

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION : AN INDIAN DILEMMA.

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ABSTRACT

Quality has become the touchstone in higher education all over the world. Indian higher education system, grown enormously in last five decades, is facing unprecedented problems. There is a question of credibility and there are doubts about the quality. The need of the hour is to go for assessment and accreditation of institutions of higher education. How should one go about this ? What do we mean by quality in higher education ? Can one think of a process that would be suitable for India ? This presentation addresses such difficult but important questions.

INDEXING TERMS

Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Assessment and Accreditation.

Introduction :

Higher education in India is undergoing a transformation. The reason for this is the changing, and increasingly paradoxical nature of relationship between society, government and higher education system. This change is mainly because of the expansion of higher education in India and also new demands on the system. From 23 universities, 700 colleges, 1,05,000 students, and 15,000 teachers in 1947, the system has grown into 223 universities, 8,210 colleges, 6 million students and 3,00,000 teachers. Such a rapid expansion is unprecedented in the world. This has resulted in a few good and a few bad things. On the good side is availability of institutions offering a variety of courses in varied disciplines and easy access to higher education. In science and technology, India has the worlds third largest reservoir of trained work-force. On the bad side is widespread dissatisfaction about the utility of higher education. It is true that the system has

become unwieldy, incompetent, static and devoid of quality. It is neither able to achieve excellence in pursuit of truth and expansion of boundaries of knowledge nor is able to create an able and trained work-force to feed the emerging employment oriented egalitarian society.

The charges against higher education are many and varied. They include, creation of a passive and non-vibrant environment; absence of open and flexible approach; highly personalised way of dealing and even politicking in matters of appointments and administration. On the whole the opinion of people is heavily tilted against the Indian higher education system. Every element of society, be it intellectuals, scientists, industrialists, students and interestingly enough, even politicians, is worried but not knowing what needs to be done to improve matters, it continues to be a helpness spectator of the distressing scenario. There is a great need to introduce order and sanity into higher education. The advent of the 21st century, in the near future, calls for a

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drastically different approach.

It is interesting that higher education is in a flux throughout the world. The balance between elitism and mass participation is shifting towards the latter. In almost every country, there is an increasing pressure on the higher education system to equip students with not only the expertise derived from traditional academic programmes, but also to give students sufficient range of transferable skills to enable them to play more diversified and effective roles when they enter employment. Thus the institutions of higher education need to have a very clear understanding of what they are seeking to achieve through their academic programmes. In addition, whatever they do, need to be of quality. Now-a-days, in the education sector, much of the discussion and debate, which hitherto was focused on standards, has now shifted towards quality. It is a truism to say that quality has become the touchstone of the last two decades of the 20th century.

We all have an instinctive understanding, considering common sense and conventional wisdom, of what *Quality* means. It may be difficult to articulate it but one can quote the following passage from the Pirsigs book entitled *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

"Quality You know what it is, yet you do not know what it is. But that is self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes proof! There is nothing to talk about. But if you cannot say what quality is, how do we know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it does not exist at all.

But for practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others but what is betterness? So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is quality? What is it?"

This is "you-cannot-define-it-but-you-know-it-when-you-see-it" argument. Alexander Astin contends that there are four conventional views of excellence in quality higher education : excellence as resources, excellence as reputation, excellence as outcomes and excellence as content. After going into the merits and demerits of each of these views, Astin offers "a talent development" definition of quality. The most excellent institutions are, in his view, those that have the greatest impact - and the most values, economists would say - on the student's knowledge and personal development and on the faculty members' scholarly and pedagogical ability and productivity. Astin's definition tries to ascertain the difference [that education makes] in student's knowledge, skills and attitudes. A different definition is offered by Lewis Mayhew, Patric Ford and Dean Hubbard in the book *The Quest for Quality*. They say : "Quality undergraduate education consists of preparing learners through the use of words, numbers and abstract concepts to understand, cope with and positively influence the environment in which they find themselves. They believe that colleges and universities can have little effect on fundamental character traits such as honesty, optimism, or sense of humour. Those traits are formed much earlier and by different processes." Quality is always an exclusive idea.

However, egalitarian education reformers have grouped quality under the following headings :

- Quality as exceptional high standards
- Quality as perfection or consistency
- Quality as fitness for purpose
- Quality as value for money and
- Quality as transformation.

These are five ways of viewing quality in education. Traditionally, quality in higher education, has been linked to the idea of exceptionally high standards ("exceptional"). A second approach to quality sees it in terms of consistency ("perfection") with reference to processes and sets of well defined criteria. A third approach to quality relates to *fitness for purpose*. In this approach quality is to be accepted as a relative concept, as different interest groups or beneficiaries : namely students, teachers, staff, parents, would-be-compliers, funding agencies and society, have different priorities. A fourth approach to quality equates it with *value for money*. This factor brings in the idea of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. A fifth view of quality sees quality as *transformative*. Education is to be treated as an on going process of transformation of the learner (student).

