

9. USE AND MISUSE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN 'DEEMED UNIVERSITIES'

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use and misuse of academic freedom that is granted to the newly formed deemed-to-be universities. Does every teacher have complete freedom too? How far is this freedom desirable? Will it be misused? What are the measures that can be taken to prevent such misuse? The paper examines some of these concerns.

Some misgivings and why teachers cannot be given full freedom without checks and balances are discussed. Certain internal safety mechanisms that can be built into the academic system are suggested. Some ethical issues are raised. The paper ends with a closure.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of a deemed-to-be university*, there is complete academic freedom in the sense that there are no outside agencies that have to give a nod to every proposal. Does this complete freedom of the university imply that every teacher has complete freedom too? Is this freedom desirable? Will it be misused? What shall we do to prevent misuse? This brief article raises some of these concerns.

Let us examine briefly what complete academic freedom entails.

2 COMPLETE ACADEMIC FREEDOM

For an educational institution, this would mean that there could be formal and informal programmes. Erudition, such as that among traditional Sanskrit scholars and Ayurvedic physicians who may not possess any university

degree, can and must be recognised. There are similarly masters among Carnatic musicians who may have no formal English based education, and thus, no "paper qualification". They too qualify eminently to be professors in Music. There can be a fast track for fast learners, and another slow track for slow ones, instead of having academic programmes of fixed duration.

Every teacher is free to plan and develop a course (subject) and offer it to the students. He or she selects the topics, decides the depth and thoroughness of coverage, and devises his/her own methods of evaluation and assessment of students. There may be closed-book, open-book and/or take-home examinations, or conceivably even no examination at all. There may be completely innovative courses on synthesis of ideas and creativity. All this is implied in the teacher's academic freedom.

While total freedom of the teacher may be

●The views expressed here are those of the author, and not necessarily of the organisation that he represents.

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desirable in some cases, and can be tolerated to some extent in others, by and large such uninhibited freedom for all would lead to chaos. In institutions with a large number of students, a measure of uniformity seems to be essential, at any rate in the outer structure and framework of the undergraduate degree programmes. Human nature being what it is, there would otherwise be unacceptably large variations in the perceptions, expectations and academic convictions of the faculty members even when they are all well! meaning mature scholars of integrity. How shall we reconcile the conflicting requirements of total academic freedom for all teachers on the one hand, and academic discipline on the other?

3. MISGIVINGS

In the new context, the teacher will have a new role. He will be the master of the situation. A student completes his programme that is, graduates when his teacher says so, as in the *Gurukula* days. There may be no examinations or other formalities. No two nominally identical students may be identically treated or assessed by the same teacher. Whatever may be the merits of such a system, or however lofty such a vision is, this is hardly suited to our times (except possibly in the case of a microscopically small number of spiritual seekers aspiring to be enlightened under the tutelage of sages and adepts). Thus, it may become necessary to climb down from these lofty views on education* to down-to-the-earth pragmatism. Academic freedom is perhaps not quite the same as an unbridled license to do whatever one likes. Checks and balances seem to be necessary to guard against erratic whims and fancies.

There can be misgivings among the students and even the public at large if the teacher is given full freedom. One must realise that teachers are not always particularly enlightened sages; they are not free from prejudices and other

human weaknesses, even when they are well meaning. The public may look upon the practices with understandable, and often justifiable, suspicion if the teacher is left all to himself with no one to oversee his assessment.

4. WHAT ABOUT THE IITS AND THE NORTH AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES?

Proper academic traditions, which could include informal corrective measures, (by discussions, peer evaluation, evaluation by students, presence of role models worthy of emulation, etc.) would effectively curb irrational and unjustifiable practices. Yet, in spite of a generally satisfactory state of affairs, injustices do take place not only in IITs and other prestigious institutes in India, but even in the finest universities in North America. But such cases are perhaps only few and far between. Such isolated incidents are soon forgotten, and are not noticed. As Kalidasa remarks "*Eko hi dosho gunasannipate, nimajjatindoh kiranavivankah*" (A single blemish among a multitude of virtues is overlooked like the dark spot of the moon among its rays.)

5. WHY TEACHERS CANNOT BE GIVEN FULL FREEDOM - A FEW TYPICAL SITUATIONS

As stated above, teachers are individuals with their own points of view; some may be strict and severe, while others may be all forgiving and lenient. Serious distortions can occur in setting the question papers, marking (valuation) of answers and finalising the marks or grades are left entirely to the teachers with no checks or monitoring. This remark is particularly relevant in the case of common courses like the first courses, say, on Mathematics and Physics. Taught by different faculty members taken by several batches of students at the same time. It is obvious that a certain amount of uniformity is

*The large gap between such lofty considerations (Shall we refer to them as the Vivekananda-Tagore model of education?) and the rather pedestrian situation that actually prevails in classrooms makes education an easy target for cynical criticism.

necessary, and this calls for some understanding among the various faculty members concerned.

