

'True' autonomy can liberate higher education

The decision to grant autonomy to select institutes is welcome, but it should be extended to all who meet a set criteria



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RECENTLY, PRAKASH JAVADEKAR, the Union minister of human resource development, announced that the University Grants Commission (UGC) had decided to grant autonomy to 60 educational institutions, including a few private institutions, across the country. It would be pertinent to recollect here that, in the 1960s, the IIMs and IITs were created outside the Indian university system to allow freedom and autonomy to them, which was not quite possible under the university system; i.e. rather than to reform the university system at that time, the then government created these independent institutions, giving them full autonomy by keeping them away from any higher education regulator. And so, reforming the university system got bypassed.

Here, 'autonomy' would mean more



freedom for institutes to start their own courses, create new syllabi, launch new research programmes, hire foreign faculty, enrol foreign students and set their fees. This, in effect, would mean no or negligible dependence on the regulators, in seeking their permission for various academic initiatives including the decisions on fees. Autonomy must also be closely linked with accountability, lest it degenerates into laxity and no performance, particularly for public institutions. Therefore, accountability must be defined in performance metrics so as to

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ensure that obligations of these institutions are not miscarried.

Even though many academics from public universities vehemently opposed this move—it reflects their concerns with accountability issues—this initiative, otherwise, is an apt move to liberate the higher education sector.

Both public as well as private institutions stand to gain on a long-term perspective.

Such autonomy should also be extended to other institutions who meet the criteria set for them to ensure positive and constructive changes that are affected

at an all-India level on a sustained basis. The government, in fact, should take further specific and proactive steps to encourage participation of good quality private sector players in strengthening Indian higher education.

Quality education can only be achieved if there is a 'pull' mechanism; quality cannot be 'pushed', and faculty cannot be 'forced' to deliver quality.

A comparison and contrast of private versus public institutions would help us develop a framework of regulations that aims at catapulting higher education quality to the next level on an all-India perspective rather than from government institution perspective.

Understandably, as more bureaucratic hurdles are put in place, the private players would only become more cautious in their investments and involvement. If criteria-based autonomy is uniformly provided to both public and private institutions, then there is no doubt that in a few years the public institutions may get tough competition from private institutions, as is seen in the industry sector, primarily due to differences in their efficiency and delivery capacity. Providing funds and autonomy to a select few chosen institutions who may not have the real intent to excel must not become a case of feeding those who are not hungry and starving those who are already famished.

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Views are personal*