

Summary of the Report

DISCRIMINATING AGAINST EXCELLENCE: ABUSES IN RECRUITMENT PRACTICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA

The Subcommittee for Academic Integrity, Jaffna University Science Teachers' Association

Introduction

The Subcommittee for Academic Integrity found blatant, endemic abuse across several university departments and units in the selection of academic and non-academic staff. The root of this abuse is both political and personal patronage which operates at all levels of the system, and an unwillingness of senior professors and administration to challenge it.

The most prevalent form of abuse documented is in the selection of probationary lecturers (or assistant lecturers), resulting in the most highly qualified candidates such as First Class degree-holders being systematically excluded from consideration or denied positions.

The culpability of the University Grants Commission in making political appointments to the Council and then being unwilling to fulfil its statutory mandate to regulate the administration of universities is very much part of the problem.

The Political Nexus and 'Pre-council Meetings'

The governing Councils, especially the external members, the majority who are appointed by the UGC (which in practice acts as a rubber stamp for those in political authority) have been disinclined to act on academic principle and in the best interests of the University. The selection of the Vice Chancellor has largely depended on them. In Jaffna a political party which works with the current government, was given a monopoly over the appointment of external council members, although by statute the responsibility is the UGC's. That party keeps a tight control over them, by summoning them for pre-council meetings before each monthly council meeting. Unfortunately the internal members have gone along without protest and, consequently, few councillors know or care about the rules. A powerful core of internal members is served well by this system and the others take the easy way out by playing along. Academics who fall in line enjoy unchallenged arbitrary power in their own spheres, especially over appointments to the academic staff.

MALFEASANCE IN ACADEMIC RECRUITMENT

Zoology

The 1st Class Honours candidate, who won the Sir Sangarapillai Pararajasingam Award for best performance in Zoology Special with GPA (Grade Point Average) 3.72, was rejected for the post of probationary lecturer in Zoology on 14th October 2013. The schedule given to the selection board unaccountably failed to flag her distinctive Award. The candidate given the appointment was about the weakest of the eleven interviewed, having a 2nd Upper with GPA 3.44. At the interview, the Vice Chancellor had stopped the First Class candidate's presentation after 2 minutes, but gave the selected candidate wide berth to present herself.

Computer Science

Four candidates with first class were interviewed for probationary lecturer in Computer Science on 8th May 2012, having GPAs as high as 3.80. However, the selection board ruled, "*No selection is made since the presentation skill, subject knowledge and overall performance of the candidates are not satisfactory*". They did not apply again.

The candidate selected at the subsequent selection on 12th November 2013, where just two were interviewed, had graduated with a 2nd Upper in June 2001 but worked as Assistant Network Manager Grade II in the Computer Unit for nine years, without any marked academic attainment. How fresh first class graduates lacked subject knowledge is one of those unanswered questions. **Circumstances make it look as though the selected candidate was smuggled in as Lecturer at the very moment the most eligible young first classes had been shooed off and credible applicants had dried up.**

FACULTY OF ENGINEERING

An engineer who entered the University of Peradeniya in 1982 and completed his PhD at the University of Moratuwa in 2008 was appointed as Senior Lecturer Grade 1 in 2012 without the mandatory 6 years experience after obtaining the required postgraduate qualification. Another applicant rejected twice for the same position was admitted to the University of Moratuwa in 1981, but completed his engineering studies at University of Madras owing to the 1983 violence, and in 1995 obtained his PhD in Coastal Engineering from Queen's University, Canada, which is an acclaimed leader in the field. He also had amply fulfilled the required experience after his doctorate and met all requirements for the post. The second time the Selection Board decisively stated that his 'subject knowledge, teaching skill, research ability and overall performance are not satisfactory'. But this engineer not selected has three refereed publications, while the selected engineer has little to match this.

Sociology

A first class graduate in Sociology from the University of Peradeniya, with a PhD in Anthropology (a related subject) from the Johns Hopkins University in the US (ranked among the top 20 Universities in the world) applied for a position in Sociology at the University of Jaffna. Although he was shortlisted for the interview, the SAR Academic made a note that this candidate could be dropped because the position required a PhD in Sociology, while the applicant's was in Anthropology. The regulations are clear that anyone with qualifications appropriate to the position in a relevant discipline must be called and the selection board must rule. In fact it is hard to draw a dividing line between Sociology and Anthropology.

