

Autonomy and Quality of Higher Education

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Of late, there has been a lot of debate on autonomy of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in various forums. Recently NR Narayana Murthy advocated absolute independence to all levels of educational institutions. Our Prime Minister, Narendra Modi during his address at the 102nd Indian Science Congress in early January 2015 gave a call for giving more autonomy and academic freedom to the Universities. Broadly speaking, autonomy of an institution is the degree of freedom given to the HEI to steer itself to achieve its goals. In operational terms, it is the authority delegated to take decisions in functional areas like Academics, Administration and Finance. Autonomy is essential for performance of the institution from the perspectives of quality of academics as well as access and equity.

Current Status of Autonomy in India

During the last six decades, and in particular in the last 20 years, Indian Higher Education system had undergone dramatic changes, not only in terms of number of institutions but also in types of institutions and geographical spread. Number of universities grew to 677 in 2013-14, which includes private and government funded (Central Government and State government), whereas number of colleges increased to over 37,200 in 2013-14. The HE system includes 45 Central Universities, 318 State Universities, 185 State Private universities, 129 Deemed to be Universities, 51 Institutions of National Importance (established under Acts of Parliament) (16 IITs, 30 NITs and 5 IISERs) and four Institutions (established under various State legislations). They were set up for different purposes and at different points of time under different Acts. Areas of autonomy and degree of autonomy enjoyed by different types of Institutions today vary significantly. By and large, there is a visible correlation between the extent of funding by government and degree of control exercised by government (and indirectly the degree of autonomy, given to the Institution). It was noticed that broadly, Institutions with greater autonomy have delivered better performance consistently. At the same time, there is a general perception that quality of education at a number of the state universities, with low autonomy, seems to have gone down, as they lack even basic infrastructure and core resources like teachers. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC 2006)

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described the governance structure of India's HEIs as "over-regulated and under governed". Consequently, the existing system of governance not only limits institutional autonomy but also fails to offer adequate and appropriate accountability.

Progress of Autonomy in HEIs over the Years

In the last 10 years, Government of India has been seized of the subject of how much autonomy to be given in key operational areas, safeguarding accountability. A committee, constituted by Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) in 2005 studied Autonomy of HEIs, covering academic, administrative and financial aspects (MHRD, 2005). It made recommendations to enhance the autonomy of HEIs, especially those with potential for excellence and to institutionalize regulatory provisions for promoting autonomy and accountability of the institutions. It was recommended to link the degree of autonomy with the level of accreditation of the Institution (by NAAC), which was considered to be indicative of the potential for excellence. It was suggested that a National Testing Service (NTS), along the lines of ETS in USA, may be established to evaluate the educational standards across the country, but it may be left to the institutions to interpret the outcomes of the tests conducted by NTS.

While a number of recommendations related to academic autonomy are being progressively implemented by UGC, critical ones in financial and administrative aspects, particularly with regard to approval number of posts (for teachers) and their recruitment in government funded universities are not yet implemented. This resulted in acute shortage of teachers, which has impacted the quality of education in most of the government funded universities.

Issues Affecting Autonomy

Major issues affecting autonomy of the universities broadly fall under two categories – restrictions and limitations as per the regulations (University Acts and Regulatory Guidelines from UGC) and operational decision making. They affect both government funded and private universities, though in different ways and to different degrees.

In government funded universities, major issues include government's influence on vital aspects like appointment of Vice Chancellor, functioning of the

governing bodies like Senate, Syndicate, Academic Council etc, Government control on opening of new colleges or grant of affiliation to new colleges. Wide powers are vested in the Chancellor, which position is vested with Governor in State Universities, who find it unwieldy to exercise, due to preoccupation with other responsibilities.

However, in the case of private universities, most of the issues are with regard to setting up the university, scope for expansion (geographical as well as mode of academic delivery) and sources of funding. As per the current UGC guidelines for setting up private universities, a private university can be set up only through a state private university act and has to be unitary in nature, thereby limiting the scope for expansion. A study of the Private Universities Acts of various states reveals the differences in governing mechanisms as well as operational guidelines, including admission of students. Besides restriction on jurisdiction of the state, there are regulatory restrictions with regard to mode of delivery, like distance education. Restrictions on type of sponsoring institutions constrain the sources of funding. Need for compliance to guidelines of multiple regulatory bodies (Central and State government) affects governance.

Autonomy and Accountability

Autonomy enables self-regulation by empowering the HEIs to exercise freedom in decision-making in all functional aspects of their working. Accountability is the owning of academic, administrative and financial responsibilities, with pre-defined goals for each stakeholder - teachers, students, administrative staff and management - with the objective of providing quality education. The yardstick of measurement of accountability is achievement of the set goals and at the same time adhere to the defined rules/guidelines. However, the key issue is striking the right balance between autonomy and accountability. Too much of operational accountability may lead to stagnation of innovation and potentially undermine the goal of autonomy itself.

