The New Genre Higher Education Framework

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education exist to contribute to the collective growth of the society by nurturing the creative genius of individuals. This may be achieved by striking a fine balance between gifting intellectual freedom and monitoring the fulfilment of social obligations. An environment of this kind can only be built through a policy of non-interference and institutional autonomy. A governance structure like this does not necessarily suggest lack of accountability or decentralization of power. Rather, this implies great commitment towards academic, administrative and financial accountability through the process of self-regulation. Given that higher education is transcending international borders in the digital world, we are in greater need of establishing governance structures and international quality standards which foster competence and excellence in our higher education system without curtailing academic freedom.

Keywords

Accountability, transparency, self-regulation, autonomy

Higher education in India is presently in the early stages of major reforms. However, unlike other sectors such as telecommunications, energy and healthcare where restructuring has been determined by market forces; this fragile knowledge-based sector needs to be restructured through the intervention of the government, albeit in consultation and collective cogitation with civil society and most importantly committed educationists.

The basic purpose of higher education is to increase the choices for an individual to realize his or her creative genius and thereby contribute to the collective growth of society. At the same time higher educational institutions and universities need to be centres of creativity and intellectual enterprise. They need to play a vital role to serve the society, maintaining the balance between intellectual freedom and creativity with commitment to the needs of social and economic development. Therefore, the restructuring of the higher education framework is being undertaken around the principles that recognize the creative genius of every person and a new spirit of 'regulation' that respects the autonomy of institutions amidst the need for accountability to society.

It is well known that in the extant framework, the legal requirement that all certification be awarded by either universities or recognized examining bodies is being flouted with impunity by many private institutions, owing to the overstretched supervisory capacity of the Government. As a result some of the institutions award certificates and diplomas after only a few weeks of teaching/training. This has resulted in deplorably low standards in most of professional streams. The larger damage caused is to the credibility of the higher education system itself where every certificate or diploma, except for those given by handful of institutions, are viewed with suspicion. Evaluation and accreditation of the institutions and their programmes is thus necessary. As this will make it easier for students to navigate in the jungle of professional education providers and also help to protect them from questionable ones. Determination of standards in institutions for higher education calls for a well-informed and transparent benchmarking system based on *a priori* norms which have been evolved by domain experts, accepted after due deliberations and put up in public domain. This will ensure transparency in the regulatory structures and would be in

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accordance with the general principle of moving from an 'inspection approval' based mechanism of recognizing institutions to a 'verification assessment' method.

Thus a mandatory accreditation system is being put in place, to be undertaken by independent accreditation agencies working under the oversight of an Accreditation Regulator to manage issues of conflict of interest and ensure objectivity and transparency in the accreditation process. The accreditation mechanism is expected to provide a credible method of informing all stake-holders including potential students, employers, etc., of the academic quality benchmark of the institution and the programmes of study. This will mirror the world-wide trend to ensure quality assurance and certification of institutions and programmes of study.

Also legislation to prohibit and punish malpractices and adoption of unfair practices in higher education and in the university system is being considered by Parliament. The legislation should deter fly-by-night operators in higher education from indulging in illegal profiteering and exploitation.

Further, an independent fast-track adjudication process through specially constituted tribunals is proposed to be established to adjudicate all disputes that arise in the higher education sector, including disputes with regulatory authorities, in a speedy and objective manner. The essence of the tribunals is to provide a rapid, credible and enforceable dispute-adjudication and settlement mechanism for the orderly development of the higher education sector.

A single national testing system for entry into higher education—a process that could reduce the burden on students of appearing in multiple entrance examinations is being evolved. It will respect the autonomy of institutions/ universities to structure their admission processes and provide flexibility to the student to pursue education of his or her choice.

In the interim in an effort to promote transparency and accountability in the functioning of the extant overarching regulatory bodies like the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA), web-based portals were launched whereby the processing of various categories of applications by institutions have been made 'on line'. Further with the intent to make the progress of processing of the applications transparent AICTE has introduced an SMS service that will inform and update the status of the applications made under various categories. The AICTE has also implemented Business Intelligence Report which will provide complete and current statistics pertaining to courses, programmes, faculty, students, etc., to the public in real time.

