

Critical Evaluation of the Psychology Curricula of Bachelor's and Master's Degrees

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Abstract

Curricula are the guiding frameworks for the teaching-learning experience in the university. This auto-ethnographic account presents my critical evaluation of the curricula of the bachelor's and master's degrees of psychology being used at Tribhuvan University, after 5.5 years of teaching as a permanent faculty. There are some strengths in curricula like a strong theoretical foundation, and significant weightage for practical works, and some weaknesses like lack of integrated approach, ignorance of context, and aimlessness. The strengths can be retained and weaknesses can be corrected to provide psychology education that can meet changing societal or market demands.

Keywords: *Andragogy, Syllabus, Psychology education, Nepal, Practicum, Counseling*

Introduction

Curriculum serves to define and describe the contents to be covered in a given timeframe. It facilitates better teaching (Luitel & Luitel, 2020) and is a roadmap for any discipline (Whitson, 2005). It also has guidelines for instructional practices, learning experience, and assessment. A syllabus sets the delimitation of the course and provides the sequence description for it (Brown & Green, 2016). Syllabi are the guiding framework for teaching and learning. They are also the guide to designing assessments or evaluations after the teaching and learning are done. Syllabi are contained in the curriculum. A syllabus should have components like general logistics, course descriptions, information about instructors, required materials, course objectives, assignments, grading criteria, schedules, and a code of conduct for students (Rhoads & Rocha-Hidalgo, 2020). The new curricula of psychology for bachelor's and master's degrees at Tribhuvan University come with some strengths and some weaknesses. Psychology is the study of affect, behavior, and cognition (Adhikari, 2021). It has both basic and applied scopes. Psychology as a major in bachelor's and master's degree is offered only at Tribhuvan University in Nepal to date.

Bachelor's degree is run in annual system. Master's degree is run in the semester system after 2014 AD. In the semester system, students remain busy and they get more engaged

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with teachers (Ghimire, 2017). They have a higher chance of getting better grades. The university should synchronize both the master's and bachelor's degrees by introducing a semester system both. This may provide a better chance to facilitate students' transition from bachelor to master degree. In terms of curricula, there will be a smoother continuity. Still, more homework such as preparation of infrastructure may be necessary to get ready for the semester system.

Adhikari (2022a) pointed out some flaws in the curriculum for the master's degree in psychology. Some of them are a repetition of matters across subjects (or lack of coordination or integration), lack of context in some syllabi, and unscientific allocation of teaching hours. The curriculum does not come with a clear framework. In other words, it is ambiguous what purpose the curriculum serves. There is a need to identify the weaknesses and strengths of the bachelor level. There is a need to discuss these with bachelor's and master's degrees in unitary consideration also.

Method

In qualitative research design, auto-ethnography has been used as the method of this study. Autoethnography is about critically evaluating the socio-cultural practices from the inquirer's experience (Wall, 2008). In it, a researcher can present the analysis and interpretation of cultural experience and personal experience in relation to each other (Adams et al., 2015). For the study, I recalled my teaching experiences and compared them with the contents of old and new syllabi. I have taught psychology for seven years, including 5.5 years in Tri Chandra Multiple College as a lecturer.

Results

I divide this portion into two parts: strengths and weaknesses. The results may be biased. The results of qualitative inquiry have personal experience and engagement (Patton, 2002, pp. 40–41). The researcher should be reflective about voice and perspective; I have also tried to balance subjective experience and objective evaluation.

Strengths of current curricula

For a bachelor's degree, despite running in the annual system, there is practical work with a 30% weightage of total marks in each subject. This allows some chance for teachers to impart and students to acquire practical skills. Nonetheless, this weightage for practical work can be considered low because psychology is supposed to be highly applied a subject and the university needs to prepare human capital strongly skilled in the related industry. The lecture hours have been allocated to each chapter/unit. The allocation is a guideline to manage time (and compensation for part-time teachers) even though the division seems impractical in many places. A reason may be that the professors who never go to a

bachelor's class have designed syllabi (because permanent faculty teaching the bachelor's degree have never been asked to design the syllabi, as said [or complained, if you will] by my senior colleagues) and allotted time haphazardly. In other words, in some units, topics demanding more hours have been allocated less time and those demanding fewer hours have been allocated more time. This can be corrected based on the experiences of tutors currently teaching related subjects. In the new version, some subjects have removed outdated theories like type theories of personality (such as Sheldon's and Kretschmer's) from Introduction to Psychology (Psy421; Psychology Subject Committee [PSC], 2076BS). Its corresponding old syllabus Foundation of Psychology (Psy311) had these unscientific theories. Abnormal Psychology (Psy424) has been updated with the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5). Social psychology (Psy422) offers specific guidelines for practical work.

