

Autonomy and Quality of Higher Education

O R S Rao*

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)

*Vice Chancellor, The ICFAI University, Jharkhand.
orsrao.icfai@gmail.com

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

