

Accountability and Autonomy in Higher Education Institutions: Dilemmas and Solutions

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Abstract— The quality of teaching and educational performance in institutions of higher learning has always been a concern. In general, quality assurances in educational institutions are provided through external audit mechanisms. This practice also ensures accountability among institutions. This article explores the complex question of professional autonomy coexisting with accountability in higher education institutions. It is felt that even though at times interests of accountability overshadow the need for academic freedom, standardised accreditation and assessment measures are vital to sustain the quality and academic accountability of an institution. However, it is also required that, while accountability and transparency are important principles which academic institutions should uphold, the processes of verification and validation should not assume greater importance than the actual delivery of quality education. Perhaps it is time to explore a middle path of accountability with a measure of trust and academic freedom.

Keywords— Accountability, Accreditation, Autonomy, Education, Freedom, Quality Assurance

Introduction

Education is one of the most fundamental of social institutions. In any modern welfare state, education requires significant budgetary allocation, capital investment and expertise—both human and technological. The basic raw

material in any educational process is the human individual, and the finished product is also the person's value-added knowledge and skill. There is customarily a long gestation period before the benefits of education can be reaped. As a matter of fact, if there is any sector of the economy in which the human resource is the real asset, then education would be that sector.

The achievements of any institution of teaching are highlighted through the scholastic levels attained by students and the academic accomplishments attained by teachers. So both teachers and students are accountable to one another, to the institution, and to wider society. Institutions are accountable to all their stakeholders, including students and their families, teachers, and society. In addition to this configuration of relationships, there is an added dimension of submitting to audit by an outside agency such as an accreditation or ranking board for quantifiable indices of achievement through which their credentials can be rationally observed.

The success of an institution on the aforementioned dimensions is heavily reliant on the quality of its human resources, which includes its knowledge, skills, competence, motivation and conformity to the overall organisational culture. In knowledge-driven economies, it is critical to

identify the human capital component, in this case, for example, students and teachers, as a vital part of an organisation's overall value. To estimate and project an institution's credentials, some viable system of quantifying the knowledge, motivation, abilities, and contribution of the human element in the organisation needs to be developed and standardised. This is the rationale behind standardised institutional assessments.

Literature Review

Research on higher education governance delineates a range from highly centralised, state-driven models to market-influenced, institution-centred regimes. Extensive study has been conducted on the capacity of institutional autonomy to enhance organisational agility and foster educational innovation (De Boer, 2013; Henkel, 2000). 'Institutional autonomy' refers to the extent to which institutions can independently transact their academic programmes and manage their financial priorities, personnel decisions, and strategic planning. Autonomy is often associated with accelerated curriculum changes, the establishment of multidisciplinary research centres, international collaborations, industry linkages, consultancy, patents and technology transfers. Those in favour of autonomy might argue that it is essential for global competitiveness since it enables institutions to tailor their curricula to suit global requirements and focus on market-centric areas of study, as well as emerging fields such as digital social sciences, sustainability studies, and artificial intelligence.

Literature on accountability, conversely, emphasises procedures that ensure economic responsibility, academic rigour, and public benefit. Examples of accountability mechanisms include periodic accreditation reviews, mandated financial audits, performance-based funding models, disclosure of key performance indicators, and stakeholder reporting. Critics argue that excessive focus on quantitative metrics fosters an 'audit culture', wherein the processes of data collection and reporting eclipse

substantive educational enhancements (Stergiou & Airey, 2009). Excessive prescriptive accountability may hinder instructional creativity, promote superficial compliance instead of genuine quality enhancement, and divert faculty time from teaching and research. Conceptual frameworks designed to reconcile the tensions between accountability and autonomy have arisen from the interplay between the two. From the perspective of contractual governance, institutional autonomy relies on implicit agreements with stakeholders, wherein freedoms are exchanged for demonstrable transparency and quality (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Proponents of the stewardship model endorse shared governance frameworks that integrate academic personnel, administrators, and external stakeholders, including employers, community organisations, and accreditors, into collaborative oversight structures (Tierney, 2004). This paradigm posits that communal ownership of accountability mechanisms diminishes adversarial dynamics and enhances legitimacy. Mishra (2021), discussing the complex relationship between autonomy and accountability in higher education governance, finds a significant positive relationship between autonomy and accountability, suggesting that institutions that are perceived to provide more autonomy are expected to have more accountability. The association implies that enabling educational institutions can lead to better governance and outcomes. Thus, in the long term, it can be beneficial for both teachers and students and for creating a climate of trust and independence.

