
Autonomous College: Studying its Relevance in the Indian Higher Education Scenario with Special Reference to the State of Assam

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Abstract:

The higher education scenario in India is yet to present an encouraging picture. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is still far below that of the western and progressive Asian nations. Many recommendations have been forwarded by various committees and government agencies regarding the upliftment of the higher education scenario in the country. The focus however remains on a few cardinal issues – making higher education more accessible, quality higher education, enhancing the spread of higher education and meeting global standards in higher education. Thus the onus is on proper planning leading to the upliftment of the standard of higher education in India. One major policy recommendation that has been implemented is the establishment of autonomous colleges in India. However, since the bestowal of autonomous status to colleges for the first time during the academic session 1978-79 only 441 colleges have achieved the status till date. There is an urgent necessity to look at the modalities of the system as its permeation rate is rather low and look

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for factors that have prevented many noted institutions of higher education from seeking autonomous colleges. In the context of India's North East the number of autonomous colleges is 3 and in Assam it is 1. The paper, basically restricted to colleges conducting general degree programmes, seeks to look at the relevance or else of the system in the mission of ascertainment and quality enhancement of higher education. The University Grants Commission guidelines on autonomous colleges and course regulations as well as examination rules of select autonomous colleges of the country shall be analysed for studying the phenomenon of academic autonomy and its impact and relevance or otherwise in the Indian higher education machinery.

Key words: Higher Education, Autonomous College, Academic Autonomy.

Introduction:

Education has been one of the most important concerns of the human society since the dawn of human civilization. India has a history of ancient universities where scholars from across the world gathered for intellectual enrichment. A major step towards the spread of higher education in India was the dispatch of Charles Wood, the President of the Board of Control of the East India Company (famous as the Wood's Despatch) to Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India in 1854 leading to the establishment of the universities of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay in 1857 by the British colonial regime modelled on London University (established in 1836). Lord Curzon was the force behind the first All India Conference of the Directors of Public Instruction and a representative of universities in 1901 (by then University of the Punjab at Lahore and Allahabad University came into being in 1882 and 1887 respectively) for planning educational reforms and the subsequent move was the establishment of the first Indian Universities Commission in 1902. Since the attainment of independence in 1947 many education commissions have been

established at various times by the government for finding ways of improvement of the higher education scenario through concrete constructive suggestions. Despite all such attempts the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) does not present a very encouraging picture when compared to many other developed or progressive nations as can be seen from Table 1.

Sl. No.	Name of the Country	GER
1	United States of America	95%
2	Russia	76%
3	Sweden	74%
4	Argentina	71%
5	Canada	60%
6	United Kingdom	59%
7	Brazil	26%
8	China	25%
9	India	18%

(Source: The Global Competitiveness Report, 2012-13)

That all were not too pleased with the shape of higher education in the initial years in India could be gauged from a comment of Lord Curzon which was taken very seriously by the Education Commission, 1964-66:

How different is India! Here the university has no corporate existence in the same (as in Oxford Cambridge) sense of the term; it is not a collection of buildings, it is scarcely a site. It is a body that controls courses of study and sets examination papers to the pupils of affiliated colleges. They are not part of it. They are frequently not in the same city, sometimes not in the same province. (Higher Education: Retrospects and Prospects, p.41)

The university as the core of the system situated far removed (in most cases) from the affiliated cases remains a concern even today. For instance the single universities in the North East Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura affiliate all the Higher Education

Institutes (HEI) of the states. In Assam the three affiliating universities have tremendous workload (Assam University has a comparatively narrower jurisdiction) and most particularly the universities at Guwahati and Dibrugarh cater to the needs of HEIs very different from each other in terms of intelligence level of learners, infrastructure, modern teaching-learning aids, industry exposure and accessibility to information technology. The gap that exists between the affiliating university and the affiliated colleges needs to be bridged for achieving the goal of at least reaching the level of the global GER. No doubt establishment of many more colleges and universities has been recommended by experts but equally important is the revamping of the existing HEIs infrastructurally as well as academically. The mission document of Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), released in September 2013, has stressed on the National Policy of Higher Education (1986) has set five major goals of higher education in India (p.3):

- Access: Greater access requires an enhancement of the education institutional capacity of the higher education sector to provide opportunities to all those who deserve and desire higher education.
- Equity: Equity involves fair access of the poor and the socially disadvantaged groups to higher education.
- Quality and Excellence: Involve provision of education in accordance with accepted standards so that students receive available knowledge of the highest standard that helps them to enhance their human resource capabilities.
- Relevance: Involves promotion of education so as to develop human resources keeping pace with the changing economic, social and cultural development of the country.
- Value Based Education: Involves inculcating basic moral values among the youth.