Likewise, there are many strong aspects in MA courses. Forty percent weightage for internal marks is a praiseworthy thing but the nature of practical work needs an overhaul. The research methods are divided into two: quantitative and qualitative. Psychometrics is also included. In Psychotherapy and Counseling (Psy565-1), references are given unit-wise. These are the strong points of the curriculum.

Courses in both bachelor's and master's degrees have strong theoretical foundations despite the fact that syllabi seem incoherent and deviated at times. For example, History and Systems of Psychology (Psy551) seemingly has a topic "Philosophical Foundations of the Psychology" which is an odd man out in the pool of other contents. Even though the syllabus appears inspired by a book (Schultz & Schultz, 2011), the topic could have been made relevant with the names of contributors like Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Mill, and Comte. Though most of the syllabi fail to include the latest theories, students can strengthen their psychological base with existing courses. There is room for improvement in the practical portion of each syllabus. The practicums should be connected to the contextual needs and availability of resources. Still, if the student do the practical works sincerely under the mentorship of a good faculty, they can be skillful enough to enter into the related industry confidently.

Weaknesses of current curricula

Curriculum Development Center (CDC) is directly or indirectly involved in the construction and modification of curricula (Curriculum Development Centre, 2020). Subject committees under the dean's office are responsible to draft and finalize the curricula. For example, the Psychology Subject Committee is responsible for designing the syllabi of psychology subjects. The professors in the committee prepare the required syllabus. The first error they commit is by designing the curriculum individually. CDC should create a curriculum/syllabus from a team of professors working in various colleges. Since teamwork and

necessary preparation are lacking, Luitel and Luitel (2020) blame curriculum experts as being repressive and forgetful of the real context where the learned knowledge should be applied. Some other weaknesses of the psychology syllabi are presented below. They are given in twelve themes.

Not really updated

The course of study for the bachelor's degree was rife with errors and weaknesses in the previous version. The new syllabus (PSC, 2076BS) of Introduction to Psychology (Psy421) is the continuation of the old syllabus of the Foundation of Psychology (Psy311) with minor additions and omissions. The new syllabus has failed to add topics like "Consciousness", "Language", "Stress, Lifestyle and Health", "Communication", "Psychological Disorders", and "Psychotherapies" included in the latest international textbooks (Baron & Misra, 2016; Feldman, 2019; Hockenbury et al., 2016; Spielman et al., 2020). This weakness is not seen much in General Psychology (Psy410), an elective for the third year. Unfortunately, this better course is not studied by psychology majors. Research Methods and Academic Writing (Psy427) lets students critically evaluate studies done prior to the mid-70s. These studies are too old and have now lost relevance in the methods and contents of inquiry.

Haphazard

The order of syllabi kept in the first through fourth years of a bachelor's degree is odd. Since each subject in psychology has practical work, the representation of the work should be done in a research report and it may require data analysis. Both skills would be provided in Research Methods and Academic Writing (Psy427) but unfortunately, this subject has been kept at the fourth or last year rather than the first one. To study Abnormal Psychology (Psy424) in the second year, the students should already know what abnormal psychology is in the first year. So, "Abnormal Behaviors" and "Psychotherapies" should have been included in the Introduction to Psychology (Psy421).

In the master's degree, some contents of Quantitative Research Methods (Psy553) and Applied Psychometry (Psy559) overlap. Psy559 could have been made less burdensome by culling them. "Ethical issues in psychological research" have been missed out in both the subjects of research- Psy553 and Qualitative Research Methods (Psy558), even though included in Psy559.

