

# Realising the true potential of graded economy

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The recent announcement of Prakash Javadekar, the Union HRD minister, to grant autonomy to select higher education institutions in India will pave way for fundamental reforms in higher education policy, regulation and governance. The historic decision of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to ensure high autonomy to 60 higher education institutions among over 50,000 institutions is truly path-breaking. The select group comprises of 52 universities (five central universities; 21 state universities; 24 deemed universities; two private universities) and eight colleges. The decision to grant autonomy has come at the right time when there is an aspiration to build a world-class higher education system. It is useful to understand the importance of autonomy.

Autonomy as a framework for university governance: Universities are unique institutions that function in ways that cannot be compared to any other organisation—these are not like a corporation, NGO, think tank, research institution, or a government agency. Universities, whether they are established by the government or the private sector, are inherently public in their character. They are also longitudinal in their evolution. While it is possible to measure the success or otherwise of a corporation, an NGO or a government agency within a limited time period on the basis of well-established indicators, it is difficult to assess the true success of a university. It is even more difficult to measure the contribution of a university to the social, cultural, economic, political and intellectual life of a nation and indeed humanity.

In that sense, universities need to draw their strength from within its institution and, hence, they need to be autonomous.

The autonomy ought to be the foundation and bedrock of their governance. While universities need to be mindful about the aspirations of all stakeholders—government bodies, civil society, funding agencies, benefactors and donors, accreditations bodies, regulatory agencies, ranking organisations—they need to function in an autonomous manner in taking decisions about what their institutional objectives and priorities are and how they will go about fulfilling them. In this sense, the decision to let universities in India, which have achieved a high academic distinction, be self-governing in relation to many aspects of their activities will empower them to achieve higher levels of excellence. The inherent vibrant nature of the university community—with faculty, students, research scholars and staff—provides opportunities for debates and discussions surrounding autonomy. The best thing the government can do is to pave way for this dynamism to grow and stay away from universities—those have been proven to have achieved some distinction.

**International practices for university autonomy:** The evolution of universities around the world has placed enormous emphasis on academic freedom and autonomy. In a book that is deemed a classic, written in 1966, “Universities: British, Indian, African. A Study in the Ecology of Higher Education” (Harvard University Press) by Eric Ashby, he argued that academic freedom should be a universal right and shouldn’t vary from place to place, nor from time to time. However, he recognised that issues relating to autonomy were “parochial” and may need to be responded in different ways so long as the fundamental attributes to autonomy were protected in a university. Over 50 years ago, he identified three essential attributes for respecting university autonomy: (1) Freedom to select staff and students and to determine the conditions under which they remain in the university; (2) Freedom to determine curriculum content and degree standards; (3) Freedom to allocate funds (within the amounts available) across different categories of expenditure.

In the last century, universities have grown significantly in numbers, vision and mission. With over 26,000 universities in the world, there is a need for re-examining the concept of autonomy, particularly when universities are expected to shape the future of knowledge society and address the most critical and compelling issues facing humanity. The European University Association (EUA) has developed a sophisticated tool to measure autonomy. It is an advanced mechanism to assess the level of autonomy in universities including an ‘Autonomy Scorecard’. EUA uses four critical aspects of autonomy across Europe—organisational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy and academic autonomy—and ranks countries in each of these dimensions.

\* Organisational autonomy is about a university’s ability to decide freely on its internal organisation, such as executive leadership, decision-making bodies, legal entities and internal academic structures.

\* Financial autonomy recognises a university’s ability to decide freely on its internal financial affairs. The EUA model underscores the university’s ability to manage its funds independently and enables an institution to set and realise its strategic aims.

- \* Staffing autonomy recognises a university's ability to decide freely on issues related to human resources management, including recruitment, salaries, dismissals and promotions.
- \* Academic autonomy is about a university's ability to decide on various academic issues, such as student admissions, academic content, quality assurance, introduction of degree programmes and the language of instruction.

The global discourse on autonomy of universities is a long and arduous journey that has been fought within and without the university. The fact that India has joined this discourse by taking an important step towards giving her universities greater autonomy for certain aspects of their functioning is a welcome step.

### **The way forward**

The HRD ministry's and UGC's vision to grant graded autonomy to 52 universities needs to be further strengthened. In the case of central universities and deemed universities, the proposed autonomy framework is indeed useful and path-breaking, but for state public and state private universities—governed by state legislations—a lot more needs to be done before the object and purpose of these regulations can become meaningful. In fact, the UGC regulations require the active support of all state governments and regulatory agencies.

The HRD ministry may consider advising state governments and professional regulatory councils (such as Medical Council of India, Bar Council of India, Council of Architecture) to adopt resolutions and initiate necessary changes in existing regulatory mechanisms to give effect to the vision and aspiration of the government to promote autonomy in higher education institutions. This will go a long way in fully realising the benefits and potential of the UGC regulations on graded autonomy.

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