INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM
NEED FOR A SERIOUS DEBATE

SANDEEP SANCHETI
Vice Chancellor
SRM Institute of Science and Technology Chennai
and Past President
Association of Indian Universities New Delhi

LATHA PILLAI
Director QAR, SRM Institute of Science and Technology
Chennai

ASSOCIATION OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES
NEW DELHI (INDIA)

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

NEED FOR A SERIOUS DEBATE

SANDEEP SANCHETI AND LATHA PILLAI

UNESCO defines institutional autonomy as, "a degree of self-governance, necessary for effective decision making by institutes of higher education regarding their academic work standards, management, and related activities". Academic autonomy is a generic concept, implying self-governance of a university and not limited to a narrow sense of designing the academic curriculum. Financial management and controls are also integral to the concept of autonomy at the institutional level. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are highly interlinked. Higher education in India is highly centralised and institutions have very limited autonomy, regardless of their public or private status. This is especially true with colleges. Creating successful universities requires a supportive governance structure in which universities or colleges have the autonomy to achieve objectives, whether research or teaching, with the appropriate level of accountability. Evidences from different higher education systems across the globe suggest that countries have been modifying their governance structures and systems to meet higher autonomy and higher levels of accountability. In India too, incorporating an Indian Index of Institutional Autonomy (i3A) within the parameters of NAAC and/ or NIRF or separately, can address many concerns and ambiguities related to institutional autonomy.

PRELUDE

What would a senior academic administrator do if an angel came in the middle of the night and asked for one wish that would be granted right away? The most likely answer would be "more autonomy"! UNESCO defines institutional autonomy as, "a degree of self-governance, necessary for effective decision making by institutes of higher education regarding their academic work standards, management, and related activities" (Vlasova, 2019). Academic autonomy is a generic concept, implying self-governance of a university and not limited to a narrow sense of designing the academic curriculum. If autonomy is examined closely, it also needs to percolate to the academic units and individual members of the faculty, ideally resulting in self-governance of various degrees at all levels. It involves the selection of students; academic restructuring; ways to examine them; and all related aspects. Financial management and controls are also integral to the concept of autonomy at the institutional level. Extrapolating autonomy to department level would involve the freedom to design and execute the quality of teaching, assessments, research, and

extension. Autonomy to a student gives the flexibility of classes, gives ample time for developing skills required for the market as also getting involved in selecting major and minor specialisations, driving entrepreneurship and innovation, or other activities of their choice in a graduated manner. In short, it would amount to the freedom to make all strategic and operational choices.

This article delves into various aspects of autonomy and its implementation in higher education segments – both in the international and national contexts. The first part of this paper looks into the concept of autonomy, types, and dimensions; the second part elaborates autonomy related initiatives by MHRD; and the third part shares the concerns and proposes the concept of Indian Index of Institutional Autonomy.

DIMENSIONS OF AUTONOMY

Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are highly interlinked. Institutional autonomy is a necessity but not a sufficient condition for academic freedom, which is essentially the right of academic staff to decide what to teach, to determine their research questions and methods, and to publish the results of that research. At least one critic of university development regards the recent installation of systems of market competition by governments in many countries as extending regulation and inimical to academic freedom. With the expansion, diversity, and complexity of higher education in most countries, the need to decentralise authority and to provide greater autonomy to higher education institutions has emerged as an inevitable approach. As pointed out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005), autonomy is usually determined by the level of capability and the right of an institution to decide its course of action about institutional policy, planning, financial and staff management, compensation, students, and academic freedom, without interference from outside authorities.

Granting autonomy is not a one-way process or simply a set of policies to achieve successful higher education management (Dahiya, 2001). It is not only about what freedom higher education institutions are going to obtain from the government but also about what freedoms the government is willing to give. This involves government provisions to adopt legal reforms, restructuring of public funding mechanisms, and personnel regulations (ADB, 2012).

International Scenario

The relationship of a government to its universities is not static. Many foreign countries have already undertaken reforms in the area of autonomy with far-reaching educational implications. For example, in the United States of America, Romo (2007) observed that the role of Ministry of Education is limited to approving new universities and university centres in the private sector. Forest and Altbach (2007) noted that each

institution has the autonomy to determine its own program requirements, typically following guidelines from accrediting agencies. Yet, the ability to set tuition fee, freedom to seek funding, and obtain freedom from state policies and regulations in areas such as purchasing are additional autonomy that public institutions are seeking.

In implementing the Dearing Committee recommendations, the United Kingdom has introduced several government initiatives (Anderson and Johnson, 1998). Australia and New Zealand have emerged from long periods of 'reform' in which governments have introduced 'user pays' and are exposing institutions to competitive market forces. Sweden has completed a larger reform designed to devolve authority from the government to institutions. The Danish government has been intervening to reduce the length of courses and time taken to graduate. Italy has granted budget autonomy and further legislation is being implemented giving institutions increased scope for taking decisions. Discussions are taking place over 'who owns the curriculum, government or universities or some intermediate agency' (Anderson and Johnson, 1998). Italian universities were overshadowed by the compartmentalized faculties and only became autonomously operating collective actors over the past few decades (Michael and Christoph 2017). Autonomy is intertwined with the educational traditions of the country and policy changes. For example, German higher education heavily draws on Humboldt's tradition of academic self-rule and rooted in the tradition of academic freedom and autonomy (Gieysztor, 1992).

