

Autonomy new catchword in education system

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IT is very refreshing to see that the word "autonomy" has crept back into the academic world. With cluster schools becoming a reality, education history is being created, with autonomy the mainstay for the successful implementation of the concept.

Some are even surprised at the degree of autonomy allowed, saying this has never happened before in the education system.

For too long "autonomy" has been regarded as a taboo or dirty word when it comes to education.

Now, all of a sudden, a school can actually hire a badminton coach if it wants to churn out badminton champions, have its own special training programmes or seek collaboration with major IT companies to enhance the school's computer facilities to keep up with new advances (NST, March 24).

Cluster schools can collaborate with professional arts groups and theatres as well as seek sponsors from financial institutions to leverage the development of artistic talents among pupils.



The possibilities appear endless, leading towards to meritocracy in diversity. The sky seems to be the limit.

Reportedly, the Education Ministry is thinking of model academic performance and the possibility of higher wages for teachers, as well as niche schools that excel in particular fields, including sports and the arts.

Alternative programmes like O-levels, A-levels or General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) are also allowed.

These are certainly very bold steps in the right direction that can boost the status of national schools to be on par with their international counterparts.

It is also very timely as education everywhere else appears to be facing some kind of a crisis.

Even the US undersecretary for education recently admitted this (*Financial Times*, March 21). The likelihood of a first-year high school student enrolling in university four years later is less than 40 per cent, according to the US National Centre for Public Policy and Higher Education.

At the same time, in a national dialogue on higher education, convened by leaders and stakeholders from across the US, US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings suggested some items to improve college access, affordability and accountability.

Among the issues discussed at a summit on "A test of leadership: Committing to advanced post-secondary education for all Americans" in Washington, D.C. was aligning K-12 (the North American designation for primary and secondary education) and higher education expectations.

Others were increasing need-based aid for access and success; using accreditation to support and emphasize student learning outcomes; serving adults and other non-traditional students; and enhancing affordability, decreasing costs and promoting productivity.

In her speech on March 22, Spellings said that America's universities have long been the envy of the world.

But the data shows that they are in danger of losing that position. She reckoned that the US would not remain the world's innovation leader for long if it continues to leave so much talent and potential untapped.

This is a frank assessment from a country known to advocate full autonomy not only at the school levels but most definitely at the post-secondary level as well.

If such a country, despite allowing the spirit of "free enquiry" to blossom uninterrupted, still worries about not being the world's innovation leader, what hope is there for countries where such a spirit is almost absent?

In other words, should not higher education itself need to undergo a change drastic enough so that it can be better aligned with a more autonomous school system of K-12?

Should not higher education, too, be given similar autonomy to carry out the desired changes for the 21st century?

Here again, the US— no less than Harvard—provided the lead, according a recent report (FT, March 13).

For the first time in three decades, it is on the verge of overhauling its curriculum by redefining what it means to be an educated person in this new century.

Interestingly enough, the co-chair of the task force was quoted as saying: "We're not trying to say that an educated man or woman needs to know this, that and the other.

"What we're saying is that an educated person should have a certain set of capacities: interpretative capacities, problem-solving capacities, reflective capacities and critical capacities to help them through the world."

Succinctly, the reappraisal is designed to help students prepare to contribute to civic life, respond to change in society and grasp the ethical implications of their implications.

Reportedly, under the new curriculum, each student would be required to take one course in each of eight categories, including science of living systems, science of the physical universe, societies of the world, empirical reasoning, and ethical reasoning.

Equally important are aesthetic and interpretative understanding (which include cultural expression, such as literature, art and music), culture and beliefs; and the US in the world.

The report, which generally has been well received among its faculty members, is said to have recaptured the importance of undergraduate education.

The proposals now, said to be drafted into legislation, are to be put to the vote next month. The outcome will be much awaited the world over.

Could this be the type of revolutionary changes that the prime minister spoke of soon after he assumed office?

If so, we must no longer delay kick-starting the call for nothing less than "education revolution" as articulated by the country's number one.

Thus far, we are grateful to those who have the courage and vision to set the stage for our education system to "liberate" itself from its previously battered image.

It is one of the best examples yet of how bureaucratic shackles can be removed in the effort to expedite the delivery system and foster healthy competition.

Therein, autonomy, no doubt coupled with accountability, must take its rightful place once again in the drive towards educational excellence.

At last, education revolution here we come.

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