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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION



* Mr. Manoj Thakur,

* Asst. Prof. Institute of Edu. Technology & Vocational Edu, Panjab University (C.G)

A B S T R A C T

The paradigm shift in socio economic change in all trades of human life, continuous innovation in science and technology, cultural diversity and globalization has caused a similar shift in educational settings, particularly higher education. The universities are perceived as change leader in the modern world, where they construct the ideology of nations and direct the future of local community. The universities are supposed to be the home of policy advises and guidance for the political, social and economic progress. In present scenario, the shortage of teaching staff, unpleasant environment for teaching, misuse of administrative powers of officers and political influence on the promotion of teachers causes lot of problems in higher education. Higher education can be improved only if all higher educational institute and universities follow a minimum standard to give degrees.

Introduction

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

The new challenge before the country at the beginning of the twenty first century is to become a developed society by the year 2020, which requires that not only a vibrant economy driven by knowledge has to be ushered in soon, but also a new society where justice and human values prevail has to be created. Moreover, challenges in higher education are no longer only nation centric. They have already attained global dimensions. With the explosive growth of knowledge in the past century and with the development of handy tools of information and communication technologies as well as of other scientific innovations, competition has become a hallmark of growth all over the world. As a result, knowledge is not only going to be the driver of Indian economy, but also, it is going to permeate into all the strata of Indian society for a better quality of life and living conditions. Therefore, India

has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposeful. Besides, there is absolutely no substitute to quality of higher education, although the country has been faced for a long time with the serious problem of meeting the quantity needs of our society. It is, therefore, essential that a careful balancing of the two is given priority to meet the twin requirements of the society in the foreseeable future.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education in India

In an environment of global competitiveness it is important that Indian products of the higher education institutions are as competent as graduates of any other country, not only in their scholastic attainments, but also in terms of the value system and richness of their personality. Unless the quality and standard of Indian higher education institutions is enhanced zealously and sustained at a high level through innovation, creativity and regular monitoring, it seems to be difficult for the Indian academics/professionals to compete in the world scene. This calls for suitable assessment and accreditation mechanisms to be available in the country to ensure the quality and standard of the academic/training programmes at higher educational institutions. The assessment has to be continuous and the process has to be transparent to gain the acceptance of the society at large.

Sustaining Quality

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. stu-

dents. Quality dimensions seem to have two implications, i.e., functionality of the output and meeting the basic standards. Hence, 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-a-vis emerging principles of pedagogy; evaluation of learners 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.

Assessment and Accreditation

The fact of the matter is that the Indian elite and middle classes have not cared for making education, what to say of higher education, accessible to the other sections of society. It is ironic that the beneficiaries of privileged access to institutions of higher learning are ever ready to persuade others to believe that the Indian education system has expanded beyond reasonable limits. The fact of the matter is that the system needs to be expanded to a much greater scale to serve the needs of the Indian youth. Many institutions of higher education in the country are excellent in the sense that their infrastructure, resources, faculty, programmes of teaching and research are almost as good as the best in the advanced countries. But, the same cannot be said of the average institutions of higher education in the country. They do not come anywhere near the level of average institutions of higher education in the advanced countries. This vast gap in standards and facilities has been a cause of constant anxiety and concern to the policy planners of higher edu-

cation in India. The issue of accessibility to quality higher education needs to be addressed in the light of the vast economic and social disparities, cultural and linguistic diversities, and extremely uneven opportunities of learning at the school level together with the aspirations and capacities of the potential students. Therefore, the question of access to higher education needs to be addressed at the local, regional, national and international levels from trans-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and discipline-specific perspectives. The issue of accessibility of quality higher education arises in the context of the transition in the country from elitist to mass education in the post-independence period. The issue has significant implications in the sense that it demands a redefinition of the aims of higher education.

