

# Appointments in higher education

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...ute, this editorial could easily apply to Pakistan and the heated debate  
...ent's proposals on reforms in higher education

...forms satisfactorily during this period. All such appointments carry full salary benefits, including health insurance and employer contributions towards pensions/provident funds.

'Visiting' appointments, in contrast, do not carry such privileges. They are explicitly short-term (one year or

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...less), relatively rare and, at the start-up level, are generally offered only to those candidates not considered promising enough to warrant 'tenure track' positions. Teaching loads are mandated and equitably distributed across all faculty, whether permanent or not. Any faculty member not taking his/her classes is severely reprimanded and if on a limited term contract ('tenure track' or 'visiting') termination is immediate. While administrative responsibilities are assigned course equivalents, such positions are reserved for permanent faculty. Tenure track appointees, thus, are left free to pursue teaching and research, the two parameters on which they are judged over the course of their appointment.

In the case of teaching, student evaluations are paramount. Every course that a faculty member teaches

is evaluated in this way, year after year. Those on tenure track are informed of the departmentwide average teaching grade, and know that their teaching must be close to this level by the third year and preferably above it towards the end of their fifth year at the university. At this time, s/he submits all research publications to the department head, with these, under the supervision of the university's Dean of Faculty's office, then being sent out for peer review and assessment. Teaching ability is assessed internally, based on the evaluations received by the candidate on all the courses s/he has taught thus far. At the end of the process, one is either granted tenure, or asked to leave.

While painful, and sometimes imperfect, the system is by and large considered 'fair' and, as with student examinations and grading, viewed as providing a reasonable approximation to 'first best', full information solutions. Most importantly it delivers the two things that universities prize the most — high quality teaching and proven research ability. Contractual appointments serve this purpose because the systems in place in these universities ensure a direct causality between performance and outcomes. Unfortunately, such systems are not in place in universities in India today, and without these, limited-term appointments are likely to be plagued by severe 'agency costs' — of both the adverse selection and moral hazard kind.

Putting aside starting level remuneration issues (and the adverse selection costs that these generate), a young person choosing between limited-term contract appointments will look to his/her own abilities and from amongst the contracts on offer, pursue those that are most likely to reward, over the longer horizon, the abilities that s/he has. An able and motivated young individual will, other things being equal, prefer job contracts conditioned on performance to ones that are not, precisely

because they allow for, and reward, the signaling of superior abilities, skills and effort. Thus, if appointments in other organizations are conditioned on performance, a person with above average capabilities would prefer those to university appointments because, with no reasonable evaluation systems in place, universities cannot credibly commit to rewarding good teaching and research. Consequently, contractual appointments offered by universities and colleges are likely to be taken up only by second rung candidates, with obvious implications for the quality of teaching and research delivered by these institutions.

The story, however, does not end here. Absent conditioning on performance, limited term contracts are bound to carry severe moral hazard costs, with particularly pernicious implications for the quantity and quality of teaching rendered by these institutions. This is because, with no monitoring and evaluation of teaching, and with the probability of renewal dependent more on 'other factors', a sensible contract appointee will, most likely, work either on these 'other factors', or on developing skills that are demanded by the larger job market outside. While this may on occasion induce the pursuit of research, projects and publications, among other sundries, it will certainly not induce any efforts towards, or investments in skills specific to teaching. Thus, given the present environment in universities and colleges, contract appointments will assuredly not deliver better educational institutions. What one will get on this front, instead, is contract appointments, increased shirking, and an accelerated fall in teaching standards across the board. As poor teaching begets ill-trained students, and as this is the pool from which colleges and universities recruit faculty, an accelerated decline in the quality of higher education in India is axiomatic.

As suggested earlier, limited-term

contracts are needed, but these will deliver only if they are well designed and only if they are backed up by systems of evaluation that enable tight and fair conditioning on performance. It is these systems that need to be built in our educational institutions and it is here that the UGC can play a significant role. It can begin by mandating teaching evaluations by students, of every course taught in every college and university across the country. After a couple of years, once this implemented and fine tuned, it can require that institutions of higher education offer tenure track appointments, conditioned, among other things, on delivering a certain minimal grade level (the department average?) on this front. This will empower students in the correct dimension and, at the very minimum, ensure that teachers teach. The UGC can follow this up by liberating undergraduate teaching from the shackles that presently bind it. Specifically, faculty members in undergraduate colleges should be allowed to set their own course syllabi, as also to examine their own students.

Without these changes, talented and able individuals are unlikely to join these institutions, and it is imperative that they do, for undergraduate teaching is the foundation on which the rest of our higher education system builds. With better teachers in place at this level, one will assuredly get better-trained students emanating from these institutions. As these students move up the educational system and into faculty positions themselves, not only is better teaching assured across the board, but one can then begin looking to better research delivery as well.

A long and tropical view undoubtedly, but perhaps that is what is needed. Rome after all was not built in a day ■

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