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Power meritocracy, Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy: Their Role in Promoting Quality Innovation and Accountability.

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Abstract

This research explores the theme meritocracy is a type of power, academic freedom and institutional autonomy of university within the context of recent policy reforms in governmental services and higher education in Nepal. This research addresses the problem of how these reforms impact the ability of universities and others area to operate independently while remaining accountability accountable to governmental expectations. The primary objectives of the study are to understand how university and others leaders define and experience meritocracy academic freedom institutional autonomy, to analyze the effects of policy reforms on governance structures and decision-making processes, and to identify the challenges that impede effective autonomy. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research utilizes semi-structured interviews with university job holders, students, general people and political parties' members supplemented by document analysis to capture a comprehensive view of governance dynamics. As the Nepalese government seeks to enhance the quality and competitiveness of its everywhere governmental services, Universities V.C and others appointment higher education system, the balance between institutional autonomy and state control has become a critical area of study. The findings reveal a complex landscape where higher position university leaders perceive practices academic autonomy negatively but new political members positive, yet face significant bureaucratic constraints and political pressures that limit their operational freedom. While recent reforms have led to increased decision-making authority at the departmental level, financial dependencies and informal control mechanisms continue to pose challenges. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on higher education governance, highlighting the need for policies that foster genuine autonomy while ensuring accountability. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of balancing institutional independence with regulatory oversight, offering recommendations for policy makers aimed at enhancing university autonomy in a way that promotes innovation and responsiveness to societal needs.

Keywords: Power, Meritocracy, Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, Promoting Quality Innovation and Accountability.

Introduction

Mainly we are exploring the intricate relationship between Power, meritocracy academic freedom, “institutional autonomy”, and “accountability”. Over decades on Higher Bureaucracy and higher Education has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of these foundational principles, initiating a national dialogue through research initiatives and publications. Meritocracy means first and first appointment

everywhere but not kinship relations. In meritocracy the government selected related people on the basis his qualified ability. This type of provision started 20th century in Europe specially Britain. Academic is a type of individual capacity related with their educational achievement. Freedom means everywhere free but maintaining social norms and values. Here we are going to introduce one of the primary benefits of university autonomy is the enhancement of academic freedom. Academic freedom allows scholars and researchers



to pursue knowledge without fear of censorship or political interference. This freedom is essential for university teachers' students fostering an environment where critical thinking, creativity, and educational innovation can thrive or grow. Autonomous universities can design their curriculum, choose their research agendas, and establish their academic standards, which leads to a more vibrant intellectual community. In countries where university autonomy is respected, institutions tend to produce higher-quality research and education. For instance, the European University Association (EUA) has noted that universities with greater autonomy often deliver better educational outcomes and research outputs, as they can align their missions with the needs of society and the economy (Pinheiro & Gänzle, 2023). This alignment is crucial in a rapidly changing global landscape where knowledge and skills must evolve to meet new challenges. The accountability and innovation directly not relevant but one is supporter of others.

Objective and methodology

This article aims to examine how "Power meritocracy, Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy, Their Role in Promoting Quality Innovation and accountability" intersect in shaping the governance of higher education institutions within a Nepali context. It examines evolving challenges and opportunities that present as a result of political power and their influence on governance structures. The specific objectives are: power meritocracy, academic freedom, "institutional autonomy, and accountability" in public and private higher education governance. This article adopts a qualitative research approach, employing a Scoping Review methodology within the interpretively paradigm. The interpretively paradigm is well-suited to this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex and evolving nature of governance in higher education institutions. This approach acknowledges that the interplay between academic freedom, "institutional autonomy, and accountability is shaped by various socio-political, economic, and historical contexts. A Scoping Review was selected as the most appropriate method because it enables a broad and systematic mapping of existing literature, identifying key themes, gaps, and emerging trends relevant to the governance of higher education in a globalized context (Kumar and Praveenakumar 2025.). Contrasting to Systematic Reviews, which concentrate on a narrow focus of defined research questions, Scoping Reviews are particularly useful for synthesizing diverse bodies of knowledge and informing future research directions. This article aims to examine the intersection of "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" in shaping the governance of higher educational institution. It examines the shifting challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization and their influence on governance structures.

