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Hema Raghavan

Neo-liberalism: Its Impact on Education and the Role of Educators Today

Aarti Joshi

Quality Concerns in Present System of Teacher Education

Bhagawati Prakash Sharma

Academic Integrity: Need of Policy and Regulations

Tessy Thomas

Journey from Dream to Action
— Convocation Address

Attar Rabbani

Academic Staff Development Institutions: From Bad to Better?



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Academic Staff Development Institutions: From Bad to Better?

Atraal Rabbani*

Indian higher education is anything but quality. This is a studied observation of the serious educationists at the opening decades of the "knowledge century". This does not mean absolute absence of bright spots on the horizon though. This merely means a large chunk of the pie is substandard. The bright spots can be found in lucrative spheres – a tiny section of technical, medical, and managerial sphere for example. The lucrative spheres serve negligible number of students mostly from elite class and castes; and yet, corner the major proportion of resources.

The large chunk of the system is comprised of institutions of arts, science, commerce, agriculture and law. This chunk serves the largest number of students, is often at the lower end of the resource allocation; and yet expected to meet high quality standards. In other words, Indian higher education institutions are committed to the minimum quality standards. However, they do so more on paper than in practice due to lack of requisite resource base, regulatory oversight and professional training. Over and above these paralysing inadequacies, it receives inadequate supply of quality teachers. In this paper, I critically examine the current status of academic staff development architecture. I argue that current status of academic staff development architecture is substandard and is adversely affecting the quality of higher education. The HRD Ministry has recently renamed academic staff development institutions as "Human Resource Development Centre" which regrettably demonstrates nothing substantive but just a change in name.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section lays out conceptual carpet of academic staff development institutions; the second links academic staff development institutions with teachers; the third untangles the relationship between academic staff development and teaching quality; while fourth critically analyses existing system of academic staff development – UGC Human Resource Development Centres.

*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Government College of Arts & Science, Near Subhedari Guest House, Kile Arch, Aurangabad 431 001(MS). rabbaniattar@gmail.com




10

The Conceptual Carpet of Academic Staff Development

Teacher is the dynamic actor who shapes the teaching. It is she/he who sorts-out, arranges, connects, contextualises and delivers the content to the learner. The other factors – classroom, equipment, reference material, etc. are but static. These physical factors might be important; nevertheless, are secondary. The teacher brings not merely the prescribed syllabi into teaching but her/his personal attitudes, beliefs, experiences, bias, prejudices and more importantly her/his understanding of the matter under discussion. Over and above, the teacher employs different modes, methods, techniques, making the teaching-learning experience interesting or dull depending upon her/his capabilities, habits and styles. Moreover, as time passes by, the teacher's attitudes, beliefs, experiences, bias, prejudices, capabilities, delivery habits, styles, etc. get hardened. These hardened teaching traits of the teacher, more often than not, become impediments; and it is here, the refreshing, innovative and professional training has to come in and dismantle hardened impediments so as to make the process of teaching-learning interesting and effective.

The point I am making is – the teacher must receive professional grooming so as to enable her/his teaching more up-to-date, interesting and refreshing to every new batch of learners. A good academic staff development institutions or programme therefore has to be jamboree of the most recent knowledge, theoretical perspective, teaching trends, methods and techniques. Similarly, it must be premised upon theoretically sound, empirically tested and professionally approved foundations; for, a staff development programme minus advance research will probably be nothing more than the 'old' pedagogy posing as 'new'. In a nutshell, teacher is the most crucial, dynamic and influential actor and any serious academic staff development institution or programme must pay enough attention to 'the centrality' of teacher in teaching. The hue and cry about technology being able to replace the teacher some day is merely a propuganda. On the contrary, teacher's role is becoming more central, given the stuff that is being mounted on

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all kinds of tech devices without any serious consideration of its long term effect on health of the young mind. Any teaching and far less the 'quality teaching' without professionally groomed teachers will probably remain mirage as is the reality of our higher education scenario today.

