

Corrupting the Idea of (Delhi) University: Logic and Logistics of Corporate Capitalism

Maya John

University of Delhi (DU), Delhi, India

Abstract

Recently in a meeting of the statutory bodies of the University of Delhi (DU), the administration tabled a 'vision' document titled the Strategic Plan (2022-2047), and a draft Institutional Development Plan, that are to serve as roadmaps for the University's future functioning and institutional priorities. It is expected that these would serve as a template for other public-funded universities to emulate since DU is one of the largest teaching and research institutions of the country. In the backdrop of declining public funding for higher education, the new policy documents of DU push for collaborations with industry and corporates. This entails the complete restructuring of a public-funded university. With the University's teaching-learning process and research being made subservient to the agenda and profits sought by private interests, the autonomy of knowledge production and dissemination that wider society requires of public-funded universities in India is completely undermined. A dangerous trajectory of enhanced commercialization and colonization of the academic world by domestic and foreign capital looms large, and manifestations of it are already fast unfolding. Consequently, the aims of education and the research agenda of the country are increasingly sought to be set by the dominant ruling ideology and market forces.

Keywords: *Delhi University, higher education, NEP 2020, institutional development plan, capitalism*

The administration of University of Delhi [also known as Delhi University (DU)] – one of the largest public-funded teaching and research universities in India – has been aggressively pushing through a host of detrimental measures to completely restructure the University. In December 2023, they tabled an initial draft of a ‘vision’ document or what is known as the Strategic Plan (2022-47) in a special meeting convened of the University’s Academic Council. Following an uproar about rampant plagiarism from vision documents of foreign universities and other grave concerns about the Strategic Plan’s implications (The Hindu Bureau, 2024), the DU administration was compelled to withdraw the draft. It again recently tabled a revised version of the Strategic Plan in a routine meeting of the Academic Council on 10.10.2024. The revised Strategic Plan as well as a draft Institutional Development Plan (IDP) were conveniently clubbed with numerous other agenda items. They were also strategically provided to the members of the Academic Council barely three days before the meeting was convened; leaving hardly any adequate time for a detailed study of the policy documents that completely reshape the essence of a *public-funded* university. Expectedly, the DU administration bulldozed through the Strategic Plan and the IDP despite opposition and dissent from the elected Academic Council members.

A close reading of both the Strategic Plan and IDP of DU shows that the administration has sought approval, in one go, for a host of restructuring measures which affect different parameters of the University’s functioning. These include the teaching-learning process, research, service conditions, recruitment, promotions, governance model, and so on. These are parameters

that, when required to be amended, are always *separately* tabled and deliberated by the University's statutory bodies. Consequently, the Strategic Plan and IDP represent the suicide note of a public-funded university. While it appears that the revised Strategic Plan document is not plagiarized this time round, the spirit of the earlier draft lingers on in the revised Strategic Plan, as well as in the IDP which is drafted on the principles spelt out in the Strategic Plan. The essence of the policy framework being thrust onto the University is to sync the core functioning of DU with the agendas of private interest groups. As a result, what is compromised are the much-required endeavors to organically sync the long-term plans of the University with the needs and aspirations of the people of the country in terms of equal access to quality public-funded education that produces socially required knowledge. The lack of sync is evident, for example, in the prioritization of research themes which are seen as harboring commercial potential to generate revenue and attract external funding, which goes to show how the research agenda of the country is increasingly sought to be set by the dominant ruling ideology and market forces.

The so-called 'vision' reflected in both the revised Strategic Plan and in the IDP *does not* stem from the objective conditions and specificities of the historical context and landscape of education within which Delhi University is actually situated. Moreover, given that DU tends to be used as a model for other central universities to emulate, we can expect that DU's IDP will serve as a template for other centrally funded universities, especially as such plans and roadmaps are now mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Government of India - GoI, 2020; John, 2023a).¹ In no uncertain terms, the NEP 2020 states:

Each institution will make a strategic Institutional Development Plan (IDP) on the basis of which institutions will develop initiatives, assess their own progress, and reach the goals set therein, which could then become the basis for further public funding. The IDP shall be prepared with the joint participation of Board members, institutional leaders, faculty, students, and staff (p.50, GoI 2020).

By this very logic linking IDPs of universities with future public funding for them, it becomes imperative to closely read the fine print of such Plans as they can feed into and justify the larger agenda of curtailed public funding for higher education.

Plucked out of the local needs and realities, DU's Strategic Plan and IDP fail to actually keep the University's prevailing problems, challenges, long-standing issues, and advantages at the center of its agenda-setting. This is most evident when we consider the fact that a vision document or a roadmap has to be based on close review of the University's past and current projects and responsibilities. However, the University authority has been unable to review and make summation of its past and current projects and responsibilities. Many centers such as Disability Studies, Tribal Studies, and the pilot education courses like Integrated Teacher Education Program (ITEP) are all envisaged and executed without proper commitment for funding and faculty appointments. Similarly, while the two policy documents talk about dual/double degrees – all of which are provisions that cater to the aspirations of a few elite students coming from affluent sections of society – the longstanding decisions of the University's Executive Council, such as constituting a new Examination Branch for the fast-growing School of Open Learning (SOL) with approximately half a million students, remain unimplemented.²

