

Indian Higher Education :Contemporary Challenges of Quality Assurance

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Introduction

The hallmark of the millennium is growth. Growth is necessarily multidimensional – intellectual, emotional and spiritual. All facets of growth, individual or at the level of system seek efficiency and excellence. Consequent upon contemporary India witnessing two major forces of changes viz. Globalization and Liberalization, a need has arisen to establish dynamic equilibrium between international perspective and sub-national ethos.

The current changes in Indian Higher Education therefore are in a crucial stage of metamorphosis. The perception of the world over about Indian education system is extremely positive. We are seen as a growing and dynamic system. The Higher growth trajectory, shored up performance and increased efficiency has strengthened our market confidence as visible in the IT sector and the BPO outsourcing leads. Student expectations have grown manifold making the organizations vibrant then ever before. Enhanced image and greater visibility encourages the institutions to excel further. Thus metamorphosis has been the high point, as it provides the platforms for the leaps, our nation is set to make on the structured road map for growth.

Corresponding to the enrolment of students in Higher Education the interest for investment in Higher Education has grown manifold over the years. This factor has added a new dimension to Higher Education i.e. Privatization, Commercialization, and globalization, which immediately resulted in concerns about quality its sustenance and enhancement, its standards, mutual recognition, excellence etc. Further the unplanned development in the Professional Education and its privatization has led to the neglect of the mainstream sector in Higher Education with its adverse impact on excellence and diversification. What is therefore needed is a comprehensive vision that gives due importance to enlarging access, quality and diversification of higher education.

Since the advent of Independence, this old but rejuvenated country embarked on its tryst with destiny and currently engaged in modernizing itself had built over years perhaps the largest and the most complex educational systems in the world. The 283 University level institutions and the 16,000 colleges, spread across vast geographical terrain, occupy varying positions in the scale of quality assurance. The modern Indian Higher Education Institutions Universities & Colleges are patterned after the 18th century British Universities & Colleges. It has 12 million students from different socio economic and cultural backgrounds in Post Secondary Education and around one million teachers in Higher Education in India. Even with this huge enrolment figures, it is less than 7% of the relevant age group (18 – 22 years), which is covered.

Indian Society is plural and heterogeneous with an underlying current of unity. The imposition of a homogeneous and uniform methodology (management, curriculum, evaluation) on any of the processes may prove counter productive. Thus except for

identifying certain basics and essentials regional autonomy must be exercised for developing an effective education system. Indian reality demands that plurality should be used for strengthening national solidarity and social cohesion.

Reflections on the Challenges of Indian Higher Education

Higher Education in India caters to a vast student population of around seven – eight million students spread across large geographical terrains. With a view to provide equity and access to one and all the system of education was structured with emphasis on affiliated college system and the 10+2+3 pattern. While the Universities are the apex institutions of higher Education where Postgraduate and Research programmes are offered, they also regulate the functioning of a certain number of colleges affiliated to them within its geographical jurisdiction. The Universities are responsible for the proper maintenance of the academic standards of the affiliate colleges in which it frames the curriculum, provides them with the academic calendar, regulates admission criteria, qualifications of teachers and their recruitment and finally evaluates the students performance through the end-term examination and awards the degrees to the qualifying students. This does not mean that all the affiliating colleges have uniform standards. Most of them vary widely. There are colleges with a single programme of study and with as less as 100 students and 3-5 teachers to colleges with almost 2000 students and as many as 100 teachers. Similarly the performance of these institutions and the standard of education provided also vary depending on their location, programmes offered, teacher quality etc.

The institutions function in diverse situations. The student population comes from a diverse socio-economic backgrounds, most of them are first generation learners, vary in their learning abilities and the knowledge base, have diverse needs and duties to be performed back at home etc. The diversity in our institutions thus makes the design and effective delivery of education a challenge. Further to these there are challenges related to absence of democracy, managerial authority, teacher apathy and student and community indifference, privatization, onslaught of commercial interests and the invasion of foreign universities and so on and so forth.

Issues of Equity and Access: The apologists of globalization questioned the emphasis on the role of the state in the development of higher education. As a result the tendency towards restricting subsidies in higher education, which took roots in the 90s, got further reinforcement in the beginning of the present century. Though the World Bank in its study “ Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education (February 2002) revised its views and reasserted that education at all levels including higher education was indeed a “merit good “ the initial pronouncement of the World Bank of higher education as “non- merit good” deserving no subsidies continues to dominate the thinking of Indian Policy planners, administrators and the judiciary. The Supreme Court of India preferred the old definition “non-merit good” while pronouncing its judgments in various cases pertaining to higher education resulting in scraping of cross subsidies in professional and Higher Education. This resulted in opening up of the sector to private providers. As a result 70% of Indian Institutions are private initiative. With less than 7% of the relevant age group (17-23) undergoing higher/professional education, it is a high time that the Indian Government and the policy makers realise the

important role of higher education sector in this knowledge society and for India to reach the global target levels.

