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By Rajat Pandit

NEW DELHI: Delhi University is in a "precarious financial condition". It may well be pushed over the edge if the recent austerity measures directed by the University Grants Commission are implemented.

Teachers will get "frustrated and demotivated" and students will be the "worst sufferers". This, in effect, is the message conveyed to UGC in a letter dashed off by DU registrar Kamalakant Panda on Monday, said sources.

Under the directions of the Union finance ministry's department of expenditure, UGC on August 31, asked all central universities to implement certain austerity measures with immediate effect. Among them are DU, JNU, Jamia, Benares Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University.

The directives include 10 per cent cut in posts; ban on filling up vacant posts; 10 per cent mandatory cut in non-plan, non-salary expenditure; ban on new expenditure proposals; ban of foreign travel; and cut in existing schemes.

Already reeling as it is under a severe resource crunch, higher education will receive a crippling body-blow if the directives are implemented, feel several academicians.

The directives will hit DU the hardest. It was not able to hold meetings of selection committees for teaching posts for a long time because the Union human resource development ministry failed to intimate the nominees of the visitor (President of India) in time.

Then the UGC changed the qualifications required for academic posts. Consequently, all posts were readvertised. As per sources, Mr Panda's letter said all this has led to a "huge backlog" of vacant posts. As of now, around 200 of the 700 posts in various departments are vacant.

The selection process for these posts had begun afresh, with screening committees scrutinising applications, when the UGC direc-

tives came like a bolt from the blue. Teaching will be adversely affected if the posts are not filled up soon.

Moreover, DU is yet to fill the posts for several new courses, departments and centres, in thrust areas, sanctioned under the 9th Plan. Sources said vice-chancellor V R Mehta has already communicated his distress to UGC chairperson Hari Prasad Gautam.

In his letter, Mr Panda said any further pruning was not possible. As it is, DU has drastically cut procurement of periodicals, books, chemicals and equipment due to the financial crunch and cost escalation in recent years.

An additional 10 per cent cut will force DU to prune academic and research activities even further, which will be a "grave deterrent" to ongoing work. It also talks of foreign travel ban for teachers which will cause "frustration" since they will not be able to present their research findings in international forums.

At present, DU gets a measly Rs 3 lakh for this purpose. The university does not allow a teacher to attend a conference more than once in three years. Moreover, 50 per cent of the travel grant has to be obtained from elsewhere.

The financial crisis is especially threatening for DU since it is the only central university with colleges under it. Of the total grants it gets from UGC, almost 95 per cent goes towards payment of salaries.

With the new directives, the situation will become even more precarious, where teachers are appointed on the basis of actual workload and the student-teacher ratio.

Teachers are already up in arms over the new UGC directives, with the Federation of Central Universities Teachers' Association calling for a September 23 total bandh in all universities.

But all may not be lost yet. Sources said the HRD ministry has recommended to the finance ministry that universities and colleges should be kept out of the purview of the latest austerity drive.