

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 101 Number 4

25 August 2011

EDITORIAL

Auditing Academia: Sherpas and Stars

Auditors have always been associated, in common perception, with the responsibility of ensuring that the financial transactions of institutions and organizations are above board, following norms laid down by government and regulatory bodies. Auditors also examine whether public institutions have overspent money or delayed projects, often pointing to managerial inefficiency. In assessing the factors that lead to cost and time overruns, even when the highest standards of financial propriety have been maintained, auditors have the wonderful benefit of hindsight. In recent times, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has acquired a larger than life image as the guardian of integrity and efficiency in public projects and institutions. The present climate of public suspicion and recrimination in India may lead to a situation where doing nothing may be the safest option for those who are charged with the responsibility of overseeing expansion and development. Academic institutions are also subject to audit, but the focus has always been on matters related to finance, accounting, purchases and construction activities. While the scale of spending in our research institutions is increasing, it is still a relatively minor figure in the ever increasing expenditures of government. Institutions often benefit from the sometimes uncomfortable observations of auditors, as corrective measures invariably follow the dreaded 'audit para'; a not uncommon outcome of every annual exercise. Many heads of academic institutions are generally innocent of the byzantine world of finance and accounts (I count myself among them). The external auditors, are therefore, a most welcome addition to internal oversight mechanisms. While financial audits are performed with great efficiency by teams with accounting expertise, 'academic audits' may still be largely uncharted territory. While project reviews and departmental assessment by external 'expert committees' are the norm, they certainly do not seem to be invested with the same stamp of authority that is conveyed by financial audit. Performance audits in the sphere of higher education and research are often subjective and open to debate. How does one assess the performance of an academic institution? The easiest, and undoubtedly escapist, way appears to be to follow the ranking schemes that have become so popular; the Shanghai rankings or those produced by *The Times*. These, however, largely focus on the best in the world; the top 500, leaving thousands more well beneath the radar. Nobel prizes, papers in *Science*, *Nature* and in the top 1% of cited articles may be criteria that permit

distinctions between the top research universities; they may hardly be the index by which one can judge whether the vast majority of institutions are doing their jobs well. Institutions are invariably judged by the academic performance of their faculty and students. Strong teaching and mentoring programs create an image of well trained and capable alumni. Productive research programs are the hallmark of a scholarly faculty. When both flourish, institutions scale great heights and bask in the warm glow of public appreciation. When either teaching or research become the exclusive focus, the academic profile of an institution becomes excessively skewed. Small, exclusive research institutions are often well hidden from public view; rarely do they confront the public scrutiny to which large universities are often subject.

Two entirely disparate events conspired to turn my thoughts towards the problem of assessing performance ('auditing') of academics and their institutions. First, of course, was the barrage of discussion in the media on financial audits conducted by the CAG. Can there be other kinds of audit, especially where performance in a mandated task is measured? Secondly, I stumbled entirely by accident on a provocatively written report, commissioned by the Regents of the Universities of Texas. Here, a highly paid outsider was brought in to assess the state of two major universities. The subject of 'academic audit' may indeed be highly relevant in India today, especially as a rapid expansion of the higher education and academic research sector has now been set in motion. The building of new universities and institutions is being undertaken in the backdrop of serious concerns about the state of existing universities across the country, many of which have completed several decades of existence. There has been widespread and, often depressing discussion on the state of governance, declining academic standards, precarious funding positions, faculty shortages and a deteriorating ambience at many universities, many of which have seen better days. Legislation is often seen as the only possible approach to the problems at hand, with the result that a large number of bills dealing with higher education await the approval of a Parliament, that has many more pressing concerns on its agenda. In the run up to the 12th Five Year Plan, discussions about new initiative to repair the eroding structures of our academic institutions are being heard with increasing frequency, in Delhi's meeting rooms. Over the last few years a succession of commissions and committees have laid out road maps for resurrecting the academic system. Planning a

reform agenda appears possible; implementing even the least controversial elements of change appears impossibly difficult. I, therefore, read with some interest the Texas report, which has strongly stirred resentment in the academic community and has been widely denigrated and summarily dismissed, as motivated.

