

Contract appointments

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THE University Grants Commission (UGC) has never required universities and colleges to implement systems that tightly evaluate faculty performance. In fact, its moves over the last decade have, if anything, been in precisely the opposite direction. Thus today not only is a faculty appointee assured of job security fairly quickly, when hired against a permanent vacancy, s/he is also guaranteed promotions to successively higher levels based on the number of years of service put in at each level.

Against this background, the recent UGC proposal that faculty appointments in institutions of higher education should henceforth be on contract for a limited term will serve one purpose and one purpose alone — that of reducing the central and state governments' expenditure on higher education. To believe that the proposal was motivated by a desire to improve standards of teaching and research in these institutions would be to doubt the intelligence of the eminent members of the UGC.

The idea, that faculty appointments be awarded, in the first instance, for a limited term only, is per se a good one. The recent UGC proposal to this effect, however, will, given the current state of our universities, serve one purpose and one purpose alone — that of reducing employers' (central and state governments) salary bills (as such appointments carry lower remuneration, with no employer contributions required towards either pensions/provident funds, or health insurance). Perhaps this is the only objective that the UGC wished to serve here. For, to believe that this proposal was motivated by a desire to improve standards of teaching and research in these institutions would be to doubt the intelligence of the eminent members of the UGC. As they well know, good teaching and research do not drop like manna from

heaven. Delivery here requires ability, effort, and investment in skills that are very specific to the task at hand, on the part of individuals appointed to these positions. Incentivizing and capturing these abilities and investments requires carefully designed contracts. Specifically, it requires contracts that provide adequate baseline remuneration (comparable to the alternatives available to potential providers of this service), that are of reasonable length (to allow some play for investments and experience), that allow for termination on proven failure to deliver, but which, at the same time, assure a high probability of renewal, and movement up ladder on 'success'.

In other words, one needs contracts here that are fairly and squarely conditioned on performance. Unfortunately, institutions of higher education in India cannot offer such contracts at present. This is because, despite the innumerable years that it has been in existence, the UGC has never required universities and colleges to implement systems that tightly evaluate faculty performance on these parameters (while some lip-service is paid to evaluating research at the post-graduate, departmental level, delivery on teaching is ignored at all levels). In fact, its moves over the last decade have, if anything, been in precisely the opposite direction. Thus, today, not only is a faculty appointee assured of job security fairly quickly, when hired against a permanent vacancy, s/he is also guaranteed promotions to successively higher levels based on the number of years of service put in at each level. With senior levels inundated by faculty that have reached there merely because of such guaranteed hand-outs, the decline in standards of teaching and research in institutions of higher education in India is hardly surprising.

Privatization is frequently offered as a solution to abate these problems. Ownership, per se, however, seems to have little to do with the standards

maintained by educational institutions. Both Canada and the US, for example, have excellent university systems. In the former, however, ownership/funding is largely public, while in the latter it is primarily private. Even within the US, there are some very good state-owned universities.

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The key issue is not ownership of systems of governance in place within these institutions. Faculty appointments play a critical role in this regard and are commonplace in the better universities across the world. The devil here, though, lies in the detail. The contracts offered by these universities generally provide very good remuneration (though this is always and everywhere a sore point), are of reasonable length, and are tightly conditioned on performance.

thus, is not ownership, but the systems of governance and accountability in place within these institutions. Limited term faculty appointments play a critical role in this regard and are commonplace in the better universities across the world. The devil here, though, lies in the detail. The contracts offered by these universities generally satisfy the criteria outlined above, i.e., they provide very good remuneration (though this is always and everywhere a sore point), are of reasonable length, and are tightly conditioned on performance. Virtually all start up appointments in North America, for example, are made on a 'tenure track' basis. These are appointments made against permanent positions but which, in the first instance, are limited to a term of six years. Permanent status itself is granted only if the candidate per-