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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of quality is not new, nor that of quality assurance. Neither, for that matter, are our concerns on quality. Over the years, many books have been written by experienced quality professionals to provide an admiration for those aspects of quality that are of practical relevance. But these are meant largely to meet the needs of personnel engaged in quality assurance. There are different approaches to quality assurance. The meaning of quality assurance may vary depending on the field of activity. Different nations have evolved quality assurance models for their higher education systems as necessitated by their unique national contexts. Nevertheless, in all activities related to quality assurance across the world, there lies a common unifying thread that laces together the basic concepts. This paper focuses on the quality assurance in Higher Education.

Key-Words

Quality, Indian higher education, Assurance, Governance, Efficiency.

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The higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way, particularly in the post-independence period, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. However, the system has many issues of concern at present, like management and financing including equity, access, and relevance, reorientation of programmes by laying focus on health consciousness, values and ethics and quality of higher education together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. These issues are important for the country, as it is now engaged in the use of higher education as a strong tool to build a knowledge-based information society of the 21st Century.

Quality has both absolute and relative connotations. The concept of absoluteness in quality props up the morale of the higher education system at the delivery end i.e. institutional and at the receiving end i.e. students. Quality dimensions seem to have two implications, i.e., functionality of the output and meeting the basic standards. Therefore, the quality of a higher education system may be seen from the point of view of norms and standards, which may evolve depending on the need of the hour. In the 21st century, it is crucial to identify the relative norms for different components of a higher education system. The alternative dynamics for teacher preparation and the sustaining quality in teacher input, like: Curriculum design and development; Curricular practices vis-à-vis emerging principles of pedagogy; Evaluation of learner's performance and progress vis a vis curriculum evaluation; and, Quality management practices become crucial. The quality of these components may also differ from institution to institution. Therefore, sharing of the experiences among institutions on quality issues may generate ideas for evolving norms and strategies for their quality assurance of management processes, curricular inputs and practices and the evaluation system as well. Of late, various developments have been witnessed relating to quality assurance mainly through the intervention of information and communications technologies (ICT) in education, like networking of the open learning system with traditional Universities, interdisciplinary interactions at intra-institutional and inter-institutional levels, networking of institutions globally, data based management of higher education, changing the

orientation of institutions by incorporating self financing in their financial management, assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and creation of different statutory and regulatory bodies at the national level. These and related issues are noteworthy to discuss at length in this paper, main recommendations are given below.

1. Curriculum Planning and Management should be studied in the perspective of knowledge management
2. Every University must have its own curriculum. There should not be any mechanism for central curriculum framework at higher education level. Context, specificity and inquiry oriented experience must be reflected in the curriculum. Learners' participation in the generation of knowledge must be the focus of constructivist curriculum. Problem solving abilities must be developed through experimentation life-like situations..
3. Decentralization must be encouraged with a broad frame work of University System.
4. Curriculum construction should transact in an authentic and real environment.
5. Curriculum transaction should involve social negotiation and mediation.
6. Encourage group activities and make maximum use of peer as resources of higher learning.
7. Knowledge and skills must be developed with a view to provide relevance and meaningfulness.

In a society full of diversity, ideologies and opinions, higher education means different things to different people. The pluralism of views is quite inevitable and some would opine it should be like that only. However, as we intend to discuss and learn more about quality in higher education, we should ask ourselves, what is *higher* in higher education? You, as a teacher/stakeholder of higher education, will agree that it is not just about the higher level of educational structure in the country. There is more to it.

In terms of the level, higher education includes college and university teaching-learning towards which students progress to attain higher educational qualification. Higher education imparts in-depth knowledge and understanding so as to advance the students to new frontiers of knowledge in different walks of life (subject domains). It is about knowing more and more about less and less. It develops the student's ability to question and seek truth and makes him/her competent to critique on contemporary issues. It broadens the intellectual powers of the individual within a narrow specialization, but also provides him/her a wider perspective of the world around. According to Ronald Barnett (1992) there are four predominant concepts of higher education:

i) *Higher education as the production of qualified human resources*. In this view, higher education is seen as a process in which the students are counted as "products" absorbed in the labour market. Thus, higher education becomes input to the growth and development of business and industry.

ii) *Higher education as training for a research career*. In this view, higher education is preparation for qualified scientists and researchers who would continuously develop the frontiers of knowledge. Quality within this viewpoint is more about research publications and transmission of the academic rigour to pursue quality research.

iii) *Higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision*. Many strongly believe that teaching is the core of educational institutions. Thus higher education institutions emphasis on efficient management of teaching-learning provisions by improving the quality of teaching, enabling a higher completion rate among the students.
iv) *Higher education as a matter of extending life chances*. In this view, higher education is seen as an opportunity to participate in the development process of the individual through a flexible, continuing education mode.

