

## **Autonomy of Universities: External Interferences and Decision Making**

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### **Abstract**

*Autonomy, Accountability, Transparency, Good Governance, Quality Education, World Class Ranking etc. have been the buzz words precisely in the field of Indian Higher Education. All the aforesaid words are of great importance, however, 'autonomy' among all has been of the prime concern for two reasons, first, autonomy is an umbrella term which includes rest all in it and second, autonomy has been discussed, debated and suggested by almost all individuals, committees & commissions and reports. The world class institutions are having 'autonomy' as one of the essential features embedded in their overall functioning. This paper is an effort to understand autonomy and explore the probable pathways to achieve it.*

**Key Words:** Autonomy, New Public Management, Governance.

### **Introduction**

Autonomy of Indian universities has been the matter of concern for long, this has been the issue deliberated and expounded by many committees and renowned academicians, thinkers, policy makers etc from time to time. If we go through the observations and recommendations of those, it seems, Indian Higher Education must have been the model for whole world, but as soon as we actualize the ground reality, the situation is almost opposite and meager. Innumerable reasons may be cited for such a situation in Indian context but the substantive reason may be identified as external interference in the form of political and bureaucratic interferences. Autonomy of a university is a matter of governance, which is precisely dominated by bureaucratic structure of governance, which does not trust the academicians and do not permit academicians to take their own innovative and creative decisions rather complex system of bureaucracy diminish the ideas and enthusiasm of academic fraternity. The problem of governance in India starts from top level viz. MHRD & UGC itself. Lack of confidence, unassertive decision making and complex bureaucratic structure pave the way for poor autonomy in higher education institutions so far as power and functions of head of the institution and academic fraternity is concerned. Funding of HEIs has been the major concern in Indian context, almost all bodies related with any kind of funding to HEIs is in poor state so far as timely & sufficient allocation, release of the grant and maintenance of strict time frame in execution is concerned. Academicians are more involved in non-academic and paper works than to their academic work because of extrapolated and complex bureaucratic system. This has been the reason behind less involvement in research related

activities in HEIs as complexities and hurdles in governance hamper interest and innovative thinking of academicians. Contradictory steps and lack of coordination among regulatory bodies adds more complexities to existing situation. In recent past an attempt was made by NCTE to provide a draft syllabus nationwide, which was a direct attack on autonomy of individual institution for designing its own curriculum within a prescribed broad framework. Status and standard of research in Indian universities itself questions the state of autonomy in HEIs in India.

### **Why Autonomy?**

I would like to begin with this straight forward question, ‘why autonomy?’. To answer this question, I would like to refer from Karl Jaspers book entitled, “The Idea of a University” which was first appeared in 1923 and then it was republished in 1946 and again revised in 1961. In this book, Jaspers proceeds from the premises, ‘An institution remains functional only so long as it vitally embodies its inherent idea. Should its spirit evaporate, an institution will petrify into something mere mechanical, like a soulless organism reduced to dead matter’. Contrary to this idea, Habermas argued, ‘Couldn’t Jaspers have learned years earlier from Max Weber that the organizational reality into which the functionally specified subsystems of a highly differentiated society imbed themselves rests on wholly different premises. The functional capability of such institutions depends precisely on a detachment of their members’ motivations from the goals and functions of the organization. Organizations no longer embody ideas’. Contrary to Jaspers, Helmut Schelsky came up with writing, ‘Solitude and Freedom’ in 1963 after two years of Jaspers revised book and again after two years to 1963 came the writing, ‘The University in a Democracy’. **Habermas on the University in a Democracy says**, “If, without additional knowledge, we read it correctly, a university is to serve as an instrument for the industrial development of an almost inaccessible region.... For the future of Israel this is probably a vital project. For us, however, the idea of a university as the starting point for the industrialization of a strip of desert is unusual.... Universities must not only transmit technically exploitable knowledge, but also produce it.... Through instruction and research the university is immediately connected with functions of the economic process... University assumes at least three further responsibilities- **First:** The University has the responsibility of ensuring that its graduates are equipped, no matter how indirectly, with a minimum of qualifications in the area of extra functional abilities. In this connection extra functional refers to all those attributes and attitudes relevant to the pursuit of a professional career that are not contained per se in professional knowledge and skills. **Second:** It belongs to the tasks of the university to transmit, interpret, and develop the cultural tradition of the society. **Third:** The University has always fulfilled a task that is not easy to define; today we would say that it forms the political consciousness of its students”. The Habermas’s idea may be concluded as, “University should be treated as public sphere having discourses through questioning and communication rationality”. This concluding statement of Habermas leads towards autonomy of universities, where discourses through questioning and communication rationality may take place. Also if we see the three responsibilities attached to the universities by Habermas, requires autonomy, any hindrance or