We must however have the faith in the fact that teaching abilities are not god-ordained but can be cultivated by means of scientifically grounded, professionally designed, and sensitively executed development programme. Many things that surround us are god-ordained – the earth, the oceans, the sun, the moon and our physical traits for example. Similarly, there are things which are not god-ordained but can be taught, leaned, unlearned and relearned. Many animals can learn and master the abilities. The ability of jumping, walking and dancing in a particular way can be taught to an elephant, for example. Human animal however is the most prone to learning, unlearning and relearning innumerable abilities which may be fruitful to live a distinguished life. It means, teaching abilities are not beyond our grasp – they are as far away as our desire to lean, unlearn or relearn. The moral of the narrative is we can, through development programmes, train teachers.

The development programmes must have three ingredients though – scientific foundation, appropriate design, sensitive execution. Scientific foundation of a development programme means we must derive it from empirical observable data, secular analysis and provable conclusion. Appropriately designed training implies that staff development courses should be so designed that the participants will be able to appreciate, understand and without much effort fine-tune their learning. Development programmes' sensitive execution means they must be implemented with due diligence and consideration to the cultural, emotional and temperamental make-up of the participants. The development programme in general and academic staff development programme in particular therefore ought to have all the ingredients of nurturing participants' teaching abilities to the highest degree possible. In addition to these, democratic and secular societies like ours would also have to ensure suitable socio-economic and political environs via instrument of education.

Embrace of democratic way of life necessitates a large pool of effective teachers to educate citizens as to their rights, duties and responsibilities towards society. India, post independence, declared herself as

"liberal, secular, socialist, democracy". Establishing, running and deepening such social, economic and political order is a tall task and demands huge commitment on the part of the people. Above all, such an order requires large pool of educated not merely literate citizens for carrying the burden of democracy. This means, we would have to have reservoir of quality teachers, for a robust education system coupled with reservoir of effective teachers would afford education to every person, irrespective of her socio-economic background. The education system must however be of such type, creed and class that it must, with due respect to individual difference, be able to raise standards across different levels. The role of school education going to be important but the most important would the role of higher education, science education, legal education, technical education, science education, that students understand the real meaning of rights, duties and responsibilities. In this connection, the supply of high calibre, high quality teachers would assume greater significance. Such high calibre, high quality teacher can only be had via robust system of academic staff development institutions. However, this is not going to be easy as it demands uninterrupted input of human, economic, technological, and political capital.

Moreover, only a professionally groomed teacher would be able to dismantle entrenched cultural prejudice, gender bias and caste-class-communal division – the anathema to open, socialist, secular democracy. This was perhaps the foremost impediment our founding fathers wanted to get rid of. Our founding fathers had pinned their hopes on the teachers and believed that teachers would demolish the entrenched cultural prejudice, gender bias, and caste-class-communal division. The contribution from teachers would, to a large extent, however hinge upon continuous, ruthless training courses to prepare them for the titanic tasks of demolishing impediments of cultural prejudice, gender bias, and caste-class-communal division. The very idea of education in a liberal, socialist and secular democracy is premised on transformative education and relentless supply of effective teachers and this, in turn, means robust network of academic staff development centres. Furthermore, effective teachers would also double-up as the role-models for young generation.

The teachers would be better role-models than others for obvious reasons. Of course, the successful people from different walks of life: medicine, science,



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art and cinema, politics, public administration, social work, etc. could also serve role-models for growing generations because their professions weigh heavily on young minds and are therefore desirable. Teachers with high calibre, high quality however would be the best role-models. Why? Here are couple of reasons. High calibre, high quality teacher would be the one who mingle, dingle and dance around the young minds on daily basis than any other person and can influence sensitive minds positively. Second, teacher would be able to portray, pose and cast himself more effectively into shadow of desirable personality traits than does any other person. Thirdly, teacher is the person most suitable to inform, sensitise young people as to the pressing issues, raising controversies, and novel opportunities as well as threats. With right mix of knowledge, modes, methods and effective skills, the teacher may be able to channelize young minds towards productive purposes unlike any other person. Fourthly, the teacher would better portray the real world through his skills and prompt young minds to appreciate, embrace and adopt fitting means, methods and techniques to realise their dreams, satisfy their urges, and pacify their desires. For these and other similar reasons, the teacher would be better role-model for growing generations. The successful people from other walks of life are indeed important and can complement the efforts of the teacher. Moreover, successful people can also be asked to come and share their inspiring ideas, thrilling experience and rebellious passion for success with students, as and when appropriate, possible. Teachers, in other words carry immense responsible of posing, performing as role-model for young minds. Only better equipped, better qualified staff development institutions would be able to supply a sufficient number of high calibre, high quality and dedicated teachers.

