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# EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF AUTONOMY: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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**ABSTRACT:**

*Education is a crucial aspect of the country's social and economic growth. Hence, the government, the UGC, and several commissions have studied the educational system and proposed various reforms to address the system's shortcomings and boost quality education. In higher education, autonomy is often seen as a game changer. There are multiple reasons to opt for autonomy. While shifting from an affiliated to an autonomous system, preparing the institution to meet the requirements of the autonomous structure is a complex process. Any new change in the system has some short-term or long-term impact on the institution and the people involved. While many organizations have chosen autonomy, it is interesting to observe its impact on the institutions, their functioning, and the people involved. The researcher studied five autonomous institutions from various streams and tried to understand the impact of institutional autonomy on the functioning of these institutions. The current case study research looked at educational institutions at different stages of the autonomy cycle.*

**KEY WORDS:** *autonomy, autonomy as a game changer, impact of institutional autonomy*

## INTRODUCTION:

Autonomy is looked at as a game changer in Indian higher education. When asked how the respondents felt about autonomy, one participant from a reputed autonomous institution expressed the feeling of being stuck due to the lack of a system for supporting and sustaining autonomy. Is it attributable to our higher education system? The lack of a direct correlation between educational qualification and employment makes us question higher education quality and value in our country. In such a scenario, institutional autonomy was thought to be a solution. The autonomous institutions are expected to fill the gap between education and employment by introducing their own programs relevant in terms of time, market and globalization. UGC formulated the system for autonomous colleges in India in the fourth Five Year Plan (1969-73) in response to the recommendations of the Education Commission (1964-1966). In spite of many efforts to introduce college autonomy and support from numerous commissions, the drive for autonomy failed to gain popularity until recently. Since many institutions choose autonomy, it is intriguing to study the impact of autonomy on educational institutions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW:

Numerous studies have examined the influence of autonomy as a significant trend or one of the breakthroughs. Jacob (1987) examined autonomy as one of eight educational breakthroughs in eight

colleges linked with the Indian government. The results indicate that colleges achieved a high level of effectiveness in completing functions such as designing their curricula, devising good teaching techniques, and conducting evaluations and assessments. Many additional examinations reduced the time available to students for creative pursuits. Teachers were overburdened with work due to the imposition of new obligations. Studies conducted by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, NIEPA (1987), indicate that some autonomous colleges attempted to frame courses closely related to societal needs. Teaching methods changed to a certain extent. Many colleges introduced internal evaluation along with semester-end examinations. Teachers' participation in academic decision-making has increased, and a few teachers took advantage of teaching in a college with a more flexible curriculum. Rao and Mathew (1993) concluded that autonomy improved accountability, increased the level of recognition of teachers and colleges, allowed the freedom to explore innovative teaching methods, and fostered more significant teacher-student interaction. There is no observed increase in workload owing to autonomy. Rao (1999) examined the operation of autonomous colleges and concluded that most of them were successful in obtaining community support, meaningful extension and research activities, restructuring their courses, introducing examination reforms, ensuring teacher accountability, and implementing UGC administration and management guidelines. Mohanty (2005) found that the quality of education at autonomous colleges in terms of connection and assessment system was much higher than the quality of education at non-autonomous colleges; however, students' perception was the opposite. The perceptions of faculty in autonomous and non-autonomous colleges regarding the principal as a leader, the quality of teachers, links and interface, students, teaching, office management, material resources, job satisfaction, and extracurricular activities did not differ significantly. There was no evident difference between autonomous and non-autonomous colleges in terms of instruction, infrastructure, or student participation in extracurricular activities. Sarongs (2018) compared autonomous and non-autonomous institutions. They found that autonomous colleges are superior in terms of the quality of teachers, the quality of instruction, and the examination system, whereas non-autonomous colleges scored higher in terms of student satisfaction with material resources.