Additionally, public accountability must be separated from political control. Its priority must be to ensure the best possible practice rather than regulate it (Kelly, 1995:131). A second key assumption that emerges is that accountability, apart from being perhaps the most fundamental component of democracy, is also essentially post-eventum (Downey and Kelly, 1979). Holding someone accountable for acts before they occur is impracticable and unreasonable. The fundamental feature of accountability is that it comes into

play once someone has been given the freedom to use professional judgement and take whatever action he or she deems suitable. In the context of teaching, accountability cannot be read as implying giving in advance an account of what one plans to accomplish, although many may have interpreted it in this way and therefore regarded it as adding weight to the prevalent practice of the prespecification of teaching objectives. This has been a significant aspect of the accountability schemes that have been implemented in many regions of the United States in the past few decades (Hamilton, 1976; Atkin, 1979) and that have served as models for comparable schemes proposed and implemented in the United Kingdom. By 1974, nearly forty states in the United States were attempting to establish a legal foundation for demanding teacher accountability (Hamilton, 1976), and a major feature of their proposed schemes was a concern with 'outcomes or outputs' (Atkin, 1979), their emphasis being on 'management by objectives', 'programme budgeting' and even 'performance contracting', a system by which outside agencies are paid (Atkin, 1979). In short, the emphasis has been on obtaining more external control over education by intervention from the outset, rather than allowing teachers to use professional judgement and holding them accountable when they do (Kelly, 2004).

According to Behn (2001), accountability is to do with answering the primary question: "Who is accountable to whom, for what purposes, for whose benefit, by which means, and with what consequences?" It is society which is the ultimate beneficiary of any educational system and to which it must be accountable, in the ultimate analysis. At the same time, accountability does not mean only being responsive to external agencies or stakeholders, the demands of the employment market or even, as in a democracy, eventually, to the general public. This is the outward dimension of accountability. We must remind ourselves that accountability is also an inward journey where agents are constrained to act out of an exalted sense of ethical standards. Teachers must set a positive example. But the

outward dimension of accountability sets forth certain tangible criteria through which institutional standards can be ascertained and maintained.

It can be seen that empirical studies have yielded mixed findings. It is also observed that robust multidimensional accountability systems are often present in countries with significant university autonomy, as indicated by national evaluations; however, the efficacy of these systems is contingent upon their alignment with institutional missions and stakeholder expectations. Case studies demonstrate that co-designed accountability frameworks, developed through participatory processes, enhance stakeholder engagement and reduce perceptions of bureaucratic burden. Nonetheless, a knowledge deficit exists about the manifestation of autonomy-accountability linkages in both established and nascent higher education markets, since little research systematically combines practitioner survey data with theme analyses of governance experiences across diverse geographic contexts.

The need for accountability

The discourse of accountability in teaching and learning is far more complex than in any other professional sphere. Accountability at its simplest is understood as 'responsibility to someone or for some activity'. When considering an institution's accountability, we relate it to the institution's responsibility for students and their learning outcomes, as well as to society at large. In an educational institution and in the sphere of teaching and learning, it is difficult to account for resources because profit and productivity are largely reliant on intangible assets such as the teacher's intellect, inherent teaching aptitude, the vibrancy of the student-teacher relationship, the academic outputs of educators, and student learning. The more measurable entities, such as the educational qualifications and research degrees of teachers and the learning outcomes of students as reflected through examination results, are usually reckoned as yardsticks of an institution's standing,