Despite the muddled contents in DU's Strategic Plan and IDP, their thrust is quite clear. The aim is to transform higher education in the interest of corporates and industry, devise methods to ensure subversion of the University's existing governance model, and render public-funded higher education subservient to the corporate aims. Hence, beneath the hodge-podge of ideas and fashionable phrases, the primary purpose of the proposed Strategic Plan and IDP is to make way for intense commercialization and colonization of the academic world by domestic and foreign capital. Importantly, the onslaught embodied in the

Strategic Plan and IDP is not new. The provisions in these policy documents build on ongoing endeavors of the ruling dispensation and its yes-men in university administrations to steadily undermine the academic autonomy of public-funded educational institutions. It is an open secret that the current right-wing ruling dispensation has been weak in academia because it is steeped in a world view which requires complete subservience and uncritical adherence to certain dogmatic understandings of the social system. This has resulted in a paucity of intellectuals who can draw recognition for intellectual prowess within the domestic and international community of scholars and social scientists. Keenly aware of its weakness in producing knowledge of critical import and of sound academic rigor, the present ruling dispensation has aggressively resorted to large-scale nepotism and cronyism to appoint mediocre candidates across key central universities (Patgiri, 2023; John, 2023b) who, in turn, would remain subservient to the world view of ruling elites.

Having packed its people into the academia and university administrations, and still unable to adequately control knowledge production, the ruling clique has strategically sought to restructure the syllabi/curriculum of public-funded universities; terming such endeavors as the ‘decolonizing’ of the Indian academia. As part of this game plan, we have seen the thrusting of the “Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)” paradigm on to the curriculum framework of public-funded universities. It is no coincidence that IKS finds its way into the IDP (p.15, p.104) recently tabled in DU’s statutory bodies. In the name of IKS what is being peddled is the Brahminical tradition and decadent ideas and dogmas that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) strives to catapult into the mainstream.³ In this way, the IKS seeks to sideline engagement with the rich heterodox traditions and radical philosophies of the Indian subcontinent. Further, the overt emphasis on curriculum development and research which is “rooted in Indian culture and ethics” (p.15) strives to impose an *insular* kind of

paradigm that hampers the cross fertilization of ideas and ideals, and which particularly seeks to minimize the influence of global perspectives and critical approaches arising from different nooks of the world (Roy, 2023). In this way, it undermines the volition, agency and capacity of the academia to produce scholarship which can facilitate the much-required audit of society and polity. Already through preferential funding for conferences and projects that gel with the IKS paradigm, as well as the continuous imposition of poorly-designed value addition courses under the four-year undergraduate curriculum framework (UGCF), the critical import of research and the teaching-learning process of universities like DU have been steadily eroded even before their Strategic Plans and IDPs surfaced. Indeed, we find that in the name of ‘decolonizing’ academics, syllabi of several existing courses are being restructured and the contents of newly floated courses are tailored according to a very narrow, particular view of the Indian subcontinent’s past; ignoring diversities of traditions and worldviews, bypassing dynamic developments in the subcontinent’s medieval era and erasing the cross-fertilization of ideas with other sister civilizations in the past (Mohanty, 2024; The Hindu, 2024).

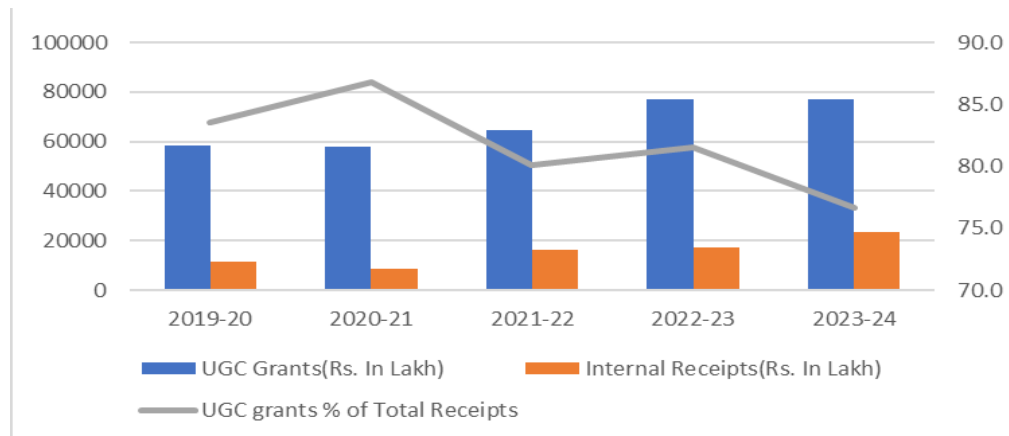
Fast retreating public funding and a deepening crisis

The University has prepared its IDP in a context wherein its colleges/departments/centres, etc. are chronically underfunded, which is a situation that has worsened over time with public funding *not* being enhanced in proportion to the growing demand for higher education. In response to the widening gap between the demand and supply for education, successive governments – and, in a more aggressive vein, the current ruling dispensation – have pushed through measures which allow for greater penetration of private capital in higher education, and its corollary, the persistent decline in per capita government allocation of funds towards education (PRS Legislative Research,

2024)] Interestingly, the crunch in public funding has been conceded in the IDP document tabled for approval in the Academic Council meeting of 10.12.2024.

