

HIGHER EDUCATION

Freedom's Not Just Another Word



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The University Grants Commission's (UGC) announcement on March 20, granting autonomy to selected higher education institutions, is a landmark initiative in the history of higher education in India.

This decision is an impetus to bringing about key fundamental reforms in higher education. Through this initiative, 52 universities — five central, 21 state, 24 deemed and two private universities — and eight colleges shall receive this distinction.

The notion that education is a public good is deep-rooted, much like in the case of healthcare. But this has not prevented the emergence of the private sector in education. This has further heightened the involvement of the state and central machinery in higher education through the UGC.

Education should not conform to short-term indicators or metrics, like in the case of other social goods. Its true purpose is to fulfil an obligation to propagate and propel a social, cultural, economic, political and intellectual vision of a nation.

The pursuit of public good requires institutional autonomy. This alone can empower individuals within the institution to assume responsibility. Autonomy within the sphere of education includes both the substantive and procedural kind. There has been a renewed push for autonomy within the substantive context involving curriculum conceptualisation, academic research policies, entrance standards, academic staff appointments and institution of degrees. However, there continues to be systematic involvement of external forces on the procedural side that involves finance, appointments of administrative staff, contract formulation, etc.

While autonomy is profoundly critical to realising an institution's vision, it is also important to be sensitive about the role of stakeholders — including government bodies, funding organisations, accrediting agencies and regulatory bodies. Autonomy resonates with academic freedom. At the same time, it is critical for autonomous educational institutions to not skew their academic cohort without any form of accountability.

The negative impact of unregulated growth of private sector education is well-established. The 'graded autonomy' should be understood as an incentive for institutions to remain true to their guiding principles of institution-building, and not as a conduit for widening inequity in higher education.

In 2017, the European University Association (EUA), in its annual conference on 'Autonomy and Freedom', renewed its resolve to address some of the influential barriers that European universities face in exercising autonomy.

Public sector funding mechanisms, the political climate and the overall economic landscape of the region were thought to exert their influences on institutional autonomy. Higher education institutions in the US fare exceptionally well in world rankings because of institutional autonomy. Academic freedom there is enshrined within the institutional policy, as well as the contractual obligation between academic institutions as well as with scholars.

The need for Indian universities to have autonomy is based on the recognition that they need to seek excellence. The pursuit of excellence in university settings requires an ecosystem that will promote innovation, creativity, research and reflection. But it must be emphasised that accountability and responsibility go hand in hand with autonomy.

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Free Knowledge

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