Considering such a vision it becomes imperative that innovations need to be initiated in the system and one important step towards easing the load of affiliating universities is to confer the 'Autonomous' status to colleges that have been suitably graded by the recognized assessment agencies. Such a step would allow the HEIs to design and amend the syllabi of the various programmes of studies keeping in view the global standards and local demands as well as limitations if any.

Purpose of the Study:

The significance of higher education in the enhancement of socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions of a society cannot be ignored. The earliest Indian universities were set on the London University model but whereas that university was remodeled in 1989 the case is not the same in India as yet. In the context of the north eastern states of India the situation is even more pathetic. There is urgency in terms of expansion of the web of quality higher education in the region and considering UGC's focus on autonomous colleges as centres of fostering academic excellence certain colleges can be conferred the autonomous status. However the prospects and lacunae of the system, if any needs to be addressed and that form the purpose of the current study.

Methodology:

This study is qualitative in nature. The researchers have resorted to analytical approach for critically analyzing the secondary data collected from various sources- journal articles, newspapers etc. Reports of various commissions and government agencies like UGC and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), Policy papers and mission document of RUSA related to the spread of higher education in

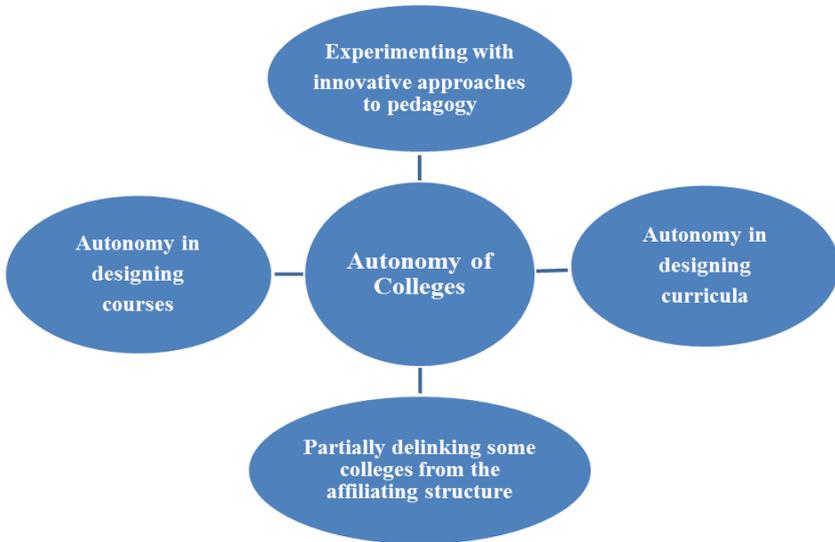
India would be taken into purview for arriving at constructive conclusive suggestions.

Autonomous College & Need for Academic Autonomy:

An autonomous college in the Indian higher education parlance is an HEI that has the academic autonomy in designing its own syllabi for various programmes of studies as well as examination and evaluation methodology by remaining within the folds of the affiliating university (there is provision of gradual elevation of such colleges in to degree awarding colleges). Other aspects that go in to the management and functioning of a college remain the same as that of other affiliated colleges. The impetus remains on continuous evaluation with active student-teacher participation. The University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines to autonomous colleges during the 11th Plan period stresses on the need of autonomy in these words:

The affiliating system of colleges was originally designed when their number in a university was small....The system has now become unwieldy and it is becoming increasingly difficult for a university to attend to the varied needs of individual colleges. The colleges do not have the freedom to modernize their curricula or make them locally relevant. The regulations of the university and its common system, governing all colleges alike, irrespective of their characteristic strengths, weaknesses and locations, have affected the academic development of individual colleges. Colleges that have the potential for offering programmes of a higher standard do not have the freedom to offer them..... With students, teachers and management being co-partners in raising the quality of higher education, it is imperative that they share a major responsibility. Hence, the Education Commission (1964-66) recommended college autonomy, which, in essence, is the instrument for promoting academic excellence. (p. 2)

