

BIG SHIFT: Relief for 10 lakh college teachers

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has dumped a mandatory requirement for varsities to only select and promote faculty members based on a performance index score, bringing relief to the over 10 lakh college and university teachers across the nation.

The decision – taken on Monday -- is a direct outcome of fears that the strict but inflexible parameters of the UGC Academic Performance Index (API) were holding up appointments and exacerbating widespread teacher vacancies that already plague India's higher education system.

Instead of the UGC's API, universities will now have the flexibility to evolve their own mechanisms to screen teacher performance, under a decision that tries to straddle the difficult balance between ensuring the autonomy of varsities and improving faculty accountability.

"We want teachers to meet certain standards in order to be eligible for selection or promotion, but what we've seen with the API so far is that it's best to let universities decide those standards for themselves," UGC chairman Professor Ved Prakash told HT.

The API is India's first attempt at ensuring that teacher selections and promotions are directly linked to their academic performance. Started along with the unprecedented salary hike teachers benefited from under the Sixth pay Commission in 2010, the performance-linked promotions system is aimed at increasing the accountability of the country's teachers to improve the standard of India's universities. Repeated global rankings place no Indian university among the top 200 in the world – in stark contrast not only to the west but also to China.

But teachers unions have strongly protested the API from the very beginning, pointing out what they argued were flaws with the index that allowed favoritism and benefited a select few.

In several universities, confusion over the parameters of the index has also placed several appointments in limbo, at a time when the country's central varsities face teacher shortages of up to 30% and many state varsities have over 50% teacher vacancies.

Under the UGC's fresh decision, varsities will need to rate teachers, but can set the parameters themselves. To encourage transparency, the UGC will insist that teachers are given a point-based score. The varsity-developed index will only be used to screen applicants – and not to make final selections, which will be made on the basis of recommendations of an expert panel.

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