

**TOWARDS A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY RENAISSANCE:
THE FUTURE OF BENGAL'S PRESIDENCY UNIVERSITY
Sixth and Final Report of the Presidency Mentor Group,
January 20, 2018**

PREAMBLE

In this, our sixth, and final, report, presented at the conclusion of the bicentennial year, we offer our assessment of what has been accomplished in Presidency University since 2011. We suggest in outline the challenges and opportunities we anticipate in the foreseeable future. In short, significant progress has been made in recruiting a talented young faculty based on academic merit alone and free of undue political interference. Faculty members have been successful in attracting substantial research grants. Financial constraints pose challenges in recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty, especially in the senior ranks. A dramatic upgradation has taken place in the quality of academic infrastructure in the heritage College Street campus. Rapid progress has been made in constructing the second campus in Rajarhat consisting of two fourteen-story towers. We expect it will begin to be functional from the start of the 2018 academic year. The academic programs organized on the occasion of the bicentennial in January 2017 were of the highest quality.

The members of the Presidency Mentor Group kept in touch and held meetings in Kolkata in December 2017. We reviewed the implementation of our first five sets of recommendations. This concise sixth and final report should be read together with our more wide-ranging and elaborate earlier reports, which provided a strategic vision that continues to be relevant. This report has been given final shape after further consultation among PMG members by

phone and email in January 2018. We trust it will be given the same serious consideration as our earlier reports.

ACTION TAKEN AND TO BE TAKEN ON THE FIRST FIVE PMG REPORTS

1. We are pleased that the Chief Minister and the Government of West Bengal accepted our recommendation that Presidency should be a unique state university with a special status to be nurtured as **a center of excellence**. The government at the instance of the Chief Minister has been unstinting in providing funds for the improvement of Presidency's academic infrastructure.
2. We had recommended recruiting half a dozen strong academic leaders in the natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities as **Distinguished University Professors**. The Chief Minister personally approved and announced five such positions at Presidency University named after iconic figures in the modern history of Bengal. These have been described as follows: Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Distinguished University Professorship in the Natural Sciences; Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore Distinguished University Professorship in the Humanities (in the field of literature and cultural studies); Swami Vivekananda Distinguished University Professorship in the Humanities (in the field of philosophy, broadly defined); and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Distinguished University Professorship in the Social Sciences (in the fields of economics, history and/or political science) and the Kazi Nazrul Islam Distinguished University Professorship in Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Peace Studies. At the moment four of the five Distinguished University Professorships are vacant. We urge the university to try and fill these positions between now and June 2018. **If it proves impossible to attract outstanding permanent faculty to**

these positions, we recommend that the university seek the permission of the government to appoint named Distinguished Visiting Professors using these resources for intensive courses to be taught during successive monsoon semesters over five years. The Distinguished University Professorships may also be offered to outstanding candidates who may be prepared to come for at least two years with leave from their home institutions.

3. Progress has been made in recruiting an outstanding and diverse faculty that we had identified in our first report as the top priority. The state government approved and the university authorities adopted the transparent and rigorous selection process suggested by us. **The outstanding scholars who came as subject experts saw for themselves the new energy at Presidency. This enhanced the University's reputation throughout India and beyond. We wish to place on record our gratitude to these outside experts for investing so much of their time and energy in the Presidency selection process.**

4. **In order to attract the best faculty to Presidency as a unique institution and center of excellence, we had emphasized the need to offer emoluments including allowances, medical and other benefits comparable and commensurate with central and central government funded institutions.** The decision of the Chief Minister to create a provision for a guaranteed annual supplement in the form of faculty research and professional development funds – Rs 4 lakh for Distinguished University Professors, Rs 3 lakh for Professors, Rs 2 lakh for Associate Professors, and Rs 1 lakh for Assistant Professors – was an important step in the right direction. Our conversations with faculty confirm that they continue to find this scheme of incentives attractive. The offer