This section has laid out conceptual foundations and has clarified the conceptual imperatives of academic staff development programmes. It has shown: a) teacher is pivot and dynamic actor and as such need to be groomed and trained in right attitude, belief, insights, modes, methods and styles of effective teaching so as to enhance teaching quality; b) Teaching abilities are not god-given but could be cultivated by the means of scientifically grounded, appropriately designed, and sensitively executed development programmes; c) the embrace of democratic way of life is incumbent upon sufficient supply of quality teachers so as to enable citizens take the charge of democratic politics; d) only a professionally groomed teacher

demolish social evils like cultural prejudice, gender bias and caste-class-communal divisions which most certainly retard the very reason d'être of a liberal, socialist, secular democracy; and e) that teachers serve better role-model for growing generation because of their proximity to young people, ability to awaken, sensitise young minds as to the pressing challenges, emerging threats and new horizons of opportunities. In short, the academic staff development institutions should be premised on the veracity of carefully designed, effectively implemented academic staff development programmes.

Academic Staff Development Institutions and Teachers

Academic staff development institutions are meant to imprint sufficient and effective teaching, research skills; nevertheless, produce nothing tangible without quality teacher-trainers. The relationship between academic staff development institutions and quality teachers is incumbent upon availability and optimum use of the trainers at a given point in time. Staff development institutions without adequate number of highly motivated trainers are like oranges without nutritious pulp. The institutions boasting the title of academic staff development centre therefore must attract, groom and retain the finest trainers so as to fulfil their reason d'être – developing the future teachers not merely to teach but teach effectively. They can and should launch themselves as forums where the experienced, highly skilled, highly motivated teacher-trainers would be given hearty welcome, afford them professional freedom, operational autonomy and a decent remuneration. The managers of academic staff development institutions would also digest the fact that highly skilled, knowledgeable and committed teacher-trainers could not be attracted towards it merely because they have competitive remuneration package, specious buildings, modern tech-devices but sincere respect for professional competence, personal integrity and ethical commitment. A staff development institution devoid of these highly valued ingredients would be nothing but liability on resource. Retaining highly valued and dynamic teacher-trainers would be quite challenging and risky, for the loss of such quality manpower would take double the efforts and remuneration package to compensate. Finally, the managers of academic staff development institutions would go to the extent possible to retain effective teacher-trainers and assure them of continuous infrastructure improvement, professional innovation and procedural rejuvenation



along with flexible working hours. In other words, academic staff development institutions will be able to provide adequate pool of highly effective teachers, if they have at their disposal high quality trainers.

The academic staff development institutions must therefore have the authority, autonomy and revenues to identify, attract and retain talent – the best teacher-trainers. The academic staff development institutions, to begin with, should have sufficient authority to identify and attract people with suitable professional credentials for galvanising teacher-participants to seek as much knowledge about teaching and research. Similarly, they should have adequate autonomy to frame and follow own rules as to the content, course design and the sort of teacher-trainers required for the purpose. Further, academic staff development institutions must have sufficient revenues to run programmes, attract and retain the best professional talent so as to remain relevant to the changing times. In a nutshell, academic staff development institutions would identify, attract and retain the best teacher-trainers only they enjoyed sufficient authority, meaningful autonomy and adequate revenues.

