

You can't shop for Teachers

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The rains may have eluded Delhi this monsoon, but it certainly is raining jobs. The University of Delhi is about to appoint more than 5000 teachers in the next few months. And no, that astonishing number is not a typographical error. There are about 4500 vacant positions in the 80 odd colleges under the University and around 850 positions in the faculties of the University. The Ministry for Human Resource Development, for reasons best known to them, has ordered the University to fill these positions within 6 months.

There are several reasons for such an astonishing number of vacancies. Firstly, there have been almost no appointments in the last decade or so for reasons which are not entirely academic. In the interim, many teachers have superannuated and their positions have fallen vacant. In addition, the expansion of the enrolment because of OBC reservation increased the number of positions by almost one half. Recently, the EWS reservation has added to this pool. Given that the appointment of such a huge number of people will have a profound effect on the teaching and research environment of the colleges and the faculties, it is important to delve into several aspects of the current lightning drive to recruit.

The vast majority of positions in the colleges are already being staffed by teachers who are oddly termed as ad-hoc, though they teach as much and sometimes more than the regular faculty. These teachers are having all the requisite qualifications for a permanent position but are given appointments from semester to semester. And for some of them this has been going on for a decade. The devastating psychological toll that this arrangement takes on the teachers can only be imagined. The situation in the faculties of the University is different- here by and large there are no ad-hoc appointments.

The critical issue in this whole exercise is the recruitment process itself. The recruitment is decentralized for the colleges and so in principle, one can conceive that such a huge

number of appointments would be done concurrently and thereby could take place in a reasonable amount of time. Further, since most vacant positions already have ad-hoc teachers teaching against them, and these have been deemed to be competent (or else would not have been reappointed year after year) and qualified, one can imagine that the colleges would be able to fill the positions.

For the university faculties on the other hand, the recruitment is centralized. The process is as follows: The number of candidates to be called for the interview per vacant post is determined by the UGC and a shortlisting of the applicants is done according to an academically suspect formula which is given by, well the UGC. Whatever happened to university autonomy is another matter. The Selection committee which interviews the candidates and selects them, consists of external experts as well as the Vice Chancellor and the Visitor's nominee apart from the Head of the concerned department.

This might seem like a reasonable process ordinarily- but these are hardly ordinary times. Filling up 850 positions involves interviewing around 10,000 candidates at the minimum as per the UGC guidelines. Assuming even a perfunctory interview lasting 30 minutes means a staggering 5000 hours of interviews. Since these committee meetings cannot be held concurrently, they would have to work for almost a year without a break! One can only imagine the quality of the candidates chosen by overworked and overburdened selection committees.

This elementary mathematical anomaly aside which seems to have escaped the MHRD aside, there is a more serious aspect to this farce. No academic institution worth its name ever goes in for such mass recruitments of its teaching faculty. The reason is simple- it is almost impossible that one would be able to find such large numbers of excellent teachers and researchers at any given instant of time. In addition, in any discipline, new sub-disciplines might emerge in the future which would need specialists. Academically, it makes a lot more sense to stagger appointments over a long period of time, something which institutions like the IITs and IIMs have been doing. The bureaucrats at the MHRD are obviously blissfully unaware of the academic consequences of their diktat before issuing it.

The selection itself is usually done primarily on the basis of the research capabilities of the applicant without any reference to her/his teaching capabilities or inclinations.

Generating new knowledge is obviously an integral and important part of the University's function in society. However, only focusing on research is to take a myopic view- good teachers are essential to motivate and train future researchers and teachers. Thus, one should factor in the applicant's capabilities to teach as well.

Of course, it would be difficult and impractical for a selection committee to gauge such capabilities in a short interview. However, this could easily be done by the concerned departments where the candidates could be required to give a seminar or teach a class and their peers could rate them on their teaching capabilities. This assessment could be shared with the selection committee which could give it due weightage before selecting. Once again, there is nothing particularly revolutionary about this process- the IITs and IIMs have been doing this for years.

For the past few years we have been witnessing an almost maniacal obsession with the global university rankings amongst our educational policy making establishment. Sanctioning money for infrastructure, research and human resources are all for the goal of improving our position in these rankings. Unfortunately, what our policy makers and administrators do not realize is that research and teaching are done by humans. Buildings and laboratories are crucial but they are superfluous in the absence of high quality teachers and researchers. The *Tuglaqian firmaans* to hire on a mass scale in an impossibly short time scale might be fine for hiring 2 lakh railway workers. But building world class academic institutions needs patience, some familiarity with how the academia works and willingness to modify straightjacketed processes. If we ignore these self-evident facts, a majority of our institutions will stagnate at best and decay into oblivion at worst.

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