In OECD countries, the changes are producing convergent tendencies, as documented by Anderson and Johnson (1998). Among Anglo-American systems where institutions had been traditionally enjoying higher institutional autonomy are demanded by their respective governments to be more accountable also.

The situation in Asian countries is different because of the sudden expansion in the number of universities, which are seen as largely instrumental for contributing to national plans in a cohesive framework in these countries. In Malaysia, the government has been concerned with many aspects of university management, but the new legislation is intended to deregulate them 'to become less hierarchical and bureaucratic institutions' (Anderson and Johnson, 1998). Subsequently launched was the National Higher Education Strategic Plan: Beyond 2020, which operationalised the Strategic Plan of the State, promised greater autonomy for the universities in Malaysia (Sirat, 2010).

Even on the discussion about public universities, levels of autonomy vary significantly in different countries. Fielden (2008) relates four models (ranging from control to autonomy) to the status of public universities. The continuum suggested by him shows that while countries like Malaysia have better state control over public Universities, on the other extreme Australia and the United Kingdom have more independent public universities. At the same time, there are several criticisms of undue government influence in Australian universities. Countries like France and New Zealand have semi-autonomous public universities where Singapore has semi-independent public universities.

A government may exert pressure on the autonomy of the institutions in multiple ways. For example, using its legislative or regulatory authority to place preferred members in leadership positions is one way. It may exert influence over matters of salaries and service conditions of staff members. Such instances are seen not because of any legal authority, but because of its powers to withhold funds. Such influence of 'steering from a distance' using authority is very common in many countries, particularly in Asia in matters of faculty appointments, transfers and student admissions.

Autonomy in India: Need for a New Lens

In India, the concept of university autonomy has been debated almost for the past four decades. The Gajendragadkar Committee Report (UGC, 1971) states "The concept of University autonomy is often misunderstood. It is neither a 'legal concept', nor a 'constitutional concept'. It is an ethical concept and an academic concept. This concept does not question how in a democratic society like ours legislatures are ultimately sovereign, and have a right to discuss and determine the question of policy relating to education, including higher education. The concept of university autonomy, however, means that it would be appropriate on the part of democratic legislatures not to interfere with the administration of university life, both academic and non-academic."

Autonomy is equated with dynamism and freedom that an institution will need to change the course structure and curriculum to fit the demands of the market forces. But the discourse on autonomy in India's higher education cannot be confined to the narrow lanes of academic freedom only. The idea of 'university autonomy' is defined as the freedom of an institution to run its affairs without direction or influence from any level of government. Despite the difference in conception and variations in definitions, to an institution, enhanced autonomy will give it sufficient time to focus on ways to maximise excellence at par with global institutions.

The recent changes in the Indian education system demand a relook at the concept of autonomy, incorporating the diversity of universities. Firstly, the current systems of regulation-based autonomy have ignored the recent demographic and compositional shifts in education. Currently, the number of private institutions is almost twice that of government institutions. Yet, the model of governance has been relatively slow to change. Secondly, wherever the central government has taken incremental steps, their implementation at the state level has been tardy or one of inaction. Thirdly, our understanding of autonomy does not always consider the interconnections across the related concepts like academic, managerial, administrative, and financial dimensions. Finally, most of the existing regulations are based on the affiliating model which does not seek to address the aspirational value of Indian institutions in quality and diversity. In short, institutions of higher education (IHEs) in India need to be looked through a different lens to conceive the reality of autonomy.

Draft National Education Policy (DNEP)(MHRD, 2018) talks about teacher autonomy as well as institutional autonomy. The committee has recognised the need of individual autonomy and opined that lack of faculty autonomy results in poor motivation and reduced scope for innovation. DNEP further envisages that through institutional academic and administrative autonomy, institutions will be enabled to: start and run novel and cutting-edge programmes; develop innovative curricula; govern more locally given local knowledge of circumstances and requirements; and set up optimal people and career management systems. For imaginative curriculum and pedagogy, institutional autonomy is seen as a prerequisite by DNEP.

Autonomy and Accountability

Countries across the board have different levels of autonomy and accountability. The World Bank attempted to capture the perception of task managers on this issue and found that there is variation in levels of autonomy, while across the board centralised accountability remains high. For example, countries like Chile, which are seen to be at the forefront of higher education reform, continue to maintain high levels of accountability regardless of whether institutions are public or private.

In India, there is a skewed allocation of limited funds to central universities while state universities face a paucity of funds. Moreover, the existing system of governance and regulation needs to be re-examined. The system of command and control does not promote accountability. The institutions are constantly subjected to governmental pressures and decisions are often made based on non-academic considerations. This intervention starts at the highest level with the appointment of the Vice Chancellor. Also, University Courts and Academic Councils are usually large, which prevents dynamism in decision-making (Joshi, 2011). He argues that to promote accountability, there should be complete transparency in the working of Executive/Academic Bodies and other Governing Councils of the universities and colleges. University Acts in different states should be reviewed and new technologies should be utilized for ensuring administrative efficiency.

