

An obsession with quantity

Are higher education institutions turning into PhD factories?



WIDE ANGLE

ALBERT P'RAYAN

A month ago, it was reported that around 1,000 candidates with a PhD degree applied for positions advertised by the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC), such as typists, stenographers and village administrative officers. In September 2015, over 250 PhD holders responded to an advertisement seeking applications for the post of attendants (peons) in the Uttar Pradesh government secretariat. This prompted me to raise many questions and engage in discussion with those who are concerned about the problems academia faces.

While the minimum qualification required for a clerical position is school education, why do persons with the highest degree apply for the positions listed above? Does India produce more PhDs than required? How useful are the doctoral degrees awarded by our universities? How relevant and useful is the research carried out by our 'research scholars'? Why does someone want to do a PhD?

The two reports may make one think that unemployment is a major problem in the country. It is not true. Unemployability is a major problem in India. It is said that many candidates with PhD degrees do not have the knowledge and skills required for the jobs for which they are academically eligible. It is also widely believed that getting a PhD from certain universities is quite easy. Stories about corrupt research supervisors who indulge in and

encourage ghostwriting do emerge. No wonder the question of whether someone bought or earned a PhD is quite common these days.

Diluting quality

Have some higher education institutions in India become PhD factories? By admitting candidates who do not have the right attitude, knowledge and skills to undertake PhD-level study, without monitoring their progress and awarding them the degree, some universities have diluted the quality of the prestigious degree.

Recently, I asked a teacher candidate why she wanted to do a PhD. "I'll get a pay rise and promotion only if I complete one," she replied. When I asked her whether it would be easy for her to get admission, she responded asking, "Do you think it is difficult?" To my next question on whether it is important to choose a good university, her casual response was, "It doesn't matter. What I need is just a certificate." It is obvious that the person is not serious about her PhD research work. Should she or the system which has made her think that it is easier to get a PhD degree than to get a basic degree be blamed?

Why does a person want to do a PhD? The reasons could be any or combination of these: to pur-

sue a career in academia, to continue research in the person's field of interest, to specialise in it, to contribute to the field, to discover or learn something new, or to develop oneself professionally. To earn a PhD and thus to become an expert in the chosen field, the scholar/researcher should work hard. The journey is not always smooth. If the percentage of people embarking on PhD programmes with these good reasons is relatively higher than that of those with bad reasons, the research capacity in our country will be boosted. But, the reality seems to be different.

Universities should admit the fact that PhD research in the country has slipped and take necessary steps to improve its quality. Identifying the right candidates for PhD programmes is the first step.

Only those candidates who are motivated by a genuine desire to pursue doctoral research, who are open-minded and persistent and who possess core skills such as the spirit of scientific inquiry and the ability to think logically and critically should be admitted. They should be encouraged and given adequate financial support. Encouraging researchers to engage in meaningful and socially relevant research is also important.

These days policymakers, politicians and academics talk of the need for competing with top-ranked universities in the world. A big dream, indeed! To compete, educational institutions should first free themselves from their obsession with quantity and start focussing on quality.

The author is an academic, columnist and freelance writer.
rayanal@yahoo.co.uk

Many candidates with PhD degrees do not have the skills required for the jobs for which they are academically eligible.