Lack of inter-level flow

The bachelor's degree should be able to impart all the basic skills and knowledge which should be understood in more depth at the master's degree. The latter should have an applied orientation also. Students fail to connect these two at times. There should be a smooth transition between the two levels but Social Psychology at the BA level (PSC,

2076BS) and Advance Social Psychology (Psy552) at the MA level (Central Department of Psychology [CDP], 2013) have much overlap. This is a waste of time for students and the resources of the university.

Uncoordinated

Applied Psychometry (Psy559) and Quantitative Research Methods (Psy553) have some contents in common. The former has some topics in common with Applied Psychological Assessment (564-2) or Psychological Assessment (564-1). Psy551 and Quantitative Research Methods (Psy553) both have overlapping philosophical portions. The designers need to coordinate and curtail the contents of a subject to ensure that they are not repeated. Similarly, the practical work in many subjects gets repeated and students get bored. They even lose the opportunity to learn better and more. The lack of coordination among designers is to blame. There should be an integrated approach to designing the curriculum so that contents do not get repeated and students can learn diverse skills and acquire updated knowledge of the industry. To learn complex subjects in later semesters, they should get primed in the first year/semester already. The discussion of having a separate subject that has practicums from all other subjects is going on (Adhikari, 2022a) but the existing curricula have repeated practicums.

Everything foreign

The mindset of “everything foreign is good” has prevailed. Neither there is any local or indigenous concept in the entire curriculum to study, nor there is any practical work to inquire about native problems or solutions. Even if the architects of syllabi are willing to adopt local curricula, a lack of human and financial resources may obstruct the decision. Such a lack has been felt at the primary level (Bhetuwal, 2022). The feasibility of domesticating the curriculum is not a far cry for behavioral science when the discussion about incorporating culture in mathematics education is already being discussed (Pant & Luitel, 2020). However, the multicultural nature of Nepalese society may bring multiple challenges (Nikku, 2010). If we start to address the need of each culture or customize the curricula for each social group, we need to create hundreds of varieties because Nepal has many ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and religious cultures. This will create a problem. As a solution, we can create a national framework to address each culture and include it in our curricula. However, such a decision should be evidence-based, and the evidence comes from research. Adhikari (2022b) has suggested exploring the indigenous psychology of Nepal.

Lack of materials

Most of recommended textbooks are foreign and hence may not be accessible to Nepalese students. Just recommending the international textbook is not enough. The designers of the course of study and hence the university should be aware of materials access. Moreover, all the contents are not available in a single book or source. Buying many sources for Nepali students may not be affordable. So, creating the material to study is very necessary along with the release of syllabi. Inquiring is a good thing and searching the original sources is even better but they are good when colleges have libraries with the certainty of having such sources. So, letting students search the materials in our context is an unnecessary hassle we create. This might reduce the productivity of the students tremendously. In the semester system, a resourceful library is a must (Baral, 2019). Other resources are also needed but the governmental colleges do not have enough infrastructure (Dahal, 2018). In the case of psychology also, the major instruments for lab experiments and psychological testing are lacking. For example, two batches of Psy421 students have passed out without doing any experiments/tests in both governmental and private colleges. COVID-19 was partly to blame but the colleges were irresponsible equally. If buying the required instruments internationally is not the best option, a project can be initiated to produce psychological tools in our own country. This will have many merits including lowered costs, and a chance to train graduates with local instruments, with the possibility of creating more effective skills. In fact, the construction of locally validated psychological tests is a must but who should lead the process of initiating such a project is an ambiguity.

Underload

Bachelor's graduates are supposed to be officers in various organizations. The designers of the syllabus seemingly undermined its worth and stingily kept the contents as if they should save some for a master's degree. The incomplete content creates confusion among both teachers and students. In the yearly system, a lot of content can be covered. The time has come to make a bachelor's degree subject-specific. Currently, the students get to choose two main subjects and they have an elective in the third year. Each discipline (like psychology and sociology) has got enough knowledge and specialization to have 20 subjects. Making a bachelor's degree subject-specific allows the chance for students to acquire basic skills in a bachelor's degree alone. It will have twofold benefits. One, graduates with bachelor's degrees will have more ability to act as independent and confident professionals. Two, the master's degree can be made more research- and practice-oriented. Currently, bachelor's graduates have a superficial understanding of the subjects and have to suffer from low self-esteem. They have false pride of having studied psychology with the completion of a bachelor's degree, but while they are tested, they fall short to prove their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Too demanding practicums

In the semester system, the students have to complete many assignments in a semester. Most of them have similar themes. Students get exhausted and bored completing them. A solution is to design the curriculum in a way that the students have to do diverse practicums and they learn all subject matters. Alternatively, inter-subject coordination through a meeting among teachers can manage this issue. History and Systems of Psychology (Psy551) lacks guidelines for practical work. This creates ambiguity with what a teacher should assign the students for practicum.

