



AUTONOMY AS A STRUCTURAL SOLUTION FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

For decades, there have been concerns that India's Universities were being bogged down by the number of institutes they had to manage. Recently the University Grants Commission accepted in principle that autonomy must be green-lighted. But debates on the freedom of the institutions remain inconclusive. Though autonomy seems to be closer never than before, the debate is on the level of freedom. Worries that institutions may follow arbitrary employment policies and charge high fees from students, thereby putting higher education out of reach of the poor, persist. As a profession, we need to take a critical look at the structure and content of teacher training programs. In this sense, the paper focuses on autonomy, its need and challenges before autonomous institutions.

Introduction

The system of higher education in India is one of the largest in the world and is continuing to expand. Many universities are burdened with unmanageable number of affiliated colleges, because of which many of the reputed universities and colleges have lost their eminent positions. Only a few manage to maintain their status and dignity in an environment of complex socio-economic pressures and worldwide changes in approaches to the educational process. In the Tenth Plan the University Grants Commission (UGC) indicated a vision for higher education making it more flexible in diversity of programs, in its structure, its curricula in its delivery systems and in its use of innovative use of information and communication technologies. It was proposed to identify colleges and universities with potential and fund them for achieving excellence in teaching and research with greater academic, administrative and financial autonomy. It was thought that delinking colleges from affiliating universities would give them academic and operative freedom as well as credibility.

As a result the question of autonomy has recently received considerate attention in the main stream education. Autonomy is thus considered as an important tool for quality improvement of education. Successful implementation of the concept requires willing and honest participation of students, teachers and management in the educational process and their openness for scrutiny and audit. Besides, dependence on UGC or the State institutions also require some financial autonomy to mobilize resources.

Concept Of Autonomy

Autonomy is an attitude of the mind which can be equated with critical intelligence, independent mindedness, a determination and think things out for one self. Autonomy consists of one's own independent judgments freely choosing among alternatives and governing one's own action and attitudes in the light of one's own thinking. Etymologically, there are two features of autonomy viz. the nature of self i.e. 'autos' and the kind of norm and rule 'norms'. Put together autonomy would thus mean adopting for oneself - self norms, self governance, and responsibility. Autonomy thus introduces the idea of 'self direction' as well as recognition of norms or principles with which the autonomous person governs himself. Autonomy therefore, essentially means the relative independence of an individual in guiding and regulating his or her own conduct without any external control. Autonomy or freedom is accompanied by accountability. Autonomy means accountability to stakeholders and society. Therefore, it is important to strike a balance between stakeholder's needs, societal demands and institutional autonomy.

Autonomy In Education

The concept of autonomy in education is a structural solution intended to provide an enabling environment to improve and strengthen the teaching learning process. Autonomy is the unrestrained freedom of action within the established norms of the institution. In the field of education the feeling of freedom percolates to the each and every academic unit, creating in teachers and students a sense of involvement in the pursuit of learning. Teachers in colleges and departments are then to actively be associated with four fundamental questions of what to teach, how to teach, whom to teach and how to evaluate?

In education autonomy can relate to budgets, appointments, students intake, curriculum, degrees awarded, quality of teaching and research. Autonomy provides an enabling environment, to improve and strengthen teaching-learning process. A decentralized management culture can encourage autonomy within the environment. However, no institution can have effective institutional or academic autonomy without financial autonomy.

Need For Autonomy

These days some of the universities in India are too large and have many affiliating colleges. Managing its own post graduate courses, teaching and research is getting difficult by the day. Managing the colleges, conducting number of exams, declaring results and certification has become unwieldy. The colleges, on the hand feel restricted in developing themselves due to lack of freedom. They feel that too many controls only hinder in their development.

It is also observed that same regulations govern all colleges irrespective of their performance or non performance, management or mismanagement, regularities or irregularities. The colleges doing well, face the same appraisal. Academic freedom of teachers too is affected. University bodies decide the curriculum, its transaction as well as evaluation without consideration of the needs and aspirations of the students residing in different parts of the city. The teachers in an institution are too occupied completing what is mandated by the university and are not motivated to give beyond the minimum requirements.

Types Of Autonomy

Essentially there are two types of autonomy or two levels of autonomy. 1. Autonomy at individual level (individual autonomy) 2. Autonomy at the institutional level (institutional autonomy) *Individual Autonomy* incorporates autonomy to be given to its academics and its students to pursue knowledge. The teacher (academic) is given freedom to learn and the freedom to teach i.e. operational freedom to develop and innovate different methods and styles of teaching, research testing and evaluation. Role of teacher changes as they develop capacity to acquire knowledge through continuous inputs and feedback. This implies professional freedom for self directed teaching and self directed learning. The student is given the freedom to choose courses which they think would help them grow, are of interest to them and students have the ability and capacity to pursue. *Institutional Autonomy* implies freedom of operation to universities and colleges. The universities and colleges have the freedom to determine their own policies and programs. University is a community of teachers, students and researchers committed to communication and advancement of knowledge. University autonomy is governance of the university by the stakeholders without any interference from any outside agency be it the government (bureaucracy) or political parties. College autonomy means that the principal, teachers, students are in charge of admissions, curriculum, teaching-learning, exams and appointments- subject to university control. Autonomy can be of departments of universities or a college or of a teacher.