With the plethora of definitions of quality, the best approach is simply to define quality as a multi-dimensional entity. This means a set of parameters needs to be identified which would encompass the entity in totality. One can define a set of criteria to further define each of the parameter at a micro-level. The information on these criteria and its analysis will help to decide the quality of a particular activity.

Defining Quality in Higher Education :

How does one define quality in higher education ? Can the Academics think of a better definition ? Several attempts have been made to define quality in higher education. In the document produced by Higher Education Quality Council, an organisation in the UK, it is stated that "*quality in higher education is not the same as satisfying a customer with, for example, the latest motor car* Quality in higher education embraces, but is not synonymous with effectiveness, efficiency and accountability." But can one really equate quality with efficiency or accountability or for that matter effectiveness ? Education is not a commodity that can be looked upon as a mere product. It goes beyond and gives to a human not only skills, information and knowledge, but something more to make it an enriching experience. Moreover, these terms have connotations of terms used in industry. In a manufacturing industry the input (the material), the process (the manufacturing mechanism) and the output (the product) is pre-defined and the user needs to be assured of the quality of the product. However, in education, every element : the input the process and the output are human beings and cannot, therefore, be dealt with such a simplistic approach. Ellis states that quality is a somewhat ambiguous term (in higher education) since it has connotations of both standards and excellence. Most of the debates on quality end with synonymity between "quality" and "excellence". There is also a notion of quality as conformation to a standard or specification. Again, one can see that, the

origin of the above statement is in the notions of quality control in manufacturing industry. In higher education, the term "standard" means a basis for measurement, or a "yardstick" to describe a required characteristic and this varies from nation to nation. Once the standards are decided, the institution can try to achieve Quality so as to possess such Excellence.

Thus, one can see that defining quality in higher education is a difficult exercise. To a large extent the difficulty is understandable and even appropriate, given the nature and role of the institutions of higher education. For centuries they have served society, more or less effectively, by teaching what they have been asked to teach, to generate new thinking so as to broaden the frontiers of knowledge and to challenge the societal conditions and value structures. The universities were, then, organisations small and independent enough to manage their own affairs. In fact, managing quality was done by the traditional elitist concept of standards. The last quarter of the twentieth century has brought about fundamental changes in the conditions of nations and also in higher education. In the post-modern era higher education has moved from a restricted to mass access and that too in a pluralistic system. The students and public in general do not view higher education as an effort merely to become "learned" but as a tool to prosper in their personal life so as to achieve higher living standards. The funding for higher education is mostly governmental and it too has brought newer controls into the picture. All this has changed the interrelationship between universities, government and society. Higher education is now looked upon as a service to society; hence the

nature of quality control should hereafter reflect the needs and aspirations of the various beneficiaries. The definition of quality, therefore, becomes fitness for purpose. This means that rather than arguing for a precise definition, it would be advisable to accept quality as a relative concept, about which different beneficiaries have different notions because of their different priorities.

Measurement of Quality in Higher Education :

Can one measure Quality ? A 1990 issue of *World* features a lead article by George Fisher entitled "Measuring the Unmeasurable" that deals with quality assurance efforts at Motorola Corporation. The article reports that the Chair of Motorola started raising two questions at all levels of organisation and with its customers. The questions were : "what do you like about Motorola and what don't you like ?" Jan Carlson in his book entitled *Moments of Truth*, a story about Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) has written "Every interaction between an employee of SAS - whether pilot, baggage handler, or reservation agent - is a "moment of truth" in presenting the service face of SAS. The reasoning behind the issues raised in the above examples pertaining to the corporate world is akin to the field of higher education when we look at it from the beneficiaries point of view. One has to look at the functioning of the institutions of higher education - academic and organisational - from a totality angle. This necessitates panopticon - the all-seeing eye - approach for assurance of quality in higher education. The full-blown panopticon in higher education system would have a three tiered nature : internal quality assurance mechanism, evaluation by peers, and accreditation by an

independent and competent organisation. Universities, over the years, have developed remarkable capability to adjust with the changing conditions they are confronted with, without deviating from basic values and ideals. The ideals like search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge are the intrinsic qualities of the institutions of higher education. Because of their basic orientation towards knowledge, universities, irrespective of their geographical location and socio-economic environment, have to protect a few fundamental characteristics. They are the acceptance of:

- the authority of the academics to take decisions regarding the knowledge-oriented academic activities of teaching and research.
- the concept that knowledge areas form the basic foci of attention. This means that each area and the people connected with it are autonomous but are loosely connected with each other, thus making universities a vibrant "loosely coupled system."
- the extreme diffusion of the decision-making power (decentralisation of authority) to make it (university) a federal system, and
- the location of authority mainly with academics.

