



Higher Education and Quality Improvement: A challenge for India

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, India

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ABSTRACT *Since independence, higher education has always been identified as a critical component of India's growth story. The Indian higher education system continues to demonstrate many structural shortcomings which in turn create challenges in meeting future expectations. The need of the hour is to upgrade the Indian Higher Education system to train the increasing proportion of young population so India can truly realize the prophesized 'Demographic Dividend'. This paper describes some challenges faced by India and suggestions to improve quality of higher education.*

Introduction

Education is a service industry. It requires to adopt the techniques of other industries in measuring the quality of its services and the satisfaction of its customers. This paper explains on a study of educational institutes in India in terms of how well they meet the needs of local industrial customers. This paper also explains those factors which should be specifically addressed to improve educational quality and customer satisfaction.

The level of higher education is determined by the size of institutional capacity of higher education system in the country. The size of higher education system in turn, is determined mainly by three indicators, number of educational institutions, universities and colleges, number of teachers and number of students. The higher education in India has witnessed many fold increase in its institutional capacity since independence. During 1950 and 2008, the number of universities has increased from 20 to about 431, colleges from 500 to 20,677 and the teachers from 15,000 to nearly 5.05 lakhs. The enrolment of students has increased from 1.00 lakh in 1950 to over 116.12 lakhs.

Indian institutions, with the exception of some notable ones, not been able to maintain the high standards of education or keep pace with developments in the fields especially in knowledge and technology. Some B-schools have adopted certain branding activities, but P. Shahaida, H. Rajashekar and R. Nargundkar (2009) assumed that B-schools in India do not practice an organized holistic approach to branding activities.

Table -1
Institutional Capacity of India
(Capacity Expansion in Higher Education)

Institutional Capacity Indicator	1950	2008
Number of University Level Institutions, including 11 private universities	25	431
Number of Colleges	700	20,677
Number of Teachers	15,000	5.05 lakhs

Number of Students Enrolled	1950	2008
	1 lakh	116.12 lakhs

source: UNESCO conference

In this time of a techno-scientific revolution, when the sheer quantity of knowledge and information is expanding exponentially when the needs of a constantly growing and increasingly varied student population are burgeoning, the quality of teaching in higher education institutions and the quality of training for teachers demand top priority. Rather, it requires a major investment to make human resource productive by coupling the older general disciplines of humanities, natural sciences, social sciences and commerce to their applications in the new economy and having adequate field based experience to enhance knowledge with skills and develop appropriate attitudes.

Mantz Yorke (1999) relates higher education to the labour market, stating that the pace of change in national and international economies requires higher education to encourage the development of people who can act effectively in turbulent circumstances. He shows that quality and standards are open to interpretations which depend upon the interpreter's perspective. Also, he argues that the extra-institutional scrutiny of quality and standards is appropriate where higher education is expected to respond to national needs, but that the method used should be adapted to institutional context. He discusses the potential that ISO 9000, might have for an extra-institutional quality assurance system that is economical in operation.

New Challenges

The decline in public funding in the last two plan periods has resulted in serious effects on standards due to increasing costs on non-salary items and emoluments of staff, on the one hand and declining resources, on the other. There is also a need to relate the fee structure to the student's capacity to pay for the cost, so that, students at lower economic levels can be given highly subsidized and fully subsidized education. Concepts of access, equity, relevance and quality can be operationalised only if the system is both effective and efficient. Hence, the management of higher education and the total networking of the system for effective management has become an important issue.

Emphasis on curriculum change has to be laid, interdisciplinary courses gradually replacing discipline oriented learning, especially at the master's degree level, greater emphasis on field based learning experiences for students both in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, more career oriented courses and response to local needs for human resource in specific work-related opportunities.

Need for Vast Changes

The university is required to be seen not only as a seat of learning and new knowledge through its research and extension functions but also as a focal point for the dissemination of information to the community through continuing education, extension education and through field outreach activities.