Results and Discussion:

The results from the study reveal significant insights into how policy reforms have influenced university autonomy, governance practices, and educational outcomes.

A. Perceptions of University Autonomy The interviews conducted with university presidents and party secretaries highlighted varying perceptions of autonomy across different institutions. The research reveals several key insights into university leaders' perceptions of autonomy. Academic Autonomy was viewed positively, with participants expressing that they felt significant control over curricula and academic programs. This sense of control enables the development of innovative educational offerings that can better meet local needs. In contrast, Financial Autonomy presented challenges of leaders felt secure in their financial independence. Many voiced concerns about budget constraints and their reliance on government funding, indicating that such limitations can hinder the ability to fully implement their academic visions. This reliance on state allocations raises questions about how universities can sustain their initiatives without compromising their academic goals. Regarding Organizational Autonomy of participants reported feeling empowered to make independent decisions concerning staffing and administration. This autonomy is crucial for fostering a responsive and effective academic environment where institutions can adapt to changing circumstances and demands. However, a striking of participants acknowledged that despite their perceived autonomy, compliance with central regulations was a significant factor influencing their operations. This finding suggests that while universities may enjoy some degree of independence, they remain tightly bound by regulatory frameworks that can restrict their overall autonomy.

This study found that recent policy reforms significantly impacted various dimensions of university governance. Participants noted both positive outcomes and ongoing challenges. This research finding reveals significant insights into various areas of governance within universities. In the realm of Enhanced Decision-Making of participants reported a positive impact, indicating that internal processes have improved. However, noted ongoing challenges, suggesting that while universities have gained some autonomy, substantial external pressures continue to influence their decision-making processes. Another area of growth is Increased Collaboration, with leaders highlighting the positive effects of policies that encourage partnerships with industries and other educational institutions. This collaborative approach enhances educational relevance and resource sharing; nonetheless, acknowledged that challenges remain in fully realizing these partnerships. When examining Research Output, an impressive of participants reported positive impacts, attributing their autonomy in research decisions to an increase in innovative projects and publications. This level of autonomy is critical for fostering a vibrant research culture; however, recognized that challenges still exist in balancing research priorities with institutional goals. In terms of Student Engagement of leaders noted that greater freedom allowed for the development of more engaging curricula. Despite this, pointed out that some students felt disconnected from the administration, highlighting a gap that needs to be addressed to ensure that student voices are included in the governance process. Overall, while university leaders appreciate the

positive impacts of increased autonomy in decision-making, collaboration, research, and student engagement, they also recognize the ongoing challenges that could hinder the full realization of these benefits. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of governance in higher education institutions.

Institutional Autonomy:

Every University of Nepal free but control. The Impact of Policy Reforms on Higher Education in Nepal" highlights several significant challenges that universities face in exercising their autonomy. The government wanted to modify every University concern accountability and transparency. The major concern identified of participants expressing frustration over lengthy approval processes for new initiatives. This old bureaucratic inertia can stifle innovation and slow the implementation of vital programs, ultimately hindering institutions' responsiveness to emerging educational needs. Another noteworthy challenge is Inconsistent Policy Enforcement, reported by participants. The variability in how policies are enforced at different administrative levels creates confusion among university leaders. Resource Limitations also emerged as a significant barrier, with most of leaders citing financial constraints and a lack of support as common themes in their discussions. These resource issues not only restrict universities' abilities to pursue ambitious initiatives but also impact their capacity to attract and retain talent, invest in infrastructure, and enhance educational offerings. The reliance on limited funding sources can severely restrict the potential for universities to thrive autonomously. Lastly, Cultural Resistance was highlighted by of participants, who noted that traditional hierarchies and norms sometimes hinder participatory governance. This cultural backdrop can create obstacles to fostering an inclusive environment where diverse voices contribute to decision-making processes. In many cases, ingrained structures within higher education governance may resist the changes necessary for more collaborative approaches. In summary, while the research identifies several avenues for enhancing university autonomy in Nepal, it also underscores critical challenges that institutions must navigate. Addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies, ensuring consistent policy enforcement, overcoming resource limitations, and fostering a culture of participatory governance will be essential for universities seeking to exercise their autonomy effectively by tackling these challenges, higher education institutions can better position themselves to respond to the evolving demands of the educational land scape.

