

“When facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, Sir?” is what one of the greatest thinkers of the previous century, Lord John Maynard Keynes is reported to have retorted in response to criticism of changing his intellectual position. Unfortunately, in the University of Delhi, facts, even when they stare at your face, don’t seem to matter as far as policy and thinking about policy goes.

The messianic zeal with which the previous administration went about trying to introduce the Semester system at the undergraduate level has been much talked about. What has also been evident is the widespread opposition to it from the teaching community. Indeed, despite the fond belief of the administration and dare I say much of civil society, the majority of the teachers were opposed to the hurried and ill thought out introduction of the system, not because they are lazy or don’t want to work-but because they are actually cognizant of the real issues involved in its implementation. The so-called benefits of the semester system- interdisciplinarity , modularity, closer interaction between those being evaluated and those evaluating were all shown to be non-existent in the scheme which has been introduced in a tearing hurry by the University.

Despite all the opposition and the critiques of the system, the University went ahead and introduced the system-by means which certainly violated the spirit of procedural propriety and academic debate, if not the letter. Courses were hurriedly made (in some cases by teachers who had not even been teaching for a year) and they were rammed through statutory bodies without any discussion or debate etc. All this is well known and commented upon.

The semester was introduced in the Sciences and now we come to the end of the semester and it is time to evaluate. It is clear to everyone who cares to see, that the whole exercise has been farcical from the beginning. The teachers, left with little option struck work and so there are colleges where teaching has been disrupted with the result that syllabi, such as they are, have not been completed. The inherent friction in the administrative processes at the college level has also meant that a fair amount of time has been wasted in things like admissions etc.

The appropriate response of an administration which cared to see these “facts” as Keynes pointed out, would have been to opt for a mid-course correction. Instead, if reports are to be believed, what is being done is so completely destructive of academic integrity that it boggles the mind. Apparently, the University authorities in their wisdom have decided that given the “problems”

with the way the Semester system has been implemented, the students should not be tested in ways that the teachers might want to.

In the Physics Department, after all the undergraduate question papers for the Semester examinations were ready, the committee overseeing the work was informed (verbally, of course) that the University authorities had taken some decisions which need to be implemented. And what were these decisions?

All papers will have a uniform pattern, that is to say, all papers will have the same number of total questions, out of which some number (again uniform across subjects) will have to be attempted. This will be the SAME across all papers! If this was not bizarre enough, the committee was also instructed to make sure that the questions were framed in such a way that anyone who has prepared even one half of the syllabus can attempt the whole paper and come out with flying colors!

The papers were of course suitably modified to conform to these instructions from the powers to be and no doubt, all the students taking the examination will do well. The university authorities will be happy that the semester system is a success; the students will be happy at being able to do well with a paper which hardly tests their knowledge of the subject. So where is the problem?

The problem is what these actions mean for the long term academic health of the University. We have already seen the bizarre case of marks in a postgraduate course being inflated so that most of the students who had failed, were passed. This led to the comical case of students getting more marks than they had even attempted in the examination! The questions of academic autonomy of the teacher, or the intellectual propriety of such an action of course are not to be raised since then one would be termed "obstructionist".

The latest case of direct interference in the form and content of the examination is only an extension of the logic which seems to be governing the University administration in recent times. We know what is to be done; we will tell you what is to be done and how; it is not for you to question our wisdom on academic matters but just do it!

Keynes had also quipped famously, that "in the long run, we are all dead". Yes, in the long run we indeed would not be around to see what shape the University has taken as a result of the obduracy, ideological rigidity and zeal with which these fundamental issues are being addressed. Unfortunately, the students will

bear the brunt of all this and the academic reputation of the institution, built over several decades would almost certainly have been frittered away.