

Honorarium to Fellows of the scientific academies and SSB awardees: need to link with performance and not age

The University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi, initiated a scheme to provide incentive to those who are fellows of at least two scientific academies or recipients of the coveted Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize (SSB), by providing an honorarium of Rs 15,000 pm in addition to the salary. The UGC approved the scheme in principle in 2006 and issued a circular to that effect. Accordingly, some institutions like IISc, Bangalore, implemented the scheme in respect of the SSB awardees from July 2007 onwards. In state universities the scheme was not implemented for want of clear directions either from the UGC or the CSIR. The CSIR started providing honorarium to SSB prize winners directly from April 2008. However, the SSB awardees in the state varsities were not informed of this either by the UGC or CSIR. Therefore, they missed the honorarium for the year 2007–08, which is unfortunate and discriminatory in nature.

The UGC issued specific guidelines on 24 March 2009. As per these guidelines and the letter issued by the CSIR, it is clear that CSIR will provide honorarium to SSB prize winners and the UGC to teachers (including Pro-Vice Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors) who are fellows of at least two of the four specified Science Academies (National Academy of Sciences India, Allahabad; Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore; Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi; and Indian National Science Academy of Engineering, New Delhi). A consistent and good publication record in the preceding five years is also required. As per the Clause 3.3 of UGC guidelines circulated on 24 March 2009, the teachers are eligible for the honorarium up to the age of 65 or superannuation, whichever is earlier.

Undoubtedly, the scheme will lead to a healthy competition for good science. Hence, the move by UGC and CSIR is most welcome and laudable. However, implementation of the scheme for SSB awardees and fellows of the academies by the CSIR and UGC needs to be uniform across the institutions because the funds are derived from the same source, i.e. the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India. The

objective of the incentive award being the same, both SSB awardees and fellows of the academies should be provided with the honorarium from the same date, i.e. from the date UGC first issued a circular to this effect (December 2006). Secondly, the incentive award should not be linked to one's age. It should however be linked to the performance. In defence of this view, I have the following points for consideration of UGC, CSIR and those interested in the promotion of science in the country.

1. In most state universities the teachers retire at the age of 60, and 62 in a few state universities while their counterparts elsewhere, in all Central varsities/institutions, retire at 65. Therefore, fellows of the science academies and SSB awardees serving in state universities cease to get the benefits of the incentive award soon after superannuation at 60 or 62, as the case may be.

2. It is pertinent to note that truly accomplished scientists and scholars, as a rule never stop their research pursuits at 60 because of superannuation. They continue to work as Senior Scientists of INSA/CSIR/DST and other funding agencies or as UGC Emeritus Professors and so on, not only up to 65 years but also beyond and make significant contribution by way of research publications and books. Actually, superannuated teachers have more time for research/publication; while in active service they are full-time teachers, burdened with teaching workload, examination-related works, and other numerous assignments, characteristics of affiliating state varsities.

3. In reality, superannuation leads to many logistic disadvantages and forces active researchers to call it a day though they have potential for pursuing active research. Therefore, more incentives are needed for scientists after superannuation rather than during their active service. Moreover, the average age of scientists who are recognized with the fellowship of INSA is close to 60. That being the case, whom will this incentive award benefit? The incentive award should therefore, be linked to performance rather than age or institution where one serves.

4. The teachers working in state universities face more challenges in terms of poor infrastructural facilities/academic environment and opportunity for interaction with competent scientists on a day-to-day basis. Yet, good researchers emerge from the state universities setup who are recognized by way of fellowships of the academies. Even after receiving recognitions as fellows of the academies, they continue to work in state universities because they love teaching, are content and happy to be there. This has resulted in visible improvements in the concerned postgraduate science departments in terms of attracting grants, building infrastructure, organizing academic events such as conferences, workshops, increased interaction with premier institutions and scientists, good publications, creating academic microenvironments, guiding younger faculty and summer fellows of the academies, inspiring students and teachers, etc., to name a few.

