

(Published in Hindustan Times, June 2, 2015)

Once again, it is that time of the year when admissions to the University of Delhi dominate the front pages of the newspapers. Pictures of teeming teenagers sweating it out for admissions at colleges are standard. Of course, the prominence given to this event is not just because it is of interest to the lakhs of students in the city but also because with the temperatures in the mid-forties, there is not much happening in politics for the newspapers to report since anybody who is anybody is out to cooler climes! And it is once again, the time of the year when major, or dare one say, revolutionary changes are proposed in the way the University functions- whether it is the semesterization, or the four year undergraduate program (FYUP) and meta-universities and BTech in Humanities, every new session brings forth a new innovation! This year's flavor of the month is the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) which was approved by the University's decision making bodies recently.

One of the hallmarks of these changes is the totally undemocratic way in which these are normally introduced. There is no discussion and debate amongst the stakeholders or even an effort to take them on board. Leaving aside the procedural shenanigans that might have gone into getting the CBCS scheme approved, let us look at the proposal per se and its efficacy in promoting the ends which it itself professes.

Fundamentally, the CBCS proposes to overhaul the higher education system in the country in one stroke. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which is a unique example in the world I think of a regulator and a funding agency rolled into one, has "proposed" that every university (Central, state, private, deemed-to-be etc.) move to this system immediately. Of course, given that the manna comes from the UGC, the "proposal" should be read as a diktat.

The CBCS concatenates two key concepts in the dynamics of higher education- choice and assessment. The cafeteria approach, a feature of the now abandoned FYUP, and so beloved of our educational mandarins, is being reincarnated. Courses are to be sliced and diced into categories like foundation, core and elective and the student can opt for the courses of her choice out of a bouquet of courses.

It is hard to argue against the desirability of more choice for students though one could nit-pick about the actual criteria for clubbing particular courses into these categories.

Unfortunately, the theoretical attractiveness of this scheme is at odds with the practical limitations. The infrastructure (both physical and human), even in a well-funded institution like the University of Delhi is woefully inadequate for its operationalizing in any meaningful sense. Cramped classrooms, shortage of faculty, inadequate library and laboratory facilities etc. will make the scheme unworkable in its spirit. It speaks volumes for how insulated the higher education mandarins must be from the realities on the ground if they think that a

scheme which works well in a small, well-endowed university in the US will be successful in our environment.

The planners of this scheme also seem to be suffering from a major categorical confusion in that they seem to be conflating choice with uniformity. The scheme also envisages a uniform curriculum, which has been provided on the UGC website, for all universities. The arrogance evident in this riding rough shod over all concepts of academic autonomy is astonishing. Once again, leaving aside the in-principle objections, the practical implications are mind boggling. The standardization of the curriculum, where the Delhi University syllabus for an undergraduate course say in Physics will also be the course for study in a small state university with scarce resources and infrastructure will have disastrous consequences. The enormous differentials in the infrastructure and institutional culture amongst our universities will make any such attempt farcical.

This is not to argue against high academic standards in all institutions of higher education. But for that, we need to empower the faculty in those institutions to formulate and implement those standards. The concept of a model curriculum which can serve as a guide, and only as a guide, has anyway existed for almost two decades when the UGC formulated these model syllabi and made them available on its website.

Finally, the issue of grading or assessment. The UGC claims that "The grading system is considered to be better than the conventional marks system and hence it has been followed in the top institutions in India and abroad". Here, once again, the CBCS seems to be confusing categories. It seems to imply that a simple shift to a letter grade system with a CGPA is inherently better than the existing system of giving marks. In a system of absolute grading, where your marks or grades are independent of everyone else's performance, how a simple semantic shift from numerals to letters would achieve anything is hard to understand. Of course, if assessment was done on a relative scale, as is the norm in the "top institutions" that the UGC strives to emulate, then letter grades make sense. Note that the UGC is not stipulating a shift to a relative assessment system but only this cosmetic change to letter grades.

It is almost a truism that major systemic changes need to be well thought out, discussed and debated amongst all the stake holders, and then implemented incrementally with provisions for mid-course corrections. And what is more, the old Yankee adage of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", needs to be followed in any large and complex system. Unfortunately, the educational policy makers in our country seem to be too enamoured of novelty. They don't seem to realise that the unintended consequence of such a drastic, top down, hurriedly implemented change will be to further erode the standards of higher education in the country. And the price will be paid by those poor teenagers who are currently braving the scorching heat to queue up for admission to the University of Delhi.