

Higher education quality hit

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UNIVERSITY AD HOC TEACHERS

In recent years, there has been an increasing realisation in on the need and importance of raising the standard of higher education. The cause of higher education has captured the imagination of our leaders who have been voicing their concerns about the need to engage with the concerns of quality in the higher education sector.

Union Minister for Human Resource Development Prakash Javadekar recently vowed to improve the quality of higher education while attending a review meeting with vice chancellors. But then, while we talk about raising the quality of education, we are not willing to engage with the concerns faced by one of the most fundamental pillar of education - teachers.

The quality of work life that we have been offering to our teachers for several decades now, is demotivating to say the least. Teaching is considered one of the most important aspects of education but unfortunately, not the teachers. The recent hunger strike by academics from Delhi University against ad hocism is an example of this. How do we hope to improve the quality of higher education without paying attention to plight of one of the major stakeholders of education?

It is important that the idealism that reflects in the claims of the policy maker also gets reflected in the reality that surrounds the lives of our university teachers. If education is the panacea for all evils, then how and why is it that people who have dedicated their lives to the cause of education are thus afflicted?

As per the UGC norm, not more than 10% of the total workforce should be working on contract. Recent reports indicate that there are close to 4,500 ad hoc faculty members who have been working on a contract which gets extended after every four months, which is a clear violation of UGC norms.

This is happening when close to 40% positions are lying vacant. Some faculty members have been working as ad hoc for up to 10 years and even that does not guarantee a place for them in the university if a permanent position ever opens.

The argument is that whenever a position is advertised, everyone should get an equal chance to apply for the position and only the best candidate would be offered a position. If that is the case, then how is

it that an ad hoc faculty is allowed to work on contract for years if the management is not convinced about their suitability for a permanent position in the same role?

Ad hoc teachers work in an environment of uncertainty and are often overburdened with work. They are known to put in longer hours than permanent faculty members and hardly have a voice in decisions that affect the quality of their work life.

In such a demoralised and exploitative state, how are teachers expected to instil higher ideals of life and values in students, especially when it is not their lived reality. An ad hoc faculty carries out the same duties as a permanent faculty though at half the salary and less than half the benefit such as vacations, research grants, and other developmental schemes that extends to a permanent employee. The DU is still better at paying salary but the same cannot be said about colleges across the country. In many states and private universities, individuals appointed as assistant professors on contractual basis earn as low as Rs 15,000 per month.

Ad hocism as a trend gained currency in the early 1990s as a measure to respond to the problem of teacher shortage. Ad-hoc appointments are a stopgap arrangement and can never effectively respond to the faculty deficit in the universities unless these faculty members are given opportunity to acquire adequate on job research experience and training and absorbed in the university they have been serving.

As teachers ad hoc faculty offer same quality of teaching as permanent faculty, the only difference lies in the way ad hoc faculty is treated. They cannot even take pride in their professional contribution or job situation in spite of having years of education, experience and academic credentials.

Parameters of quality

Coming to the question of quality, how can we improve the quality of the educational experience if one of the most important drivers of education – teachers – do not have a sense of belonging towards the organisation or job security.

The question of what constitutes quality or how do we define the term is a highly debated one, but in most global discussions, teaching, citation, research, international mix of students and teachers, industry-academia interactions etc, have emerged as some of the important parameters to gauge quality and effectiveness of higher education.

Teaching, research and innovation, which are some of the key quality parameters, are bound to suffer in the environment of ad hocism. Universities try to extract the maximum from ad hocs with minimum commitment towards their growth and welfare.

There is hardly any policy around promoting innovative teaching, training, and research for and through practitioners. If university teachers are left to fend for themselves without even the basic mentoring from the more experienced permanent faculty members, how are they expected to themselves engage in research or promote research interest in their students?

In such a suspect atmosphere, how can universities hope to become sites of innovation, knowledge creation or promote quality and research oriented environment for either its teachers or students. This calls for a systemic change. In all the inaction and perpetual tussle of contract teachers with the system, it is higher education that gets defeated.

It is time that the policy makers and educational leaders, more specifically the HRD ministry, muster enough will to elevate the higher education system from the affliction of ad hocism, charting a path where the higher ideals of life are not only preached but also experienced by the educators.

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