

The fault, dear MHRD is not in the syllabus.

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The famous scientist and peace advocate, Linus Pauling once said “The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of them”. Our educational bureaucracy seems to have taken this advice to heart. Not a day passes without some new regulation, policy change or amendment being brought out by the MHRD and/or the UGC. Whether it is the draft National Education Policy (framed curiously, by a committee of 4 ex bureaucrats and 1 educationist!) which seeks to severely restrict politics and free speech within the academia or the new workload and promotion norms for Central University teachers, the bureaucrats at these two august policy institutions seem to be exceedingly busy even during the Delhi summer!

And now comes the latest announcement by the Honourable Minister about the involvement of foreign experts in upgrading the curriculum of state universities. This is under the Rashtriya Uchattar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), a central scheme to assist state universities. The Minister has claimed that several experts from leading foreign universities have consented and they would spend a few days with the in-house teachers revising the syllabi of state universities.

On the face of it there seems to be nothing wrong with the scheme. After all, why would anyone object to top class academics assisting the poor in-house teachers at these institutions? Never mind that most of them would be NRIs who would take this opportunity to combine it with a trip back home and possibly get credit (and travel reimbursement) for this. Never mind that in the past, similar schemes to involve our famed academic diaspora in academic institutions have been utter failures. One could even argue that the combined intellectual brain power in the IITs, Central Universities and the Research Institutes is enough to frame world class undergraduate syllabi and this obsession with “top-ranking foreign universities” is misplaced at best and pernicious at worst.

All of the above, though true are not the critical reasons why this scheme is faulty and would do little to upgrade the quality of our universities. To paraphrase the bard, “The fault, dear MHRD, is not in the syllabus...”. The fundamental reason for the poor quality is not out-dated syllabi as the mandarins seem to think. To see what the real issues are, let us consider the case of a premier Central University like Delhi University which is much better endowed, both financially and academically than most state universities.

Till the recent fiascos of a hurried semesterisation, the Four Year Undergraduate Program (FYUP) and the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS), the honours programs of DU were considered amongst the best in the country. In Physics, for instance, the undergraduate

syllabus was comparable to the best in the world. It was upgraded regularly and at each revision, new subjects were introduced while retaining the essential core. And yet, it could be argued that the overall quality of the students who went through this world-class course was not terribly different than the students from DU's poor country cousins, namely the state universities. Incidentally, the Physics syllabus of most state universities is not terribly outdated in as much as the core subjects are concerned.

The issue of the syllabus thus proves to be a red herring- the problem or rather the problems lie elsewhere. Assessment, poor infrastructure (both human and physical) and poor training at the feeder level are some of the real issues. To illustrate this, again, let us consider the case of Physics at DU.

As any educationist would tell you, the system of assessment has a profound impact on uptake of the subject by the students. Most universities, including DU have a year (or semester) end examination without any meaningful continuous assessment. What is worse, this assessment does not test any genuine understanding of the subject. This then has a feedback effect on the attitude of the students to the subject.

Teaching is done by teachers- this elementary fact seems to have evaded our education mandarins. Leaving aside the quality of academic human resources, the simple fact is that there seems to be a concerted effort to scale down the number of teachers. For instance, there are currently, more than 4000 vacant positions in Delhi University (and its constituent colleges) alone. Furthermore, opportunities for effective in-service training are missing. Yes, there are refresher courses mandated for promotions etc. but anyone who has attended these would tell you how ineffective these are in genuinely upgrading the teacher's skills and knowledge. There seems to be little point in introducing new and fancy subjects when the teachers themselves are unfamiliar with them. It is critical to have a system to upgrade the level of teachers themselves first before thinking about world-class syllabi.

Physical infrastructure is in a pathetic state in most of our institutions. Inadequate classrooms with poor lighting and seating or even functioning blackboards, libraries which are grossly underfunded and barely any Information Technology facilities which are functional, are the norm in most universities. Laboratories, which form an essential component of science teaching, are in a dire state because of lack of funds. Thus, for instance, a premier college in DU, in 2013 spent a royal sum of 16,000/- for new equipment for all its physics laboratories- an amount which would not even get you a decent oscilloscope!

Finally, teaching at the school level, has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of our university graduates. In physics, for instance, the dominant paradigm is one of rote learning

and an excessive focus on information rather than problem solving. This continues through the university with disastrous effects.

The educational planners need to engage with the real issues facing University education in the country rather than come up with facile solutions to the numerous problems facing higher education. Unfortunately, history does not give us any reason for optimism that they are upto it.

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