

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON

AUTONOMY OF COLLEGES IN KERALA

SUBMITTED TO THE
KERALA STATE HIGHER EDUCATION COUNCIL

APRIL, 2013

THE COMMITTEE ON AUTONOMY OF COLLEGES

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REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON AUTONOMY FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KERALA

INTRODUCTION :

The Committee (composition of the Committee in Annexure-I) set up by the Kerala State Higher Education Council in December 2012 to recommend criteria for selection and steps for operationalization of “Autonomous Colleges” in Kerala deliberated on the subject extensively in the context of UGC Guidelines for Autonomy (Annexure II) and the experience in some neighboring States in implementation of the scheme. Six meetings were held including a day long interaction with the authorities of Stella Maris College (one of the colleges in Tamil Nadu which h enjoyed autonomy for over a decade), another meeting with representatives of colleges, staff and students from all over Kerala and a consultation with Vice-Chancellors of Universities in the State. Several notes on the subject were prepared and discussed. [one of the Discussion Notes on Nature of Autonomy circulated is in Annexure III, another note, a Case Study on Stella Maris College (Autonomous), is in Annexure IV]

The Committee felt that such an important reform on higher education in Kerala should receive critical feedback on its recommendations from the multiple stakeholders involved before they are finalized and submitted to KSHEC. Therefore, the Draft Report containing the key recommendations of the Committee was put up in the Council’s website and circulated among the universities and colleges inviting comments and suggestions. The responses and reactions received to the Draft Report were examined along with minutes on interactions with stakeholders in a final meeting of the Committee held at Trivandrum on 25th April, 2013.

NATURE OF AND NECESSITY FOR AUTONOMY:

Quality is as important as Access and Equity in higher education because it is intended to enable its recipients to live a life of dignity while contributing to the development of society. Ever since Independence there has been several attempts on the part of Central and State Governments, University Grants Commission, AICTE and similar regulatory bodies as well as universities and colleges to improve the quality of instruction offered. Nonetheless, because of heavy demand for access and consequent expansion of colleges and universities together with constraints on resources, standards of education could not cope up with expansion. The affiliating system, which played a useful role in managing access in the past occupied disproportionate time on administration of the system and undermined the capacities of universities and colleges to work towards research and development. Even curricular reform took a back seat in many universities. While there is no alternative in the present context to the system of affiliation, there is a felt need to seek fresh strategies for innovation and experimentation in the entire range of higher education activities at the institutional level. Acknowledging this need, the University Grants Commission evolved in 2007 a set of Guidelines for Autonomous Colleges (Annexure II) and encouraged States and Universities to give autonomy to at least 10 per cent of its colleges during the XIth Plan itself. UGC offered special grant to autonomous colleges to manage the transition to autonomy. It is understood that over 420 colleges in 19 States spread over 79 Universities already enjoyed autonomous status by the end of XIth Plan and they are doing well in quality enhancement of their academic programmes. In this regard, the case study appended to this report gives enough evidence on how autonomy leads to enhancement of academic standards and promotes student-centric learning in higher education.

Admittedly, there are colleges in Kerala in the Government and private sectors which deserve autonomy and which can prove their full academic potential if only

greater freedom is given to take risks with responsibility. The Committee therefore strongly recommends that Kerala should introduce this reform without further delay. The Committee welcomes the policy announcement in this regard in the 2013 Budget Speech of the Finance Minister and hopes the recommendations herein will facilitate the grant of autonomy to deserving colleges in the State in the current academic year itself (2013-'14).

There are many misgivings and apprehensions amply demonstrated in the Committee's interactions with stakeholders about what autonomy implies to Colleges, Universities, State Government and the student body. The UGC Guidelines are very clear in this regard. Essentially, it is autonomy in respect of academic affairs as that is where quality matters. How should the curriculum be developed and the courses of study organized? How the examination system be improved to make it a true measure of learning? What innovations need to be introduced in pedagogy using modern tools of technology in order to make learning student-centric? How the academic calendar be developed to increase working days and to maximize learning opportunities for students? What extension activities and outreach programmes can enrich the curriculum while engaging the colleges with the communities where they are located? These and related measures may bring greater opportunities to teachers and staff of autonomous colleges.

