

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

## Autonomy, accountability and responsibility

The Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) oversees the sprawling enterprise of education in India. Two autonomous (and here I use the word loosely) organizations that fall within the umbrella of the MHRD, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) serve to regulate our Universities and 'professional' institutions which provide higher education in engineering and technology. With education being a 'state subject' the vast majority of our universities are controlled by state governments, most of which have a limited interest in higher education. MHRD's direct control is felt by relatively few institutions, a handful of Central Universities, the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), among them. In general, the MHRD provides a substantial annual grant to these institutions, but has permitted them to function with a considerable degree of autonomy. The IITs and IIMs were creations of the state at a time when globalization and liberalization were unknown terms; even Mikhail Gorbachev's famous phrases of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were yet to enter our lexicon. Set up as national institutions of academic excellence, the IITs and IIMs have proved enormously successful. In a relatively short span of time they have established a worldwide presence; their alumni among the most influential Indians, both at home and abroad. With economic liberalization, these institutions have found that raising funds to create an institutional corpus is easy and their coffers have swelled. Directives from the government, that subsidies in higher education must be minimized have led to a substantial increase in the fees that students pay at the IIMs and IITs. Higher education has slowly become more expensive, with elite institutions like the IIMs raising the annual fees to a figure of Rs 1.5 lakhs. High fees seemed to be in line with the thinking in governmental circles that subsidies must be reduced for courses, where students can invariably repay any loans that may be necessary to finance their course of study. But in a sudden turn-around the MHRD has directed the IIMs to reduce their fees to a figure of Rs 30,000 per year. Normally the reduction in the price of a

product or a service would be a cause for celebration. Instead we have a brewing controversy. The pages of magazines and newspapers abound with articles, where even students who might welcome a fee reduction expound on the terrible consequences of MHRD's move. To an uninformed outsider the reactions are inexplicable. Closer examination of the issue reveals the contours of the arguments on the two sides. The IIMs (or at least their most vocal supporters) view this as an attempt by the MHRD to gain control over the institutions. A return to subsidies would ostensibly permit government a handle to erode institutional autonomy. For the MHRD a lowered fee structure would mean a greater accessibility of the IIMs to students who are intimidated by high costs of education. This view is promptly countered by the IIM protagonists, who argue that loans are readily available for all students who are admitted to these institutions. Indeed the success of the IIMs is judged by the salaries that each successive graduating class commands on the market, making an IIM alumnus extremely credit worthy. Is the MHRD's position based on misguided populism or is there a deeper purpose, posing a threat to institutional autonomy? Are the IIM supporters overreacting to a move which may be little more than playing to populist sentiment, at a time when the government seeks to project a favourable image?

The most curious feature of the IIM fees controversy is the public role played by captains of industry. They have mounted a public campaign, which is unprecedented in its intensity against a government directive. Business interests in the IIMs run deep. The graduates of these institutions, with very very few exceptions, enter the private sector. The government has invested considerably in these institutions since their founding. The beneficiaries of this support, continued, consistent and largely undemanding, have been the alumni and the organizations that have employed them. It would almost appear that having reached a stage of possible financial self sufficiency, these institutions and their supporters look forward to a future, where 'privatisation' has occurred seamlessly, unnoticed by all. The transformation of publicly funded institutions into essential private organizations is a diffi-

cult one. In the area of higher education there are many complex issues to be considered. Some years ago there was a proposal to 'buy control' of the IIT system with an infusion of about a billion (and here I write from memory) dollars. A little reflection might lead to the conclusion that these institutions are worth much more; even more importantly, public control over these national assets may be critically important. The captains of industry who worry that increased dependence on MHRD funds will limit autonomy at the IIMs, with consequent effects on their products, might detail the nature of their fears. Would there be a compulsion to dilute academic standards? Will the academically unqualified enter the institution? Would the MHRD dictate the course of future faculty recruitments? Would some faceless bureaucrat decide the nature of the courses to be offered?

We might ask, more generally: 'What is the autonomy that is desirable at institutions of higher education which are supported by public funds? The answer, of course, would be the complete lack of interference in academic decision making. This would encompass student admissions, course content, examination systems, evaluations and faculty recruitment and assessments. Traditionally, the sometimes conflicting demands of internal autonomy and public responsibility have been integrated by management councils which are broadly representative of different sections of the academic community, government, industry and public representatives. Erosion of autonomy occurs when leaders of institutions and their councils of management abdicate their responsibilities in the face of political or bureaucratic pressure. In many matters like fixation of salaries or disbursement of perquisites, many

institutions conveniently opt for autonomous decision making or acceptance of MHRD directives, depending on which option is more favourable. A couple of years ago the MHRD, in a burst of generosity, provided funds for travel to international symposia to the faculty of IITs and IISc. There were no murmurs of protest at an expenditure which does little for research and subsidizes conference organizers. Autonomy can be jealously guarded only when the administrators of institutions and their councils of management have a clear sense of public purpose and the strength of conviction to adopt unpopular positions. Unfortunately, the constitution of institutional councils is not a subject which attracts much attention, often leading to situations where institutions lack powerful, visible and energetic champions. Here the IIMs have scored, with many public figures weighing in on their side against the MHRD.

Finally, there is the question of accountability. Publicly funded institutions must adhere to standards, procedures and practices which justify public investment and public trust. Autonomy cannot be used as an impenetrable shield. Academic freedom cannot be interpreted as a license for non-performance. When the dust has settled on the IIM-MHRD battle, some reflection on the relationships between public institutes of higher education and the government might be worthwhile. The policies of institutions and governments cannot be matters of impulse. The growing power of business interests will also be a factor which may redefine these relationships in the future.

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