Through research and development, the higher education system develops its knowledge, innovates, shapes its path of advancement, and determines its future course. Arslanhan and Kurtsal (2010) state that the lack of autonomy granted to universities in Turkey harms university research and development. Abhilash and Mohankumar (2012) examined the scope of research and development in autonomous colleges, and they found that the anticipated expansion in scientific research and development has not yet been realized. Luhamya and Kimogal (2016) investigated the impact of institutional autonomy on teaching and research in Ugandan public universities. The results indicate that teaching and research appear to be significantly influenced by external circumstances. Universities establish research topics based on the interests of funding agencies, limiting researchers' flexibility.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

A broad research question guiding the study was 'What was the impact of autonomy on the functioning of autonomous institutions?'

## Methodology

The study was conducted using relativism ontology, emic epistemological lens, and qualitative approach. The research method used was case study, and tools for data collection comprised semi-structured face-to-face interviews, review of documents, and field notes. Five autonomous institutions from different disciplines and at different stages of the autonomy cycle were selected using the purposive sampling method and labeled as Case A, Case B, Case C, Case D, and Case E. Total 50 participants were selected and interviewed based on predetermined criteria to ensure a wide range of participants. Data analysis was carried out using open and thematic coding.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Case A

**Profile:** Case A is a government-funded institution affiliated to the University of Mumbai with more than 50 years of standing in the field. It offers a professional degree, graduate, and research program. The institution is rated A+ for its aided programs and A for its unaided programs and received autonomy in the year 2010-2011. It has a strong research culture and more than twenty agencies sponsor its research programs. The institution is characterised by the educationists as management members, highly qualified faculty, and exceptional students.

### Impact

Regarding administration, Case A observed swift decision-making due to the institution's academic autonomy. As additional duties and responsibilities required structural changes, more committees were formed. The responsibility of preserving documentary evidence shifted from University to institution. Thus, documentation became more systematic. Institutional operations began to resemble those of industry. Respondents believed that the new system utilized faculty talents. The feedback system was modified, and student feedback was emphasized. Student attendance increased significantly. The majority of respondents felt individual accountability had grown under the new system. Faculty members strengthened their leadership skills while performing their new tasks, resulting in new learning. By adding courses, the faculty's focus was broadened. There was a greater sense of duty, and even the most timid individuals came up with inventive and original ideas. More opportunities for interaction with the outside world led to the expansion of knowledge and the acquisition of new skill sets. The performance of teachers improved despite increased assessment work, additional classroom hours, paperwork, and administrative duties. The faculty led the development of syllabi and newly added courses, fostering a sense of ownership over the curriculum. Over seventy percent of the faculty held Ph.D. degrees. The greatest positive impact was noted in the teaching-learning aspect, where students were encouraged to apply their knowledge in real-world settings. For several of the courses, industry professionals taught in the classroom. Students became more active, resulting in improved student-teacher interaction. The use of technology in teaching has expanded. Some faculty members expressed that the joy of teaching and learning was sometimes lost since they had to complete too many tasks. Research-related publications increased. Industry collaborations improved research opportunities and quality. However, most faculty members believe that the lack of free time is making genuine research increasingly difficult. The revised curriculum appeared to better prepare students for the marketplace.

Regarding assessment and evaluation, the number of examinations had increased, and they were all administered centrally. The questions posed become increasingly application-based. Because everything happened on campus, it was easy to follow the exam schedule and complete all exams and re-exams on time. The student's academic performance had improved. The admissions procedure, classroom intake, student-to-teacher ratio, fee structure, discipline, and infrastructure remain unchanged.

### Case B

**Profile:** Case B is an unaided, autonomous, privately managed institution affiliated with the University of Mumbai. UG and PG programs are offered as part of the professional degree program. It has excellent infrastructure and state-of-the-art sports facilities and is one of the most sought-after schools in the central suburbs. It was awarded the autonomous status in 2013 and decided to implement autonomy across all the program levels.