Distribution of Grant in Aid and Internal Resources: University of Delhi

Extracted from the Draft IDP tabled by the DU authorities. Amounts in Rs. Crores



Source: Annexure-8.02, AC- 10.10.2024, DRAFT INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2024: University of Delhi, p.11

To elucidate the worrying financial implications of the University’s IDP, we can turn to p.9 of the document where it states: “Although University of Delhi is a public funded organization, its long-term goal of financial planning should aim to *reduce its dependency on the government grants* and to achieve financial stability gradually” (p.9, emphasis added). Similarly, we find the “Financial Enablers and Funding Models (Resource Generation)” component on p.10, where it has been mentioned that:

The five years trend of the distribution of receipts (see Figure 2.2) clearly indicates that there is a falling trend in government grants. In the medium and long term, it is sine qua non to generate revenue from internal as well as external sources through appropriate mechanisms.

Justifying the government’s abdication of financial responsibilities towards a constantly expanding public-funded university like DU, it is stated on p.12 of the IDP that: “The ratio of IRG [internal resource generation] funds to the total budget receiving from the Government is one of the key indicators to determine

the performance of the University.” Clearly, the idea of the public-funded university is being completely subverted, and the performance of the University is being linked to its ability to mobilize resources *independent* of the government! Thus, it has been clearly stated that DU, although it is a public-funded institution, has to generate revenue from sources *other than* government funding. This, implies that revenue is sought to be generated from sources, including students’ fees, which the IDP concedes is already 23.4% of the total receipts by DU (p.10).

The overall thrust of both the Strategic Plan and IDP justifies the already unfolding process of the steady withdrawal of the state from its responsibility of providing financial grants to higher educational institutions (HEIs). We have seen this withdrawal of the state unfold in terms of public-funded HEIs, including DU, being increasingly pushed to avail loans from the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA).⁴ In line with this, the policy ecosystem now compels public-funded HEIs to secure funds for their functioning, infrastructural expansion and research through philanthropic donations and fundraising. Taken together, these developments point to the unhealthy situation in which HEIs that are already differentially and hierarchically placed in terms of state-funding are being pushed into greater competition over dwindling state funding, and such meagre state funds increasingly stand to be granted in the form of patronage and privilege, *not as a matter of right*. On these lines, DU’s proposed Strategic Plan and IDP envisage private fundraising, endowments and donations to keep the University running even when these sources of funding compromise the autonomy of knowledge production in the University; making it subservient to private vested interests.

Corporate and industry-driven teaching and research

The repeatedly emphasized ‘need’ for alignment with private interest groups entails pushing into the center-stage the corporate and industry-driven agendas, which are to be conveniently grafted on to the research and teaching goals, the prestige, and the existing public-funded infrastructure of DU. Such grafting entails making the University’s teaching-learning process and research subservient to these private profit-seeking entities. In no uncertain terms, this policy thrust represents the intensification of the Bologna Process. Initiated in 1999 through a series of ministerial meetings of education ministers of European countries, the Bologna Process has aimed at compatibility in the standards of higher education and a uniformity in the higher education system world over so as to facilitate the free flow of private investment (John, 2013). Such compatibility has been sought by generalizing the credits transfer model; something which the earlier government under the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-II sought to usher in via measures. These included replacing the annual mode with the semester-mode, a short-lived attempt at introducing a four-year undergraduate program in place of the three-year undergraduate program in DU, an unsuccessful bid to allow foreign universities to set up campuses across Indian metropolises, and so on. Since 2015, these and other measures have simply intensified and been carried forward to their ‘logical’ conclusion under the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime. The more than a decade-long unfolding changes have been given a final form and recognition through NEP 2020.⁵

The inclusion of education as a tradeable commodity in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) also indicates how domestic and international capital as well as the ruling elites are aggressively imposing their consensus on privatization and commercialization of education onto the policy ecosystem. In fact, DU’s latest ‘reforms’ (the introduction of four-year undergraduate program

with multiple entry-exit options, ‘multidisciplinary’ undergraduate education, the cluster innovation centre, meta university, incubation centres, semesterization, and so on) represent a hodge-podge of recently developed models across the world. What provides this hodge-podge a semblance of coherence is the increasing alignment of higher education with private interests of the market.

Not surprisingly then, in DU’s Strategic Plan and IDP taken together, the word ‘industry’ is used 194 times. It is interspersed across both the documents, ranging from vision, financial issues, designing of curriculum for research, identifying key research areas, curating faculty development programs, and so on. The terms ‘private’ and ‘business’ are used 21 times, and the word ‘corporate’ is used 12 times in both documents. Meanwhile, the needs of society are completely ignored in the policy documents. Evidently, the overarching emphasis on the industry/business/corporates in the documents seeks to supplant people’s needs with corporate agendas and goals.

Such influence of the private sector on India’s higher education is keenly felt, particularly in terms of the consistent endeavours of industry and pro-market lobbies to get the educational bureaucracy to restructure the curriculum framework of public-funded universities. The current context is characterized by the domestic manufacturing and service sectors’ rapidly changing organizational practices, which are geared towards greater *flexibility* and *multi-tasking* (John, 2013).⁶ The present key requirement of these sectors are workforces that can perform different tasks; leading to aggressive lobbying for more and more *skill-based* university education that helps reduce the training costs of the industry-corporate combine. This agenda is insidiously couched as the ‘redressal’ of a ‘problem of skill gap’ within India’s youth. Yet, if we look closely at higher education and its connection to employment, we find that more

than a ‘skill gap’, it is the sheer lack of high, professional level jobs as well as middle-rung jobs that confront educated youth graduating from universities.

