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Seeking Autonomy & Achieving Accountability in Technical Education : Managerial Challenges & Opportunities

Computer Science

KEYWORDS :

S S,Managave | Principal, SJPNT BCA College , Nidasoshi

(Dr.) Sudhakar Bhoite | Asso.Prof.,DOCS, SIBER, Kolhapur 416004

ABSTRACT

Autonomy is two sided coin, on one side one can achieve prosperity and other side can be a threat to the existence of an institution itself, As it is to be enjoyed and utilized in a right perspective. Since, there are increasing evidences that they yield better results than their peers, with respect to quality and relevance. The present era being named as 'knowledge era', we all know that the knowledge management is basically aimed at effective and efficient dispensing of knowledge for meaningful outcomes that fuel the creative spirit and impel innovative thrust. Here comes the role of institutions to impart the quality education to the students. This, in turn, would imply a number of challenges and opportunities for the management of such institutions.

An introspection of educational managers, administrators and academicians to examine the challenges and opportunities that await their institutions has resulted in the adoption of capacity building and hence autonomy as an important strategy for institutional ascendancy. Academic institutions need five kinds of freedoms to function effectively, to contribute best to the society, and to human civilization. Three of them are academic: the freedom to decide what to teach, whom to teach, and who will teach. The remaining two are economic and administrative: the freedom to decide where to find resources and the freedom to decide how to deploy those resources.A nation must develop its economic, scientific, and technological capabilities so that it can compete with the best in the world. A nation cannot get this competitive strength without developing world class educational institutions diligently managed with autonomy.

Our paper attempts to review some of the vital fields where management can identify challenges with potent opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

In the present scenario of education in general and technical education in particular, there is urgency for the institutions to catch up with the competitive race at the global level as well as to prove their accountability. In this perspective, question of autonomy is no more controversial, since, there is increasing evidence that they yield better results than their peers, with respect to quality and relevance.

The 'relevance' is with respect to the changing scenario of social, economic and knowledge systems. The present era being named as 'knowledge era', we all know that the knowledge management is basically aimed at effective and efficient dispensing of knowledge for meaningful outcomes that fuel the creative spirit and impel innovative thrust. Here comes the role of institutions to impart the quality education to the students. This, in turn, would imply a number of challenges and opportunities for the management of such institutions. We call them institutions, and not organizations apparently because they are founded for a social purpose. Their purpose, unlike that of most business organizations, is not to develop a good product, sell it and make a profit.

The centrality of this social purpose has a great deal to do with the ways in which an educational institution is managed and its functions are organized and performed. This calls for certain diligent managerial approaches. An introspection of educational managers, administrators and academicians to examine the challenges and opportunities that await their institutions has resulted in the adoption of capacity building and hence autonomy as an important strategy for institutional ascendancy. The need for autonomy came to the fore because of concerns that affiliating universities were being bogged down by the number of institutes they had to manage. Apart from cutting red tape, autonomy is seen as essential to meeting the GATS requirements. At present, autonomy and accountability are the key attributes for technical institutes to qualify for assistance under TEQIP, launched by the Government of India with World Bank aid.

THE NEED FOR AUTONOMY

The basic objective of an institution as against that of a mere organization is its commitment and obligation to society. An educational institution definitely serves a social cause, rather the most crucial one. Whether it be general education, or technical education, it needs to operate with certain degree of autonomy for an uninhibited performance with fullest scope for creativity and flexibility, and with a resilient response to changing social needs.

It is stated in no uncertain terms in Magna Charta Universitatum:

- "The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies. To meets the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power."

Institutions need autonomy for –

- **Academic freedom**-- to be able to decide what is best academically for the public: what programs to offer, how to offer, what teaching and learning methods to be used, what are the standards of teaching and learning and research, etc
- **Personnel management**– to be able to have one's own personnel management system that assures the recruitment, retention, development and performance of personnel to deliver desired academic outcome
- **Financial management**– to be able to create and administer the use of fund diligently for achieving the desired academic outcome.

Autonomy implies capacity building with diligent management/administration that leads to accountability as perceived below –

- Autonomy is not an end in itself but a means to achieve capacity (Quantitative) and capability (Qualitative) by appropriate managerial initiatives.
- Capacity and Capability are prerequisites for attaining Quality, Relevance of academic approaches, and Sustainable economic growth.
- Quality and Relevance should be instruments of Accountability towards the stakeholders.

THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGEMENT V/S OPPORTUNITIES

Educational institutions have a number of features which distinguish them from the more common models of organizations in business, industry and trade. Let us see in what way educational institutions differ. Some of these features are the following:

- Teaching and learning are the primary tasks of educational institutions.
- Teaching is not just transmission of information or even knowledge; it is a multi-dimensional function. It involves the development of a powerful relationship between the

teachers and the learner which aims at the full development of the learner's personality with emphasis on self-reliance and the ability to form individual judgment and a sense of individual responsibility. It is not surprising that teachers are often held responsible by the rest of the society for most of the feelings associated with any deficiency or decline in any aspect of national life.

