Assuring the Quality of Collaborative Provision of Transnational Higher Education

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Abstract

India is swiftly developing its presence on the global stage particularly in higher education. It is both a provider of education to a few countries and a consumer of education from other countries. Even though, its curriculum is already used outside India and Indian campuses have been established overseas, the policies pertaining to Transnational Higher Education (TNE) in India have evolved largely in response to the transnational delivery of higher education by Foreign Education Providers (FEP) in India. TNE enhances the mobility of students and teachers across national frontiers. Of late, students from different institutions seek employment in countries other than their own. Hence it has become vital for the quality of an institution to be recognised in another country. Whatever may be the TNE strategy, it has to deliver quality in all its programmes to safeguard students from poor quality education. Obviously there is a need for India and her partner countries to agree suitable approaches to assure the quality of TNE, since only QA system can build mutual trust and confidence among stakeholders.

This paper explores QA initiatives and perspectives with a focal point on the implications for the QA mechanisms, set of issues and challenges relevant to QA in TNE. The implications are expressed in terms of QA structure and propositions, which are endorsed by the accredited HEIs and various stakeholders including Foreign Education Providers (FEP). It also tries to capture the new roles of QA agency in the light of on-going restructuring of higher education system in the country and take a detailed look at quality assuring of transnational collaborative programmes.

Introduction

Higher Education System (HES) in India is not only evolving but also expanding at a rapid pace. This has resulted in the emergence of a wide degree of diversity and complexity among HEIs. Institutions have to compete to attract better faculty and students. Similarly students have not only plenty of choices but also have to compete to get into institutions of repute to enhance their future prospects. Liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalization and Commercialization of Higher Education, Choice and Competition among the HEIs have made it more important than ever before for Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms, in order to safeguard students from poor quality education. TNE enhances the mobility of students and teachers across national frontiers. Of late, students from different institutions seek employment in countries other than their own. Hence it has become necessary for the quality of an institution to be recognised in another country.

QA in higher education is a shared responsibility of different categories of stakeholders and is supposed to be inbuilt in the system rather than to be imposed from an outside supervising body. Hence National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has promulgated the concept of internal Quality Assurance mechanism in the country. Based on the NAAC's

initiative, more than 60% of the accredited institutions repositioned themselves in the quality map by establishing internal quality assurance cells in their institutions. Institutions have to constantly monitor quality issues in all aspects such as Curricular Aspects, Teaching-Learning, Evaluation, Research, Consultancy, Extension, Infrastructure and Learning Resources, Student Support and Progression, Governance, Leadership etc. which would in turn help them to improve academically and in administration.

This paper explores NAAC's QA initiatives and perspectives with a focus on the implications for the QA mechanisms, set of issues and challenges relevant to QA in TNE. The implications are articulated in terms of QA framework and propositions, which are endorsed by the accredited HEIs and various stakeholders including FEP. It also tries to capture the new roles of QA agency in the light of on-going restructuring of higher education system in the country.

The Current Policy

Until now, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the main body responsible for the maintenance of standards in the Indian university system, has not introduced regulations on the entry of foreign universities. On the other hand, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has introduced a set of guidelines for foreign providers offering technical/professional programmes. Foreign educational activity has, in large part, developed in an unregulated operating environment, guided by market pressures.

Necessary steps are taken to check these practices and formulation of a regulatory framework for cross border offering in India is under serious consideration of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). While initiating these steps it also becomes necessary that Indian Higher Education Institutions offering education to foreign students may also be subjected to Quality Assurance within India.

Justification for the import of FEP

FEP in India not only enhance the employability of graduates but also cater to the needs and expectations of the labour market by emphasising practical skills development. Zhang (2003) notes five important justifications for the presence of FEP in China - improving the quality of human resources; upgrading the education system; meeting the education demand of the country; preventing brain drain; and attracting foreign capital into education. These justifications are also valid for India's TNE context as there are many similarities between India and China.

Quality Assurance framework for TNE in India

The entry of FEP in India is a new happening along with the fast-growing development towards private higher education. FEP may play an important role in bringing a new wave of quality in higher education, but the unregulated growth of TNE may lead to a few uncertainties. There is a strong requirement to evolve a framework for transnational higher education to minimise the threats and maximise the benefits of TNE.

The threats faced by TNE are:

1. Mounting tuition fees and limited access to underprivileged students as a result of privatization.
2. Fly-by-night operators
3. Recruitment of qualified and competent faculty members

The major benefits of TNE are for those students who are dreaming of acquiring a foreign degree in India, without spending thousands of dollars travelling abroad, which in turn prevent the outflow of vital foreign exchange. Since FEP cannot repatriate any surplus, they need to utilize for developing their institutions in India. FEP cannot impose their own independent curriculum and they need to conform to standards laid down by the statutory authorities.