The observance and protection of these fundamental characteristics - intrinsic qualities - is the prime duty of the University authorities. To know about the quality of a university one has to look for evidence that would reflect in the state of intrinsic qualities in a university. Besides these, extrinsic qualities, which reflect its links with society, also need to be considered. The beneficiaries look at education from the view point of "fitness

for purpose." The extrinsic dimensions focus our attention on the idea of accountability. Accountability means the requirement to demonstrate responsible actions to one more external constituency; in our case, the beneficiaries.

The measurement of quality in a highly complex system like higher education needs to address itself to both the intrinsic and extrinsic requirements of universities. Several questions could be associated with the measurement of quality. What evidence will be an appropriate operational expression of quality? What evidence will reflect the performance? Once the evidences are identified, the question of performance standard arises. What level of performance will be required as demonstrating an appropriate level of quality? This means that one has to make a judgement with reference to possible choices for performance standards.

The measurement of quality, thus, embraces a good bit of work - selecting evidence, making provision for both acquisition and analysis of data, setting an appropriate standard of performance and setting up the mechanism to exercise judgements on performance.

Quality Revolution : A Crusade that Needs to be Faced :

It is true that India's Higher education system has had a phenomenal growth but this is not a planned healthy development because it has been brought about by blind political expediency under the camouflage of meeting the aspiration of people and also to satisfy regional pride. It is also true that such an unprecedented expansion in the span of almost fifty years has allowed mediocre people to creep into the system and the system is being managed by persons, with

no commitment except to use it for personal advancement and glorification. It is equally true that the so called intellectuals' and scientists' community, while shedding crocodile tears on the plight of higher education are willing neither to sacrifice their time nor to put in efforts for improving higher education. Thus, there is no action plan to improve it. It is more than true that governments' financial support to higher education will not go up dramatically in the future; the fear is that it may go down. It is unambiguously true that economic liberalisation, interest of other countries in Indian industry and economy, breaking of national boundary barriers because of the communication revolution, possibility of easy access to the better knowledge and education without leaving the country, are already established realities of today. Indian higher education is truly facing an unprecedented crisis and the academic community, the staff in the higher education system and the managers of education have no choice but to rise and work for assuring quality in higher education. Let the remaining period of this century be a period for the quest for quality so that the first decade in the 21st century would truly be the decade of quality.

Even though, there are many definitions of quality but, as far as India is concerned. *Quality* is 'fitness for the purpose' for which higher education is given to students. To put it another way, there will be diversity in opinion about quality depending upon the end use of the product and expectations from it. Thus, one needs to define and judge quality from what is appropriate. It would be wholly inappropriate to expect the American or British models to determine our expectations towards all types of

higher education. But, we can learn much more by carefully analysing these and adapting them appropriately to suit our system.

How should one go about introducing quality assurance and control in India? What would be the best methodology and approach? It is here one needs to blend Western models with the Indian psyche. The well tried and accepted process is to undertake self study for appraising an institution's strengths and weaknesses in the frame of the goals and objectives of the institution; to subject the institution to peer review for critical testing and checking of the facts, figures and ideas presented in the self study document for achieving quality; and finally submitting the outcome in the form of a report with suggestions for achieving better quality. The last two steps should be left to an independent autonomous body - an assessment and accrediting agency - with the mandate of giving authenticity and credibility to the entire process.

Self study has become the backbone of the quality assessment, control and assurance mechanism. Self study in turn is based on goals, objectives and missions of higher education institutions. It is here the heterogeneity and complexity of Indian higher education system becomes an impediment. This is mainly because India has residential and affiliating, central and state universities, unitary "deemed" universities, specialised multidisciplinary national institutions and also regional institutions. All institutions of higher education are established through legislation and have more or less similar preambles in their Acts. Their goals and objectives are, therefore, not very well defined in the Acts of the universities. The myth of highly and nobly worded preambles must be

dispensed with and substituted by each institution's own goals and objectives uniquely suitable for the region it is serving, with a clear eye on the ever changing market scenario. This would allow each institution to determine its own ethos and the nature of its teaching programmes. This would not only enhance the capability to deal effectively with the emerging scenario of the future, but also allow each institution to define its target for quality standards. The important thing to note is that what was true in 1950's and 1960's is no more true now in respect of the needs of individual students and society. It was possible then to think of a higher education system catering to an economic and academic elite group within society, who in turn were expected to become the social and academic elite in the nation. Now it is the "mass" with varying social, intellectual and economic background which has to be catered to. This demands the tailoring of higher education for a much wider range of individual needs and future placement in the work force through a much wider diversity of offerings. What institutes need to do is to decide their own purposes and the utility to regions they are serving, because they need to produce the dedicated and trained members as demanded by the economy of the region. This does not mean that every university should do this; a few should in fact have the mission of producing highly trained manpower at par with those at the international level so as to meet the higher order challenges for the country. The point is that such an acceptance of diversity of aims and objective for different institutions would allow acceptance of variation in quality standards between one institution and another. The self study in this new framework becomes a much more meaningful

and challenging exercise.