external force will ultimately ruin the autonomy and in turn the university's ethos. Therefore, autonomy is required.

### **Universities in India & the Question of Autonomy**

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that 'autonomy' is a spinal-cord of any institution and because of this autonomy; any institution marks its presence in the society and in the knowledge world. Autonomy leads to creation of knowledge and learning of all kinds. Interference, at any level by anyone viz. political, commercial in the functioning and priorities of a university is bound to bring destruction in the autonomy and hence in the overall outcome or performance of the university. During inauguration of 150<sup>th</sup> foundation day celebration of Madras University, former president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said, "Universities should be empowered with adequate functional autonomy to enable higher education institutions generate human capital for the knowledge era". Interference in designing curriculum, admissions, and appointments at all levels, purchasing of essential goods & equipment for the university, construction work and even in day-to-day functioning is hampering the autonomy badly, leading to destruction in knowledge world. Prof. Yashpal once said, "The universities should be given free hand in deciding their design of curriculum and the way to conduct different courses". On the one hand, Harvard University, which has produced maximum number of Nobel Laureates so far (151), Columbia University (101) and many other universities having more than 10 Nobel Laureates in their credit and the world ranking of those universities are good examples of having 'autonomy' as one the essential feature of their structure and on the other hand JNU (the so called excellent Indian University) is locking its horn with UGC on taking classroom attendance of students studying in the JNU campus. Almost all Indian Universities are busy in taking and calculating attendance of students in order to allow them to sit in the examinations and now it has been given more importance by attaching it to the API score, which is essential for promotion of a faculty member. It is not a matter of attendance, it's a matter of autonomy of a university, let the university decide its own course of action, instead of locking horns on attendance issue, universities are supposed to prove their credentials with their outcomes. It has been proved that wherever the higher educational institutions have a governance system which functions with a high degree of autonomy, their performance have earned national and international respect notwithstanding financial constraints. The absence of any sense of academic and administrative autonomy, introduces a high degree of educational and social distortion. Autonomy in true sense, is linked with accountability, self-discipline and responsibility, which is missing from Indian universities. Few years back UGC had asked for academic and administrative audit of higher educational institutions in order to get the assistance from UGC. This demand was having an undercurrent of overcoming malpractices in the functioning of the universities through its IQACs and to enforce the quality norms, but somehow this idea couldn't take off.

In the report of 'The Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education-2009', Prof. Yashpal has clearly and categorically mentioned that, "It is matter of

deep concern that in recent years, choosing persons for high-level appointments is becoming scandalous in several states involving political and financial considerations at the cost of qualifications and competence”. Similar concerns have been put forward in the ‘Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy-2016’, where it has been clearly and categorically mentioned that political intervention and large scale corruption in appointments, transfers, recognition of institutions and in manipulations of examination results are there in practice. The Education Commission (1964-66) recognized the imperatives of university autonomy and clearly mentioned that, “only an autonomous institution, free from regimentation of ideas and pressure of party or power politics, can pursue truth fearlessly and build up in its teachers and students, habits of independent thinking and a spirit of enquiry unfettered by the limitations and prejudices of the near and the immediate which is so essential for the development of a free society”. The report of the Knowledge Commission in 2005 also recognized this phenomenon. It states that, “the autonomy of universities is eroded by interventions from government and intrusions from political processes.” It further adds that, “experience suggests that implicit politicization has made governance of universities exceedingly difficult and much more susceptible to entirely nonacademic interventions from outside. This problem needs to be recognized and addressed in a systematic manner within universities but also outside, particularly in governments, legislatures and political parties”. Starting from Habermas to Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy-2016 every person, committee and reports have argued in favour of autonomy of a university, however, in Indian context still a good deal of efforts are required to achieve it.

