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Honorary Doctorates: Exploring Alternative Non-Academic Honorifics Distinct from Earned Academic Degrees

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Abstract

The widespread public use of the prefix “Dr.” by recipients of honorary doctorates has increasingly blurred the distinction between such ceremonial honours and earned academic degrees through systematic educational processes. To avoid this conflation, this article proposes that universities may consider replacing “Honorary Doctorate” with a clearly non-academic honorific such as “Honorary Fellow.” Such a reform, while continuing to recognise distinguished societal contributions, would also uphold the sanctity of genuine academic credentials.

Keywords: Honorary Doctorates, Earned Academic Degrees, Academic Integrity, Non-Academic Honorifics, Universities, Policy Reform

Introduction

Honorary doctorates have traditionally been conferred by universities to recognise individuals for exceptional contributions to society in various fields such as literature, the arts, science, humanitarian services, and social leadership. The objective is to acknowledge excellence beyond academia.

In recent years, however, their increasing proliferation and uneven standards have raised concerns about their implications for academic credibility and public perception. The issue has also begun to receive policy and media attention.

At a time when higher education institutions are striving to strengthen integrity and trust, it may be appropriate to reflect on whether the current approach to honorary doctorates continues to serve its intended purpose effectively. This note seeks to examine the issue and suggest a constructive alternative framework for recognising excellence beyond academia.

Emerging Concerns

The concerns are not about the intent behind honorary doctorates, but about certain trends that merit attention:

- **Indiscriminate use:** The widespread public use of the prefix “Dr.” by honorary awardees has become a contentious issue as it is causing confusion between such ceremonial awards and earned academic degrees through systematic educational processes. Several countries explicitly prohibit recipients of honorary doctorates from using the prefix “Dr.” in public [1,2]. India, too, has guidelines discouraging such usage, but these are not enforced [3]. Once an honorary title is conferred, regulating its public use becomes difficult, as evidenced by frequent and visible public use of the title by most of the recipients. In view of this, a more practical and sustainable solution may therefore be required.

- **Proliferation:** There has been a noticeable increase in the number of honorary doctorates awarded by institutions, raising questions about selectivity and consistency.
- **Lack of Standardisation:** Criteria and processes vary across universities, leading to uneven perceptions about the value of such recognitions.
- **Conceptual Overlap:** The term "doctorate," even when honorary (*honoris causa*), creates a symbolic overlap with academic doctorates earned through systematic educational processes. This distinction is not always clearly understood by the public.
- **Credibility and Perception:** In an environment where academic credibility is increasingly scrutinised, even unintended dilution can affect institutional reputation.

Need for Conceptual Clarity

Academic degrees represent sustained scholarship, research, evaluation, and intellectual achievement. Their credibility rests on clearly defined academic processes.

Honorary doctorates, while symbolic, share the same nomenclature. Over time, this has led to a blending of two fundamentally different forms of recognition, often reflected in the common usage of the prefix "Dr."

A clearer distinction between academic and honorary recognition may strengthen the overall integrity of the system.

Exploring Alternative Non-Academic Honorific

A constructive approach would be to consider a **distinct non-academic honorific framework** for recognising outstanding contributions across domains such as Literature, Performing arts, Fine arts, social services, Science and Innovations, etc.

One possible model is the conferment of titles such as "**Honorary Fellow**" instead of 'Honorary Doctorate.' The title 'Fellow' would be clearly non-academic, yet dignified and prestigious. It could be adopted at the university level or within a broader national framework.

The specific field of recognition of an Honorary Fellow may be indicated in the citation, thereby enhancing clarity without creating ambiguity.

For example,

- Fellow of Literature (F.Litt.)
- Fellow of Performing Arts (FPA)

The honorific 'Fellow' appears to be appropriate, but other nomenclature may also be explored.

Advantages of a Clear Distinction

A transition to such a framework offers several advantages.

- It preserves the sanctity and distinctiveness of academic degrees which are earned through rigorous intellectual efforts. Maintaining this distinction is essential for the credibility of higher education institutions.
- It enhances transparency and public understanding. A clearly defined non-academic honour avoids ambiguity and communicates its purpose more directly.
- It aligns recognition practices with evolving expectations of accountability and institutional integrity - factors that are becoming increasingly important in a rapidly expanding higher education ecosystem.
- Importantly, such a shift need not diminish the spirit of honouring excellence. On the contrary, it could strengthen it by placing honours within a framework that is both conceptually clear and publicly credible.

Role of Universities and University Associations

Universities along with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) are best placed to lead this reflection. They can play a facilitating role by:

- Constituting a special committee to look into 'Honorary Doctorates' issues
- Encouraging dialogue among institutions
- Developing broad advisory guidelines
- Reach consensus on a non-academic honorific, be it 'Fellow' or any other.
- Promoting consistency and best practices

The committee may also look into other important academic issues and suggest reforms to enhance their value and progress.

Conclusion

The term 'honorary doctorate' (honoris causa) creates a symbolic overlap with the academic doctorate degree earned through systematic educational process. Further, the widespread public use of the prefix 'Dr.' by the recipients of honorary doctorates is blurring the distinction between the two, thereby creating avoidable ambiguity in public perception. The issue is not about recognition, but the form and nomenclature of recognition. To avoid this conflation, it is proposed that the universities may consider replacing 'Honorary Doctorate' with a distinct non-academic, yet prestigious honorific like 'Honorary Fellow.' Such a reform, while continuing to honour excellence, would also uphold the sanctity of genuine academic credentials. The universities can also look into other academic issues that merit attention. A healthy debate on such issues can lead to systemic changes and strengthen academic credibility.

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