Fostering College Autonomy

This editorial is based on **"Universities must budge on college autonomy nudge"** which was published in The Hindu on 05/04/2024. The article highlights that Universities need to address the autonomy related concerns of colleges as autonomy has a transformative effect on higher education.

Lately, there has been an increasing demand to provide sufficient autonomy to educational institutions and colleges. The **National Education Policy 2020** envisions a future where colleges will evolve into autonomous institutions, enhancing their capacity for innovation, self-governance, and academic freedom. To realise this goal, the **University Grants Commission (UGC)** launched a new regulation in April 2023. Since then, the response from colleges seeking autonomous status has been unprecedented.

What are the NEP Recommendations for Higher College/Higher Education?

- **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER):**
    - **GER** in higher education to be raised to 50% by 2035. Also, 3.5 crore seats to be added in higher education. The GER in higher education was 27.1% in 2023.
- **Couses-Cum-Curriculum Reforms:**
    - Holistic undergraduate education with a flexible curriculum can be of 3 or 4 years with multiple exit options and appropriate certification within this period.
    - M.Phil courses will be discontinued and all the courses at undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD level will now be interdisciplinary.
    - **Academic Bank of Credits** to be established to facilitate Transfer of Credits.
- **National Research Foundation:**
    - The **National Research Foundation (NRF)** will be created as an apex body for fostering a strong research culture and building research capacity across higher education.
    - Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), at par with IITs, IIMs, to be set up as models of best multidisciplinary education of global standards in the country.
- **Higher Education Commission of India (HECI):**
    - **HECI** will be set up as a single umbrella body for the entire higher education, excluding medical and legal education. Public and private higher education institutions will be governed by the same set of norms for regulation, accreditation and academic standards. Also, HECI will be having four independent verticals namely,
        - National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) for regulation,
        - General Education Council (GEC) for standard setting,
        - Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for funding,

- National Accreditation Council (NAC) for accreditation.
  - **Autonomy to Colleges:**
    - Affiliation of colleges is to be phased out in 15 years and a stage-wise mechanism to be established for granting graded autonomy to colleges.
    - Over a period of time, every college is expected to develop into either an autonomous degree-granting College, or a constituent college of a university.

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Learning plan

A look at the key features of the new education policy:

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SCHOOL EDUCATION
- Universalisation from age 3 to Class 10 by 2030
- Mission to ensure literacy and numeracy skills by 2025
- Mother tongue as medium of instruction till Class 5 wherever possible
- New curriculum to include 21st century skills like coding and vocational integration from Class 6
- Board exams to be easier, redesigned

- Public spending on education by States, Centre to be raised to 6% of GDP
- Ministry of Human Resource Development to be renamed Ministry of Education
- Separate technology unit to develop digital education resources

HIGHER EDUCATION
- New umbrella regulator for all higher education except medical, legal courses
- Flexible, holistic, multi-disciplinary UG degrees of 3-4 years' duration
- 1 to 2 year PG programmes, no M.Phil
- College affiliation system to be phased out in 15 years

Note

Eligibility Criteria For College Autonomy:

- As per the rules & regulations stated by the **Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) the colleges which fall under the given categories are eligible for autonomy:**
  - HEI of any field/discipline (of any discipline) – aided/unaided/partially aided/self-financed can claim for autonomous status if they fall under Section 2(f) of the UGC Act.
  - The college must at least have completed 10 years.
  - The HEI must have achieved NAAC - National Assessment and Accreditation Council Accreditation.
  - Colleges with the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) are also eligible if they have three programs with a minimum score of 675.
  - Existing HEIs that aim to extend their autonomy status need to manage these eligibility terms and conditions for a maximum of five years.
  - HEIs with a score of 3.0 & above in NAAC/NBA/Corresponding Accreditation Agency will also be considered for autonomy after the decision of the on-site peer visit committee.
  - HEIs having a NAAC/NBA/Corresponding Accreditation with a score of 3.26 or more, up to 3.5 for one cycle & accredited in the second cycle will also be eligible without any on-site visit by experts.
  - HEIs having a pointer of 3.51 in NAAC/NBA/Corresponding Accreditation and a score of 750 will also be eligible without any on-site visit by experts.

- The HEIs are required to follow the UGC Regulations such as (a) No cases of ragging in college (Regulations 2012); (b) Promotion of Equity in HEI (Regulations 2012) (c) Proper Grievance Redressal (Regulations 2012), and likewise in written letter and spirit.

What is the Significance of Granting Autonomy to Colleges?

- **Tailoring Curriculum and Teaching Methodologies:**
  - Granting autonomy to colleges is essential for promoting innovation, enhancing academic quality, and fostering institutional excellence. Autonomous colleges can tailor their curriculum to meet the evolving needs of students and industries.
  - They can experiment with new teaching methodologies and research initiatives, driving the frontiers of knowledge and contributing to societal development.
- **Promoting Institutional Efficiency:**
  - Autonomy fosters a culture of accountability and responsibility among colleges, as they assume greater ownership of their academic and administrative decisions.
  - This empowerment enhances institutional efficiency and cultivates a sense of pride and identity within colleges, in turn motivating faculty and staff to strive for excellence.
- **Improving NIRF Ranking:**
  - The **National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)** of 2023 suggests a compelling case for the effectiveness of autonomy in enhancing the performance of colleges in India.
  - In the 'Colleges Category', with 55 out of the top 100 colleges being autonomous institutions, the NIRF rankings offer insights into the positive consequence of autonomy on academic excellence and institutional effectiveness.
    - Besides, in the top 10 colleges of the NIRF Rankings of 2023 from the college category, five are autonomous colleges.
    - Having half the top spots occupied by autonomous colleges significantly strengthens the case for autonomy as a successful approach to achieving academic excellence.
- **Nationwide Interest in in Maintaining Autonomy of Colleges:**
  - In India, higher education is increasingly embracing autonomy, with the number of autonomous colleges expected to reach 1,000 across 24 States and Union Territories. States like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana lead this trend, boasting over 80% of the total autonomous colleges.
  - This nationwide interest in autonomy is evident even in states with fewer autonomous institutions, indicating a growing recognition of its transformative impact on higher education.