To be able to do these and more on the academic front, colleges may need some degree of administrative autonomy. That is why the UGC Guidelines prescribe a new internal governance structure in place of the existing management. Thus, the Guidelines speak of a Governing Body for the college with 12 members in which existing management can nominate as many as 9 members including the Principal. The UGC, the State Government and the University to which the college is affiliated will have one nominee each to the Governing Body.

Each autonomous college will have its own Academic Council with four experts from outside the college nominated by the Governing Body and three nominees of the University. The Principal and all Heads of Departments of the college as well as four other teachers of the college are its members. The decisions of the college Academic Council do not need any ratification by the University. The college will have Board of Studies attached to each Department to prepare syllabi, teaching methods, examination, research and related academic activities. Head of the Department is the Chairman of Board of Studies. In short, autonomy does not rest with the management or the Principals of the colleges. It percolates down to every department and to every teacher allowing space for innovation and creativity for the benefit of students at all levels.

Autonomy is to be sought and deserved. It is a voluntary process of the concerned college. On the basis of records and inspection, the UGC grants autonomy for an initial period of six years during which it sends teams to review functioning at periodic intervals. In other words, it is a carefully crafted, properly supervised and responsibly administered process to offer chances to individual colleges to show their potential for academic excellence. Neither the affiliating university gives up its responsibility for ensuring standards nor the State Government gives up its obligations to finance higher education in autonomous colleges. Autonomy has nothing to do with privatization or commercialization of education which are matters to be addressed by the policies of appropriate governments.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF COLLEGES FOR CONFERMENT OF AUTONOMY:

The next question referred to the Committee is about the criteria for determining eligibility for autonomy and the procedure for selection and conferment of autonomy.

Obviously, the Committee can only propose the eligibility for seeking autonomy and it is for the colleges concerned to decide whether they want to seek autonomy

under the scheme or remain outside it. Let it be very clear therefore that autonomy is not being imposed from outside or being conferred on favourites surreptitiously. It is a voluntary, transparent process designed to give opportunities for colleges to show their potential for higher academic standards for the benefit of the student community.

The initial eligibility criteria are provided in the UGC Guidelines which the Committee broadly endorses and wish to add some more in the context of situation obtaining in Kerala. The Guidelines tentatively are as follows :

(1) In principle, all colleges, Government, Government-aided, Unaided, Self-financing including professional colleges, are to be considered eligible for seeking autonomy provided they fulfil the parameters prescribed hereunder.

They must have been functioning for a substantial period of time, say minimum of 10 years, with good academic and administrative performance record to be able to deserve autonomy under the scheme.

There is a view that in the first year (2013-'14), only Government and Government-aided colleges alone be considered for autonomy as their financial security is the responsibility of Government and there are enough checks and balances in the system to correct distortions and excesses. Others are of the view that unaided and self-financing colleges are more likely to implement autonomy with commitment and responsibility as it affects their survival and reputation. Still others argue that irrespective of their status, colleges which have been in existence for over 25 years or more alone be declared eligible to seek autonomy in the first instance.

The Committee is of the view that to declare unaided, self-financing and professional colleges not eligible for seeking autonomy is an irrational and arbitrary decision contrary to the purpose of the scheme, namely, enhancement of academic standards. There is, however, merit in the

argument that colleges which have been imparting higher education in the State for a considerably long period should be preferred in the first instance in view of their proved record of service in education.

(2) The college must have been accredited by NAAC or other competent agencies at least once and must have received nothing less than 'A' Grade accreditation.

(3) The adequacy of staff (Teacher-Student ratio) and the educational qualifications and experience of teachers are important considerations for being able to run an autonomous college. To have 1/3rd of faculty with research qualifications (M.Phil., Ph.D.) is a desirable requirement in this regard. How many of the Faculty members are involved in UGC or Government-sponsored research projects is another indication of the research capabilities of the staff and, as such, a relevant criterion for seeking autonomous status.

(4) Colleges seeking autonomy should have teaching programmes both in under-graduate and post-graduate courses.