In regard to 'autonomy' of higher educational institutions, it is a *sine qua non* for realizing high quality. The autonomy of any educational institution is closely linked to structural factors such as its sources of finance, the legal framework under which it operates and rules and regulations to which it is subjected to, besides the overall culture prevailing within the institution. In respect of publicly funded institutions the conundrum has been to resolve the issue of autonomy within the desired levels of accountability in a parliamentary democracy. A publicly funded institution, aiming at world class standards, would have to structure a governance framework that promotes autonomy but at the same time inculcates the spirit of accountability as well.

Autonomy in the context of 'knowledge institutions' has multiple connotations; within the institution, the sense of autonomy needs to permeate to the faculty, to the teacher of researcher and to the student; between the institution and its governance or regulatory structure it is not to be constrained by rigid rules and procedures and lastly between the institution and government, in respect of funding and management, there needs to be flexibility. Under the circumstances and autonomy of higher education institutions requires evolving new governance structures that promote autonomy in its various dimensions with the concomitant accountability. Autonomy is thus not just mere decentralization of selected powers; it is self-regulation, providing for responsible exercise of decision-making, with full commitment for accountability—academic, administrative and financial.

In this context the present higher education system seems to lack accountability, understood simply as 'an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or account for ones' actions'. Accountability needs to be considered in four dimensions: upward, downward, inward and outward accountability. The upward accountability means how the system in its working and the use of resources to achieve stated outcomes lends itself to cheques and balances by various bureaucratic and political structures. The downward accountability draws attention to the need for these systems to be accountable, to the students and teachers—and secure satisfying and worthwhile outcomes for them. A downward accountability refers to the kind of education provided and on the performance goals to be set. The downward accountability is also aptly complemented by the concept of outward

accountability—educational outcomes being in service of the economy and the broader socio-political goals of inclusiveness, equity and affordability. And lastly the inward accountability implies professionalism and adherence to ethical standards in working of the system. Accountability thus does not imply uncontrolled interference, but it does impose a requirement to periodically disclose and explain actions and performance in a transparent fashion. Since, autonomy of higher education institutions goes hand-in-hand with its accountability, the delegation and devolution of power and authority concomitant with responsibility should flow not only from the external environment to the higher education institution but should be given at different levels within the higher education institution itself. This necessitates a charter of responsibility and devolution and delegation of authority to be defined. All interactions should occur within the context of agreed rights and responsibilities. A Code of Conduct for the processes and practices in the university and higher education system is being drafted. The Code aims to bring about efficiency, transparency and autonomy with accountability through self-regulation. It envisages that a set of standards of an accountable behaviour, both at individual and institutional level that can foster competence and excellence in the university system with minimum of internal and/or external interferences.

Also higher education has long crossed national borders, through movement of students and movement of academics, and now it is further increasing through the movement of educational materials. The recent rapid increase in this phenomenon, through ease of personal travel and ease of communication via electronic means, has generated increased attention to international, transnational, or cross-border, education. Reactions to the phenomenon range from enthusiastic support, through sceptical acceptance, to worried opposition. Thus mobility, across borders, has become one of the most common features in the field of higher education and dual/double and joint degrees are becoming common. Distance education/learning is also emerging as a major medium of expanding access in higher education through branch campuses and other forms of off-shore delivery, and through partnerships between domestic and overseas providers. A transparent mechanism for mutual recognition of qualifications based on quality assurance systems across countries is being developed.

The digital world, which has trained young minds to inquire and collaborate, is challenging the traditions and systems of walled-in higher educational institutions and the universities that presently prevail. A meta-university—a transcendent, accessible, empowering, dynamic, communally constructed framework of open materials and platforms on which much of higher education worldwide can be constructed or enhanced seems to be emerging. The Internet and the Web will provide the communication infrastructure, and the open-access movement and its derivatives will provide much of the knowledge and information infrastructure to such a meta-university. Such a university may even give teachers and learners globally the ability to access and share teaching materials, scholarly publications, scientific works in progress, tele-operation of experiments, and worldwide collaborations, thereby achieving economic efficiencies and raising the quality of education. It may even speed up the propagation of high-quality higher education, scholarship and research worldwide. Strategic thinking and preparing the framework for such a development should be the agenda for the next set of reforms.