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), set up in 1994, accredits higher education institutions in the country. The process has been made mandatory recently and the University Grants Commission (UGC) funding for some of the schemes is linked to accreditation. Some of the dimensions of assessment of universities is that of governance, leadership, and management. Under this criterion, there are key aspects like institutional vision and leadership, strategy development and deployment, faculty empowerment strategies, financial management and resource mobilization, and internal quality assurance system. Hitherto, 8,159 colleges and 364 universities have been accredited, which is less than one-third of the total number of institutions. It is, therefore, not a straightforward activity to introduce and implement accountability measures (Varghese and Malik, 2015). Ravi *et al* (2019) noted that limited assessment and accreditation capacity of the NAAC and NBA has been a significant barrier in linking the performance of an institution to autonomy and funding decisions. Moreover, they criticise that NAAC retaining the exclusive

power to accredit HEIs, allows corruption and profiteering to creep into the sector. Srinivas and Salil (2020) point out that using accreditation score as a single core criterion for giving autonomy or significant funding or any other policy decisions will magnify the ill effects of proxy-quality. In turn it reduces the accountability also.

Accountability is variable and it requires a pan-India approach incorporating all forms of institutions, whether accredited or not. It is not the individual plans of public or private institutions that matter in terms of accountability, but the vision of the regulatory bodies and accreditation agencies that shall be reflecting it beyond compulsions for procedural compliance. It turns out that institutions with better autonomy may exhibit more accountability in the long term, by default, owing to its operational efficiency.

With each decision to increase institutional autonomy, governments also have to reassure the public that these institutions are held accountable. The core question is getting the right balance between autonomy and accountability of universities. The challenge is to determine how much accountability is optimum (Fielden 2008, Salmi 2008). Too much accountability can lead to stagnation of innovation and potential rent-seeking, as well as potentially undermining the goal of autonomy itself (Lao and Saint 2008). However, accountability remains important, especially as governments continue to be significant financers of higher education.

Types and Dimensions of Autonomy

Various conventions and declarations have reaffirmed that enhanced institutional autonomy is critical for universities to reinvent themselves and respond to new challenges. National and regional level studies have been undertaken to study the nature and extent of autonomy in higher education, dimensions of autonomy, and the impact of changes on the functioning of institutions. The University autonomy in Europe (Estermann and Nokkala 2009), a survey of institutional autonomy in 34 European countries identifies autonomy in the areas of academics, recruitment, financial and organisational levels where involvement of public authorities or regulatory bodies are visible.

Academic Autonomy

Key issues of academic autonomy are spread across institutional trajectory, student-cycle, and faculty career path. It is generally assumed that European processes such as the Bologna process and European frameworks have impacted many issues related to academic autonomy. For example, student selection is strongly regulated, whether by setting frameworks for admissions or by limiting student intake in specific disciplines. Many countries opt for imposing direct limitations such as setting student quotas, instead of indirect steering by incentives.

Autonomy in Recruitment

Second is the area of recruitment and staffing, where a paradox of cost centre and expenditure centre is visible in many countries. While universities are setting and meeting the cost centres, they rarely have the freedom to set salary levels, which is one of the highest costs centres, even with good intentions. Similarly, the study on the university autonomy in Europe (2017) shows that involvement of the public authorities in staffing issues ranges from determining – directly or indirectly – the salaries to being a direct employer of university staff. However, the trend of university officials being conceived as civil servants is on the decline across the globe. The draft National Education Policy of India (MHRD, 2018) envisages that all institutions, including public institutions (and aided institutions), will have the autonomy to recruit faculty and other members of their choice.

Financial Autonomy

The most common historical trend is allocating public funds as block grants to institutions. This may or may not be accompanied by outcome or performance criteria or targets. Institutions are allowed to collect fees from at least part of their student population. However, this fee may vary from a very nominal amount to a cost-based amount, depending on the type of the institution. The pattern is similar in European countries as well as in most Asian countries, including India. Universities face difficulties in raising finance as they are constrained to operate in the financial market in most countries. This restriction is also extended in terms of using the land and buildings most of which have cultural, traditional, and historic relevance. This means formal ownership of the land, building, and assets do not necessarily provide the possibilities for universities to use them without limitations. Another common theme relevant under financial autonomy is that investing and raising money are mostly open to sponsoring bodies or 'satellite' legal entities of the universities and not the universities themselves.

From the financial angle, the granting of autonomy should not be viewed as escaping from the responsibility of providing public funding (Varghese and Malik, 2015). Instead, granting of autonomy should be accompanied by financial assistance to the institutions while maintaining the freedom of the institutions to mobilize additional funds. In effect, this will help in the capacity development efforts at the institutional level.

Organizational Autonomy

Despite the differences in the type, ownership, ranking, and levels, the broad structure of universities largely continues the same as in the past. There are differences in the internal administrative styles, but the internal academic structures have relatively less variation in countries like India. Governance structures are often prescribed by the national regulatory or legislative frameworks. External stakeholders are increasingly involved in the universities' governance structures, and especially in countries where universities have more than one governing body. In Western Europe

and the United States, there is a visible shift towards a managerial leadership style characterised by positions and roles resembling CEOs in corporate bodies. Some countries have small executive management groups, comprising the Rector and a core team, with broad competences and are therefore considered to be a powerful body.

