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Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Present Scenario and Challenges in India

Dr. Rajive Kumar | Assistant Professor, Deoartment of Education N.A.S. College, Meerut

ABSTRACT

Higher Education as system, process and product of education in a society is not an accidental phenomenon. It evolves an answer to the socio-economic need and philosophical, religious aspirations of its people. Quality is a critical factor in influencing the educational outcome of the educational institute on one hand and employability of the graduates on the other. In today's contemporary world the interests of many stakeholders like students, parents, future employers, the State and funding bodies need to be taken care of while developing a strategy leading to quality in higher education. The academic freedom and flexibility granted to educational institutes like universities make the adoption of quality control exercise a complex and difficult one. This necessitates developing a stringent monitoring mechanism to maintain and improve the standards of education.

KEYWORDS

Among various levels of education, higher education has a pervasive and influential impact on development. Higher education empowers the individual with necessary skills and competence for achieving important personal and social development. It is widely believed that the state of higher education in a country is an index of its future well- being. It is not a burden on federal budget but a long term domestic investment in order to increase economic competitiveness, cultural development and social cohesion. Higher education is indeed a vital tool for intellectual, cultural and aesthetic development and a means for achieving wider Social aspiration. It also has an increasingly crucial role to play in producing change agents for moving the country along the development continuum. The need for quality assurance has been established specially the context of globalization and financial constraints impinging-on higher education. This unit provides an introduction to the twin and integrated issues of quality assurance in higher education.

Quality of education is a multi-dimensional concept, which should embrace all functions and activities that are, teaching, academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, infrastructure, and academic environment. There are many university level institutions and colleges, which offer various types and levels of programmes. These institutions widely differ in terms of the mandate to offer programmes and courses, student 'enrolment, infrastructure, delivery systems, sources of funds and governance. They are established by the Centre and the State governments and, therefore, the power to award degrees/diplomas/certificates vested in them by the respective governments. The universities and colleges are autonomous and self-governing institutions. They are responsible for the quality and standards of their programmes. Each institution has its own internal procedures for assuring and enhancing quality of its provision, and for satisfying itself that appropriate standards are maintained. These are carried out through the procedures for the design of programmes, the approval of programmes, and the monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

Most institutions carry out both regular monitoring and periodic review of programmes. Major developments in information technology have led to changes in study requirements, teaching and learning arrangements and in areas such as research organisation, and university administrative practice. There is an increased focus on multi-media strategies for promoting teaching and learning, which call for review of the traditional arrangements for quality assurance. Most higher education institutions have proved themselves highly effective and entrepreneurial in expanding their student intakes both from within and beyond national borders. As there is an explicit policy for taking higher education abroad, this has become major factor in India's external accounts through fee- paying foreign students and the sale and promotion of services? Universities from many other countries are also in the market for enrolling students and providing services.

Imperatively, the quality assurance is one of the central issues in higher education debates today. The serious problems include assuring the quality of adverse academics of teaching, overflowing enrollment, admission and infrastructure. Accessibility and quality improvement are inseparable dimensions of higher education over emphasis on one at the cost of another would be counterproductive. Emphasis on quality parameters become all the more necessary in the light of mushrooming growth of private institutions with the opening of the economy.

The globalization of higher education the world over is seen in a variety of contexts. It will definitely improve the overall quality of higher education and promote cooperation with institution in other countries. Globalization has broadened the opportunity to study abroad and examine the organizational needs of international education. It will motivate universities to revamp curricula to reflect the need for international understanding. It will bring universities together to build consortia to enhance capabilities.

In a sense, there is thus import as well as export of educational services. India now faces an international environment in which success would depend on the quality of tertiary level of teaching and research. Many countries have therefore moved to develop national system of QAA and India is no exception. The prospective international students, faced by a plethora of possibilities for studies, may well feel such a hallmarking process of external validation tips the balance in favour of enrolling in accredited institutions.

