

Liberal Education: The Road Not Taken

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The proposed Foundation Courses promise a well rounded liberal education with enhanced employability and the ability to meet national challenges, but their rigid structure and poor content breaks this promise.

Delhi University (DU) is seeking to create a core curriculum of eleven “Foundation” courses as part of a new Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) that repeatedly refers to the idea of a liberal education. These eleven courses will be mandatory for all students regardless of their chosen subject. More importantly, for students who opt for a two-year diploma, the Foundation Courses represent the lion’s share of the curriculum. These courses aim to provide a “multi-disciplinary” education that will “strengthen the educational base of the students in relation to the grand challenges facing India” and ensure that students “acquire both key knowledge and ability.”¹ The core emphasis is on “skills and employability”, an emphasis underscored by Vice-Chancellor (VC) Dinesh Singh In a recent interview: “Absolutely. That’s one of the games here. To get our students to be employable.” The VC goes on to argue that this is particularly important for the two-year diploma students: “In two years’ time, we also give them some knowledge-based skills, at least their employability goes up.”²

In this essay, I take the Vice-Chancellor at his word and examine the two central aims of the Foundation Courses: (a) increasing skills and employability; and (b) providing “knowledge and ability” to address “India’s grand challenges.” I end by juxtaposing what liberal education in a public university in contemporary India could aspire to be against what is offered by the proposed Foundation Courses. In doing so, I draw on my own experiences as a student trained in a liberal curriculum, as well as my experiences as a teacher of urban practice.³

The What and Why of a Liberal Education

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the three capacities at the core of liberal education as: (a) critical self-examination about one’s own culture and traditions; (b) seeing oneself as a human being bound to all humans with ties of concern; and (c) narrative imagination and the ability to empathize.⁴

These capacities are skills – critical, analytical and human – that are deeply necessary and

relevant in today's world. There can be no greater foundation for our students than the ability to assess, analyse, critique, question, argue and reason. These abilities will allow them to innovate and develop in the arts, in science and technology, or in entrepreneurship and business. A liberal education creates students who can adapt, update and evolve because their ability to think is not limited to a particular object or to the current state of knowledge in any field.

The Proposed Foundation Courses

This is not to deny the importance of also teaching a more immediate and tangible set of skills including tools, techniques and information that represent the current state of knowledge in disciplines. The challenge of an effective core curriculum is to balance these two kinds of skills and to recognize that compromising on either inhibits precisely the near- and long-term employability of students that the VC claims to care about. Teaching techniques at the cost of analytical skills may answer an immediate market demand, but it creates a generation of university graduates unable to evolve with the inevitable changes in technique.

Yet Nussbaum's capacities are also critical for creating students who can "face India's grand challenges." This is a welcome and imaginative vision that must not be set aside for narrow discussions on skills and employability. It suggests a different way to evaluate education at the nation's largest public university, reminding us once again of the balance that a core curriculum must strike. India today is marked by a deeply contested trajectory of growth and development, a growing trend of intolerant and un-democratic impulses, as well as persistent social, political and economic inequality. Any core curriculum must face this moment and prepare its graduates to live and work within it. If a public university is not concerned with the quality of citizens it produces in addition to the students it graduates, then what hope can our democracy offer?

Do the proposed foundation courses address their own stated aims, or manage a semblance of this balance? There are eleven courses: Language, literature and creativity I and II;⁵

Information Technology; Science and Life; Applied language course (a) and (b);⁶ Building Mathematical Ability; Indian History and Culture; Business, Entrepreneurship and Management; Governance and Citizenship; Philosophy, Psychology, Communication and Life Skills; Geographic and Socio-economic diversity; and Environment and Public Health.⁷ I offer three critiques of them based respectively on their structure, content and approach. Within each, I again assess the two stated aims of creating citizens as well as imparting skills and employability.

First, it remains unexplained why the Foundation courses are organised into a rigid structure of a mandatory set of courses rather than offering a choice of courses across different departments. Imagine that "Business, Entrepreneurship and Management" (BEM)

- key to the VC's desire for skills and employability⁸ - was not a course but a category for the kind of knowledge that is part of the core curriculum. Could such a category not be more fruitfully fulfilled by offering a choice among, say, a course on caste, work and enterprise in sociology; one on labour and consumer markets in economics; or on institutions in markets and society within political science; or indeed one called simply "entrepreneurship" in business studies? Such a structure would offer students with different histories, personalities, tastes, choices, beliefs - and indeed very different notions of "employability" and the life they want to lead after DU - the freedom to choose how to study BEM in a manner that suits them. Instead, BEM becomes fixed, singular and narrow when confined to a single mandatory course. If it seeks to make students more "employable" it does so in terms of a very narrow form of employability that it imagines as legitimate and desirable. Allowing students to choose from a range of categorized courses offered across departments could, on the other hand, increase employability from a different viewpoint. It would allow students to know their particular weaknesses and address them, to build certain specialisations or choose not to, all the while opening them up to multiple disciplines and skill sets.

