WEAK FOUNDATIONS

In less than a week, as I write this, some 60,000 students would be entering the University of Delhi as undergraduates. These young adults, coming from various regions of the country, with diverse academic and socio-economic backgrounds comprise a fairly representative cross section of our educated youth. University of Delhi being a premium institution of higher education, attracts students from all over who, despite all the hardships of coming to a new metropolitan city, look forward to a good education and an undergraduate degree which is respected both by the academia as well as the market. Unfortunately, this year's entering undergraduates are going to be not so lucky. Instead of a well-respected, three year undergraduate course which the University was undoubtedly proud of, they will be guinea pigs entering a lab as subjects of a new experiment- the Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP).

There has been a lot that has been written about the desirability or otherwise , the real or imaginary motivations behind and the hurried way in which this revolutionary change is being brought about.

First of all, I think it is obvious that there is no *a priori*, fundamental reason for an academic course to be 3 year, 4 year or indeed 6 years long. One can see several different models operating in various countries. How long a particular degree/diploma course is of course decided keeping in view the prevalent view amongst experts and in society as to how long would it take for a student to absorb the material that is considered necessary at that time so as to be ready for the next stage of life- either the job market or a higher academic degree. This is therefore, clearly a function of the particular historical and social conditions prevailing at a particular point in space and time.

So the issue is not about the duration of the course. It is about what the course would contain and whether it would be an improvement on the existing undergraduate programme which has been running successfully for decades at the University of Delhi. As the Yankee saying goes, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

The stated aim of introducing the FYUP has been increasing the employability of students, increasing their exposure to other fields apart from their specialisations, increasing transdisciplinarity (whatever that means) and interestingly, find time for sports and cultural activities. **"..It will help [the student] to know the grand challenges of India; it will help [the student] to find a place in its dynamic environment…".**

Of course, it would hard to argue about the desirability of these stated aims. However, as always, the devil is in the details and not in rhetoric laced with choicest

quotations from our ancient scriptures. The manner in which such a crucial change is being implemented, the academic implications of the change and past experience however do not portend well.

First, the manner. It is well established by now that in any large system, with diverse stakeholders, any lasting and fundamental change can only come about if all the stakeholders are taken on board. This is not just because democratic principles prescribe it- it is essential for the success of any such exercise. For a change of this magnitude, one would have thought that the students, the teachers and the non-academic staff of the University, as well as the civil society at large would have been consulted, the concept debated in depth, diverse opinions taken into consideration etc. Once a consensus was achieved on the conceptual apparatus, then the large teaching community at the University and its constituent colleges would be asked to prepare the detailed courses of study etc.

Of course none of this happened. What we had instead were a series of proclamations in the mass media about the impending change and some academic jamborees of carefully selected students and teachers to demonstrate "wide-ranging" support for the new programme.

The structure of the programme-the mix of foundation courses, skill based courses and discipline courses, their numbers, their sequencing and indeed their titles were then decided by a, once again, carefully chosen "task force" of teachers. Interestingly, this august body of about 5 dozen teachers didn't have a single teacher in Physics, a subject which would be taught to all students!

The Foundation Courses and the skill based courses were designed by some handpicked teachers. The discipline or subject courses were to be designed by the post graduate departments. On March 5th, 2103, the University authorities asked the departments for a detailed syllabus and course of study by March 20, 2013! To think that a meaningful, major overhaul of the syllabus and courses could be achieved in 2 weeks would be hilarious if it wasn't so tragic. The University was helpful though in giving some guidelines to perform this superhuman exercise. The departments were told that **"..the content of each paper should be based on the premise that the fundamental principles and ideas must come across in a clear, easy and trans-disciplinary/interdisciplinary manner to the student." Further, "…in every paper please ensure that the student SHOULD NOT be overburdened with too many topics."** (emphasis in the original) The impact of such overarching principles in framing of courses of study across disciplines would be obvious in the actual content and form of the courses.

What about the courses themselves? The Foundation courses, which are common and mandatory for everyone are 12 in number, including the curiously titled

"Integrating Mind, Body and Heart"! Whatever it is, surely the likes of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the Babas on television channels would approve! Let us indeed look at two of the more down to earth and plebeian courses. Information Technology and Science & Life. It seems that the framers of these courses have a total disconnect with reality.

Information Technology first. An average undergraduate, (and here we are not even speaking of those coming from elite public school backgrounds today) would find it tiresome that she is supposed to sit through classes where she is lectured on things like shortcut keys, WiFi, Bluetooth etc. In this day of smartphones and pervasive connectivity, this would seem as obsolete to her as teaching students to write with a ball pen in our times. She would find it even more tiresome, indeed hilarious that she is supposed to write an email to her teacher and a group as a project- this at a time when the neighbourhood kirana store owner is checking out status updates on Facebook during long and languid summer afternoons! Or connect her computer or mobile using WiFi! Projects are not just an important part of all courses, but have a 50% weightage in assessment. It seems that the "cabal" (yes, it must be a cabal since unlike the discipline courses, no one knows who designed the Foundation Courses) who designed this particular course is living on another planet. And to claim that courses such as these would "enhance the employability" of our students, is not just laughable but disingenuous.

The Science and Life course does a little better. Although it is not clear what the science component of this course is per se, there seems to be some effort to connect science with everyday life. However, teaching about fuses and water filtration to undergraduate students can only be described as dumbing down. The framers of this course might have looked at a Class VIII science textbook or even what used to be called "General Knowledge" book used by schools to see that the students know these things-they have been drilled into them for years. Once again, the suggested projects truly take one's breath away. Most of them, at best involve a quick google search and at worst they are truly pedestrian. But then, this must be one of the ways our Vice Chancellor has in mind to make our students employable- maybe they can then claim on their CVs- can Google!

Though the objectives of the foundation courses are indeed lofty and include things like "…develop scientific temper…" etc, the reality is that there is a fantastic dumbing down of curriculum. Things which are taught in middle and high school are now being made a part of a mandatory curriculum for all. And the much touted project work, at least as envisaged will have only two outcomes- one possibly intended and one hopefully unintended. It will certainly enhance the ability of students to use Google and Wikipedia. More perniciously, it will lead to a mushrooming of shops selling "projects". Maybe this will give the photocopy people an alternate employment in case the copyright case is decided in favour of the publishers! Unintended consequence no doubt!

But none of this seems to matter. The powers that be have decided, despite fierce and widespread opposition to the whole project by teachers, students and civil society, that this has to be done. It is a sign of times that the highest elected officials of the state as well as the highest constitutional authority express their concern about the exercise and their inability to do anything to stop or reverse it! We seem to be, as the Chinese curse says, “living in interesting times”!