

Riot of Researchers

UGC's Alternative Adds to the Chaos

The University Grants Commission's recent decision to exempt MPhil or PhD degree holders from the national eligibility test for the appointment of lecturers will be welcomed by potential teachers. This has already resulted in a rush of applications for MPhil courses. But what kind of alternative is this to the NET? What kind of research will it generate? Will it help students in any way?

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Till last year on an average 30 students sought admission to MPhil course in the department of politics at the University of Pune. This year, the number of applications the department received went up to around 300. It is the same scene in most of the other social science and language departments of Pune University and in most of the other universities of the state. The course coordinators and the research supervisors of these universities are puzzled as to how to deal with this sudden upsurge of bulk demands for conducting social science research that was in a pathetic shape till now.

What causes this outburst of social science researchers in regional universities of the country? It is a circular that the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued on June 14, 2006 specifying new norms of minimum qualifications required for the appointment of teachers in the universities and degree colleges. The circular stated that the national eligibility test (NET) shall remain the compulsory requirement for appointment as lecturer for those with postgraduate degree. However, the candidates having PhD degree in the concerned subject are exempted from NET at the postgraduate and undergraduate levels of teaching. Similarly, the candidates having MPhil degree in the concerned subject are exempted from NET at the undergraduate level teaching (UGC, F No 1-1/2002 (PS) Exemp). In the context of large-scale failures in the NET, the UGC had earlier appointed a review committee headed by Bhalchandra Mungekar. It is on the basis of recommendations of the Mungekar Committee that the UGC derived an easy alternative to NET in the form of an MPhil degree. The alternative hopes to provide a (at least temporary) respite to students who could not enter the

loop of "NET scholars" despite many desperate attempts. But actually, it has come as a cruel joke of the UGC – for all those students who have been loyally appearing for the NET, year after year, paying huge fees without much success. Or even for those who have succeeded, after years of relentless work and practice and had finally breathed a sigh of relief with some hopes of getting a job. For the supervisors placed in various universities, especially in the regional universities, the new norms bring a disaster of inspecting piles of MPhil and PhD dissertations that are poor in content. But more seriously, the decision of the UGC points to certain serious lapses in our policy-making processes as far as the field of higher education is concerned.

NET's Failure

Let us go back to NET. Why did it fail? There may be certain problems in the designing and contents of the examination. The question papers of the NET and the state eligibility test (SET) – that has on par status with the NET – sometimes gave an impression that the examiners are not sure about exactly what they expect from the prospective teachers. Similarly, the prescribed syllabi of these examinations never matched those of the regional universities. Most of the regional universities in the country hardly ever revise their courses and operated on the basis of a narrow understanding of the respective disciplines. As a result the students of these universities could never successfully grasp the nature and scope of NET. They could neither develop a sound understanding of their subject nor could acquire the essential writing skills for competitive examinations such as NET. As a result the success rate of students qualifying at NET remained abysmally low in different regions of the

country and the examination became a nightmare rather than remaining a simple qualifying examination. Coaching classes and study circles teaching the NET syllabus flourished in big and small regional towns, ready-made notes and guide books for NET became a commercial success and regional newspapers proudly flashed snaps of NET qualified candidates among local achievers. In that sense the failures of NET got linked to the basic pathologies of the educational system as a whole.

At another level, these failures are also linked to the other larger systemic pathologies in contemporary Indian economy and society. The NET was introduced in early 1990s. This was the period in which the nature of the public sector job market in India underwent a change and opportunities in the field of education shrank gradually. The 1990s saw a paradoxical scenario taking shape in the field of higher education. Educational infrastructure and opportunities expanded as a result of privatisation of the field, education became a lucrative business for many and the regional political class made large-scale investments in the field of higher education. But the process of expansion of education contained many perversions. The private as well as state educational institutions produced herds of graduates and postgraduates but without any proper set of skills. The expansion of the educational network did not provide any job guarantees to these aspirants as the process of privatisation led to casualisation and trivialisation of teaching jobs. At the same time the overall employment market in the country kept shrinking as a result of changing economic policies.

It is at this stage that NET acted as a systemic buffer in regulating and filtering the employment market in the educational sector. Every year hardly 2 or 3 per cent of those appearing for the examination could clear it. But the rest of them could be kept engaged in the web of the examination for a long time thus ensuring a limited workforce entering the job market. These students invested all their meagre monetary and academic resources in the examination without success. On the other hand, even those who did qualify, could not get any proper and secure teaching jobs as there were not many jobs available. The private institutions run under the patronage of the local political bosses usually demanded a cut in their pay packets from these successful aspirants without ensuring any security of jobs.

