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A meeting of all seven Directors of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) will soon be convened by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MoHRD) to discuss the merits and shortcomings of the tenure track system. In the U.S, the tenure track system is used for evaluating the performance of new faculty members before their position is made permanent. In an email sent to all the seven Directors a few days ago, V.L.V.S.S. Subba Rao, Senior Economic Advisor, Higher Education, MHRD, has requested the Directors to provide their views on the system well before the scheduled meeting can take place.

## IISER Directors' meeting

The Ministry is calling for a meeting to discuss the different implications of the system as faculty appointment at IISER Pune and IISER Tirupati has been at variance with the IISER statutes, giving rise to court cases.

In the tenure track system, the performance of a young faculty member joining as an Assistant Professor is evaluated at the end of five years, and his position is made permanent if his or her performance has been satisfactory. If the person fails to make the cut, he or she is asked to leave. Some institutions, such as Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) and the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) Bengaluru, already have this system in place.

A few days ago, Professor Jayant B. Udgaonkar, who was earlier with the NCBS and is now Director of IISER Pune told *The Hindustan Times*: "It is important that universities and institutes adopt this [tenure track] system." He went on to state that the draft National Education Policy (NEP) has said that if the system is adopted "there will be a massive improvement in the quality of research done in the country".

## 'Better without'

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Professor Arvind, Director of IISER Mohali said: "We are doing very well without the tenure track system. If this system is introduced, then new faculty will be forced to pursue short-term research goals to satisfy the administration instead of addressing the long-term

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gives too much control to the Directors and the administration. Directors change every five years.

Assessment could become subjective,” said Prof. Arvind. According to him, under this system, permanent positions for faculty would be based on the whims of the Directors and the administration.

## Fostering insecurity

In the note sent to the Ministry, Prof. Arvind states that job insecurity would affect personal life and thus academic performance. Since Assistant Professors join the institute when they are 33-35 years old, they would rendered unemployable when they fail to make the cut after five years of assessment.

“Most academic institutions will not consider them for a job, particularly if they know that the candidate is being asked to leave from the parent institution,” the note reads. This is unlike the situation in the U.S. where the tenure track system is followed – researchers who fail to secure tenure at top institutions can “probably get a full professorship in a lesser ranked university”. Further, industry jobs, too, are available for those who fail to get tenured at the end of five years, which is not the case in India, Prof. Arvind pointed out.

“It is well known how difficult it is to attract excellent faculty members to join institutes like the IISERs in India. When a new faculty member joins, it is quite a strenuous process for them to establish themselves and build their scientific reputation. Experimentalists have to set up their labs, train students and produce results, which in some research areas can take up to five years, even when there is adequate funding available for setting up the labs. In the changed funding situation, if the colleagues have to compete in the beginning itself for large grants, then many of them will not be able to show meaningful results even in five years,” the note reads.

While IISER Mohali does provide institutional support and grants to new faculty, it takes at least one year for a research grant to be approved, if at all, by funding agencies. It also takes time to write a grant proposal. Even when projects get funded, very often funding is released sometime in February and the researcher is expected to spend the amount before March 31.

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Several senior faculty members have on Facebook commented strongly against introducing the

tenure track system. Prof. Raghavendra Gadagkar from the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bengaluru, says: “I fail to understand why the pressure [to improve the quality of research in the country] should be only on the young faculty. It stands to reason that the pressure to perform should increase, the stringency of the evaluation criteria should become more severe, and the probability of being dismissed for non-performance should become significantly higher with seniority.”

## Sharing accountability

Prof. Gadagkar then adds: “I am not really convinced that dismissing non-performers will improve performance but, if we are going to go down that path anyway, why not dismiss 10% of the worst performing Assistant Professors, 30% of the worst performing Associate Professors, 50% of the worst performing Professors and 90% of the worst performing Directors and Vice-Chancellors?”

Professor T.N.C. Vidya from the Evolutionary and Organismal Biology Unit at Bengaluru’s Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR) posted on Facebook: “Tenure track only increases stress and leads to quick rather than necessarily meaningful publications. It also places your faculty at the mercy of more powerful ones, worsening the power imbalance that already exists. The necessary support system for young faculty does not exist in India. Having a tenure track system in such a situation is just one more reason for people to leave academics.”

She then adds: “It is also interesting how senior Professors who did not have to go through the kind of competition that exists today keep coming up with these recommendations that affect young faculty and not themselves.”

“There will probably always be some poor performers. You can either allow genuine researchers to work and also carry some dead weight, or you can try to weed out poor performers and also make it difficult for genuine people to work. I think the second case is worse than the first case. I don’t think the ideal case can be achieved – it is like minimising both type 1 and type 2 errors,” wrote Prof. Vidya.

## Impact on research

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According to a June 21 report published in *Nature*, a survey of members of the Young Academy of Euro

(YAE), a pan-European network of early-career researchers found “career uncertainties are costly, and t  
out rates among tenure-track researchers [those who are on track to a permanent position] seem to be  
the rise”.

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