In other words, the current job market is characterized by the growing tendency of overqualified university graduates entering middle-rung jobs where rather than a ‘lack’ of skill, their many skills are left under-utilized. Far from enhancing “student employability” (as argued by capitalist lobbies and the DU administration), supply-side initiatives merely allow for the reshuffling of jobs within the existing pack of job-seekers. In real terms, the capitalist system does not create a multitude of jobs, given the efforts of individual capitalists to depress wage costs through *minimal* employment.⁷ Changes in university degrees and pedagogy are then not going to increase the number of college graduates being employed, but merely impart ‘suitable’, ‘corporate-friendly’ skills to those who would otherwise be employed in the current job market, or, would help such university graduates grab jobs first in comparison to graduates of other universities that have not imparted similar skills through their degrees/courses. Hence, in the competition to grab the limited jobs created by capitalists, education has been used to create not so much a flexibility within workforce but *flexibility for capital*, which constantly seeks ways to minimize wage costs in order to maximize profit. It is precisely against this backdrop that we have seen within premium public-funded universities like DU, the imposition of a four-year undergraduate programme based on the *multiple entry-exit system*, reduced teaching time for core discipline courses, skill courses spread across six out of the eight semesters, the overt emphasis on ‘practical’ learning, and the active promotion of a work-related component within the curriculum in the form of (unpaid) internships and apprenticeship by undergraduate students (John, 2023a).

Driven by their calculation of immediate returns, the vision and interventions of corporate and industry players are without a doubt antithetical to the long-term

vision of what the University as an institution needs to be for larger society. The university-industry collaboration or relationship building is, thus, a trajectory of restructuring which steadily eats into the autonomy of knowledge production and dissemination that wider society requires of public-funded HEIs. Such collaborations dangerously reduce knowledge to the expected short-term returns sought by private players. The propensity for this looms large since industry and corporate houses are interested in certain narrowly-defined *practical* and *profit-driven* knowledge which can be applied to their immediate purposes, and which can give these players easy and immediate profits.

Notably, industry-corporate houses are more interested in research which has a *signaling effect* and can be smoothly converted into easy and immediate profit for them. Meanwhile, in sharp contrast, the University is supposed to cater to the other needs of society, which do not fit into the corporate world's own reading of 'what is good' for society. Many social needs and aspirations of larger society cannot be subsumed under or reconciled with the short-term, profit-driven needs of corporate houses as this would affect our syllabi, our programs and our activities. Hence, given this reality, it is imperative that the autonomy of the public-funded university's knowledge system be protected from the industry-corporate world. It ensures that the university caters to the other needs of society; namely the responsibility of facilitating fundamental and basic research, and building critical minds, democratic values and responsive citizenry.

It is wrongly assumed by university administrators that collaboration between academia and corporates would benefit both parties. For example, it is often asserted by the Chairperson of the UGC (one of the key statutory bodies under the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, GoI) that there ought to be agreements between industry and universities to use patented research to drive profits for the industry and make financial endowments by

industry possible for universities (Kumar, 2024). Already, the industry-corporate world has been using the knowledge produced by public-funded universities. What is disturbing in the proposed roadmap delineated in DU's Strategic Plan and IDP is that now the University's goals and purposes are to be firmly hitched to the bandwagon of the corporate world. More than just borrowing from the knowledge produced by public-funded HEIs, the stage is being set for the industry-corporate combine to dictate what knowledge the country's HEIs will increasingly generate. Consequently, what is disregarded is that the short-term, profit-driven goals of the industry are quite contrary to what is supposed to be the societal responsibilities of a public-funded university. An example can serve to highlight the tension between the aims of the university and those of industry. Penicillin (an antibiotic) was discovered by the Scottish microbiologist, Alexander Fleming, a University Professor. However, instead of patenting his discovery, he considered it antithetical to allow it to become a profit-making monopoly of manufacturers, that in turn would have precluded people's access to the antibiotic and led to continuous loss of life due to bacterial infections. On the question of patenting, Fleming is known to have argued: "I found penicillin and have given it free for the benefit of humanity. Why should it become a profit-making monopoly of manufacturers in another country?" (quoted in Bruner *et al*, 2023).

The agenda of corporates and industry find full-fledged acknowledgement in the Strategic Plan and IDP, where it is implied that there is need for developing mechanisms for "strengthening systems to convert research outcomes into technologies and generating financial resources through technology development and transfer, and enhancing its global ranking". Naturally, the research agendas of the university's Departments would also be made subordinate to corporate interests as indicated in the specifically listed research agenda topics on p.45 of the IDP. Here it is stated that the major research

themes are: “Natural sciences, including Mathematics; Engineering and Technology; Environmental and Earth Sciences; Research leading to food security vis-a-vis agricultural sciences; Health and Medical Sciences; Scientific and Technological interfaces with Humanities and Social Sciences.” These identified research areas will be considered for special funding. It is also important to note that there are “Revenue-Generating Research Areas” wherein the purpose of the University is to “identify research projects with commercial potential to generate revenue and attract external funding” (p.51 of the IDP). Needless to say, these special research areas and the extension of incentives, funding, and provision of leaves for faculty involved in such research will leave out other research themes and areas around labour, caste, gender, uneven development, anthropological and epidemiological studies of the diseases of the poor, and so on. These other research areas will suffer due to paucity of funding and other disincentives. In this way, the research agenda of the country will be set by the dominant ruling ideology and market forces.