The vast system of education continues to be essentially teaching and teacher oriented. We need to quickly alter it so that students learn to question answers and not just answer questions. All this has been due to the pressures on the system to make Higher Education access a mass campaign, aiming to achieve the target of getting atleast 25% of the relevant age group into Higher Education. Policy on making higher education access to one and all, by relaxing the admission regulations and entry qualifications resulted in a drastic downfall of quality at the cost of access. We need new methods of planning, organization, co-ordination, and motivation and revamp the whole education system.

Objectively viewed, quality is an essential element in Higher Education, but it is criticized that the our institutions in general cater to quality Higher Education at the expense of equalization of educational opportunities and consequently fragmentation of the civil society. Further it has failed to deliver goods and reduced itself to commercial needs of the demand and supply system. A significant drawback with the present policies is that they do not take an unequivocal stand against commercialization of education. New Technologies backed by proper policies will lead to healthier lives, greater social freedoms, increased knowledge and greater productivity. By this distributive justice would become an achievable goal and the targets attainable. In a vast country like India where more than 25% of the population living below the poverty line, addressing to issues of equity and access need to be carefully looked at. The low cost challenge will eventually challenge –the revenue model for our conventional institutions.

Addressing Social and Demographic Needs: Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen endorses that the expansion of social opportunities are positively correlated with the relevance of the educational system. Such type of linkages, in the globalised setting, sharpen the preparedness to cope up with challenges within, thus the nation is sufficiently equipped to exogenous threats. Educational institutions thus need to philosophically and academically be committed to the attainment of competence in defined areas of societal needs.

The sudden swing of the pendulum in one direction put a severe pressure on the service sector. With raising unemployment rate among graduates from traditional subjects and dwindling jobs in service sectors many of the youth seeking upward mobility in socio – economic conditions preferred Professional Programmes. With increased number of Professional Institutions and the number of students going in for Professional Studies the general education colleges were left with low achievers. Along with technological education, we require an education, which caters to the needs of our agricultural system and rural economy. Realizing the gravity of the problem consequent governments have laid great stress on Science Education, which has been aptly reflected in the policy decisions, and the incentives announced for the sector.

Major challenges in demographic and socio-economic profile of the country's population are another major impediment for change in our education sector. With the 20% of the affordable population opting for the foreign Universities the financial situation of the institutions is becoming difficult to manage. With the increase of number of providers and for want of takers several student positions remain vacant making the institutions

unviable to continue. This has been more visible in the fields of non-professional traditional programmes.

Academic Challenges

The Indian Culture and Philosophy makes its campuses have a unique advantage where the tradition of tolerance enables flowering of different ideas, reinforcing the different perspectives that flow from the vast cultural diversity. These are natural stimuli for creativity and innovation. Nurturing such diversity and tolerance is therefore, not merely a matter of ideology as was in the past, but a practical necessity in the present scenario. Unfortunately our present education systems have lost its traditional values and enabling character and tend to generally suppress alternative ideas, encouraging students to regurgitate standard answers based on rote learning.

During the last decade, new thrusts have also been posed in our education programmes due to rapid changes in the educational, political, social and economic contexts at the national and international levels. While a number of complex factors are responsible for the largely deteriorating quality of our education, the role of curriculum and examination system are of particular relevance.

In our effort to maintain uniformity and standardization the institutions are left with little scope to grow and practically no opportunity to innovate because the system prefers status quo. This reduced the teaching – learning process to a ritual, resulting in a stagnant system. A gradual devolution of powers of the university to the academics as a counter to centralizing and dictating whether managerial or bureaucratic is the need of the hour. This will lead to the creation of a curriculum base for a contemporary dynamic, progressive and culturally strong system of Higher Education, which alone can cope with the enormity of challenges.

The present evaluation system is basically an end term evaluation. This is a convenient system to manage the gigantic education system, where you have to manage huge numbers. Examination reforms occupy a top priority in any scheme of quality improvement in the sector. Introduction of continuous and multi-point assessment may lead to a meaningful exercise and improve performance.