### Impact

Some areas felt the impact quickly, while others didn't. The curriculum boosted interdepartmental collaboration. Due to academic freedom, syllabi could be redesigned to meet the standards. Therefore, the syllabus quality was superior to that of the University. The course outlines

could be modified immediately if needed. The new audit, exposure, and interdisciplinary courses attracted students and the industry. Curriculum changes influenced students' personalities, profiles, and study habits. The institution was better able to assist students with special needs. There were reports of improved student participation in the teaching and learning process. Compared to the university system, learning became more active, and teachers shifted from "teaching" to "facilitating." Students were better prepared for examinations due to the random selection of papers. As a result of the presence of external examiners, objectivity and transparency were ensured, and students began to take examinations seriously. Changes to the examination format and the implementation of grading rubrics lowered the number of failures. The institution could administer multiple types of examinations to students with varying abilities. Exams were administered according to the schedule.

The institution could determine its research focus, and the number of publications increased. Increased funding and support resulted in filing patents. New networks and alliances were established. Faculty and student exchange programmes were planned. Personnel hired to manage the industry-institution engagement. According to the faculty, networks and collaboration were driven by necessity, not interest. The quantity of community outreach programs expanded, and their rigour intensified. There was an observed improvement in placements, and the scope had expanded. There was a sense of ownership, accountability, and responsibility among the faculty. The amount of work has increased manifold that hindered the faculty's professional development despite increasing exposure, opportunity, and finances. The faculty felt neglected and dictated because they were not involved in many decisions, and the decisions were communicated through middle-level administrators. More meritorious and dedicated students began enrolling at the institution. The attitude of students toward learning had shifted. Academic competitions inside and outside the institution have witnessed an upsurge in participation and success rate. There was no significant change in the student intake in several departments. The institution's use of technology had risen. The fees increased. After gaining autonomy, the institution had more bodies and committees. Some areas remained untouched. These areas included admissions, student-teacher ratio, infrastructure, and industry response.

### Case C

**Profile:** Case C was founded in 1990 and is permanently affiliated to Mumbai University. Private management runs a self-funded professional training program at the graduate and postgraduate levels. The institution is accredited with an A grade. The institution is one of the many offering programs from KG to PG in various disciplines. Case C has a smaller number of enrolled students and employed personnel than other Cases.

Autonomy was granted in 2017-2018. As the new academic year was approaching and limited planning time, it was agreed to implement the same university curricula for 2017-2018. Simultaneously, preparations for the 2018-2019 syllabi began. The institution is distinguished by its supportive management, dynamic leadership, and excellent infrastructure.

**Impact:** Students who entered the institution after being autonomous appeared to be more focused, self-assured, and knowledgeable about autonomous setup. While creating syllabi, faculty members experienced greater academic freedom. More options were made available to students to choose the option that best suited their needs and talents. The process of teaching and learning became interactive. The attentiveness and participation of students in classroom discussions increased. The examination was focused on the students' abilities. The examination department and students were satisfied that the examination schedule was adhered to flawlessly and that results were declared on time. The faculty members felt overburdened while performing these new roles and responsibilities due to additional duties, multiple roles to play, and the need to maintain evidence for everything. Due to the change in their portfolios, they began to acquire new skills and enjoy creative work more than routine work.

As a consequence, faculty members felt a sense of ownership and enthusiasm. Due to a quicker decision-making process, solutions to the problems could be found and implemented rapidly. Although the effects of autonomy were apparent in numerous ways, some aspects remained unchanged for

various reasons. The institution anticipated its own admissions process, which did not occur because autonomous institutions do not have the power to choose their students. The student intake remained unchanged. Professional development and research were unaffected, as they were excellent even before autonomy.

## Case D

**Profile:** 1869 saw the founding of Case D, a government-aided institution affiliated to the University of Mumbai. The institution's distinctive feature is its architecture, designated a historic landmark. The institution offers numerous UG, PG, Certificate, and Diploma programs in Arts, Sciences, Business, and Commerce in its aided and self-financed sections. It is the institution in Mumbai with the highest ranking and highest demand. The institution received the highest rating of A+ (5 Stars) from NAAC in 2007 and the College with Excellence Potential (CPE) award from UGC.