Meritocracy its use and misuse of power discourses:

It is a type of strategy. Power is everywhere come from every (Foucault 1982) Referring to the first sense he had indicated; one may call power strategy the totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or to maintain it. It means a system, organization, or society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and

merit. Only the elite, in that new meritocracy, would enjoy the opportunity for self-fulfillment. Though founded theoretically on principles of meritocracy, the public arena was parceled into spheres of personal influence. The word "strategy" is currently employed in three ways. First, to designate the means employed to attain a certain end; it is a question of rationality functioning to arrive at an objective. The mass appointment of government like Universities, and other governmental sectors. Second, to designate the manner in which a partner in a certain game acts with regard to what he thinks should be the action of the others and what he considers the others think to be his own; it is the way in which one seeks to have the advantage over others. Third, to designate the procedures used in a situation of confrontation to deprive the opponent of his means of combat and to reduce him to giving up the struggle; it is a question, therefore, of the means destined to obtain victory.

Accountability and Nepali context discourses:

The concept of public accountability within the skills discourse also requires re-examination. Contributing to Societal Development Universities are not only centers of learning but also play a crucial role in societal development. Autonomous universities can engage more effectively with their communities, addressing local needs and contributing to social cohesion. By having the freedom to develop outreach programs, conduct community-based research, and collaborate with local organizations, universities can become catalysts for positive change. The White Paper's narrow definition of accountability as financial reporting fails to address the broader governance issues central to the national development agenda (CHE, 2008). As noted by the HRDSCA (2014), a developmental state in a democratic South Africa is not solely informed by business growth alone. There are other socio-economic considerations that encompass a democratic developmental state such as popular democracy, social inclusion, job creation, economic restructuring for mass participation, improved healthcare and education, poverty eradication, public service delivery, social protection, pro-poor growth and sustainable livelihoods (HRDSCA, 2014). However, as Thapa and Singh (2019) accord, the human capital approach remains silent about associated social returns.

Moreover, the ability to adapt curricula to reflect societal needs ensures that graduates are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to their communities. This responsiveness is particularly important in addressing pressing global challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and social inequality.

Academic Freedom:

Autonomous universities can lead initiatives that promote sustainability, equity, and social justice, thereby enhancing their relevance and impact in society. Challenges to University Autonomy Despite the clear benefits of university autonomy, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that institutions face in maintaining their independence. In many

countries, political pressures, funding constraints, and regulatory frameworks can limit the autonomy of universities. Third world countries government interventions in academic affairs can undermine the integrity of research and education, leading to a culture of compliance rather than innovation. Furthermore, the commercialization of higher education poses a threat to academic freedom. As universities increasingly rely on external funding sources, there is a risk that financial interests may influence research agendas and educational priorities. This situation can create conflicts of interest and compromise the quality of education and research. This study's purpose is to explore the impact of recent policy reforms on university autonomy in Nepal and to understand the lived experiences of university administrators regarding autonomy. By addressing these objectives, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of higher education governance in third world countries, providing insights that can inform both policy and practice in the global higher education landscape.

Academic Autonomy: Academic autonomy refers to the only freedom of universities to determine their educational programs, curriculum, and research agendas without undue interference from internal external power base political and social authorities. This dimension is crucial for fostering an environment conducive to academic freedom and innovation. Institutions with strong academic autonomy can set their admission criteria, design their courses, and establish their research priorities, which allows them to respond effectively to societal needs and global trends in education and research (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Recent this studies highlight that academic autonomy is not only about independence but also involves accountability mechanisms that ensure quality and relevance in education. For instance, all universities are often required to meet certain standards set by accreditation bodies, which can influence their academic decisions while still allowing them the freedom to innovate (Maccario & Garibaldi, 2024). Financial autonomy in higher education institutions is defined as the ability of universities to manage their financial resources independently, which encompasses the authority to set tuition fees, allocate budgets, and engage in fundraising activities without excessive governmental control. This autonomy is crucial for universities to sustain their operations, invest in infrastructure, and support research initiatives (Kohtamäki, 2011). The relationship between financial autonomy and institutional performance is significant; institutions with greater financial independence tend to exhibit more flexibility in resource allocation, which can lead to improved educational outcomes and enhanced research capabilities (Enders et al., 2013; Etomaru et al., 2016). However, financial autonomy also necessitates a commitment to transparency and accountability in financial management, as stakeholders increasingly demand evidence of effective resource utilization (Pham et al., 2022).