What are the Different Concerns in Autonomous Functioning of Colleges?

While the UGC proposes the autonomy of colleges, unfortunately, some universities have been reluctant to relinquish control for questionable reasons. Therefore, addressing the challenges that colleges encounter even after receiving autonomy from the UGC is crucial.

- **Imposing Limitations on Colleges:**
  - Some universities impose limitations on the extent of autonomy granted to colleges. One common restriction is the imposition of caps on syllabus changes, often allowing only a fraction, typically 25%-35%, to be altered. This constraint hinders colleges from exercising their autonomy, particularly that concerning curriculum development and academic innovation.
- **Delays in Recognition of Autonomy:**
  - One prominent issue that colleges encounter despite being granted autonomy by the UGC is that they often find themselves grappling with delays from universities in recognising this autonomy. Such delays not only hamper the efficiency of the operation of colleges but also undermine the spirit of autonomy, as colleges may still feel tethered to the bureaucratic processes of the university.
- **Imposing Arbitrary Fees:**

- Also, colleges may find themselves subjected to arbitrary fees imposed by the university for the purposes of affiliation. This approach not only undermines the autonomy of colleges but also raises questions about the transparency and fairness of such practices by the universities.
  - **Political Interference:**
    - Appointments of key leadership positions, such as vice-chancellors and principals, are often influenced by political considerations. Governing bodies and decision-making structures of colleges are sometimes dominated by politically affiliated members.
    - Undue political pressure on colleges to admit certain students, hire specific faculty, or make decisions that may not align with institutional priorities.

What Suggestions Should be Incorporated to Make Colleges More Autonomous?

- **Ensuring Compliance by State Councils:**
  - The State Councils for Higher Education must ensure effective implementation of UGC regulations on autonomy. Universities must recognise the importance of addressing the concerns of autonomous colleges within the broader framework of higher education reform.
    - They must streamline decision-making processes between colleges and universities, ensuring that autonomy translates into meaningful empowerment for colleges.
- **Embracing Trust and Collaboration:**
  - By embracing a culture of trust and collaboration, universities can create an environment where autonomous colleges feel supported and empowered. This includes allowing them the freedom to innovate in their teaching methods, research initiatives, and administrative practices, while ensuring that they maintain high academic standards.
    - This collaborative approach can lead to mutual benefits, such as improved academic quality, enhanced institutional effectiveness, and a stronger higher education system overall.
- **Creating Supportive Environment:**
  - To promote autonomy effectively, universities must create a supportive environment that encourages innovation, excellence, and inclusivity in higher education. This means empowering colleges to make independent decisions and take risks in order to improve the quality of education they offer.
    - For autonomy to be successful, all stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, students, and government bodies, must work together.
- **Maintaining Financial Sustainability and Independence:**
  - Traditionally, many colleges in India, especially public/government-funded ones, have been heavily reliant on budgetary allocations from the state or central government.
  - There is a need for ensuring financial sustainability, as autonomous colleges should manage their finances independently, which can be challenging without proper planning and resources.
- **Profound Education with Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS):**
  - As an institution, CBCS needs to be introduced rather than the traditional learning system. It enables students to get interdisciplinary education and to learn the subjects they like. There's no compulsion to learn only the course-specific subjects. Rather than evaluating the academic student performance via marks & percentages, the CBCS system uses credits.
- **Implementing College Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) Software:**
  - As it is important for institutions to achieve NAAC/NBA accreditation to become eligible for attaining autonomy, implementing college Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software with accreditation data management software can be useful.
  - It can collect, compile, manage, and store institutional data including all the documents & records that are necessary to generate complete compliance reports. It also has provision of managing data chronologically along with maintaining data privacy.

Conclusion

Granting autonomy to colleges is essential for promoting innovation, enhancing academic quality, and fostering institutional excellence. Autonomous colleges can tailor their curriculum to meet the evolving needs of students and industries, driving the frontiers of knowledge and contributing to societal development. Additionally, autonomy fosters a culture of accountability and responsibility among colleges, enhancing institutional efficiency and cultivating a sense of pride and identity.

The NIRF rankings of 2023 suggest a compelling case for the effectiveness of autonomy in enhancing the performance of colleges in India. Effective implementation of autonomy requires collaboration among stakeholders to ensure a vibrant and dynamic higher education ecosystem.

> **_Drishti Mains Question:_**
>
> Discuss the concept of college autonomy in higher education, highlighting its importance, challenges, and potential reforms.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 3, 4 and 5 only
(c) 1, 2 and 5 only
(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q1. Discuss the main objectives of Population Education and point out the measures to achieve them in India in detail. **(2021)**

Q2. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. **(2020)**