- Learning is an activity associated with several uncertainties. The desire to learn, the learning process and the outcomes of learning involve a degree of unpredictability about them. For instance, learning might change an individual's outlook and attitude in ways which cannot always be predicted. The outcome of learning is often judged through examinations, which can verify only the academic caliber of the learner.
- Curriculum changes involve constant modifications in what is taught and how it is taught. Most of these changes involve assumption of additional responsibilities by teachers even in areas in which they may not have adequate expertise.
- Environmental changes, especially technological and societal changes, increased accountability and not the least, the growing erosion of the professional authority of the academic, have all significant consequences for the management of the educational institution

With this background and with an assumption that the institution is striving for autonomy and accountability, following are some of the significant fields in which challenges are identified against hidden or potent opportunities.

1. DEFINING SYSTEM BOUNDARY OF AUTHORITY
CHALLENGES:
From the institutional perspective, managing the system boundary is crucial.

Effective management of the system boundary involves:

- Determining and defining the primary task
- Managing the information flow across the boundary;
- Ensuring the availability of resources to plan the primary task; and
- Monitoring the performance of the primary task to ensure that it relates to the wider system and to the environment.

Managers who relinquish their own boundary position cannot manage themselves; and managers who give up their position on the institution's boundary cannot manage the institution.

OPPORTUNITIES:
Focusing on the primary task helps develop on-task leadership and avoids abuse of power.

Enables us to understand the flow of authority through the institution.

It legitimizes the exercise of power in an institution.

It can flow from the top through a process of delegation.

Responsibility in pace with the requisite authority to achieve the outcomes consistent with the primary task.

Clarity in the understanding of an institutional structure and mechanism.

2. STRUCTURE FOR SELF-GOVERNING
CHALLENGES:
The power and authority to take all decisions in carrying out the mission and goals of the institution vest in the members who constitute the institution;

The decision-making bodies are so constituted that they represent the members of the institution since all of them cannot be involved in all decisions;

These bodies have the freedom to

- Decide what to teach and how,
- In determining the programmes,
- Prescribing the curricula,
- Setting out the entry and exit standards for the students, and
- The methods for assessing those standards;

and these bodies are also vested with the responsibility for all decisions relating to engagement of personnel (teachers and other staff), mobilization and deployment of resources, and creation and maintenance of infrastructure.

OPPORTUNITIES:
A significant nature of the self-governing structure is that all decisions are taken on democratic principles after considerable discussions and debates even though this process can be time-consuming.

Further, the structure, though collegial in theory, does function on the principle of hierarchies to the extent that it has individual members reporting to departmental heads, who in turn report to Deans or Rectors and they to Principals, Secretaries or Presidents.

3.ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT AND CURRICULA
CHALLENGES:
The constraint in most cases will be the question of comparability of contents, the depth of their study, and the standards to be achieved so that equivalence of qualifications awarded by different institutions can be established.

There should be well-established cells for developing the curricula. Faculty and the Academic Council provide the mechanisms for this function. These bodies comprise mainly teachers from within the institution, though external experts are also associated with this process.

The important point is that decisions on these matters are taken collectively and are never left to individuals in the institution.

Peer review and feedback from employers should preferably be a part of this process so that the curriculum of any programme is informed by the social demands and employment needs.

Along with the design and development of curricula, two other important issues require to be settled. These are the instructional system and the student assessment procedures.

OPPORTUNITIES:
The content, structure, flexibilities in combinations of content, etc for every programme is clearly spelt out;

The instructional processes can be laid down in as much detail as possible; and the assessment system can be explained clearly and in detail.

It should be remembered that any student who enrolls in any programme in an institution relies on these details before he/she commits himself/herself to pay the fees and spends his/her time in study.

These are therefore the material premises on which the learning contract between the student and the institution is chartered.

4.PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
CHALLENGES:
There should be a well-articulated personnel policy for all categories of staff.

The policy should clearly indicate how the personnel needs are assessed and how the additional needs are going to be met.

The mechanism for recruitment to all positions should be clearly spelt out. This would include identification of the unit in the institution which is responsible for assessment of vacancies, the periodicity for such assessments, the methods of recruitments for specified types of vacancies, etc.

The methods of recruitment should specify the processes asso-

ciated with selection both for promotion as well as recruitment from the open market.

The policy would also specify the institution's strategies and programmes for the professional development of its staff, their career advancement, and the remuneration packages available to them.

OPPORTUNITIES:
Imbibing of efficient personnel results.

No ambiguity exists in the personnel processes.

There would be clarity in the performance-based evaluation and rewarding system.

Retention of efficient personnel.

Growth of the real work-force.

5.INFRASTRUCTURE MANAGEMENT
CHALLENGES:
The physical infrastructure of an institution is a major component that contributes to its performance. The important elements that constitute this infrastructure are land and buildings, laboratories and library, equipment and furniture, health centers, sports and recreation facilities, hostels and guest houses, staff residences, campus utilities (water, electricity, and transport) and so on.

With the increasing applications of technology in office automation, and audio-visual support to instructional process, the installation and maintenance of the technological infrastructure have assumed considerable significance.