The dynamics of the system of autonomy could be understood from the following diagram:



(Source: Indian Higher Education – Quest for Excellence, p. 22)

The motives behind grant of autonomy to colleges can be stated as follows:

- Providing scope for academic innovation
- Quest for academic excellence
- Emphasis on internalization of and continuous evaluation
- Making ground for innovative teaching-learning methodologies
- Confirming greater accountability and participation of stake holders
- Encouraging participatory decision making in policy matters

In the state of Assam there are 6 government and 189 provincialised colleges receiving government patronage in

terms of staff salary and other development funds as of today besides the non-provincialised colleges and private colleges that conduct general degree programmes. The present GER of Assam as recorded in the mission document of RUSA is 13.4% and is the lowest among the north eastern states .Manipur stands second in the country having a GER of 35.9%, the highest being that of Chandigarh at 41.4% (the GER figures of other north eastern states: Arunachal Pradesh has 26.9%, Sikkim 24.2%, Mizoram 21.6%, Nagaland 21.5%, Meghalaya 17.5% and Tripura 13.6%. The colleges of the state are mostly affiliated to three universities – Gauhati University which has 103 affiliated colleges (excluding the non-provincialised and private colleges), Dibrugarh University has 75 affiliated colleges (excluding the non-provincialised and private colleges) and Assam University which has the lowest of 16 colleges (excluding the non-provincialised and private colleges). If we look at the number of constituent colleges of the universities of Gauhati and Dibrugarh the workload of the universities become apparent. In his essay “Higher Education, Globalization and Autonomous College” Prof. Kishori Mohan Pathak, former Vice Chancellor of Tezpur University, has stated:

All the three affiliating universities in Assam are now finding extremely difficult to attend to the varied needs of the individual colleges affiliated to them. (K.M. Pathak, p.77)

The oldest college of the state as well as the entire north eastern region Cotton College, Guwahati is the sole constituent college of the Cotton College State University created by the XIX of 2011 of the Government of Assam. It was at Cotton College that the issue of conferment of autonomous status to a college in Assam created rifts in the intelligentsia. Whereas a section was in support of the change in the system others thought of maintaining status quo. Now that a state university has been formed debate is still on as regards the status of Cotton College under the new set up. But considering the

number of colleges that have been awarded 'A' grade by NAAC, Bangalore and declared College with Potential for Excellence (CPE) by UGC the load seems *reducible*. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and Yashpal Committee have recommended lessening the burden of affiliating universities by enhancing autonomy to the colleges by establishment of College Cluster Universities. Considering the extent of emphasis on autonomy bestowed by UGC and burden on the affiliating universities many reputed colleges should have opted for autonomy but takers are few (441 colleges till June 2013 including engineering and teacher training colleges) since the award of autonomous status for the first time during the academic session 1978-79. The need of the hour is to find the apprehensions preventing HEIs from opting for autonomy by focusing on the advantages and surmountable challenges of the system in the Indian context in general and that of Assam in particular.

Autonomy and Colleges in Assam:

With only 3 autonomous colleges in north east India (Oriental College of Imphal, Manipur has been given the autonomous status subject to the condition that it fulfills the conditions given by the UGC nominated visiting team within 2 years of notification as autonomous college) and 1 in Assam the message is loud and clear that the concept of academic autonomy to colleges has not gone down properly with the state academia. Whereas Patkai Christian College, Dimapur, Nagaland was granted autonomy from the academic session 2005-06, North Lakhimpur College, North Lakhimpur, Assam was declared an autonomous college in May, 2013; Oriental College, Takyelpat, Imphal was declared autonomous in January, 2014. Opting for autonomy by select colleges of the state can bring in deep-rooted and prominent changes in the educational scenario of the state. Not only will it keep the teachers aware of the latest

advancements in the subject(s) of study but also address the local issues in the process of framing of syllabi. Considering the huge distance between the affiliating universities and the colleges and the infrastructure and resources gulf that exists between HEIs many colleges having great potential for enhancing the academic environment of the state are compelled to remain silent. Thus the homogenizing approach turns fatal for the advanced colleges. Further continuous evaluation would ensure that the learners are not dependant on the end-semester examinations only for their final result. Prof. Gautam Barua, former Director of Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati and present Mentor Director of Indian Institute of Information Technology, Guwahati, in his essay “Prescriptions for Higher Education in Assam” is critical of the current affiliating system prevalent in India:

