



ISSN: 2249-894X
 IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)
 UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514
 VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2019



NEW KID ON THE BLOCK: PERCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT:

Education is a key factor for social and economic development of the country due to which the Government, UGC and various commissions reviewed education system and suggested various reforms to overcome the problems faced by the system and to give impetus to quality education. Autonomy is looked at as a game changer in higher education. The reasons to go for autonomy are many. While lots of institutions opting for autonomy, it is interesting to see how many of them have thorough understanding of autonomy. Whether autonomy is taken as feather in the cap, status symbol or as an outcome of insightful decision will direct the

path towards future of the institution. The process followed for shifting from affiliated to autonomous system becomes important. Preparing the system as per the requirement of the structure of autonomy is a challenging task. How this task is completed depends upon the perception of the stakeholders about the process and the system of autonomy. While studying the process of autonomy in selected educational institutions, the researcher realised the difference in the perception of the administrators and faculty members in institutions operating at different levels of autonomy. Therefore, it is interesting to understand the perception of the new entrant institution in autonomous system as this perception is going to guide the implementation of the whole process of autonomy. The present case study research studied educational institutions which are in their first phase of autonomy.

KEYWORDS: phenomena of autonomy, process of autonomy, perception of new entrant.

INTRODUCTION :

“We are a Ferrari with an engine of an Ambassador” were the words of a participant when asked for the feeling about autonomy. What made the participant in a well reputed institute feel this way about autonomy? Is our higher education system responsible for this? While looking back at our education system we realised in spite of putting in so many efforts by so many

commissions and bodies we failed to achieve what we intended to achieve.

India has the largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number of institutions and the second largest in terms of the number of students (Source: British Council report, 2014) but the gross enrolment ratio is below the world average of 26%. (Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan, 2012-2017). Achievement in education is not directly linked with employment opportunities which raises a doubt about the quality and relevance of the

higher education in India. According to a study of 60,000 graduate students across states in India 47% graduates in India are unemployable for any job. (Aspiring minds’ National Employability Report, 2013). India has still not become a preferred study destination for international students. Education is a key factor for social and economic development of the country due to which the government of India, UGC and various commissions appointed to review education system have suggested various reforms to

overcome the problems faced by the system currently and to give impetus to quality and career-oriented education. One major reform in this direction is 'Autonomy'. According to UGC "The only safe and better way to improve the quality of undergraduate education is to delink most of the colleges from the affiliating structure. Colleges with academic and operative freedom are doing better and have more credibility." There is need to bridge the gap between the education and the employment opportunities. This is possible if the institutes are given freedom to design their own programs which are relevant with respect to time, market and global development. This drives the institutes to be autonomous.

Affiliation system in India is deep rooted and gives protection to the educational institutions. With the tremendous increase in number of colleges it has become difficult for the universities even to perform their routine functions effectively. In the affiliated system all the affiliated institutes are measured through same scale of evaluation without distinguishing the highly performing ones from the ones doing bare minimum for their survival which is a severe drawback. Most of the highly reputed and high performing institutes are driven by their own aspirations for which freedom is necessary. Through autonomy these capable higher educational institutes are given powers of self-governance mainly in the area of academics to achieve greater heights.

In India in pursuance of the recommendations of Education Commission (1964-66), the scheme of autonomous colleges was formulated by UGC in the fourth Five Year Plan (1969-73). Although the scheme of autonomous colleges was introduced long ago, it did not pick up as expected owing to different reasons like reluctant state government to let go of power, apprehensive managements of the private colleges due to requirement of more resources, no willingness from the teachers and fear of management having more power etc. (Sankaran & Joshi, 2016). But the trend is changing now with more and more institutes applying for autonomous status. GCPEA report (2014) considers autonomy to be protecting higher education directly or indirectly from government interference and politicization. The reasons to go for autonomy are institute specific. There are lot of pull and push factors at work when any institute decides to apply for autonomy. Since lots of institutions opting for autonomy, it is interesting to see how many of them have thorough understanding of the phenomenon of autonomy. Whether autonomy is taken as a feather in the cap, a status symbol or as an outcome of insightful decision will direct the path towards future of the institution. The process followed for shifting from affiliated system to autonomous system decides its success in the end. Therefore, it is essential for the institute and all the stakeholders involved, to understand the real meaning of autonomy.

PERCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

The concept of autonomy is derived from the Greek word 'autonomos' which means 'having its own laws'. An autonomous institute gets flexibility in introducing new courses, have its own examination and evaluation system. It expects the institutes to develop collaborations with other institutes and evolve innovative practices to enhance the quality of education. Success of any innovation depends upon how it is perceived by the stakeholders.

