

Autonomy: Towards a Joint Statement of Commitment

In the wake of the College becoming autonomous as per the UGC norms, we, the Teachers, Non-teaching staff, Students and the Management of the Union Christian College, Aluva, commit to the following understanding of autonomy and its practice in keeping with the heritage and distinctive ethos of the college. We believe that our distinctive democratic, liberal, secular/cosmopolitan, and humanistic ethos will provide the most conducive ambience for the autonomy to flourish, grow and bear ample fruits. We do not share any other notion of autonomy other than academic autonomy and the associated administrative autonomy to achieve it. We commit ourselves to the core values of academic excellence, social justice and transparency.

The affiliating university system is one of the few remaining vestiges of the colonial period that continue to function in India and few other developing nations. The affiliating university system was originally designed when the number of colleges in a university was small. The university could then effectively oversee the working of the colleges, act as an examining body and award degrees on their behalf. But today, the affiliating colleges have become too unwieldy to manage all aspects of teaching-learning and evaluation processes effectively and efficiently.

The affiliating university system promotes a system that is totally unaccountable. The managements appoint teachers often profiting from this exercise; universities prescribe syllabus; students manage to write the examination even without sufficient number of class hours that are lost due to student strikes besides abstentions from classes of both students and teachers for personal reasons; universities evaluate them and award degrees. Examinations are never held in time and academic calendars are observed more in their breach. Everything ends without any meaningful process of evaluation or correction. Neither the teachers, nor the management, nor the university is accountable to anybody for grave lapses on their part with enormous cost to the state, society and students.

The affiliating University system sustains an enormous bureaucracy which again only serve to generate red-tapes and unnecessary delays. It stifles creative initiatives in academic field and draws everybody to a least performing common denominator and uniformity. Moreover universities are today hotbeds of politicians who brazenly interfere with varsity administration and faculty appointments and care little about dropping standards of higher education.

The Tenth Plan Profile of Higher Education in India prepared by UGC, pointing out the changing trends towards flexibility, states: "World over, the higher

education is passing through an interesting phase. It is changing radically, by becoming organically flexible in diversity of programs, in its structure, in its curricula, in its delivery systems and it is adopting itself to innovative use of information and communication technologies.” This concern for flexibility and innovation in the context of rapid changes cannot be addressed by the affiliating university system and hence this concern for a changeover to the model of autonomous colleges.

As the Madhava Menon committee points out, “Quality is as important as Access and Equity in higher education.” The poor also should be able to have access to quality education, in the absence of which we are only furthering inequity. We see autonomy as a means to academic excellence, of keeping up with the knowledge explosion, changing needs of a rapidly changing world and of empowering the vulnerable sections of our society with quality education to take on the challenges of a competitive world.

It is in the light of these considerations that successive Higher Education Commissions such as Dr. K. S. Kothari Commission (1966), the Gajendra Gadkar Committee (1971), the National Education Policy (1986) and many other committees and agencies proposed the establishment of autonomous colleges. It is in line with these considerations that the Union Christian College has been earnestly striving for autonomous status; this conviction and intent have been expressed in its master plans and various important vision and review documents. Autonomy has been a long cherished goal of the Union Christian College, even before the New Economic Policies became a vogue in the political and economic life of India.

However, we do not belittle the role of State/Universities In the higher education scenario. They still will have a significant role as funding sources and resource centers and also in monitoring and evaluating the academic standards and new initiatives of autonomous institutions of higher learning. We are also aware of the limitations of the scheme of autonomy as proposed by the Government of Kerala arising from its attempts to withdraw from more spending in the higher education sector.

By Autonomy for higher educational institutions, we mean autonomy in academic affairs, and the necessary administrative autonomy to achieve this end. The neo-liberal economic agenda followed and promoted by the present Central and state governments lend us to believe that the drive toward autonomy is to free the governments of economic investment in higher education and to facilitate self-financing of higher education. This fear cannot be dismissed as without substance. However, we wish to make it unambiguously clear that the UCC has no such intentions and that the philosophy of education represented by the Self-financing Educational system

is contrary to all the deeply cherished Christian values that the college hold dear. Self-financing educational system treats education as a private good and a profitable investment. We would stand by the convictions of the founding fathers that education is for social good and a means to equipping young minds to hear their ultimate calling (vocation) in life and become productive citizens.

