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Appraisal to promote R&D in IITs

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IITs have done a great job in education — we are known the world over for our graduates. Our performance on however, is mediocre. Though there are many cultural and social issues that account for this, one key reason for performance is systemic — the IITs have no regular performance appraisal and feedback mechanism in place for researchers, and does not have the means to better reward or recognise good performers.

In IITs, like in most other systems in the government sector, appraisals are done only at promotion times. How are only three levels for a faculty member, he/she is likely to go through only two appraisals in a career of about is clearly insufficient as a mechanism for feedback and generating some “push” on faculty to achieve more.

A basic paradigm of human resource management is that the performance of an individual must be appraised some objectives so as to identify strengths and areas of improvement.

Unless a regular appraisal and feedback mechanism that is backed by some action, based on the outcome of it put in place, it is unlikely that a competitive and energetic R&D environment can be created in IITs, which can do better R&D.

It should, however, be mentioned, that though having an appraisal and feedback mechanism is necessary, it is not sufficient. Proper shared organisation goals, suitable environment, supportive administration, etc., are all extremely important for an organisation to excel in R&D. But, without an appraisal and feedback mechanism, even with very good many IITs have), the R&D performance will not improve.

Regular performance appraisals and reward based on the appraisal is the way the world academic and R&D is moving. In many countries that have active R&D programmes, such systems are becoming the norm. In the US, performance based salary raises have been there for decades.

They also now exist in countries like the UK, China, Singapore and Korea, which have started these mechanisms a decade or so. And, many countries in Europe, like Germany and Italy, are now moving towards this.

The accompanying table gives a summary of the state of appraisals in academic institutions in a few different countries (data was obtained through an informal e-mail survey of colleagues from different countries).

Though an appraisal system is desirable, while building one for IITs we have to take into account the historicity of the system that existed within a government system of fixed pay-scales — and that framework is likely to exist for some time - a system where salaries can be freely decided is neither possible nor desirable as in these institutes of technology where compensation should never be the only reward mechanism.

Differential pay scales or having market-determined salary structures will also be unacceptable. It will be best if a system can be built within the salary-scale-increment concept, with which the government and the faculty are quite comfortable.

One easy way to achieve this is to have a system of variable increments. In this approach, there is an appraisal of academic performance of each faculty member at the end of each year.

The criteria for appraisal should attach suitable weight to the R&D performance, and should be clearly articulated. The outcome of the appraisal, performance can be grouped in a few categories, and people in the different categories should get a different number of increments (up to some maximum limit).

That is, increments have to be earned. For example, one increment can be given if the person has performed well. Up to some maximum percentage of the faculty (say, 25%) each year can get two increments, and a smaller percentage (say, 10%) can get three increments, and the top performers (say, 1%) can get four increments.

The percentages of people in different groups should be suitably chosen such that it creates the desired differential. The scheme creates some differential in the reward structure while maintaining an overall balance, which is important for the system.

academic institution where great disparity in financial rewards is perhaps not desirable.

However, the key aspect of this scheme is that it requires a performance appraisal every year of all the faculty this appraisal separates the performers from the average and under-performers.

And, it also provides a regular feedback to the faculty. The fact that the salary for the next year is determined outcome of this appraisal will ensure that appraisals are indeed done seriously and in a timely manner.

This scheme can be implemented easily if each scale has a larger range but smaller increments. For example, a Rs 4,000 with an increment of Rs 100 to 200 permits a total of 20 to 40 increments — sufficient to provide the envisaged above. With small increments, the net financial impact will also be minimal.

The yearly appraisal has a potential drawback that it cannot handle research with long-term impact. For t appraisal can be supplemented by another scheme, which is similar to what is being used in the University of Cal For each of the three faculty designation, there are a few scales. Every five years or so, a faculty member becom the next higher scale.

After an appraisal and feedback, the faculty member may move to the next scale or remain in the same scale does not have the stigma that is attached with not making it to the next designation as the designation does not gives strong incentives and recognition for people who are performing.

If any or both of these can be implemented in IITs, we can see a sea change in how R&D is viewed by f administrators. This can also lead to a demand for and improvement in other systems which are needed t promote R&D.

These appraisals will no doubt cause some “pressure” on the faculty, but it will, in the end, benefit the individual his own output is increased, thereby enhancing his standing in the global R&D community — something all res for. If this system delivers, it can be then employed in other R&D institutions and government organisations, what they were created to do — lead the way.

(The author is the Microsoft Chair Professor at IIT Delhi. Views are personal.)



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