

New PhD Guidelines in Maharashtra

A Remedy Worse Than the Disease

Recent guidelines on the eligibility criteria for PhD registration and the process of submission of doctoral theses in the universities in Maharashtra do not address the malaise affecting research. The guidelines, drawn up by the academic bureaucracy and without consulting the teaching community, will in fact create new problems and discourage potential research scholars.

A CORRESPONDENT

Sweeping changes are envisioned in the PhD programmes of the universities of Maharashtra. The former governor, Mohommad Fazal, who was also the chancellor of all universities in the state, decided when in office to take stock of the research programmes. He has said that he had noticed through newspapers and other representations that there were a lot of malpractices in the PhD programmes in the state's universities. He thinks that this has lowered the standard of PhD degrees in the state, as compared with international standards. He therefore tried to find out why things were going from bad to worse and how this situation could be improved.

The chancellor issued an order (No CS/GEN/MISC/37/04/(5647)/1783 dated July 2, 2004) in which he has raised these issues.

He noted that one of the reasons for the falling standards is because the minimum qualifications prescribed for registration is "between pass class to second class post-graduate degree." Hence there is a need for changing the rules regarding selection of students and evaluation of theses.

The chancellor then appointed a six member Expert Committee under the chairmanship of A S Kolaskar, vice chancellor of the University of Pune and a well known scientist. The other members were drawn from the academic fraternity in different universities of the state. One does not know whether all of them are supervisors/guides for the PhD courses in their universities. In fact, two of them do not possess doctoral degrees. The chancellor's order does not mention the date when the Expert Committee was formed nor does it enlighten us on how many meetings the committee had

before it came to its learned conclusions. All we know is that the committee met the chancellor on May 24, 2004 and "Dr A S Kolaskar, chairman of the committee made presentation (sic) on the subject".

The committee or its chairperson made the following observations regarding the "current status of PhD degree" (sic): The quality of PhD programmes is very low. The admission process is flawed and the topics are irrelevant or repetitive. The time taken for processing and evaluation of the dissertation is long and only few of the guides (supervisors) are competent. It is not clear whether the committee has made these sweeping generalisation about all the doctoral research in the state's universities, the majority of them or, only a few cases. Moreover, there is no mention of the basis on which the committee came to such conclusions. Did the members have time to study the situation in each university or were these findings based on impressionistic research?

Based on the committee's findings, it recommended certain criteria and procedures for selection of candidates, selection of guides and research topics. The committee also laid down the criteria for submission and evaluation of the thesis. The chancellor is convinced that these revised procedures are needed for improving the quality of research in the state's universities and for raising the level to international standards. Before commenting on the quest for attaining international standards, let us first see what the guidelines are because the chancellor and his committee of experts firmly believe that following the guidelines will convert the research to international standards.

New Guidelines for PhD Registration

The committee has drawn a long list of requirements for a student to enter the PhD course. The best combination for getting registered is having a first class at the Master's degree and having qualified for the various eligibility tests (NET/SET/GATE, etc). Any candidate possessing these can get registered with comparative ease. For the others the going is rough. Others eligible for registration are those having done their Masters or Mphil; those who have at least five years full time teaching experience above the secondary level and those working in national laboratories, institutes, etc, and finally those who have qualified for the NET/SET/GATE/JRF examinations but do not

possess a first class postgraduate degree. In addition, these candidates need to have two published research papers in peer-reviewed journals. Those having a first class need not have published papers.

There is more to come. After having qualified under one of the above mentioned conditions, the candidate will have to pass a common entrance test conducted by the University of Pune. Candidates who have passed the NET/SET/GATE/JRF are exempt from appearing for this examination. After having passed this exam the candidate will have to appear for a university level examination before s/he is finally admitted to the PhD course of a university in the state. The order further states that PhD theses must be submitted in loose sheets so that the candidate can have no difficulty in making changes on the basis of the referee's comments. The final thesis must be submitted to the university in a CD and should be put on its website so that it is accessible to all. This, the committee felt, would prevent plagiarism.

Will the Quality Improve?