In fairness to HEIs as a whole, many believe that India would do well to establish a comparable, national system of external validation. Accordingly, steps have been taken to assist the higher education sector through development of performance indicators and benchmarking systems. These developments give rise to questions about the specific aspect of universities that bear comparative analysis including the value of measures relating to different categories of institutions. Such exercises lend perspectives on the extent to which the institutions are successful in improving internal and external efficiency. In this

context, in a period of rapid growth and change, attention is being paid to such matters as selection procedures for admission, curricula, students' attrition rates, length of study, staff qualification, financing and costs of study and research capability. It is in the interest of higher education to be able to present evidence systematically on the ways in which these and like matters is being addressed. The existing system of quality assurance in higher education operates at a variety of levels and comprises both long standing elements and recent developments towards national approach. The current practices and its weaknesses may be described below:

Academic Boards and Governing Councils have major responsibilities for the quality of educational provision including academic standards. A number of external mechanisms for reviewing aspects of internal university activities are of long standing among the universities. These include the use of external examiners for higher tasks done by research and some honours degrees, the role of professional bodies and associations in accrediting professional courses. There are however several weaknesses in current mechanisms. These are: (i) lack of a clear mechanism for ensuring comparable standards of judgments in different states and for different institutions; (ii) The criteria for recognition as a university such as the Central, State, 'deemed' to be universities, institutions of national importance, etc. widely differ and therefore it needs to be reviewed; (iii) lack of transparency in the existing system of independent external verification of standards and quality of universities or self-accrediting institutions.

There has been a dramatic progress in establishment of HEIs both under the public and private sectors. HEIs offer a variety of programmes through on and off-campuses, adopt different strategies of teaching and learning, enrol heterogeneous groups of learners in diverse discipline and engage themselves in multifarious activities of teaching, research and extension services. The concern for quality assurance has therefore acquired paramount significance. The National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1986) responded to this concern by initiating action. Accordingly, the colleges and universities were encouraged to make a voluntary self-assessment of their performance. A Council, the policies stated, would then assess and accredit performance primarily on the basis of the self-assessment. This led to the establishment of NAAC in 1994, the major function of which, as mentioned above, are: (a) to act as a catalytic agent to motivate HEIs to achieve excellence in all spheres of academic activity; and (b) to promote the idea of accountability among the academics.

The issue of how to measure educational quality will continue to pose daunting challenges on account of both the procedural aspects as well the fundamental educational issues. The recent developments, mainly globalization of education and the extensive use of educational technology have made the issue of quality measurement even more complex. The quality assurance systems have to constantly modify their procedures to address a growing variety of open and distance learning opportunities which is stimulated by the use of information technologies. The review procedures developed for conventional system are hardly sufficient for electronic delivery method, which has a wider reach. It would therefore require a greater clarity as to how electronic delivery can be objectively evaluated.

A large number of institutions are offering distance education programmes. They use multimedia strategies, enrol higher number of students' heterogeneous backgrounds and differ considerably in their capacities to use electronic media and delivery infrastructure. This development has serious implications for quality assurance agencies. It would require - effective monitoring of distance education providers that offer courses at different learning centres and through different modes and that without ensuring adequate infrastructures stipulated by apex bodies.

A similar concern arises in the context of international student mobility due to globalization of education. When students enrol in other countries or foreign universities offering programmes in the students' home country, the study plans must be evaluated to establish equivalence of their degree programmes. Quality assurance of programmes that are based on electronic delivery methods is further complicated by the fact that learning need not occur at the same time or place of instruction. How is this learning monitored when the instructor does not have a face to face contact with a student, and how well can learning be assessed by remote methods that are not buttressed by direct contact? With international study, learning occurs at a different time and place and the sponsoring institutions have limited control over the circumstances in which it takes place. When there are differences in instructional settings, including cultural and linguistic differences, the outcomes of instructional process, mainly in terms of what the student learns, are difficult to assess and monitor. This will continue to remain a challenge for quality assurance.

The emergence of private higher education institutions, which offer courses on profit taking basis and offer instruction in multiple sites and without permanent staff and other facilities, poses a greater problem for quality assurance agencies. In such type of institutions, the relationship between the capacity to offer quality programmes and the scale of delivery of services is hard to establish. Because of internationalization of education, the solutions to the major issues and problems concerning quality assurance should **be** sought through cooperation among institutions and countries. Therefore, global effort is needed to deal with the challenge to quality assurance.

Hence, today is a need of total quality management and total quality assurance in higher education to face the challenges ahead in India & worldwide. Moreover the implementation of total quality management in higher education requires deep commitment, full involvement of people , top management support , fair reward and recognition policies and training of concerned people in the concept , tools and techniques of total quality management.

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