(5) The academic reputation of the college as evidenced from past performance in university examinations, youth festivals, sports and games, extension activities and community engagements are relevant criteria for selection for autonomy.

(6) Adequacy of academic, physical and technical infrastructure of the college including library, hostel, equipment, staff quarters, ICT-enabled services etc. are also important considerations to decide on autonomy though they might have been looked into by the accreditation agency.

(7) Quality of institutional management, management practices, work culture, discipline, reform initiatives taken, standards adopted in selection of teachers, staff and students, grievance redressal mechanisms in place are to be given due weightage in deciding the question of autonomy.

(8) Equity and affirmative action programmes for weaker sections followed by the college is another criterion to be given due importance. Has the college been following the Government regulations on student admission, fee structure etc.? Did the college maintain anti-ragging policies and prohibition of sexual harassment norms scrupulously and efficiently?

(9) Would the college be able to maintain the integrity of the examination system in all its aspects? What checks and balances the college proposes to build-in to ensure integrity of examinations if the college is given autonomy. The viability and professionalism of the proposal for maintaining integrity of examinations is to be a criterion to decide the issue of autonomy.

(10) What is the proposal of the college seeking autonomy to prepare its management, teachers, staff, students etc. to be able to discharge the responsibilities by themselves when autonomy is granted? The Committee recommending autonomy should satisfy itself that the necessary preparations have been made, draft regulations are prepared, management committees are formed and the college is ready to exercise autonomy responsibly. This should be a pre-requisite for conferring autonomy and not left to be done after conferment of autonomy. To facilitate this process the Committee on Autonomy should inform the short-listed institutions to prepare themselves within a month so that when the UGC team comes things are in place and autonomous functioning can take place without delay.

On procedure for seeking/granting autonomy, UGC Guidelines talk about preparation of faculty, departments, students and local community by the

college seeking autonomy status as it involves multiple responsibilities which are otherwise done by the university or management. It involves introduction of semester pattern of study, continuous internal assessment system, credit/grading arrangement, student feed-back and self-appraisal by teachers etc.

There is a format prescribed by UGC (Annexure V) for submission of proposal for autonomous status which has to be signed by the Principal of the college and the Registrar of the Affiliating University. This may be improved upon by KSHEC to gather information on eligibility.

In order to select the colleges at the State level, the State may constitute an Expert Committee (Autonomy Approval Committee) under the Chairmanship of the Minister for Education and the Vice-Chairman of KSHEC as Vice-Chairman of the Committee with representation from the affiliating university, the KSHEC and the Government. A letter of consent issued by the State Government on the basis of the recommendation of the Expert Committee should be a pre-requisite for forwarding the application of the college to the UGC. This is essential in view of the peculiar conditions obtaining in higher education in the State.

The UGC thereafter follows its own procedure to confer the Autonomy initially for a period of six years.

The Committee has not examined the question of amendments, if any, necessary to the University Acts and Statutes to allow Autonomous Colleges. Since the University continues its affiliation of the College for purposes of conferring Degrees and ensuring standards, it may be necessary to ensure that the university is a party to decide on the eligibility of the college for autonomy. Hence the need for a Screening Committee at the State level involving the university concerned. To accommodate such an arrangement within the University Statute, it may be necessary to introduce a chapter on "Autonomous Colleges" with a statutory

mechanism to process it in the Act itself. Once such an amendment is made, the university is bound to process and respect the autonomy of such colleges (ie. independent curriculum, separate college academic council, independent examination and declaration of results etc.) independent of universities' own statutes and decisions in this regard. The University at best can ask for a Memorandum of Understanding with college getting autonomy in order to ensure that the college undertakes to work in the broader framework for teaching and research as stipulated in the University Act and Statutes.

POSSIBLE IMPLEMENTATIONAL PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES TO

OVERCOME THEM:

A final issue raised in the terms of reference to the Committee was about possible problems which may arise in the implementation of Autonomous Colleges Scheme in the State and what can be done to smoothen them in the best interests of enhanced quality of higher education in the State.

