P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817

Remarking
Vol-II * Issue-VI* November - 2015

Quality Assurance and Enhancement Through Innovative and Best Practices in Indian Higher Education

C. D. Suntha
Principal,
Deptt. of Commerce,
Govt.Postgraduate College,
Champawat

Abstract

India has a complex higher education system which is said to be still at the crossroads in respect of several quality gaps, inequality, international ranking of institutions, program and professional diversity, autonomy and accountability and public and private participation, regulation, reforms among others. In delivering teaching, infrastructure, support services and governance, the issue of quality has become a severe shortcoming. In order to find an appropriate and continuous system of quality assurance and improvement, UGC has established an autonomous institutions of NAAC as its subsidiary in 1994. During the last two decades NAAC has created a systematic concern for HEIs by providing a mechanism of quality, assurance, sustenance and enhancement. It has made quality as the defining feature of higher education, provided three tier system of assessment and accreditation and follows seven point criteria to achieve this vision. In view of the quality gaps found in HEIs, particularly in collegiate education in respect of minimum level of infrastructure and processes, besides macro level change in policies the institutional quality is to be assured and improved. NAAC has a system of IQACs being supported at the grass root level of institutions. Here, the institutions can adopt several best practices followed by better institutions. In this paper the issues in quality assurance have been analyzed and best practices are outlined for quality enhancement at institutional level.

Keywords: NAAC- National Assessment and Accreditation Council, GATS –General Agreement in Trade in Services, PTR - Pupil Teacher Ratio ; GER – Gross Enrollment Ratio, QA- Quality Assurance, SSR- Self Study Report, Heis- Higher Educational Institutions; IQAC- Internal Quality Assurance Cell, SWOC– Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunity and Challenges, CGPA- Cumulative Grade Point Average, SSR- Self Study Report, AISHE- All India Survey on Higher Education, AIU– Association of Indian Universities.

Introduction

Human Quest for quality and excellence is as old as civilization, however concern for quality and demand for quality assurance in education is perhaps of recent origin. Higher education in recent years has already changed from elite to mass and even universal education. Internationalization of higher education have recognized education as a tradable service capable of being an instrument of competitive advantage among nations in an attempt to gain supremacy. In such knowledge economies teachers among others are supposed to be the knowledge workers who are expected to add knowledge through research and development and innovations. Today the higher education transcends across geographical boundaries and higher educational institutions globally are under pressure to abide by the international standards in order to internationalize their operations and survive in emerging competition. Moreover, with the huge expansion of higher education, and the consequent deterioration in quality has risen the concern for quality and obviously demand for quality assurance emerged world over.

Research Methodology

The paper is based on secondary data published by AISHE annually conducted by MHRD by a full time dedicated portal. The theoretical analysis and innovative practices are mainly based on NAAC publications and manuals for assessment and evaluation.

The Concept of Quality in Higher Education

The meaning of quality is different to different people and fields. Greek philosopher, Aristotle rightly remarked that “this education and these

studies exist for their own sake." Similarly quality of goods and products in business world exists for fitness of purpose (Juran), whereas manufacturing concept of quality defines it as "conformance to requirements. (Crosby) But the market based concept is hardly regarded as feasible to measure quality in value based sector of higher education since learners cannot be treated as customers and it is difficult to assume education as a tradable commodity despite the fact that education has been included among 12 tradable services under GATS. In higher education the concept of quality is multi-dimensional which should embrace all its functions and activities vis a vis academic programmes, teaching and learning, evaluation, support services, infrastructure, learner progression, management and governance.[1] Quality is both process and outcome oriented. However, better outcomes with bad processes are not sustainable like better processes with bad outcome are unsustainable. Therefore, first the processes have to be focused and fine tuned to get the desired outcome. "Quality focused enterprise believe that you can deliver quality only when you begin to focus on the processes than the end results. Process focused enterprises are quality enterprises. Like an outstanding runner, these are the people who take every aspect of their sport seriously and pay full attention to the act of delivery without getting distracted by the ribbon that is waiting to be braced at the end of the race."(Bagchi:2005)[2]