There are many other parameters, in addition to institutional goals and objectives that are the crucial components of self study documents. They are related to curriculum, teaching, learning, research and consultancy and they reflect mostly on the academic health of the institution. Operational parameters like organization and governance, student services and support services, infrastructure and generation and management of financial resources reveal the readiness of the institution to provide the best services with efficiency. It presents the total picture of the working of a university and is, therefore, most important when considering the quality of education in any institution.

The acceptance of self study concept, for the university, for each of the beneficiaries, namely students, teachers, parents, staff, employers, government and society, establishes a sound footing for quality achievement. The peer review exercise under such circumstances becomes very productive. Peers can by virtue of their expertise and position, give meaning and credibility to the process of the evaluation of quality. It must be said that higher education is essentially an educative process. If we are seriously interested in initiating the quality ethos, then the only course left open is to adopt the professionalism of self critique under the mechanisms of panopticon, the all seeing eye. And it is here that the role of the teaching community acquires a new dimension. As the number of those participating in the higher education system increase, and as that increase is inevitably unmatched by an equal increase in unit funding, the quality and versatility of teaching will become ever more important. Moreover, the nature of

the student body is becoming more and more varied, *albeit* more in relation to the social and educational backgrounds they have experienced than in relation to the innate talent they possess. Consequently, teaching will have to be highly skilled and appropriate to the diverse needs of the student population. We have all along been complaining about crowded classes and apathy on the part of students. But we probably have made too much of hue and cry only on this count. However, from diverse sources evidence has been piling up to show that the higher education system contains, and tolerates, too large a minority of teachers who are not delivering an acceptable service to their students. This clearly is not a position that should be allowed to continue. The ultimate guarantee of quality in the teaching process lies in the attitudes, knowledge and skills of the teachers. However, how is one to judge the skills of a teacher? In the higher education sector, the word of the teacher (about his/her performance in the class room) was accepted as final. However, we now need to develop and accept ways of collecting evidence about the performance of teachers. Now a days it is possible by more informal and supportive observations, coupled with external performance indicators, to formulate an informal judgement of an individual's teaching competence with sufficient accuracy. The common and standard reaction of teachers to a proposal for appraisal is of enormous anxiety. One can understand and even sympathize with the fear of the exposure of one's teaching competence vis-a-vis other teachers, but these initial worries could be surmounted with the help of responsible and supportive senior academics and a patient and helpful management.

The performance of the individual

teachers is only one ingredient in the teaching quality of any institution. It is the totality of institution's functioning, which, as mentioned earlier, becomes critical for achieving quality. The overall claim and ethos of an institution is one of the major contributors to the richness of student's experience. Higher education is worth its name only if the institutions that offers it are vibrant with activities which enrich the quality of student's experience, be it academic or sociocultural or on the play ground. Students need to understand the way in which their education would contribute to the socio-economic life of their country and they need to develop a sense of pride in their own potential for this contribution. An academic institution that, by ethos and attitudes, isolates itself from the world at large, fails to provide a sense of belonging and identity to its students.

This brings up back to the issue of "quality in education." Quality has to be "owned" by every member of the staff throughout the institution, if "education" is to carry any guarantee of reliably high standards. The recently formed National Assessment and Accreditation council (NAAC), as an independent autonomous body, plans to include the spirit of "quality" through self study and external appraisal. It plans to do this as voluntary process for achieving the best in a given environment. The process of assessment is going to be guided by rigorous self examination to understand merits and limitations. External evaluation by peers and practitioners of academics is to help measure the institution's own performance. It is not to be compared with other institutions. Periodic check ups help the healthy to maintain good health and the ailing to get timely diagnosis and treatment. Thus the process of

assessment and accreditation is expected to progressively improve the quality of education.

Creating a dynamic commitment to quality in higher education is going to be a great and exciting challenge of the next decade. It is this quality that will deliver results in spite of diminishing finances, the unprecedented challenge of continuous expansion and change. We cannot afford to tarry much longer in the task of providing the country with an educational system of high quality geared to accept the challenges of the future.

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