The Texas report entitled, *Higher Education's Faculty Productivity Gap: The Cost to Students, Parents and Taxpayers* is authored by Rick O'Donnell, an analyst of education policy, with an outlook that might place him at the conservative end of American policy commentators. The O'Donnell report analyses faculty performance at the University of Texas and Texas A&M University, using data provided by the institutions. The report begins by noting that these are 'the only two public universities in the country to have released such detailed data', shining 'a bright light on higher education's faculty productivity gap'. In provoking readers to plunge into the report the author advances his thesis: 'The data shows in high relief what anecdotally many have long suspected, that the research university's employment practices look remarkably like a Himalayan trek, where indigenous Sherpas carry the heavy loads so Western tourists can simply enjoy the view.' O'Donnell's analysis uses data on workloads for over 7000 faculty members at the two universities. Using two parameters, the number of students taught in an academic year and the amount of external research grants generated, he categorizes faculty in a most colourful manner, undoubtedly with the clear, albeit unstated, intention of stirring institutions out of comfortable slumber. Using descriptors that will certainly be used for some time to come, he divides faculty into five categories: *Dodgers*, *Coasters*, *Sherpas*, *Pioneers* and *Stars*. The *Dodgers* 'are the least productive faculty' who do no research, teach very little and 'have figured out how to dodge any but the most minimal of responsibilities'. *Coasters* are largely 'protected by tenure and seniority' and do little teaching and bring in negligible research funding. *Sherpas* are the ones who do much of teaching 'on a grueling time-table' and 'maintain interactions with students'. O'Donnell's metaphor is evocative, conjuring up an image of the largely unsung toilers, who have helped to build the reputations of many climbers, famed for their conquests in the Himalayas. The *Pioneers* are 'highly productive research faculty' who 'buy released time from teaching'. *Stars* are 'highly productive faculty who do a lot of teaching and a lot of funded research'. The analysis provides quantitative data, which will undoubtedly be contested, on the distribution amongst the five categories. A quick estimate for the two institutions revealed that the *Dodgers* accounted for 35–44%, *Coasters* 32–33%, *Sherpas* 21–30%, *Pioneers* 0.8–1.4% and the *Stars* trailed behind at 0.6–0.8%. O'Donnell asks some disturbing questions, which may indeed find echoes elsewhere. How did teaching loads get so light, with tenured and tenure track faculty not performing the majority of the teaching? The answer that is usually advanced is, 'that although these faculty have light teaching loads, it is

because they are doing research'. For the large Texas institutions the statistics used in this report undercut this argument; approximately 20% of the faculty bring in 99% of the research funding. O'Donnell, an acerbic critic of academia, is quick to note that Pareto's 80/20 rule is 'more like 20/99 in research'. He emphasizes the need for university administrators to ask the questions that need answers if improvements are to be made. Some questions are general enough to be asked in academia across the world: 'Who are the *Dodgers* and *Coasters* and has a "Fat City" culture been allowed to flourish in any part of the university? How do we ensure the quality of teaching undertaken by the *Sherpas* many of whom are part time? Who are the *Pioneers* and *Stars* and how do we identify and recognize them, honour them and attract more of them to our universities?'

In a 'policy perspective' that asks, 'Is academic research a good investment for Texas?', O'Donnell is merciless on much of what passes for academic research. In questioning the value of scholarly papers he quotes William Broad, a former editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*: 'There seems to be no study too fragmented, no hypothesis too trivial, no literature citation too biased or too egotistical, no design too warped, no methodology too bungled, no presentation too self serving, no argument too circular, no conclusions too trifling or too unjustified, and no grammar and syntax too offensive for a paper to end up in print.' Even invective can sometimes be pleasing to the ear. Critics of O'Donnell's analysis have been quick to point out that 'research dollars generated' may be a poor index of productivity and, that such criteria do a disservice to scholars in humanities and social sciences. However, one cannot escape the feeling that the broad conclusions of the analysis may hold even if alternate criteria for measuring research output are used. He has been perceptive in realizing that 'big time researchers...need access to the best of the best graduate students'. His advice: 'The best way to do that is to teach.' I suspect that there will be many in our institutions who will disagree. His conclusion: 'The bottom line is that high-performing researchers are also high performing teachers for very self interested reasons. The search for talent.' Predictably, the O'Donnell audit has been widely condemned and his services terminated.

In reading about the happenings in faraway Texas one cannot but help wondering about the possible conclusions of a similar academic audit of our institutions. There is little doubt that even a cursory study will reveal many disquieting facts. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are prized. Responsibility and accountability are rarely demanded in academia. Institutional ambience and peer pressures are the sole driving forces in maintaining standards in our laboratories and universities. If these forces do not operate, decay is inevitable. If the world class aspirations that are constantly trumpeted are to be met, we must praise and encourage the *Sherpas* even as we search for the *Stars*.

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