The argument that the quality of education will suffer if affiliation is removed is a specious one, as one may argue that it cannot get any worse. One may further argue that affiliation is in fact allowing mediocre and non-performing colleges to hide behind the affiliating university. Many colleges today are nothing more than coaching centres for the University examinations. (Barua, p.4)

When the affiliation system would be replaced by unitary or autonomous colleges not only would the colleges be better equipped to cater to the need of the learners in a far more intensive manner and the universities would get more scope for furthering the cause of academic excellence. When the colleges would have to thrive on own academic strength the non-performers shall be easily identified and necessary reformative measures could be initiated which in turn shall have positive ramifications in the higher education sector of the nation. The agencies researching on autonomy in the colleges of India have certain interesting findings. The following conclusions can be derived on the basis of studies on academic autonomy of

colleges:

- Enhancement of the status of the college and faculty.
- Greater professional satisfaction for the faculty members as there is ample scope for active participation in the system.
- Introduction of innovations in admission policy programmes of studies and in the examination-evaluation process.
- Easy introduction of new courses.
- Restructuring and revision of existing courses periodically by taking into consideration the institutional strengths and the society.
- Optimum utilization of existing infrastructure and resources.

While framing syllabi for various courses neither can the parent universities take into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of each college nor can they prepare syllabi focussing on the sub-regional issues. The Report of the Task Force on Higher Education formed by the Government of Karnataka in 2002 considers autonomy to be a potent tool for bringing constructive changes through active participation of all the stakeholders by taking each institution as an individual test case. In a culturally diverse state like Assam the autonomous colleges can cater to the demand of local and indigenous knowledge. The case of North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous) can be taken as an example in this regard. When the college was following the syllabi prepared by Dibrugarh University there was no course (paper) on the geography of Lakhimpur district. Now the Board of Studies of the Department of Geography of the college has introduced a course on the Geography of the district. Further the project reports that shall have to be submitted by the students in partial fulfillment for the award of bachelor's degree would encourage generation of fresh knowledge related to the district in

particular and the state in general. As far as innovation in examination and evaluation is concerned the college has made provisions for personal verification of answer scripts by students before the declaration of end-semester results. This shall not only remove any doubts regarding partiality in evaluation in the minds of the students but also make the teachers approach the evaluation process with greater caution. Noted educationist of Assam Dayananda Pathak stresses on the need for making the presence of colleges “visible in the grey areas of the university system. If a college has to make its presence meaningful then it has to shape its own destiny by occupying a larger space in the academic administration.” (D. Pathak, p. 279) The UGC document on “Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher Education (Compilation Based on the Deliberations of the Working Group for Higher Education in the 12th Five-Year Plan)” has suggested the elevation of autonomous colleges with proven track record of 10 years as an autonomous college to the status of ‘Degree Awarding Colleges’ which shall be another milestone in the national higher education scenario.

Opinions of the scholars and personal experiences of the researchers have indicated presence of contradictory opinions regarding the credibility of the concept of academic autonomy to colleges. Dr. Ghanashyam Nath, who happens to be a Principal of a premier college of the state, in his essay “Autonomous College: A Step towards Reduction of Subsidization of Higher Education” has drawn 6 inferences to prove his stand against autonomy of colleges in Assam (Nath, p.294-295):

- i) The institution will be free to fix its charges for educational services.
- ii) It is doubtful whether the parents and society would be ready to bear the same charges, if they aren't then the outflow of Rs. 180 crore per annum spent by the students of Assam taking education elsewhere would

continue.