Weak framework

Designing syllabi without a sound framework is a big problem. The market is demanding a kind of professional but the university is supplying another kind. There is a gap in market need and educational training (KC, 2018). If education is to help the economy of the country, it should always palpate the market demand. The emergence of new subjects like fashion and textile education (Singh & Shrestha, 2022) is the result of such a framework. Psychological subjects should be prepared similarly. Putting outdated theories like instinct theory in Psy421 is a lapse. Some subjects' syllabi have been designed with a single foreign textbook as a guide without caring how updated it is and how understandable it is to the students. Examples are History and Systems of Psychology (Psy551) and Psychology of Human Factors (Psy562-2). The result of the poor framework has made some subjects' syllabi a confusing medley. For example, Adolescence and Juvenile Delinquency (Psy423) has kept "Neurodevelopmental disorders" under "Childhood Deviant Behavior" (PSC, 2076BS). There is confusion from the angle of a reader if it is related to developmental psychology or juvenile delinquency or even abnormal psychology. When the framework to design is hazy, the curriculum appears aimless.

Bad precedents

The syllabi have set bad precedents. The citation and referencing are supposed to be in American Psychological Association (APA) format but the references given in syllabi breach this rule (e.g., refer to the syllabus of Adolescence and Juvenile Delinquency [Psy423] and Psychosocial Counselling [Psy425]). This is proof that syllabi were produced in rush. If anybody argues that a different format can also be chosen in Nepal, the logic fails when we notice the inconsistency of referencing styles in the syllabi various subjects. The contents do not match the objectives of Psy551 (CDP, 2013). The objective mentions theories and ancient Greece but the content of the syllabus avoids both. It is personalistic and begins with Rene Descartes, a French philosopher of the 17th century, and continues through Wilhelm Wundt, a German psychologist of the 19th century to Herbert Simon, a cognitive psychologist of the 21st century. The personalistic approach is justifiably related to history but clear topics to relate to 'systems' are lacking. Some contents like "Ecological

Context”, and “Inclusion/Exclusion” of Advance Social Psychology (Psy552) are unclear. There are spelling mistakes and document formatting mistakes at different locations like in Psy558.

Fewer options

Internationally, there are hundreds of choices in psychology to specialize in. Tribhuvan University has offered only three choices – Clinical Psychology, Counseling Psychology, and Industrial and Organizational Psychology for MA degree. The following updates/versions in the syllabus should consider other options like Educational Psychology, School Psychology, Sports Psychology, Forensic Psychology, and Developmental Psychology among others. Again, what specialization is to be kept need to be decided by a framework like market demand or governmental plans like sustainable development goals (SDG). There are many working students unlike before. They can be inspired to do both academia and practice at the same time. Hence, both sides will be strong and the result is beneficial to both the individual and the community.

Quantitative Research Methods (Psy553) recommends using SPSS and Qualitative Research Methods (Psy558) recommends using Atlas.ti to analyze data. They both are paid applications and likely are unaffordable to Nepalese teachers and students. Open-source alternatives should also be given. If anything, open-source applications should be prioritized. Alternatively, the university can acquire organizational licenses for these applications.

Knowledge for knowledge sake

In the applied subjects also, research has been emphasized. For example, Organizational Behaviors (Psy561-2), Psychology of Human Factors (562-2), Psychology of Consumer Behavior (Psy565-2), and Occupational Health (568-2) all have research as practical work. The work could have been made project-based. Moreover, these projects can be done in collaboration with the industry from the third semester already.

