

# Autonomous colleges: Unfulfilled objectives

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The country at present is preparing to implement the ambitious provisions of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) with wide-ranging exercises. It is coinciding with almost half a century of another important provision for improving the higher education sector by allowing 'autonomy' for colleges. The UGC guidelines in this regard say, "Colleges with academic and operative freedom are doing better and have more credibility. The financial support to such colleges boosts the concept of autonomy. Hence, the Commission recommended college autonomy, which, in essence, is the instrument for promoting academic excellence."

A college with autonomy is granted several privileges for improving its academic pursuits for the greater interests of the students. These include review of existing courses/programmes and, restructuring, redesigning and prescribing its own courses/programmes of study and syllabi, formulating new courses/programmes within the nomenclature specified by UGC, evolving methods of assessment of students' performance, the conduct of examinations and notification of results, etc., among others.

The Commission has strict and elaborate benchmarks which need to be met satisfactorily by all the colleges aspiring for this status and applying for it. Like NAAC, this is a periodical status one to be reviewed from time to time.

The country today possesses 1043 universities including 442 state, 126 deemed ones and 54 central and 397 private ones. Together, the number of colleges is

42,343. This is a major achievement from the humble beginning with only 20 universities and 500 colleges having 2.1 lakh students at the time of Independence. This is as per the UGC Annual Report, 2019-20.

The above situation offers scope for discussing a few issues as the latest list of Autonomous Colleges (ACs) of March 31, 2021 reflects a few interesting facts. First of all, though UGC initiated the programme in 1973, the development in this direction seems to be far less than desirable. That is, only 827 colleges out of the total number is less than 2%, a dismal scenario.

Secondly, the list also shows major imbalances in the numbers. At one extreme, Tamil Nadu has 227 such colleges with Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh leading with 117 and 114 respectively. Also, only 24 States and one Union Territory (Puducherry) have at least one AC. But, five States – Tripura, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram – do not have any AC.

Further, Anna University scores the maximum with 75 ACs under its jurisdiction, Jawaharlal Nehru Technical University (JNTU) has 33. Hence, it is high time to capitulate how come such a noble scheme has been lagging till date. First of all, there may be a lack of awareness about this aspect. It will not be surprising to find that not many people in general or students and teachers in higher education in particular may be aware of this scheme.

Secondly, the colleges or their affiliating universities may not have been able to motivate the faculty members to work in a dedicated manner to achieve this status. It is not that majority of the colleges would be granted autonomous status if they applied for it. Yet, in the process, something would definitely improve for that institution.

It can be mentioned here that

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many of the affiliating universities of our country have a provision for the office of the Director of College Development (CDC). Its primary objective is to work towards improving the status of the colleges under that university. The personnel manning these offices also seem to have been unable to inculcate enough motivation for working towards achieving the autonomous status.

Let us look at the potential benefits of being able to get this status.

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grading from NAAC, this is also a reflection of the overall quality of the college. Thus, when a student would be seeking admission into higher education, one would very obviously look into these factors. Simply put, in today's competitive world, this would be a great opportunity for marketing oneself properly visible in the highly-competitive world of education nowadays. With NEP 2020 laying a lot of emphasis on autonomy, this is one way of making efforts for reaching the ultimate goal of quality attainment.

There are some interesting hurdles for colleges on the way to applying for autonomy. These include the reluctance of college authorities for fear of discontinuation of government grants, increased burden of work, university authorities fearing losing control of a reputed college, etc.

However, the moot point is that the overall environment nowadays has undergone a major change in all aspects of higher education. An autonomous status would be an important feather in the cap of any college across the country.

Coming to the situation in the North-eastern Region, it is already a grim one as five out of the eight States of the region do not have even a single AC in them. While Assam has three colleges – North Lakhimpur and Jagannath Barooah College under Dibrugarh University and Nowgong College under Gauhati University, Nagaland has three colleges followed by Manipur with two of them. Here, even with-

in the region, Assam with 558 colleges has three ACs whereas the other two States having far lesser number of colleges stand almost in the same category. This requires a major rethinking of the scenario. It is difficult to comprehend why not a respectable number of colleges have already achieved this status in our State and also the region. That too, with each of the affiliating universities having full-fledged CDC establishments. The council of principals of the colleges also needs to be proactive in this regard.

The Assam Government in the recent past has upgraded several old and reputed colleges to the status of universities with plans to upgrade another five soon. But, the irony is that there has been no proper planning, mapping of opportunities, SWOT analysis, etc., for this purpose. Besides, there has been no adequate grant for the augmentation of infrastructure in them. These colleges probably even have not earned the capability of applying for the autonomous status.

Yet, the writing on the wall is simple and clear. An autonomous college status is a way toward gaining the confidence of the students' community. This would help the former a great deal in attracting quality human resources both in terms of students and teachers. The sooner it is realized the better it is. Besides, society is in such a situation where accountability in terms of improving oneself and providing quality education out of 'public money' shall be very much called upon.

As the country plans to convert all the colleges into the autonomous category by 2035, this is definitely going to be a tall order to achieve by any standard. That is unless drastic steps are taken for achieving the target.