- iii) Some of the subjects which do not provide immediate readymade job market would become redundant.
- iv) We may bear in mind at the same time that a degree college like Cotton College does not stand for producing technically qualified persons for the job market. The purpose of a degree is to create manpower with a general average aptitude for learning of general course curriculum. In the name of granting autonomy we cannot convert it into a job churning factory.
- v) Academic autonomy should be supplemented by financial autonomy.
- vi) There was a time when the famous universities like Calcutta University, Bombay University, Madras University flourished and found niches for themselves, produced Nobel laureates with the government patronage and public financial support. An autonomous college may not necessarily produce brilliant students and intellectuals.

The issues raised by Nath are commonly found apprehensions of the people regarding autonomy and autonomous colleges in Assam. The researchers encountered many teachers and guardians who were dead against any change in the system and pointed out probable lacunae like excessive workload of the teachers, prevalence of favouritism and acceptability of the degree of an autonomous college in the national and global job market. Dayananda Pathak has described this mindset in details:

Since we are born and brought up under the affiliation system we find it quite uncomfortable to think of coming out of the cocoon of our closed mindset even for better reasons. A kind of fear psychosis impels us to withdraw from anything new. We think of our job security. We are apprehensive of bigger work

load. We are also panicky about more responsibility that may create roadblocks in our comfort zone that we are accustomed to...We do not like to expose ourselves to the alien visitor. With this xenophobia in mind we do not hesitate to say good bye to the new visitor without allowing him to step into our portal (Pathak, p.281)

A very major fear among the class opposed to implementation of autonomy in the colleges of Assam is the issue of increasing fee which many feel would be arbitrarily determined by autonomous college authority. This apprehension lacks depth as fees vary from one college to another even under the jurisdiction of the same affiliating university as is the case now. Government of Assam is mulling over the idea of having uniform fee structure across all colleges of the state and under such a condition it is unthinkable that North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous) would be allowed to fix its own fee structure. The autonomous colleges are to manage the expenses of the formalities involved under autonomy through the grant received from UGC (during the 11th Plan it was Rs. 15 lakh for colleges conducting only UG classes and Rs. 20 lakh for colleges with PG classes in at least 2 teaching departments).

The second issue raised by Nath is that of parents/guardians consenting to pay the hiked fee (if autonomous colleges hike fee) and that of students moving outside the state for higher education. It is pertinent to note that most students that move out of the state end up paying huge amounts as fee and one main reason behind the outward flow is the absence of quality institutes imparting lessons in their chosen field of study. As such only the apprehension (not firsthand experience) of fee hike is not a factor that discourages parents/ guardians from admitting their wards into the autonomous colleges and subsequently a factor encouraging brain drain.

The third apprehension is regarding the redundancy of certain subjects/ programmes that does not aid in procuring a

job to the learner at the earliest. It is noteworthy that there is a craze among the youth of today to opt for technical courses rather than pursuing a general degree programme. The affiliated colleges conducting the B.Sc programme in Assam witness full admission at the start but gradually the students drop out opting for various technical courses that guarantee better job prospects in future. Many affiliated colleges have started Programmes like BCA, BBA, MBA etc. in the self-financing mode to cater to the demands of the student community. In such a situation holding the autonomous system responsible for rendering certain subjects redundant is not justified. The UGC guidelines for autonomous colleges during the 11th Plan period has made the presence of on representative from the corporate sector compulsory in the Board of Studies of every department with the intention of preventing subjects from remaining contemporary and thereby not slipping into redundancy.

The fourth apprehension of turning the colleges into job churning machines without regards to creating manpower having aptitude for learning of the general course curriculum. The autonomous colleges, whether it is government, provincialised or private, conducting general degree programmes cannot dissolve the core issue of imparting knowledge in the faculties of science, humanities, social sciences etc. Considering the insistence of students on job oriented subjects certain innovations can be made by the autonomous colleges but that cannot be at the cost of holistic education. Famous autonomous colleges like St. Xavier's College, Kolkata; St. Xavier's College, Mumbai; Presidency College, Chennai have evolved strategies to strike balance between the demands of the job market and pursuit of holistic learning. Mere bestowal of autonomy cannot rob a college of its commitment to the society.