Organizational autonomy: It refers to the capacity of universities to structure their internal governance and administrative processes. This includes the ability to establish governing bodies, define roles and responsibilities, and create

policies that guide institutional operations. Organizational autonomy is essential for fostering a responsive and adaptive institutional culture that can effectively address the challenges posed by a rapidly changing educational landscape (Szeubs, 2016; Yevdokimenko et al., 2020). This type of research indicates that organizational autonomy is closely linked to the effectiveness of decision-making processes within universities. Institutions that operate independently in their governance structures are often better positioned to implement strategic initiatives and respond to both internal and external challenges (Wilson & Knighton, 2021). Staffing autonomy involves the authority of universities to make decisions regarding the recruitment, management, and promotion of academic and administrative staff. This dimension is critical for ensuring that institutions can attract and retain qualified personnel who align with their mission and goals. Staffing autonomy allows universities to establish their hiring criteria, salary structures, and professional development opportunities, which can enhance the overall quality of education and research (Dattée et al., 2022). Furthermore, staffing autonomy is increasingly recognized as a factor that influences job satisfaction and institutional loyalty among faculty and staff. When universities have the freedom to manage their human resources effectively, they can cultivate a more motivated and engaged workforce, which is essential for achieving institutional objectives (Uslu, 2017).

Governance Models in Higher Education: The governance models in higher education have evolved significantly over the past few decades, influenced by various factors including globalization, marketization, and the increasing demand for accountability and quality assurance. In the context of Nepal, these governance models are particularly relevant as the country navigates its unique socio-political landscape while striving to enhance its higher education system. This literature review explores the key governance models in higher education and their implications for Nepal.

Traditional Bureaucratic Model: Historically everywhere many higher education institutions in develop and no develop countries operated under a centralized bureaucratic model, where decision-making was heavily influenced by government policies and regulations. This model emphasized uniformity and control, often stifling innovation and responsiveness to local needs. However, as the higher education sector expanded, this model faced criticism for its rigidity and inefficiency (Do & Mai, 2023; Yang, 2020). The new Public Management (NPM): The introduction of New Public Management principles in the late 20th century marked a shift towards more decentralized governance structures. NPM emphasizes efficiency, accountability, and performance measurement, encouraging universities to adopt business-like practices. In Nepal, this model has led to increased competition among institutions and a focus on market-driven approaches to education (Yang, 2020). However, the implementation of NPM in China has been met with challenges, including the tension between market forces and the traditional values of education (Geng & Huang, 2022).

Participatory Governance: This model advocates for greater involvement of various stakeholders, including faculty, students, and the community, in decision-making processes. Participatory governance aims to enhance transparency and accountability while fostering a sense of ownership among stakeholders. In Nepal, there has been a gradual move towards this model, particularly in response to calls for reform and modernization of the higher education system. However, the extent of participation remains limited, often constrained by hierarchical structures and cultural norms (Ma & Shi, 2024).

Hybrid Governance Models: Contemporary society model literature suggests that many institutions in China are adopting hybrid governance models that combine elements of traditional bureaucratic structures with more decentralized and participatory approaches. This hybridization allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness to local contexts while maintaining some level of central oversight. For instance, universities may implement performance-based funding while still adhering to national educational standards (Huang, 2023).