Finally, academic staff development institution's edifice, ethos and ethics are weighty issues and must weigh on the minds of its custodians – administrative heads, academic fraternity, policy makers and civil society. The institutional edifice implies both hard and soft elements of the space. Academic development institutions need proper physical as well as human spaces. Such spaces need to support, sustain and encourage participants in their leaning endeavours to the extent possible. The institutional ethos or culture too requires quality conscience to realise the stated objectives. More importantly, institutional ethos or cultural environ must guard against entry of autocratic tendencies, for they have the potential to retard institutional growth. In addition, academic staff development institutions must promote high ethical standards for its technical, teaching staff so as to effectively secure stipulated aims. In short, they must command respect of the academic, professional and student community. In other words, the custodians of academic staff development bodies must weigh properly the issue of ethics, ethos, for these are weighty matters which will act as the ultimate arbiter of their future.

This section emphasizes significance of the relationship between academic staff development institutions and teacher-trainers. It argues that sufficient

number of quality teacher-trainers, the ability of academic staff development institutions to attract, retain the talent, and the issues of ethos, ethics as matters of great substance for enhancing credibility of the staff development institutions.

Academic Staff Development and Teaching Quality

Academic staff development programme and quality of teaching comprise 'the core' of effective learning. Academic staff development programmes build teaching capabilities and encourage teachers to embrace better teaching techniques, methods and processes. Moreover, they present the only potent opportunity to inject essential ideas, concepts and theories so as to enrich teachers who in turn enrich teaching. In other words, academic staff development programmes not only inform but also influence the quality of teaching.

The effective teaching however resides into teaching procedures, processes and practices. Effective teaching essentially means having prudent, verified pre-teaching rehearsals in the form of procedures designed to grab attention, enthuse learning appetite and impress upon the mind of the learner. Such procedures are often tagged as preparatory steps and are considered as imperative for making teaching-learning experience truly interesting. Likewise teaching processes imply measures the teacher undertakes as a part of content delivery exercise so as to attract and entertain attention of the learner for the maximum impact on learning output front. In actual practice this means prudent design and execution of teaching plan with due regard to learner's background and classroom conditions. By learning practices we mean adopting theoretically accepted learning practices that are considered essential for realising effective learning outcomes. And all these procedures, processes and practices therefore form the core of effective academic development programme.

The quality learning outcomes, nonetheless, rest on standardised teaching modes, methods and manners. Apart from teaching procedures, processes and practices, the quality learning outcomes hinge upon enthusiastic embrace of standardised teaching modes, methods and manners. Standardised teaching modes denote embrace of proven ways of content delivery, appropriate teaching audio-video aids, and tested modes of holding attention. Standardised teaching methods connotes to theoretically sound, discipline specific teaching methods with due regard to local



[Signature] 13

context. This also involves utilising context specific, context sensitive and context dependent devices for the benefit of learners instead of rigidly following text book methods. Standardised manners refer to the manner in which the teacher minds herself. This means actual classroom performance of the teacher as to her words, deeds, gestures summoned in the process of interface between the teacher and the learner. Put simply, quality learning outcome requires adoption of standardised teaching modes, methods and manners and academic staff development programmes are expected to review, reinforce and refresh them.

Finally, academic staff development programmes are also expected to respect the content too, for both methods and content as much essential for effective learning outcomes. Which means the content and the methods are not either/or matter but go hand in hand and influence the quality of learning outcome. Moreover, the nature, scope of content decides the type of methods. Academic staff development programmes therefore must value the content and methods both. In other words, the content component and the methods component share symbiotic relationship with one another and determine the quality teaching outcomes.

This section has substantiated the symbiotic relationship between academic staff development programmes and the quality teaching. It notes that quality learning outcomes are incumbent upon (i) prudent teaching procedures, processes and practices and (ii) standardised teaching modes, methods and manners and (iii) the symbiotic relationship between the content and the method. The section has argued that quality teaching-learning outcomes are the result of quality academic staff development programme where the teachers would be exposed to the prudent ways for enriching their teaching.

UGC Human Resource Development Centres

Firmly holding the above context as backdrop, this section offers critical analysis of the system of academic staff development centres – UGC Human Resource Development Centres (HRDC).