but they may not necessarily be the complete picture of institutional wellbeing. The concept of measuring the worth of any intangible resource is perplexing. In the institutional context, audit agencies, peer teams, and verification mechanisms attempt this task through a comparative assessment of the attainment of certain standardised outcomes. Quantifying the investment in intellectual and knowledge resources and assessing their future value to provide a comprehensive view of an organisation's total competency is a hard endeavour. In contrast to other tangible resources, the intrinsic value of intellectual assets does not diminish with time; instead, it is expected to increase or improve, albeit at rates that vary from individual to individual. There can therefore be no set 'formula' to calculate academic assets, and any endeavour to do so is a task laden with complexity. The attempt to compute and quantify intellectual and academic worth through assessment based on certain performance criteria has an inherent insufficiency contained in its very nature. Although grading systems mark institutions in grade points to the second or third decimal, the results generated do not in fact have the degree of precision and accuracy that they purport to possess and may not accurately reflect the actual quality of an institution. Truly evaluating the worth of a pedagogue requires more than just objective criteria. Some institutions have a heritage of learning that is invaluable; some have high levels of technological and infrastructural resources, and, in some cases, individual teachers and scholars may be institutions in themselves in the context of their disciplines. Nevertheless, at the same time, in the broader view, it is essential to understand and appreciate the logic and rationale behind quantifying and accounting for human assets in an academic institution. The valuation of an institution is not merely the value on a computational scale; teachers and teaching institutions are the transmitters of intellectual tradition and knowledge. It is their bounden duty to be accountable— to themselves, to their students, to the institution, and to wider society. For any institution, the value of its resource of teaching is not just its estimated

worth in the market; it also carries with it the added dimension of the value of social consciousness and the moral order that it sustains. In other words, one must also consider the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning as valuable assets. It has a cognitive dimension— that of accounting (tabulating and record-keeping)— and a moral dimension— that of accountability. In dictionary terms, accountability is defined as the “obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions”. An institution of higher learning and its members are constantly exposed to the public gaze and should be willing to subject themselves to public scrutiny and audit. Members of the institution have to be answerable to the citizenry and not just to the state. They are answerable to society. This accountability imposes certain demands. State-funded colleges and universities, in particular, must prove they deserve that support and will keep up the expected standards of teaching and learning.

Dilemma between university autonomy and academic accountability

Across educational systems worldwide, there has been a constant struggle to maintain balance between autonomy and accountability. If accountability indeed has all the virtues extolled in the preceding discussion, then there should have been no hesitation in embracing its practices. It has often been found that while academics accept the idea of accountability as a guiding principle, they feel encumbered by the manner of its imposition and implementation. Morley (2003) asserts that while scholars concur on the significance of and need for monitoring teaching quality in higher education, many contend that the implemented quality management systems incur substantial opportunity costs and may not yield genuine enhancements in teaching and learning (Morley, 2003). Concerns exist around a perceived diminution of autonomy and purpose. In the context of the UK, Hoecht (2006) asserts that most educators believe they exert considerable effort to be effective teachers; however, many argue that the quality management framework at UK

universities diminishes their professional autonomy and academic freedom, which were pivotal factors in their initial decision to pursue careers as university teachers (Hoecht, 2006: 541). This issue is a significant concern that is shared in the wider academic community, not just in the UK but also in India and elsewhere. It is indeed the case that many individuals enter the domain of university teaching because of the intellectual freedom it provides and nurtures.

In the 19th century, the German university pattern was developed as conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt and laid stress on academic freedom, discourses and seminars and research laboratories in universities. In contrast, the French university model was one of strict discipline and control over every aspect of the university. The idea of a university ambience in which teaching and research took place combined with the search for the objective truth was the keynote of the German Humboldtian model (Anderson, 2004, 2010). It espoused intellectual freedom in research and teaching, university autonomy, the growth of independent disciplines with their own standards and priorities, and internationalism. Since the very beginning, universities have been international institutions (*studia generalia*). This model became popular in America and the rest of the world from the 20th century onwards (Suryanarayan, 2016).