The institution is characterized by progressive and robust leadership, quality-conscious teachers, high-quality students, and a vibrant institutional environment. The institution is renowned for its contributions to academics, extracurricular and cultural endeavours. In 2010-2011, it became autonomous, and the institution chose to implement autonomy gradually.

## Impact

Due to the availability of funds, infrastructure was regularly upgraded. Being one of the first to acquire autonomy had advantages and problems administratively. The number of committees and bodies increased, discipline became more stringent, and the academic calendar became busier. The institution's systems and forms continued to evolve after entering its second cycle of autonomy. Both new and established procedures were implemented in order to ensure transparency. It was possible to make and implement decisions without delay. The utilization of technology had increased. The recently hired teachers used technology more. The curriculum was updated, became relevant and emphasized the students' complete development. Students were given a greater array of options and broader educational opportunities leading to more options for experimentation, innovation, and creativity. Respondents indicated that immediate restructuring of curriculum and syllabus was possible. Relevant knowledge and faster industry trend adaptation improved student education. The institution had control over program type and direction. Since faculty members were designing syllabi, the interaction between them grew. As a result of incorporating the research component into the curriculum, students' involvement in research has increased. Classroom observations demonstrated increased student-teacher interaction. Student-centered teaching and learning methodologies emphasized the practical component more than the exam. The pre-distribution of grading rubrics to students enhanced their classroom participation. When it came to examination and evaluation outcomes, they were timely. Following autonomy and a change in the curriculum, students became more engaged; e.g., they began designing the laboratory experiments they used to conduct in the university system. The examination-related administrative workload was reduced due to decentralization of examination-related activities among many committees. The rubrics changed the faculty's feedback methodology. Establishing networks and collaborating became easier after gaining autonomy. New networks and partnerships have been established for specialized help, such as research.

On the other hand, the respondent perceived time limits for extra-institutional interactions. Its outreach always defined case D to the community. Prior to autonomy, the community outreach initiative was supervised by the institution. However, after autonomy, the department was also compelled to complete a predetermined number of hours. More academic freedom and adaptability encouraged creativity and innovation. The self-funded group was more motivated and adaptable than the aided group. The faculty members stated that accountability is either assumed freely or is compelled in the autonomous system. Even if research was supported and new opportunities were created, greater workload harmed it. Students were permitted to conduct mini-studies, but their participation in research was limited due to their large numbers. Due to the high expectations of an autonomous system, the students' stress levels rose. The overall performance of the students has

increased, and they have become more capable and resourceful. Academically-oriented students were excited about the autonomy system. Autonomy led to financial grants that contributed to upgraded laboratories. The aided section's fees remained stable, while the self-financed section's fees grew by 10 to 15%. Despite achieving autonomy, several areas such as the admission system, number of admitted students, student-to-teacher ratio, and cost structure remained untouched. The feedback system and measures for ensuring responsibility were already in place and quite adequate; therefore, they were preserved.

### Case E

**Profile:** Case E is an aided college founded in 1983 in the western suburbs. It is affiliated to the University of Mumbai and administers undergraduate and graduate degree programs. NAAC accredited the institution with an A grade and a five-star rating, making it one of the finest in the western suburbs. The institution is ISO-accredited, the University of Mumbai has designated it as a Lead College, and it won the 2011-12 Best College award. In 2012, the Indus foundation presented the College with an excellence award. From bachelor's degree through doctorate, the institution offers approximately fifteen programs. In 2016-2017, the institution attained autonomy, making it the fourth autonomous degree college.

The institution is characterized by management that is prepared for the future, faculty composed of professionals, and a diverse student body.