Need for Frontline, Contingency and Pragmatic Curriculum: In a fast changing world, new developments seem to be claiming appropriate place in the education system urgently and hence there has to be some provision for accommodating such areas in the existing system . The concept of frontline is used in the area of warfare and defense in terms of strategy, methods and models. This can be a prototype strategy used for frontline warfare, can be changed and modified at any time at any place, depending on the need of the situation without any formal procedures. The major important component in the frontline strategy is to prepare the persons with the flexible, dynamic and creative mindset to adjust with the changed situations, accepting the changing components with an optimistic result oriented output. The concept of frontline curriculum is nothing new in education. . Frontline curriculum is the need of the hour to manage the speed of change and its effect in the education system and society. In a stagnant system, the past crept forward into the present and repeated itself in the future. In such a society, where ancient is considered as wisdom, the most sensible way to prepare a child was to arm him with the skills of the past for these were precisely the same skills s/he would need in the

future. In the changing scenario there is a need to change this creeping over tendency. For this we have to design a curriculum that is contingent and dynamic and which can prepare frontline citizens who are ready for the random global changes. Further the pragmatic nexus between theory and practice, academic and applied learning, fact and value can help us reconceive frontline and contingency curriculum for the future need of the educational systems.

Overall there is a need of frontline, contingent and pragmatic curriculum based on the foundations of change management, trust, autonomy, flexibility and accountability without forgetting the components like value inculcation within the constitutional ideology and Indian ethos which would help to prepare futuristic, dynamic and forward looking citizens with high level of commitment and willingness to perform.

Issues of Autonomy and Accountability: Quality is right now in the backburner and we seem to be contributing to mediocrity. All institutions are put under the same umbrella and this stifles growth of academic institutions. The University Systems created with very little scope for expansion are not able to handle the growing number of colleges affiliated to them. The affiliated system means providing a uniform pattern of instruction to a heterogeneous group, which is academically an unmanageable combination, which jeopardizes the quality of the content of education. This has resulted in the dilution of the content to such an extent that learning is rendered valueless. Further centralization has also made innovations less possible. Added to this the market needs, the increasing student demands, dwindling finances, changing funding patterns, lack of reform measures all made the system prone to criticism and inefficiency. With lost trust and hope on the University system many of the colleges who could bring in considerable change and expand qualitatively and quantitatively opted to become autonomous. After the visible success of these institutions the Government is encouraging more and more institutions to become autonomous. The change from an affiliate system to autonomous institutions will not only aid in effectively tackling the diversity, but also will aid in developing need based development oriented structures leading to overall improvement and quality provisions. It will help the institutions for optimizing the input-output ratios. However there is a need to strengthen our institutions through proper training for improvement of management capabilities. Autonomy leads to accountability and credibility. The system of autonomy is intertwined with a corresponding system of accountability. Until this is established no institution can survive. Institutions become viable, hence they try and put their resources to optimum use because they have the freedom to plan and implement the policies, which can suit their objectives and interests. The growth of these institutions academically and financially will be proportionate to our investments and magnificent institutions could be created if we pursue excellence.

Interface With Other Sectors: To enable quality access of all types of education and encourage students to pursue courses of their interest but not which will result in easy climbing of the socio-economic ladder the educational institutions and the regulating agencies should force a strong bond and work in tandem in such a way that the quality of teachers, managements and policy decisions take place resulting in an increase in overall quality of the education. If this idea is inter woven and effected we will not only be a truly literate nation but also a materially advanced welfare state.

In the present system where there is no established relationship between the industry and the institutions we are dumping courses as a package, leaving the student with little choice of subjects. This resulted in a situation where the market needs determine the choice of subjects. Indian Industry has by and large fought shy of investing in the developmental chain, in education and in R&D. This is shortsighted and in a competitive world suicidal. In tomorrow's world it is the process results of the education systems that will drive the corporate profits as well as national economies. Being the third largest nation in human capital and skilled workforce India has the right soil and climate for fostering a public- private partnership to plant seeds that will make a thousand flowers bloom. It is required that both the Governments and the Corporate to invest for enhancing the quality of our provisions and campus experiences to students.

Multiplicity of Quality Assurance Agencies

Despite serious handicaps of means and resources, India has built up during the last 50 years one of the largest education systems in the world. Though riddled by explosion in the growth of population, a large illiterate population and economic problems, poverty affecting one-third of the people India is still set to forge a bright future and has significantly contributed in developing an education system, which just doesn't aim at access but to provide quality access. In India the institutions of Higher learning cater to the students coming from a wide-ranging socio-economic backgrounds. More than 50% of them are first generation learners, with not so conducive atmosphere back at home. The major problem to educationists thus is to cope up with the diversity of student populations, diverse needs of the society and the diversity of the institutions. In the process to tackle with the diversity and to bring in uniformity we have fragmented the system into specialized areas and established diverse organizations to regulate and monitor their performance. In the process we started working in isolation. If we see the Higher Education sectors in India the main players are:

1. The University Grants Commission (UGC) – responsible for co-ordination, determination and maintenance of standards of the Universities and Affiliated Colleges.
2. All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) – Responsible for Planned growth and quality issues of Engineering, Technology Management and Pharmacy Education.
3. National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) – Responsible for regulation of Standards and planned growth of the Teacher Education System (including Physical Education) of the country.
4. Medical Council of India (MCI) – Responsible for Medical Education and the Accreditation of programmes concerned with medical education
5. Pharmacy Council of India (PCI) – Regulating the courses in Pharmacy and their Accreditation.
6. Indian Nursing Council – Courses in Nursing and paramedical courses.
7. Bar Council of India – Dealing with Legal studies.
8. Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) – Concerned with Agricultural Education.
9. Central Council for Homeopathy
10. Council for Alternate Medicine
11. Council for Indian Institutes of Technology
12. National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT)
13. Distance Education Council (DEC)
14. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)– The Quality Assurance agency for Higher Education Institutions

15. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)

16. Architecture Council of India

The above are only some of the major agencies dealing with a few of the specialized sectors of education. While these agencies have been set up with a view to have planned and coordinated development of a particular field or sector of Professional /Higher Education, it is observed that various functions of these boards and councils are quite often overlapping. Thus there is a large degree of duplication of efforts and a considerable degree of uncoordinated activity in the educational sector. The different sectors/sub-systems have become semi-closed vertical structures with very weak horizontal linkages. These need to be considerably strengthened. In the process of fulfilling the norms and standards of several of these bodies at varied points of time the institutions loose focus on their academic activity. While the efforts of MHRD to bring in unity in diversity by creating a single body for quality assurance has yielded visible benefits, not much efforts have been put to redress the constraints of the institutions by bringing necessary amendments in the various acts of the regulating bodies. As a result the institutions are constrained to produce a chain of reports to fulfill the requirements of one body or other and in the process have been wasting valuable time, human and fiscal resources.

Co-ordination among various agencies and statutory bodies is vital for quality sustenance. Unless the regulatory agencies and the institutions both state and Central, function in a concerted manner the quality of education is going to remain a distant dream. Further there should be coordination between the educational sector and other sectors with which it interfaces in the development process need to be strengthened. All most all institutions have programmes, which provide the interface. The only need is to coordinate all these with the activities of the other departments or agencies. It is also important that the vertical linkages within the educational system should be supported and strengthened. It is imperative that the multi –hierarchy is transformed into a system wherein modernization of the syllabi and pedagogic methods are diffused from the higher to lower order institutions. The system has been conceived with large number of horizontally linked educational institutions with the University as its node. The system works in such a manner that the Higher order institutions monitor the progress of the lower order institutions in its area of influence, provide them technical and infrastructure support and arrange for the updating of knowledge and skill base of their faculty on a continuous basis.

Conclusion

India realizes like other nations across the globe, that humanity stands today at the head of a new age, of a large synthesis of knowledge, and that east and the west have to collaborate in bringing about concerted action, universal upliftment, and lasting peace and unity. All these factors will impel Higher Education to undergo vast changes in respect of objectives, contents and methods. For this Higher Education demands a rational response towards change, towards diversity and social and economic imbalance, towards dissemination and responding to the very sickening contrast of the rich and the poor. While this will automatically lead to an improvement in the performance and quality, it will also set more exacting standards of excellence and perfection.

The Indian Higher Education is being overhauled and redesigned to include the changes taking place in the Higher Education across the world. With increased demand there has been a quantitative expansion and to survive in the market, institutions have started and attempted to improve quality. If we make a historical analysis of quality enhancement, we find that many of the achievements were the results of trial and error experiments. Most of the institutions till recent times have maintained quality under pressure. But today Higher Education is the repute of efficiency, accountability and better infrastructural facilities. Technology is thus top on the agenda of our institutions with prime objective being introduction of modern methods of teaching learning and enhancing its competitive strength through quality improvement. The obligation on heavy cost of technology has increased pressure on the institutions and the infrastructure. This has triggered a phase of consolidation in the system. The consolidation aims at developing globally competitive domestic institutions with strengthened technology base and quality enhancement for mitigating risks arising out of sudden global shocks.

Quality is a journey we have to tread through many paths some smooth some thorny. It is an adventure that is continually calling and there is no resting on the way and no end of journey. If we have to equip our youth to face the reality of the present and to instill courage in them to meet the challenges of the future, it is highly imperative that we should make such advancement in education, which will facilitate the desperately needed quality. Let us have 'Ultimate concern for the Ultimate'.

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