of moving expenses for faculty relocating from outside West Bengal sent the right signal about our intention to make Presidency a magnet for talent from across India and the world. Much more needs to be done to compete effectively with institutions in other states and central government funded autonomous institutions, such as, IIM- Kolkata, IIT-Kharagpur, ISI-Kolkata, Bose Institute, IISER-Kalyani and the central university Visva Bharati in our own state. **We urge the state government to find a way to fully implement our recommendations in this regard. In the absence of complete parity with central institutes in regard to salary, allowances, and perquisites, it will be extremely difficult to recruit and retain the very best faculty, especially in the sciences. Other institutions in India have their eyes on the best scholar-teachers we are bringing to Presidency. It is possible that our aspiration to have a world-class faculty must await the restoration of the state to full fiscal health and a thoroughgoing reform of higher education in the country as a whole. At this time, according to the rules and regulations in place, governments can provide funds for infrastructure but not for differential emoluments for exceptional faculty.**

- 5. Thanks to the generous financial support of the Government of West Bengal, most of our recommendations regarding dramatic upgradation of academic infrastructure on the heritage College Street campus have been implemented. These have included science laboratories, sophisticated research instrumentation facilities and at least one state-of-the-art classroom in each department. Faculty have individual office space where they can advise students. The IT infrastructure, non-existent in 2011, is acceptable now.**

6. **We had stressed the need for additional space in our earlier reports. We are grateful to the Chief Minister for taking personal interest in the matter. The Government of West Bengal provided a ten-acre plot at a good location in Rajarhat for Presidency's second campus. The two 14-story towers on the second campus have been constructed at a commendable speed.**
7. **Several challenges remain and will have to be addressed in the future in the quest for academic excellence and in maintaining the intangible heritage of a Presidency intellectual culture of free and open debate. We can build on the new sense of purpose in rejuvenating Presidency and the substantive achievements of the last six years.**

SPECIFIC ASSESSMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A STATE UNIVERSITY WITH A SPECIAL STATUS

[Terms of Reference No. 11: To explore whether Presidency should continue to be a State university or seek the status of a Central university or aspire to be counted as one among the new innovation universities.]

Presidency University should continue to flourish as a state university with a special status with due acknowledgement of its unique heritage. **If there are insurmountable fiscal, financial or legal obstacles to providing competitive salaries and benefits within the state university system, we would like representatives of the state governments to discuss with us creative ways in which Presidency as a center of excellence can achieve parity in these respects with the top central institutions. The state government should permit Presidency to supplement the total emoluments of exceptional faculty from its own resources. We also recommend instituting prizes and**

incentives for faculty who have articles accepted in top international referred journals, publish books from leading university presses, or receive international recognition for new discoveries or inventions. The newly amended PU Act allows the University to utilize funds raised from sources other than the state government “for providing honorarium to the teachers of the University for their outstanding performances in the field of research, publications, etc. with the approval of the Governing Board”.

AN OUTSTANDING AND DIVERSE FACULTY

[Terms of Reference No. 4: To define search procedures and the constitution of search committees to make the best faculty appointments at the levels of professor, associate professor and assistant professor in order to create an outstanding and diverse faculty.]

We had stated in our first report that the first 100 faculty appointments will be of critical importance in shaping the future of Presidency University. We are very pleased that the recommendations in our first and second reports about the recruitment process and the composition of selection committees were taken on board in designing the faculty recruitment drive that has taken place during 2012- 2014.

The following sentences in our second report bear repetition as part of the mission statement of the new Presidency: “We envisage Presidency University as a path- breaking institution of higher learning that will have a judicious balance and synergy between research and teaching. Presidency must be a place where the faculty will carry out first-rate research at the level of top institutions in India and, in time, the leading institutions in the world. The faculty should be encouraged to offer research-based teaching and inspire students to undertake research.”

Vice-Chancellor Malabika Sarkar skillfully conducted a gigantic faculty recruitment exercise with a skeletal staff between 2011 and 2014. We had recommended that in addition to excellence due attention needed to be paid to the question of diversity.

Very good appointments have been made at the assistant professor level in the scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, and other backward classes reserved categories. We had advocated special efforts to recruit faculty from under-represented minorities and the imperative of maintaining a healthy gender balance on the faculty.