### Comparing Indian Universities from Universities of OECD Countries

Universities in OECD countries enjoy considerable autonomy to determine their own policies and priorities in a wide range of their activities, while in India there are certain guidelines attached to their autonomy. This comparison is based on the author’s understanding only-

Extent of autonomy experienced by universities								
Institutions are free to-								
(Data in Table are based on responses to a 2003 survey of university governance by members of the OECD’s Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) programme)								
Countries	Own Their Buildings & Equipment	Borrow Funds	Spend Budgets to Achieve their Objectives	Set Academic Structure/ Curriculum	Employ & Dismiss Academic Staff	Set Salaries	Decide the size of Students’ Enrollment	Decide the Level of Tuition Fees
Mexico	A	A-SR	A	A	A	A-SR	A	A
Netherlands	A	A	A	A-SR	A	A	A	A-SR
Poland	A	A	A	A	A	A-SR	A	A-SR
Australia	A	A-SR	A	A	A	A	A-SR	A-SR

Ireland	A	A-SR	A	A	A	A-SR	A	A-SR
U.K.	A	A-SR	A	A	A	A	A-SR	A-SR
Denmark	A-SR	A	A	A-SR	A	A-SR	A	A-SR
Sweden	A-SR	A-SR	A	A	A	A	A-SR	--
Norway	A-SR	--	A	A	A	A-SR	A	--
Finland	A-SR	--	A	A-SR	A	A	A-SR	--
Austria	A-SR	--	A	A	A	A	--	--
Korea	--	--	A-SR	A-SR	--	A-SR	A	--
Turkey	--	--	--	A-SR	A-SR	--	A-SR	--
Japan	--	--	--	A-SR	A-SR	--	--	--
<b>India</b>	<b>A-SR</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>A-SR</b>	<b>A-SR</b>	<b>A-SR</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>A-SR</b>	<b>A-SR</b>

A: Autonomy, A-SR: Autonomy in Some Respect

### Probable Path-Ways to Autonomy

1. New Public Management (NPM) may be explored in Indian context.
  - a. NPM, deliberately alters the structure and policy-development process of public-sector organizations with the intention of making them more efficient and effective.
  - b. NPM approaches to higher education governance and management more resemble those of the corporate sector than the traditional norms of academic collegiality.
  - c. In NPM, many responsibilities have been devolved to individual universities. But, at the same time, institutions are held more directly accountable for the effective and efficient use of the funding and other freedoms they enjoy. Moreover, institutions are now placed in a much more highly competitive environment, and considerable pressure has been placed on universities to strengthen management, to become more entrepreneurial and corporate-like.
2. 'Efficiency' & 'Accountability' must be the point of concern in Universities.
3. 'Thinking out of the box' may be promoted and protected and consequently failures too, to be accepted and appreciated.
4. Product oriented rather than Process oriented mind set may be developed.
5. All strata of education must be kept outside the periphery of vote-bank politics.
6. Before giving the appointment of leading positions, multitasking ability must be judged along with academic achievements.
7. There must be some specific formal training to the non-teaching/supporting staff before placing them into any university.
8. In place of UGC-HRDC's orientation and refresher courses which are more or less fulfilling the quorum only, there should be some formal training before placing the teaching faculties into the Universities. Successful completion of such training should be made mandatory for all.
9. Annual appraisal of performance of each and every teaching faculty should be discussed in IQACs of each university and it should be followed by students feedback.

10. The following five principles of good governance, enumerated by European Commission may be exercised in order to bring autonomy-
- openness;
  - participation;
  - accountability;
  - effectiveness; and
  - coherence

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that universities have to reposition themselves so far as autonomy is concerned and it cannot be done without having a strong political will and adherence to the parameters set by regulatory agencies. We need to keep the authority, accountability and autonomy in cyclic process as following-



To do this exercise the universities has to be geared up and rigour has to be infused in the process. To meet the new demands and requirements the stakeholders have to reorient and reposition themselves in the system and its functioning. Total work culture has to be changed. The only parameter has to be tested whether the outcome of the university is suitable to the knowledge era having self-confidence in their students.

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