Delhi University and the Crisis in India's Higher Education

ARUN KUMAR


Arun Kumar (arunkumar1000@hotmail.com) is at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The Four Year Undergraduate Programme at Delhi University will aggravate the problems of higher education that are so visible in DU and that it is supposed to solve. Delaying specialisation till the students have found their interest is good but this is a process that has to start during school education.

Delhi University has been in the news for introducing the proposed Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP). Many have accused the administration of being autocratic and rushing through with a scheme that is potentially disastrous. The administration claims to have followed procedures - having discussions with the stake holders and getting approval of the University’s Academic bodies. They suggest that the new scheme will change the way undergraduate teaching/learning occurs by providing greater flexibility to the students. The administration brands the opponents as status quoists and shirkers who are afraid of change.

A section of the MPs petitioned the prime minister and met him. The minister for human resources development and his minister of state have argued that politicians should not intervene in what is essentially an academic matter. This is a signal to the university administration to go ahead. Five top intellectuals appealed for intervention by the higher authorities to prevent the university administration from pushing its agenda. They characterise the non-intervention as abdication of responsibility. Could they not have appealed to the academic body to rise to the occasion?

It is a cause for concern that academic matters rather than being resolved within the University are sought to be settled by calling for outside intervention. The crisis is that those outside who intervene all the time are calling for non-intervention and those who should be demanding autonomy want intervention.

Concerns regarding the proposed FYUP
In principle, a four year (instead of three year) undergraduate programme does not pose too much a problem. It is being justified in terms of improving teaching-learning. In the first two years of programme the students are to get a wide background before specialising in the next two years. There is nothing wrong if the students get more time to discover their interest. Inter-disciplinarity is to be introduced through allied subjects and “foundation courses” and this sounds good. However, the problems are with the nature of the proposed courses, operational aspects and the manner of introduction of the programme.

Students joining the programme have already specialised in school and chosen their narrow field - social sciences or sciences and so on - and studied courses only in that area. So, in the FYUP, they will study subjects that they have not had at the secondary level and, therefore, the basic courses for all would have to be pitched at the level of the 9th class. So, the problem of specialisation is linked to our secondary education but it is sought to be resolved at the college level.

The deeper problem is how to make courses interesting? Innovative syllabi and teaching would be required. The Jawaharlal Nehru University was supposed to provide for interdisciplinary programmes. For instance, instead of having geography as a core area of specialisation, there is the Centre for Study of Regional Development. But, after more than 40 years of existence and many attempts to be true to the original mandate, inter-disciplinarity remains a distant goal in JNU. Inter-disciplinarity does not mean combining modules from different subjects or doing a cut and paste job from existing courses. It implies making an interconnected whole.

The manner in which FYUP has been pushed through has antagonised many academics and getting their commitment will be hard. Those who are concerned are protesting and those who are quiet are perhaps indifferent. The supporters of FYUP have drafted the new courses in a matter of months and even days. At JNU, attempts to revamp an entire MA course has at times taken ten years (not that it should). When the challenge is inter-disciplinarity and innovativeness, rounds of discussions would be required but some departments have stated that they have been bypassed.

Operational problems with the FYUP will be serious since more teachers and infrastructure would be required. There will be a mismatch between the Delhi University and other institutions of higher education. Since in India credits are not transferable across different institutions, Delhi University students will face problems.

Students who leave after two years would get a diploma which would be little better than a school degree given the nature of the courses taught. If students leave after the third year they would have done very few courses in the subject of their specialisation so they would not be equivalent to students of other institutions and they would not be acceptable in the Masters programme of other institutions. If they complete the 4 year programme and decide to go for the Masters programme they would still have to do two years since there is no
possibility of transferring credits and they would have just about completed what an undergraduate student from another institution would have done.

Is Delhi University copying the system in the USA? Some argue that Indian students going to study in the USA face difficulties because our system is different. But Indian students have been studying in the US for a long time and have had little problem. The real problem is not a three year undergraduate programme but rote learning and lack of questioning (Richard 2013).

India as a poor country has to worry about access and equity - more than in the rich nations. Education is crucial for upward mobility for the marginalised sections. Adding one more year of studies to get to a better job will be a disincentive for the deprived. In India there is a huge reserve army of labour so that even for a job of a peon where the minimum requirement is a high school degree invariably undergraduates also apply. The increase in the costs of education due to an extra year will further undermine democratisation in higher education which is under attack due to privatisation (Chattopadhyay 2012).

Finally, the real problem in India is with what in the US is called graduate study. In India, this consists of two years of masters degree followed by two years of M.Phil. and a minimum of four years of Ph.D. - in all at least eight years. In the US the graduate programme is of four years after the undergraduate degree. Thus, in the US compared to India, students spend one year more in the undergraduate programme but save four years at the graduate level. In India, the M.Phil and Ph.D. are often a parking place for students who are waiting for some other job. It is this that needs urgent reform.

In brief, the wider ramifications of the introduction of the FYUP need analysis. If at all it is required, it should be implemented all over the country. Further, it is desirable that students specialise later rather than earlier but this change needs to start from the schools. We need to decide as a nation when and how to introduce specialisation? Finally, reform of graduate studies and manner of learning are more urgent than FYUP. The moot question is how is the Delhi University administration able to push through the FYUP in spite of the substantial opposition?

**Erosion of Autonomy**

The answer to this question lies in the change in the character of the academic body of Delhi University due to the increasing bureaucratisation of the institution. This is a problem common to most institutions of higher education in India.

