

# The role of the university: Nation needs it, and it can only thrive with academic freedom and institutional autonomy

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Universities have been forums of knowledge creation and exchange, and they continue to play an instrumental role in transforming nations into knowledge societies. Over time, their academic freedom has been curtailed, and their significance as tools of social change has diminished. The Academic Freedom Index established by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) has demonstrated that academic freedom has been challenging for universities in several nations. Albert Einstein famously observed, “By academic freedom, I understand the right to search for truth and to publish and teach what one holds to be true. This right also implies a duty: One must not conceal any part of what one has recognised to be true.”

Recent events that have taken place in a reputed Indian university are only a reflection of the more significant public concern across the world relating to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and regulatory stringency. While many issues of academic freedom are being debated in the public domain, we need to engage in a deeper and more nuanced analysis of these issues, which will shape the future of universities in India and across the world.

At the outset, it needs to be mentioned that academic freedom is fundamental to any university in the world. Democracies take pride in the fact that they’ve precious spaces in society where freedom of speech is duly protected and promoted. In a democracy that celebrates freedom of expression of diverse views, ideological dogmatism of any kind, either from the Left or from the Right, will not help universities. At the heart of academic freedom is preserving democratic ideals consistently, promoting pluralism and nurturing democratic institutions.

Our challenge as educators is to recognise the complex role universities play as social organisations. No unique circumstances favour or disfavour a public or private university to promote academic freedom within its institutional context. However, there’re undoubtedly historical, social, political and economic factors contributing to institutionalising academic freedom in some societies more than others.

The fundamental objectives of university governance are based on the following three principles to promote academic freedom, while ensuring institutional autonomy. First, all recruitment, appraisal and assessment of faculty and staff ought to be entirely undertaken within the university. They must be performance-based, following the policies, rules and regulations of the university. The powers for decision-making to implement these processes must be vested in the university's leadership, which includes the faculty and staff. Outsiders, including the most generous donors, should be excluded from this process. Internal governance of a university is central to protecting academic freedom, and it has to be led by the faculty and not anybody from outside the university.

Second, all decisions relating to the formulation of programmes, curriculum, courses, pedagogy and establishment of schools/ departments ought to be determined within the university as per established policies, rules and regulations of the university with all powers of decision-making vested within the faculty and staff of the university. While these decisions are taken in consonance with the laws, rules, regulations and guidelines given by the various government and regulatory bodies and based on international best practices, nobody from outside the university should exercise control or influence in these decisions.

And third, all decisions relating to the research that's undertaken by the faculty members, including their publications ought to be based upon the principles of academic freedom and intellectual autonomy. Those faculty members who're involved in academic research ought to have full autonomy to determine the type of research projects and initiatives, including the topics of research that they undertake, and the outcomes of the research. While the faculty members will be engaging in research and publications that'll speak truth to power, it should be based upon evidence, especially when the intention of the research is to inform policy-making.

Going forward, we need to recognise the importance of two central aspects of university governance for academic freedom to be meaningfully institutionalised in Indian universities. One, regulatory freedom. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has envisaged substantive regulatory reforms to empower Indian universities.

Regardless of their public or private character, universities in India are hugely dependent on multiple stakeholders for effective internal governance. These stakeholders are internal and external to the institution. Without achieving substantive regulatory freedom, no university can function in a genuinely autonomous manner and protect the academic freedom of faculty and students. I believe that this is the intention of NEP 2020 as well, which promotes "a 'light but tight' regulatory framework to ensure integrity, transparency, and resource efficiency ... while encouraging innovation and out-of-the-box ideas through autonomy, good governance, and empowerment."

Two, universities need to develop a culture of transparency in which important decisions are taken after proper consultation with all stakeholders. The need for consultation, communication and consensus-building is imperative. However, for decisions to have legitimacy and acceptance, there ought to be the fundamental and foundational aspect of trust, respect and collegiality among all stakeholders. Only then will disagreements not lead to acrimonious engagements that can vitiate the academic and intellectual ecosystem, and universities must guard against that.

The vision and imagination of NEP 2020, if implemented in letter and spirit, will enable Indian universities to provide world-class education, while promoting excellence and contributing to nation-building. 'Atmanirbharta', for the nation, institutions, especially universities, is intertwined with the fundamental principles of freedom, autonomy and governance.