We noted in our first report that Muslims forming over a quarter of the population in our state accounted for less than 2% of Presidency teachers in mid-2011. This serious problem of under-representation has begun to be addressed and a number of appointments have been from under-represented minorities. However, continued attention is required to ensure improved representation of women and under-represented minorities on the faculty.

We had recommended that a provision be made for short-listed candidates to give job talks in the future. This recommendation has not yet been implemented. Now that a critical mass of faculty has been assembled, the views of the current faculty members of the relevant department should be taken into account in making the appointments. Interviewing all applicants with basic qualifications is not conducive towards substantive interactions with the very best candidates. We encourage a public discussion on the need for short-listing so that both the executive and judicial branches of government appreciate the merits of a transparent and rigorous shortlisting process. Advertisements from now on should indicate preferences for particular specializations in order to build balanced departments with adequate coverage of essential fields of knowledge. This does not preclude any deliberate decision to excel in certain sub-fields by creating a genuine depth of faculty expertise in those areas.

While expressing our gratitude to the Government of West Bengal for generously providing funds for the Distinguished University Professorships, we had pointed out that these are not quite sufficient for the scholars of real stature that we wish to attract to Presidency. **As a matter of principle, the salary scales for these distinguished academic positions should be delinked from the grades and ranks of the higher bureaucracy.** We were given to understand that the basic salary of the Distinguished University Professors cannot be more than the basic salary of the Vice-Chancellor, even though that is not necessarily the case in centers of excellence in India and abroad. The total emoluments should be at the same level with the best available in India for similar positions in central institutes. Presidency University should supplement the funds provided by the government from its own resources.

We note that the inaugural holder of the Infosys Chair in Economics left Presidency on December 31, 2017. As a result, the once renowned Department of Economics has no senior faculty. We urge the university to try and fill this important position by June 2018. If that is not possible, we recommend that this gift be utilized to appoint outstanding Infosys Visiting Professors of Economics to teach intensive for-credit courses in monsoon semesters until a permanent appointee can be found.

We are pleased to note that following our recommendation in our fourth report the state government by an amendment to the PU Act provided for 15 department-based Heritage Chaired Professorships – one each in 15 departments – with salary levels higher than the full Professorships and lower than the Distinguished University Professorships. This, we hoped, would enable Presidency to recruit and retain senior scholars of great merit who have shown or are displaying interest in joining the Presidency faculty. We had recommend that the Heritage Chaired Professorships be named as follows: Bengali: Suniti

Kumar Chatterjee; Biological Sciences: Sibatosh Mukherjee; Chemistry: Prafulla Chandra Ray; Economics: Amartya Sen; English: Gayatri Spivak; Geography: to be decided; Geology: Ajit Kumar Saha; Hindi: Rajendra Prasad; History: Ashin Dasgupta; Mathematics: Syamadas Mukhopadhyaya; Philosophy: Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya; Physics: Meghnad Saha; Political Science: A.K. Fazlul Huq; Sociology and Social Anthropology: Benoy Kumar Sarkar; Statistics: Anil Bhattacharya. This recommendation has not been implemented yet, largely because of the difficulties in recruiting outstanding faculty in the senior ranks. We recommend that these names be linked with associate and assistant professor positions, if necessary, to recognize the faculty member with the best research and teaching record in each department.

The current faculty should begin to play a role in recruiting their colleagues with the help of outside experts. In all well-established, reputable universities in the world, a fine faculty usually knows how to replenish and augment itself.

We recognize that it will still take some time to reach the sanctioned full faculty strength and there are particular challenges in recruitment faced by departments like Economics, Statistics, and Mathematics because of competition from a range of other institutions.

VISITING PROFESSORS

[Terms of Reference No. 15: To create a provision for short courses to be taught by distinguished scholars based in other parts of the world as visiting professors.]

Scholars based in different parts of India and the rest of the world, including distinguished alumni, have expressed interest in teaching short courses at Presidency. As mentioned above,

we recommend inviting a few outstanding scholars to serve as visiting professors during monsoon semesters.

A TALENTED AND DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

[Terms of Reference No. 5: To refine and streamline the admissions process in order to recruit the most talented students from all sections of society and the process for awarding scholarships and providing financial aid on the basis of merit and need.]

