

Research at Tribhuvan University, (T.U.): A Brief Appraisal of the State-of-the-Art

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INTRODUCTION

A university is generally understood as an institution where the highest level of academic activities are planned, organized and implemented. Besides teaching research is another essential component of higher education and university is the only place where training for all kinds of research is provided. Both teaching and research provide the ultimate knowledge to the seeker who then becomes a qualified servant to the society and the nation. A university graduate therefore is one who has been duly initiated into the world of both basic and general as well as specific research. Since research is an ongoing phenomenon at the university one can always increase his/her skill of research even after graduation from the university. That teaching and research are the two main components of an established and statutory university is today a commonplace knowledge in the world of academia.

Tribhuvan University, the first university in Nepal, is more than thirty five years old now. In its history it has produced thousands of graduates who are serving the society and nation from various levels of their expertise employed in and outside the government. This paper discusses in brief the history, role and status of research at Tribhuvan University.

THE CONCEPT OF RESEARCH AS ENVISAGED IN THE PAST

During the formative stage of the evolution of Tribhuvan University as a leading academic institution research did not play very significant part in its regular programmes. Teaching was the only known and practiced medium of imparting higher education to the students. Permanent teachers often received

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scholarships under bilateral/multilateral programmes such as the Colombo Plan and Fulbright/East-West Center, among few others, to receive degrees and/or training in various fields of knowledge. But such opportunities were very few and far between. Inside the T.U. system itself it took a long time to develop research manpower and make research a part of the regular teaching profession even at the highest level of instruction such as Masters.

The New Education system Plan (NESP) introduced in 1970 aimed at revolutionizing higher education in Nepal. Its basic objectives consisted of creating various levels of manpower to meet the need of the nation. Tribhuvan University was the sole organization to produce such manpower. Naturally therefore its programmes and prospects went through fundamental changes introducing several novel ideas. Research was then envisaged as a necessary component of teaching in T.U. Consequently, research institutes that were functioning more or less in the periphery of the university were reorganized and their programmes revamped according to the outlined objectives of the NESP. At one point in time at least fourteen general and technical institutes were established in T.U. Similarly, four Research Institutes such as the CEDA, CNAS, CERID and RECAST were established with a view to combine teaching with research and upgrade the teaching and research skills of the teaching hands at the higher levels of the University. At the Center the Research Division was instituted under the Rector's Office to monitor, coordinate and facilitate research activities within the four Institutes just mentioned and/or other individual/group research registered in T.U. This was an ideal provision whereby the university teachers could improve their research skills and the research officials could remain in touch with teaching.

THE ACTUAL OUTCOME OF RESEARCH FACILITIES AT T.U.

As a result of the new provision made under the New Education System Plan, the seventies saw the growth and evolution of the research institutes in competitive ways. They were academically sound to attract the attention of the native and foreign scholars and donors to carry out and fund various research programmes. As one senior colleague and the then Chief of one of the Research Institutes put it rather succinctly, 'Research programmes at T.U. run as long as the milch cows keep us feeding.' He was thus referring to the various funding agencies through which our research institutes in most part sustained their research.

One ideal situation created by the new provision was that under the new rules the teaching staff would get opportunities to put their hands in various research activities at the Research Institutes and thus increase their teaching efficiency as well as their income. Similarly, the research personnel at the Institutes were also supposed to maintain their links with the corresponding departments to which they originally belonged or which they found closer to their specialization to teach some classes at the Master's level. Such a provision would not only keep the departments and centers closer together academically but also enrich the store of knowledge at the highest level in T.U. It is an open-book knowledge however that to the dismay of those interested in both research and teaching such a situation could only begin and not continue. There were several factors leading to the early demise of the provision of exchange of skill and knowledge between the Departments and the Centers at T.U. namely, a) the frequent and fast change at the highest level leadership in T.U., b) the appointment of non teaching personnel at the helm of Research Centers and non research personnel at the central administration in T.U., c) lack of enough fund at the Departments and the Centers, d) lack of research interest and sincerity on the part of the teaching staff, and e) lack of clear policy on the status of research, among others. As a result, Research Centers began only to maintain regular staff just on pay role with minimum involvement of teaching staff in their projects. For some, it was even impossible to run continuing, basic and already contracted research for lack of funding and commitment. T.U. kept fulfilling its major obligation by providing the salary of the regular staff at the Centers. Some Centers, however, managed to bring in funds and continued the tradition of research. Again, the quality of leadership both at the Central Administration and the Research Centers has always played important role in the checkered history of the Research Centers in T.U. As far as the Departments and the teaching staff are concerned, research is the name of an unheard-of bird for them as a large percentage of the teachers remain outside the latest development in the field of various branches of knowledge that characterizes a university. The job is a jagir ipso facto and as long as you manage to rub your pen at your attendance register the jagir is one thousand percent safe. In such a safe situation why worry about research and/or better performance? And on the top of it, if the employer does not have a discreet and impartial means of evaluation of your work you might as well join the community of 'jagire.' This seems happening at Tribhuvan University even today. This can be considered an unfortunate situation at this stage of the evolution of our university.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY AT RESEARCH CENTERS

