

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 89 Number 8

25 October 2005

GUEST EDITORIAL

Deemed Universities and other Universities

In keeping with the aspirations of the enormously large young population in India, the number of universities has rapidly increased during the past one or two decades. Three kinds of universities exist: (i) the regular universities which have been set up by the state or the central governments through legislative acts, (ii) those institutions of higher learning which have been 'deemed to be universities' (deemed universities) by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and (iii) private universities which have been set up by individuals or private trusts following legislative permissions granted for their establishment. In recent years, an increasing number of institutions of higher learning are recognized by the UGC as 'Deemed Universities'. Many of them are primarily teaching institutions, with limited research activity while others are primarily research institutions with little teaching.

Genesis of 'deemed universities' is traceable to the 1948 report of the Radhakrishnan Commission on university education, which noted 'During the earlier years of the nationalist movement a number of institutions of higher education were established independent of the government and its support, determined to work out their own destinies in the spirit of free India. Though their difficulties and discouragement were great, and the mortality among them high, a few of them survived and have justified the heroic struggle they made'. The Commission suggested that these institutions may be given university status by adopting a method of creating universities by charter. Accordingly, the University Grants Commission Act of 1956 provided that the institutions which have unique and distinct character of their own could enjoy the privileges of a university without losing their distinct character and autonomy. The relevant section of the UGC Act states 'The Central Government may, on the advice of the Commission, declare by notification in the Official Gazette, that any institution for higher education, other than a University, shall be deemed to be a University for the purposes of this Act, and on such a declaration being made, all the provisions of this Act shall apply to such institution as if it were a University'.

The number of institutions which have claimed and received recognition as 'deemed to be university' has shown a phenomenal increase in recent years. This increase in the number of the so-called 'deemed universities' is a cause of concern on several counts. The most important reason is:

do the various institutions recognized as 'deemed universities' really fulfil the requirements expected of a university? The other important concern arises in the context of the rapid deterioration noted in recent decades in the quality of teaching and research in the regular universities.

A common perception of a typical university is that it is a place where strangers from different parts assemble to learn (students) different subjects at different levels from those, also derived from different parts and in different subjects, who are experts in their chosen fields (the teachers). The ancient universities or 'Gurukulas' like Taxila or Nalanda in this subcontinent also were based on the same principle of being a source of universal knowledge. The 'source' here implies both creation of new knowledge as well as its dissemination. This age-old concept of a university need not change in modern times. Thus a university has three important components: creation of new knowledge (research), dissemination of knowledge (teaching) and both these activities needing to encompass a wide range of subjects.

In the light of this universal perception of a university, one can examine the reasons for concern for 'deemed universities'. There are two broad categories of institutions that have been given the status of 'deemed universities'. Some institutions are basically involved in teaching (at under- and/or postgraduate levels) in limited or wider range of disciplines while others are primarily involved in research in specific disciplines but which are, as deemed universities, authorized to award Ph D degrees in their own names. It is clear that neither of these categories fulfil the basic requirements of a university. Without active research component, the excitement of the presence of research labs and teachers who contribute to creation of new knowledge is not available to the students and consequently, those coming out of such 'deemed universities' (or for that matter out of the typical university departments with little research activity) are generally less competent to move ahead with distinction either in higher education (teaching and research) or in other fields. On the other hand, research institutes that specialize in research in some specific areas fail to provide the inclusive academic environment provided by a typical university with its large numbers of departments of very diverse subjects. Moreover, research institutes that get the status of 'deemed university' to enable them to award their own Ph D degree

(whether in a limited or more diverse range of disciplines) do not fulfil the expectations of an ideal university, which should have teaching programmes spanning from undergraduate and/or postgraduate to doctoral levels in several different disciplines. Thus in either case, institutions are created that enjoy the status of a university but do not really fulfil the requirements or objectives of a university. An institution, no matter how good its teaching programmes are, if without the active research component (and vice-versa), does not deserve to have the status of a university.