The creation of this infrastructure requires heavy investments and takes extended periods for putting them together. Since educational institutions never really have the luxury of enough financial resources at their disposal, the planning and actual commissioning of the facilities require to be done with great care and foresight.

It is important that realistic plans are prepared and implemented so that available resources are optimally utilized.

It is not enough to create excellent infrastructure. Its maintenance is just as important. It is not uncommon to see the campuses of many good institutions in a dilapidated state of poorly maintained buildings, unhygienic sanitary conditions, costly equipment rusting for want of repairs and replacements, broken furniture and dingy corridors stacked with rows upon rows of moth eaten records.

OPPORTUNITIES:
Though these physical infrastructure facilities may not have any direct contribution to make to the processes of teaching and learning, they do contribute to the creation of desirable learning environment in the institution.

Academic environment becomes conducive to learning, and effective teacher-student engagement will take place leading to considerable confidence in the institution's capacity to provide good quality education.

6.FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT
CHALLENGES:
As the level of autonomy rises, the search for alternate sources of funding becomes intense. Some of the efforts in this direction are:

- progressively increasing the recovery of the cost of education through periodic increases in tuition fees;
- extending the facilities of the institutions, especially their expertise and physical facilities for external projects (research, consultancy, product development, testing, etc.) for a negotiated fair cost;
- collaboration and networking among institutions for sharing intellectual and physical resources;
- organizing professional development programmes for company-specific personnel;
- establishment of chairs by industrial houses; and
- creation of endowments with donations and sponsorships from wealthy alumni groups and their organizations.

OPPORTUNITIES:
These new initiatives would necessarily involve a major shift in approach to financial management, from the existing pre-occupations to cost reduction, increase in productivity, and returns on investment and so on.

They go a long way towards attaining self-sufficiency and financial freedom.

7.INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING
CHALLENGES:
The initial steps in this process are organizational diagnosis and evaluation.

This stage is followed by the formulation of an institutional plan which seeks to consolidate the strengths, correct the weaknesses and redesign the strategies in the context of new opportunities and challenges.

The implementation of this plan might involve redesigning the organization, and reworking its current strategies.

OPPORTUNITIES:
A review of the current mission and goals and reformulation of the directions in which the institution wishes to move. This might even involve framing of a new vision of the future, preparing a new mission statement and resetting the long and short-term goals.

Recognition on priority basis the areas of development in the context of the current strengths and weaknesses. This might necessitate greater focusing of the current effort and resources on areas of strengths to consolidate them even as the weakest areas might be put on hold or completely disengaged.

Refocusing the commitment of the members of the institution to the new goals and the strategies to attain them.

Mobilizing the resources necessary for implementing the new plan of action

8.MANAGING LEADERSHIP ISSUES
CHALLENGES:
Leadership is about inspiring the people for the progress of society in total. It builds civilization and leads to economic and societal progress.

Therefore, leaders have to create a vision that is noble, aspiring and inspiring, which will make people enthusiastic and energetic to make sacrifices that are required for moving towards that grand vision.

The leader also has the responsibility of translating the vision into a very clear set of action plans which could be executed over a specified period. This would require paying attention to the details, putting in place a good metric for each dimension of progress, and ensuring that it is measured with actual versus budgets.

The term budget here encompasses not just the financial aspect but also the issues of brand equity, research, quality of the academic learning, their impact on the society at large.

OPPORTUNITIES:
We need to create and respect meritocracy.

Unless we embrace meritocracy and have the freedom to give opportunity to the best and the brightest, we will not make significant progress.

Participation, mutual respect and recognition, ability and willingness to develope a shared vision and goal, encouragement to innovations and experiments and continuously strengthening the evolving relationship among the members can be identified as significant attributes of leadership in educational institutions.

When they work in teams, they develop synergy. As a result, the productivity of the members of the group becomes greater than the sum total of individual contributions. It would therefore be useful to organize projects in the institutions around departments, interest groups etc.

CONCLUSION

Challenges we face in building autonomous educational institutions of technology is timely and opportune. It is timely because, to succeed now, a nation must develop its economic, scientific, and technological capabilities so that it can compete with the best in the world. A nation cannot get this competitive strength without developing world class educational institutions within its boundaries. Without MIT, Harvard, California Institute of Technology, and other such renowned institutions, would America have got its industrial, economic, and military might? Therefore, if India wants to shake off the 'third world country' label, then the responsibility of doing so must fall on the shoulders of the nation's elite academicians and people managing technical education..

Academic institutions need five kinds of freedoms to function effectively, to contribute best to the society, and to human civilization. Three of them are academic: the freedom to decide what to teach, whom to teach, and who will teach. The remaining two are economic and administrative: the freedom to decide where to find resources and the freedom to decide how to deploy those resources.

We are neither a fledgling nation nor a mature one — we are in transition. We are witnessing great changes in our economy, polity, and society. We are in the middle of one of the greatest technological revolutions of human history. What we do today will set the course of our future for centuries to come. Academic autonomy is one such issue that is critical for both economic and human development.

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