The HRDCs symbolise quantitative expansion with a little or no respect for quality. Recently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has renamed Academic Staff Colleges as HRDC. The UGC has in fact brought forth a special regulation for establishing, managing and controlling HRDCs ostensibly for improving the nature and quality of academic staff

development programmes. This special regulation stipulates that HRDCs would now required to be more proactive, relevant and tech savvy and would also have to collaborate with newly established regional coordinating centre. Both HRDCs and Regional HRDCs now are expected to maintain the reservoir of talent (resource persons for example) and share so as to achieve better results. The special regulation also specifies the requirements as to the receipt of UGC financial support for HRDCs as long as they strictly follow relevant guidelines.

The special regulation however maintains studied silence as to the qualifications or academic credentials of the resource persons who can be invited to conduct training sessions. It merely says that HRDCs will pool resource persons from the vicinity. The practical effect of this stipulation is that HRDCs continue to function as before without having to invite resource persons of high credential and calibre. It is an open secret that HRDCs invite resource persons with bare minimum credential who habitually bring little interest or enthusiasm to their sessions. For example, the special regulation holds all university professors worthy of invitation by HRDCs for conducting sessions without any strings attached. This means a professor without any proven contribution or reputed publications can be invited to conduct sessions at the HRDCs. Such a professor will end up projecting himself as embodiment of virtues and boast his credentials as regards teaching skill, domain knowledge and publications who himself has very little or no experience of it. This has unfortunately been the dominant practice for years at the erstwhile academic staff colleges and likely to continue without any serious rupture at the HRDCs. This is entirely possible because our universities, barring a few, are crowded with professors who rarely seen taking interest in serious, systematic contribution to their professed field of specialization by way of credible, useful research and its dissemination via reputed journals.

The other relevant factor is that HRDCs have not paid due attention to emerging areas of studies like women's studies, studies in social inclusion, studies in migration, studies in agriculture, policy studies, pedagogical studies, population studies, security & strategic studies, peace studies, etc. and have been rigidly following outdated programme schedules. The erstwhile ASCs had faithfully adhered to disciplinary boundaries and had rarely demonstrated willingness to reform, renovation despite appeals to do so. The fact



of the matter however is that the contemporary times demand intra-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and multidimensional knowledge; and such knowledge is incumbent upon embracing area studies instead of overarching complex carpet traditional subjects. Women's studies, studies in migration, studies in social inclusion, human development studies, studies in agriculture, etc. for example, need to be part of any academic staff development programmes for the reason that they bring the issues, difficulties of the most affected groups of people to the centre stage who constitute the largest proportion of humanity. Similarly, studies in pedagogy, population, policy formulation, security, peace building, etc. have become exceedingly significant so as to know, adopt and implement better policy paradigms and academic staff development programmes definitely has a role to play herein. For instance, academic staff development programmes are those rare opportunities to expose the university and college teachers as to their role as instruments of knowledge dissemination among youths. The reality however is HRDCs have unfortunately been oblivious as to the pressing challenges of our time and continuously ignoring the calls of sincere, systematic inclusion of the issues affecting our lives in the garb of respecting mundane disciplinary boundaries.

The HRDCs are not well equipped with the capacity or incentives to improve quality standards and are dependent on physical, human, and administrative resource of the host university. Both the erstwhile ASCs and present HRDCs, by their regulatory content and design, heavily rely upon resources of the host university. For example, they are invariably housed in already over stretched, poorly serviced physical spaces. The UGC, of course, provides funds to support the scheme; nevertheless the university bureaucracy reluctantly regulates its implementation and superficially monitors them. Similarly, the HRDCs, more often than not, left with no choice but employ host university's dull, unwilling or unenthusiastic human resource to fill-in the routines as well as emergencies due to absence of robust support systems. For example, the host university bureaucracy reluctantly deposes necessary administrative, technical personnel to staff development centres and the best and brightest professors rarely come forward to engage training sessions at the HRDCs citing workload, routine bureaucratic imperatives. Either way services offered by HRDCs are severely affected. The conditions of HRDCs however are slowly but surely improving due to increased funds and other technical competencies

but they are far from satisfactory. Put simply, most of the HRDCs lack imperative competencies of their own and host university bureaucracy reluctantly offers them support. This indeed renders the HRDCs a somewhat burdensome for host universities despite declarations to the contrary. This, in turn, offers managers of HRDCs no incentive as to making their service more relevant, enriching and effective.