Studies by Berdahl (1971, 1993) distinguish two kinds of institutional autonomies: Substantive Autonomy and Procedural Autonomy. Substantive autonomy covers the sphere of academics and research, specifically autonomy over areas associated with curriculum design, research policy, awarding the degree, etc. Procedural autonomy covers the non-academic areas that overlap with many financial matters as given in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Substantive (Academic and Research)	Procedural (Non-academic Areas)
Curriculum design	Budgeting
Research policy	Financing management
Entrance standards	Non-academic staff appointments
Academic staff appointments	Purchasing
Awarding degree	Entering into contracts

Source: Berdahl (1971, 1993)

Many governments interfere substantially on procedural issues but vary in terms of their interference in substantive issues. Anderson and Johnson (1998) found that Anglo-American countries are more autonomous, especially on substantive issues, compared to other regions. For example, in the USA there has always been substantial autonomy, but individual states within the federation vary vis-a-vis procedural autonomy. In Asian countries, both areas of institutional autonomy are limited. However, worldwide there is a push towards institutional autonomy across the board. Innovation in substantive areas is resource-intensive and, to generate those resources, procedural autonomy is necessary.

Higher education in India is highly centralised and institutions have very limited autonomy, regardless of their public or private status. This is especially true with colleges. Universities have some substantive autonomy in theory while private institutions have more leeway in terms of procedural autonomy. Under the affiliation system, most parent universities are responsible for regulating admission, setting curricula, and conducting examinations for the affiliated colleges under the general oversight of the UGC. Academic curricula of professional courses are subject to oversight by their professional councils. Both public and private universities can modify curriculum and propose new programmes with UGC approval but have no

or limited autonomy over areas like fees. Private universities also have their fees determined by state committees headed by prominent public figures who ensure that these institutions are not profiteering. Neither public nor private universities can determine faculty or staffing salaries. However, private institutions can hire and fire faculty. Neither type of institution has external independent boards with external representation to select leadership. Prakash (2011) elaborates aspects of institutional autonomy in India under three heads:academic autonomy, administrative autonomy, and financial autonomy.

- *Academic Autonomy* involves: a) designing academic programmes and curricula; b) autonomy to decide one's own procedure for selection of research fellows; c) adoption of choice-based credit courses; d) autonomy of departments; e) setting up of internal quality assurance cells; f) switching over to internal evaluation; g) performance appraisal of teachers with adequate weightage for research work based on quantifiable parameters; h) autonomy to establish linkages for academic and research collaboration in India and abroad; i) transparency and objectivity in the selection of faculty on an all-India basis; and j) quality of research with a focus on international benchmarks such as citation indices, and patents.

- *Administrative Autonomy* involves: a) management system in the university to encourage best practices of governance; b) head of the institution to have the autonomy to determine both the rank and the number of positions of professors, as well as associate and assistant professors; c) outsourcing of non-academic activities for efficiency and effectiveness; d) a central/state higher education tribunal for grievance redressal mechanisms; e) norms of accountability to be evolved which are open, participative and data-based; and f) charter of responsibility and devolution and delegation of authority defined for different levels within the higher education system.

- *Financial Autonomy involves*: a) provision of funds to individual institutions in an united manner to ensure greater degree of freedom; b) mechanisms for deciding the fee structure; c) scholarships to meritorious and deserving students from the lower economic strata; and d) undertaking consultancy assignments and sponsored research projects.

It can be seen that the various aspects of autonomy permeates into all areas of institutional functioning, in spite of the nature and type of the institution.

Opting Out of the Regulatory Maze for Higher Autonomy

Institutions without autonomy suffer in inexplicable ways. Prakash (2011) discusses how, during the last many decades, higher education institutions in India have suffered a loss of autonomy due to the prevalence of factors like interference, over-assertive bureaucracy, money power, and the inability of universities to protect their autonomy. Revisiting acts and Memorandum of Associations, alumni representations, and strong institutional leadership would all go a long way towards increasing and protecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. Fielden (2008) opines that lesser

dependence on state funding increases institutional autonomy. Agreeing to this, some of the elite Indian institutions have opted for a higher degree of autonomy by choosing not to take up university status and the associated regulatory structures. These institutions consequently cannot offer degrees but instead they offer diplomas which are equally valued in the marketplace.

Currently, Indian School of Business (ISB) is one among the foremost respected business schools within the country. Despite not being a university and not offering a degree, there still is a great demand for admission as their qualifications are widely accepted as being one of the best in Indian education.

RECENT INITIATIVES BY MHRD AND UGC

The relevance of the autonomous status of universities is reiterated by many committees and recommendations in India, one of the recent being from Rashtriya Ucchhatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) (MHRD, 2013) which suggested amendments or legislations to ensure the existence of state universities as autonomous independent entities. It recommends the withdrawal of the state from the management functions of the university. Among other aspects, RUSA suggests the creation of buffer bodies or agencies (such as State Higher Education Councils) to carry out some of the detailed policy, planning, and supervision functions in the sector. Providing sector-wide services and allowing institutions to adopt new funding models that give them greater freedom to explore new sources of income are also recommended. Consequently, new forms of accountability through reporting on performance and outcomes in achieving nationally-set targets for the sector are also suggested. This is apart from institutionally-set targets. One of the most significant suggestions is the gradual withdrawal of the state from decisions on the appointment of Chairpersons of the Executive Council or Vice Chancellor and members of the Executive Council. Grant of special status through Graded Autonomy to institutions and Institutions of Eminence (IoE) are two special moves in this regard.

