

## Teaching versus research in higher education institutes: revisiting the issue

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*We discuss here the concept of teaching research nexus and its impact on quality education and need to bifurcate teaching and research in higher education institutions.*

The Narendra Modi led India Government is laying great emphasis on revamping higher education system of the country, to make it more competitive globally. The recent attempt of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (GoI) to rank higher education institutes (HEIs) of the country (i.e. National Institutional Ranking) is a commendable effort. Overall 3565 institutions, including 233 universities were ranked on the basis of 22 parameters grouped under five heads. Amongst the various parameters used, maximum weightage was given to research output of the universities (40%).

However, in our endeavour to figure in the global ranking, willingly or unwillingly, we are ignoring existing ground realities in many Indian universities which could undermine our efforts.

### The three goals of higher education

Higher education (HE) has a three-fold purpose, namely teaching, research and extension. However, there is little doubt that imparting quality education (i.e. teaching) is a primary objective of HEIs. Teaching is a complex professional practice which involves sharing of knowledge and understanding by an expert in a field or discipline of knowledge with a student who is expected to be initiated into that field or discipline. It is through teaching that the new generation gets acquainted with the culture of a discipline, including its knowledge, processes, the norms and values, etc. Once initiated into the culture of discipline through teaching, one can venture, develop and enrich the discipline. Apart from producing quality human resource and skilled workforce, quality teaching paves the way for fruitful and meaningful research and innovation.

Research function of HE deals with generation/creation of new knowledge, which is crucial and much linked to the teaching process. Apart from universi-

ties, various research institutes have devoted themselves exclusively to this purpose. However, universities continue to shoulder the dual responsibility of imparting (i.e. teaching) and creating (i.e. research) knowledge. In recent times, with the opening up of HE (easy access to foreign-trained researchers; emergent knowledge societies and knowledge-based economy to which India is also a party), research function of the universities has gained greater prominence. Not only in India, globally, countries are facing the challenge of enhancing their research capacities, each responding to it according to their capacity. Globally, research and ensuing knowledge are considered as productive investment, and are positively linked to the economic growth of the countries (i.e. innovation-based knowledge economy). According to Kearny<sup>1</sup>, recognizing and promoting excellence so as to discover and access new frontiers of knowledge is an imperative which should be possible for all countries whatever the level of their economic development.

Extension is the third important function of HE, which includes sharing of knowledge and innovation, so as to ensure that its maximum benefits reach the society. It represents the social responsibility of HE achieved through fostering of intellectual and social development of society. This is determined by the quality of knowledge produced (i.e. research) and excellence of its transmission (i.e. teaching). Both GoI and Office of the President of India are making special efforts to actively involve HEIs in achieving our goals in the realm of education.

### Teaching versus research: distinctness versus complementarity

The relationship between teaching and research is fundamental in defining the distinctive nature of a university as an institution (M. Taylor, unpublished). This observation was accepted by the

then National Knowledge Commission (NKC), GoI highlighting the complementarities of the two functions of HE. Both teaching and research are metaphorically related as the two faces of the same coin, leading to the emergence of the concept of teaching–research nexus. It is assumed that an excellent teacher would automatically excel in research and *vice versa*.

However, this assumption has emerged to be controversial, with increasing voices highlighting its fallacy<sup>2</sup>. According to Gibbs<sup>3</sup>, ‘the notion that teaching excellence flows directly from research excellence is absurd: they are in direct conflict, compete for academic attention and only one of them is rewarded’. This has been further supported by other studies<sup>4,5</sup>.

Without belittling the importance of research, the above arguments clearly discard the myth that excellence in research will bring excellence in teaching. We accept that both functions are important and vital for HE. In fact, quality teaching is a pre-requisite to quality research. Therefore, both functions should get equal importance. However, in case of conflict and confusion, HEIs should side with teaching. In a decade or so, it has been increasingly realized that greater emphasis on research is severely compromising the teaching standards in Indian universities. The academic performance index system used to appoint and promote the teachers is biased towards research output; however, benefiting none, neither teaching nor research. It has resulted in a flurry of bogus and sub-standard publications, with the mushrooming of fake publication houses in every nook and corner of the country. Rather than promoting research, it has generated publication pressure on good teachers. Such forced research is not going to benefit us, as evident from India’s dismal standing in global science publication<sup>6</sup>.