Perception is defined as 'a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem' - Cambridge Dictionary. 'Way in which something is regarded, understood or interpreted' - Oxford Dictionary. Perception depends on our interest, familiarity and what we consider important. Our perception creates our reality. How do people perceive the concept of autonomy will decide their line of action? Therefore, the study is required to investigate how people perceive autonomy.

The situation has changed; more and more colleges are going for autonomous status. The reasons are varied. For some it's a feather in the cap, for some it's the only way ahead, for some it's a foreseen trend being imposed on colleges by the university and government, for some it's a status symbol, for some it's a way out of the university control so on and so forth. Whatever may be the reason, are the colleges prepared enough for autonomy before applying for the same? Have they understood the real meaning of autonomy? Are they ready and equipped enough to shoulder the new roles and responsibilities? It becomes a matter of concern. The way these colleges perceive autonomy becomes very important to understand, because the implementation and success of autonomy depends on the perception of the concept by the stakeholders, who will be implementing autonomy practically.

In the absence of appropriate practices and leadership vision, autonomy will remain as a mere concept and position on paper and the hazards will be seen in the near future. There were few studies done on the perception about autonomy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Taira (2004) viewed autonomy as economic engine, budget control and double-edged sword. She expressed that the institution may not become excellent by the simple fact that it is autonomous. Weber (2006) stated autonomy as a necessary but not sufficient condition for excellence. Thangaraj, (1981) concluded that the scheme of autonomous colleges did not ensure improvement in the quality of management of institutions. Autonomy is presented as an important factor needed for fulfilment of academic freedom and excellence but not as a survival strategy in the market of knowledge production (International Association of Universities, 1998).

Thangamuthu (1993) studied the reasons for colleges being unwilling to apply for autonomous status. The reasons cited in the study were fear of colleges becoming elitist institutions and leading to inequality, fear of autonomy giving more power to managements and the unwillingness of teachers to shoulder extra responsibility which was also supported by Bhatia (1993) through another study. Highlighting the similar findings in a study, Duong (2014) stated that the legislators are hesitant to give up control of the sector and uncertain about actual implication of institutional autonomy.

A study conducted by Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE, 2005) reveals the perception of stakeholders towards autonomy. The respondents of this study were from different levels like college, university and government. There were teachers, administrators, researchers, management members involved in the study. The analysis of the participants' responses suggested that the participants were satisfied with the existing system of curriculum designing by academic board and board of studies, admission policy, student intake, fee structure, UGC norms and qualification for recruitment of teachers and determining workload. They expressed the need for complete autonomy as a precondition for excellence and advised that only the institutions demonstrating good track record should be conferred autonomous status. They favoured relevant, updated and career-oriented curriculum designed by the teachers, self-financing courses, credit system, decentralization of evaluation system and merit, aptitude, constant professional accomplishment as criteria for appointment. They recognized the significance of regulatory bodies and inclusion of professionals and experts in decision making bodies and stated the need for financial assistance for the academically performing students.

CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORIES OF PERCEPTION

Constructivist theories assume the process of perception as extremely active process of extracting sensory stimuli, their evaluation, interpretation and backward organisation of sensory stimulus. According to these theories, perception is end product of the interaction between stimulus and internal hypotheses, expectations and knowledge of the observer. Motivation and emotions play an important role in the process. Therefore, perception is influenced by a variety of individual factors (Démuth, Andrej, 2013).

GREGORY'S THEORY

According to Gregory (1990) perception is a matter of receptors as well as of brain. Therefore, sensory data are only clusters of physical stimuli and our brain tries to interpret them in the most meaningful and the most likely way. Gregory claims that the sensory data is of no importance in itself. Its importance is based on our previous experiences. Experience is the key point of interpretation. Our perception is determined by attitudes, emotions and expectations (Gregory, 1990).

Colleges differ in their perception and they are different with regard to their philosophy, context, practices etc. So, the way one college implements autonomy may provide guidelines for others but it may not guarantee the same success in case of others. Also, the perception changes over time and with experience. Therefore, it is important to study how the new players in the game i.e. colleges

recently became autonomous perceive the phenomena of autonomy. Their perception about the concept of autonomy and its various aspects will give shape to their successful or unsuccessful practices and help them to achieve the desired goals and objectives of autonomy. Hence the question of how the academic faculty perceive autonomy and its different aspects gains immense significance.