When the government in early 2018 decided to grant 'autonomy' to some twenty educational institutions, including many in the private sector, it set off a raft of comments from academics and educators in the country on the exact rationale for the move. The government for its part attempted to make the argument that its autonomy was actually 'liberating' the Indian higher education from a slew of regulations and regulators. Critics argued that this move towards autonomy was making education into a trading place with market forces taking away the real 'public' from education. In other words, the bottom line was that in the name of autonomy the government was perhaps making education exclusive and more expensive, which however may not be entirely true.

The issue of granting autonomy to institutions had also to be seen in another context: globally, Indian institutions of higher education are nowhere in the top 100 or even 200 academic standing with perhaps the bare exceptions of a few IITs and

the Indian Institute of Science.   As the official refrain put it, "Recognizing the need to create an enabling environment whereby Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) can become institutions of global excellence, autonomy is pivotal to promote and institutionalize excellence in higher education. These regulations are aimed to provide autonomy to the HEIs based on quality benchmarks". The move on the autonomy front has also to be seen against a backdrop of clear suggestions from vice-chancellors and top administrators of the statutory bodies' over-bearing attitude in academic affairs even to the point of getting involved in the nomenclature of courses, its contents, and even examination practices.

It is in this rationale that the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) came up with the idea of Institutions of Excellence of two categories – Grade I and Grade II – depending on an institution's standing as assessed by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Autonomy to select institutions will be coming by way of 'freedom' in several areas—to start new courses, new programs, hiring of foreign faculty, and admitting foreign students on a different and yet undefined fee structure. Some educators and academics have made the point that while de-linking the new freedom from regulators has its positive spin-offs but officially much more ought to be done to entice the private sector in strengthening higher education in India. It is not as if the private sector was not involved in higher education but that they were under a maze of regulations and regulators and ultimately feeding off on the traditional avenues to survive and flourish.

To overcome some of the above challenges, firstly, academic institutions will have to be enlightened enough to cut through the maze of regulations and regulators to see how best a rule can be utilised to one's benefit without wading into the realm of flouting the laws and regulations. Secondly, there is nothing absolute about autonomy; it is always relative and subject to built-in rules however liberal the regime may be. Autonomy relies heavily on the inter-dependence of different functions of agencies and functionaries. Leaders in a democracy may have all the powers defined in the books; yet by no means are they absolute, for the will of the masses is what would finally determine actions and policies. Autonomous colleges is another long-standing scheme by UGC established to ensure autonomy to colleges, which needs an impact review.

Autonomous Colleges

The UGC has a scheme for granting autonomous status to colleges. Some of the objectives were to allow colleges to exercise freedom in framing courses of study and syllabus, devise appropriate teaching methods and conduct evaluation and assessment independently (George, 2011). The colleges recognised under Sections 2(f) and 12(B) of the UGC Act with sufficient academic and non-academic resources are eligible to apply for the conferment of UGC autonomy. There are 746 colleges across 25 states and 109 universities conferred with autonomy status. The largest numbers of autonomous colleges are presently situated in the state of Tamil Nadu, followed by those in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: CURRENT STATUS OF LIST OF
APPROVED STATE-WISE AUTONOMOUS COLLEGES

State	No. of Universities having Autonomous Colleges	No. of Autonomous Colleges (as of 19.12. 2019)
Andhra Pradesh	12	106
Assam	1	2
Bihar	2	2
Chhattisgarh	3	11
Goa	1	1
Gujarat	4	4
Haryana	1	1
Himachal Pradesh	1	5
Jammu & Kashmir	2	3
Jharkhand	2	5
Karnataka	11	74
Kerala	3	19
Madhya Pradesh	9	42
Maharashtra	10	94
Manipur	1	1
Nagaland	1	3
Odisha	7	47
Pondicherry	1	4
Punjab	4	11
Rajasthan	4	6
Tamil Nadu	12	208
Telangana	5	65
Uttar Pradesh	6	11
Uttarakhand	2	4
West Bengal	4	17
Total	109	746

Source: www.ugc.ac.in

Studies (George, 2011; Kapur, 1998) show that the scheme of autonomous colleges has not made the intended progress. This is attributed to one or many of the following reasons: (i) The state governments prefer to retain the powers over government-run colleges; (ii) The managements of private colleges are concerned that they will lose their powers; (iii) In many cases, faculty members are unwilling to assume the responsibilities of autonomy and fear an increase in their workload; and (iv) There is a concern among stakeholders on the value of the college degree against that issued from the university. These can be seen as collective and interlinked reasons.Draft National Education Policy of India (MHRD, 2018) observes as follows:

> *Colleges are unable to chart their own courses, controlled as they are in many significant ways by the affiliating university. Higher Education Departments of the State and other such bodies often tend to treat universities and colleges as an extension of their hierarchy. All this deeply undermines institutional autonomy.*

It can be seen that even in the case of autonomous colleges, the autonomy is merely theoretical and variables like state and university culture are also possible determinants of experienced institutional autonomy.