There has been a significant rise in student interest in seeking admission to Presidency University. We understand as many as 21,000 applicants appeared for the Presidency admission tests in 2017. However, the large number of vacant seats once the academic year got under way triggered widespread concern.

We reaffirm the principles that ought to undergird the students admissions process at Presidency that were outlined in our first report – outreach to schools in many regions, undergraduate admissions tests of a high standard, open competition among graduates from all universities for post-graduate admissions, and due attention to diversity on the student body. The male to female ratio in the student body should be as close to 50:50 as possible.

The outsourcing of the administration of the undergraduate admissions tests to the Joint Entrance Board, while increasing efficiency, has created an inevitable disconnect between the faculty and prospective students at the counselling stage. To mitigate this problem, we recommend a high-quality orientation to be conducted by faculty and very distinguished scholars in each discipline on the first day and during the first week that first-year students arrive on campus. The orientation should be geared towards the explaining the value of an education in the liberal arts and basic sciences as well as the

unique resources Presidency has to offer.

The timing of the admission tests and the start date of the academic year for first-year students also must be fine-tuned. This presents a special challenge. The Division of Natural and Mathematical Sciences seems to require an early August start to the academic year after the results of admission tests for medical colleges and engineering institutions have been published. On the other hand, the Division of Social Sciences and Humanities seems to call for early admission tests and results in order to compete for the best students with peer institutions. We would like the university administration to explore with the Joint Entrance Board the possibility of conducting admission tests in two stages.

In so far as the vacant seats problem is particularly severe in the reserved category, we recommend that the university conduct enhanced outreach and ensure that the best efforts have been made to attract candidates from historically disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds before going for a transparent process of de-reservation following government guidelines. We recommend a special outreach in Darjeeling district and the western districts of Bengal to recruit promising students in the ST category.

The University should have a dedicated Admissions Office to conduct outreach and maintain close liaison with the Joint Entrance Board. The University must also have a Placement Cell and maintain records of students' progression so that future students can have a clear idea of career prospects resulting from a Presidency education. We need to highlight the accomplishments of our students, for example, the Distinguished Student Awards won by two of our recent graduates, Amitava Banerjee and Kaustav Mitra, from the American Physical Society. We also laud the effort of Sandipan

Mitra, former student of Sociology, to create a virtual exhibition of Presidency's involvement in the freedom struggle highlighting old archival documents.

DEPARTMENTAL REORGANIZATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARY INITIATIVES

[Terms of Reference No. 6: To suggest innovative and efficient ways of organizing Departments and Schools of the University enabling both disciplinary and inter- disciplinary appointments and courses of study.]

Following our recommendation and a workshop involving the faculty and senior biologists, a consolidated Department of Life Sciences was formed. Since the various branches of the life sciences are highly interlinked in the twenty-first century, we believed that Presidency University, especially its students, would benefit from the integration of different departments and centers into a single Department of Life Sciences. The wisdom of this move has been amply borne out by the number of research grants won by faculty of this department. The Department of Geology has also done very well in getting research grants.

Theoretical computer science should form a new stream in a revamped Mathematics Department. A focus on linguistics, complexity theory and algorithms, neglected in other Indian institutions, may enable Presidency to quickly emerge as a leader in this area.

In view of the outstanding new scholarship in the field of social and cultural anthropology, we had recommended that the Department of Sociology should be formally renamed the Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology as soon as possible. This should be done at the next meeting of the Governing Board.

We continue to encourage two or three University-wide research initiatives and the establishment of a School of Public Policy, which has been accepted in principle. The Department of Hindi should be broadened and recast as a Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literatures.

AN INTELLECTUALLY EXCITING CURRICULUM

[Terms of Reference No. 7: To propose a curricular structure and an intellectually exciting curriculum with a balance of lecture courses, seminars and tutorials and to provide detailed guidelines for innovative syllabi in the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and the arts.]

We refer the reader to our second report that dealt in detail with this topic. We welcome the acceptance of our recommendation to eliminate the distinction between honors and pass courses and to give students the flexibility to change their honors subject based on aptitude and performance at the end of the first year.

