Higher Education in India:
A Perspective of Its Autonomy and Accountability

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ABSTRACT This paper aims at revealing the facts related to the status of autonomy and accountability in Indian higher education institutions which comprises a historical account and contemporary policy concerns, practices and challenges. After review of data from secondary sources, this study found that in India there are two major contradicting contexts.One is that where the institutions have restricted autonomy but are held accountable in defined forms and the other are the institutions which exercise fairly more autonomy but do not have expected accountability. Considering the prevailing circumstances, through this paper it is recommended that there is a need for balancing autonomy and accountability in management of higher education with prudential leadership and equitable distribution of resources meant for education in India so as to make it more approachable and productive.

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy and accountability have become very crucial for academic expansion, excellence and innovation in higher education in India. What should be the courses of study, the opening of new course, updating syllabus, structures of education, duration of education, modes of transaction, modes of examination, the required number of teachers for a particular level of education etc. directly or indirectly were decided by the government. But with the arrival of the new concept of autonomy and accountability in education, the entire scenario of education changed drastically (Deepaidnani 2016). Now with the changing scenario of how an educational institution or university functions from a more typical bureaucratic to new public management arena, the focus is on the autonomy, quality, accessibility and accountability of the educational institution in its management and service. Autonomy with accountability gives an empowering environment in educational institutions to support, strengthen and advance the teaching-learning process and provide desirable outcomes. The higher educational institutions and its peripheral bodies having the freedom deals with the fundamental questions of what to teach, how to teach, whom to teach and how to evaluate? Autonomy can relate to budgets, appointments, students' intake, curriculum design, degrees awarded, quality of teaching and research and

innovation in higher education (Pondhe 2016). It is a concept which is understood differently in different parts of the world but there seem to be some similarity that there a is need to make the educational institutions independent in their operations while appointing teaching and non-teaching staff, deciding on which programs to offer and which not, based on the demand of students and society, framing curriculum, conducting examination and publishing results, choosing areas of research, collaborating with eminent institutes and organizations, being able to establish infrastructure and raise funds, mobilize and allocate additional resources to meet their needs and objectives (Estermann and Nokkala 2009). It percolates to each academic unit, creating a feeling of involvement among stakeholders of education in the pursuit of learning. On the other hand, accountability is always considered as the consequence of autonomy. Accountability can be ensured only when the tertiary educational institutions are empowered to operate autonomously and responsibly in which the student, teachers and administrators actively participate and understand various issues of the institution (Salmi 2009). Effectiveness, efficiency and better results and outcomes, proper implementation of evaluation, improving the quality of education, prompt institutions to set up and strengthen awareness of responsibility and ensure efficient use of resources, are the characteristics of accountabili-

ty in higher education (Kai 2009). The well-defined accountability mechanism has the potential to serve democratic goods such as transparency, equality, and public discourse (Levinson 2011). The accountability system of the institutions improves the effectiveness of participants in comparison to the teachers of the control group and hence, the entire system of education should nurture accountability relations for the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process (Rosenblatt and Shimoni 2001). Studies suggest that an ideal institution with autonomy and accountability provides quality education, teaching, research, innovation and strives towards excellence. It has the scope of experimentation, innovations in curricular content, teaching methods, and quality improvement with transparency in teaching, examination and evaluations as well as providing the scope of educational reforms and speedy implementation.

Objectives

1. To study the status of autonomy and accountability in higher education institutions of India.
2. To study the historical perspectives, policy concerns, challenges and practices of autonomy and accountability in higher education institutions of India.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the resources such as books, journals, research-based articles, government documents available in digital forms explored from open educational resources. Descriptive method has been adopted to compile the content-based data and present the report of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Perspectives

India has a long history and tradition of higher education which can be traced back to the Assemblies of the Vedic period where the Brahamans learned Vedas and Dharma. All institutions of ancient times had enjoyed autonomy in their administration, both academic and institu-