5. It must also be noted that contribution to higher education (expansion, access, equity and excellence) comes from state varsities in a major way, as they cater to the needs of >80% of the student community (production of graduates, postgraduates and doctoral students). Thus, major feeding to all prestigious institutions of higher learning comes from the state varsities. Sadly, however, state varsities remain neglected. Therefore, if the country has to have a viable size of good scientific community, state universities must be nurtured and provided all needed incentives to attract good faculty, especially in the area of Science and Technology. These include providing additional incentives that may not be available in other institutions to attract fellows of the academies to join state universities. The incentives can be in the form of seed money for research and additional pay package/perks. Undoubtedly, attracting talented students to take up a career in science is the need of the hour. This is possible only when the state universities have a mechanism in place, to appoint and retain talented faculty who can teach well, inspire students and also conduct good research. Should each state university recruit at least 3–4

fellows of science academies, the academic environment there will become highly transformed and inspiring.

Therefore, the UGC's policy of giving honorarium to fellows of the science academies is good but it should be linked to performance and not to age/superannuation, lest, it hurts the interest of scientists working in state universities who are compelled to retire/superannuate 3–5 years earlier than their counterparts in Central universities/institutes. Consequently, the fellows of the academies

working in the state universities may want to migrate to Central universities at the earliest opportunity to avail five years of extra service and also special honorarium of Rs 15,000 pm in addition to the regular salary. Honest and sincere efforts are needed to attract and retain good scientists in state universities as well as prevent their exodus to Central universities/institutions. Therefore, it is desirable that the clause 3.3 of the UGC guidelines be modified to include INSA/CSIR/DST Senior Scientists, Emeritus

Professors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, etc., who are actively engaged in research under the incentive scheme. Superannuation per se does not affect one's creativity or performance. Ernst Mayr the renowned evolutionary biologist, published a paper in *Science* when he was 100 years old!

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Yes, scientists also need money, but. . .

I felt amused to read these words: '... The honorarium bill required an undertaking on my part that I would declare this income in my income tax return! On the one hand, the University expects the examiner to give a fair assessment of the thesis, and on the other hand, it suspects that the examiner may not be honest enough to declare the income in his tax return. Needless to say, I declined the offer mentioning the reason explicitly...'¹. Are scientists and university teachers necessarily honest? Without questioning the integrity and conscience of the said author per se, I strongly believe that people in the scientific profession are just as honest or dishonest as in other fields. Appointments in academic institutions are not based on the honesty of prospective candidates. That a person is honest is simply taken for granted, unless we encounter reasons to think otherwise. It is not guaranteed anyway.

During my professional life in a university, I had ample opportunities to see and meet all sorts of people, including those who could be said dishonest on the basis of their activities. Indeed dishonesty has its own variations and degrees. I believe that a reasonably honest man displays honesty in all activities in which he/she is involved. In a university, it is not uncommon to find teachers not attending in time their teaching duties in

a laboratory or a lecture room, and faking entries in students' attendance registers. There exist teachers who conveniently, and without informing concerned authorities, absent themselves from performing invigilation duties in examinations, and indulge in hurried and careless evaluation of answer books. Evaluation of doctoral theses is also not always fair and objective. Caste considerations, political influence, personal relations, etc. are known to play an important role in academic appointments and promotions. Perhaps no institution can boast of being free from unethical practices like plagiarism and misappropriation of research funds. One can mention similar other possibilities.

Some organizations routinely advise one to make a declaration of a remuneration for an extra work in the tax return. Perhaps such declarations do not serve a useful purpose. One could argue that tax-related issues should be left to the individuals; nevertheless each organization has its own arguments to continue with such formalities. My university had adopted the policy of explicitly showing examination remuneration paid to its teachers in the salary income certificate. Similarly, entitlement to leave travel concession required one to submit proof of train/bus travel. Honesty is not presumed in these cases. Perhaps hardly

anybody feels offended by these practices, even though they prove inconvenient.

The author also argues that academic people must be paid good remunerations commensurate with their status¹. A question that I would like to ask is whether one should accept an assignment only if it brings money or other equivalent material benefits. Is it possible for them to offer, at least sometimes, a free service to individuals and to organizations, hoping that that would be an indirect service to the society? The same issue of *Current Science*² carried an altruism-related article, bearing these words: '... there are real experts who are willing to share their knowledge and time gratis to educate others. It is this group of altruistic people (GAP)...'. Indeed there is a remarkable variation in our attitudes.

1. Dutta Roy, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **96**, 630.
2. Bera, R. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **96**, 627.

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