

*Commentary*

## **Excellence in Universities**

ALOK BHATTACHARYA

*Schools of Life Sciences & Computation and Integrative Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi 110 067, India*

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Ranking of Universities and educational Institutions has caught the imagination of the common citizen as well as that of the head of the state, the President of India. This is partly due to media interest, as the total absence of any Indian Institutions in the list of top hundred perhaps makes a good story. There is also financial interest of companies that run the business of ranking. In addition, many Universities worldwide use their high rank to attract potential full tuition students that help them balance their budget. Such market forces are almost converting the ranking phenomenon into a fine art. While ranking may be beneficial to set up some bench marks, what is worrying is that in the midst of the din surrounding ranking, one does not hear sufficient discussion on the current state of teaching and research in Indian educational Institutions, and on how to bring about excellence in Indian Universities. Specific recommendations have been made by a group of scholars and educationists (Lakhotia *et al.*, 2003) Unfortunately, it is not clear if any of the recommendations will be implemented. Therefore it is felt that UGC should be part of the whole process of revamping Universities.

UGC in the last few years has introduced a number of schemes to promote excellence (in research) in Universities. This includes the University with Potential Excellence (UPOE) scheme. Unfortunately, it is not clear what is meant by “excellence” and how one is supposed to achieve. The definition of excellence as in Oxford dictionary

is “The quality of being outstanding or extremely good”. Since this is intrinsically a relative entity, it is necessary to keep the bar high so that mediocrity does not pass off as relative ‘excellence’. Undoubtedly, the quality and quantity of research is heavily dependent on basic administrative and scientific infrastructure and funding, and in general the Universities with better funding do attract more qualified faculty and also have higher scientific output. However, individual effort makes up the bulk of University research in India, and a few outstanding researchers can be found in almost all Universities irrespective of prevailing conditions. This human resource is more precious than any Rupee grant the University may receive, and it is important not only to nurture such individuals especially at the early and mid-career level, but also to analyze the factors that make them much more successful than their peers. It is equally important to identify and address the factors that may be a hindrance to higher level of achievement. Supporting high achievement to ensure the continued productivity of well-performing faculty while mentoring non performers should be one of the major aims of UGC.

UGC should also devote attention to the quality of teaching programmes. It is important to periodically review the courses, introduce novel pedagogy, and maintain the quality of teaching by interacting with students and getting their feedback. Good practices and outstanding performance in teaching should be rewarded and replicated.

The committee appointed by UGC for site visits of UPOEs should be used in a more serious manner to help promote excellence. A detailed report based on the documents sent by the Universities should be prepared before a visit, highlighting both achievements as well as lack of performance in specific areas. This report should be available to the University before the visit. The committee should identify individuals and interact with them on a one-to-one basis. In the final report the committee should suggest ways by which the University can increase

output and number of high performers in research and teaching rather than a mere formula for distribution of funds. This will help to increase the number of such people in the Universities, automatically helping the Universities to get higher rank as well as offering quality education.

### Reference

- SC Lakhota, LS Shashidhara and Ron Vale (2013) Excellence in Science Education and Research. *Current Science* **104** 163-165.

