

The case of the implementation of the semester system at the undergraduate level at the University of Delhi gets more and more curious. The latest sets of events make it evident that the administration, in its unseemly haste to implement the semester system, is bothered neither about legal/procedural propriety nor about academic autonomy or excellence.

The case in point is about the undergraduate syllabus in Physics which, because of the proposed shift from an annual to a semester system, was to be framed, discussed and approved by various statutory bodies. The statutes and ordinances of the University are clear on how new courses of study (syllabi) are to be framed and approved etc. The usual procedure is that a committee, called the committee of courses of the relevant department forms a sub-committee which prepares the syllabus.

This sub-committee is supposed to have wide ranging consultations with the faculty members and prepare a draft which is then discussed in the committee of courses. The committee of courses finalises the draft, approves it and sends it to the Faculty of Science (in the case of science subjects) which then considers the recommendations of the committee of courses and approves the syllabus for consideration of the Academic Council, the highest academic body in the University.

As is obvious, this procedure ensures that the people who are supposed to be domain experts in the subject (namely the teachers of the postgraduate and undergraduate classes) prepare the syllabus which is then overseen by a larger body and then by the highest academic authority.

What actually happened was far from this. In his impatience to pander to the messianic zeal of the university administration, the Head of the Department in Physics convened a meeting of the committee of courses. At this meeting, he waved a syllabus which he wanted to get approved! Several members pointed out the illegality in this apart from the fact that the syllabus needs to be discussed by the teachers.

To cut a long story short, the committee of courses never discussed, much less approved any syllabus. But this did not stop the Head of the Department to take the syllabus to the Faculty of Science meeting to be passed! The tragicomic situation was even more remarkable at the Faculty of Science meeting- on being told that the syllabus cannot be discussed at the meeting since it has not been approved by the department, the Dean of Science brazenly said that yes, it had

not been approved, but we don't have the time and hence will pass it! Imagine a judge saying I can't follow the due process of law since it takes time!

Now we see a newspaper report that the university is ready with the syllabi for the science courses and has put them on the website for feedback and comments! Quite apart from the fact that the syllabus on the website has already been passed and so is not clear what purpose the comments will serve, the whole mindset behind such a bizarre act is comical.

An academic document, which has not even been seen by the people who are supposed to teach the subject, is now open for feedback from the general public! Clearly, the feedback/comments on the intricacies of quantum mechanics from the general public are more important than any kind of opinion of people who teach the subject who are best left in the dark about it!

This, by the way, is not simply a matter of being a stickler for procedure, though when the caretakers of an institution brazenly and openly violate statutes and ordinances, there is something to be worried about. But it has some very real consequences. A very similar thing had happened a year ago with the postgraduate syllabus in Physics which again, was never discussed in the department and was sent to an external committee. Nothing wrong with that- however, when the external experts pointed out certain lacunae in the syllabus, they were told, falsely that this is how the teachers of the department want it.

The result is that we are now teaching a syllabus which will be laughed at in any respectable university. We have the strange situation, for instance, of teaching two courses, one of which is a prerequisite for the other one, in the same semester!! It is like teaching a child multiplication AND algebra at the same time. It would be comic if it was not so tragic.

I don't know if a similar bizarre situation will arise in the undergraduate syllabus since I haven't seen the syllabus, which no doubt I will see when it is posted on the website for wider comments.

Recently, a two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler has been published- the first volume is called "Hubris" and the second "Nemesis". One day when the history of this university will be written, I am sure these terms will come to mind- hubris for individuals and nemesis for the institution.