Some probable solutions

Accessibility and quality upgradation are inseparable dimensions of higher education. Over-emphasis on one at the cost of the other would be counter productive. India being a country of the sub-continental size with a population above 1 billion, the quantitative expansion of education (i.e. accessibility dimension) is of paramount importance to mitigate disparities across regions, gender and social strata in the field of education. This should be given due consideration. Along with the necessary and inevitable quantitative expansion of higher education, it is equally important to improve the quality of higher education. Institutions of higher education would find it difficult to meet the challenges of globalization of higher education if one fails on this front. Emphasis on quality parameters becomes all the more necessary in the light of mushrooming of private institutions with the opening up of the Indian economy. Setting up of NAAC has sent the right and positive signals for generating and promoting awareness of the urgent need of quality upgradation of Colleges and Universities. The need is to identify effective ways, and strategies to expedite the completion of assessment and accreditation by **NAAC within a stipulated time frame.**

Quality upgradation is not a one time phenomenon. Quest for excellence is a continuous and perennial pursuit. In view of this, post- accreditation complacency must be arrested by evolving quality assurance mechanism for self-regulation. The setting up of an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) is one such mechanism. The Cell may constitute two quality groups, one for academic excellence and another for administrative efficiency. These groups may design strategies for quality enhancement for consideration and implementation by IQAC. Effectiveness of Quality upgradation initiatives in higher education largely depend on the quality of primary and second-

ary education. Institutional mechanisms on the pattern of NAAC, may be set up for upgrading the quality of education at these levels-to further enhance the outcome of NAAC efforts. Periodic assessment exercises in the future should be undertaken by IQAC as part of post assessment and accreditation exercises. These could be conducted in collaboration with NAAC. With a view to ensure maximum participation of College teachers in Workshops/ Seminars/ Conferences and Orientation/Refresher Courses, it is suggested that these events be organized during lean periods in institutional academic work (i.e. March-July). This would help the teachers to participate in these activities without upsetting the teaching schedule.

The several parameters identified by NAAC for evaluating the quality of institutions, although useful, need re-examination as they seem to be inadequate to fully assess the quality of higher education. Assessment and accreditation bodies like NAAC should take into account these implications while reviewing the quality parameters. The NAAC should also inform the institutions as to where they stand in terms of the standards of excellence from a global perspective.

At present NAAC is assessing and accrediting Universities and Colleges. This may not truly reflect the programmes/ activities at the departmental level. With a view to encourage this, NAAC can move a step further by starting the practice of assessing and accrediting teaching and research departments within Universities/ Colleges. Multiple bodies have been undertaking assessment and accreditation of Universities and colleges. An institutional effort should be made to coordinate the activities of these bodies so that in togetherness they can address the issues of higher education in a broader societal perspective. Some other important solutions for improving quality assurance in higher education may include

" A well-planned and structured interaction to be developed between centres of Academic Excellence and other Universities/Institutions. " While restructuring the syllabi and courses, efforts should be made to develop an optimal combination of acquisition of theoretical and practical skills. The courses should be so designed that critical reading and interpretation of classics, practical field work wherever relevant, and

application of readings and other skills are given importance." Quality of higher education can improve considerably through an extensive and optimal use of audio-visual technologies and Internet. The courses should be so designed to make good use of these modern developments;" In restructuring of syllabi, all stakeholders such as students, teachers and users of services should be involved. However, teachers should be given flexibility within the norms and benchmarks decided by the stakeholders.

" Examination reforms, gradually shifting from the terminal, annual and semester examinations to regular and continuous assessment of student's performance in learning should be implemented. " Quality of higher education can also be improved by inducting quality-oriented objectivity in merit promotions of teaching faculty. Specification of weightages for teaching, research publications/ supervision would help in making this transparent and credible.

" Re-organization and integration of various faculties, particularly in social sciences, around inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary courses can also help in quality improvement in teaching, research and consultancy. UGC, ICSSR and other research funding bodies should encourage interdisciplinary/ multi-disciplinary Seminars/ Conferences/ Research projects. These bodies could allocate at least 50 percent of their research funds for inter-disciplinary activities. UGC could also take initiatives to open Centres/ Schools for promoting multi-disciplinary teaching and research.

" Basic parameters of academic merit need to be developed for bringing transparency and credibility in the process of granting promotions under the Career Advancement Scheme. There should be no disparity between Readers/Professors appointed through open selections and those promoted on the basis of the Career Advancement Scheme.

" A critical review of activities of higher educational institutions as well as their budgets needs to be conducted to phase out obsolete activities and create the necessary space for new activities. The shifting from traditional incremental budgeting to performance based one is now necessary to arrest the erosion in quality inspite of the resource crunch.

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