Within such a policy ecosystem, the creativity and autonomy of the social sciences is massively compromised as increasingly the social sciences are being deemed relevant only as long as they are AI-driven; an approach clearly reflected on p.46 of the IDP. Similarly, a policy ecosystem anchored on collaborations with industry and corporates stands to adversely affect critical research in the sciences. It tendentially pushes science departments to prioritize commercially viable research; leading to the skewed emphasis on applied scientific research at the cost of core, fundamental science with its linkages to larger social needs. Moreover, the pressure on HEIs to produce conducive results for industry and corporates that have entered into collaborations with, propels the tendency to compromise with research integrity; all of which are issues that are conveniently scuttled as statutory bodies of HEIs are reduced to rubber stamps.

Strategic plotting for private players and the making of subservient faculty

The statutory bodies as well as the participation of the stakeholders such as teachers, students and non-teaching staff is shown short-shrift in the Strategic Plan and IDP as a top-down approach is taken for granted. Correspondingly, the documents speak of introducing a new element within the governance structure of the University, which is *lateral entry of private players* into the University's administration. Overriding the collective wisdom of the university community which presses for sensitive, efficient and accountable administration, private players are projected as 'more creative' and 'more capable' administrators. Thus, we find that on p.4 of the IDP, it is stated: "The University will devise mechanisms for lateral entry into administration to attract talent from industry, banking and commerce, the security forces, journalism, administrative services, and the social sector".

Overall, the restructuring envisaged in both policy documents undermines the role and responsibility of the teaching fraternity. In other words, the University's faculty are assumed as incapable of designing courses, syllabi, research agenda, as well as incapable of understanding the needs of the larger economy and society. Thus, on p.1 of the IDP, it is stated: "Membership of the Committee of Courses (CoC) will be extended by including alumni and student representation based on merit, industry expertise, NGO and Social Service Sector, wherever possible." Undermining the autonomy of the teaching community, we also see that under the heading 'External Advisory Boards' on p. 6 of the IDP, it is stated: "All the Department Research Committees (DRC), Committee of Courses (CoC), and Faculty Board of Research Studies will endeavor to co-opt members from Industry, Commerce, Banking, and Union Bureaucracy." Further, on p.16 of the IDP, it is stated:

Committees responsible for creating Skill Enhancement and Value Addition courses will identify essential courses designed to cultivate life and soft skills. These new

offerings will be developed in collaboration with industry and societal experts...[They will] conduct regular reviews and evaluations of all academic programs to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with industry standards.

While paving the way for an alignment between the University and industry, the aforementioned provisions simultaneously reduce the faculty to a position of marked subservience to the agenda of corporates. We see this in terms of serious implications on recruitment, promotion, leaves, faculty development programs, and so on. For example, on p.21 of the IDP, it is stated that continuous professional development programs for faculty are to be offered to ensure that they stay up-to-date with industry standards and can effectively teach emerging skills sought after in the job market. Similarly, the autonomy of faculty and their extant service conditions are undermined by provisions tabled on p.28 of the IDP where it is stated that:

CPDHE [Centre for Professional Development in Higher Education] will establish an **advisory body** composed of industry leaders, academic experts, and policymakers to ensure that the faculty development programs are aligned with current industry needs and trends. This body will provide insights into curriculum updates, training needs, and emerging skills, helping faculty members stay relevant and prepared for the changing educational environment.

The access of DU's faculty to certain kinds of leaves is also threatened by provisions that speak of creating "monetary and non-monetary rewards (such as sabbaticals or grants) tied to API scores," (p.52, IDP).⁸

A marked violation of extant UGC Regulations on Direct Recruitment and Promotions, as well as existing statutes of the University of Delhi, is evident in both policy documents when we look at the larger restructuring proposed with respect faculty recruitment and promotions. For example, for academicians seeking to enter the teaching profession, an additional qualification is sought to be imposed over and above the present UGC NET qualification for teaching

positions. The IDP document states: “The University aims to make NCTE (National Council for Teacher Education) training mandatory for all entry-level faculty members...” (p.28). Likewise, going against prescribed UGC norms for career advancement, the IDP on p.82 speaks of the so-called need to “establish an annual teaching excellence award with significant institutional recognition, *possibly linked to promotions* or enhanced leadership opportunities”. A particular provision that triggered much uproar in the 10.10.2024 Academic Council meeting was the unhealthy pitching of one stakeholder against another, as evident in the proposal on **p.7** of the IDP, where it is stated: “Steps will be taken to restructure the rules and regulations for teacher promotion by linking them to feedback analysis” [student feedback].

By and large, the policy paradigm dangerously nurtures a generation of docile and subservient scholars; further diluting critical knowledge production of the University. It is, thus, no coincidence that we come across repeated references to “leadership development” in the IDP. On p.5 of the IDP, the identifying of “leaders” from within the faculty, close annual monitoring of targets set by branch heads, and the curating of leadership development programs for Heads of Departments/Professors/Senior Professors under the aegis of bodies like the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) are indicative of a grave danger to established good practices like *rotational* headship of academic departments, and so on. Indeed, within such a policy gambit, we can expect ideological cronyism and nepotism of the worst kind to intensify.