Universities provide the space for scholars and scientists to pursue knowledge, to teach and learn, and to publish their findings. In a democratic society, academics sometimes also behave as public intellectuals; they pronounce their opinion on matters of state and society, and more often than not, their views are highly regarded. Hence, they have this immense burden of integrity and credibility. At the institutional level, although universities enjoy a certain amount of autonomy of governance and decision-making, it is also equally important that they be brought under some agency for monitoring and standardisation of syllabi and maintaining educational standards. There is always a possibility that in a modern capitalist economy, curricula

and research agendas could be market dominated. There is also the possibility of ideological biases. Furthermore, universities too have to follow the practices of social justice and equity that operate in the wider society in which they exist. Hence, subjecting the university to public gaze and peer review is paradoxically in the interest of safeguarding the objectivity and integrity of the institution (Suryanarayan, 2016). Therefore, though notions of pure intellectual freedom are desirable and can lead to productive research, the construct of the free intelligentsia or the unattached intellectual has led to serious questions about the elitism of some universalistic institutions of higher learning. Education should be accessible to everyone, not just the elite. There is also a need for skill-based and vocational training to be imparted through universities (Ibid.). Furthermore, the increasing dominance of the free market economy and its consequent economic globalisation have greatly aligned research with market requirements. Research is encouraged and funding is more readily available in those areas that stand to support certain political or economic agendas. Teaching and research are also no longer necessarily interlinked. Students tend to view university education as a means to a market-centric end such as employability, and technical, skill-based, and applied courses are emerging as more popular than pure disciplinary areas. Universities have also been brought under the ambit of corporate social responsibility, and their goals are required to be in tune with the values of the wider society in which they thrive. Despite the lofty ideals under which universities were conceived, they have, for the main, had to come out of their ivory towers, and the imagery of the maverick professor in the search for truth is possibly an exception rather than the rule.

Consequently, pragmatically, institutions cannot endure under an idealised model of university teaching that expects educators to perform optimally based on trust alone and are only subject to very mild or moderate scrutiny by outside agencies. At the same time, in the present quality assurance systems in higher education, all decisions must adhere to a

strict, established framework of mechanical performance objectives, and sometimes zealous devotion to documented processes of accountability may replace the quest for real teaching quality. Critics have pointed out that these impositions and restrictions are tantamount to deprivation of academic freedom. This 'colonisation' of the academic sphere is identified as central to the commodification of students' educational experiences and as the primary obstacle hindering universities from fulfilling their social obligations (Dillard, 2002; Sing, 2002). Universities are being run as large corporations with students being treated as customers, undermining the haloed public good nature of university education (Lawrence and Sharma, 2002). This analysis is compelling. A look at private universities in India reflects this very picture of corporate efficiency and goal attainment of so-called 'student-centric' ideals. Therefore, though intensive scrutiny may appear to thwart academic freedom, sometimes these checks and balances are necessary to protect vulnerable individuals and groups within the institution from victimisation. In state-funded universities as well, Hoecht (2006) asserts that quality management is legitimised by the ideals of accountability, transparency, and service excellence, though it may frequently serve to obscure manoeuvres to exert state control over the university sector. Hoecht calls for a more profound investigation into the issues of accountability, professional autonomy, and trust. According to Hoecht, we just need to think of the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors, or the dependent position of junior research staff, to realise that the traditional university system does not offer an ideal academic life for all of its members (Hoecht, 2006: 542). Subjecting themselves to evaluation by outside agencies creates transparency and safeguards the rights of vulnerable groups and protects their salary and work conditions.

The role of accreditation

Accountability, thus, is to do with being able to show that the institution is indeed striving towards excellence in the creation and dispersal of disciplinary knowledge and, in the

process, also engendering a social order in consonance with the desired goals of the society in which it functions. For, to be accountable is also to be transparent. Accountability through institutionalised means, such as audits and accreditation, ensures that the efficiency and effectiveness of an educational institution are optimised. It guarantees the quality of the generated programmes and services. Every institution of learning should be able to show that it serves the needs of the public. The process of institutional accreditation serves to fulfil this end.

