

The one thing that the University of Delhi can't be faulted for is showing any diffidence in announcing new initiatives at a breathtaking pace. Hardly had the dust (and the mess ) of a hasty, ill-thought out semesterization settled, the Vice Chancellor announces the formation of a meta university, transdisciplinary courses, 4 year undergraduate degree, a Bachelors in Innovation Engineering and the latest oxymoron- a BTech in Humanities! It is a season, it seems, of a Hundred Flowers Blooming!

Clearly, theoretically there is nothing per se better or worse about any of these schemes as compared to any other structure. For instance, theoretically, it will be hard to argue for or against the virtues of a semester based system as opposed to an annual one. Both are used effectively the world over. Similarly, it would be difficult to argue against freedom to take courses in various institutions- which is what one understands to be the crux of "meta university", though what is particularly "meta" about it, is obscure. Or replacing the three year undergraduate degree with a four year one. After all, these are hallmarks of the North American university system which, it seems, the powers that be in the country and in the University are so enamored of. On the other hand, a three year system works perfectly well in the United Kingdom. So, for anyone to claim, that any of these new models are theoretically and inherently superior to the existing ones is fallacious at best and downright dishonest at worst.

The picture is very different when it comes to the practical issues of implementation. It is here that we notice an utter lack of thinking, an astonishing ignorance of the existing reality and a foolhardy optimism regarding the capacity of the system to take these stresses. That the existing university system is incapable of taking a massive change like semesterization, at the pace at which it was introduced, has by now become too obvious to bear repetition.

The inability of the bureaucracy to handle the new system is evident. For instance, we have seen the recent confusion over the attendance regulations and the bizarre case of the marks being lowered. Incidentally, the lowering and subsequent "rectification" of marks has an interesting sideshow- it is widely rumored within the University that the examination bureaucracy goofed by sending the actual (that is the "uninflated") marks to be uploaded on the website since it is common knowledge that marks in the semester examination were inflated hugely to demonstrate the superiority of the system.

Thus, at the practical level, implementation of these new initiatives is likely to cause immense chaos since it would mean dealing with completely new systems and paradigms with ancient tools- both infrastructural and intellectual. The devil, as they say, is in the details- For instance, would all courses at the designated “meta” universities be eligible for transfer of credit? Or would there be specified courses whose equivalence is established? What about the system of ensuring things like attendance or transfer of credits from one bureaucracy to another? These are not imaginary or trivial issues- if the system has to work, questions like these need to be addressed and resolved.

An argument might be proffered that any change leads to some teething problems and these will be ironed out as it evolves. Unfortunately, the students who are bearing the brunt of these, completely avoidable dental issues are not going to be there if and when things stabilize. And they would have lost their one-off opportunity at a good, well rounded undergraduate education.

It is a truism that in most social systems, whether in business or politics, a buy-in of all the stake holders is an essential prerequisite for any fundamental and lasting change. And the buy-in occurs through a consultative, inclusive process whereby the stake holders are consulted and persuaded etc. Unfortunately, none of this is visible in the University in recent years.

The utter disdain with which the administration treats the opinion of the students and faculty and the roughshod manner with which it rides over statutory provisions is shocking. The pattern is by now familiar- the Vice Chancellor announces to the press a new initiative. A coterie of teachers and administrators get down to hurriedly flesh out the proposals which are then rammed through the statutory bodies if needed, or implemented using the infamous Emergency powers of the Vice Chancellor. The course of Innovation Engineering is a good example of this happening. Unfortunately, the coterie in its rush to prepare the blueprint, plagiarized almost verbatim the course and other details from the website of a Western University! So much for intellectual honesty and creativity.

A BTech in Humanities or an MA in Microbiology might amuse us. However, for the lakhs of students who would bear the brunt of such hasty, hare brained and ill thought out schemes, there would be nothing funny about them. And worse, the academic reputation of the institution, built so carefully over decades would suffer a huge blow. Vice Chancellors would come and go, but these effects would be here with us for a long time to come.