If we examine the order and its contents carefully in an academic perspective, we will find that every point it stresses is flawed. Let us look at the eligibility conditions. It is no doubt true that some of the existing eligibility conditions, especially in the older universities, like Mumbai, are absurd. For example, a candidate who has completed her/his graduation with a pass class can enrol for the PhD course. The minimum period of enrolment for such candidates is three years instead of two years for candidates with a Master's degree. The same candidate will not be qualified for the Masters course by thesis, as the minimum requirement for that is a second class at graduation. Moreover, there is no pre-PhD course that would give the candidate exposure to research methodology, review of literature, etc. The onus of this lies with the research supervisor. This rule has given several non-academic people hopes of earning their doctorates from the university (Mumbai). Thus one can find bureaucrats, policemen and other officials with PhDs.

The existing rules regarding PhD registration may be bad and in need of change. However, the remedies suggested are even worse. The order lays down that in most cases the candidate must have published two research papers in peer-reviewed journals. Only the first class candidates are exempted. One wonders why the committee

has decided to place this condition. Is there any university in this country, including the highly reputed ones like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, University of Hyderabad, Aligarh Muslim University or Benares Hindu University, etc, or known internationally reputed universities like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, etc, where such conditions exist? In fact no PhD course worth its salt would insist on research publications before enrolling for the degree. The reason is that the PhD is the first research degree of a candidate – not the final degree, as the committee appears to believe. The student will start writing papers only after s/he is well into the PhD programme. In some of the better known universities in the UK research supervisors in social sciences insist that their students should not publish anything till their dissertations are complete. Ironically, such students may qualify for admission to Oxford or Cambridge but they would be denied admission to a university in Maharashtra. The committee may then reiterate its position that its guidelines have made universities in Maharashtra superior to the best ones abroad!

The publication mania will create other problems. The PhD dissertations in most of the universities in the state are in Marathi. The question is, how many peer-reviewed journals are there in Marathi. For example is there a single peer-reviewed Marathi journal in psychology, statistics, sociology or anthropology? Hence, are students of Marathi medium to be denied admission because of this? Denying these candidates access to a research degree would be a grave injustice to teaching and research into the colleges in the interior of the state. In fact for such candidates, enrolment in the PhD course would itself serve as an important means for further research in the region's problems. The ICSSR has undertaken a programme for imparting training in research methodology to teachers and researchers in colleges, especially in the interior areas of the state. The objective is to provide them the expertise that will encourage them to undertake research in future. In fact, the committee could have suggested such simple but effective means of improving the quality of research. Instead, its recommendations are directed towards discouraging people from undertaking research.

Even if a person manages to get two papers published in proper academic journals, the ordeal for registration does not end. The person has to appear for an

eligibility test conducted by University of Pune for all the universities in the state. It should seriously be considered whether such an aptitude test violates the autonomy of the universities. In case the candidate passes the test, she/he will have to appear at another university level selection test. It is quite evident that the whole process of admission is directed at making it as difficult as possible for a candidate to get registered. In no university in the world do such elaborate series of tests exist. The better known British universities do have admission criteria, but they do not insist on publications before starting the PhD programme. There are some universities in the US which, due to fierce competition for admission to the PhD course, give extra weightage to publications, but these too do not have such elaborate tests for admission.

The submission process is also very unusual, to say the least. As mentioned earlier, the Order states, "Thesis shall be submitted in the form of loose papers or preferably in computer readable form (soft copy) enabling the candidate to incorporate changes after updating data, if suggested by the referees." One would not like to nit-pick on every issue, but this statement seems to presume that if the thesis is submitted as a bound volume, changes cannot be incorporated later. This is incorrect, as anybody engaged in this profession knows. Most theses submitted for examination are bound and many of them are sent back to the candidate for modification.

The order further states that after the thesis is cleared, it will be put up in the website of the university so that all can read it. The committee feels that this is the best way to prevent plagiarism. On the contrary, a thesis that is put up in the web will be easier to plagiarise. There is a specific instance, in a different context, of Mumbai University in this regard. It was noticed a few years ago that a number of people from lesser known universities would come to the library of the university every year during the vacations. These people were interested in only photocopying PhD theses in the library. The university authorities suspected that they might plagiarise these theses and pass them off as their own through their universities. The university then issued an order that no PhD thesis could be issued out of the library nor could they be photocopied. This policy may have made it difficult for plagiarists, as they now have to sit in the library and copy the thesis by hand. By putting up theses on the net the universities will only

be inviting these plagiarists to lift them and, as a senior professor of Mumbai University mentioned in a press interview on this topic, "add salt and pepper to the original and pass it off as his own".

