

Role of syllabus in higher education: A critical study

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to consider and appraise the importance of syllabus in a course of study, especially in the field of Higher Education. It highlights the characteristics and potentials that need to be considered while designing a course syllabus in order to make the syllabus effective and useful. The paper is purely based on the method of literature survey and observation of factual data in the form of syllabus of different courses set by different Universities and Educational Institutions. The objective of the paper is to bring the importance of syllabus to the notice of students & teachers as well as to aid the syllabus framing agencies. The paper also highlights some of the major advantages and disadvantages of a course based syllabus. Further, the paper is summed up with a concluding remark as finding of the research carried out.

Key words: Higher Education, Course, Curricula, Syllabus, Syllabus Design

Introduction:

A syllabus, in its rudimentary sense, is a summary of topics to be covered in an education or training course. The term 'syllabus' originates from the Greek word 'syllibos' and its etymology suggests a "label" or "table of contents." It is often either set out by an examination board, or by an academic board, or prepared by the teacher who supervises or controls the course curricula and course quality. It primarily contains a schedule of topics, lists of recommended books and other information necessary for completion of the course.

A syllabus, thus, is a promise to the students that they would be taught these topics and in this method; and the requirement of which if they satisfy, would be given a reward in the form of a degree/diploma/certificate with the specified pattern of grading/marking. As a promise of what the course will be, a syllabus resembles a contract between students and teachers, and also to an extent between students and the University/Institution. Teachers are bound to cover the topic as per specifications in the syllabus and the students have to learn those for their evaluation and completion of the course. Again, the University/Institution is

under obligation to award students on successful completion of all criteria. Though a promise, a syllabus is not a legal contract.

Components of a syllabus:

A syllabus has to cater to multiple factors and issues. Apart from texts and topics required to cover, time frame for completion of the course of study, pattern of evaluation/examination, distribution of marks per individual unit, list of recommended books with their full bibliographic information etc. find an essential place in a syllabus. A syllabus also contains information regarding admission procedure, tentative schedule of classes and examinations, eligibility criteria examinations, promotion rules, and guidelines/provisions for choice of subjects and the various alternatives/facilities which the students can avail for completing the course. The major components of a good syllabus are outlined below:

- i. Introductory information
- ii. Complete Course Title
- iii. Course Description
- iv. Course overview & course prerequisite(s)
- v. Course competencies and / or objectives
- vi. Required & Optional texts and supplies
- vii. Class delivery methods/Attendance/ Class behavior –
- viii. Withdrawal policy / Reinstatement policy:
- ix. Student Responsibilities
- x. Evaluation/Examination
- xi. Final grade options
- xii. Other information
- xiii. Syllabus Acknowledgement

Functions & uses of a syllabus:

A syllabus is a fundamental unit of a course to which both the students and teachers have to rely in a day to day basis for completion of the course. It serves diverse purposes such as provides a road map of course organization/direction, minimizes confusion on policies relating to the course, sets clear expectations and objectives, ensures a fair and impartial understanding between the instructor and students behaviour in the classroom, indicates effort on student's behalf to be put into the course, and the like.

The overall function of a syllabus can be put under three broad heads— as a contract, as a permanent record, and as a learning tool.

As a contract between the instructor and the student, it sets forth expectations and guides the behaviour of both parties. More specifically, it delineates responsibilities for various tasks like attendance, assignments, examinations, and other requirements.

As a permanent record of what was taught in a course, a syllabus is useful for its accountability and documentation. It can be helpful in evaluating both individual instructors and entire programs, and at the same time can serve to document what was covered in a course, at what level, scope and depth, and for which purpose or credit.

A course syllabus can serve as a highly effective facilitator of student learning. If it is clearly written, organized, thoughtful, perfect in style and grammar, a syllabus can stand as a model of professional outlook and writing for students. Besides, students can learn principles of organization, precision, meticulousness, and diligence from a syllabus.

Advantages of syllabus:

A good syllabus is prima facie evidence that devotes essential effort needed to create a good course. A good syllabus is a resource for students and serves a variety of purposes that go well beyond the confines of a specific course. It lays out itinerary for the semester/course, and is a student's first reference. It gives students a clear sense of the disciplinary lay out of the course and assists students in pursuing topics that interest them.

The chief advantages of syllabus are as mentioned below:

- offer students a clear and concise statement of what a particular course is about;
- tell students how they would be taught the material and why;
- provide logistic information and the course materials easily;
- explain exactly what is required of the students, when and why; and
- lay out for the students key elements of the social contract that teacher and students are entering into.

Disadvantage of syllabus:

A syllabus, in spite of its many advantages does have some disadvantages also. As a syllabus is time bound it poses obvious problems for both students and teachers to complete it within the stipulated time frame. Besides, a syllabus has to move by the process of inclusion and exclusion in which certain texts are prioritized over certain others; at times having no absolute reasons for doing the same. Moreover, the course requirements in a syllabus often do not succumb to the taste and expectations of the students and teachers.

It is also a serious drawback of the syllabus that it runs the risk of being outdated and obsolete; thereby making it necessary to change it time to time. An outdated syllabus, especially in case of Higher Education which aims at providing advanced and objective knowledge, exerts inverse effects upon the growth and development of the students. As such the Universities/Institutions imparting Higher Education have to review and change their syllabus at a comparatively rapid succession, which further aggravates the problem of the students and teachers.

Some of the major disadvantages of syllabus are outlined below:

- time bound and scrupulous;
- involves inclusion-exclusion and prioritization (often seem to be arbitrary);
- often do not succumb to the taste and expectations of the students and teachers;
- runs the risk of being outdated and obsolete; and
- needs to review, modify and change (at times constantly)

It must, however, be noted that the disadvantages of a syllabus are not exclusive and unbending. Rather, they are inescapable and necessary for the syllabus to exist. In fact, what seems to be disadvantage of a syllabus at the apparent and superficial level, more often there lies some hidden advantages of it.

Conclusion:

A good syllabus, as it has already been mentioned earlier, is a resource for the students. It is the first and most essential of all elements of course curricula; and influences

almost all spheres of the same including teaching, learning and evaluation. Apart from being a comprehensive guide map, a syllabus reflects the educational Philosophy governing the course.

A syllabus also lays considerable stress on the Methods of teaching, and system of evaluation and grading. As such any loop hole in a syllabus is bound to exert inverse influence upon the courses, its objectives and goals. It may discourage the students, and even teachers in their process of reading and learning. They may also lose interest in the course requirements, be dissatisfied with the curricula and get frustrated in the set of programme of study; thereby nullify overall aims and objectives of the course. This becomes more obvious in case of Higher Education in which objective knowledge, standard of education, organized and methodical study form as the basis. The syllabus framing agencies, especially in case of Higher Education, thus, need to be careful and conscious enough in preparing course syllabi; otherwise the entire venture of study may be jeopardized.

Suggestions:

The syllabus framing agencies, especially in case of Higher Education, need to be careful and conscious enough in preparing course syllabi. Unless they do so, the entire venture of study may be jeopardized. They may also consider the following corrective measures while designing a syllabus of a course:

- i) A syllabus should contain all information starting from admission procedure to the scheme of award of Degree/Diploma/Certificate.
- ii) It should be clear, unambiguous, lucid and written in a standard language.
- iii) Along with availability of materials, the taste and expectations of the students and teachers need to be considered.
- iv) Should be reviewed, changed and modified time to time to make the contents updated. However, constant & rapid change/modification should be avoided.
- v) It is more fruitful to involve students and teachers in the process of review.

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