Quality in education may be identified with certain basic attributes. On the quality of education, a policy perspective (1985) entitles "challenges of education", it is said that "a quality conscious system could produce the people who have the attributes of functional and social relevance, mental ability and physical dexterity, efficacy and reliability, and above all, the confidence and capability to communicate effectively and exercise initiative and make innovation and experimentation with new situations. To these personal attributes, one could add the dimension of a value system, conducive to harmony, integration, and the welfare of the weak, and the disadvantaged."[3]

Indian system of education profess education as a liberating force. ***"Sa vidhya ya vimuktaye"*** Contrary to western concept which takes the narrow view what one can do, Indian philosophy preaches what one can be. Therefore education continues from womb to tomb. There are two kinds of education prescribed in ***Upanisadas – "Paravidhya'*** **and** ***Apparavidhya*****".** The latter is preached in modern institutions whereas the former is life long education. Former president of India Dr. S. Radhakrishanan even went further in his book, "the idealist view of life" and said that learning even continues in life in successive births and rebirths. Swami Vivekananda said, "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man". Therefore the concept of quality of education is dynamic, multidimensional and has wider perspectives. NAAC in its five point value framework has envisioned for every HEIs to contribute in national development, foster global competencies and values among learners, enhance the use of information and communication technologies and quest for excellence.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is a generic term the meaning of which depends on the field of activity. QA is the minimum level of standards given by the educational institution to its stakeholders. It is a prerequisite of accreditation, however it provides the mechanism for guidance in the improvement of standards and quality of Programmes. Q A involves designing system before the event. (Fidler, 1996).[4] Its emphasis is on assurance rather than detection and elimination (Mukhopadhyay:2005)[5] of defects. QA is a continuous and ongoing process. In the era of Globalization knowledge is a key driver of competitive advantage among nations. With higher education becoming an international service, there is growing concern the world over about quality, standards and recognition.(Prasad, A.Stella : 2006)[6] HEIs in every country have to abide by these benchmarks in order to survive. When more and more institutions are being established, it came to be recognized more clearly then ever before that to evaluate standard of performance was the most important thing to ensure.[7] This requires self evaluation by institutions and external review by peers through an independent body. Creation of an organization to assess quality with internationally accepted norms and then accredit the higher educational institutions can be called a very significant development in the country.[8] The national policy on education, 1986 and the Programme of Action (POA), 1991 inter alia recommended that "Excellence of institutions of higher education is a function of many aspects : self evaluation and self improvement are important. If a mechanism is is set up which will encourage self assessment in institutions and assessment and accreditation by a council… the quality process, participation and achievement, will be constantly monitored and improved."

Now, over the years, the demand for QA in higher education has become a global phenomenon and result of two forces vis a vis (i) Massification of higher education and (ii) Competition generated by globalization. In India we have the third largest system of higher education in the world followed by china and USA with 642 universities 34852 colleges, 29.18 million students and 1.25 million teachers and more than 1 million non teaching staff. The number of institutions and enrolment in them has registered tremendous increase over the last two decades after opening up of economy and structural adjustment since 1991. Globalization and consequent inter nationalization has introduced competition and a need to bring quality in order to survive in global higher education with free movement of investment, resources, institutions and students across countries in GATS regime under WTO. However despite significant increase in GER (20.8%) and GPI (88.0 %) the country is still facing problems in access and equity being demand driven problem of quantity which is dominating quality. The 12th plan has targeted to push the GER to 24.5% with enrolment target of 35 million students. There has already been mismatch of quality and quantity and the issue at stake is how to stop it deteriorating further with new expansion.