### Impact

Administratively, the number of committees increased. IQAC became active since autonomy requires greater quality. Initially, many students had canceled their admissions due to the numerous uncertainties. As a result of the formation of new committees and reorganization of the existing committees, procedures changed. The volume of documentation increased. The academics and administration have become increasingly strict. Due to the accreditation organizations' greater expectations of autonomous institutions, the accreditation procedure became more rigorous than non-autonomous institutions. The curriculum became more student-centered and its quality improved. Experimentation was encouraged. The curriculum could be modified instantly and regularly as needed. Students have access to a large number of elective courses and supplementary courses. As curriculum became student-centered, so did the teaching-learning process, increasing student participation. Online activities for teaching and learning were initiated, though insignificantly.

Students' academic performance improved due to the modified examination and question paper format, and the results could be announced on time. The internal assessment provides students with a broader range of possibilities. More connections were made with the industry and other institutions. Aided and unaided sections interacted more. The research was encouraged by monetary incentives. The aided section had more research assistance than the unaided section. Despite the increased opportunity, faculty members' additional responsibilities reduced research. The faculty was inventive and motivated. The faculty members had seen increasing academic freedom. More faculty members pursued the Ph.D. due to the increased chances for professional development. Increased documentation, administrative duties, and the government's recruitment policy increased the faculty workload. More workload contributed to innovation but had a negative impact on faculty performance and research. More meritorious students were enrolling in the College, and their overall performance had improved, but they wanted to pursue multiple things at once and lacked a clear understanding of autonomy. The application of technology has grown. The fees were now higher. There were no effect areas where the status quo remained unchanged following autonomy, such as the admissions process, student-teacher ratio, attendance, discipline policies, and facilities. Although the merit of the students appeared to have increased, the faculty viewed this as a general tendency and concluded that there had been no significant change in student success. The same holds for the research and feedback system. After gaining autonomy, administrators appeared confident in their ability to make an impact.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of autonomy on each of the Cases was multifaceted. In certain respects, it was instantly apparent. After autonomy, the institutions expected quick decision-making and experienced enhanced finances and updated infrastructure. Documentation increased drastically and became more systematic. Respondents believed that institutions had begun to operate as an industry. The importance placed on student feedback has increased. New roles and responsibilities sparked leadership, learning, and innovation. The faculty began to think differently. Interaction with outside institutions was mainly need-based. Curriculum designing opportunities fostered a sense of ownership and led to application-based practical learning. Participation of students in teaching and learning has increased, and the nature of interaction changed. The use of technology expanded, and many teachers began to use technology. The increased workload made the faculty feel overworked, deprived them of the joy of teaching, and negatively affected their professional development. The number of research publications by faculty increased. In both Case A and Case B, research prospects were enhanced by relationships with the private sector and increased funding. The additional courses assisted in attracting industry professionals as well as meritorious students. The institution determines the courses' emphasis and future direction. Students were better equipped for the job market and their future careers as a result of taking up relevant courses. Though the scope has expanded, the market largely determined the placement trend. A transparent examination system reduced revaluation requests. Examinations were administered on time, and results could be declared promptly. The students became more vigilant and began comparing syllabi and general academics before admission. However, it was also seen that the students had unreasonable expectations and tried to exploit the autonomous system to their benefit.

As perceived by the respondents, autonomy was a challenging system that elevated stress levels among faculty and students. Due to the top-down nature of many decision-making processes, the faculty felt neglected. The non-teaching staff did not report any significant effects, except for greater physical labour due to increased internals and practicals. Regarding the financial impact, some grants were obtained due to autonomy, but these were insufficient and ran out after a few years. Admission procedure, student-to-teacher ratio, fee structure, and infrastructure, among others, remained constant across all Cases. Even after a decade of autonomy, the institutions continued to progress. In addition to the existing procedures, new practices were implemented to increase the system's transparency.

Autonomy is an academically satisfying as well as challenging system. This system's success or failure depends on the institutional preparedness, involvement of the stakeholders, awareness about the challenges it imposes, and effective coping strategies planned considering their unique contexts.

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