tional. They had the freedom in managing and directing their academic affairs. The teachers had the freedom to impart any kind of instruction to their pupils and the pupils had the freedom to choose their teachers and education institutions. Teachers were autonomous in their work, adopting various methods of teachings and assessment. A teacher was the ultimate authority to decide who can be eligible to take admission and eventual success in academic of a disciple (Puri 2009). Enjoying the highest degree of autonomy, teachers were highly responsible towards their duty and students and at the same time were held accountable towards their duty. During the medieval period, the establishment of colleges at different places in India was encouraged. These institutions were maintained out of the bounty of nobles and king men. Education was not the responsibility of the state and therefore no revenue was earmarked for the establishment and maintenance of colleges. But the rulers helped in the spread of education and they built educational institutions. The rulers did not claim any authority over the educational institutions nor interfered with their management (Puri 2009). In medieval period, the educational intuitions had autonomy to some extent but their functioning was largely dependent on the donations of rulers and kings. The institutions were struggling for financial support and ensuring accountability towards their stakeholders. Higher education in modern India started from the British and erstwhile to the establishment of three universities such as in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857 and existed twenty-seven colleges which had full autonomy. These colleges had the autonomy to decide their courses of study, curriculum and evaluation procedures and awarding their degree and diploma (CABE Committee Report 2005). After the formation of these three universities, twenty-seven autonomous colleges were affiliated to these universities and rules were made for common courses of study, admission, conducting examination and publishing results based on a prescribed curriculum and syllabi that curtailed the freedom of colleges to perform these functions and were made non-autonomous. Till the beginning of the 20th century, there were no faculty members attached to the universities and there were no teaching departments with the universities and also no res-

idential facilities for teachers and students (Gupta 1983). In 1919, Saddler Commission recommended to minimize the Government control over the universities and make the functioning of university more flexible. It had recommended for conferring autonomy to the university in the appointment of teachers, curriculum construction and conduct of examinations and formation of powerful Academic Council with faculties of different subjects and Board of Studies along with closer cooperation between the colleges and the universities (Calcutta University Commission Report 1917). When Sir Asutosh Mukerjee was the Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University in 1916 had started teaching departments and post-graduate teaching which was seen by the affiliated colleges as an infringement upon their territory. Consequently, the Principal of Presidency College, Calcutta, campaigned for the freedom of his college to prescribe its curricula and to conduct its examinations. This was the first attempt in the history of Indian higher education by any college to become autonomous.

Post Independent Policy Perspectives

The directions and objectives of higher education in India were changed due to political independence. The base of education had to be expanded in order to cater to the demands for higher education by the increasing young population of the country. These prerogatives led to the appointment of the University Education Commission, 1949, headed by Dr. S. Radhakrishan. This Commission Report discussed at length about autonomy of educational institutions (Palamattam 2016). The University Education Commission (1949), stated that the affiliating universities are more than a machine for conducting examinations. It is a misfortune since it had suggested examinations as the university's main function, a profound delusion and one which has done great harm in India. It had emphasized to give autonomy to expand the federative type of universities in India and to do away with the affiliating system in the long run and safeguard them from external domination. Uttar Pradesh Legislature attempted to revive the autonomy of higher education institutions by Agra University Amendment Act. However, this Amendment Act was not successfully imple-

mented by the university. The Committee on Standards of University Education (1965) also emphasized the need for introducing autonomy in higher educational institutions. Education Commission (1964-66) report had given the first formal and specific recommendations on college autonomy. It made the distinction between university autonomy and academic freedom and stated that the teacher cannot be ordered or required to teach something which goes against his conscience. Teachers should be independent to undertake their study, research, publish and should be free to speak and write about and participate in debates on significant national and international issues. It identified the university autonomy in the different fields namely, the appointment and promotion of teachers and selection of students, determination of courses of study, methods of teaching and the selection of areas and problems of research. It had recommended to grant autonomous status to colleges which were outstanding colleges or a small cluster of very good colleges within a large university with the freedom to make its own rules of admission, its courses of study, to conduct examinations, and so on. The parent university's role would be one of general supervision and the actual conferment of the degree. The first National Policy on Education (1968) also continued its emphasis on changing the affiliation system of colleges. It took the critical note on the affiliation system which was working well when the number of colleges affiliated to the universities was very less and the universities had a direct interest and close association with the programs and performance of its affiliated colleges. But after a few decades, the increased number of affiliated colleges to universities had created an unmanageable situation that symbolized the mechanical structure of functioning of affiliated colleges. In 1972, the 36th session of the Central Advisory Board of Education endorsed the Education Commission's recommendation on autonomous colleges, adding that at least 5 percent of the colleges should be made autonomous by the end of 1979 March, that is, Fifth Five Year Plan. In 1979, UGC in its document called "Autonomous Colleges, Criteria, Guidelines and Patterns of Assistance" made strong recommendations to universities to amend their statutes to make provision for au-

