Delhi University’s Undergraduate Programme

Notes from the Archives

This article draws on archival material from the records of the University of Delhi to recount the last major change in its undergraduate programme in 1943 when the present three year BA course was introduced replacing the two year intermediate followed by a two year BA. That change took almost two decades of consultations and debate before they were accepted and implemented and provide an insightful comparison to the current proposals for changing the University’s undergraduate programme.

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Seventy years ago, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University and former Chief of the Federal Court, Maurice Gwyer, pushed through a set of reforms that were later emulated by higher educational institutions across much of India. Following almost two decades of discussion, Delhi University’s two-year intermediate degree followed by a two-year Bachelors degree (Pass or Honours, in Arts or Sciences) was duly replaced by a three-year Bachelors degree (Pass or Honours, in Arts or Sciences) in 1943. In the wake of recent changes and ongoing debates on University of Delhi’s latest curricular reforms, it is worthwhile revisiting the contours of this debate from the past.

A Brief History

Shortly after the decision to move the capital of the British Empire from Calcutta to a new Delhi had been taken, the decision to upgrade the existing facilities for higher education began to be contemplated. In December 1919, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi invited the representatives of the three colleges at Delhi – St Stephen’s, Hindu, and Ramjas – along with officials from the education department to a conference to discuss the lines along which a university might be established.1

It was unanimously decided that a unitary teaching university would be established in Delhi and, that colleges would be responsible for teaching only until the intermediate stage; teaching beyond this stage would be transferred to the new university. Less than two years later, at a meeting of college representatives in June 1921, it was resolved that Delhi University should have an independent examining university, with inter-collegiate lectures and university lectures on special subjects. The college representatives also resolved that at least two-thirds of the representatives in the governing bodies of the University should be from the colleges, that the separation of intermediate classes from the BA / BSc classes could only be effected after such a separation had been effected in neighbouring universities, and after it was deemed financially feasible.

Five years later, a report commissioned by the Government of India noted that the excessive representation of college representatives in the universities’ Academic and Executive Councils had impeded the development of a “unitary” institution, one of the founding purposes of the college, as enunciated in the Delhi University Act of 1922. It is worth quoting from this report at length:

It will be observed ... from the history of the negotiations that preceded the foundation of the University that although the colleges made a representation to the Government that a unitary, teaching and residential university should be started in Delhi, they showed very little enthusiasm for the scheme when they realized the precise implications of their demand. It is clear that they never regarded the separation of the intermediate from the BA classes as
anything more than a remote possibility. Their demand was really for an examining university, with inter-collegiate lectures as a general rule and university teaching in special subjects. The proposals of the Government, as embodied in the Act, however, involve the gradual destruction of the colleges in their present form and the complete subordination of the newly constituted colleges to the university. It is obvious that an executive body on which the colleges were in a large majority was hardly the most appropriate agency for the carrying out of a policy which was not quite acceptable to them ... the point we observe emphasizes the futility of formulating any proposals which are likely to be opposed strenuously by the colleges, and the importance of securing their cooperation in carrying out any scheme for the future development of the University.2

Furthermore the report pointed out that according to section 7(5) of the Delhi University Act of 1922, it was not lawful for the University or any college to maintain intermediate classes after the expiration of five years since the passing of the Act, without the sanction of the Governor-General in Council. In conclusion, the authors of this report compared existing teaching practices at the universities of Dacca, Allahabad, Lucknow, Agra, Andhra and Madras Presidency and surmised that the separation of intermediate classes from degree classes was not so easy. The standard of secondary education had to be raised, for instance.

The report recommended that Delhi’s colleges continue with intermediate teaching until an amendment of the Delhi University Act was effected. The foregoing discussion should have made clear the differences in objective between college representatives on the one hand, and the Government of India which sought to look at educational matters from the perspective of the university. Also, the opinion of college representatives mattered, and unanimity of opinion on such weighty matters, was a cherished ideal.

Through the mid-1930s, college teachers and university authorities collaborated in “cooperative teaching”; a method that allowed for the centralisation of scarce resources. Thus, even colleges with “no provision for lecture work in a department of study for the BA course or the MA” could register students who would then be entitled to attend University lectures “organised on the cooperative basis and receive tutorial assistance from their own college”.3 Although this system did not work so smoothly in the late 1930s, it was revived during the years of the second world war. Thus, for example, K C Nag of St Stephen’s College, B N Ganguly of Hindu College, and V K R V Rao at the University, were all involved in cooperative teaching in Economics.4

In the meantime discussions for a transition to a three-year degree programme had not abated. In March 1936 the Academic Council of Delhi University decided to now accept the principle of a three-year BA and BSc course (Pass and Honours) irrespective of its adoption by neighbouring universities.5 Such a move would be essential to facilitate the university’s development into a “federal” university that would also give the colleges a certain degree of autonomy.6 What remained to be negotiated were the stage of admission to the university and the length of the different courses.

