

Are we giving enough recognition to the better lot of our University Teachers?

Opinion

There are quite a few things, which are important but somehow do not get enough attention or recognition. Through this article, I would like to draw attention of readers towards one such point relevant to higher education: "Lesser opportunities for a university teacher to get recognized for his/her teaching/mentoring skills". Though the theme of this article is of general relevance to all disciplines, but more so for experimental sciences like biology, because in such subjects the teacher has a dual responsibility of imparting effective training to the students in both theory as well as experimental aspect of the subject. Job of a teacher becomes even more challenging in interdisciplinary subjects like bioengineering. First, let us give a thought to the status of *teaching* and the *teacher*. Though primary job of a teacher is teaching, when it comes to evaluation for promotion/recruitment/any incentive, what is given emphasis is not the *teaching skill* but the *research output* of the teacher. In any typical University, teachers are performing three major duties: Teaching, Research and Administrative tasks (latter one is particularly relevant in the Indian context). To quantify the research contribution is relatively easy (i.e. in terms of *h* index, citations, etc.), but it is usually difficult to quantify or rank *teaching and administrative skills*. This should not go unnoticed that latter two activities consume much of a teachers' time.

While recruiting for any academic job position, usually not much emphasis is given to the candidate's teaching skill and the administrative contribution made by him to his employing institute(s). Much emphasis is put on research output. Now here a teacher will be competing with those, many of whom are full-time researchers (with no teaching responsibilities). This (i.e. comparing a teacher with a scientist) makes the competition imbalanced. Improving science and technology education requires faculty with the skills, resources and time to create active learning environments ensuring student engagement. Current faculty hiring and promotion policies at our universities neither measure reward nor do they encourage faculty pursuit of these skills. A cultural change is the call of time. We have quite a few awards (quite rightly) instituted to encourage good researchers, but not many for honouring good teachers. There must be one or other type of incentive, which can motivate a faculty to focus as much on his teaching effectiveness as his research. Otherwise teachers will also start neglecting teaching. They will be forced to focus disproportionately more on research at the cost of teaching, which is certainly not in good interest of the student population. The way we value a good research paper, same way we need to learn to value a teacher who successfully motivates/mentors his students to pursue scientific (academic) excellence.

The current scenario in higher education institutes in most developing countries is that all teachers (whether *good* or *bad*) are treated almost at par. The overall perception of teaching and the teacher by society has not remained that positive. This is partly because of the fact that a large section of the professoriate has displayed a disdainful attitude towards their primary duty i.e. teaching. In the current

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scenario, situation may be comfortable for the under-performers, but de-motivating for the dutiful performers. To keep the effective teachers motivated and to keep the possibility of more new brilliant people entering the teaching profession alive, appropriate policy changes have to be made. Teachers who are performing relatively better at all the three fronts, i.e. teaching, research and academic administration must be provided additional incentives and/or early promotions. Current system of career advancement depends largely on length of service, irrespective of the quality of work done over the years.

There are quite a few teachers at undergraduate as well as graduate level, who are adopting some innovative ways of teaching/mentoring, despite being bound by limitations of a rigid conventional system. For example, there are teachers making effective use of case-studies in classroom to relate the classroom teaching with real-life situations; there are teachers who engage themselves in informal intellectual discussions with students outside the office hours; there are teachers who generate publishable data from dissertation projects of Bachelors' and/or Masters' students; there are teachers who pose *critical thinking questions* to their pupils making them think and help develop a scientific temperament. But such efforts usually go unnoticed, or meet just some oral appreciation by concerned stakeholders, instead of some tangible reward. Such dedicated teachers particularly in remote areas are almost never recognized for their special efforts. Establishing a well-structured system of awards/rewards at institute level, state level, as well as national/international level for recognizing and honouring the effective teachers will surely have an overall positive impact on the quality of higher education. This is of special importance to subjects like life sciences, which are almost entirely experimental in nature, as a teacher's interaction with disciples becomes more of a 'direct' nature while imparting experimental knowhow.

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Conflict of interest

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