Yet, in the absence of government funding, we will be constrained to start new courses in frontier disciplines that have a cutting edge in terms of social relevance and global impact, following a self-sustainable model. Even in such situations we will strictly adhere to Merit, Social Justice, and Transparency in matters of admission without any consideration of profit. We are also committed to developing a corpus amount using the good will of our alumni and friends to provide scholarships to needy and disadvantaged students.

New Self-financing courses will not be started until such time we consolidate the gains of autonomy in relation to the present courses in the aided stream. New courses will be started only with the initiative and active co-operation of the respective faculties who stand to gain from this new initiative. Its fee structure, organization and financial viability will finally be decided by appropriate bodies in consultation with the respective Board of Studies and the Academic Council. We also commit to follow strictly the norms (Govt./University/UGC) of reservation and merit now in vogue “for admission to courses in the aided stream and for admission to new courses after autonomy is obtained.” Our commitment mainly is to strengthen the existing courses in the aided stream and update it to serve the needs of students and society at this time in its history. We will also strive to get new courses in the aided stream, if that is ever possible, even after getting autonomy. In short, we will not let self-financing courses to crowd out aided courses.

We are committed to protecting the service rules and benefits of the present faculty (University Act/Statutes/UGC Rules) and non-teaching staff who have been appointed in the Aided Stream. The government has made it doubly certain by its G.O from the Higher Education Department (G.O.(Ms) No. 618/2013/H.Edn dated 13-09-2013) that “the granting of autonomy shall not affect the validity of obligations arising out of the Direct Payment Agreement executed between Government and Aided Colleges.” However, in the event of any attempt by the government to dilute or violate this agreement, the management will go to any extent to protect the interests of the present teaching and non-teaching staff of the college. We also take refuge in the judgement of the Division Bench of the Supreme Court in W.A. No. 2529 of 2005 (dated 18.08.2007) that the State cannot go back on the Direct Payment Agreement. The crucial part of the judgement is that it is obligatory for the Government to honor the appointments and pay the salary of those who are

appointed by the Statutory Selection Committee as per clause 35 of the Direct Payment Agreement.

We are well aware of the fact that the college must bear all additional financial liability arising on account of autonomy being granted to Aided colleges. This naturally would imply passing on this burden to students. However, this additional financial liability will be met through a transparent way of raising resources from students according to their economic status and providing relief to socially and economically backward students with concessions or scholarships. We understand that this would involve striving to enhance our endowments from alumni and friends for scholarships and other forms of aids to needy students.

This would also necessitate that we develop strategies for raising financial resources through many other alternative sources other than State, UGC and RUSA. The Management has already initiated steps to establish a Development Office to take on this concern further. We will give a special thrust to our efforts in this direction. Wherever possible, we, the management and the staff, will work together to make the State accountable to fulfill its social obligation in education and prevent the State from taking an easy recourse to disinvestment in education. Even in the neo-liberal economic context, to take advantage of demographic dividend, it is prudent for a country like India to invest greater resources in education and higher education in particular.

With the grant of autonomy, the college will have the additional burden of conducting admissions, examinations and also other administrative obligations that would add to the burden of existing support staff (Non-teaching Staff) and hence, new staff will be recruited, posted and paid by the college management. Wherever the faculty requires additional help to discharge their administrative tasks, the college is duty bound to provide it.

We believe that autonomy in respect of academic matters would necessarily involve curriculum development and organization of courses of study, improvements in examination system to make it a true measure of learning, innovations in pedagogy to make learning more student centric, strict adherence to academic calendar and maximization of working days and learning opportunities for students, and enriching the curriculum with community extension and outreach activities. This would primarily involve “preparing the faculty, staff and students to take up autonomy with responsibility and evolve an appropriate work culture which alone can make a difference in the existing system.”

We are committed to work towards enhancing transparency, participation, decentralization and increased activity, which the college holds as its cultural capital for the multifaceted development of students. To facilitate this, we will

strictly adhere to the proposed new internal governance structure- Board of studies, Academic Council and the Governing Body- in the place of existing management structure as per the UGC norms. This is in keeping with the cherished management practices of the Union Christian College and we will ensure that autonomy percolate down to every department and to every teacher allowing space for innovation and creativity for the benefit of students at all levels. Furthermore, we will not follow suit any autonomous college in proliferating courses and introducing shift system with an eye to monetary benefit. Neither will we allow extra and/or co-curricular activities and community extension activities to diminish. We consider them as important in meeting our aim of producing such scholars who would be morally upright, intellectually competent, socially committed and emotionally resilient.

