OPINION

Odisha’s Higher Education Crisis: Acute Faculty Shortage Threatens Academic Standards

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • March 29, 2025 • 5 min read

Odisha’s higher education sector is facing a severe faculty shortage, with **1,353 professor posts** lying vacant across **17 state universities**. The alarming figures were revealed by **Higher Education Minister Suryabanshi Suraj** in the **Odisha Legislative Assembly** on Friday, raising serious concerns about the state’s academic future and the quality of education being imparted in these institutions. The crisis, compounded by legal roadblocks and administrative delays, has left universities struggling to maintain academic standards and research output.

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Faculty Crisis in State Universities

The total sanctioned faculty strength across Odisha's 17 state universities stands at **2,027**. However, only **674 faculty members** are currently in position, leaving a staggering **65% of posts vacant**.

Category	Sanctioned Posts	Posts Filled	Vacancy Rate
Professors	2,027	674	65%
Non-teaching staff	5,385	3,304	39%

To fill the gap, the Odisha government has appointed **965 guest faculty members**. While guest faculty are helping to manage day-to-day academic operations, the over-reliance on temporary staff raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of educational standards. Experts argue that temporary appointments lack the stability and commitment necessary to foster a strong academic environment.

Worst-Hit Universities: Ravenshaw and Utkal University

The crisis is particularly severe at some of the state's most prestigious institutions:

- **Ravenshaw University** (Cuttack) – 161 vacant positions out of 267 sanctioned posts
- **Utkal University** (Bhubaneswar) – 133 vacant positions out of 239 sanctioned posts

The acute faculty shortage has had a direct impact on the quality of education and research output in these universities. For instance, Ravenshaw University, which earned the prestigious **NAAC A++ grade** last year, is managing with only **110 faculty members**—far below the sanctioned strength. Similarly, Utkal University, Odisha's premier higher education institution, is struggling to maintain student-teacher ratios and provide adequate guidance to research scholars.

The shortage is not limited to these two universities. Other universities facing high vacancy rates include:

- **Sambalpur University** – 135 posts vacant (60% of sanctioned posts)
- **Berhampur University** – 182 posts vacant (60% of sanctioned posts)
- **Khallikote University** – 112 posts vacant
- **Dharanidhar University** – 97 posts vacant
- **Vikram Dev University** – 111 posts vacant

Additionally, **Odia University** at Satyabadi and **Odisha State Open University** have no sanctioned regular positions and are almost entirely dependent on guest faculty.

Legal and Administrative Roadblocks

One of the primary reasons behind this crisis is the prolonged stalemate over the **Odisha Universities (Amendment) Act, 2020**. The Act, introduced by the previous **BJD government**, was aimed at centralizing faculty appointments and governance structures in state universities. However, the Act was challenged in court, and the **Supreme Court's stay order** has effectively halted faculty recruitment for the past five years.

As a result, there have been **no new permanent faculty appointments** in Odisha's state universities since 2020. This legal deadlock has created a vacuum in academic leadership and weakened the universities' ability to attract and retain talented professors.

In **November 2024**, the new government proposed amending the **Odisha Universities Act, 1989** to restore autonomy to universities and streamline faculty recruitment. The amendment was approved by the state cabinet and introduced in the Assembly on **December 3, 2024**. However, the Bill could not be passed due to procedural delays.

According to Higher Education Minister Suryabanshi Suraj, recruitment will resume once the amended law is cleared by the Assembly. However, the delay in resolving this issue has already caused significant disruption to the state's higher education ecosystem.

Impact on Education and Research

The faculty shortage is having far-reaching consequences on both education and research in Odisha’s universities:

1. **Decline in Research Output:** The lack of senior faculty members is affecting research guidance and the ability of universities to secure research grants and collaborations.
2. **Reduced PhD Enrollment:** Several universities have been forced to limit the intake of research scholars due to the shortage of qualified professors.
3. **Poor Student-Teacher Ratios:** The shortage has stretched the existing faculty thin, affecting the quality of classroom interaction and personalized guidance.
4. **Impact on Accreditation:** The ability of universities to maintain or improve their NAAC accreditation status is under threat due to faculty shortages and administrative instability.

The dependence on guest faculty, who often have limited contractual tenure and lower pay scales, has further weakened the institutional framework for academic growth and excellence.

Government’s Response and Future Plans

The Odisha government has acknowledged the crisis and assured that steps are being taken to address the situation. Key measures under consideration include:

- **Expediting Faculty Recruitment:** Once the amended law is passed, the government plans to fill vacant faculty posts through a centralized and transparent recruitment process.
- **Enhancing Faculty Retention:** Improving pay scales, offering research grants, and providing housing and infrastructure support to attract and retain faculty members.

- **Reducing Dependence on Guest Faculty:** Shifting from a temporary staffing model to permanent faculty appointments to ensure institutional stability and academic excellence.
- **Boosting Research Funding:** Increasing financial support for university research programs and establishing partnerships with industry and international institutions.

However, the success of these measures hinges on the government's ability to resolve the legal impasse and ensure the smooth passage of the new University Act in the state Assembly.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

While the government's plan to amend the Odisha Universities Act offers a potential solution, several challenges remain:

- **Legal Uncertainty:** The Supreme Court's final verdict on the Odisha Universities Act will determine the future course of faculty recruitment.
- **Political and Administrative Delays:** The inability to pass the amendment in the last Assembly session reflects the political complexity surrounding this issue.
- **Brain Drain:** Odisha's failure to offer competitive salaries and research infrastructure risks losing talented faculty to universities in other states and abroad.
- **Sustainability of Guest Faculty Model:** The reliance on guest faculty may lead to inconsistencies in teaching quality and academic rigor.

To address these challenges, the government must take a bold and decisive approach. Increasing autonomy for universities, streamlining the recruitment process, and improving working conditions for faculty are essential steps toward restoring Odisha's higher education sector to its former strength.

Conclusion

The faculty shortage in Odisha’s state universities is not just a staffing issue—it reflects a deeper crisis in the state’s higher education policy and governance. While the proposed amendment to the Odisha Universities Act offers a path forward, timely execution and sustained political will are critical for success. Odisha’s academic future depends on the government’s ability to resolve legal hurdles, attract talented faculty, and create an environment where higher education can thrive.

Restoring academic excellence in Odisha’s universities is not just about filling vacant posts—it’s about reaffirming the state’s commitment to knowledge, innovation, and future generations.

(By Brajabandhu Mahanta)

Category: Opinion

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