An Autonomous institution/university/college requires three types of autonomy

1. **Administrative autonomy** implies recruitment of staff both academic and non-academic, appointment of examiners, admissions of students.
2. **Academic autonomy** answers four questions- a) What to teach? b) How to teach? c) Whom to teach and d) How to evaluate? Each institution will have its own Board of Studies, Academic Council and the Management Council.
3. **Financial autonomy** involves generating money for its operation through fees, endowments, consultations, courses, using premises. Further spending for its operations the institution will have complete freedom.

Autonomy envisages two-pronged liberation for universities and colleges, especially in the affiliating system. One is liberating the universities from the burden of conducting examinations for lakhs of students and their certification. In this process universities do not discharge their main functions of teaching, learning and research and giving academic and administrative leadership in higher education. In the autonomous system the process and programs of testing, evaluation, grading and certification will be the portfolio of colleges and universities are relieved of these responsibilities for autonomous colleges. *Second*, autonomy also liberates colleges from excessive, minute, oppressive control of the universities and allows freedom to chalk out their plan of action including course, curriculum and examination management, subject to of course overall supervision and control of the universities. The basic philosophy is that when a person or group is free and autonomous, is more efficient than a person or group which is controlled. Of course one has to be responsible and accountable for its actions but there is no interference in the day-to-day functioning of the individual or the group.

Challenges Before Autonomous Institutions

Running an autonomous institution is challenging and problematic.

Survival depends on achievement. This is the same as free market economy, where there is greater productivity than in controlled economy.

Student's placement and employability helps institutions achieve.

Autonomous institution has to be its own policy formulator.

It has to match declared objectives and performance.

It has to ensure coordination of teachers for qualitative improvement through professionalism.

Autonomous institution to take steps towards excelling in

- innovations in syllabi and curriculum
- achieve larger number of teaching days

- □ better regularity of teachers and classes
- □ Objective evaluation frequently conducted and expeditiously conducted.
- □ Will support teachers' academic freedom

Factors Conducive For Autonomy

For an institution to be autonomous the social and political discipline, national consensus and new work ethos is important. There should be no political and bureaucratic interference. Functional independence has to be given. Government /UGC should appoint expert committee to review state of affairs. University nominees can be appointed on monitoring cell to give feedback to autonomous institutions. External assessment and accreditation to monitor for periodical review will help to improve the institution. The institutions seeking autonomy should have clarity of objectives of autonomy and aim of academic growth. They must have improved infrastructural facilities and amenities. Well defined measures of performance should be in place. Each autonomous institution/college is to have its own Board of Studies, Academic Committees and Governing Council. The management should be less top heavy and Principals should have full freedom to function. The board of management should have members from faculty, and expert educationalists. Focus should be on redesigning of high quality courses, preparation of learning material, workshops, seminars, and examination reforms. Curriculum and new courses should be need based from the point of view of students, and the society. There should be vocational courses leading to employability. Parents, students, teachers should be educated on the merits of autonomous institutions. Separate orientation course for explaining the approach to autonomy should be held. Teachers should be mentally prepared for this organizational and academic change as it entails extra efforts and accountability. Teachers are to have a respected status. Competent and devoted teachers, who are motivated, sensitized, understanding to be given incentives for assistance in new courses, research, teaching, pursuing excellence, teacher exchange.

Problems Faced By Institution For Autonomy

No complete financial autonomy because the government through UGC gives grants, so spending has to be incurred with approval of government / university / UGC. Besides, budget finalization committees, utilization certificates, audited accounts, are looked by same committees causing external delays. *No full academic freedom* because of the relationship between university-government, university-colleges, university-colleges-affiliation. There is no freedom with regard to what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate. There is fear that syllabus will get diluted, wasted working days, prolonged examination, distribution of bogus marks and mercy chances to undeserving will become the norm. *No full administrative*

freedom because if the Government/UGC finance then the Government/UGC nominees are appointed to tell how to govern, state policies, and governance takes place from the top.

Apprehensions About Autonomy

UGC's offerings are too low and there are few takers of autonomy. As such the progress is slow. State government is not enthusiastic to let go control (abandon) good colleges. Universities are indifferent and not encourage the schemes. Teachers too are not prepared to accept challenge of independent functioning and take additional work and accountability. They want to play safe and maintain status quo. Due to negative experiences, and bitter feelings, they are reluctant and think that managements will become stronger and autocratic. It is assumed that there is no way to check malpractices by management especially financial matters. The non-government institutions are confused and lack clarity about the scheme of autonomy. There is paucity of resources. There are no indigenous models available for autonomy. Only foreign models and theories are available, which may or may not work in Indian conditions. Operational difficulties will thus be a hindrance in the smooth functioning of the institution. Finally, social attitude towards autonomy is such that public wants university stamp on the degrees. All these apprehensions are due to lack of knowledge and ignorance about autonomy. Pros and cons of the scheme and its influence on quality of teaching-learning, teacher, students and administrators of the college is not understood fully. Malpractices in exam and admissions are feared. It is also felt that autonomous colleges will promote elitism and there will be accessibility to rich. Autonomy will be misused by colleges for admission and evaluation leading to corruption. Teachers and students will be victimized and administrators will use power to penalize teachers arbitrarily. Teachers' service conditions will be affected, affecting job security, work load.

Conclusion

The idea of autonomy of higher education institutions is considered to be a step in the right direction. In education autonomy can relate to budgets, appointments, students intake, curriculum, degrees awarded, quality of teaching and research. Autonomy provides an enabling environment, to improve and strengthen teaching-learning process. Autonomy can be at the individual and institutional level including three types of autonomy-academic, administrative and financial. However, there are many challenges before autonomous institutions and many are apprehensive about its efficiency and effectiveness.

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