In India. the share of universities in the total enrolment (55.2 Lakh) is very small as compared to

colleges. Affiliated colleges constitute the majority of HEIs and most of enrolment but their faculty position and other infrastructure is poor. Most of these colleges are affiliated to state funded universities and facing dearth of resources. Professor Amrik Singh remarked that state is the weakest link in higher education ……. And affiliating system is one of the most prominent drawback of Indian higher education system affecting quality. Affiliated colleges could not be managed properly to maintain academic norms. As per AISHE[9] data, Out of 641 universities at present, 234 are affiliating universities which have a staggering 34852 colleges. Only 132 universities have less than 100 colleges. 13 universities are very large and have 500 or more colleges. Rajasthan university have 994 affiliated colleges with it. Though 55% colleges are located in rural areas, regional distribution of affiliated colleges is very uneven. Whereas 13% of these colleges are located in 10 districts, top 50 districts have about 36% of the colleges. Top 6 states in terms of highest number of colleges in India, are UP, AP, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. As regards college density, i.e. number of colleges per lakh population (18-23 age group) varies from 6 in Bihar to 20 in UP, 30 in Tamilnadu, 32 in Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Goa, 34 in Maharashtra, 48 in AP and 64 in Puducherry as compared to all India average of 25.

Moreover, the size of the colleges is not sustainable. Majority of the colleges are smaller in terms of enrolment. 64 % of the colleges enroll less than 500 students out of which 22% of colleges are having enrolment less than 100. Majority of colleges (73%) are privately managed and 58% are private unaided. But private colleges have lower share in total enrolment (62%) and they mainly cater to professional courses. 42% colleges which run only single programme , out of which 79% are privately managed. Among them 34.7% run B.Ed. programme only.

Total enrolment itself is dominated by arts and social sciences (66.36 lakh) and commerce. (24.65 Lakh) and B.Sc. (20.42 Lakhs) where as share of engineering and technology (27.75 Lakh), BCA (4.16 Lakh), MBA (4.89 Lakh), MBBS (1.00 Lakh), M.Tech (1.02 Lakh). Overall 79.4% students are enrolled at UG level whereas students enrolled at P.G. level and Ph.D., M.Phil level is 11.5% and 0.5% respectively. At Ph.D. level maximum students are enrolled in science stream followed by social science.
At international level not a single institution from India could make it to come among 200 best institutions in the world. Except IGNOU who spread its study centres abroad, university level internationalization initiative is not significant barring project level MOUs. During 2011-12, 33151 foreign students were enrolled by Indian universities mainly in UG/PG courses and bulk of them coming from neighborly Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka on the one hand and from Iran, Malaysia, Iraq and Sudan etc. whereas the number of Indian students going abroad is quite higher and moved to universities in the developed world. This shows that in global market Indian universities are way behind than their counterparts in western world, Australia, Taiwan etc. and require change in outlook and strategy for improvement in quality.

The concern for quality is not new and it has been expressed right since the education policy of 1968 in which quality, excellence and relevance was included but during the vast expansion of eighties it could not be implemented. Constitution amendment 1976 brought education from state list to concurrent list to give Union government power to reinforce the national and integrative character of education, maintain quality of standards and monitor the educational requirements of the country as a whole. In the era of globalization and liberalization higher education has to become international in character and shoulder the responsibility of developing appropriate level of knowledge and skills among the people and ensure relevance and excellence in every aspect of higher education. Consequently in 1994, following the recommendation of NEP (1986) and POA(1991), UGC established NAAC as a freehold institution.

Contrary to previous system of checks and balances through AIU, regulatory bodies, affiliating universities and state governments, NAAC provided a continuous system of evaluation and improvement of quality with internal evaluation of strength and weaknesses by the institutions and their external validation by independent peer teams of NAAC on previously set criteria and benchmarks based on international standards.