The course pattern under both erstwhile ASCs and current HRDCs follow an outmoded, rigid and archaic course pattern. For example, the courses are typically segregated as Orientation, Refresher and Short-Term. These are mainstay triad: nonetheless, starkly similar barring the duration factor. The Orientation and Refresher courses are normally of three weeks and part and parcel of the Teacher Career Advancement Scheme. However, if looked closely, would give striking sense of sameness, except some random variation injected to give them superficial distinction. The short term course is the recent entrant and is also mandatory for Career Advancement Scheme. Though short term course is rather purpose oriented - like that of honing research method skills. In practice though they are nothing but a bunch of often-repeated methodology themes: formulation of research question, hypothesis, research design, etc. The course is a textbook example of how not to design, implement a course on such complex, perplexing and context-dependent as research methods.

Moreover, the courses follow no prudent style or robust content and pay little attention to details as to their effective execution. Baring very few academic staff development centres, the remaining simply follow archaic training pattern, year on year - typically a session begins around 10 o'clock during the morning and ends at around 5 o'clock in the evening. What goes in between is short sessions unthinkingly squeezed into one another covering issues from gender discrimination to global warming without doing justice to any of the single issue covered. The participants, in the processes, are left to collect scattered bits of information, which can easily be accessed in portals like Google. And the same pattern is repeated for days with mindboggling number of loosely connected issues without any theoretically sounds premise whatsoever.

The other important issue which is equally archaic is the issue of awarding 'grades'. The grades (A, B, C and F) are generously awarded. The distribution of grades, it goes without saying, are done without any systematic tracking of participant's sincerity, domain



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15

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knowledge or teaching skills but simply awarded not because they want to but they have to. Of course, no participant ever gets 'F' for the reason that 'F' means 'fail', repeat of the same course, and unnecessary burden on already depleting resource of the centre, the host university and the participant's parent institution.

Finally, the HRDCs do enjoy some autonomy; although, it exists more on paper than in practice. Institutional autonomy denotes to the presence of effective independence to make all the necessary decisions so as to realize the objectives as stipulated in relevant regulatory framework. With regard to educational institutes this typically involves the authority to command adequate power vis-à-vis receipt, application and allotment of the resources so as to fulfil the mandated aims. In respect of ASCs or HRDCs, they have been somewhat left to fend themselves, for their establishment, operations and prospects are tied together with those of the host university's willingness to accept, adapt and run them as per the standing guidelines of the funding agency. The HRDCs, in this sense, have no independent standing or autonomy to organise itself as may be necessary to offer quality service to all the members of academic fraternity as and when she thinks appropriate and useful. Rather, the HRDCs are not in position to extend their service beyond a tiny group of people due to lack of necessary, reliable and trained support system and continue to be at the mercy of university bureaucracy. What is more, even the new regulation did not grant sufficient autonomy to the HRDCs; and yet, hopes them to scale the new horizon of successes.

This section identifies the major issues affecting the current system of HRDCs. It argues that the HRDCs, embody quantitative expansion with scant regard for quality as it makes no distinction between the best and brightest professor who can and should be invited for conducting courses at the HRDCs. It has brought home the point that HRDCs instead of paying serious attention to important study areas like women's studies, studies in social inclusion, etc. still follow the content with trivial relevance. Also, the section has held the spotlights on the capacity crunch of HRDCs which make them look like dependents on already dwindling resources of the host university. In addition, the section unravels the archaic course pattern which is neither robust in design nor sound or sufficient in content. Finally, the section has dealt with the mighty issue of HRDCs' autonomy which rather exists on paper than in reality for they have no real option but to rely upon the whims of the host university's bureaucracy.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, the current system of HRDCs has failed to nurture quality conscious teachers because of its design fault, content deficit, disorderly execution and inadequate finances. The Indian higher education consequently receives inadequate and low quality teacher input. This, in turn, has affected the quality of higher education in the country. Even the new regulation seems to have missed the opportunity to overhaul academic staff development architecture and with it, we have missed the bus to new horizon once again. □



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