For any reform which changes established practices, there is bound to be resistance from interest groups partly because of fear of implications of anything new and partly because of ignorance of the potential for good the scheme involves. The resistance can be reduced if the details of the scheme are widely circulated among the stakeholders in order to remove levels of ignorance and unfounded apprehensions. The success stories from other States on how Autonomy led to enhancement of academic standards may be widely disseminated (a case study is attached) by the KSHEC and the Universities among its affiliated colleges. Further, it is advisable to go slow in implementing the scheme, limiting the first phase (say 2013-'14) to few outstanding colleges only so that it will have a demonstrable impact on colleges generally and on students and teachers in particular.

It is necessary to convey categorically to the teaching fraternity that Autonomy in no way will alter the existing service benefits of the teachers concerned and the

existing Service Rules will continue to govern the same. However, given the funding pattern in the State, colleges which receive the Autonomous status may be allowed to start self-financing courses under the existing rules with the approval of the Government and the University. They may be advised to have a Research Council and Research Fund to encourage creativity of faculty and students particularly in post-graduate programmes.

Despite all the precautions and procedures recommended in this report to ensure that only outstanding colleges receive autonomy, it may still be necessary to monitor their functioning so that mid-term corrections are made wherever necessary and the experiment is not allowed to fail under any circumstance. For this the Committee is of the view that independent of the UGC Review, the KSHCEC may have a Review Committee involving the university to monitor the functioning of each Autonomous college at least every three years and make it public for information of all concerned.

The success of the programme depends on the integrity of preparing the faculty, staff and students to take up autonomy with responsibility and evolve an appropriate work culture which alone can make a difference in the existing situation. Freedom comes with responsibility. Success results out of hard work and dedication to the cause. In other words, the motivation and self-discipline of faculty, staff and students have to be very high indeed and they must be prepared to make sacrifices for the successful implementation of the scheme in their college. That is why a written proposal from the college on preparation done is to be insisted upon while applying for autonomy.

Concerns Expressed in Consultations held with Stakeholders :

- (1) Existing service conditions of teachers and staff should not be changed to their disadvantage. The system of direct payment of salaries by Government

to teachers in aided colleges should continue even after granting autonomy. The Committee is in agreement with the demand.

(2) Autonomous colleges should not be allowed to crowd out aided courses by starting self-financing courses. Government should regulate through appropriate regulations starting of self-financing courses in autonomous colleges. The Committee appreciates the concern and recommend strict guidelines for starting self-financing courses in autonomous colleges.

(3) The grant of autonomy should be initially limited to not more than a dozen most deserving colleges distributed among the various affiliating universities in the State. The idea is to nurture the “good” ones to become the “best” and thereby become role models for the rest. Only after review of their functioning should the experiment be extended to more colleges. The Committee is in full agreement with the suggestion.

(4) There is concern about the tenure of teachers in autonomous colleges and how the transfer system will govern them and their colleagues in sister institutions. While on the one hand, a longer tenure of 5 to 6 years needs to be given for those trained for managing autonomous colleges, it should not block the chances of others in sister institutions qualified to serve in autonomous colleges. The transfer policy should be so regulated to balance the interests of teachers and colleges in this regard. The Committee recommends such a transfer mechanism as proposed.

(5) There is apprehension, perhaps unfounded, that autonomous colleges will not abide by the admission policies, fee regulatory arrangement and appointment of staff norms of the State Government. The Committee recommends that authorities do the needful to remove such apprehensions.

(6) Another apprehension of those who support college autonomy is whether autonomy will only rest with the Principals and the Governing Boards! If

autonomy does not percolate down to every member of the staff the intended result will not follow. In order to ensure that autonomy is shared by all stakeholders and accountability for academic enhancement is equally shared, one of the suggestions put forward is increased representation of teachers in Governing Board and Academic Council and that too, not through nomination, but through seniority or election by constituents. There is merit in the argument and the Committee is inclined to support it.

(7) An effective, participatory and transparent grievance redressal system is essential for the success of the initiative. This must be set up at the college level with representatives of management, teachers, staff and students and its decisions should be binding unless the managements give reasons in writing to differ from it. An appeal should be to an independent board with external members (nominees of the University and Government) in it. This is a welcome suggestion.