Equally troubling is the IDP’s active promotion formal relationships between the University, local organizations (p.37), as well as with voluntary organizations and private entities (pp.87-88). These collaborations are recommended as part of an agenda to expose students to community engagement and enhanced employability opportunities – all of which have the tendency to be easily misused. In fact, in recent times it has been seen that

colleges and institutions have actively promoted certain groups and bodies which are close to the current ruling dispensation. This apart, the promotion of “voluntary organizations” also implies that the existing teaching fraternity is considered incapable of nurturing a sense of social responsibility in students. What is overlooked too is the fact that students as young adults need to be allowed to freely choose their alignment with voluntary or any other kind of organization/body, and that the college/university should steer clear of choosing/promoting any organization. Notably, we find that the IDP promotes heightened surveillance through enhanced use of CCTV cameras “with direct Live transmission and recording” (p.5), as well as the deployment of drones for such purpose (p.6). The call for enhanced surveillance has the propensity to be (and has actually already been) widely misused to repress critical, oppositional voices within the university system (D’Souza, 2023).⁹ Indeed, the intense discussion in the IDP on surveillance smacks of a larger undemocratic design to curb the self-activities of oppositional student groups and the activism of University’s employees.

Rapid informalization and further exclusion of marginalized sections

At present, there are more than 650 thousand students studying at DU. Most of these students are receiving very substandard informal-mode education. Unfortunately, this is a situation that has long been in the making. Substandard informal education is a generalized widespread phenomenon across the country, given how successive ruling dispensations have built on policies/approaches that simply intensify exclusion, and which have restricted quality state-subsidized education to a small section of elites. Indeed, education policies in India have largely remained exclusionary despite the pronouncements of political leaders and educationists to the contrary (Bilal, 2023).

Against such a historical backdrop of unequal education, DU’s vision document and long-term plan aggressively promote informal education instead of ensuring

access to mainstream education through various measures (like opening of evening shifts in more of DU's regular mode colleges).¹⁰ Increasingly, the informalization is being designed not only for those already trapped in the University's open and distance learning (ODL) mode, but even for regular mode students. Correspondingly, digitalization and virtual classrooms are increasingly projected as a viable replacement for direct classroom teaching; overlooking of course how these adversely affect the quality of teaching-learning, as well as reduce job opportunities for aspiring teachers (John, 2020). Currently, as additional workloads materialize with the enforcement of a four-year undergraduate program and there is no corresponding increase in funds and teaching positions, many classes/courses are bursting at the seams. Having precipitated such a crisis, university administrators and their bosses in the UGC and Union Ministry for Education easily project massive open online courses (MOOCs) as the solution. Consequently, DU's IDP speaks of "encouraging faculty to undertake training in platforms such as MOOCs to integrate them into their teaching practices, supporting NEP 2020 goals" (p.26). The IDP also seeks to "position the University's MOOCs, as and when developed, on global platforms, offering high-quality, internationally recognized online courses that attract students from across the world, enhancing the University's global reach and reputation" (p.17).

Contrary to such policy thrusts, students and teachers have been at demanding the implementation of various measures, such as the opening of evening colleges so as to incorporate within the formal-mode mainstream education system, the scores of students enrolled in the University's ODL mode.

However, the IDP enunciates quite contrary goals, wherein on p.104 it is stated:

"The Crucial Role of Open Learning: In view of the projected population, inclination for distance or part-time learning, need based distance learning programmes, SOL will have to be restructured and it will be working as a

parallel hybrid University.” Thus, the University’s School of Open Learning (SOL) is to be promoted as a parallel university, conveniently overlooking that DU SOL has already been repeatedly exposed for the substandard education imparted and self-learning materials distributed to around half a million students enrolled in its various programs (Times News Network, 2023). Essentially, the endeavour to promote an ODL institute as a parallel university targets the students of the most deprived and marginalized sections of society, who have long been crowding SOL due to the lack of seats in regular mode DU colleges. Ironically, the University’s SOL has been functioning in the self-finance mode since 1997, compelling the country’s most marginalized students to pay not only full tuition fees, but also for the salaries, pensions and maintenance costs of SOL. Nothing has been envisaged in the IDP to ameliorate the woes of SOL students.

In lieu of a conclusion: a withering academia?

Instead of developing infrastructure to accommodate around half a million students languishing in the University’s informal-mode of education and devising plans to bring them into the mainstream, the policy documents speak of developing overseas campuses of University of Delhi. In other words, the bleak reality that scores of students have little or no access to the resources of DU is blurred out. Instead, the University’s vision is firmly linked to endeavors to reap profits overseas by setting up campuses in the other countries. Needless to say, the neglect of socio-economically deprived students is palpably evident.

