and we certainly want Anup to join us as soon as possible," Prof David Tan, SBA's Vice President (Business Development and Communications), told PTI. "All I can say is that it is not a short-term contract, and all other terms are confidential," he added. Tan also refuted media reports that the 41-year-old Sridhar, who has three international titles and a Commonwealth Games mixed team bronze to his credit, was going to be the men's singles head coach. "SBA is indeed appointing Anup Sridhar to this role as Singles Coach, but this is not as men's singles head coach as erroneously mentioned by the media in India, as well as by the commentator during the live telecast of the quarterfinals match between Loh Kean Yew and Viktor Axelsen in the India Open," Tan said. SBA had advertised for the position of an additional singles coach. The required qualifications included a minimum of five years' experience within a national badminton team structure with a primary focus on singles. Sridhar was captain of the Indian Thomas cup team in 2006 and 2008.

Sunrisers Eastern Cape beat Durban Super Giants by six wickets in SA20

PTI ■ GQEBERHA

Sunrisers Eastern Cape defeated Durban Super Giants by six wickets to enter the playoffs of the SA20 here. After three consecutive defeats, the defending champions have certainly turned the corner and seemed to have peaked form, that has seen them win back-to-back SA20 championships in the last two seasons. Last season's leading wicket-taker Marco Jansen (2/23) led the comeback by delivering a special new-ball performance for the Sunrisers Eastern Cape on Sunday night. Jansen was well supported by Englishmen -- pacer Richard Gleeson (2/19) and left-arm spinner Liam Dawson (2/11) along with Otneil Baartman (2/30) as they restricted the visitors to 115/8. Sunrisers Eastern Cape then chased down the target with six wickets in hand with as many as 28 balls remaining.



Asked to bowl, Jansen knocked over Durban Super Giants opener Brandon King with the second ball of the innings which sent a near-capacity St George's Park crowd into raptures. "Glad to have it on a string. Going well at the moment. It's not easy to bowl in the powerplay, for me it's all about taking wickets and everything just falls in place," Jansen said. "I try to bowl in the channel consistently. We have the best crowd in the country, appreciate them coming out." Durban Super Giants innings was held together by New

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Iga Swiatek's one-month suspension for failing a drug test will not be appealed by the World Anti-Doping Agency because her explanation "is plausible," WADA announced on Monday. WADA released its decision just minutes after Swiatek, a five-time Grand Slam champion and former No. 1-ranked women's tennis player, sealed a 6-0 6-1 victory against Eva Lys to reach the Australian Open quarterfinals. Unlike the Swiatek case, WADA did appeal the exoneration of current men's No. 1 Jannik Sinner and a hearing is scheduled to be heard at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland, in April. Sinner was not suspended because the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) determined he was not negligent for two positive tests

Iga Swiatek's drug-case ruling will not be appealed by World Anti-Doping Agency



for an anabolic steroid in March. The resolution of Swiatek's case was made public by the ITIA in late November. She already had been sidelined provisionally, missing three tournaments in October, and finished her ban during the sport's offseason. "WADA sought advice from external legal counsel, who considered that the athlete's contamination explanation was well evidenced, that the ITIA decision was compliant with the World Anti-Doping Code, and that there was no

sleeping. The ITIA said it determined her level of fault was "at the lowest end of the range for no significant fault or negligence." That "scenario," WADA said on Monday, "is plausible and that there would be no scientific grounds to challenge it." On the eve of the Australian Open, Swiatek described the initial period she was sidelined, which she chalked up at the time to personal reasons, as "pretty chaotic" and said, "For sure, it wasn't easy; it was probably, like, the worst time in my life." "It got pretty awkward. Like, we chose for the first tournament to say personal reasons because we honestly thought the suspension is going to be lifted soon," Swiatek said in Melbourne. "From the beginning it was obvious that something was contaminated because the level of this substance in my urine was so low that it had to be contamination.

Novak Djokovic is ready to concentrate on his quarterfinal showdown with Carlos Alcaraz

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Novak Djokovic got the mea culpa he wanted from the Australian Open's local broadcaster and its employee who insulted him on the air and so, according to tournament organisers, the 24-time Grand Slam champion is ready to concentrate on his quarterfinal showdown with Carlos Alcaraz. "Novak acknowledges the apology has been given in public as requested," read a statement issued Monday by Tennis Australia, "and is now moving on and focusing on his next match." That, perhaps, will draw a curtain on the bizarre off-court distraction as Djokovic pursues what would be an 11th championship at Melbourne Park and a record 25th major trophy overall. After winning at Rod Laver Arena on Sunday evening to set

up the contest against No. 3 Alcaraz, Djokovic declined to do the customary post-match on court TV interview, but didn't immediately say why, eliciting some jeering from spectators. Only later that night, at his news conference, did Djokovic explain that he was taking a stand to protest comments made by Tony Jones on Channel 9 on Friday. Djokovic, a 37-year-old from Serbia, did not name Jones, but said a "famous sports journalist who works for official broadcaster Channel 9... Made a mockery of Serbian fans and also made insulting and offensive comments toward me." Jones called Djokovic overrated and a has-been and made what seemed to be a reference to when the player was deported from Australia in 2022 because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19. Djokovic added that he would



continue to avoid speaking to the network without an apology from it and Jones. Those finally arrived on Monday. Nine Network said in a statement it apologised "for any offense

caused from comments made" while live on air. "No harm was intended towards anything. I genuinely feel for those fans." Serbia's ambassador to Australia, Rade Stefanovic, even got involved Monday, telling the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper that Jones' comments were "clearly unprofessional," including a "most concerning" reference to what happened three years ago when Djokovic was kicked out of the country ahead of the tournament amid the pandemic. Before Jones and his employer offered their apologies, Djokovic posted a message on social media reiterating why he declined to speak. That drew a reply from billionaire X owner Elon Musk, who said, "It's way better just to talk to the public directly than go through the negativity filter of legacy media." Djokovic replied to Musk's tweet with "Indeed" and a raised-hands emoji.

Novak or his fans," the statement continued. "We look forward to further showcasing his Australian Open campaign at Melbourne Park." During an appearance on a TV show Monday, Jones said he intended his words as "banter" and apologized to Djokovic "if he felt that I disrespected him." "I considered it to be humor, which is consistent with most things I do," Jones said. "Having said that, I was made aware ... That the Djokovic camp was not happy at all with those comments. I immediately contacted the Djokovic camp and issued an apology to them. And as I stand here now, I stand by that apology to Novak." Jones also offered words to Serbians. "I do feel as though I've let down the Serbian fans," he said. "I'm not just saying this to try and wriggle out of trouble or

