



AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Higher education can still be viewed primarily as a part of the public sector. Governments have predominant role. Yet markets and competition are affecting the structure of higher education. Increasingly, competition for students and academic staff is taking on an international dimension. Thus, higher education is shifting towards new structure of governance where the power of markets and the power of the government combine in new ways. If the government is granting more autonomy, at the same time, it is introducing new controls in the form of accountability for performance including funding and quality recognition. Institutions can longer take their existence for granted and they will have to work hard both to meet the criteria for funding and at the same time to strengthen their position in the market place. Institution should be dynamic and can not afford to be still as the market for students is both expanding and charging while competition has become more intense. In this context, the internal governance of higher education needs reassessment. They need to develop clear organizational strategies if they want to survive and thrive. Their first and foremost mission is to generate knowledge and preparing a community of learners. The administration of higher education in the 21st century requires to develop a fusion of academic mission and executive capacity, rather than substitute one for the other. There is a need of balancing autonomy and accountability. Government retains a strong interest in higher education to promote national objectives of ensuring equality of opportunity and equity in access. The government should frame policy which may help in achieving the public goals in higher education through influence rather than direction.



INTRODUCTION

Governments of most countries have been reforming, reviewing or restructuring their higher education systems. The reasons behind such reforms lie great changes in the objectives of higher education and the challenges that it faces. It has been well understood that universities and other higher educational institutions should adjust themselves to a more complex environment. The expectations of clientele have changed beyond recognition. Earlier, governments exercised considerable control and influence over the higher educational institutions. Today, governments have greater interest than ever to meet economic and social needs of the nation. Government wants to make the knowledge creation and teaching-learning activity more efficient and thus a thriving society and economy requires higher educational institutions to operate with more autonomy. Therefore, there are some complex challenges in the governance of universities. In order to pursue the national objectives, the governments should not compromise with the autonomy of higher educational institutions. This article aims to address the question of autonomy and related issues around the governance of higher educational institutions. There is a need to look at the degree to which a university should exercise autonomy and develop its own internal strength. It involves considering the changing levers of governance in relation to five components of governing higher educational institutions.

- first, how much freedom is required to run the internal affairs of higher educational institutions (HEIs).
- second, to what extent they should rely on government funding and draw on other resources.
- third, the changing ways of enforcing the quality assurance and control on higher educational institution.
- fourth, how to strengthen the governance of the HEIs.
- fifth, new roles of leaders of HEIs.

Autonomy means the capability and right of an institution to decide its activities without any interference from the government. However, autonomy is a relative term, which exists to different degrees in different contexts.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

An ideal autonomous institution fulfills the following eight criteria:



- (i) They own their building and equipments.
- (ii) They generate their own funds or state government supports their all requirements.
- (iii) They spend budgets to achieve objectives and mission.
- (iv) They set their academic programmes like structuring of courses and content.
- (v) They employ and discuss academic staff.
- (vi) They decide the salaries of teaching and non-teaching staff.
- (vii) They decide the size of the class and number of students being enrolled.
- (viii) They decide their tuition, examination and other kinds of fee.

Although many higher educational institutions enjoy considerable freedom to decide their own policies and priorities but still they are bound in one or other aspect by the state governments. Many higher educational institutions are free to decide their courses and employ the staff but all the higher educational institutions are dependent on government funds/grants and setting the tuition fees. In Indian conditions, state governments are shirking its responsibility of funding the higher educational institutions and thereby there is a shortage of teaching staff which is directly affecting the quality of education. The paucity of fund is affecting the quantity as well as quality of research and innovative activities. However, in developed countries, the governments are reducing its control and increasing the autonomy of the universities eg. Norway has considerably increased institutional freedom to introduce or remove courses and programmes which form the basis for various degrees (Norway, 2003). In Australia, the Universities Act 2002 has also drastically expended institutional autonomy; universities are now free to decide on employment conditions, academic programmes and resource allocation without government approval (Sporn, 2002), and from January, 2004 to borrow funds. However, these freedoms are accompanied by accountability like monitoring and controlling performance and quality. This has generally been connected with external evaluation of the performance of universities. Government generally required universities to accept some form of external quality assessment as an accountability measure. Universities and college are accountable for their outputs or outcomes. The justifications for such control or accountability are: (i) higher education produces wider social and economic benefits and therefore such benefits must percolate to the whole society (ii) Equity considerations requires that low-income students are not disadvantaged; (iii) students, employees and the wider society need to have confidence in the quality of higher education qualifications



(Mc Daniel, 1997). In order to have a proper balance of freedom and accountability, the government may ensure fiscal accountability, accountability for quality teaching-learning process and research and protecting the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged section of the society. The remaining issues should be left to the discretion of higher educational institution.

FUNDING

Extensive changes have occurred in allocating the funds to the universities. Government funds are reducing year by year. Most of the universities are resorting to generate income through distance education courses. Students are opposing the more to hike tuition and examination fee. The deficit in resources has forced the university to appoint teachers on contract/adhoc basis. This has made a bad impact on the quality of teaching and research. The funding changes should be seen with the expansion of higher education. The government should allocate more resources in accordance with the increase in enrolment of students. The rates of growth of public and private funding have resulted in a shift in the share of total funding of higher education institutions. Rising share of private expenditure may be due to the growing importance of private tertiary institutions that charge fees. Another factor may be the increased fee or charges in institutions that previously were largely publicly funded. The basis of public fund allocation to higher education institutions has changed in several countries and the net result is that higher education institutions now face more varied and less predictable funding environment. The government should shift from itemized to lump-sum or block grant budgets. This will allow the institution to freely spend the funds according to needs and requirements within the regulations for public sector finance. This trend is prevalent in many OECD countries. In such countries the majority of recurrent spending for teaching activities, support services and administration is now provided in the form of block grants; however, there are generally separate allocations for research, capital expenditure or specific projects and development (Eurydice, 2000).

