

Who is afraid of university autonomy? Scholars have nothing to lose but their chains

B Venkatesh Kumar, Alan Ruby
and Matthew Hartley

The government's decision to cede autonomy to 62 higher education institutions that have all met the highest national standards for educational quality in learning outcomes has generated a range of responses. Some reactions are based on fact, some are fuelled by ideology and some a mix of both leavened by a fear of change. Much of the debate has focussed on the financial dimensions of the proposed change which are interpreted as stepping stones towards privatisation of higher education.

Some have criticised the provisions to allow autonomous institutions to become more international by adding up to 20% of new faculty posts that are open to leading scholars and researchers from around the world, that would enrich these academic communities and increase opportunities for Indian scholars to collaborate on research projects of significance to the nation and the region. There has also been opposition to allowing autonomous institutions to add up to 20% of student places for talented young people who want to learn about India, in India from Indian scholars. These new places would add to the number of international students in India which is currently one-sixth of the number of international students in German universities.

It seems the critics wish to embrace and reinforce the insularity of Indian higher education. There has been less

debate about the devolution of personnel decisions, the recruitment, appointment and promotion of faculty. Given the poor record of centralised hiring, the delays, political interventions and the history of rank exercise of patronage this reticence is understandable.

What is less understandable is the relative silence about the freedoms extended to faculty of these institutions. There has been no celebration of the breaking of the thrall's ring that has limited the professional and intellectual freedom of some of the nation's leading

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scholars and confined them to following the curriculum dictates of distant official committees and subject knowledge satraps.

Vesting decisions about course design and content with scholars recognises their expertise, trusts their capacity to judge what is important enough in their field and respects their depth of discipline knowledge. Academic autonomy also acknowledges that scholars have a deep understanding of



the needs and aspirations of their students, especially students from the surrounding city or state with its distinct culture and economic geography. Scholars are now able to tailor and customise their programmes and curricula to local needs and individual preferences.

Similarly academic autonomy allows India's scholars to use their specialised expertise and appreciation of their intellectual field to create new degree programmes that respond to changes in technology and lead developments in their disciplines. It also allows them to discern and shape interdisciplinary studies in fields like bio-informatics and nanotechnology that did not exist 20 or 30 years ago.

This shift of authority and control from the halls of UGC in Delhi to the best universities and colleges across the nation, symbolises a shift in focus and priorities. UGC as an institution is an echo of the UK's University Grants

committee which operated for 70 years – 1919-88 – as a funding body and regulatory agency with an instrumental view of higher education.

Universities existed to serve national needs, to support a partially planned economy and to manage the growth of the sector as more young people finished secondary education. There was little interest in research, or innovation and little concern for changes in the structure and nature of working lives. It did not serve educational aspirations of its citizens, had little time for improving access for women or for children of the lower classes.

Nor was it particularly interested in redistributing public resources from the privileged few to those with greatest ability. In essence it was an agency based on the notion that the economic and social structures of society were fixed and unchanging and that the aspirations of individuals, be they students or scholars, were of little concern.

Opponents of the government's modest steps towards greater academic autonomy seem to cling to this view of a constant world where everyone knows their place and higher education institutions are most successful when they simply follow orders. They seem to inhabit a world which sees little value in the expertise and professionalism of India's best scholars and no respect at all for the dedication and sustained success of these 62 top ranked institutions.

B Venkatesh Kumar is Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Alan Ruby is Senior Fellow and Matthew Hartley Associate Dean, University of Pennsylvania