(8) The constitution of the Governing Body, Academic Councils, Boards of Studies, and Finance Committee of autonomous colleges shall be in accordance with UGC guidelines in this regard. However, the Committee recommends increased representation of teachers in all these bodies.

(9) Apprehensions were raised how the scheme will work in Kerala given the level of political activities in campuses on the part of managements, staff, faculty and students. It was suggested that if academic, including extension activities are increased in campuses involving students and faculty, which autonomous colleges are expected to do, students will not have time nor inclination to indulge in self-destructive activities. Moreover, when they themselves have ownership of the reforms undertaken, they will naturally behave more responsibly and in a democratic manner. The Committee believes that the solution lies in transparency, participation, decentralization and increased activities.

(10) It was pointed out that the question of “equivalence” may arise with multiplicity of Boards of Studies and Academic Councils in autonomous colleges and the universities. This, it was argued, is misplaced fear as it is a phenomenon, which exists even now between universities inter se. Furthermore, such differences are desirable for competitive excellence intended by the concept of autonomy, so long as there is no variation from the bottom line fixed by the universities themselves. The university representatives in the Boards of Studies and Academic Councils of autonomous colleges will ensure such minimum standards are maintained.

In fact, the concept of giving autonomy to the good colleges is to encourage and nurture them to become better and better by taking standards to higher levels of academic excellence. As such, we want them to be different from the ordinary. Equivalence, therefore, is not a problem as long as standards in autonomous colleges are higher than the ordinary.

(11) The pre-autonomy process is important for the success of the autonomy objectives. As such, colleges seeking autonomy will have to prepare themselves thoroughly to be able to exercise autonomy with accountability. Let the colleges specify in their application for autonomy (a) why they need autonomy, (b) what innovations they are contemplating in academics and governance and (c) how they expect them to be sustainable and what measures they propose to put in place to make it sustainable.

(12) It is necessary to identify colleges which are potentially capable of becoming autonomous in subsequent stages and put them on alert so that they can prepare themselves for seeking that status later. Universities have a role to play in this regard by encouraging such identified colleges to offer new courses in their optional curriculum and evolving methodologies for improving governance systems and research initiatives. The positive experience of well run autonomous colleges could provide part of the pre-autonomy capacity

building module that every autonomy aspirant must fulfill before either seeking or getting autonomy.

(13) It needs to be made known to everyone that under the existing UGC scheme, purely self-financing institutions are not eligible for autonomous status.

(14) It is desirable to have as part of autonomy processes to require the college to mandatorily renew at least one-third of the courses every three years by rotation. The idea is to make graduates engage with new syllabi at periodic intervals.

(15) It was suggested that introduction of autonomy scheme may require amendments to university statutes. In response, it was proposed that, through an omnibus legislation, the State Legislature may introduce a new chapter with the title "Autonomous Colleges" in the Universities' Acts, wherein provisions may be included not only to authorize the concept of autonomous colleges independent of university authorities but also to create a separate statutory body like the "Autonomy Approval Committee" to decide on issues related to autonomous colleges involving university representative.

Concluding Observations :

The consultations with students, staff and teacher organizations in the State have indeed been helpful not only to clear apprehensions about the implications of the Scheme but also to realize what precautions need to be taken in giving autonomy to colleges in the peculiar circumstances of Kerala. The Committee is thankful for the critical feedback they have given to the Draft Report earlier circulated. The final report has incorporated most of the valuable suggestions received. The Committee's interactions with the Vice-Chancellors of Kerala Universities were particularly helpful in finalizing the recommendations.

The inputs given by the Principal, Staff and Students of Stella Maris College, Chennai have clarified the Committee's own apprehensions and reinforced our conviction that autonomy to colleges is the best strategy available in the present circumstances to improve quality in higher education. We record our deep appreciation and thanks to the college and its staff.

Finally, we cannot but record our sincere thanks to the ever-enthusiastic and imaginative guidance extended to us by Ambassador (Retd.) Mr. T.P. Sreenivasan and the excellent services rendered by his colleagues and staff of KSHEC in completing our tasks in record time of four months.

Trivandrum

Chairman and Members of the Committee on Autonomy

25th April, 2013

for Higher Education Institutions in Kerala