Higher education is a complex system and each unit of higher education is influenced by its external environment which is uncontrollable but adaptive. However, internal environment are well within its control. Stakeholders are the integral part of higher education process. Quality assurance is meant to assure all stakeholders that the minimum standards of higher education programmes would be maintained by the institution. These standards of quality recognized at international level is determined by independent national body of NAAC. NAAC also determined the criteria, process, procedures of evaluation. At present there are seven criteria which are sub classified in quality aspects and several quality indicators against all of which letter grades are allotted, converted into grade points under CGPA system. Finally accreditation grade is awarded to the institution. This new incarnation of accreditation is now accepted all over the world and in the last five years or so as many as 38 countries have gone in for quality assurance and control system in one form or the other,(Nigvekar:1999)[10] Accreditation serves as a guarantee of certain level of standard to the stakeholders that the programmes and services provided by the HEI are recognized, capable of achieving the pre determined objectives and facilitates students progression and mobility at national and global level. Moreover, It provide a mechanism for continuous improvement in quality through the peer team report which is jointly prepared by them in consultation with the host institution as a road map for next five years.

The new methodology of assessment and accreditation facilitates rigorous and objective evaluation. SWOC analysis by HEIs is done while preparing self study report. At present there are seven criteria which are sub classified in quality aspects and several quality indicators against all of which letter

grades are allotted, converted into grade points under CGPA system. Finally accreditation grade is awarded to the institution. Best practices are comprised in each of seven criteria which are interdependent but requires a holistic approach.

Best Practices Benchmarking

Best practices benchmarking is becoming an increasingly popular tool in service organization like education and used for improvement of performance at the institutional level. There are institutions which are performing better and from whom other institutions can learn. Best practices requires identification, sustenance, dissemination and adaptation.

On the basis of reports of high grade accredited institutions by NAAC a number of best and innovative practices have been listed which can be adopted by other institutions in order to enhance institutional performance. NAAC has given highest weight age to teaching learning and evaluation in respect of affiliated colleges but this criteria is also linked with other criteria as well. There is also need to institutionalize the best practices for ensuring their sustainability. The following criteria wise innovative and best practices have been suggested to raise the performance level of institutions.

Curricular Aspects

Which comprise the institutional vision and intent suggests that the programmes and courses run by institution is compatible to fulfill its objective. It is under this criteria that the institution determines in advance its strategic intent as to where the institution wants to go in the long term and how can it may reach there. This is a system of strategic planning and management with the help of which the institution formulates its institutional development plan keeping in view the evaluation of its strength and weaknesses and implement its strategic plans to improve further. It must be noted that quality in higher education at micro level begin with institutional Endeavour's and comprise both processes and outcomes. An innovative practice might be the engagement of all stakeholders in the formulation and dissemination of strategic intent of HEIs.

Teaching, Learning and Evaluation is the most important criteria for quality assurance and enhancement under NAAC methodology in terms of overall weight (45%) assigned to it. Unlike universities, in colleges bulk of emphasis is given to this criteria which comprises admission process and student profile, catering to diverse needs, learning process, teacher quality, evaluation process and reforms and best practices in teaching learning and evaluation. It was rightly observed in CABE meeting that we could not move forward unless quality of classroom teaching is enhanced and made more student centric, participative and enjoyable rather than the presently followed system of rot learning In order to improve the quality of class room teaching the pedagogical reforms are very necessary and teachers are required to be equipped by them through orientation, training and attitudinal changes while providing their access to such technological devices. Teaching is a professional that requires specialized knowledge and teachers must not only be skilful in the profession but also must be proficient in teaching methods. Pedagogy is the most indispensable factor for the success of any educational effort. In the modern complex world of information and communication technologies teacher dependent pedagogies based on chalk and duster approach are needed to be supplemented by learner centric pedagogies in which teachers can utilize innovative use of devices for learners benefit and improve the teaching outcome. This is dependant on teachers competence to use teaching methods, their expertise in handling audio visual aids and e media.

Similarly, evaluation process can be improved by innovative and best practices followed by quality institutions in respect of internal assessment, weekly, monthly and quarterly tests, transparency of evaluation, preparation of question banks and evaluation process to be made a tool for learners motivation. This also include faculty evaluation through student feedback and evaluation by peers.