Second, the ethos and pedagogical imagination of the proposed Foundation courses is hard to understand. Even an empathetic reading cannot help but conclude that they are simply narrow transfers of fact and information without even a semblance of the debates, concepts, and histories of thought in these rich and diverse fields. In many cases, even the information on offer is out-dated, instrumental, simplistic and uni-dimensional, and the skills rudimentary. Put bluntly: the courses infantilize the students. They neither impart immediately relevant skills-as-techniques, nor do they build skills-as-analytical-capacities.

A course on "Science and Life" has nothing on scientific reason or its long and enduring tussle with faith to organize and structure human life, nor a survey of recent scientific innovation, research findings, methods and techniques. Instead, themes called "Nutrients and Household Chemicals" teach students about baking soda and table salt. The students learn about the "solar system and origin of the earth" and the "importance of carbon." Other themes are called "Physical Parameters and Household Appliances" that include, as sub-themes, "refrigerators, pumps, and heaters; fuses, tolerance and rating of gadgets." I do not mean to say that these are not worthy of learning. The question is what is being taught here and how does it relate to the claims of "India's grand challenges" and of employability? From here, how is a student meant to reach this particular courses' stated aim of "engaging scientific issues from multiple perspectives and making better informed decisions of societal relevance?"

Each of the courses is open to this critique. In "Governance and Citizenship," there is only one set of concepts on offer: participation, accountability and transparency, to be read against one definition of "good governance." Nowhere does the fundamental conceptual distinction between "government" and "governance" find place. Nowhere does a debate

even begin on the meaning and ends of governance, about the rule of law itself, or the meaning of belonging that underlies the formal system of citizenship, or other ways in which we could govern ourselves and our relationships with each other. In “Geography and Socio-Economic Diversity,” students are not taught to think spatially but instead the thematics recreate geography as a narrowly physical and topographical subject while socio-economic diversity returns us to a nearly colonial accounting of social groups. There is then the course on “Philosophy, Psychology, Communication and Life Skills” which is fated, by the fact that one believes such a course can exist, to be as meaningless as it indeed turns out to be.

Students taking these courses will learn a set of facts that will be outdated nearly as soon as they leave the classroom. But more importantly, they will lack that deepest promise of a liberal education: the ability to seek and assess knowledge independently because they have been given the conceptual tools to do so. They will not know how to engage with debates or other perspectives, draw from global realities or even the incredibly diverse realities of our own contexts. They will be unable to unpack different ideologies and positions, unable to innovate.

A False Promise

Yet the deepest danger of the proposed Foundation is that it holds a false promise to students, namely that the two-year diploma is a coherent body of knowledge that has what the Vice-Chancellor described as “knowledge-based skills” which “increase employability.” Take the course on Information Technology as one example he cites. The course is, quite simply, a course in computer literacy. Its main themes include “document preparation and presentation” with a sub-theme called “use of shortcut keys.” The theme on “Internet, Security and Legal Aspects” gets reduced to “e-ticketing and e-payment” with attention to “virus, malware and spam.” Suggested project work is to “connect an active wi-fi network to a computer.”

Let me be clear: I am in no way suggesting that computer literacy is not critical and needed for many students who come to DU; but a 12-week foundation course in Information Technology is not the place for a course in computer literacy. There are other more appropriate locations and forms - workshops, bridge courses or skill labs - for teaching the latter. If the kind of employability that might result from such a basic course in computer literacy is the DU VC’s goal, then he would be better off advising such students to go to NIIT whose placement record and relationship with market demand on computer applications is far stronger in these segments.

I say this without a shred of sarcasm. The need for good technical education in our country is tremendous and perhaps an even more important educational challenge than the curriculum at DU. Should DU choose to become part of that educational infrastructure with a two-year technical diploma, I would welcome it - but such a diploma would have to have

its own rigour. If that is the employability Dinesh Singh imagines for the two-year diploma students, then the proposed Foundation courses are a mockery of what the market wants - even today, let alone in the future - and what it will consider employable.