One basic philosophy of research Centers at T.U. is that they should not always depend on the central budget for their research activities and progress. If their survival is in question, the T.U., is the only supplier of bread and there is no question about that. But the highly limited budget of the university cannot be allocated for their regular research programmes unless already demanded, specified and approved in advance. The highly truncated research Budget then compels the research staff at the Centers to fend for themselves. It is in this situation that individuals need to forage for their survival and progress. Regarding the functioning of the Centers one could often hear complains such as these: a) Research grants that individuals/Research Centers manage to bring to their respective Centers are kept outside the jurisdiction of T.U., b) qualified researchers often engage themselves outside the T.U. where they keep only their leave and other records straight; c) for all kinds of extra or consultancy income that our teachers and/or researchers make the T.U. does not receive a penny; and more importantly, d) research papers, documents relevant to the teaching departments in particular and the interested public in general are not easily available for upgrading the teaching and the information dissemination role of the university. If such circumstances build up and continue, the university will be lagging behind in its foremost social and academic duty.

In the light of the situation, the university must help the Research Centers prepare congenial academic atmosphere and develop adequate manpower in order to foster more creative research programmes within the university system. The Centers must also strive to solicit funds not only to survive but to move toward self-sufficiency. Actually it is worth noting here that some Research Centers seem already heading towards this goal and now enjoy more physical facilities than others not because the T.U. has provided them but because they happen to attract more national and international agencies for research programmes. For others, as mentioned above, the struggle is always aimed at keeping the name alive and well. Some again have gone to the extent of disappointing donor agencies by sheer negligence in keeping the date line, performing satisfactorily and utilizing the donated fund discreetly and creatively for the contracted research programmes. This situation has only earned low reputation for them and the T.U.

~~While discussing the issue of research funds being brought in from donor~~

agencies to our Research Institutes it should be made explicit that the one and the only objective has been and should be to make the Institutes self-sufficient in terms of undertaking research programmes on their own financial strength. This is not an easy task but concerted efforts made in this direction can make this happen. The system of overhead charge that is levied on research projects can be taken as a case in point here. If all the Institutes manage to implement this system for both foreign and native projects/individuals our institutes will not suffer from hunger and thirsts despite the lack of 'milch cows.' Overhead charge must also affect individual and group researchers in the departments, if any. Our researchers from the Departments and Institutes are constantly running, manning and supporting consultancy firms, both foreign and natives, on short and long term basis. By granting them leaves often for very long times at one stretch the T.U. has always been very considerate and is on the losing side of the balance. More than any thing else the quality of teaching and research have been badly affected by such consideration. Certain measures should therefore be developed and enforced so that the jagir at T.U. becomes more than a springboard and the sense of responsibility toward the primary employer becomes more overt. Lately T.U. has issued a notice stating that T.U. employees can not assume full or part-time, salaries or otherwise responsibilities outside T.U. without the permission of T.U. It now remains to be seen what kind of response this notice can invite from individuals for whom the T.U. job is less than part-time.

One Norwegian example on this issue would be relevant here. Last Fall a high level delegation from T.U. led by the V.C. and consisting of the Rector, Deans of Medicine and Engineering visited the University of Bergen, Norway, on the invitation from the Rector Prof. Ole D. Lehrum, During the visit the V.C. showed interest in the status of research and the nature of relationship between the Departments and the Research Institutes at the University of Bergen. The Nepali team was told that Research Institutes are involved in regular research both for the University and the community or the Government agencies, corporations, etc. What is interesting in these activities is a lesson for us, too. University professors are paid regular salary and a meager of approximately 25% extra allowance by the University for any kind of research they undertake outside their main job at the University. It is the concerned Department and not the researching professor who manage the fund allocated by the client for a given project. The Department makes the contracts, the concerned teacher/s sign them and the University profits. If the professors want to take a longer leave to do their research and need to be away from the classes, they take leave without salary and let the department hire a temporary

substitute from their own salary. The Department Chair is given to professors on rotation basis and professors interested in research try even to avoid this responsibility, if possible. The rotation of Chair is another provision T.U. can perhaps practice not only to the satisfaction of faculty members but also to the smooth running of the Departments. Central Departments must assume leading academic role and rally the Instruction Committees of the campuses and not remain as islands in the Southern Pacific !

CONCLUSION

Research at T.U. has suffered several set-backs in the past. But with four Research Institutes and the Research Division as the coordinator there should not be dearth of research activities for the upliftment of the status of higher education in Nepal. With new universities in the offing the T.U. must think of further and continual standardization of both teaching and research programmes. Besides allocation of adequate funds to keep research on the move T.U. must also hire and promote qualified hands for this purpose. Often times it appears that the coordinating role of the Research Division is thrown into the background. Unless this role is reconsidered and emphasized, the validity of the Division's very existence can be questioned. As the senior-most academic institution of the country T.U. should in fact be catering for the teaching, administrative and research need of the nation. For this it is essential to create, maintain and foster adequate teaching and research manpower. Unfortunately, this has not happened up to the level of expectation. T.U. indeed has been witnessing regular flights - temporary and permanent - of her qualified and saleable manpower to other firms and institutions outside the T.U. On the one hand this has seriously hampered the potential inflow of external financial resources into the Research Institutes and on the other the quality of teaching and research within the T.U. system heads speedily towards a point of decline from where there might be a very risky and strenuous return, if at all.