

The ceding of academic freedom in universities

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Everyone engaged in higher education recognises that academic freedom is primary because universities are the places for raising doubts and asking questions about everything. Exploring ideas, debating issues and thinking independently are essential in the quest for excellence.

After all, knowledge develops only if we question existing knowledge. This means that students must have the freedom to ask questions just as faculty must have the freedom to question received wisdom in their respective disciplines. Indeed, universities, as institutions, must have the freedom to raise questions, express opinions or articulate criticisms in the wider context of economic, social and political spheres.

In fact, the development of knowledge is central to university education. Students enter the world of higher education to learn. Understanding existing knowledge is a first step. The ability to ask relevant questions, a capacity to critique conventional wisdoms, and the confidence to resist the authority of the spoken – even printed – word are the next successive steps. Of course, learning is a continuous process that never stops. Thus, it is for universities to decide what is taught to students, which must not be controlled from elsewhere.

There should be no restrictions on who is invited to address a student audience. Circumscribing this space, in any way, can only stifle learning, which, in turn, can hurt economic and social progress.

The world of research needs similar freedoms. It is for universities to decide their research priorities. It is for faculty members to decide their research agenda. Of course, financial support for research must be based on peer review without preference or prejudice. Dissenting opinions or unorthodox thinking, irrespective of disciplines, should be encouraged for that is how knowledge develops. In fact, fundamental research needs far more in terms of not only freedoms but also resources and time. Such an environment is essential for brilliant scholars or thinkers to surface, blossom and flourish.

The disturbing reality in India

The unfolding reality in India is disturbing. Curricula are regulated and straitjacketed. Readings are prescribed. Indeed, what is excluded or what is included in prescribed reading lists is decided elsewhere, not necessarily by the teachers. Some readings are explicitly excluded. Promising research, which departs from the mainstream, particularly in social sciences or humanities, is stifled. Research funding is controlled, directly or indirectly, by the central government through its research councils and departments. In this milieu, fundamental research in universities in India is rare if not impossible. It is no accident that our universities have not produced any Nobel laureates.

Even the freedom for students and teachers to organise discussions or debates on campus, which are perceived as critical of the Bharatiya



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It is harming the teaching-learning process while stifling thinking and creativity in research; in the long run, the economy, society and polity will be the losers

Janata Party or its governments at the Centre and in States where it rules, is circumscribed everywhere, often by administrative fiat or penal action. Freedoms are curbed further, as social media posts sometimes lead to disciplinary action by universities or legal action by governments.

At many central Universities, if a faculty member applies for duty leave to participate in a conference abroad, he/she has to provide a written undertaking which says: "I will not participate in any anti-Government activities...while I am abroad whether on official duty or a personal visit, I shall be subject to all the provisions of Government Servants Conduct Rules including those relating to connection with the press and criticism of Government...Further I understand that... any breach of these provisions whether committed in India or abroad shall render me equally liable to disciplinary action."

Such intrusion, in different forms, is now being extended to private universities. Dissenting or critical voices of students or faculty members are silenced with disciplinary action. In some cases, it goes much further, essentially because risk averse promoters fall in line, since they do not wish to displease or antagonise the central government, or the State governments where their universities are located.

Autonomy and accountability

Just as important, the autonomy of university spaces is also sacrosanct in the wider context of political democracy, where universities perform an important role in addition to imparting higher education. In the economy, they are a source of ideas for science, technology, research and development, innovation, and economic or social policies. In society, they are the conscience-keepers as public intellectuals, from among the faculty, who engage with the public domain, informing citizens in their columns or lectures. In the polity, their evaluation or assessment of the performance of governments fosters accountability.

Of course, this autonomy must have a corresponding accountability. But it is essential for governments to recognise that the provision of resources to universities does not endow them with a right to exercise control.

The resources are public money for public universities, which are accountable to students and society through institutional mechanisms that exist or can be created. For this purpose, it is imperative that structures of governance in universities are appropriate for, and conducive to, accountability. Good governance is necessary but not sufficient. There must also be checks and balances in the public domain.

Rankings of universities perform an important role in this context. Such rankings, despite their limitations, provide students, their parents and society at large, such an institutional mechanism for accountability.

It is absolutely essential that regulatory structures provide complete autonomy – administrative, financial and academic – to universities. Liberation from the shackles of the

University Grants Commission is a necessary condition.

The existing parliamentary or legislative acts that created our universities also have many constraints and fetters. Thus, as an approach, it would be far better to reform regulatory structures, provide autonomy to universities and ensure accountability through systems – rather than interventions or controls – to create an environment that encourages freedom of thought and is conducive to learning.

The quest for uniformity is the worst enemy of thinking, creativity, understanding and knowledge, which can thrive only in open societies. One-size-fits-all is a flawed presumption. Indeed, diversity and differentiation are an integral part of the quest for excellence in higher education.

Governments and their quest to control

Academic freedom in universities is circumscribed not only in India but also in countries such as Argentina, Hungary and Türkiye which have democratically elected governments.

Of course, academic freedom is highly restricted in countries that are ruled by dictators in Africa and Asia. It is also curbed in countries that have one-party rule, for example, China, Russia and Vietnam. China is somewhat different. Even if the freedom for academics – especially in the social sciences and humanities – to write or to speak in the public domain is highly restricted, there is no compromise, driven by preference or prejudice, in the quality of academic appointments at leading universities and research institutions.

The real surprise is the United States, where academic freedom in universities has been sacrosanct for more than a century. The federal government of U.S. President Donald Trump is slashing research grants and imposing curbs on its leading public universities. If this continues, the leading edge of American universities in education, research, science, technology and innovation is bound to erode.

Governments seek to control universities essentially because they are worried about criticism or dissent. Just as important, there is a sense of discomfiture, if not insecurity, since universities, empowered by academic freedom, ask questions that are perceived as difficult. Of course, in some countries, governments just want ideological conformity. Most universities cede their autonomous space because they are largely dependent on government grants to support their teaching and research. The reasons why academics, as individuals, are often silenced are because of fear or compromise, while a few are willing to trade their beliefs for rewards.

The moral of the story is simple. The absence of academic freedom in universities will inevitably harm the teaching-learning process just as it will stifle thinking and creativity in research. Students and teachers will obviously be the worse-off. Ultimately, however, the economy, society and polity will be the losers.