There are also valid apprehensions regarding potential fee hikes, and further dwindling of financial aid to students with need. Already, the University has seen massive fee hikes in its existing programs alongside the introduction of more and more self-financed courses with very high fee structures. Typically, the new self-financed courses are being aggressively introduced without requisite state funding and grant of faculty positions being extended to the

University and its constituent colleges. Justifying consistent fee hikes, we see a new ‘normal’ being imposed in the discourse surrounding the University’s policies and direction. Fee hikes are now justified on the grounds of ‘efficient’ internal resource generation and the provisioning of ‘appropriate’ fee waivers for ‘talented’ and ‘meritorious’ students from socio-economically deprived sections. Such an approach strategically creates a category of students within the underprivileged for whom there would be no fee waivers; thereby, surreptitiously evading the need for creating and expanding the educational infrastructure to enable access to quality education for all. Hence, the threat of higher out-of-pocket expenditure for a DU degree looms large, considering that the policy documents continually emphasize the need for the University to mobilize alternative funds; indicating a crucial departure from established entitlements linked to state-backed fee concessions / publicly-funded scholarships. The linking of the financial aid for the “students with the greatest need” with paternalistic philanthropy / private fund-raising is highly problematic, as it marks further withdrawal of state funding, which has proved crucial for greater access to higher education. Within such a policy ecosystem, the scope for marginalization of students from Dalit, Adivasi, and other socially and economically weaker backgrounds can simply be expected to grow manifold.

The fast-diminishing commitment to societal needs and responsibilities is also reflected in the complete lack of reference to the need to provide greater job security in place of existing rampant contractualization of teaching and non-teaching jobs within the University. Similarly, we find no concrete planning in terms of funding and infrastructure development to ensure more gender-sensitive campuses that are equipped with expanded support systems like creches / greater number of subsidized university day care centers, all of which

enable higher enrollments of women students and sustained employment of women employees.

At a juncture where the University is facing a dire crisis in terms of the dilution of the academic richness and rigor of its erstwhile academic programs; institutionally compelled higher teacher-student ratios in tutorials/practicums/lectures; faculty and students struggling with drastically reduced teaching time per week; growing discontent with hugely increased burdens of assessment and evaluation; constant workload flux which breeds enhanced job insecurity for teaching faculty; and so on, it is nothing but disturbing to see no engagement with these concrete challenges in what are purportedly being projected as the long-term plans for the University's growth and development.

In no uncertain terms, DU's Strategic Plan and Institutional Development Plan represent a euphemism for enhanced commercialization of higher education and the privatization of an extant public-funded university. The University's knowledge autonomy stands to be steadily compromised in the process, and consequently, we can expect its curriculum, teaching-learning structure, and research output to be increasingly delinked from the larger social needs of society as the profit-driven agenda of domestic and foreign capital permeates into the administrative and academic fabric of the University. Evidently then, we are staring at a bleak future of colonization of the academia. Also engrained within the very logic of DU's Strategic Plan and Institutional Development Plan are major compromises with equity, quality, and access to public-funded higher education. This is reflected in various provisions that justify the steady informalization of higher education, and promote the need for enhanced internal resource generation by the University, which in itself spells doom for subsidized higher education.

Notes

¹ *Debating Education in India* is a recent collection of essays that brings together a wide spectrum of oppositional voices on education policies like NEP 2020. For a summation and synthesis of different debates in the domain of education in India, see the Introduction, *Debating Education in India*.

² See p.5 of the Appendix-I of Resolution no. 41, DU Executive Council dated 17.08.2019, <https://du.ac.in>.

³ The RSS is a Hindu supremacist, far-right paramilitary organization. It was started by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925, who was a political protege of B. S. Moonje, a Hindu Mahasabha politician from Maharashtra. The RSS has been instrumental in developing the Sangh Parivar - a network of various right-wing organizations working in different social segments of society. Its electoral political front, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is currently heading a coalition government in the Centre and various provinces of India. For succinct introduction to the ideology and functioning of the RSS, see T. Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*.

⁴ HEFA is registered under Section 8 [Not-for-profit section] under the Companies Act 2013 as a Union Government company and as Non-deposit taking Non-Bank Financial Company (NBFC-ND-Type II) with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). It is a joint venture of the Union Ministry of Education (GoI) and Canara Bank; with an agreed equity participation in the ratio of 90.91% and 09.09% respectively. Its chief purpose is to extend finance at competitive interest rates for capital assets creation in India's higher education institutions, and to supplement it with grants by channelizing CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds from the corporate and donations from others. For 'efficient' utilization of the corporate funds through HEFA, the escrow mechanism is used to recover the loans from the borrowing educational institutions. The principal portion of the loan is to be repaid through the 'internal accruals', which is generated from fee receipts, research earnings, and so on. In this way, since the institutions are to return the money borrowed, they have to be revenue-surplus, which intensifies the process of fee hikes, etc.

⁵ For a critical analysis of the various provisions of NEP 2020 and their bearing on higher education in India, see John, Higher Education in NEP 2020, in *Debating Education in India*. For the long-term trends and dynamics in the education sector in India, which have culminated in the contemporary crisis, see John 2013, Bilal 2023, and Raina 2023.

⁶ For an engagement of how changes in higher education are linked to the imparting of 'transferable skills' demanded by employers in the labour market, see Weert, Perspectives on Higher Education and the Labour Market.

⁷ Typical to capitalist employers is the tendency to assign more and more work to fewer and fewer people – a reason why the average workday in countries like India is nothing less than ten to twelve hours. By employing fewer people, each individual capitalist has worked towards creating a reserve army of labour, or a large number of unemployed people whose untapped labour is used to threaten existing workers and professionals into accepting long work hours, low pay, etc. It is in order to maximize their profit through minimal employment that individual capitalists have resorted to preferential hiring of not just multi-skilled workers but also multi-skilled professionals who can easily circulate within an entire range of middle-rung jobs created in both the service and industrial sector.

