

Competition among academic institutions

The month-long world cup soccer tournament held in Germany has just ended. Since the inaugural world cup tournament in Uruguay in 1930, the number of national teams that qualify for every tournament has been steadily increasing: 32 national teams competed for gold in 2006, indicating that competition for glory and gold is continuously on the rise. A couple of these teams that were favoured, and deserved to win the gold failed for different reasons. What triggered Zinedine Zidane head-butting himself out of the world cup? Perhaps a slur on his race or a defaming remark on his mother/sister? The jury is still deliberating on this unfortunate incident. Regrettably, in sports as well as in other professions, the response is punished but not the provocation! Many of those who played for their national teams during the world cup, are also on the rosters of the premier league soccer teams in the EU, South America and elsewhere. Corporations, syndicates or wealthy families own the league teams. Coaches, assistant coaches, assistants to assistant coaches, publicists and other like-minded people manage the league teams. They acquire these players through bidding wars; whoever bids higher gets the 'hot' player.

Since there are some similarities between academic institutions and professional sports with regard to recruitment and retention, it might be of interest to consider what counts as acceptable or unacceptable practices in the higher education system. In the US, like in professional sports, administrators at research institutions and universities vie with one another to attract quality students and faculty members to broaden their recognition factor. The bidding wars are especially widespread among non-state universities and research institutions. The resources necessary for such activities are not from the Government, but by donations from corporations, alumni and wealthy families, not necessarily in that order.

In the field of academic research in India, there seem to be two parallel universes: universities and research institutions. The history of the past 20 years discloses that the gap between universities and research institutions in terms of the quality of research and its output is

widening. In recent years, the Western model of recruitment of faculty members and students is apparently imported by few research institutions and national laboratories in India. I believe that it is harmful to adopt the Western model to our higher education system at least under the present circumstances. Are we in the 'vicious struggle' to survive in science? There is little scientific data to support this contention. What inspires some select institutions and national laboratories to practice the American higher education model? It is simply the resources at their disposal. To paraphrase P. Balaram, a few of these institutions have 'bottomless budgets'. The quantum of internal resources allocated to faculty members in some institutions is several orders of magnitude greater than their counterparts in other institutions. Intriguingly, the funds sanctioned by the research advisory committees (PAC or Task Force) to competitive research proposals are similar, regardless of whether a project is supported with internal resources or not. What should other institutions and universities do to compete in the bidding wars or not? Clearly, the budgetary realities might not allow them to do so. It is not realistic to think that one or two institutes will raise the bar of scientific research in India. Considering that all of the national laboratories, universities and other institutions are supported by the Government's exchequer, it is fair that the policies and procedures should be uniformly applicable to the benefit of all concerned.

Unlike in the US and other developed countries, selection committees in most institutions and universities in India are composed of experts from other organizations. This is done with the implicit belief that these experts help in selecting the best candidates for faculty positions. In reality, some clever expert members work opportunistically to exploit their access to privileged information. They move with lightning speed to promise the same selected applicant with unfettered facilities and boundless resources, ranging from investment of large amounts of funds for investigator-specific equipment and funds for other activities, including international travel at periodic intervals. Although one might argue that it is better

from the perspective of the job applicant to have as many options as possible, the above practice often creates extremely awkward situations. I am also aware that many colleagues in universities and research institutions find this practice unacceptable. This, of course, generates its own problems for institutions and universities unwilling to perform the role of an aggressive employer. As time goes by, this will provide an obvious template for the private as well as foreign universities to poach on faculty to the detriment of several research institutions and universities. In this context, it is noteworthy that the Prof. C. N. R. Rao Committee appointed to advise the Government on the entry of foreign universities into India, recommended that no poaching of faculty from Indian universities should be allowed. The failure of the system, in particular on the part of those who head the academic research institutions to recognize and halt the bidding practice will be compounded by several other problems. However, the leadership at some institutes may prefer not to deal with such problems directly or alone. So a clear-eyed perspective is required to ensure that they are appropriately addressed. If we do not speak out, and remain silent when we encounter them, we will indirectly be sending a message that such practices are acceptable.

Let me turn to consider a related issue that has generated much debate in the academic community in India – the state of research in the universities. All of the national laboratories, advanced research institutes and industries would certainly benefit from the input of quality students from universities and colleges. For this to happen, research and teaching should be intertwined. The truth is otherwise. There are strong concerns among many in the academic community that soon most universities will be reduced to teaching colleges. How did it happen? The long neglect of the higher educational system and decline in investment of research infrastructure and facilities could be some of the underlying reasons. In addition, the policies of the funding agencies and the university administration have made it increasingly difficult to enable scientists to pursue active research. Currently, many of those who wish to