tonomous colleges. Some universities did amend their statutes to incorporate provisions for autonomous colleges, but most others did not do anything in this direction. They did not want to confer autonomy to colleges which they thought would dilute their power and authority over the colleges. In 1978, the Tamil Nadu Legislature provided autonomous status to twelve colleges by the amending University Acts of Madras University and the Madurai Kamaraj University. In 1986, the National Policy on Education recommended autonomy for colleges in deciding admission policy of students, recruitment and promotion of teachers, determination of courses, framing and updating syllabus and selecting methods of teaching and conducting research, innovation and their promotion. The Policy also suggested that there should be provisions for granting autonomy to more and more deserving institutions and UGC should play a guiding role in this process. The Programme of Action for NPE-1986 also suggested to develop a large number of autonomous colleges as well as the creation of autonomous departments within universities on a selective basis. It also proposed that each State should establish the Council of Autonomous Colleges. CABE Committees on Autonomy of Higher Education Institution (2005) reported that the autonomy of higher education institutions is a pre-requisite for enabling them to achieve their goals and objectives. An honest exercise of autonomy (academic, administrative and financial) will lead to making these institutions the centre of innovation, excellence and development. With this in view, the institutions need to be insulated from internal and external pressures of all kinds, maybe bureaucratic, political and other groups. In 2018, UGC's Graded Autonomy Regulation introduced a three-tiered system of graded autonomy for colleges and universities based on scores and ranks given to them by NAAC or corresponding accreditation grade/score from a UGC empaneled reputed accreditation agency. It gives more autonomy to the highest-ranked institutions coming under Category-I and II Universities in starting a new course/program/department/school/centre, hiring foreign faculty and admitting foreign students, collaborating with foreign educational institutions and they are exempted from annual monitoring of their off-

campus centre(s) and/or the study centre(s). Category-III Universities are those which would not be included either in Category-I or Category-II Universities.

Post Independent Practices and Challenges

In India autonomous educational institutions have better and adequate functional status than non-autonomous. Autonomous educational institutions have opportunities to think freely, construct intellectually and bring in innovations effectively (Nesamani 2012). The autonomous status ensures a more effective and a better functioning of institutions where the stakeholders express different needs at different levels as not like in non-autonomous colleges (Ganesan 2000). Autonomy has positive impact on quality of teachers, method of teaching, curriculum, co-curricular activities, library, infrastructural facilities and examination system, students' achievement, and further the on-customer orientation, client education, quality in education, teachers' participation, innovation and linkages (Barik 2013). The autonomy of higher education institutions is the right step in educational management which provides an enabling environment in colleges and universities (Pondhe 2016) and it requires willingness, honest participation and accountability of the students, teachers and management in the education process for its better implementation. For innovations in curricular content, teaching methods, supplementary learning, systems of examination and evaluation etc. the autonomous functions highly depend upon fund provisions and training of the teaching community (Sharma et al. 2017). The institutions with strong financial status and leadership quality have the better opportunities and scope to adopt autonomy and restructure the curricular according to the needs of the locality and provide creative and conducive learning environments both for students and faculty members in autonomous institution leading to the production of skilled and well-trained human resource to meet the modern needs (Isakkimuthu 2011; Yerande 2018). In 2005, the CABE Committee report on Autonomy and Accountability in Higher Institution found that the Board of Studies and Academic Councils of higher educational institutions determine curriculum, ad-

mission policy, student's intake for general and professional courses, the fee structure was to be determined by the university, individual institution and the State government. But the autonomy of higher educational institutions is a limited one and it varies from university to university and state to state. The autonomy is severely restricted in matters relating to the selection of teachers, fixing of tuition fees, etc. so far as the autonomy of colleges is concerned. Hence, it suggested to provide more autonomy to universities in selecting Vice-Chancellors, teachers and other functionaries, including the constitution and functioning of various decision-making bodies (CABE Committee 2005). On the other hand, it is found that the Indian central universities enjoy greater autonomy as compared to state universities and show relatively better academic performance (Sheetal and Patro 2017). The system of affiliated colleges does not provide autonomy to deserving college to frame curricula, courses of studies or their own system of evaluation. Further financial constraints faced by the institutions and too much linkage with political powers of the state reduce the autonomy of autonomous institution (Gandhi 2013). Higher education in India is disturbed by the complexity of controls and interventions by the government and therefore, there is only quantitative expansion without excellence and innovation (Sankaran and Joshi 2016). There has been organized attack in many universities of India on the fundamentals of the creative centre of learning, critical pedagogy, a minimalist and enabling administration nurturing a transparent and democratic environment for students, researchers and teachers. It brought a question mark on the accountability and idea of the public university (Pathak 2019). The university autonomy in the present context is not absolute because of the regulatory framework of states. Due to other reasons like inability of universities to protect their autonomy, political interference, over assertive bureaucracy and lack of money power, corruption in appointment, resulted in the loss of autonomy in higher education institutions in India (Prakash 2011; Kumar 2018). In India, academic freedom is threatened by the increasing precarity of academic employment which can be seen in the rise of contract employees such as adhocs or research associates,