The funding for research has increased and many governments have aimed to increase the proportion of earmarked funds at the expense of lump-sum research budget. Earmarked research is well established in USA where funds are directed towards specified research activities, but it is being adopted in many European countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic have moved particularly strongly towards earmarking of research funding (Braun and Merrien, 1999). This approach of funding the research may be adopted by Indian



government also. Several governments have imposed accountability by using *formula funding* which is based on services provided and performance level. These formulae are often based on the number of students and performance to attract clients. Accountability also links funding to outputs and outcomes. Several European countries (Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom) have adopted outcomes in their funding formulae. Several countries, for instance Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland 'have recognized the need for higher education institutions to remain essentially publicly funded while encouraging them to sell their services on an educational market' (Eurydice, 2000, p. 97).

A further funding issue for higher education, and overall the most controversial, is whether and at what level to charge undergraduate students *tuition fees* (see, for example, Brffl and Ivaac, 2002). All higher education institutions in USA charge tuition fees at wide range of levels and several students get financial support or scholarships. The practical impetus for introducing fees has been (i) the need to finance the dramatic expansion of student numbers; and (ii) "the political will to encourage self reliance and consumer choice" (Eurydice, 2000 p. 98). The Australian universities introduced tuition fees in 1989 (i) to finance the higher education expansion and (ii) to ensure that benefited students bear the share of cost on their education. The distinctive feature of this scheme is that students can defer the payment and pay their debt when they start earning through the income tax system when their income reaches a minimum threshold. By 2001, Australian Universities earned about 30% of their revenue through tuition fees.

In order to enhance autonomy of higher education institution, they should not be dependent on a single source of fund. They should plan and shape their own futures. They are required to use a wider range of funding sources rather than being largely dependent on government. In this way, they will be less vulnerable to sudden shifts. Therefore, universities should acquire a hybrid of public and private norms and values.

QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Increased autonomy is associated with more sophisticated quality assurance system which is based on the establishment of a national quality agency for higher education. This has shifted the responsibility from internal assessment to an external peer review assessment process. This is one way to exert control and fix accountability by government on higher education institutions. Another significant effect of external quality assurance mechanism has been to shift the



distribution of authority within higher education. The government has linked the grants with the grades obtained from accreditation and assessment agencies by the higher education institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

The traditional model of governing universities is collegial and consultative in nature. It has large and broadly representative bodies and forums open to all academic members of the university. The changes in institutional governance have two main effects in its internal governance: (i) strengthening of the power of the executive authorities within the universities; and (ii) implantation of representative within the universities governing bodies from outside of the university. One of the aim of bringing external representative into higher education has been to include more people with industrial or commercial experience to strengthen links with economy and improve internal efficiency. Other external members have been from local or regional government to reflect greater regional interests in funding, and in contribution of higher education institutions to local economic and social development (Eurydice, 2000). However, such representation tends to reduce the relative power of academic interests, the outside interest do not necessarily predominate.

Pressures to change the traditional models of university governance and curtailing its power have been acute as public funding is shrinking. The institutional autonomy alongwith external performance management and other accountability mechanism have required the universities to publicly demonstrate their efficiency and effectiveness in a competitive environment by demarcating responsibility and developing better strategic capacity. However, such changes can generate tensions in the governance of universities. Success depends upon resolving such tensions because universities will not be able to retain a true sense of mission if a large number of academics got alienated from the institutions. There is a need to ensure that internal representation is complementary rather than counter-productive.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the crucial aspect of the development of more powerful executive in higher education. It depends upon the process of appointment and the qualities of the individuals concerned. In order to make higher education institutions more accountable, linking with society, raise external finances, the leaders of higher education institutions requires more than outstanding academics. In several countries, there is trend to elect the leaders to represent the



academic constituency of the university but the recent trend seems to be moving towards appointment often by a board. The change towards appointment has redefined the relationship between leader and others within the university. An appointed leader find it easier to implement the major changes that cut across vested interests. Moreover, the process of appointment is essential to ensure the credibility within the institution. The characteristics and importance of leadership can be gauged in an advertisement in United Kingdom for the appointment of leader in a university:

“We are looking for an outstanding individual who combines the ability to inspire and lead with a clear vision of the future direction of higher education, both nationally and internationally. The successful person will have the drive, personality and determination to develop the University to match the vision”. (United Kingdom University).

“We need a leader who, together with me [the Chair of Council], the board and a large number of qualified staff members, can lead the activities into a new millennium. You should have good knowledge about industry, business and authorities within the [institutions] sectors of activity and a good anchorage in the science fields covered A wide network of contacts and experiences from leading large knowledge-producing organizations are also important, as well as the ability to inspire”. (Swedish University).

The universities should be governed by academics who have general leadership skills and managerial competence. Thus, Managerial expertise is seen as additional to a strong academic track record rather than the driving consideration in an appointment (Bargh et al., 2000).

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