Further, Quality Assurance framework for TNE may be categorised into five types:

- Quality Assurance of Domestic Education Providers (DEP)
- Assessment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) Abroad
- Quality Assurance of Indian HEIs Abroad
- Accreditation of Indian HEIs admitting Foreign Students
- Quality Assurance of Foreign Education Providers (FEP)in India

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) had advised NAAC to prepare guidelines for system of compulsory accreditation of Indian Universities/ Institutions admitting foreign students in consultation with Association of Indian Universities (AIU) and University Grants Commission (UGC).

Issues involved in Quality Assurance (QA) of FEP

If NAAC has to take up QA of FEP, it would raise a number of issues viz.,

- What shall be the Jurisdiction of NAAC? Will it be all inclusive –including technical education and distance education or will it be only general education?
- What shall be the purpose of NAAC's Assessment of FEP? Will it be for recognition or registering or permission granting or for quality assessment?
- At what stage should NAAC's process be applied? – as a pre-requisite for registering or after the programme offering is initiated?
- Should NAAC cover all Collaborations or only the collaborations of institutions recognised as institutions of higher learning by UGC?
- Nodal QA agency for TNE needs to be created as a special organisational arrangement.

These issues are being discussed and as and when the NAAC is given a direction and policy guidelines by UGC and MHRD to assure quality of appropriate foreign provisions, the matter will be taken up accordingly. As NAAC has already participated in the development of guidelines for quality assurance of cross-border education developed by international bodies like the UNESCO and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), it will contextualize the framework and implement the process effectively.

Issues involved in TNE

There are certain issues involved in TNE, which can be handled by considering a few policy decisions. They are as given below:

- Government of India is planning to go for multiple accreditation agencies to cater to the needs of large number of HEIs. Accordingly, separate organisational Arrangement may be considered to establish specialised nodal QA agency for TNE needs to be created.
- Mutual Recognition of various international QA agencies with reference to equivalence of courses, recognition of courses through statutory authorities, fee structure and intake and National Educational Policy for NQF may be considered.
- Uniform Assessment Criteria for TNE institutions with additional inputs – Contextualisation - Internationally accepted assessment framework may be developed, which is similar to Bologna agreement.

Bologna Declaration(1999) – EAHE(2010)

The salient features of Bologna Declaration are as given below:

- Increase Transparency
- Recognition of Education
- Mobility Across Borders

Berlin (2003) – All national QA systems should include a system of accreditation by 2005. The Ministers asked ENQA & others to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on QA. European standards and guidelines for IQA within HEIs and for external QA agencies have been asked to develop. The Bologna process has inspired HE reforms across Europe & has led to quicker results than expected and shows no signs of slowing down.

A number of generic central issues pertaining to Branch Campuses that need to be addressed are:

There are many apprehensions for the establishment of branch campuses. It is necessary for FEP to maintain the same standards for branch campuses. The following are some of the pivotal issues that could be considered for discussion.

- ❖ What is the status of the FEP in its own country?
- ❖ Is everything about the foreign branch transparent and open?
- ❖ What is the motivation of the FEP?
- ❖ Are the FEP able to deliver their programs in India using their own faculty, and does they have appropriate infrastructures such as libraries, e-learning facilities, and laboratories to deliver the programs it proposed?
- ❖ Are the FEP capable of offering the same quality in India as they do at home, and is that quality deemed of an acceptably high standard in the home country?

- ❖ When universities, which operate outside their home country, are evaluated either by the QA agency in their home country or by the QA agency in the foreign country in which they are active? Whether the degree offered is comparable to the degree in the home country.
- ❖ What areas or activities covered in an evaluation need to be compared?
- ❖ What aspects of the methods applied by one QA agency could easily be applied by another QA agency?
- ❖ Are the FEP able to sustain their academic offerings over time in India?

Allowing FEP to set up their campuses in India is not the only road to the internationalization of Indian higher education. Twinning programs, joint degrees, exchanges of students and teachers, sharing of curriculum, and other relationships are possible and more likely to ensure that essential Indian control over Indian higher education is maintained. So far, India's main contribution to world higher education is the export of students, many of whom do not return, which is one of the major issues.

QA of branch campuses is imperative for all the stakeholders. On one hand enhancement of quality of various aspects is a challenge and on the other hand sustenance of the same is another challenge. Relevance of curriculum may vary from country to country. It depends on the demand from the market at a particular point of time. Hence assuring the relevance of the curricula, depending upon the context of the country is one of the important dimensions. QA shall make curricula not only more relevant but also excellent.

Concerns of TNE

A few concerns of TNE are:

- Unequal access to higher education markets
- Negative effects of competition on domestic institutions
- Influx of low quality foreign providers
- Increasing inequity in access to higher education

International Collaborations of NAAC

Most of the issues and concerns are addressed by setting up the international collaborations.
At present NAAC has international collaborations with Commonwealth of Learning (COL); Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa; Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA); QAA, UGC, Nepal; Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT); British Council / HEFCE, UK; UNESCO; IEEE; INQAAHE; APQN etc., These international collaborations are helpful in mutual recognition of QA agencies of different countries, which in turn facilitate recognition of degrees, recognition of courses through statutory authorities, Equivalence of courses, credit transfer, students mobility, stipulating fee structure and intake etc.