A number of measures should be taken for quality improvement. These include the development of infrastructure, human resources, curriculum and research and establishment of centers of excellence and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional centers. Rajani Jain, Gautam Sinha, Sangeeta Sahney (2011) proposed model that service quality consists of two primary dimensions which are defined by several corresponding sub-dimensions: program quality: curriculum, input quality, industry interaction, academic facilities; and quality of life: support facilities, non-academic processes, campus and interaction quality.

Chenicheri Sid Nair, Lorraine Bennett, Patricie Mertova (2010) showed improvement in the form of increased satisfaction of students. The strategy adopted at the University underlined the significance of collecting student feedback in quality enhancement, supporting academic staff in implementing improvements and acting on the feedback. Overall, the strategy signaled the interconnection between student evaluations and the quality of education programmes. The successful implementation of a unit improvement strategy at a faculty level within the University demonstrated the value of the approach and recommended its application as an improvement strategy across the whole institution and provided that the internal context of individual faculties is taken into consideration. This study also offers some guidance to other tertiary institutions looking into utilizing evidence-based planning and decision making as a way of driving quality improvement.

In terms of higher education, efforts need to be directed towards raising the enrolment in higher education sector and meeting the increasing costs of such enrolment. A most difficult task ahead is to conceive certain new objectives of higher education. It will not be enough to promote specialized knowledge and skills of professional excellence; a deeper and subtler aim is to develop abilities to think globally and to resolve emerging tensions between rationalistic, ethical, aesthetic and spiritual elements of personality. The objective of a complete education for a complete human being is needed to be underlined as of highest importance. Methods of higher education also have to be appropriate to the needs of learning to learn, do, to be and to become. It will also be required to set more exacting standards of excellence and perfection.

According to S. Subba Rao, T.S. Raghunathan and Luis E. Solis (1999) Total Quality Management (TQM) is imperative for new industrializing countries in order to achieve economic growth and international competitiveness. An empirical research was conducted in three new industrialized countries (India, China, and Mexico) to assess the practices in the human resource development dimension

of quality management. Findings reveal that companies in these countries score high on quality concepts and training in work - skills and building of quality awareness. It was also found that in these countries, the level of training in basic and advanced statistical techniques is low and that the effectiveness of employee involvement and the level of employee participation is low.

All these factors will impel higher education to undergo vast changes in respect of objectives, contents and methods. It will have to bear momentous responsibilities for generating new vistas of wisdom and knowledge, new forms of courage and heroism, unprecedented arts of harmony and beauty and unimaginable skills suited to developing technologies and crafts.

The world is entering into an Information Age and developments in communication, information and technology will open up new and cost-effective approaches for providing the reach of higher education to the youth as well as to those who need continuing education for meeting the demands of explosion of information, fast-changing nature of occupations, and lifelong education.

How to improve India's higher education and research quality

We can regain our lost glory and improve on that so far our science education and research is concerned. So, some remedies can be considered-

1. Reduce spending of public money on higher education and research for non-performing institutes and universities.
2. Introduce strict accountability of public money for any research in any institute or university. And any research finding (mainly related to novel service or product) using public money must be mentioned in an open source (e.g unrestricted web site(s) for public access).
3. Private institutes and universities must follow a minimum standard to give degrees.
4. Start "tenure track" system in Indian institutes/universities.
5. Increase spending substantially on primary and high school education (Both qualitative and quantitative).
6. Change the education system from the primary level (reduce work load, put more importance on physical activities, encourage original thinking etc). There should not be any form of evaluation (exam or so) till age 10 years (i.e till class 4 level). Subsequently the exam patterns should change and put more emphasis on original thinking and problem solving rather than emphasizing database-quiz type format. Basic education should be in mother tongue but English also should be compulsory from class 1.
7. Provide increased opportunities for students in rural and semi-urban India (in form of transparent information dissemination, transparent selection for fellowship/scholarships and recruitments).

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