Gwyer and Delhi University

First appointed Vice-Chancellor for a two-year term in 1938, Maurice Gwyer went on to be unanimously recommended and reappointed by the Executive Council for two-year terms another five times; he was DU’s Vice-Chancellor from 1938-50. His contributions included introducing written contracts between colleges and teachers, fixing the minimum pay and hours of teaching for college teachers, encouraging the formation of the Delhi University Teachers Association (DUTA), supervising building activity in the new university site near the northern ridge, raising funds for new Professorial chairs at the university, soliciting contributions from the Delhi rais (elite), and further afield, such as the majestic book-shelves for the university’s burgeoning library from his alma mater, All Souls College, Oxford University. That Gwyer’s tenure was significant for the university’s future trajectory may be evinced from this little detail: one of the oldest residence halls for students at the university continues to be named after him, “Gwyer Hall”.

Early on in this leg of his multi-faceted and rich administrative career, Gwyer declared the inauguration of the three-year degree course to be a top priority.7 Accordingly, committees were appointed to suggest the steps required to amend the existing statutes, ordinances and regulations of the university. The 1940 interim report of the three-year degree course committee dwelt on the new conditions of admission to the degree course in the university, interim arrangements for a temporary preparatory course to tide over the abolition of the two-year intermediate course, and general outlines for a three-year pass and honours course, both in the arts and sciences. The report included comparisons of the courses of study then being pursued in two-year degree courses in as many as 15 universities, from Annamalai University to Patna University. The report also included minutes of dissent or alternative proposals in the form of various appendices. Thus, for instance, we hear from Azhar Ali on the futility of making the study of modern Indian languages compulsory for just one year.8

The thoroughness, in evidence at this stage, of the process continued to be a mark of the deliberations in subsequent years. Ordinances were issued in 1942 to enable colleges to conduct preparatory classes that would help students to qualify for the new three-year degree course. Through 1942 committees prepared courses of study for the various...
All the primary sources consulted are at the Delhi University Archives, Viceregal Lodge, Delhi.

References

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Correspondence, Resolutions and Recommendations Relating to the proposed development of Delhi University as a Federal University (1934-36), Office of the University of Delhi.

Report of the Committee appointed by the Academic Council and the Executive Council to inspect the Recognised Colleges of the University, Office of the University of Delhi, 1939.

Interim report of the three year degree course committee, 1940.


The Delhi University Magazine, Vol. 3, No. 1, April 1946. Edited by S. Dutt.

17th to 26th Annual Reports, University of Delhi, 1938-1947.


3. Correspondence, Resolutions and Recommendations Relating to the proposed development of Delhi University as a Federal University (1934-36), Office of the University of Delhi, p. 13.


5. Correspondence, Resolutions and Recommendations Relating to the proposed development of Delhi University as a Federal University (1934-36), Office of the University of Delhi, p. 37.

6. Report of the Committee appointed by the Academic Council and the Executive Council to inspect the Recognised Colleges of the University, Office of the University of Delhi, 1939.


8. Interim report of the three year degree course committee, 1940.


12. Address delivered by Mr Nalini Ranjan Sarker at the Convocation on 18 April 1942 in ibid, pp. 54-55.


Comments

EPW looks forward to your comments. Please note that comments are moderated as per our comments policy. They may take some time to appear.
There is no need to copy the "West" in introducing four year degree course (or Honors course) After 12 years of schooling, students want a degree in quickest possible time, so that they can study for a professional course. If engineering is taught in four years, students can get a job in four years, but after a degree from DU one cannot get a job immediately. If students lack skills after three years of teaching, teachers must work extra and make students capable.

Thank you for this archival work, extremely valuable for all of us whose resistance stems from the recognition that the best values embodied by Delhi University have been pilloried and destroyed. The FYUP means the end of high standards of academic enquiry, free thinking, democratic vibrancy and integrity that has been our collective strength and aspiration. I hope fervently that someone up there is reading this, because what will change things now is divine intervention!

This is really a great piece to show how meticulous the previous reformers were. the callousness with which the present reform is being carried out is going to ruin the career of thousands of students.