Therefore uniform assessment criteria for TNE institutions with additional inputs need to be evolved with proper contextualisation to Indian context. Accordingly internationally accepted

assessment framework needs to be developed, which is similar to Bologna agreement, which emphasizes on increased transparency, recognition of education and mobility across borders.
QA agencies need to strengthen their international orientation to deal with QA issues and co-operation with their counterparts in other countries.

Implications for the QA mechanisms

NAAC has accredited some of the Indian HEIs which have collaborations with FEP. Those institutions are monitoring internal academic and administrative quality of TNE operations; Increase in program options based on the market demand; Restructuring curriculum in collaboration with their foreign partners; Improving the teaching-learning process by involving very competent Indian and foreign teachers; Stimulating research culture; Improved documentation; Improved student support services; Single window clearance; Ensure student mobility between institutions; Improving resource allocation for academic activities; Realizing the greater values of accreditation etc.,

Challenges to Collaborative Partnership

Collaborative partnership may have several challenges, which need to be addressed on priority basis. Some of the Indian institutions do participate in course content creation in collaboration with their foreign counter parts. The local / regional business context is reflected in the creation of such curricula, which may not be relevant for the whole country. Exchange of students and teachers is one of the important activities of collaborative partnership. The challenge for Indian students as they were generally unable to pay for their international study experience, while foreign students were funded by their respective universities. Similarly some more challenges are briefly narrated below:

- Build regulatory environment that provides entry to foreign institutions and monitors quality in establishing partnership with Indian institutions towards joint or single degree programme.
- Institutional mechanisms needed by respective councils such as UGC, AICTE etc.
- Private unrecognised sector to be brought within the fold of regulation.
- Implementation of the bill in the context of diversity and complexity of Indian HEIs.
- Evolving a QA framework by capturing various shades of higher education.

Collaborative partnerships could be successful if there are shared principles of QA; focus on ‘excellence’ and effective governance; no perception of commercial exploitation or commodification; transparent and robust regulatory frameworks; good communication and information dissemination; relevant to Indian needs; funding mechanisms to accommodate all suitably qualified students.

Guidelines for QA Bodies

Some of major features of the guidelines for QA Bodies, stipulated by UNESCO are about including TNE in all its modes in the scope of QA, strengthening the network initiatives for the

QA agencies to discuss TNE issues, information dissemination on the QA mechanism and its implications, adherence to 'Code of Good Practice', mutual recognition agreements with other agencies, and strengthening the international orientation of the QA processes. This may lead to two issues:

- How can the QA agencies benefit from the guidelines?(Exporter and Importer perspectives)
- What is the role of networks of QA agencies like INQAAHE and APQN in promoting these guidelines?

Recommendations for strengthening TNE

Some of the recommendations from the conference on "Assuring the Quality of National and Transnational Higher Education Programmes: an international perspective" organized by UKIERI at Chennai during March 2008 are of very much use for strengthening TNE in India.

- A series of bi-lateral and multi-lateral meetings between the various QA agencies in India and agencies in other countries to develop an improved understanding of each others practices and viewpoints.
- Develop a glossary of terms used in each of the participating countries to improve mutual understanding.
- Develop a comprehensive approach to regulation of foreign providers in India which gives them complete clarity regarding licensing and QA procedures.
- If QA in India is going to be carried out by multiple agencies, consider establishing a body to quality assure the QA agencies.
- Consider developing a higher education qualifications framework for India to establish threshold standards, act as a reference point for QA agencies and provide the basis for the international recognition of Indian qualifications or course modules completed in India.
- Developing a code of institutional good practice in developing international partnerships in higher education, which includes precepts on the need for institutional transparency and continuing quality enhancement.

Conclusion

Indian higher education system is not only evolving but also expanding at a significant rate along with number of foreign students studying in India. This has resulted in the emergence of a broad degree of diversity and complexity among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). TNE with a provision for one country to offer education in another has introduced intense competition within the system. Clearly there is a need for India and her partner countries to agree with appropriate approaches to assure the quality of higher education.

Transparent regulating arrangements for privatisation and commercialisation, including a built-in provision for social accountability, needs to be developed before any policy development for the entry of FEP. Any policy towards internationalisation of HEIs shall be insufficient if the government fails to support existing HEIs through greater commitment of public funding.

If India has to take full advantage of its demography then it is necessary that collaboration is built in a sustainable manner that yields a long term as well as societal benefit – not just the

private benefit guided merely by the forces of market. It means a long term relationship is built on the foundation of strong quality assurance mechanism.

There are questions about the scope of the national QA agencies in monitoring TNE arrangements, where only a part of the program is delivered in another country: Does QA restrict to only what is done in the host country or try to capture what is done in the main campus of the foreign university? It is imperative to think on these concerns collectively and networking among QA agencies and sharing of experiences will be helpful.

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