As the equation between higher educational degrees, the number of persons acquiring these degrees and their employment potential became more and more inverse, more and more students, especially from the social sciences and humanities, sought solace in NET. Their failure in the examination acquired political form in many states and the associations of "NET-affected" students were floated in states like Maharashtra. The issue of NET suddenly became a politically sensitive issue and needed an immediate addressal. In the absence of a sound policy framework, the UGC and the Mungekar Committee have forwarded an easy and politically viable response to this issue. They have placed an MPhil degree on par with the NET. Everyone would be happy about it initially. Those who have failed in NET would welcome the decision. But in the long run this alternative to NET is going to add to the present chaos of the higher education rather than ending it.

Deteriorating Research

Given the state of academic research in the country getting an MPhil degree is very easy. A lot has been already said about the deteriorating standards of the research degrees in India. Some two years ago the governor of Maharashtra (who also acts as the chancellor of state universities) expressed public concern on this issue and appointed a committee to standardise the norms of research. Nothing much happened on that count but the concerns remain valid. In the absence of any institutional checks the work for research degrees has become highly subjective, parochial and largely worthless as far as the contribution to the collective research agenda is concerned. In the wake of the present decision of the UGC there are already rumours that "made-to-order" MPhil dissertations are available in some small regional centres of the state for between Rs 50,000 and 1,00,000. This is a very serious state of affairs as far as the quality of higher education is concerned. The recent decision of the UGC would unfortunately encourage many such hidden malpractices in the field of education. But even if we abandon any concerns for quality as elitist, what exactly does the decision offer by way of fruitful expansion of educational opportunities and by way of employment possibilities to hundreds of unsuccessful aspirants of NET?

With one sudden stroke, the UGC has forced these students into research. The

regional universities cannot accommodate these inflated masses of researchers. Therefore, these students need to invest a lot in seeking admission to the MPhil course. Even if they get admission they need to spend two or so more years in completing the work for MPhil. Many of them have already spent a lot of money paying fees for NET. Now they would pay fees for MPhil plus some hidden costs and would be at the mercy of their supervisors in the absence of any outside check. It is not quite surprising that many of the private, unaided postgraduate centres are keen to start MPhil courses and are seeking permission for the same from the regional universities. These centres do not have any necessary infrastructure or supervisors to guide researchers, but would still charge enormous fees from the students to get their MPhil done. What kind of research are these students going to engage in under the present circumstances? What are we, as a nation, going to do with piles of local problems investigated and vague, opinionated solutions sought to these problems? How do research qualities of a person reflect on her teaching capacities? But most importantly, what are these students going to get after all these wild efforts of research? Does the

system ensure a secure teaching job for them once they are proud possessors of an MPhil degree?

Neither the UGC nor the other policy centres of higher education have answers to these questions. That is why these questions loom large as serious lapses in the current higher education policies. Access to higher education is seen as guaranteeing quality employment and as upgrading the standard of life. Expansion of higher educational institutional networks thus became an essential strategy in a highly unequal Indian society. At the same time, higher educational institutions are expected to add to the collective knowledge pool of society for which a definite set of quality norms is required. Any sound educational policy needs to maintain a fine balance between these two elements. Issues like the current controversy point to a state where we seem to have lost the balance between the two aspects of higher education. Instead, we have been directing a riot of researchers mainly in order to keep them away from not just quality employment but from any employment opportunities. Isn't it a pity? **EW**

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Ashoka Trust for
Research in Ecology
and the Environment

Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bangalore (ATREE, www.atree.org) announces a vacancy of **Senior Research Associate** to work for the project "Landuse Policies and Sustainable Development in Developing Countries". The term commences on October 1, 2006 and the position shall remain open till a suitable candidate is found. Duties broadly include development of databases and analysis of policies and indicators.

Requirements: The candidate is expected to have considerable skills at contemporary statistical/empirical data handling, analysis techniques and software. Good interpersonal and communication skills in English, both spoken and written are a pre-requisite. Masters or Doctoral degree in environmental economics or related discipline and demonstrated skills in handling a similar work elsewhere. The candidate needs to commit for a minimum of two years.

Desirable: Candidates with prior experience in handling variety of databases and carrying out regional level analysis or those who wish to do PhD in the topic.

Please superscribe the envelope with the position details "SRA-Landuse Policies Project" if you are sending the application by post/courier. If the application is being sent by email, please indicate the above position very clearly in the subject line. Applications are expected to reach the following address by mail/email/fax by *31st of August*. Kalpana Prasanna (kalpana@atree.org) Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), # 659, 5th A Main Road, Hebbal, Bangalore, 560 024, India. Phone: +91-80-2353 0069; 2353 3942; 2363 8771 Fax: +91-80-23530070