Current Levels of Accountability

Currently, neither public nor private HEIs in India are required to develop strategy plans, although a few individual institutions do so voluntarily. All public and private HEIs are regularly expected to update performance, though most of them do not comply. Most allocations to public HEIs are for recurrent expenditure, which constitute about 90% of the funds. These funds are subject to external auditing on a line item basis. There

are currently no mechanisms to allocate money on the basis of performance, for either public or private institutions. Hence, over a period of time, there is a tendency not to focus on predefined outcomes, unless driven by market forces.

Will Autonomy by itself can Lead to Excellence?

Enhanced autonomy is intended mainly to decentralize decision making and create an enabling environment to improve the teaching - learning-evaluation processes. Autonomy alone may not guarantee higher quality, just as non-autonomy need not preclude better performance. The essential ingredients for quality education are the positive attitudes of students towards learning, the commitment of teachers towards educational outcomes, strength of the governance processes and the capability of academic leadership. The autonomy is expected to provide a better framework for fostering these factors. Delegation of authority for the academic, administrative and financial functions is essential for the success of autonomy. However, successful implementation of the autonomy requires committed participation of the students, teachers and management in the entire education process. A system of academic audit at every step of the implementation of the concept of autonomy should be set up. Students' feedback should also be one of the vital parameters for academic audit. In order to carry out autonomous academic functions like innovations in curricular content, pedagogy, evaluation methods etc. require not only adequate financial resources but also continuous training of teachers. In order to manage the autonomy successfully, academic leaders need to be nurtured and groomed.

Global Studies in Autonomy and Accountability

Studies of HEIs around the world suggest that countries have been modifying their system-wide governance structures to devolve management and supervision of their universities to achieve the goals of autonomy, with accompanying levels of accountability. Increasingly, there is shift from being "state controlled" to "state supervised" systems across the world. The consensus among the higher education specialists that autonomy can ensure development of institutions that can be responsive and flexible, in line with the changing demands of the industry and society. Developing one set of rules of governance, without examining the contextual factors, may not be able to deliver the right balance of autonomy and accountability. Governments have to evolve alternate mechanisms of accountability, which are outcome based. These mechanisms may

include encouraging HEIs to prepare strategic plans and monitor the outcomes and signing performance contracts, whereby incentives are provided to high performing institutions.

Experience of Asian Countries with regard to Autonomy in Higher Education

UNESCO did a study in 2014 UNESCO (2014), covering five countries in Asia, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, and Vietnam, focused on institutional autonomy and the role it plays in governance and management of HEIs in enhancing the overall effectiveness of higher education systems.. Improvement in educational standards in China is widely attributed to increased autonomy and better governance of Higher Education Institutions. HEIs were progressively given authority to take decisions in academics (like disciplines of learning, courses pedagogy, research), administration (like organisation structure, recruitment, performance assessment of teachers, salary structures) and financial aspects (mobilization of financial resources and their deployment). In all these five countries, increased autonomy was accompanied by the introduction of new accountability measures, the most common among which was the creation of a quality assurance mechanism at the national and institutional levels. At the national level, in most of these countries, quality and educational outcomes are linked with industry and society requirements. They were also integrated with policy-making, regulating, facilitating, and negotiating. Quality assurance agencies have thus become a key instrument for implementing Monitoring and Evaluation in the higher education sector. In 2003, a decision was taken in China to make institutional evaluation of the HEIs a compulsory procedure to be implemented every five years and in 2004, a Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) was created for this purpose.

It was noticed that the translation of autonomy from Concept to Governance, in operational practice, depends on institutional leaders. Institutions with strong leaders benefited more from autonomy than those with less effective leaders. In all cases, the governance reforms have further strengthened the role of the institutional head. It was observed that delays in decision-making have been reduced, as a result of greater autonomy. The studies show that all stakeholders perceive that autonomy has increased administrative efficiency and the ability to mobilize resources. The case studies also show that autonomy policies need certain conditions to become successful, which includes need for coherent national policies on higher education. The study also highlighted

the need to bring elements of autonomy progressively so that all HEIs can fully embrace the potential of autonomy over a period of time. The study concluded that autonomy should not be considered as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. There is no one model for ideal governance reform in general and introduction of autonomy should be in tune with the national context and should be aligned with a policy context and autonomy reforms need to be considered as a continuous process.

Way Forward

There is a need to study the experience of Institutions that have been enjoying higher autonomy in India (like Central Universities and Institutes of National Importance) in terms of its impact of performance and the challenges faced by them so that it will help in moving forward. University Acts may be reviewed in the light of the above experience, with a view to enhance the autonomy of the Universities. Government may prepare a framework for autonomy and accountability of the Universities, considering the context in which they are operating and the resources provided. A strategic plan, including a charter of autonomy and accountability may be prepared by the respective universities, covering the key functional areas, which may be reviewed by Government. Achievements may be monitored periodically and incentives may be provided to high performing universities by way of more autonomy or more funding. Supportive long term higher education policies /guidelines, accompanied by measures for nurturing academic leadership is essential so that benefits of improved educational outcomes are realized.

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