What shall we do when there are a large number of young, inexperienced faculty members teaching a course, or for that matter, teaching any course for the first time? Many of them may be still fresh out of the undergraduate degree programmes. In the backdrop of several engineering institutions mushrooming all over, it is hard to find anybody for faculty positions except such fresh B.Tech. graduates whose degree certificates would not reach them until the postman comes next! Can we afford to let these freshers decide the final grades, in the name of upholding the dignity and independence of teachers? What if one of them decides to give A+ to all the 60 students, or another to let every student fail? Shall we let such distortions go unchecked?

Less obvious is the case when several faculty members offer elective courses. Some electives are hard, some, and some others half-way between these extremes. It is not uncommon to see students choosing one elective securing very high marks (or grades), while those choosing another taught by a different faculty member scoring poor and failing marks (or grades). If the faculty members are left all to themselves with no clear guidelines or instructions or academic traditions to follow, there will be (or at least there will appear to be) unfair advantage to some students. If the students choosing a "hard" course like, say, *Advanced Mechanics of Solids* end up securing very poor grades, while the students choosing an easy course like, say, *Metrology* or *Environment and Pollution* have a relatively easy time during the semester, and still secure high marks (or grades), that would not be desirable. The situation can result in more and more students flocking to these easy courses, with the result that fewer students would choose challenging courses that call for higher levels of analytical ability, and consequently to better value addition by undergoing these "hard" courses. (One solution, which is not necessarily

the best, is to bunch courses into several categories, and to insist that a minimum of so many courses (or credits) must be had from each category. Another solution, which is likely to lead to resistance, is to decide not to offer at all, such purely descriptive easy courses that are only at an awareness level. This, for some strange reason, does not seem to be acceptable to a large number of persons, including academicians.)

Much worse are the (hopefully few) cases where the teachers carry prejudices against students and deliberately treat them unfairly. If a really bright student is given very low marks, this may come to light, but if a student is deliberately given lower marks such as 60 when he or she deserves, say, 75, such cases may never be noticed at all. This author is personally aware of several cases where the students got a really raw deal from the faculty members. Such cases have occurred, and continue to occur, though only rarely, even in the finest institutions, both in India and abroad.

The fate of research students falling within the clutches of unfair research supervisors is the worst. If the students are exceptionally bright and productive, sometimes they are not allowed to complete their doctoral degree programmes; they are asked to continue on and on because the supervising teachers get joint authorship of a large number of good research papers. Students fail to bring such cases to the notice of the higher authorities because of fear. The students are forced to put up with a lot of injustice, because in practice some research supervisors behave as absolute tyrants. Fortunately, such cases are few and far between. (Yet students, more or less routinely, used to take 10 years and even more to get doctoral degrees in some of the acceptedly good, reputed institutes.)

More can be said on this matter. Generally speaking, faculty members are indeed trustworthy. However, the conclusion that we arrive at is that faculty members cannot be given

complete independence in all academic matters. Thus, there is a strong case to build into the academic system some internal safety mechanisms.

6. INTERNAL SAFETY MECHANISMS

We may begin by accepting the fact that the total academic freedom that is hailed by idealists (?) is not as desirable as it might appear at first. Perhaps we might look at this issue differently and learn to distinguish between the freedom of the institute as a whole to chart its own academic direction, and the license for all teachers to do whatever they like to do with no monitoring (in the style of free for all, no questions asked). A careful, unbiased examination of the various issues involved would lead us to realise that total academic freedom is granted only to the institute, and not to every teacher. Even this could lead to trouble, unless the institute has established sound academic traditions, and built up a certain amount of reputation and credibility, or in other words, unless the institute has come of age.

Some of the internal safety mechanisms that can be built into the system are the following.