Complexities and Concerns

While many of the existing schemes and new initiatives are laudable in its intentions, concerns are arising out of the complexity of the education system in India. Sarin and Dholakia (2016) observe that Government-Higher Education linkages in India have two somewhat opposite and malign aspects: (i) an overly bureaucratic oversight and accreditation system, strong on rule imposition, but weak in quality; and (ii) government neglect of HE standards and internal governance, but continued onerous annual reporting requirements.

Granting autonomy to select institutions in the A+ or A++ category to bring Indian higher educational institutions in the top 100 or 200 global rankings is a beginning in the right direction. Autonomy in an Indian context, or for that matter globally as well, has at least four pillars with inter-linkages that would have to be carefully defined or balanced as some of them would overlap or encroach each other: academic, managerial, administrative, and financial. It is undoubtedly a complex relationship with sensitive cross-connections: for instance, without adequate finances and financial autonomy, the other three would be nothing or become dysfunctional over some time. It is synonymous with multiplying a few infinites with one zero and expecting an answer, which is again infinite. Further, it is extremely difficult for operators of autonomy to understand levels or the extent to which it can be delegated. In a university setting, for example, how would one define the roles of the Vice Chancellor, Board of Management, Directors, Deans, and students? In defining autonomy, are we blurring off the lines of functioning of various stakeholders or can it trickle down to the lowest level without much ambiguity?

Mostly everyone in academic circles will be of the view that the government's effort in granting IoE status to both public and private institutions is laudable. At the same time, a few realisations have also surfaced. In all this talk of autonomy that has been going on, a pertinent question that comes to the mind is, "Has any institution not been given autonomy to function by various regulators or regulations?" Though the departments and programmes have been given autonomy, the real challenge for the balance of autonomy is not properly understood. On the other extreme, abusing the privileges would result in the re-introduction of curb, control, and addition of more regulations to prevent the misuse of autonomy resurfaces. The fact that there are scores of higher educational institutions functioning without sufficient compliances or approvals from regulatory bodies is just one proof of this paradox.

When it comes to the aspects of managerial and administrative autonomy, there is no doubt a fair degree of overlap, which has more to do with the overall functioning of an institution on a day-to-day basis and in the context of personnel management. In a private set up, an institution of higher learning gets directions from the Board of Management, which includes a cross-section of the stakeholders, and then turns it over to the administrators and academicians for proper implementation in a system that is not problem prone to an extent. Even here, for that matter, a proper system of checks and balances would have to be in place if the so-called autonomy is to benefit all players.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of autonomy in both government and private sectors of academia is financial autonomy. With financial constraints looming everywhere and the constant harping on a budget 'cutting', the guiding factor has always been the return on investment and value for the money spent. But, caught in the tangled web of discretion and indiscretion, government and private institutions seem to be in the same boat. The government appears to be making financial autonomy redundant through poor budgeting and lack of involvement of the stakeholders, and delayed implementation/operationalisation. Similarly, the private sector, while wanting to show that it is different and there are little to no limits to financial constraints, faces off with the same realities as that of the government. Though self-financed institutions are slightly better controlled, some have shown an inclination for unwanted overheads and little exposure to good financial practices.

Condition of affiliated colleges is another concern. Ravi et al (2019) *observe* that under the affiliating university model, the supervisory authority for most colleges is the university or a government authority—both lack the capacity to effectively regulate their constituent colleges and hold them accountable.

The existing system in India offers little autonomy to either public or private institutions and very little accountability (Reehana 2009). An argument can be made that a fair distinction ought to be made between public and private institutions keeping in mind their unique selling points. If Equity, Access, and Transparency can be seen as hallmarks of public institutions, the private ones enjoy speed, efficiency,

and diversity. The introduction of the private sector has not introduced competition into the system and offers just another means for the Government of India to cater to the expanding demand for tertiary education. The need for system-wide accountability is needed, even for the private sector, in an environment where short-lived institutions surface. The existing regulatory system offers neither the benefits of private sector management nor sufficient regulation to protect consumers.

Towards More Meaningful Autonomy

Creating successful universities requires a supportive governance structure in which universities or colleges have the autonomy to achieve objectives, whether research or teaching, with the appropriate level of accountability. Evidences from different higher education systems across the globe suggest that countries have been modifying their governance structures and systems to meet higher autonomy and higher levels of accountability. There is an evident shift from state-controlled to state-supervised (Fielden 2008).

India's higher education system is shaped by its diverse demography, its long democratic history, unique historical value, and its tensions with modernity. If proactive steps are to be taken in the realm of India's higher education, two things are urgently needed: First, making autonomy synonymous with transparency and with the involvement of all stakeholders; second, in systematically doing away with regulations and regulatory bodies, many of whom seen as breeding grounds of corruption and nepotism; and last but not the least, must actively solicit the participation of quality institutions in the private sector to spread their wings to strengthen the quality of education and in the process augment the economic and knowledge development of India.