Demise of Research in the Universities

The order of the chancellor, if implemented, will surely ring the death knell to research in the state's universities. The chancellor's order was aimed at curing the maladies in the PhD programmes in the state's universities. Unfortunately, the remedy is worse than the disease. The final order of the chancellor is full of contradictions. The preamble states that eligibility conditions are between pass class and second class. However, his new order does not change this. Special favour is given to first class students, but there is no mention of minimum marks. Therefore, even under the revised rules a student with a pass class is eligible for admission. In most good universities there are minimum marks for admission to the PhD course.

Secondly, the Preamble talks about ill-qualified research supervisors but the Order does not provide for any guidelines regarding PhD guides. In fact these should have been made stricter than they are at present, in terms of eligibility. The Order could have insisted that PhD guides must hold the position of at least Reader and they must have doctorates. There are Readers who do not have doctorates but can guide PhD students by virtue of their position. In most of these cases there are anomalies because the concerned guide is usually registered for the PhD course in the same university. Hence s/he is both student and teacher for the same course. Neither the committee nor the highly learned chancellor have bothered to even mention this. Moreover, the publication clause should have been mandatory for PhD guides/supervisors rather than students.

Problems of Universities in the State

In the final analysis, the current farce of PhD registration reflects a deep malaise that most state-run universities are suffering from. The threat of interference by the bureaucracy looms large over these institutions thus effacing their autonomy. This had led to a uniform policy for all universities, similar to the attempt for a common PhD policy. In Maharashtra, there is a common act for all universities, known as

the Maharashtra Universities Act (MUA) of 1994. Prior to this, each university was constituted under separate acts. This allowed them to maintain their autonomy. MUA gives overwhelming powers to the chancellor. Even the president of India, who is Visitor to most Central Universities, does not have such powers. Moreover, many central universities appoint their own chancellors, who are in most cases eminent scholars. However even in these cases the chancellors do not have the sweeping powers that the chancellor has under MUA. At times, the powers of the democratically elected academic bodies are undermined by the chancellor's veto. This has happened in the case of the PhD courses. The chancellor has used his powers under Section 9 (3) of the Act. This section states that if the chancellor passes any order using this section, the universities must accept it. It further states that in such a situation the universities have to suitably modify their statutes to incorporate the suggested changes. We can take the case of the University of Mumbai to illustrate this.

The chancellor's Order on the PhD course was issued on July 2, 2004. The Registrar of University of Mumbai issued a notice on July 14 stating that "The guidelines relating to PhD degree course envisaged in...orders of the...chancellor have been adopted by the acting vice chancellor...in exercise of...Section 14 (7) of the (MUA) on behalf of the Academic Council and Management Council." The MUA also

states that whenever a vice chancellor uses Section 14 (7) to pass an order, it has to be ratified by the respective bodies in their subsequent meetings. In this case the managing committee unanimously rejected the VC's use of Section 14 (7). In such cases, where there is a discrepancy between the VC and the concerned committee, the matter is sent to the chancellor for a final decision. He promptly returned the notice stating that the vice chancellor was justified in his act (in other words, the highest decision-making body of the university did not know what it was talking about). Such are the powers of the bureaucracy. The fact that the state's universities are able to function with this fig-leaf of autonomy is itself a miracle.

The sad part of this story is that the academic bureaucracy is keen on enforcing standards which they evolve in isolation. The opinions of the teaching community are not considered necessary. Was it not possible for the 'experts' and the chancellor to hold discussions with university teachers, especially the research supervisors, and seek their opinion on how to improve the situation? Or, did the august committee appointed by the chancellor think that it had all the knowledge in the world to decide on the issue? It is obvious that framing policies in a democratic manner is something the academic bureaucracy just cannot accept. It is this attitude that has led to the current pathetic situation in higher education. [27]

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