Accreditation presents a certification of the competency, authority, or credibility of an academic institution. It ensures that a competent and impartial monitoring agency created for the purpose of evaluation can assess the institution in terms of its resources, including human resources, and rank it on a scale that is uniform and whose gradations are understood and acceptable to all concerned. Assessment and accreditation are employed to evaluate the 'quality status' of an institution. In higher education, accreditation status signifies that an institution, be it a college, university, or other recognised entity, fulfils the quality requirements established by the relevant accreditation agency regarding its performance. These performance parameters are in relation to the educational processes and outcomes; design and structures of the academic curriculum; span and coverage of the curriculum; teaching-learning; student intake and faculty-student ratio; learning resources; evaluation; result outcomes; faculty quality; research; infrastructure; student amenities; organisation; governance; financial wellbeing; student progression; community and outreach activities, etc. Accreditation status does not just certify an institution's fitness; it also provides a mechanism for introspection for an educational institution. By laying itself open to expert scrutiny, a seat of learning can assess its comparative worth among similar institutions, including those that exist elsewhere globally. Through an informed review process, accreditation enables an institution to identify its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. It helps

identify internal areas of planning and resource allocation. By subjecting itself to accreditation, an institution establishes a foundation for increased transparency and accountability to society. This generates a spirit of excellence within the institution. An institution's accreditation status serves as a reliable indicator of the quality of education it offers. Accreditation thus serves as a link between society and an institution, providing potential entrants a means to make sense of the various categories on offer and to be able to negotiate with them. Industry also regards this index as a reliable basis for initiating the process of recruitment.

Submitting to accreditation processes has been made mandatory, especially for public funded institutions, but institutions should participate in such structured academic reviews even through their own volition for the larger goal of quality assurance and credibility. In the long run, this process of review fosters an academic atmosphere conducive to enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, and research in higher education institutions. It promotes self-assessment, responsibility, responsiveness and creativity in higher education. Such an approach ultimately benefits all stakeholders and contributes to the overall development of a nation. It also makes the global educational system competent, competitive, and viable.

The real question that emerges is therefore not regarding the rationale for external review but rather the process of review. In India, for instance, accreditation agencies require institutions to volunteer themselves for periodic external audits— academic and administrative. Financial audits conducted through the office of the CAG are already part of regular institutional practices at all state-funded institutions. Some institutions voluntarily commission gender and environmental audits, ostensibly to demonstrate their sensitivity and mindfulness towards these issues, but also with a focus on improving their institutional grade and rank. The quality seals that these procedures provide give a certain guarantee about an institution to the outside world,

which is vital in today's times, as the public no longer blindly trusts societal institutions and is becoming increasingly sceptical (Beck, 1992). Power (1994) views external auditing as a mechanism that enhances an institution's accountability to its stakeholders.

Simultaneously, inside the institutional framework, all audits and evaluations are regarded as mechanisms of monitoring and control, infringing upon professional autonomy. There needs to be a balance to be able to attain academic standards without compromising academic freedoms. It is argued that while accountability and transparency are unquestionably important principles that academics should embrace, their constant engagement in complying with cumbersome procedures makes what Power (1997) terms the 'rituals of verification' appear far more important than the actual processes of quality education. Woolston (2008) points out that with the present accreditation procedures, educators worldwide are vexed with the challenging, often time-consuming, and cumbersome demands of outcome-based assessment.

Striking the balance

An educational institution exists to serve both society and its members. Therefore, it is not sufficient for an institution to fulfil its own esoteric objectives; it has to be socially sensitive and play a proactive role in serving the welfare of society, inculcating an environment of working for the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. The values enshrined in the Constitution have to be the beacon lights of any institution—they cannot be a repository of knowledge without a conscience (Suryanarayan, 2016). Those who belong to educational institutions and, indeed, those who come out of them— generalists or specialists – have to be citizens with a spirit.

At the same time, academics have always demanded a certain special treatment – teaching is not a profession in the real sense of the term. Teachers do not serve clients for a

fee; rather, it is a vocation, and for some, it may even be a calling. This claim of academics for special treatment, therefore, is correct and justified, and it relates not only to the nature of their work but also to the unique function that higher education fulfils in society. Robert Berdahl (1990), for instance, has described the dichotomous components of this distinctive assertion. According to Berdahl, 'Universities have generally had ambivalent relations with their surrounding societies: both involved and withdrawn; both serving and criticising; both needing and being needed' (1990: 169). Berdahl asserts that colleges and universities must be provided adequate protection from external influences to preserve their societal critique while yet being sufficiently sensitive to external demands to cultivate societal acceptance. They must be able to both serve and question the society that sustains them. This dual role demands both accountability and autonomy. Too much accountability has been likened to harassment. An academic institution needs freedom to be able to creatively express itself. The assessment methodology is time and cost intensive, which may hinder the exploration of innovative pedagogies as it focuses on consistently achieving tangible outcomes.

