

ACADEMIC FREEDOM VS “PRIORITY” RESEARCH: ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

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It is the duty of intellectuals to speak truth to power. Therefore, criticisms of government’s action and motive are expected in a democracy. But it does not serve much purpose if they are triggered primarily by fear or suspicion and happen to be disproportionate to the main cause of action. A recent circular (March 13, 2019) by the Central University of Kerala (CUK) pursuant to a meeting of a few vice-chancellors of central universities and the vehement protests against it by many academics and the media raise fundamental questions about the climate, direction and quality of research in our public funded universities and institutions.

The circular suggests that Ph.D. level research by *Fellows* should be in accordance with ‘national priorities’ and selected from a shelf of projects prepared by each department, discouraging research in ‘irrelevant’ areas. Despite clarification by the Ministry of Human Resource Development that it has not issued or endorsed any such directive, major newspapers and a prominent social science journal¹ have denounced this action. A distinguished academic also started a signature campaign against this move.² The concerted action by a powerful section deserves attention and cannot be dismissed as a pre-election rhetoric, in the context of ‘we’ vs ‘they’ binaries.

The main criticisms can be clubbed as: the move is anti-intellectual and against the spirit of free enquiry necessary for knowledge generation; the motive is clearly political ‘that would saffronise the campuses and incalculably damage India’s knowledge ecosystem’; it will ‘governmentalise’ the research mind; and the government will dictate ideas and police research that would hamper

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CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KERALA

(सरकार के अधिनियम, वर्ष 2009 द्वारा स्थापित) / Established under the Act of Parliament in 2009

No. CUK/ACA/728/2018-19/1898

Dated, 19.02.2019
13/1/19

परिपत्र / CIRCULAR

1 The Vice Chancellors meeting held on 15.12.2018 at Shastri Bhawan, New Delhi to review the implementation status of all parameter indicated by Central Universities in the Tripartite MoU (CUK, MHRD and UGC). In accordance with the decisions of the said meeting, the Vice-Chancellor has directed to implement the following in Central University of Kerala:-

- To discourage research in irrelevant areas. When Fellows are being admitted for PhDs, the topics for the thesis should be in accordance with the national priorities. Allotting privilege topics to the PhD students should be dispensed with.
- Therefore, all the Heads of the Department is hereby directed to convene the meeting of the Faculties and to prepare a shelf of project to be taken for research study pertaining to their subject considering national priorities. The student can opt from the shelf of project.

2. This is issued for compliance with the approval of the Vice Chancellor.

कुलसचिव / REGISTRAR

Copy to:

- The PS to Vice Chancellor, PVC & F.O
- The all Deans of Schools
- The all HoDs
- The Finance Section
- The Concerned file

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critical thinking engaging with plurality of ideas. Questions like ‘Is there anything called useless or irrelevant research’ or ‘should not research be best left to researchers’³ have also been raised.

Even if the ill-drafted circular by CUK is just an excuse to highlight the underlying concerns, they need be

addressed dispassionately. Admittedly, freedom of thought is important for research ideas to flourish and the heavy hand of government should be as far removed from the scholarly ecosystem as feasible. Few self-respecting researchers would like to get involved in ‘administrative nightmares’ that raise various questions of accountability. Understandably, such issues cause tension between academicians/researchers on the one hand and the officials/Ministers of the government on the other.

The government has to deal with unpleasant tangibles such as budget allocation, timeline, target, audit, measurement of outcome and the like, and is answerable to the people through the legislature and otherwise. Can it remain apathetic to what has been going on in most of our institutions in the name of research? While undue governmental interference in the ‘process of research’ that starts with the identification of broad areas of investigation should be discouraged, the questions that arise are: should the government impose ‘reasonable restrictions’ to ensure that scarce public resources are fairly utilised; is ‘national priority’ a term to be despised per se and equated always with ‘priority of government in power’; would it be justified for the government to remain indifferent to the declining quality of research outputs; what should be done to create an atmosphere of trust between the government and the research establishments? The issues are complex, interrelated and offer no easy solution.