METHODOLOGY

The constructivist epistemological and a relativist ontological lens was used for the present study which believes that there is no clear-cut objectivity or reality. The focus was on understanding the interpretation of the world by the participants in their own context. Since the research was focused on perception, qualitative research method was chosen. It was decided to study the perceptions of faculty members from selected higher education institutions which were bounded by the space and time, which forms a case by itself. Creswell (2007) defines case study research as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time". Therefore, qualitative case study research was used for the study. Multiple cases were studied to find out similarities and differences in the perception of academic faculty from different institutes running different courses but at the same stage of autonomy.

Purposive sampling was used for the study since the researcher was interested in studying the educational institution who are at the beginning stage of autonomy. Therefore, three colleges; one degree and two professional colleges were selected for the study. They were named as Case A, Case B and Case C to maintain confidentiality. The size of these colleges was different. Case A is a professional college with a smaller unit as compared to other two cases and in the first year of autonomy. Case B is a professional college conducting different type of professional course with larger strength and Case C is a general degree college. Case B and Case C both the colleges are in the second year of autonomy. Intentionally colleges in the initial stage of autonomy and conducting different programs were selected to examine whether the perception about autonomy changes depending on the size and program of the study.

Total 40 participants were interviewed depending on the size of the institution and principal of data saturation. From Case A- 6, from Case B- 22 and from Case C- 12 participants were interviewed. Since the researcher was interested in studying the perception of academic faculty towards autonomy, the faculty members in different departments having varied teaching experience and handling different types of administrative responsibilities along with teaching were selected for the study.

Data was collected using semi structured in-depth interviews, observation and field notes. The interviews were audio taped with the consent of the participants. The duration of the interviews were around forty five minutes to one and half hours. Within case analysis was used to analyse data in a single case and cross case analysis was used to identify commonalities across the cases.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were written manually using all the verbal as well as nonverbal cues. Codes were assigned to the textual data. Analysis of the data was done in three stages. Open coding was used for first level of analysis, focused coding for second level of analysis and theoretical coding for third level of analysis. Qualitative data was analysed with the help of ATLAS.ti software.

FINDINGS

Case A

Case A is a college running professional course. The college received autonomy recently and have experience of implementing autonomy for few months. The participants perceived autonomy as indicator of quality and trust shown by the university. Management of this institution was looking at autonomy as a mean for achieving deemed university or private university status. Therefore, the management decided to go for autonomy. This resulted in mixed feelings among the faculty like excitement, doubtfulness, empowerment on the one hand and anxiety, uncertainty, apprehension, resistance on the other hand. Autonomy meant freedom to design curriculum, evaluation strategies and

offer additional courses. More flexibility and own admissions were expected after becoming autonomous. According to these participants autonomy helps in achieving goals through raising quality, change with the changing times, quickly respond to market needs and make things more meaningful for the students. The system enables the college to see the world differently and be visible at international level by connecting the college with the outside world. Autonomy is perceived to result in more responsibility on the shoulders of the faculty, new identity of the institution and holistic development of the faculty and the students. It is believed that better performing institutions would seek autonomy and faculty members will be the key players in the new scenario since they will be the once implementing autonomy. The observation shared by the participants was that the cut off point for autonomous colleges is higher than the non-autonomous colleges. The respondents are aware that after being autonomous they will have to develop few areas with respect to their institution such as research and consultancy. As per the respondents, autonomous colleges are expected to be different, going beyond minimum, being accountable, being self-reliant, active student participation and enhancing quality.

Case B

This college was running professional course and was into second year of implementing autonomy. The faculty members believed that autonomy is conferred to the institution as an indicator of good quality while recognising the fact that the current government policies are promoting autonomy and UGC and university are more than willing to grant autonomy. The feelings experienced during the shift in the system were enthusiasm, motivation and feeling of power of decision making. At the same time there was fear, anxiety, uncertainty, doubt, disorientation, reluctance, low confidence, confusion, helplessness. Meaning of autonomy was described as flexibility in curriculum, freedom of evaluation, possibility of introducing various courses, freedom of achieving goals in better way, reduced dependency on the university, financially demanding system and leading to survival of the fittest. They had lots of expectations from autonomy like introducing new courses, using variety of assessment tools, freedom in developing syllabus, declaring results in time, flexibility, improved quality and also increased workload. The participants felt that autonomy helps in immediate implementation of their ideas, providing more exposure to the students, attracting good students due to the changed nature of subjects and options available, increasing employability of the students through quality inputs, developing world class knowledge practices, raising and maintaining academic standards and achieving vision and mission of the institution as well as that of the nation. Autonomy results in more exposure to the faculty, more opportunities to experiment, creativity and innovation, updated courses, widening the scope of placement, faculty being more alert, feeling of responsibility, satisfaction, pride and ownership. The system of autonomy perceived to be demanding mature, positive, motivated, alert, responsible, capable people; visionary leader, accountability, good examination system and transparent systems.