As the PMG we simply suggested the need for Presidency University to return to its original vision of being an institution imparting a genuine liberal arts education, especially in the undergraduate college. We limited ourselves to prescribing a broad structure for the curriculum, leaving the faculty with a great deal of autonomy to fashion their own courses. We are especially happy with the offering of general education courses. **Some departments have formulated syllabi in consultation with outside experts at workshops while others have not done so. We recommend that all departments send their syllabi for external review by three senior scholars in their discipline every three years. The curriculum should be enriched by a process of continuous renewal. The research advisory committees set up for each department are of very uneven quality. Since we advocate a synergy between research and teaching, we recommend only recognized leaders in each**

discipline or field to be appointed to these committees.

THE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE AND GRADUATE STUDIES

[Terms of Reference No. 8: To define the relationship between the undergraduate College and the post-graduate Departments and Schools.]

We continue to encourage a synergistic relationship between undergraduate and graduate studies, including the employment of post-graduate students as teaching assistants or fellows in undergraduate courses. We have now recruited a number of faculty members with a high research profile who will wish to have doctoral students of their own. As we build small, but high-quality, Ph.D. programs in different fields, it will be necessary to make provision for a number of multi-year research studentships to support doctoral students.

THE ACADEMIC CALENDAR

[Terms of Reference No. 9: To devise the most suitable academic calendar and consider whether to adopt a semester-system or year-long courses.]

We once again recommend the introduction of an intensive monsoon semester in July, August and early September in partial overlap of the regular first semester and a short winter semester in January in partial overlap of the regular second semester in order to introduce for-credit courses by distinguished visiting professors. This will improve the quality of teaching and provide valuable mentorship to junior faculty.

AN EFFICIENT AND ATTRACTIVE ACADEMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

[Terms of Reference No. 10: To suggest ways of making rich library resources available to faculty and students, building laboratories for scientific research, and equipping the campus with state-of-the-art

information technology.]

In our earlier reports, we had already made several concrete recommendations regarding space and infrastructure in the old historic College Street campus. Of the three heritage buildings – the Main Building, the Baker Building and the Eden Hindu Hostel Building – in the old campus, the first two have been beautifully restored and renovated. We recommended the setting up of central research instrumentation facilities in our fourth report. We are glad that with the support of infrastructure development funds from the state government, it has been possible to dramatically upgrade academic infrastructure on the old campus. The science laboratories in the Baker Building have been suitably upgraded, an upper floor has been creatively constructed, the Derozio Hall, the Bankim Sabhagriha and the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Building are now worthy of the names they bear, smaller auditoriums have been built, the arts library in the main building has been exquisitely restored, and each department now has state-of-the-art technology in at least one classroom. The Eden Hindu Hostel building should now drop the religious tag from its name and be restored and renovated on the lines suggested in our earlier reports.

Overall, the restoration and renovation have been very tastefully done, making the heritage features of the campus more visible than before. However, the Presidency Alumni Association in Kolkata have brought to our attention what might be “small but sentimental” aspects of the old campus that have been altered. We recommend that the platform below the arch of the main portico be restored. We also urge the university administration to explore the feasibility of restoring the old iron gate at the main entrance, so long as this can be done without compromising fire safety.

The transition from a hereditary *durwan* to outsourcing security to a private firm has caused problems. The private security personnel must be trained to have a more welcoming attitude towards alumni and visitors. Presidency University must not be a fortress; it must maintain its intangible heritage of being a free and open space for social interaction and intellectual debate. Now that a wonderful museum showcasing Presidency's historic achievements has been set up, tourists should be permitted to visit on holidays.

We expect the second campus at Rajarhat will have research labs, classrooms, lecture theaters, faculty housing, Ph.D. student housing, a conference center and an administrative support building. We had envisioned the recreation of the College Street atmosphere in one small part of the second campus, albeit without the clanking and clattering of trams and other vehicular traffic. This would be a pedestrian zone with lively and well-designed cafes and bookshops. We would like this part of the campus to be open to the public. The other parts where academic facilities and residences are located will be private and more secure. We hope this will be an environmentally friendly and aesthetically pleasing campus with green buildings, taking into account the Eco-park just across the highway.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

[Terms of reference No. 14: To help create international partnerships and exchanges with select, outstanding colleges and universities in other parts of the world.]