Imposing ‘reasonable restrictions’, however, assumes special importance given the abysmally low allocation of public funding for research – just a small fraction of the officially estimated public funding of about 1.4% of GDP for the higher education sector. Assuming no quantum jump in the near future of flow of resources, aligning broad research areas to national and constitutional goals may not appear unreasonable. In areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), identification of such areas might pose lesser problems, than in humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless, such research areas should be identified through extensive consultations between ‘all’ the stakeholders.

The poor and declining quality of outputs from most of the university system merits serious debate. In the absence of adequate resources (financial, institutional and human), the demand for more Ph.Ds., partly propelled by UGC guidelines, has created an alarming situation in which private agencies and individuals are engaging themselves in a flourishing trade of ‘thesis making and thesis guidance at affordable costs’. Unethical and deceptive businesses like these have been mushrooming in many places.⁴ This is a grave matter that should be handled on priority.



As is evident, few research papers are published in acclaimed international journals, originating from a handful of institutions. As V.V. Krishna and Swapan Kumar Patra have reported, ‘In 2013, 23 universities out of 700 published 50 percent of total university research output; 35 universities published 60 percent... and 52 universities... published 70 percent of total research output of universities...’⁵ This was the academic milieu that seems to be thwarted by the CUK circular!

While finding a political motive behind the circular is understandable, one would also note that over the decades, the intellectual space has, exceptions apart, been monopolised, especially in social sciences, by the left-of-the-centre intellectuals hardly allowing any growth of the ‘other’. Where is any convincing rightist discourse in India? Within the constitutional scheme of things, however, the ‘other’ has apparently started expanding its sphere of activity. Ramachandra Guha has called the current dispensation as the most ‘anti-intellectual’ ever [*The Telegraph*, April 27, 2019]⁶ primarily on his assessment of the calibre of people appointed to the key positions in educational administration. He is by no means alone in thinking so. But it is a pity that there is hardly any credible voice today that can provide a convincing counter-narrative. Hopefully, with the passage of time, would emerge a kind of synthesis that would have space for the truly diverse ‘hues’.

However, to ensure that no government can push its agenda of ‘mono-culture’ and controlled research, a robust, transparent and easily accessible system has to be in place, enabling civil society to agitate, when needed, based on informed choice.

Three initiatives of the government titled Shodhganga, IMPRINT India [Impacting Research Innovation and Technology] and IMPRESS [Impactful Policy Research in

Social Science] may be viewed in this context. The first requires Ph.D. dissertations to be deposited electronically making them available for the scholastic community at large. The second brings the Indian Institute of Science, Indian Institutes of Technology and a few others together with the concerned government departments for research in key areas to “enable, empower and embolden the nation for inclusive growth and self-reliance”. Under the third, eleven broad thematic areas from *State and Democracy to Growth, Macro Trade and Economic Policy* have been identified for research by central, state and private institutions through a transparent process. Are these schemes restrictive of academic freedom?

Indeed, global experience shows that research in one area, not appreciated at that time, turns out to be extremely important later, in view of other developments. Nevertheless, one cannot be oblivious of what the State can afford and how the limited resources put to optimal use.

Finally, mistrust towards any democratically elected government should not perhaps be so acute that terms like ‘national priority’ evoke suspicions, unless there is a body of solid evidence to back such suspicion. There are many democratic countries where research, especially in STEM, is focussed on broad identified areas. How much science in the US gained in the nineteen forties, on account of such research, can be a pointer in this direction. Under the circumstances explained, priority areas should be mindfully

selected and directionless, unfocussed work should not be encouraged with public money.

Remaining unconcerned about the standard of research outputs cannot be defended under any circumstance. Since the Balaram Committee has reportedly submitted its recommendations in order to amend Ph.D. regulations and enhance the quality of research, it is time that enlightened citizenry, academic communities and the government discuss and deliberate how best the research conditions be improved to facilitate innovation and foster generation of knowledge for inclusive social benefit. □

References

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Notes

Details about Shodhganga, IMPRINT India and IMPRESS programmes are available in their respective websites.