

India's PhD students on hunger strike over delayed pay rise

Funding agencies stall over fellowship wage hikes announced by government last October.

T. V. Padma

24 February 2015



IISc Photography Club

A protest by thousands of young Indian PhD students, who are frustrated by delays and confusion over a promised raise in their fellowship payments, escalated last week as half a dozen of them began a hunger strike in a desperate bid to attract the government's attention.

This latest round of the protest centres on the implementation of a fellowship 'hike' that the Indian government announced in October 2014, following country-wide protests in July 2014. Monthly wages of graduate students were to go from US\$256 (16,000 rupees) to \$401 for students in the first two years of the five-year PhD programme, and from \$289 to \$482 for those in the last three years.

Patchy pay rises

Some of the funding agencies that award research fellowships in India, including the Department of Science and Technology and the Department of Biotechnology, implemented the hike in October, but other funding agencies have delayed. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, for example, announced its intention to implement the pay rises only in February 2015, without clarifying a timetable. And the University Grants Commission announced that it would raise fellowship salaries in December 2014, but has not yet done so, says Niraj Bhatt, a graduate student in proteomics at the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology (IGIB) in New Delhi. "Till now it is only on paper," he says. IGIB is part of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which depends in part on the UGC for funding its graduate students.

"We are still struggling for a notification from many other departments and there is complete uncertainty about all those fellowships," a group of students wrote in a letter to India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in January. "This has unfortunately forced us to explore the mysteries of government procedures, rather than exploring the mysteries of science."

Pankaj Jain, secretary of academic affairs of the students' council at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore, who wrote the January letter on behalf of the graduate students, estimates that around 15,000–20,000 students are taking part in the protests in shifts. Jain, who is one of the coordinators of the nationwide action, told *Nature* that it extends to around 100 institutes.

On the evening of 20 February, around 150 students who went to protest and make their case at the offices of the human resource

development ministry in New Delhi were taken to a nearby police station in Parliament Street, adding to the angst of students in the protest movement.

PhD students are also complaining that they often get their fellowship money with six or seven months' delay, and some do at the end of the financial year.

Agencies that provide the funding, such as the UGC, are usually separate from the institutes that disburse the salaries to the students, who consequently can be caught in the inter-institutional red tape. S. A. Hasan of CSIR's human resource development unit says that agencies such as the UGC often fail to submit the required documents, or to return previously unused grants in time to process the release of the fellowship money. The chairman of the UGC did not respond to *Nature's* request for comments.

Lipi Thukral, a computational biologist at the IGIB who did her doctorate in Germany, says that she empathizes with the students' predicament. "We are all passionate about science, but money does matter too to sustain this interest. That is one reason India loses so many young researchers to the West."

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2015.16969