The key here is to be able to strike a balance between autonomy and compliance. Autonomy fosters pedagogical and research innovation, but accountability—when collaboratively developed and clearly conveyed—validates autonomy and enhances stakeholder trust. Conversely, too onerous accountability systems undermine academic vibrancy, highlighting the necessity for balanced, context-sensitive governance structures. The ideal of a responsive academia is to prevent intellectual anarchy in the name of academic freedom and at the same time to avoid rendering the educational system an object of bureaucratic manipulation. Excessive autonomy can lead institutions, be they public or private, to neglect societal needs and focus solely on their own utilitarian objectives or lofty academic goals while also neglecting the poor and marginalised.

Maintaining a certain level of vigilance ensures that equity remains a fundamental principle in recruitment, allowing for adequate representation of students and teachers from all social groups. It also ensures fair management practices, reasonable fees, rational work hours, conducive work conditions, standardised recruitment procedures and salaries paid as per norms. At the same time, excessive accountability can create dependent institutions that are submissive to governmental or social whims (Elliott, 2002). There needs to be a way in which higher education's and society's representatives agree upon predefined standards that demand compliance without servility. It is important to reach a middle ground of balance between state priorities, academic concerns and the demands of the market. These dilemmas have become more pronounced due to the highly structured format and the one-sided nature of the auditing procedures. Academic review boards must devise simple, realistic, and workable scales for assessing institutions' minimum academic performance expectations. The academic accountability body of the state should function with a certain refinement and sophistication that fosters an environment of learning and not stifle the intrinsic creativity and academic freedom of the institution under evaluation. The accreditation agency should take into account differences in cultural capital among diverse institutions and establish a meaningful performance expectation that enables these wide differences to articulate themselves without undermining the quality of the institution. It should proactively and transparently communicate performance standards and outputs to stakeholders and the wider public. There is a need to develop mechanisms and procedures for the improvement of low-performing institutions and to integrate them into the mainstream. The agency should evaluate and ensure that academic institutions maintain the core values of social equity and justice in their structure and functioning. Perhaps it is time to explore a middle path of accountability with a measure of trust and autonomy.

Concluding remarks

Accountability in academics is a multidimensional concept. Academics have to be accountable to themselves, to the values of science and knowledge, and to the ethics of pedagogy. And at the same time, they have to be open-minded, allowing their own fidelity to ethical and scientific standards to be scrutinised by the state as well as society. The state, too, on its part, has to be able to provide an intellectual climate that fosters the growth of knowledge. Academic knowledge cannot be held ransom to the dictates of the market – pure areas of disciplinary engagement also need to be encouraged. It is here that the state should step in generously with funding and support. The public and civil society must also exercise caution when making arbitrary criticisms of academia in general. Teaching and learning deserve to be treated with a degree of respect, if not with utter reverence. Policymakers must engage in substantive discourse regarding the attainment of quality education while simultaneously preserving the trust and professional autonomy of educators, and not merely managerial autonomy. In the ultimate analysis, we have to concede that formal systems of accountability through regular audits are indeed advantageous to the institution and to society. In doing so, governments are representing the people. Enhancing the transparency and accountability of institutions fosters certainty and accessibility, alleviating public concerns regarding diminishing educational standards and escalating educational expenditures. These measures empower the public and are therefore essential in any democratic system. However, it is also necessary that the review processes uphold the inherent respect and dignity of teachers and the teaching profession. Ideally, academics also should not begrudge the principles of accountability, transparency and fairness. As utopian as it may sound, a more democratic model of intrinsic accountability could potentially replace the current bureaucratic model of accountability. Accountability and professional freedom

need not be mutually antagonistic principles. The two can and should be allowed to coexist.

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