Draft National Education Policy of India (MHRD, 2018) suggests a 'light but tight' and facilitative regulator. Regulatory bodies, such as the UGC, should serve as independent bodies separate from government and institutions, responsible for affairs of higher education. Such buffer bodies can have control over all funding and operational issues. However, this is rarely the case in India. A CHEMS's (1998) report diagrammed that UGC in India covers five functional areas out of the possible ten. These include control over strategic planning, budget development/funding. It appears that there is a wrong notion over not giving a mandate for UGC over policy analysis, especially when it is responsible for strategic planning for the higher education sector. There needs to be some rethinking about what the UGC's mandate is and what tools it has at its disposal to implement that mandate.

Incorporating an *Indian Index of Institutional Autonomy* (i3A) within the parameters of NAAC and /or NIRF or separately, can address many concerns and ambiguities related to an institutional autonomy. An international case in context to support such a measurement is the EUA scorecard. The European Universities Association (EUA) has made a significant contribution towards the measurement of university autonomy by developing a set of measures of autonomy, called the EUA Autonomy Scorecard.

The Autonomy Scorecard elaborated by Bennetot Enora and Thomas Estermann (2017) has over 30 indicators developed to offer an institutional perspective on institutional freedom. In similar lines, i3A incorporated as an index can give a big push to true meaningful autonomy in India.

PROPOSING AN INDIAN INDEX OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY (I3A)

As the institutional diversity, pattern, types, and nature are more varied in India than in Europe and American countries, India needs a differentiated frame to look into the issues of autonomy. Measuring autonomy can be a good start by introducing an *Indian Index of Institutional Autonomy* (i3A). Objective of the i3A can be to provide a detailed status of institutional autonomy in the country. It can serve as a reference point for enablers and prohibitors of autonomy. Instead of fixing a top-down approach on the indicators of autonomy, we suggest to allow the stakeholders of institutions to decide on the indicators as to how much importance they should attach to a set of perceived dimensions of autonomy. Thus, the decisions on what constitute autonomy itself will be decided under institutional autonomy. The concept of i3A can augment the existing accreditation and ranking approaches of NAAC and NIRF. Each restriction on institutional autonomy can be assigned a deduction value based on how restrictive a particular rule or regulation or practice is. This will force the regulators and assessors to be more scientific in forming regulations keeping a balance of competing priorities.

The proposed autonomy index can answer many policy questions like whether an increase in accountability standards impact autonomy; whether a specific regulatory measure hinder or further the institutional autonomy; whether the level of autonomy is related to institutional performance; how the desired autonomy can be facilitated in a robust regulatory context; and a series of similar questions.

It can evoke a new set of debates less coloured by vested interests but more surrounded by and stemming from a data-driven approach that can provide a new measure of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in India. Measurement alone is not enough. Further studies are required to isolate variables that restrict autonomy in different types of institutions. This is particularly significant when Draft of National Policy envisages gradual scrapping of the affiliation system, while many state universities maintain parochial regionalism in its operations. Such competing values will be surfacing more in the future in the backdrop of the autonomy of institutions.

In an overall context, the ball would be in the court of the academia who would have to know the nitty-gritty of use of autonomy. For all the rhetoric in academic circles, the leaders of institutions would have to understand that autonomy is something which cannot be given but has to be taken. Indeed, the post-Covid-19 time is ripe to act and seize the opportunity to set things right.

References

1. Altbach, P. (2001). Academic freedom: International realities and challenges, *Higher Education*, 41 (1/2).

2. Anderson Don and Johnson Richard (1998). *University Autonomy in Twenty Countries*, Centre for Continuing Education, The Australian National University.

3. Asian Development Bank, (2012). *Administration and Governance of Higher Education in Asia Patterns and Implications.* Manila: ADB.

4. Bennetot Pruvot Enora and Thomas Estermann (2017). University Autonomy in Europe III Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education, European University Association (EUA), Brussels.

5. Berdahl, R., Graham, J. and Piper, D.R. (1971) Statewide Coordination of Higher Education, Washington: American Council on Education.

6. Berdahl, R. (1993). Public Universities and State Government: Is the Tension Benign?, in European Centre for Higher Education (ed.) *Academic Freedom and University Autonomy,* Bucharest: UNESCO, European Centre for Higher Education.

7. CHEMs, (2004). A Final Report to the CUC on Food Practice in Six Areas of the Governance of Higher Education Institutions. London: CHEMS.

8. Dahiya, Bhim S. (2001). *The University Autonomy in India: The Idea and the Reality.* Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

9. Estermann, T. and Nokkala, T. (2009). University Autonomy in Europe. *Exploratory Study* (Vol. 1). Brussels: European University Association.

10. Fielden, John (2008). Global Trends in University Governance, *Education Working Paper,* Series No. 9. Washington D.C: World Bank.

11. Forest and P. Altbach (Eds.), (2007). *The International Handbook of Higher Education,* 978-94-007-0562-3 Springer. http://www.springeronline.com.

12. George, Abraham (2011). *College Autonomy in India: Performance and Prospects.* New Delhi: Authors Press.

13. Gieysztor, A. (1992). Chapter 4: Management and Resources. In D. Ridder-Symoens (Ed.), *A History of the University in Europe':* Volume 1 – Universities in the Middle Ages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

14. Gül, H., Gül, S. S., Kaya, E., & Alican, A. (2010). Main Trends in The World of Higher Education, Internationalization and Institutional Autonomy. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences.*

15. Joshi, S.K. (2011). "A New Direction of Governance and Regulation in Higher Education'', *International Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 1(2).

