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What autonomy means

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Ever since the human resource development ministry shot down the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore's proposal to open a campus overseas there has been a debate on autonomy mixed with the desirability of an IIM to open a campus abroad. These two issues, which are quite separate, have been mixed as it is viewed that since the institute's proposal was not accepted by the ministry, which is its 100% owner, there is a violation of autonomy.

Places like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and IIMs were started with some objectives. The main objective of these institutes is to create top-quality manpower in India, and to build a top-class institution that can serve the needs of the nation. Making money or profits is not an objective. Hence, though it is clearly justified and within the scope of a private company to go abroad in search of better margins and earnings, this argument cannot be used for the IITs and IIMs.

All organisations — private, public or government — work within a scope and towards a goal. If the scope has to be changed, then even a private company cannot do it by just passing a resolution in the board and must go to the owners of the company and get their approval (ie from shareholders in an AGM). But within their stated objectives, the company's executives are free to select a strategy and the means to execute it.

Ideally, the same should apply to the IIMs and IITs. As long as they work towards their stated goals, they should have complete autonomy of functioning. But if they want to change the goal, they should seek an okay from their owners, namely the government of India. To this extent, opening a campus overseas goes beyond the stated mission of these institutes, and therefore an okay from the GoI is needed.

However, within their stated missions, they should have complete autonomy. This is where the real problem of autonomy lies. Even basic issues like compensation of employees and performance-based increments are not in the control of these institutes. Then there are other issues like the director needing permission to travel abroad, getting approvals for a host of activities, selection of the director (which is done by the ministry), etc which eat into the autonomy of these institutes.

Anyone who knows about quality higher education knows that such operational autonomy should be given to institutes. With the top functionaries of these institutes being appointed by the government, the leaders of these institutes are not in a position to fight for these rights, leaving the level of autonomy unchanged (indeed, it seems to have declined as the institutes have become more visible), despite liberalisation in other areas.

Starting centres abroad can be justified as a means of faculty recruitment and retention and enhancing quality — both operational issues. However, this rather tenuous argument will find more takers if the institutes are perceived to have exceeded in achieving their stated goals. Without going into their contribution to research and development (which is average at best), these institutes have not done what is possible in the area of manpower development.

The IITs and IIMs produce a small number of graduates, but do little beyond that. They are still working in the scenario of the 1980s when all institutes of higher education were owned by the GoI. The situation now has changed: 90% of engineering graduates and MBAs get their education from private institutes.

The IITs and IIMs have played no role, which as leaders in education they could easily have done, to improve the quality of education in these places, or to help launch such institutes. Being controlled by the government, the IITs and IIMs follow the government's approach of maintaining an arm's length distance from private institutes.

So, we have an ironical situation — the IIMs and IITs sign MOUs with private universities abroad, but would not do so with a private education provider here. What is needed is for these institutes to expand their role in the higher education arena, besides enhancing their contributions on the R&D front. Indeed, if they were playing a more significant role in manpower creation in India, as is their charter, tapping overseas opportunities to improve their brand and manpower retention will perhaps become more acceptable.

Writer is a professor at IIT Kanpur, The views expressed are personal.

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