A common argument in support of recognizing a variety of institutions as 'deemed to be university' is that since the institutions which were created as universities are also not doing what was expected of them, why should one object to the recognition of some institutions, which are supposedly doing better either in teaching or in research even if in limited disciplines, as equivalent to university? This of course is a negative argument, which only compounds the problems facing higher education in the country. Among the many factors responsible for the worrisome decline in the quality of higher education in the various universities, limited funds and poor governance are the more significant. With increasing numbers of deemed universities, the demand on the already scarce resources becomes even more intense and the money gets spread thinner and thinner which serves no purpose at all. On the other hand, those 'deemed universities' that do not need funds from the UGC, pose another concern. The universities are supposed to be under the quality control system surveillance of the UGC but the 'deemed universities' that do not need the financial support from the UGC remain autonomous in their governance, etc. Considering the poor state of affairs in most universities, it is obvious that the UGC has not distinguished itself in terms of quality control. Notwithstanding this, the deemed universities being autonomous and generally outside even this perfunctory regulatory process, can, and often have, become reduced to fee-collection and degree-awarding centres with little component of education *per se*. Autonomy is a boon only if sense of responsibility is felt from within and also enforced from outside by peer-pressure or regulatory bodies.

The deemed university status of the various research laboratories/institutes set up by the different governmental and semi-governmental agencies needs additional considerations. Most of these research institutes were set up to undertake advanced and applied research in specific fields and supposedly competent scientists were appointed to undertake the mandated research. Over the years and decades, most of the scientists in these research institutes started having Ph D scholars working under their guidance. Somewhere in this process, the original mandate of the given research institute/laboratory was lost and the scientists started working on problems of their choice, a freedom that is generally taken for granted, and rightly so, in a university system. Since the research institutions were not authorized to award degrees of their own, each of the research institutions had to develop linkages with one or more university/universities, which would award the Ph D

degree to their research scholars. Why did this arrangement fail and why should these research institutions today feel the need for being recognized as 'deemed universities'? It seems that the arrangement between a research institute and a given university for the award of Ph D degree to research scholars working in the institute failed primarily because in this arrangement the university system did not gain either academically or financially. Ideally, scientists in research institutions and university departments should have developed academic linkages for joint supervision system so that the given university also owned the research work. The research institutions took the university system only as a 'post-office' to receive the thesis and deliver it to a set of examiners and then deliver the evaluation reports back to the research institute and finally deliver the degree to the candidate! Such an arrangement where one partner only gives and the other one only receives cannot obviously continue very long, more so when the academic community in the university also begins to feel the pinch of deprivation of quality students in their own labs, because the same are going to 'greener pastures' in better equipped research institutes. This 'brain-drain' of young research scholars from the university system to the research institutes compounded the deterioration in the university departments further through the vicious circle of 'poor output' (fewer Ph Ds and research publications) and consequently 'poor input' of quality research scholars and further research grants, etc. The university departments are continuously losing the race as is obvious even from a cursory look at the share of university teachers in extramural research grants and awards/honours.

Recognizing research institutes as 'deemed universities', as some of them already have been, is a negation of the original objectives for which dual system of universities and research institutes was set in place in the first instance. None of the research institutes, even if their scientists are 'teaching' some courses at M Sc and/or Ph D levels, fulfil the classical requirements of a university having concourses of students and teachers in many diverse disciplines. Real breakthroughs in technologies can happen only when there is a close interaction among universities (source of basic knowledge), research institutes (application-oriented research) and the industry (users of the technology). If really new technology has not been generated in the country, it is primarily because of the absence of such close interactions among the various components. The present mess in the system of higher education cannot be solved by the research institutes 'breaking away' from the university system and being recognized as 'deemed universities' with full freedom to undertake research in any area. One needs to assess where things have gone wrong and work to rectify the past mistakes. By creating more and more 'deemed universities' one would only help the other universities to be 'doomed'!

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