There are no two opinions that we need both the best of teachers and researchers, with effective performances in either of them to be acknowledged and

awarded. However, it is impossible to promote quality research at the cost of teaching. Unfortunately, in majority of our universities, there is no mechanism to promote research. Reasons are multiple – stifling bureaucracy, quality of education, insufficient funding, lack of scholarly inputs, etc. People are doing research for the sake of research. Take the case of the newly established HEIs (on or after 2007), they lack visionary leadership (Vice-Chancellors lack research aptitude and are more interested in personal gains), physical infrastructure, funds and willingness to support research on their campuses. Worst is the anti-research attitude of academicians occupying top administrative positions and non-teaching staff (majority of them have no work experience) severely impeding research and innovation in these institutes. Because of their attitude, running externally funded projects has become a nightmare. Conditions are worse in majority of state universities and colleges.

We require a fresh look towards teaching function in HE<sup>7</sup>. Efforts should be made to promote excellence in teaching, which has its own structure and epistemological basis. A teacher as a professional has to strike a synthesis between his content and pedagogical knowledge to deliver in an effective manner. He/she needs to be reflective in his/her teaching role as well so as to maintain teaching practices at their best, since it is teaching that prepares the students for future research and innovation. The rise of Finland's education system from anonymity in the 1980s to a level where it is often termed as 'the Finnish Miracle' was possible to a large extent by excellent teachers, which subsequently paved the way for excellent research output<sup>8</sup>. Even for acclaimed universities, research performance is no longer sufficient to maintain their reputation<sup>9</sup>. Effective teaching need not be considered secondary to research; an effective teacher must get the respect he/she deserves. If this is the case, which we believe is, then in HEIs these two functions of HE should be bifurcated. To support quality teaching, allow good teachers to pursue their interest without forcing them to do research, for which many of them may not be properly trained. There is no harm in promoting good teachers purely on the basis of their teaching excellence. Ideally, promotion is a democratic right of any individual and should be judged

on his/her performance for which he/she has been appointed, and not on the basis of something forced upon him/her. Since promotions are more dependent on research, teachers tend to be more interested in research (at least, it appears so), ignoring teaching. We need to devise a mechanism wherein teaching could be evaluated explicitly in a structured and organized way. Comparable quality enhancement processes that are used for research need to be applied to teaching also, such as peer review, rewards for excellence, cooperative work, and incentives to read and discuss the literature<sup>3</sup>.

### Restoring the status of teaching in HEIs

The idea that teaching and research are distinct activities, each having its own structure of practices and having its own epistemological underpinnings, highlights the fallacy of teaching – research nexus. When we talk of restoring the significance of teaching, the word 'restore' highlights that teaching is an addendum to research. In India, relegating teaching as secondary to research (as manifested in different assessment criteria) is a more recent trend, with maximum influence observed in the last couple of decades. The 'restoration challenge' demands concerted efforts, including provisions for initial teacher education (induction period) and developing a lifelong learning framework for teachers. The Orientation and Refresher courses can hardly qualify as valid programmes for preparing new entrants for a complex professional practice like teaching. Moreover, they are taken lightly by teachers, only as promotional requirement 1; and rather than showcasing the recent pedagogical developments, invited speakers are more interested in overloading and mesmerizing the participants with their supreme knowledge. Therefore, a provision for probation and training period should be made before one can officially become a teacher. Boyer<sup>2</sup> suggested that scholarly teaching has some core components, viz. clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation and reflective critique. In England, the Dearing report (1997) had identified the need of restoring the status of teaching in HE. Based on its recommendations the National Teaching Fellowship

Scheme was introduced to appreciate 'excellent' teachers. Later the scheme was modified to recognize the importance of co-teachers and other collaborators involved in the process.

### Concluding remarks

We do not intend to dilute the mutually inclusive nature of teaching and research, as accepted by the then NKC that states, 'A cross-pollination of theory and practice, wherein equal emphasis is placed on research and teaching, is essential for progress'. Nevertheless, advocacy for acknowledging teaching function of HE as distinct from the research function is based on existing ground realities. Imparting quality teaching is the prime function of HEIs. The excessive emphasis on research is adversely affecting teaching quality on our campuses. We are already having many institutions exclusively devoted for research. Non-scientific and ad-hoc mechanism adopted to assess teaching performance should be replaced by scientific and measurable criteria. There is a need to make teachers innovative, creative and inquisitive through policies and infrastructural support.

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