This need not be so. There are global and Indian examples of community colleges and trade schools where students can get certifications that are designed in close collaboration with local industry keeping in mind actually existing local employment patterns. Graduates of these programmes can transition into four-year programmes (and many do); but if they choose not to, they are actually employable in the markets in which they live and work. Moreover, this arrangement ensures that the core curriculum in the four-year programme is not compromised. The current Foundation courses are neither independent nor do they fit into an FYUP for those who want to go through the four years to get a real foundation for long-term learning, employability and growth alongside building their own human capacities. If the FYUP is to reach its own aims of employability and knowledge suited to our "grand challenges," then it simply cannot do so with these Foundation courses.

The Road not Taken

The American experience of the four-year liberal arts curriculum has been an implicit and explicit reference point in the DU debate. I was educated through such curricula at Amherst College and at Harvard University. I did indeed take courses across the physical, natural and social sciences, as well as the humanities. But I declared a major subject only at the end of two years. Yet unlike the proposed Foundation courses at DU, I was allowed a range of choice for my comprehensive basic education. Rather than mandatory courses, I was free to shape the content of my first two years at college before using the remaining two to specialize. I was taught how to argue and defend my stances. I read widely, often to no particular end, and yet always to multiple ends. I learnt skills along the way but never outside a context of inquiry. If I was taught to count, I was asked why I was counting what I was counting, and why I was counting in that particular way. "Data is as political an object as opinion," one of my professors told me. I learnt that in a way that I will never forget or have to be reminded of it again.

Yet I also felt failed by a very privileged education precisely because a certain part of the American academy has committed itself to "protecting" liberal education from the very messiness of "everyday life" that inspires it and that it must answer to. Unlike in DU, my colleges fractured my learning by separating it from my experience of the world in an ivory-tower that made my education feel self-referential, underdone, and incomplete. My alma maters could have learnt much from Tagore or any of the great public universities in the world that remain stubbornly open, inclusive, and in the centre of the great cities and civilizations that they shape.

This is why one must care about the new FYUP and fight passionately for Delhi University. Every teacher I have met, even those who are the fiercest critics of the FYUP, would

welcome a chance to re-think the curriculum at DU. Curriculum redesign is a process that could have brought together the faculty at DU and could have initiated a renaissance at the university. Instead, the VC has shown us, through an exercise in unintended irony, that a true liberal curriculum cannot emerge from a personalised, authoritarian process that brushes aside the very collectivity that it belongs to. It is still not too late if the stakeholders involved make a sincere attempt to pause and reflect on how dissent may be turned into productive engagement.

Notes:

1. I am drawing on the currently available descriptions of the eleven Foundation Courses as accessed on May 15th, 2013 included in an 2013 authored by the University of Delhi entitled "Four Year Undergraduate Programme: Foundation Courses." These include five-page notes on each of the courses, including descriptions of themes and sub-themes, reading lists, suggested projects and teaching resources including film and web sources. To the best of my knowledge, these are the most detailed descriptions of the Foundation Courses available.

2. Dinesh Singh in conversation with Shekhar Gupta of the Indian Express on May 14th, 2013. See: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/delhi-university-vc-makes-his-case-for-shift-to-four-year-undergraduate-courses/1115524/0>. Accessed May 16th, 2013.

3. I studied at Amherst College and Harvard University, both well known institutions with long traditions of a liberal undergraduate curriculum, albeit clearly rooted in a particular history and geography. I currently teach at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements in Bangalore.

4. Nussbaum, Martha (2004) *Liberal Education and Global Community*. Liberal Education. Winter, 2004.

5. LLC I is in Hindi/Modern Indian Languages/Sanskrit/Persian/Arabic/Indian Literatures). LLC II is in English.

6. Applied Language Course (a) is in Hindi, (b) is in Translation and Interpreting. For both ALCs and LLCs, there are significant concerns that they will result in mandatory courses in Hindi for non-Hindi speakers.

7. Across the eleven, there are some themes that are meant to be "implicitly addressed." As they are written and grouped in the document, they are: economic development (rural, urban, and linkages); energy, water; urbanisation, infrastructure, transport, sanitation; environment and public health; food security, agriculture; education, literacy; ethics, society and justice. 8. Ibid, fn. Error: Reference source not found.