

Academic Appointments: Contracts and Tenure

The University Grants Commission (UGC) appears to have set the cat among the pigeons, by beginning consideration on a proposal to introduce contractual appointments in universities and institutions of higher education. Although no firm directives seem to have emanated from the UGC, the very idea that academic appointments may be imbued with an element of impermanence has provoked considerable discussion in the press. While teachers' organizations have viewed the proposal with suspicion and distrust, editorials and columns in some newspapers have welcomed the move. Viewed from the outside, 'the UGC's proposal to introduce a contract system in the appointment of teachers in colleges and universities is to be welcomed as this plan, if implemented, will help to improve the standards of higher education in this country.' (*Deccan Herald*, 15 November 2002). This expression of effusive support for the UGC proposal is based on a harsh and probably accurate assessment: 'It is well known that the higher education scene in the country is not very inspiring. . . . A teacher once appointed, can continue in his position till retirement, however unsatisfactory his performance is. Security of tenure breeds complacency and inertia.' But, to thousands of academics across the country the UGC's move appears to be designed to create uncertainty and confusion among the ranks of college and university teachers. A contract system selectively applied to academics appears inherently unfair in a system, where accountability is hardly ever demanded of the higher levels of decision making. But, the UGC's proposal may be driven by another motivation; the proposed contract appointments, in some measure, will be financially underwritten by central guarantees, permitting academic institutions to recruit fresh faculty, albeit on a contractual basis. This would address an issue of considerable concern to most university departments – the problem of an aging faculty depleted by retirements. For several years, many universities and colleges have found it difficult to recruit new members of the faculty, burdened as they are by financial problems and directives from state governments, which almost completely prohibit fresh induction. The state universities have been particularly hard hit but some central institutions have

also struggled to bear the burden of hiring new faculty. Viewed in this background, the UGC's proposal might be charitably considered as an attempt to facilitate the infusion of fresh blood into our academic faculties.

Why then are contract appointments greeted with such concern by teachers' organizations? The most clearly stated fear is that a contract system would be used by administrators to limit academic freedom and to develop a system of patronage, which would be detrimental to any academic institution. The contract system would also appear to be a difficult option in an environment where job security is prized, mobility is restricted, job opportunities are limited and unemployment benefits and social security are unheard of. However, it must be emphasized that in many institutions in India the first appointments are contractual, with permanence or tenure assured only after an initial period of five years. In these cases, the conversion to a 'tenured' position is often preceded by an academic assessment, but this process is generally perfunctory. Contracts are rarely terminated on the grounds of non-performance.

The situation in India may be contrasted with the academic system in the United States where the concept of 'tenure' has been used to maintain extremely high standards of academic performance in the best of universities. The American research university system has developed extremely robust standards for assessment of research and teaching. The standards expected to attain 'tenure' are generally clear and by and large, the assessment system appears fair and equitable. The American system developed over a century, with the Association of American Colleges and Universities enunciating their views on 'academic freedom and tenure' periodically over the years 1925–1990. As the liberalization and privatization process moves forward in India, it might be valuable to reflect on the present system of higher education in India and to consider strategies for stemming and even reversing the inexorable tide of decline in our universities.

Few will argue with the proposition that universities in India need a new infusion of dynamic and committed faculty. Over the last couple of years both the UGC and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) have

introduced new schemes to support the development of infrastructure for scientific research in university departments. The funding for academic research programs has shown an upward trend, although the number of research projects supported in universities is still relatively small. Unfortunately, these positive developments are unlikely to have a measurable impact, if urgent steps are not taken to recruit faculty to university science departments. The ability of many state governments to bear an increased salary burden is limited, necessitating an infusion of central funds, through the UGC. 'New blood' appointments could be supported centrally, with a measure of control on the quality of the appointed faculty. But it may be necessary to consider centrally funding these positions over an extended period of time, since most state institutions are unlikely to absorb an enhanced financial burden after 3–5 years.

Should such appointments be contractual? It would appear that the time may have come, where a beginning can be made in introducing an element of evaluation, before the grant of tenure. What are the parameters on which an assessment can be made? It is almost self-evident that academics must be evaluated on the basis of performance in research and teaching. The former is particularly important in departments and institutions which have been declared as centres of excellence, but must not be neglected in all centres of post-graduate education. Teaching must also be judged; the spectacle of absent teachers and classes that are not conducted does not bring credit to the community. But, most importantly the evaluators must be seen to be fair; and they must be fair. It is here that the Indian university system faces its severest problems.

Few Vice-Chancellors, Directors or Heads of Department are respected by the communities over which they wield administrative authority. In attempting to democratize the functioning of many bodies in universities, academic anarchy has flourished. In many places, important bodies like university syndicates and academic senates have been corrupted and destroyed. Unsurprisingly, the idea of contracts and tenure in academic appointments is viewed with intense suspicion by teachers and researchers in our universities. The UGC might, in fact, consider

measures to tone up the administration of academic institutions, including a measure of external review of high level appointments in universities. It is a welcome sign that money for major research facilities and faculty appointments at universities may, at least in part, be supported by central agencies. But, beyond financial support, it may be necessary to find new ways of ensuring that our universities are able to steadily recruit new faculty, based on performance and promise. A young, dynamic faculty may be a pre-requisite in making an academic department an attractive option for students.

In recent times, the emphasis on science in India has focused primarily on central institutions, national laboratories and the monolithic, strategic research departments. The universities have largely been left to their own devices, buffeted by changing political circumstances in the states. The science departments in colleges and universities have been steadily downgraded, with falling student and faculty strengths. Ironically, the universities with their sprawling and sometimes, desolate campuses invariably host the annual Indian Science Congress, at which the expressions of political will to support science are periodically enunciated. This year was no exception, with Bangalore University's enormous campus playing host to the many luminaries, who represent the establishment charged with the responsibility for fostering science and promoting its development and application. As always, there were visions; this time for a global space community. But, it all seemed far removed from the concerns of the institution that so graciously hosted the Congress. The Indian scientific enterprise necessarily draws its talent from the pool of science students graduating from our universities. It is imperative, therefore, to stem the tide of decline and to plot a strategy for the restoration of science to its rightful place within our system of higher education. Despite the controversies over the modalities of the proposal being considered by the UGC, any step that facilitates new faculty induction, with necessary controls on quality, would be a step in the right direction.

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