1. A class committee; all the teachers concerned, one or two senior teachers and a few elected and nominated students; meets at least three times in a semester, and discusses all issues including the policy and parameters of evaluation.
2. A course (subject) committee for every course taught; all the teachers involved and one or two course mentors; meets often, typically once a week; discusses all the fine details of the course coverage, lesson plan, all the question papers and evaluation schemes.
3. All question papers (class tests, quizzes, end semester examination) to be approved first by the course committee, and later by a scrutiny board.
4. All valued answer books including those for the end semester examination to be returned to the students. A few randomly chosen answer books to be revalued.
5. Borderline cases of failures could be reviewed. and where appropriate. the students could be made to earn a pass by giving them additional work.
6. An oral examination based primarily on the answers can be considered. Fair decisions on borderline cases can thus be arrived at. Additionally, the students would have the motivation to study in depth the topics that they may have neglected earlier. After all, the purpose of having an examination is not merely to assess the candidates; examinations may, indeed they do, prove to be an incentive for study also. Oral examinations based on the answers are routinely carried out particularly in medical schools. The subjective element in the oral examination is to be removed, as far as this will be possible.
7. A Department Under - Graduate Committee (DUGC) could be made responsible for the proper running of all the undergraduate programmes.
8. Every effort could be made to remove the subjectivity factor in student evaluation. Where it cannot be avoided, as in oral examinations, there could be at least two teachers present at all times.
9. Regular student evaluation of the teachers and of the courses; evaluation of the teachers and the courses by their peers and superiors.
10. Provision for appeal to the Dean (Academic Affairs) against any decision.
11. Additionally, there could be another completely independent grievance

redress mechanism instituted by the Dean (Student Welfare).

12. Frequent interactions between the teachers and the students

These provisions, which are only indicative and not exhaustive, could be incorporated into the system by rules and regulations. Transparency should be consciously built into the system, and adhocism removed. If the academic administrators monitor all the academic programmes closely, almost on a day-to-day basis at least in the early stages, most of the problems can be avoided.

7. ETHICAL ISSUES

There is another aspect to the academic freedom of the institute: some ethical issues related to academic freedom. In a bid to do well - and we mean here only well meaning institutes - institutes often take the easier course of *appearing* to do well. This could be by hiking up the percentage of pass. If a student who deserves to pass fails, we recognise it instantly as injustice; this is certainly unjust. However, if a student who deserves to fail passes, our righteous indignation is not kindled, certainly not to the same extent. We accept it. What makes it even worse is that arguments like (i) "he is the only hope and support of a poor family", (ii) "after all, we are not perfect in our evaluation; let him get the benefit of doubt", and (iii) "anyway, he has reached the final year; by asking him to appear for an examination again, he will only get worse" are raised. These masquerade as expressions of compassion; actually they are not*.

Such situations, which might also be viewed as social compulsions because these are what we see practised all around us, often persuade educational institutions to ensure a high percentage of pass without maintaining adequate academic standards. If all students fail, that will

not be socially acceptable, either. There is only one thing which is worse than all students failing; and that is all students passing (without meeting the academic requirements which are to be maintained high). The real challenge is how to maintain a fairly high percentage of pass without sacrificing academic rigour.

Some, perhaps most, institutions persuade their teachers to ensure a high percentage of pass in the examinations. This is understandable when the students are presented on the big day for a final examination conducted by an apex organisation like the affiliating university. But this measure becomes entirely pointless when all the examinations are conducted, and results published, internally. If the onus of the students passing is on the teachers, that is a dangerous situation. Unfortunately, this is the situation in some, if not most, autonomous private institutions. This attitude of the management is also understandable, though not justified. It is extremely difficult and challenging to establish sound and effective academic traditions. But it is extremely easy to take punitive action against the few non-conformist faculty members who are only employees.

It is in this context that committees such as the DUGC can play an effective role.

Individual teachers may be tempted to ensure a high percentage of pass and a good name for themselves by working out some problems in the class and asking the very same questions, or their variants in the examinations. There are several teachers who are not even aware that these are unethical practices. This writer is personally aware of such practices being followed even in the finest institutions. It is a painful but noble task of the DUGC to make sure that such easy measures are avoided. The same committee could also play a crucial role in finalising the results.

*A colleague of this writer calls this "pseudo-compassion"!

8. CLOSURE

Thus, while there is no doubt at all that in principle the teacher is the sole and ultimate judge of the competence of his/her students, it seems to be necessary to introduce certain checks and balances. These seem to be necessary at least in the early formative stages. Once a certain amount of credibility is established, these internal safety mechanisms can be gradually relaxed, and the teacher can be given more and more independence. Eventually, a rich, vibrant, self-correcting academic atmosphere would hopefully be established which itself would serve as an effective check on the system.

Surely there are other important aspects that are not discussed here at all. The most conspicuous one is that the larger issues of life* are not addressed in our educational system. *Another one is that the managements often do not have an enlightened view of education.* Furthermore, there are ever so many problems in our educational system that have to be solved. However, the focus of this article is not on these issues.

Finally it helps to note that in the present day affiliating university system, all is not well. The way some affiliating universities function nowadays gives much hope to the newly formed deemed-to-be universities: any change can only be for the better.

*Our educational system completely neglects the larger issues of life. Recall T.S. Eliot's questions: "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