16. Lao, Christine and Willliam Saint, (2008). Legal Frameworks for Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Quest for Institutional Responsiveness." Washington DC: The World Bank.

17. Kapur, J.N. (1998). Concept of Autonomy: With Special Reference to Autonomous Colleges in *Accountability and Autonomy in Higher Education*. New Delhi: Association of Indian Universities.

18. Lao, Christine and Willliam Saint, (2008). Legal Frameworks for Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Quest for Institutional Responsiveness. Washington DC: The World Bank.

19. Malik, Garima (2017). Governance and Management of Higher Education Institutions in India. Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education, NUEPA.

20. Michael Dobbins and Christoph Knill (2017). Higher Education Governance in France, Germany, and Italy: Change and variation in the impact of transnational soft governance, *Policy and Society*, 36:1,

21. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (2013): *Report of the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan, National Higher Education Mission.* New Delhi: Government of India.

22. MHRD (2018), Draft National Education Policy 2019, https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Draft_NEP_2019_EN_Revised.pdf

23. OECD (2005). *Governance and Quality Guidelines in Higher Education: A Review of Governance Arrangements and Quality Assurance Guidelines*. Paris: OECD.

24. Prakash, Ved (2011). Concerns about Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Higher Education Institutions", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(16), pp. 36-40.

25. Ravi, Shamika; Gupta, Neelanjana and Nagaraj, Puneeth (2019). *Reviving Higher Education in India*, Brookings India Research Paper No. 112019-01 ISBN 978-81-941963-4-1.

26. Reehana Raza (2009). Examining Autonomy and Accountability in Public and Private Tertiary Institutions, Human Development Network, The World Bank.

27. Romo de la Rosa, A. (2007). Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom: A Perspective from the American Continent. *Higher Education Policy,* 20(3), 275-288. doi:10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300160

28. Sarin Sharad and Nikhilesh Dholakia (2016). *Higher Education in India at a Crossroads: The Imperative for Transcending Stagnation and Embracing Innovation*, (Re)Discovering University Autonomy in Romeo V. Turcan , John E. Reilly , and Larisa Bugaian (Ed.) The Global Market Paradox of Stakeholder and Educational Values in Higher Education,

29. Sirat, M.B. (2010) Strategic planning directions of Malaysia's higher education: university autonomy in the midst of political uncertainties. *Higher Education* 59, 461-473. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9259-0

30. Srinivas and G. Salil, S (2020). Challenges of Mandatory Accreditation, *University News,* 58 (14).

31. University Grants Commission (UGC) (1971): Report of the Committee on Governance of Universities and Colleges, Part I, *Governance of Universities.* New Delhi: UGC.

32. Varghese, N.V. and Garima Malik (2015). Institutional Autonomy in Higher Education in India, *University News*, 53(3), 19-25 January.

33. Vlasova and Inna. (2019). University Autonomy: Analysis of The International Documents. *The Pedagogical Process: Theory and Practice*. 100-105. 10.28925/2078-1687.2019.1-2.100105.

34. www.ugc.ac.in

The Biography of the Authors

Sandeep Sancheti

Dr Sandeep Sancheti is a Technocrat and Educationist of international repute. He is the Vice Chancellor of SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai and the Immediate Past President of AIU, New Delhi. Earlier, he served as President of Manipal University, Jaipur; Director, National Institute of Technology (NIT), Delhi; and Director, NITK, Surathkal. He also served NIT, Tiruchirapally; NIT, Calicut; School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi; and Mentor Director, NIT, Goa; NIT, Puducherry; and NIT, Sikkim as Director In-charge. He is a recipient of the Commonwealth Scholarship & Fellowship under Colombo Plan. He is a Life Fellow of IETE, IE(I), ISTE and Member IEEE, USA. An Acclaimed Scholar, Dr Sancheti holds a PhD from Queens University of Belfast, UK.

He is recipient of several honours and awards including Commonwealth Scholarship & Fellowship under Colombo Plan; SERC Fellowship from Department of Science and Technology, GoI; and UKISTRF award from British Council. He contributed significantly to the field of research through externally funded projects resulting in more than 75 research papers in national/international journals and conferences.

Latha Pillai

Dr. Latha Pillai is the Director (QAR) SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai. Earlier, she served as Adviser, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), Bengaluru; Director, Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Youth Development (RGNIYD), Sriperumbudur; Pro Vice Chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi; and Deputy Secretary, University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi. Over a span of three decades she has worked in the domain of higher education as a policy specialist. She has conducted several research studies on Accreditation, Rankings, Bench Marking, Best Practices in Higher Education and has several publications to her credit on Quality Issues in Higher Education.

She is a recipient of several honours and awards including Jawaharlal Nehru Birth Centenary Award for 2012, instituted by the Indian Science Congress Association; Endeavour Australia Cheung Kong Post Doctorial Research Fellowship, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; USIA International Visitors Programme, USA; International Resident Fellow, University of Calgary, Canada.