Case C

The college runs a general degree course and in the second year of autonomy. Autonomy is looked at as an indicator of quality, one step ahead towards progress and a game changer in higher education. The feelings experienced by the participants were optimism, motivation and high morale. They also had some negative feelings like fear, anxiety, ambiguity, confusion, helplessness, doubt, disorientation, psychological dissonance. Autonomy was understood as freedom to make change in the curriculum and evaluation pattern, more opportunities for experimentation and overall a beneficial system for students and academicians. They opined that autonomy may not affect the commitment level of the faculty. The participants expected quality enhancement, timely declaration of results, better facilities and infrastructure, more academic freedom, changes in evaluation and the curriculum, improved teaching learning process, introduce additional courses, conducting examinations and overall quality enhancement after becoming autonomous. The faculty feels that autonomy is helping in opening up unlimited platforms for experimentation and growth, meeting market requirements, better student preparation, improve quality and faculty development. Autonomy results in better quality education,

more exposure and opportunities to grow, intellectual stimulation, satisfaction about one's role, feeling of pride and higher status, feeling of making a difference in positive way and growth of the faculty and institution. According to the responses autonomous colleges are expected to be accountable, transparent, independent and experiment with new ideas.

DISCUSSION

In all the three cases the decision on going for autonomy was taken by the authorities- the Management and the Principal of the college. None of the faculty members was given a choice to decide whether to go or not to go for autonomy. In Case A the faculty was positive about autonomy and ready to accept the challenges, which made going through change easier for them. It also had an advantage of having some autonomous institutions as sister concerns. On the contrary in other two cases, Case B and Case C, the faculty took time to accept and understand the autonomous system. So along with capacity building, preparing positive mindset towards autonomy took time. But it was visible that once they had accepted the system, they started putting in efforts to make it work for the institution.

All the participants across cases consider autonomy as an indicator of quality of the institution. They also experienced similar feeling like fear of change, losing job, anxiety, uncertainty and most common one was fear of leader turning autocratic. All the participants believe that autonomy helps in better student preparation, more exposure to the faculty, opportunities to experiment and overall quality enhancement. Some of the perceptions proved wrong. For e.g. in Case A the respondents were expecting their own admission but since in Maharashtra only academic autonomy is given to the institutions, admissions are still done through centralised admission process.

As Gregory (1970) suggests in his theory of perception, the perception of the faculty in this case is influenced by the previous experience and the individual factors like aptitude, expectations, knowledge about the concept, motivation and emotions. Many of the faculty members interacted with the faculty members of other autonomous colleges and had been hearing about autonomy recently. This interaction helped build connections of stimulus in the form of information received on the concept with internal hypotheses and expectations of the individuals and shaped their perception.

The perception of autonomy by the academic faculty is aligned with the vision of UGC. UGC looked at autonomy as the only way to achieve excellence in the quality of education. It was interesting to know that even before full-fledged implementing of autonomy, the faculty members were aware about the advantages of autonomy and excited to implement it. Though the faculty members had gone through the mixed feeling which happens during any change in an organisation, none of the participant from all the three cases expressed the wish to go back to the earlier affiliated system. This indicates the positive mindset of the stakeholders towards autonomy.

This study highlights the perception of the stakeholders at the very beginning phase of autonomy. It considered only faculty members since they are the ones who will be playing a central role in implementing autonomy on day to day basis. The perception of other stakeholders like non-teaching faculty, students and parents are not considered in the study. It will be interesting to study whether the perception of faculty members undergoes any transformation over the period after implementing autonomy for few years. It will be exciting to study whether the perception of autonomy changes under the leadership of different leaders, since each leader comes with own vision, mindset and set of skills. A study of this kind will provide an idea about the perception and required mindset of the people involved for effective implementation of autonomy to the leaders of any higher education institution aspiring to be autonomous.

CONCLUSION

All the three Cases had different scenario when they had gone for autonomy located in different localities, running different types of courses and having dissimilar student intake and faculty strength. There was no major difference found in the perception of the faculty about autonomy depending on the nature of the courses run by the institutions and the students and faculty strength of the institutions. All of them echoed similar concerns and strengths of autonomy in different words. Hence it comes out loud

and clear that it is essential to have proper understanding of phenomenon of autonomy and positive mind-set to accept the change so that talents could be tapped to create new opportunities to achieve excellence in education.

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