

How to restore faculties

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On December 23rd, the Delhi High Court pronounced its judgement on a 15 year old case regarding faculty appointments in the University of Delhi. The case had been filed by a group of teachers who had been teaching for many years in an ad-hoc capacity in the Law faculty of Delhi University and were asking for regularization.

The Hon'ble High Court ordered the University to start the appointment process for all the 600 odd vacancies in its departments and 3500 faculty vacancies in its constituent colleges by January and to complete the process for the departments by May and for the colleges by July 2017.

This is a remarkable judgement. Remarkable since it seems to have given little thought to academic considerations for faculty recruitment or even simple and pure logistics. Let us look at a few facts.

The logistics first. The typical ratio for the number of people called for an interview to the number of vacancies is 10 to 1. It is typically more if the number of vacancies is small and less if the number of vacancies is large. So 10 is a reasonable number to work with. That means that to fill 600 vacancies in the departments, the interviews for which will start by March as directed by the High Court, the selection committee will need to interview 6000 candidates. Now given that these are faculty level appointments, one assumes that on an average it will take about 30 minutes per interview including breaks and other interruptions. That means that the selection committees will have work for 3000 hours. Divide that by 8 hours per day and we are talking about 375 days of non-stop interviews without any holidays. Clearly that would not be possible in the three months given by the High Court to complete the process.

Even this number is an underestimate. The statutes of the University demand that for faculty recruitment in the departments, the presence of the Visitor's nominee (usually an eminent academic) and the Vice Chancellor or the Pro Vice Chancellor is a must. Thus the interviews cannot be held concurrently since even Delhi University has not yet found a way for a person to be in two places at the same time. Plus the availability of the Visitor's nominee typically is an issue.

Thus one sees that purely logistically this is impossible. But the issue is more serious than just simple scheduling. Filling in a large number of vacancies together is not very conducive to getting the best faculty. Staggering the appointments over a period of time is a better strategy to get the best academic talent. Ensuring academic quality at recruitment is important because unlike the US for instance, where there is a tenure system in place, in our

system, appointments are essentially for life with no provision for replacing a poorly performing academic. Thus, the quality checks have to take place at the time of the initial recruitment.

Clearly the process is faulty-both on the grounds of efficiency and academic merit. We propose the following procedure for streamlining the recruitment procedure which though not ideal at least addresses some of the above mentioned shortcomings in the process. Our procedure has the advantage that it does not require any changes in the statutes of the university and so can be implemented without delay.

Instead of a single advertisement with a fixed date, the university allows applicants to apply at any time during a year. The applicant (if s/he fulfills the essential qualifications and experience criteria) is called for a seminar and interaction by the department concerned. The seminar is attended by all the faculty members who then grade the applicant in terms of the seminar and also the academic merit of his/her research and publications etc. This process continues throughout the year. At the end of this period, the department, based on the results of the candidates' performance advises the University on the number of positions to be filled. Thus, suppose the number of "good" candidates in the period was only 10. Then following a rule of interviewing in a ratio of 1:2, the department recommends only 5 positions be filled instead of 10. Once a year the same selection committee is convened. The top 10 candidates are then shortlisted to be called for the interview by the committee. This obviously takes up much less time and thus makes it easier to convene such a meeting.

The procedural merits of such a change are obvious- faster turnaround time and a more in depth scrutiny of the candidates by the committee. But what is more important is the academic merit- the department, which is going to be where the faculty member would be placed has thus collectively a say in who gets hired and has an opportunity to interact with prospective faculty members. And since there is anyway a provision for shortlisting of applicants to be called for the interview (which is hitherto done in a purely mechanical and bureaucratic manner), this more academic and detailed shortlisting will pass muster of the ordinances of the University. Finally, since the whole process is staggered over a year for some posts and over several years for all the posts, instead of a one shot recruitment for a large number of posts once every few years, the chances of getting good faculty increases.

Since most Central universities would be having procedures and ordinances similar to the University of Delhi's for recruitment, our modification to the process could be applicable to them too. We believe it is a no-brainer since the advantages of the suggested procedure, both administrative and academic are self-evident. Of course, what we have suggested is neither novel nor new- a similar procedure is being used in the IITs and IIMs and other institutions for many years though with some important differences.

Ideally, one can imagine a situation where the concerned department identifies a good candidate interacts with him or her and then if the department collectively finds him/her

suitable is able to hire the person. However, in our system, there is a danger of this kind of autonomy being misused and so it is preferable to have a two-step process. This would ensure that sufficient checks and balances exist to negate any extra academic considerations in recruitment.

In the case of Delhi University, there is an additional issue of appointments in the colleges which has its own set of constraints. 3500 vacancies in colleges need to be filled by July as per the court order. Of course, since the composition of the selection committee in colleges is not as rigid as those for the departmental appointments, one can hold these interviews concurrently though once again, it would be quite a task. The issue there is about teachers who are already teaching there in an ad hoc capacity, the very same issue which was the crux of the original plaint with the court.

This is not an easy issue to resolve either on grounds of fairness or on academic merit. We have a situation where some teachers have been teaching as ad hoc teachers for many years. Justice and fairness demands that this be taken into account. On the other hand, it stands to reason that every college should have the right to choose the best possible candidate in terms of academic merit. These seemingly contradictory issues need to be resolved in an optimal way.

One possible way to resolve this would be give some weightage on a sliding scale for the number of years that the candidate has served as an ad hoc. Thus, for instance, one could think of giving an advantage of 2 points (or any such number) for every year of service. Thus someone who has taught for 10 years would automatically have a head start of 20 points (out of 100 say) over a fresh applicant with no experience. After this head start, the selection committee then can assess all the candidates only on their academic merit and choose the one with the highest score.

Obviously, this is not the ideal solution, either in terms of fairness or of merit. But this or some other compromise which balances the two issues can be found by consensus amongst the authorities and the teachers' representatives.

The crisis of faculty shortage is an acute and urgent one. Speeding up the process without considerations of academic quality will be catastrophic in the long run. The whole purpose of expansion of higher education would be lost unless steps are taken on this front urgently.

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