⁸ API scores, or Academic Performance Index scores, are used to determine a teacher's eligibility for promotion. They are based on research and academic contributions.

⁹ For an elucidation of how public-funded universities in India are being dismantled not only through regulations that favour the corporate university model, but more drastically with political violence, deployment of police forces on campuses, and increasing criminalization of resistance, see Rohan D'Souza, Citizen, Consumer, User, in *Debating Education in India*.

¹⁰ Interestingly, on the same day as the fateful meeting of the University's Academic Council meeting, a radical students' organization, Krantikari Yuva Sangathan (KYS) organized a massive protest against DU's Strategic Plan and IDP, and demanded the opening of evening colleges so as to accommodate more and more students coming from less-privileged backgrounds and who are shoved into the ODL mode due to the sheer lack of seats in regular-mode colleges of DU. See Dhulia, *Times of India*.

References

- Basu, T., Datta, P., Sen, S., Sarkar, S. & Sarkar, T. (1993). *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*. Orient BlackSwan.
- Bilal, Mohd. (2023). Continuity Amidst Changes: Longue Durée of Educational Apartheid in India. In Maya John (ed) *Debating Education in India*. Tulika Books and Columbia University Press.
- Bruner, Robert F., Bojanski, M., Hogan, S. & Shepherdson, W. (2023). Penicillin: The Miracle Drug. Darden Case No. UVA-ENT-0234, Retrieved from SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4321087> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4321087>.
- D'Souza, R. (2023). Citizen, Consumer, User: Covid-19 and the Higher Education Churn in India. In Maya John (ed) *Debating Education in India*. Tulika Books and Columbia University Press.
- de Weert, E. (2011). *Perspectives on Higher Education and the Labour Market: Review of International Policy Developments*. University of Twente: Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/publications/Publications%202011/C11EW158%20Final%20version%20Themarapport%20onderwijs%20-%20arbeidsmarkt.pdf>.
- Dhulia, M. (2024). DU's Academic Council Approves Revised Strategic Plan. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/delhi-university-academic-council-approves-ambitious-2024-2047-strategic-plan/articleshow/114128428.cms>.
- Government of India (GoI) (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Retrieved from https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.
- John, Maya. (2013). Critiquing Reforms in Higher Education: Understanding the 'Education Question' in India. *Social Scientist*, 41 (7/8), 49-67.
- (2020). Online Education, the Latest Stage of Educational Apartheid. *Mainstream Weekly*, 58 (26). Retrieved from <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article9480.html>
- (ed). (2023a). Introduction; and Higher Education in NEP 2020: Rhetoric and Realities. *Debating Education in India: Issues and Concerns*. Tulika Books and Columbia University Press.
- (ed). (2023b). Rampant Crisis in Delhi University: The Perils of Ad-hocism. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/delhi-university-ad-hoc-prof-removal-samarveer>.
- Kumar, M. J. (2024). Breaking Barriers: The Symbiotic Interplay of Academia and Industry in Shaping Our Future. *IETE Technical Review*, 41 (1), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564602.2024.2306736>
- Mohanty, B.K. (2024). 'Manuism' sneak-in at Delhi University, academic council approves changes to LLB syllabus. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/manusmriti-sneak-in-at-delhi-university-academic-council-approves-changes-to-llb-syllabus/cid/2033947>
- Patgiri, R. (2023). A Teacher, Displaced: Why Delhi University's Actions have made me

- want to quit academia. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-teacher-displaced-why-delhi-universitys-actions-have-made-me-want-to-quit-academia-9070697/>.
- PRS Legislative Research. (2024). *Demand for Grants 2024-25 Analysis: Education*. Institute for Policy Research Studies, New Delhi. Retrieved from https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_parliament/2024/DFG_2024-25_Analysis_Education.pdf.
- Raina, J. (2023). Policy Shifts in School Education: A Critical Analysis. In Maya John (ed) *Debating Education in India: Issues and Concerns*. Tulika Books and Columbia University Press.
- Roy, K. (2023). Elusive India Lost in the National Education Policy 2020? In Maya John (ed) *Debating Education in India: Issues and Concerns*. Tulika Books and Columbia University Press.
- The Hindu Bureau (2024). *Reworked Strategic Plan to be placed before DU Council*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/reworked-strategic-plan-to-be-placed-before-du-council/article68722396.ece>.
- (2024). *DU's Proposal to Introduce Four Value Addition Courses on the Bhagavad Gita Draws Flak*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/education/dus-proposal-to-introduce-four-value-addition-courses-on-bhagavad-gita-draws-flak/article69032947.ece>
- Times News Network (TNN). (2023). Errors Spotted in SOL texts catering to a lakh students. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/errors-spotted-in-sol-texts-catering-to-a-lakh-students/articleshow/102688259.cms>.
- University of Delhi, Appendix-I, Resolution No. 41, Executive Council (EC) dated 17.08.2019. Retrieved from https://www.du.ac.in/uploads/executive_council/30082019/17082019/Appendix-I.pdf

Author and Correspondence Details

Email: mjohn@jmc.du.ac.in, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021. Maya John is elected teacher representative in DU's Academic Council.