The fifth issue is regarding financial autonomy. The autonomous colleges are regulated by the same financial rules

of the Government of Assam (in case of government or provincialised colleges) as those of the affiliated colleges. The additional grant received from UGC is to be spent on the academic and administrative assignments that are to be carried out in the autonomous set up. Financial autonomy, in the narrow sense of the term, is granted in case of the annual recurring grant. Moreover, the logic behind the establishment of autonomous colleges is academic autonomy and greater financial autonomy shall be received by such colleges on their elevation to unitary universities. The elevation of 45 autonomous colleges accredited 'A' by NAAC and declared Colleges with Potential for Excellence by UGC into unitary universities is under serious concern of the Government of India.

The sixth argument is specious. Indian universities have not bred Nobel winning scholars since long. The few Nobel laureates of Indian origin to have received the coveted honour have done it by dint of their work primarily in the west and not exclusively in the libraries and laboratories of India. Considering autonomous colleges incapable of breeding genuine talent is a misnomer as even the affiliated colleges have failed to live up to the standards highlighted by Nath in the above argument. If autonomous colleges may not necessarily breed brilliant students and intellectuals so is the case with affiliated colleges and even universities at least in India. The stakeholders and policy makers of higher education have to collectively bear the responsibility of the present draught in getting international recognition for scholarly works.

Another common apprehension that needs to be addressed is the standard of the syllabi for various courses prepared by autonomous colleges as to whether they are capable of meeting global standards. The Board of Studies of every department comprises of subject experts and nominee of Vice Chancellor of the parent university and so the question of a below par syllabus does not exist. In the case of North

Lakhimpur College (Autonomous) subject experts were nominated from 7 universities (Gauhati University, Guwahati; Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh; Tezpur University, Tezpur; Assam University, Diphu Campus; Indira Gandhi National Open University, Guwahati office; Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat and Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh) and 1 deemed university (North Eastern Regional University of Science & Technology, Nirjuli, Arunachal Pradesh).

Suggestions:

The researchers seek to propose certain suggestions for better acceptance of the system of academic autonomy by the stakeholders of higher education in Assam by removing the obstacles that have been preventing such a productive system from taking roots:

- 1) Immediate removal of higher secondary classes from the colleges. The Government of Assam needs to evolve result-oriented strategies in this issue at the earliest.
- 2) Initiating measures to encourage potential colleges to opt for autonomy by conducting sessions highlighting on the advantages of the system. Such a move stands to dispel much of the unjustified apprehension regarding the system in the minds of the stake holders of the higher education system in the country.
- 3) Better and cohesive State Government – Parent University – Autonomous College relationship for avoidance of red tapism leading to speedy resolution of matters associated with such colleges.
- 4) A regulation for management of autonomous colleges be immediately framed replacing the existent UGC guidelines which are not binding by nature. It is heartening to learn that the matter was taken very seriously in a meet of the Principals of the autonomous

colleges of the country held at the National University of Educational Planning and Administration in December, 2013.

- 5) Healthy practices such as community service, extension activities and neighbourhood programmes get priority in policy framing. The universities in Assam have not given enough focus on these aspects as far as inclusion in syllabi is concerned. Autonomy gives a college better scope to include these in the academic curricula thereby internalizing these concepts in letter and spirit. An aggressive sensitization strategy, to be adopted by policy implementing authorities, is desired in the current scenario.

Conclusion:

The system of a university at the centre of affairs with the affiliated colleges spread over the area of its academic control was initiated when the number of colleges was limited. But with times the system has changed and the universities have been compelled to have a large number of colleges under them and as a result both the university and the affiliated colleges have been suffering in many fronts right from elongated red tapism to lack of easy accessibility in complications arising out in examination or evaluation related matters. The worst sufferers in the whole process are the students. University Grants Commission- North Eastern Regional Office (UGC-NERO) in a report that it had circulated highlighted the lack of innovations in the HEIs of Assam as well as the entire north eastern region. Thus autonomy seems to be an answer to such woes but regulations should be framed to ascertain that academic autonomy does not dilute the quality of higher education being imparted. The universities should act as parents/ guardians whose pursuit is to transform their wards into worthy self-dependant citizens. The existing universities should encourage

greater academic autonomy in its affiliated colleges so that the deserving and potential HEIs get upgraded to new universities by gradually preparing them for shouldering greater academic responsibilities through the autonomy route. It would be relevant to end with Dr. D.S.Kothari's opinion that "*in the rapidly changing world of today, one thing is certain- yesterday's educational system will not meet today's and even less so, the need of tomorrow.*"

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