at one end of lapsing into bureaucratic rigidity and not being robust enough to prevent university leader who want to bulldoze the process (Sundar 2018). There is also protest on the move to provide autonomy to the institutions because that would set the ground for commercialization of education and deprive the opportunities of higher education to the marginalized section of society (Nair 2019). The government claimed that the autonomy gives greater academic freedom to innovate but students and teachers complain that the autonomy provides scope to trust and university to cut costs, raise student fees, and start courses in self-financing mode which would lead to the exclusion of economically and socially disadvantaged section of society (Ghosh 2018). Deepaidnani (2016) observed that the autonomy of Delhi University was arbitrarily used by the university authority while implementing the semester system of examination. Higher education in India does not enjoy absolute academic freedom and institutional autonomy but deemed universities often misuse the given academic freedom and autonomy and lower the quality of education of this country which indicates lack of accountability of institutions of higher education of India (Ryan and Dreyfuss 2016). The unusual mixture of high autonomy in both resources and curriculum and low outcome accountability leads to a permanent overload of management (Dvořák et al. 2014). There have been significant changes needed for more decentralization and increased autonomy for public higher education institutions but more attention is needed regarding accountability mechanisms (Salmi 2019).

Autonomy should necessarily lead to excellence in academics, governance and financial management of the institutions. In the absence of accountability autonomy is misused and to check the misuse of autonomy there should be full commitment for accountability. There is meaning of accountability only when the tertiary education institutions are empowered to operate autonomously and responsibly (Salmi 2009) in which active participation and understanding of the stakeholders in various issues of academic policies and projects are needed for ensuring accountability and success. The accountability measure has a positive effect on teaching and learning, responsibilities of full-time faculty

members, enrollment and retention of students and information disclosures, become the most significant aspect of the accountability in these regards (Rezende 2010). In the context of India, institute of higher education have a certain amount of autonomy but there is no proper mechanism for ensuring accountability (Sharma and Singh 2018). Higher education in India suffers from several systemic deficiencies such as autonomy of academic institutions and low funding by the UGC and the Government (George 2012). These studies reveal various problems related to accountability in higher education. Being accountable to different stakeholders, confusion about the goals of accountability, improper implementation of accountability measures, excessive control, and complex bureaucratic procedures bring many challenges and problems in ensuring accountability in higher education. Naik (2009) in the study 'Existing Practice of Teachers' Accountability' found that the responsibility of the teachers towards students and teaching profession is considered important for ensuring accountability of teacher but the existing procedure adopted for assessing the performance of teacher is not adequate and few teachers are not in favors of task-responsibilities. Huisman and Currie (2004) stated that accountability could lead to better improvement but despite increasing attention to accountability, the many staff members were cynical about the improvement of quality higher education through the current accountability mechanism and viewed it as not very beneficial. In another study, Marbaniang (2012) found that the teachers have claimed considerable level of accountability in Catholic educational institutions of Nagaland but the students were not happy with the existing level teacher accountability and they believed that was not good enough in existing educational practices and teachers' unions were moderately influenced by the region of states and political party control for the adoption of the accountability measures (Jha et al. 2019).

CONCLUSION

Many studies conducted in India emphasized that autonomy and accountability are very important for the growth, development and academic expansion, excellence and innovation in higher education. The success of autonomy depends on institutional leadership, financial stability, accountability and participation of the students, teachers, management, and government in the education process. On the other hand, many studies have found that there is lack of institutional autonomy in determination of course content and proper accountability measures for institutions. So, at large in India, there are two contexts. One context is where the institutions have restricted autonomy but are held accountable in some forms and the institutions which exercise fairly more autonomy but do not have expected accountability. There are also incidents where autonomy has been misused in both private and public domains in the absence of accountability whereas severe accountability measures also have negative impact on the functioning of educational institutions in India.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the prevailing situation, the paper suggests that considerable autonomy should be given to both private and public higher education institutions along with the organized internal mechanisms and defined external control and for this, the government should develop legal and regulatory policies to ensure quality higher education. Since the government plays vital role in the process of educational services in India, it has to act more democratically. It should make efforts to facilitate the higher education institutions with required supports along with justifiable guidelines so that the institutions as a whole can understand their positions and responsibilities. Autonomy and accountability are inextricably linked and widely recognized fact in the management of higher education in India. However, it requires more balancing act particularly in regulating private players. It should ensure that autonomy should not be misused for short term private gains at the cost of human resource development and nation-building in general. There is a need of a new compact nature of management for higher education that integrates increased funding with increased institutional autonomy and accountability.

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