Selective, strategic partnerships with a few leading foreign universities should be forged in various fields. The temptation to sign MOUs with all comers should be avoided.

THE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

[Terms of Reference No. 1: To craft an appropriate governance structure for Presidency University enabling its most distinguished alumni to play a positive role in restoring it to a position of academic excellence.]

The amendment to the Presidency University Act passed by the state legislature in 2013 provided for a governance structure recommended in our fourth report. The Act made the Governing Board the highest policy-making and decision-making body of the university.

In this final report, we wish to make a few recommendations about the governance of the university. The decisions taken by the Governing Board, especially on as important a matter as the award of honorary doctorates, must be scrupulously implemented by the university administration. The names of the awardees of honorary doctorates must be ratified by the Governing Board, in accordance with academic norms.

Vice-Chancellor Anuradha Lohia and Registrar Debajyoti Konar have done very well in maintaining academic discipline. Students' class attendance has gone up significantly. The administration-faculty balance in academic decision-making needs to be improved. Too much authority is centralized or concentrated in the hands of a few administrators. The university has to move towards faculty self-governance by providing for greater departmental autonomy. Within departments, leadership must be rotated and should not be determined by age-defined seniority alone. Younger faculty should be allowed to take more initiative. In 2011, we had found the Sociology Department, for example, to be in a pitiable condition. It is now doing well with young faculty at the helm. A respectful attitude towards emeritus and senior faculty and

encouragement and nurturing of the talents of younger faculty on the part of the administration will go a long way in creating a better work environment on campus.

CONCLUSION

The Presidency Mentor Group warmly appreciates the progress of the faculty recruitment process and the dramatic upgradation of the academic infrastructure. The Chairperson wishes to record his deep gratitude to Professor Amartya Sen for his sage advice on all matters. It has been an exhilarating process for him to brainstorm with Isher Judge Ahluwalia, D. Balasubramanian, Abhijit Banerjee, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Swapan Chakravorty, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Nayanjot Lahiri, Rahul Mukerjee, Himadri Pakrasi, and Ashoke Sen about the rejuvenation of Presidency.

We are grateful to Shrimati Mamata Banerjee, Hon'ble Chief Minister, for the courtesy extended to the Chairperson, her recognition of the iconic status of Presidency in Bengal's history, and her decisions regarding land for the second campus, the Distinguished University Professorships and the guaranteed annual supplements for faculty in the form of research and professional development funds. Partha Chatterjee, Hon'ble Minister of Education, gave full support to Presidency. Malabika Sarkar, former Vice-Chancellor, guided the first round of faculty recruitment with immense skill and grace and started the process of infrastructure development. Anuradha Lohia, current Vice-Chancellor, deserves warm congratulations for successfully overseeing what we have described as a dramatic upgradation of academic infrastructure at Presidency. We thank Shri Vivek Kumar, former Principal Secretary, Higher Education, and his successor, Dr. R.S. Shukla, for facilitating the infrastructure development grants from the state government.

Hindu College began its journey two centuries ago as a collective citizens' initiative. The same spirit of service is required to rebuild Presidency University as a unique center of excellence. We need to aim high even if it takes time to overcome structural obstacles in the realm of higher education in India to reach our goal.

Finally, we recommend our own dissolution. Now that the Governing Board and other statutory bodies of the university are functioning, our work is done. We understand that the PU Act says that the government "may" set up a PMG as and when needed, but it is not a requirement. Our role was to provide a broad and long-term strategic vision during the transition from college to university and its immediate aftermath until the bicentennial. Our reports should continue to serve as a guide in the future and should be readily available on the university website. The Governing Board should always have eminent academics and educationists as members since Presidency University will continue to need independent, outside advice for some time to come. The PMG members deem it a privilege to have been of service. We request the Chief Minister and the state government to dissolve the Presidency Mentor Group on a suitable date of their choice during the 2018 calendar year.

Sugata Bose (Chair), D. Balasubramanian, Abhijit Banerjee, Nayanjot Lahiri, Rahul Mukerjee, Himadri Pakrasi with thanks to Amartya Sen, Adviser to the Chair