

“If it aint broke, don’t fix it” is a well known American idiom. Unfortunately, the decision makers in the University of Delhi seem to be blissfully unaware of it. Or so it would seem from some of the recent bizarre happenings at the university. An example of the change in syllabi of certain departments is a case in point. But first, some general points about syllabus revision.

The syllabus for teaching is a formal document which lays down the structure of a particular course –namely broad outlines of what is to be taught, at what level, in what sequence etc. This much is obvious- what is not obvious, I think, is that the syllabus is not meant to be a straightjacket. And this is especially true in situations where the person who is teaching the students is also evaluating them, a situation which prevails in our post-graduate courses though not in our undergraduate courses. The teacher teaching the course should and indeed, in practice does have the freedom to interpret the broad contours laid out in the syllabus according to the academic capabilities and interest of the students, her own interest etc. Of course, despite this “academic license”, it is always contingent upon the teacher to ensure that what is broadly recognized as the essential part of any course is always taught and the students imbibe it.

Given this, there is, inherently no a priori need to revise syllabi at preset or well defined intervals. Of course, it is no one’s contention that syllabus or course structures should not change or new courses should not be added as and when there is a need. But this is different from making a fetish of changing structures and courses at some arbitrary intervals. And that is what brings us to the “Curious Case of the Changed Course”.

At some point of time, the powers that be in the University of Delhi decided that all post-graduate courses should have a uniform structure and run in a semester mode. Several of the departments of the University were already teaching and examining in the semester mode while others were teaching in a semester mode and examining annually. It was also decided that the departments would revise their syllabi and make them homogenous in structure in terms of number of courses etc. Curiously, the fetish for homogenization and uniformity also led to a diktat to introduce a credit system in all courses- how assigning an arbitrary number to a course is going to achieve anything when there is no mobility between departments, escapes me.

The Department of Physics constituted a sub-committee to come up with a revised syllabus and structure according to these norms. The sub-committee met several times, had extensive discussions with all the faculty members over mail

and was in the process of finalizing the course structure etc when the examinations and the summer break intervened. The course that had been discussed extensively was almost ready and there was a broad consensus amongst a substantial majority of the faculty members.

It was at this point that things took a curious turn- one evening, some members of the Department of Physics got a call from the Head of the Department saying that a syllabus needs to be passed by the committee of courses (a body which formally is charged with the responsibility of changing courses, appointing examiners etc) and for this purpose an emergency meeting of the committee is scheduled for the following afternoon. At this meeting, the committee members were presented with a detailed syllabus which the Head of the Department insisted be passed! When some members suggested that it is not proper to ratify a document which will have such wide ranging consequences for thousands of students in 30 minutes without consultations with the whole faculty, the Head helpfully added that the Vice Chancellor wants the syllabus passed today! And, he added, that this syllabus had been reviewed by external reviewers and they think it is OK.

To cut a long story short, the syllabus did eventually get passed by the relevant statutory bodies of the University and is now with us. This despite strong protests from a large number of faculty members who met the Vice Chancellor and told him what a disaster the new syllabus would be. But what was more striking was the fact that the external reviewers informed the Vice Chancellor that they had expressed strong reservations about the contents and the structure of the new syllabus, but they had been informed that this has been discussed extensively by the whole faculty which was a patent lie.

So we are now stuck with a syllabus and course structure which is hugely deficient and yet, given the state of affairs, would be taught to thousands of students for years to come. All this, because change was required!

The episode, sad though it is, raises several very important issues regarding the functioning of higher education in India as well as the functioning of any large institution. Academic autonomy is one of the most important features of higher education- the teachers have to decide what is to be taught and how. Of course, this does not imply that there should be no review or scope for correction or improvement. But for the university bureaucracy to think that they are better placed to tell a department what courses should be run and how, strikes me as being presumptuous at best and dangerous at worst.

And this is precisely what has happened in the present case. The lasting damage to academic autonomy is evident as is the utter contempt in which the stakeholders of the system, in this case the faculty who is going to be teaching the course, are held by those in power. Part of the blame for this sorry state of affairs is of course the despicable spineless behavior shown by the faculty members in the face of the carrots and sticks of the authorities. As Henry Kissinger is reported to have said (the quote is actually wrongly attributed to Kissinger- it was Wallace Sayre a political scientist who said it in 1973), "Academic politics is so vicious because the stakes are so low"!

A larger issue is actually about change management in any large system. It is wonderful for those in power to have grand visions which will raise institutions to greater heights etc. However, visions need to be in tune with the realities and more importantly, need to be open to modification if the circumstances so demand. Further, it is critical for the realization of any grand vision that the stakeholders of the system are taken on board and their views respected.

In the present case, it would be easy for the authorities to glibly proclaim that the faculty in the University is lazy, doesn't want any change etc. And the allegation is not totally baseless- we do have departments where the faculty has resisted any change for decades. But this should not be a license to thrust change from the top. This is not just for philosophic reasons but, as has been demonstrated by countless studies, change without taking the stakeholders along can never be lasting or effective. But if those in power feel, as it seems they do, that the whole lot of faculty members are lazy at best and incompetent at worst, then I don't think there is any hope for the system anyways.

Another issue is the fetish for homogenization. Of course, some degree of uniformity is required, as for instance in examination systems and academic calendar etc in a university for smooth functioning. However, there is, in principal no reason why the number of courses across disciplines, or the division of core and optional courses across years needs to be uniform. I for one do not see any problem with the Department of History having 6 courses in the first year and the Department of Physics having 8- after all, the nature of the discipline might demand this kind of structure. Homogeneity for its own sake can be disastrous anywhere, more so in academic environments.

Finally there is the issue of change- change for the sake of change is something which to my mind is a dangerous thing when it happens in large institutions.

Large systems have many interacting components and there could be very unpredictable consequences when things are changed without proper thought. In the case of the Physics Department, there was a good course being run for several years, a course which has served as a model for similar courses across the country, a course which serves as the benchmark for several national level examinations. The course, as it was being run, did conform to the stated objective of semester teaching and evaluation. So what was the need for change? Or more precisely, what was the urgency to push through a half-baked course, without taking any of the faculty members into confidence? And that too a course which, even the external reviewers thought was deficient and inappropriate?

As an aside, let me mention that I took the graduate (Masters Level) courses in Physics at a university in the US in 1982. I checked for the structure and the courses etc recently on the Net- it is identical to the one that I had taken, more than two decades ago! And this university is among the top universities in the world, so one can't really blame faculty laziness or systemic incompetence surely.

Maybe we need to take good old Yankee wisdom more seriously- we really don't need to fix things if they are not broken. And there are a lot many things which are broken in this system- instead, we focus on things which are running reasonably well and make a mess of them. And in the process not only destroy cherished institutional characteristics like academic autonomy, but also end up jeopardizing the future of thousands of students.