Interestingly, all these four concepts of higher education are not exclusive; rather they are integrated and give an overall picture of what *higher* is in higher education. If we look at the activities of colleges and universities, we will realize that teaching, research and extension form the three main functions of higher education.

Higher education is the backbone of any society. It is the quality of higher education that decides the quality of human resources in a country. Higher education, as we see today, is a complex system facilitating teaching, research, extension and international cooperation and understanding. The core values of NAAC for higher education system in India envisage: national development, fostering global competitiveness, including ethical values, promote use of technology and create an atmosphere and quest for excellence.

'Quality' is a much-debated term. To some it is like 'beauty' that lies in the eye of the beholder! Those who believe in this are 'relativists', whereas those who believe quality can be specific attributes that can be identified, they are 'objectivists'. The word quality comes from the Latin word *qualis* meaning 'what kind of'. With a variety of meanings and connotations, it has been referred to as a 'slippery concept' (Pfeffer and Coote, 1991). To illustrate the slippery and elusive nature of quality and the confusion associated with it many authors (Nigvekar, 1996; Warren *et al*, 1994; Sallis, 1996) have referred to the highly cited words of Pirsig (1974). 'Quality … you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self contradictory'.

When we consider quality as absolute, it is given and considered as the highest possible standard. For example the picture of "Mona Lisa" by Da Vinci, the Egyptian Pyramids and the Taj Mahal are works of high standards and quality. In product terms, they are attached with high 'brand' values, status and positional advantages. Educational institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge and Stanford in the west have this absolute quality standard, though in the case of education it might still be perceptual. Quality as relative suggests that the quality of a product or service can be described in relative terms. In educational institutions we are particularly concerned with the latter, though all other ideas of quality too have their respective places. Subsuming a wide range of discussions, Barnett (1992) quotes a 'suggestive' definition by Barrow (1991) to define 'quality' in higher education:

> …a high evaluation accorded to an educative process, where it has been demonstrated that, through the process, the students' educational development has been enhanced ... not only have they achieved the particular objectives set for the course but, in doing so, they have also fulfilled the general educational aims of autonomy of the ability to participate in reasoned discourse, of critical self-evaluation, and of coming to a proper awareness of the ultimate contingency of all thought and action (p. 61).

The University Grants Commission (UGC) with its statutory powers is expected to maintain quality in Indian higher education institutions. Section 12 of the UGC Act of 1956 requires UGC to be responsible for "the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations and research in universities". To fulfill this mandate, the UGC has been continuously developing mechanisms to monitor quality in colleges and universities directly or indirectly. In order to improve quality, it has established national research facilities, and Academic Staff Colleges to re-orient teachers and provide refresher courses in subject areas. The UGC also conducts the National Eligibility Test (NET) for setting high standards of teaching.

Indian higher education has various complexities in context of regulations, access, financing, equity, efficiency, quality, internationalization, etc. Regulations remain entwined resulting in lack of clarity for the ones who are supposed to implement the same. As a result, regulations associated confusions cause apprehensions in terms perceiving the regulation to suit the individual requirements the best. Judicial interventions add fuel to the fire with at times judgments going against the very objectives set for higher education. While the aggressiveness to achieve higher rates of gross enrolment ratios still remains unfulfilled, it would be very challenging to create sufficient opportunities to assure access to every eligible candidate in the relevant age cohort. This might continue to smooth the process of increased role to be played by the private higher education sector vis-a-vis public sector struggling to meet ends on other prioritized avenues of public expenditure. Equitable access may still be a misnomer for policy framers as there are complex challenges in assuring the same. Efficiency and quality remain a cause of concern within ever-expanding higher education sector.

At the end, we critically examined quality assurance in the academic system, and recommended that continuous improvement should be the *mantra* of quality assurance. In the process the student as the key stakeholder of the system was identified, and the role of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in improving quality and developing a culture of quality was highlighted. We also highlighted the emerging trends of open, distance and online learning and how quality issues in these variant forms of delivery of higher education are addressed.

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