

---

## FYUP- The Delhi University Experience.

### A critique

**Shobit Mahajan**

Department of Physics and Astrophysics

University of Delhi Delhi 110007

[shobit.mahajan@gmail.com](mailto:shobit.mahajan@gmail.com)

---

#### Abstract

An invited report on the current flip-flop on the Four year Undergraduate Program at the Delhi University, introduced in the preceding academic year 2013-14 and forced to be rolled back now, when processes of admission had already began. A clear example of how a well intentioned initiative can be botched up by not engaging with all stake holders in the process and proceeded with an avoidable haste. An unnecessary emphasis on the popular media and several sections on the duration of the course – four years instead of three - miss the focus completely.

---

As I write this, the fate of about 250,000 applicants to the undergraduate program at the University of Delhi is still undecided. The applicants are unsure as to what they are striving to attain- admission into a three year undergraduate program or a Four Year Undergraduate Program (FYUP).

A bit of background- about a year ago, the University decided to shift from its time tested 3 years undergraduate program to the FYUP. With the change in government last month, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has directed the University to revert to the old three year system. As I write this, it is unclear whether the University has agreed to the diktats of the UGC. Will this be an opportunity to have a fresh thinking on the principles behind the FYUP and return with a better option than both the proposed FYUP and existing three year format? Or simply status quo ante.

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, 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 program 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 trans-disciplinarity (whatever that means) and interestingly, find time for sports and cultural activities.

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 has been implemented, the academic implications of the change and past experience however do not portend well.

Let us first look first, at the manner of the evolution of the program.. 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 larger 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 program.

The structure of the program - the mix of foundation courses, skill based courses and discipline courses, their numbers, their sequencing and indeed their titles were then decided by a 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 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, 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 exercises- like, for instance, there should not be too many topics in any paper! 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”! Let us 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.

Let us take up the design of ‘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. Or connect her computer or mobile using WiFi! Projects are not just an important part of all courses, but have a 50% weight in the assessment. It seems that the people who designed this particular course have been 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.

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 dumping 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 only enhances the ability of students to use Google and Wikipedia.

But can’t one argue that any course which allows students to choose between studying different

disciplines and subjects (a so called cafeteria approach) would be better than a rigidly imposed curriculum and program of study? Of course, in an ideal world this would be certainly desirable. Unfortunately, we are not living in an ideal world and there are real world constraints which need to be factored in before one can meaningfully implement such a change.

For instance, the 80 odd constituent colleges of the University are tremendously resource starved- both infrastructural and human resources are stretched to their limits. There are just not enough class rooms, labs, library and IT facilities, and most importantly teachers. In such an environment, giving students a hypothetical choice to choose between papers becomes a comical exercise. The other important issue regarding what exactly is being taught, that is the actual content of some of the courses we have already commented upon.

Once again, I think there is nothing sacrosanct at all about a particular duration or structure of the course. But whatever changes are made should at least pass the test that the new system is *in reality* better than what it is replacing. And for that to happen, it is critical to have a reasonable knowledge of the constraints of the system and its strengths and weaknesses. And finally, any change has to be debated, discussed and deliberated by all the stakeholders for it to be successful. Sadly, the events of the last one year have shown that the University administration doesn’t -care much about any of these principles. And tragically, this neglect of the fundamental principles has resulted in the complete devastation of the undergraduate system at the University as it hitherto existed.