Discussion

The curricula may be designed with certain guiding frameworks like market demand or government policies for the achievement of certain goals. Against the backdrop of the Nepalese universities losing student enrollments (Pandey, 2023), the curriculum should not be repelling, weak, and too theoretical. It should be appealing and practice-focused so that it can make the graduates employable. There should be coherence between bachelor’s and master’s curricula. The subjects should be ordered in the sequence of years (or semesters) in such a way that courses in preceding years (or semesters) facilitate the courses in the following years. The PSC should coordinate the courses and their contents in a way that

contents do not get repeated or missed out. Rather than entirely basing the practicums on Western models, they should be creatively thought of so that students can learn using local resources. Adhikari (2022a) has suggested connecting curriculum with context. This is applicable to designing curriculum and also to letting the students use local resources to learn the theoretical or practical matters included in the curriculum. Combining mainstream courses with local concerns is a trend in the Western world also. For example, Canadians are trying to indigenize counseling and clinical psychologies (Ansloos et al., 2022).

The content alone is not sufficient in the curriculum. They should be coherent and provide enough control to implement the curriculum. Rather than letting a single professor make the syllabus, teamwork should be promoted. Authority is aware of inviting visiting faculty to review curricula (Higher Education Reform Project [HERP], 2019). This awareness should translate plan to action. The materials to study should be availed by the university or college for the students and professors. The yearly system should have enough content to teach and learn, but the semester system should minimize repeated assignments and diversify the ways the students learn practical skills.

Sometimes, cross-disciplinary techniques can be used to make the andragogy interesting. For example, Shankar (2009) found that medical students find role plays from humanities enjoyable and also helpful to understand a patient's perspectives better. Similarly, such possible techniques can be explored in psychology. Occasional interdisciplinary interaction can be helpful. The curriculum can be clearer regarding participatory or student-driven andragogy. Currently, teachers dominantly choose teaching methods (Subedi, 2019). The syllabus in the semester system is difficult to cover in the given timeframe and the academic calendar is not very reliable. College or university days are about learning life besides mastering disciplines. The students are dissatisfied with the extra-curricular facilities on campus (Subedi, 2019). Syllabi are a large part of a students' learning experiences. Still, the integrated approach to educating a student should provide them with opportunities for all-around development. So, the colleges/university should avail of all ranges of facilities- from recreational facilities, sports, and mentorship to internships or even placement. Syllabi need not be perfect but a newer version should be better than the previous one. The curriculum is a thing that builds on the previous one. Psychology curricula (and syllabi) should evolve too with the aim of serving the country by solving the psychological problems of individuals and groups.

In the future, critical evaluation of curricula at each level is needed. The syllabi can also be individually evaluated and the entire curriculum should be holistically evaluated. Research regarding what frameworks are possible and which framework is the most suitable is needed. Studies regarding how to domesticate the practicums are needed so that local resources can be utilized, and we do not have to be dependent on foreign sellers.

Conclusion

There are some good aspects in current curricula in psychology for both bachelor's and master's degrees. For example, a clear specification in practicum to use which tools and how to conduct them is a strong aspect of the bachelor's curriculum. In the master's degree, internal marks carry a weightage of 40%. Both curricula can make students theoretically empowered even though some outdated theories have also been included. The weaknesses are also rife. For example, practicums are more research-inclined and less application-oriented and disconnected from the context of Nepalese societies. The new curriculum should come with more options for specialization and subjects. The referencing style in syllabi is inconsistent and flawed. It should be improved. Market-driven curricula would provide more opportunities for employment and innovation, and market demand should be the framework. Native knowledge should also be included in curricula. The students can also be stimulated to explore them. The contents can be better organized. The inter-subject conflict and repetition should be removed. So, a holistic approach is needed. The objectives of the subjects' syllabi are clear. The entire course's objective should be clearer, and the problem of aimlessness can be solved. The order of subjects in successive years matters. The release of the curriculum should be accompanied by the release of material for the study also.

The transition of contents in the curriculum from bachelor to master degree should be smooth. The nuances in the system (annual vs semester) might cause some problems but the bachelor's degree should take students to a level of competence and ability while a master's degree should get them ready for a higher level. Mention of specific andragogy would be desirable. Some contents have that specificity already. The updated versions can address the lapses and retain the strengths. The successful implementation of the curriculum is possible in relation to many administrative and academic issues, but we need to set off somewhere. Improvement of curriculum can be the a beginning for bettering the university.

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