

The respective powers and functions of buffer bodies and government

The key functions of higher education institutions include –

- promoting learning in society;
- promoting the cultural and social life of society;
- fostering a capacity for independent critical thinking, and
- supporting the achievement of national economic and social development.

Central planning by governments in these areas is inefficient and strong economies and vibrant societies are more likely to flourish if higher education institutions operate in an environment characterised by a high level of institutional autonomy and academic freedom combined with accountability.

A buffer body is an important element of a higher education sector formed by highly autonomous institutions. Its main purpose is to act as an intermediary or mediator between higher education institutions (HEIs) and governments, allowing for a relationship between the institutions and governments which –

- respects the role and responsibility of each;
- avoids the hazards of excessive interference by governments in the institutions, especially in funding and internal management;
- facilitates the steering of higher education within a policy framework set by governments;
- facilitates government departments to focus on high level policy issues;
- ensures that the institutions contribute effectively to national objectives, and
- ensures that they are held accountable for public funds.

Buffer bodies are generally substantially independent of government and it is desirable that their functions and responsibilities be set out in law. Although highly independent, they are accountable to government for the carrying out of their functions, which can vary but commonly relate to the distribution of public funding (facilitates HEI autonomy) and the monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning (accountability measure). The bodies also can have functions in advising governments on the development of higher education and research, functions relating to disciplinary balance among different kinds of HEI and functions relating to the development of strategic planning in HEIs.

In this model of a higher education system with a buffer body, the role of Government is to set national policy and strategy; to determine the total funding to be provided from public funds to the higher education sector and to hold the institutions and any buffer bodies accountable for their activities and the achievement of national objectives.