Impact of Autonomy on Educational Outcomes: The impact of autonomy on educational outcomes has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of higher education. Autonomy, defined as the ability of students and educators to make independent choices regarding their learning and teaching processes, has been linked to various positive educational outcomes, including academic engagement, resilience, and overall educational quality. Autonomy and Student Engagement Research indicates that autonomy-supportive environments significantly enhance student engagement. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), when educators provide autonomy support, they fulfill students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning activities (Ma, 2021). Studies have shown that students who perceive higher levels of autonomy support from their teachers report greater engagement and motivation, leading to improved academic performance. For instance, a systematic review highlighted that autonomy-supportive teaching practices, such as providing choices and acknowledging student perspectives, are crucial for enhancing student engagement in higher education settings (Yang et al., 2022). Autonomy and Resilience in addition to engagement, autonomy has been linked to student resilience. Resilience, defined as the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges, is essential for academic success. Research suggests that autonomy-supportive teaching practices contribute to the development of resilience among students by promoting a sense of ownership over their learning processes (Ma, 2021). As a type of example, students who feel empowered to make decisions about their learning are more likely to develop coping strategies and persist through difficulties, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes (Johansen et al., 2023).

Autonomy and Educational Quality: The relationship between autonomy and educational quality is multifaceted. Autonomy in educational settings allows institutions to tailor their curricula and teaching methods to better meet the needs

of their students and the demands of the job market. This flexibility can lead to higher educational quality as institutions innovate and adapt their programs based on feedback from students and industry stakeholders (Yang et al., 2022). Furthermore, autonomy encourages faculty to engage in research and pedagogical practices that align with their interests and expertise, which can enhance the overall quality of education provided (Ma, 2021). Research Output The impact of autonomy extends to research output as well. Institutions that promote academic freedom and autonomy among faculty members tend to produce higher quality research. Faculty members who feel autonomous are more likely to pursue innovative research topics and collaborate across disciplines, leading to increased research productivity and impactful publications (Johansen et al., 2023). Studies have shown that autonomy-supportive environments in academia correlate with higher levels of faculty satisfaction and engagement, which are critical for fostering a vibrant research culture (Yang et al., 2022).

Challenges in Managing University Autonomy: Despite the positive impacts of policy reforms, several challenges remain in managing university autonomy in Nepal such as balancing Control and Autonomy, Resource Disparities, Cultural Resistance, and Quality Assurance. In the context of higher education in Nepal, balancing control and autonomy remains a significant challenge. The Nepalese government retains considerable influence over educational policies, which can undermine the effectiveness of decentralized governance models. Although recent reforms aim to enhance institutional autonomy, achieving a sustainable balance between state control and independence is critical (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, disparities in resource allocation exacerbate the situation, as not all universities have equal support or the capacity to exercise their autonomy effectively. This inequality results in varying levels of educational quality and research output across institutions, raising concerns about fairness and competitiveness (Wang et al., 2022). Cultural factors also play a role, as the traditional hierarchical culture in Chinese society can impede the adoption of participatory governance models. Faculty and students may be hesitant to engage in decision-making processes due to established norms of deference to authority, which can stifle innovation and responsiveness (Zhang et al., 2023). Finally, as universities gain more autonomy, the complexity of ensuring quality and accountability increases. Developing effective quality assurance mechanisms that can monitor and evaluate institutional performance without hindering innovation and flexibility poses a significant challenge for the educational landscape (Li & Xue, 2022).

Conclusion:

University autonomy is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions, each critical to the functioning and governance of higher education institutions of Nepal. The four primary dimensions of university autonomy are academic, financial, organizational, and staffing autonomy. Understanding these dimensions is essential for grasping how universities operate independently and respond

to external pressures. The governance of higher education in Nepal would entail a balance of “academic freedom”, “institutional autonomy”, and “public accountability” to remain internal competitive. Currently the has a national governance focus. As Nationally reshapes higher education, institutions and regulatory bodies must adopt governance models that foster independent decision-making while ensuring alignment with national and global standards. Strengthening “academic freedom” will empower scholars, while enhanced “institutional autonomy” will allow higher education to innovate and adapt. At the same time, transparent “accountability” mechanisms will ensure public trust and regulatory compliance. Ownership, transparency and action are key aspects of accreditation with international benchmarks, facilitating global recognition of qualifications, and ensuring crisis preparedness are crucial for maintaining the sector’s credibility. By integrating these strategies, and regulatory bodies can sustain resilience, uphold academic integrity, and contribute meaningfully to the global knowledge economy.

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