The FYUP has gone through the formal process of approval by the Academic Council (AC), the highest academic body of the university and the Executive Council (EC), the highest decision making body of the university. The question is why did these bodies discount the arguments presented by the opponents of FYUP? The answer lies in the character of the AC and EC in Indian universities.
The AC and the EC consist of the top most academics of the University - the deans, the department heads, senior professors, outside experts and so on. The senior academics of the university are dependent on the university administration for many things and, therefore, prefer to hold their counsel and mostly take a cue from the vice chancellor (VC). Those academics who dare to challenge the VC are branded as trouble makers. Often they face systematic harassment like, delays in project funding or sanction of leave and so on. An example is set to dissuade others from following these independent academics. 

The result is the silence of most academics and the dominance of the administration. VCs resist decentralisation of power so that they can have a hold on academics. This furthers bureaucratisation since no VC can go through all the papers that come to them and, therefore, become dependent on the bureaucrats around them and largely mechanically sign on the note put up by the bureaucrats. No wonder, in academia, often decisions are taken for administrative convenience and not to serve an academic purpose. This is the bureaucratisation of academia.

The erosion of autonomy (Kumar 1987), growing bureaucratisation and growing outside interference in the universities in India have gone together. This is at the root of the present crisis in Delhi University. This process has been accelerated by lack of dynamism in academia and the vacation of space for non-academics to intervene. So, currently, politicians, bureaucrats, etc., influence/ determine what happens in the field of education. In India, politicians like to control institutions and ambitious academics collaborate in this to quickly move up the ladder to gain power. The search committees set up to form the panel for the post of VC largely consist of pliant members who look to the political masters for signals. The letters exchanged between Hill and Bhatnagar in 1952 show (Kumar, 2006) that in independent India VCs have been political appointees.

Such people at the helm who are usually academically weak often depend on bureaucratic structures to force academics to fall in line. Their mind set is such that they would not even consider opposing the impositions of the University Grants Commission and the ministry. For instance, courses and syllabi have been proposed by the UGC and the universities have meekly accepted them. Centres have been set up for the study of North East, informal economy and so on. That this duplicates departments of regional studies or economics is immaterial. Soon political correctness would require opening centres for the study of each of the Indian states.

Schemes have been introduced for improving the admittedly poor standards in most institutions of higher education. In the 1980s, the Academic Staff Colleges were started. Now an index of performance (API) has been initiated to quantitatively measure the performance of academics. It has set into motion a process of weeding out the committed academics in favour of mediocrity and paper chase. Hundreds of journals have sprouted to enable academics to earn points – quality be damned? The philosophy underlying these
changes is that standards can be achieved through standardization (Kumar 2013).

Is the charge of bureaucratisation in academia vacuous? It is argued that most committees suggesting the changes have consisted of academics. But, they are the favourites who are willing to comply with the administration’s wishes. Thus, the Pay Commissions which have suggested many of the steps to improve quality have followed the wishes of the political and administrative masters rather than take an independent line.

Higher education has long term implications. It is crucially about knowledge generation which at the best of times is difficult since it requires questioning and dissent. Academic decisions typically have long term implications but the world is uncertain, so, the likely outcomes of any decision need careful consideration. In the case of FYUP, none of this is being considered. The impression is that the proposed changes are linked to some agenda of the administration and not based on the interest of the institution.

The new programme is not going to be co-terminus with the present administration. It is the faculty that will have to carry it forward but it is being marginalised. What if another administration is convinced that the proposed programme is not good for Delhi University, will the whole process be reversed and what cost would it be to the students?

Universities cannot function like a bureaucracy or the police where orders are implemented without questioning; compliance is expected and dissent is a malaise - the anti-thesis of what academia needs. In the universities, faculty make their own courses and syllabi. Given the unique thinking of an academic, what she/he wishes to teach tends to be unique. That is why autonomy of the institutions and of the academics is so crucial for advancing knowledge generation. In Delhi University with many colleges, all the teachers are involved in syllabus making and that is the way it should be.

Often, indiscipline in institutions of higher learning has been given as an excuse to impose non-academics as their heads and justify intervention. Undoubtedly, indiscipline leads to a deterioration in the quality of education. But, the cause of the indiscipline is often the political interference. Politicians try to control the teachers and the student bodies since they need them for elections and general support. Political patronage is given to the favourites and appointments manipulated top down. Thus, rather than merit, often it is the connections that matter. This emboldens students and teachers who indulge in non-academic pursuits and makes them academically non-accountable. The problem due to outside interference in academia is mistakenly stated to be a problem of indiscipline. So, when a favourite army officer is placed at the helm of an institution, that is hardly the solution since that leads to further erosion of autonomy of academia with consequent problems.

Conclusions

Delhi University today presents in a distilled form the crisis in higher education in India. All
that has been going wrong in academia has come to a head. The FYUP will aggravate the problems it is supposed to solve. Delaying specialisation till the students have found their interest is good but it has to start during school education. Today the problem is more with the graduate programmes than with the undergraduate ones.

The events in Delhi University, suggest that the basic weakness of institutions of higher learning is outside interference enabled by weak and pliable academics at the helm who promote bureaucratisation and erosion of autonomy in their institutions.

Delhi University teachers are seen as the stumbling block to change for the better and they are being marginalised. Can a perfectly designed FYUP succeed, if a large number of faculty members are demoralised by the autocratic behaviour at the top? Or, is FYUP to be taught mechanically? But then why introduce it at all?

References