English Language Teaching

A First Class candidate from Peradeniya who had served as temporary lecturer in English Literature for 1 ½ years applied for an ELTC post. The interview was fixed a year after he had applied, two months after he left for doctoral studies in the US in August 2011. He was refused an online interview. He applied next time and the interview was fixed for 17th April 2012 while his academic sessions were on and was refused a postponement by a month when his vacation began. Parallel to this (on the same date) interviews were also fixed for Law. Since Category 1 candidates (1st Class or 2nd Upper) turned up for neither, Category 2 (2nd Lower candidates) were summoned for interviews on 15th May. A 2nd Lower was selected for English. But one of the two Category 2 law candidates who turned up for the interview was told that the interview was postponed. The Law interview was held on 24th May and the candidate absent earlier was chosen. By this time the 1st Class candidate in English who was refused a postponement was present in Jaffna as he had already told the University.

The ELT position was advertised again in April 2013 and interviews were held in October 2013. The Peradeniya First Class who applied again from the USA and appealed for an on-line

interview was not granted it. The schedule failed to mention the three merit prizes listed in his application. A First Class in English Literature from Jaffna who faced the same interview was rejected, while three Second Class (Upper Division) candidates from her batch were selected.

Financial Management

A First Class candidate from Jaffna University's 2012 batch with GPA 3.63 who won the Securities and Exchange Commission Gold Medal was rejected and a candidate from the same batch with GPA 3.49 was chosen. The schedule given to the Selection Board did not flag the first candidate's Gold Medal. Further the selected candidate had her credentials inflated in the schedule to have worked as Temporary Lecturer from Apr. 2012 whereas she was not given the temporary lecturer appointment until May 2013. In addition, the leading candidate who was not selected states in her complaint to the Council that the interview was held with the Chairman of the Selection Board (Vice Chancellor), though absent shortly after the beginning of the interview, had signed the selection document. A fundamental rights appeal has been filed in the Supreme Court by this candidate.

Commerce

In the 19th Feb. 2014 interview the applications of the First Class candidate with GPA 3.63 and others with a BBA degrees were turned down contrary to the rules as Business management is a discipline relevant to Commerce. Three First Class candidates interviewed with GPA 3.55 and above (two from the 2012 batch) were dropped, while among the three selected were a 2nd Class Upper with GPA 3.19 from the 2012 batch and another 2nd Upper who graduated in 2000 and obtained an MA in Planning from Jaffna in 2009.

Sports Science: The Case of the Preferred Candidate

A candidate with a First Class Master's in Physical Education from Annamalai University who was attached to the University's Physical Education Unit and a Second Class Master's from another Indian University who had been a sports master for 4 years were interviewed for Lecturer in Sports Science on 30th March 2012. No one was selected. But about two weeks later the Vice Chancellor took the unusual step of making the 2nd Class a Temporary Lecturer for one whole year at a time the academic year was about to end.

When the position was advertised next time both candidates applied. The First Class candidate was without prior notice summoned by the SAR for an interview involving a presentation at 12.00 noon while the interviews were in progress. The Second Class candidate was selected. The Vice Chancellor cancelled the appointment after the First Class candidate pointed out the irregularities. These candidates together with others were re-interviewed on 10th October 2013 and were all found unsuitable. How does one explain such volatility of selection boards?

NON-ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

- The March 2009 list of selections for Computer Applications Assistants (CAA) drawn from a mainly EPDP list forwarded through the Ministry of Higher Education was prefaced with the Scheme of Recruitment which claimed candidates were sought by open advertisement.
- Issue of appointments to selected CAA candidates was deferred in June 2011 though the Council recorded that the procedures were correctly followed. Later this became an indefinite deferral citing a letter from the Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education. The same drama was repeated in 2012.

- Ministry of Higher Education sent a list of candidates for the post of Labourer and they were told to obtain their qualifications and complete their applications. On 8th July, the Ministry telephoned the University to withdraw 30 names from the list already given and to include 23 names from a fresh list. The schedule for candidates in the new list was prepared in record time and interview was held on 10th July. The following day, the Selection Board interviewed five absentees and acceded to a further request by a candidate to be considered in absentia. The selection was passed the same day (11th) by a Special Meeting of the Council.

Compare this with the treatment of well-qualified applicants from abroad for academic posts whose requests for on-line interview or adjustment of date were never considered.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that all cases of irregularities that have come to light be reviewed swiftly and highly qualified applicants that were excluded at interviews be called. To guard against retaliation, applicants who have filed complaints should have their cases heard by a special review board appointed in consultation with the Unions.
 2. Independent persons of repute with an appreciation of university values should be appointed to the Council as external members, and student representatives and academic staff must be allowed to review their qualifications. Internal members should be advised to resign their positions and seek a fresh mandate from their constituencies in the Faculties. This means starting on a fresh slate where the more independent internal members are not inhibited from speaking out; indeed part of their new mandate must be speaking out against cases of abuse or political manipulation.
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