We also commit to constitute an **Implementation and Monitoring Committee** to supervise all aspects of the preparation and implementation and monitoring of Autonomy in the college. The Committee would be that of the present faculty, non-teaching staff, representatives from the management and students. The first important task is to prepare management, the faculty, support staff, students and parents to equip themselves to take on the responsibilities of Autonomy. The faculty should be enabled to re-organize and develop the curriculum that it can be compared to the curriculum of leading universities in India and abroad and keep up with the knowledge explosions in various fields of study. Special educational programs must be offered to the faculty in such areas as, curriculum development, course description, modern pedagogic tools and practices, continuous assessment, assessment systems, credit/grading arrangements, and student feedback and self-appraisal by teachers. The services of our Alumni who have distinguished themselves by their scholarship and eminent academicians from reputed national and international institutions should be sought and made use of in achieving this end.

We will strive to develop and maintain a liberal, humanistic, democratic, and cosmopolitan ethos in our campus. Disciplinary procedures with due regard for students' rights, grievance redress mechanisms, and transparent evaluation procedures and examination mechanisms will be put in place and made functional. A work ethic and culture that commit the faculty to self-discipline and spend maximum time with students, both inside and outside the class room, should be facilitated. Attention must be paid to service-learning, community extension activities, internships and enrichment courses to provide adequate opportunities for the refinement of the intellectual skills and growth of students in relation to the societal needs. In this regard, we will pay more attention to the UGC guidelines on the faculty ethics (code of Ethics for teachers and code of conduct for support staff).

A separate Office of Examinations with a controller of examinations and adequate staff is one of the highest priorities, because the credibility of an autonomous institution depends on the credibility of its examination system. We should also evolve a procedure for examinations and evaluations that would strike a balance between internal and external, continuous and semester-end, acquired knowledge and its creative use in contexts. While we need to respect and uphold the integrity of the faculty in making right assessment of students, it is also important that as we begin a new process of evaluating students; we should not lend ourselves to any possible slip and criticism. Hence, we should evolve adequate checks from teachers falling a prey to criticisms of favoritism or reprisal. Students should have ready and easy access to redress of their grievances, whenever they feel that they have not been properly assessed and rewarded. A separate Redressal Cell must be constituted in the Office of Examinations to address examination related grievances in addition to the redressal mechanism at the teacher, department, and college levels.

We are committed to keep the campus politically alive. Campus politics provide students with opportunities to be concerned about the larger issues that our nation face and evolve their opinions and action plans. It broadens their commitments and concerns. Hence, we are obligated to promote easy exchange of ideas, their dissemination and political mobilization. But, at the same time, we would like this to happen in a context of cordiality and sportsman spirit. It also should not be at the expense of class hours; it also should not lead to violence and destruction of property. The students should be helped to evolve new ways of expressing solidarity and dissent and of mobilizing students around their strongly held political views. Politics also should not be at the expense of the many clubs and societies that we would like to encourage for the holistic development of students. In short, we are committed to a liberal, cosmopolitan and politically alive campus

Student evaluation of teachers and self-appraisal by teachers must be properly discussed at appropriate forums and recorded for assessing prospects of improvements. The various forms of evaluations suggested by the UGC-student evaluation, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, evaluation by superiors-must be considered by appropriate bodies and implemented with high degree of transparency and determination. This is meant to improve the overall performance of teachers and also offer in service educational programs to better equip them for their tasks, rather than a means to humiliate or threaten the faculty or to use them as a tool for taking disciplinary action.

The PTA would be further strengthened to play a more significant role in the current scenario, especially when an upright management as ours requires additional financial resources to take the college through a new development

trajectory. A development office also will be established to approach other stakeholders and friends and well-wishers in a sustained and organized manner for additional funds. Alumni organization of the college should be able to shoulder a greater share of the college's financial burden; it must become a pool of resourceful scholars for taking the college to greater academic heights. The Development Office must become a nodal agency to connect these various entities and stakeholders.

The college is proud of its democratic traditions. At the inception of the college, it was almost totally managed by those who were teaching in the College who had formed themselves into a Fellowship. Even now, in a more diluted form, the system and the concern exist through the Inter Church Fellowship. ICF is represented in the Standing Council and the Governing Board. The committee system is still followed by the college for the execution of various aspects of its administrative tasks. However, we realize the need to revitalize these democratic traditions and make them functional. Teachers and students are the primary stakeholders; teachers get an upper hand as they are the more stable among the stakeholders. Autonomy will enable us to build on this democratic tradition and thus, provide added momentum to the realization of its good fruits in abundance in our academic mission.