Best practices in Teaching, learning and evaluation include orientation of a week of teachers in ICT tools to supplement teaching, comprehensive teaching plans, maintaining teaching diary to ensure teaching quality and accountability, Formation of peer study group of students to guide, counsel and teach classes of juniors, learner cantered teaching work such as group work, role play, project work, field visits, case study, debates, use of teaching machines, effective study habit booklet prepared and distributed, post entrance diagnostic test to classify students, induction meeting of students to introduce them with student support services and procedures, self learning through books and journals, enrichment programmes for advanced learners, remedial coaching for slow learners, undergraduate assignments, projects, tests, open book tests, student evaluation of teachers and feedback, computerized examination work to ensure fast results, establishing language and commerce labs to enhance communication skill and to teach/learn with diverse groups etc.

Research Extension and Consultancy

Teaching and research are complementary in higher education Institutions are expected to enhance the utilization of ICT tools in research and extension. Moreover, Creation of better research ambience through incentives for faculty, university industry interaction and collaboration, publication of research journals, MOUs with centres of learning, consultancy output for resources, awarding best paper, virtual university, super information highway, creation of research culture among UG students, Extension activities such as medical camps, entrepreneurship training, eye camp, blood donation, social action, community reach programme etc. are some of the innovative practices which can be identified and adopted by HEIs for quality improvement.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources

Infrastructure deficiency is one of the most felt quality gap by HEIs. Development of infrastructure must go hand in hand with academic growth. However, lack of resources with states leads to compromise with this basic need. Infrastructure must also be utilized optimally. In this respect the institutions might learn from innovative practices

adopted by other institutions. These innovative practices include imaginative use of infrastructure, sharing of infra for student talent nurture, development and linking physical infra to academic growth, Technology assisted pedagogy, use of infra for social transformation such as natural herb cultivation, aquaculture etc., student participation in infra maintenance, training students to use library resources, book reading competition to enhance reading habits as well as summarizing activities by students. The proposed list is illustrative but not exhaustive.

Students Progression and Support Services

To enhance employability of the students in general and particularly to enrich their learning experience the portfolio of learner support services is inevitable in modern world. The activation of career guidance and placement cell, women empowerment cell, industry academia linkages, skill development, capacity building, social service centres are various activities which might be considered on the basis of experiences of reputed institutions.

Governance, Leadership and Management

The quality gaps among institutions have not emerged merely on account of infrastructure deficiency but equally if not more by lack of leadership and governance. The institutional management is required to be effective, dynamic and responsive for changing environment. Autonomy must be accompanied by accountability. Resources are required to be optimally utilized and transparency might be ensured through stakeholders participation. Stakeholder participation in formulating vision and mission, encouragement to development of team work, Judicious allocation of resources, Resource mobilisation through alumni and other stakeholders, private sector corporations, charging differential fee from students belonging to different economic background; central resource centre for sharing resources among departments, college councils for internal coordination, planning and redress grievances, internal quality checks etc. may be identified and adopted as best practices under this criteria.,

Conclusion and Suggestions

To sum up, it may be concluded that QA through Accreditation is the beginning rather than an end of journey towards quality sustenance and enhancement. Once in a five year assessment must be supplemented by the institutional level efforts on a daily basis. Once the institution reach a certain level of quality assurance and accredited by NAAC, it has to establish and activate quality mechanism to sustain it over the years. Quality is continuous process as famous philosopher Socrates puts it, “Quality is a habit and must be nurtured.” Therefore, being a dynamic concept it might be enhanced continuously to cope with the changes in the environment. The following recommendations may be made to improve the quality of higher education at micro and macro level :

1. New institutions might be established as stand alone institutions and the size of affiliating universities must be restricted to maximum 100 colleges.
2. The strengthening of existing institutions must be given top priority to utilize the enrollment capacity and thereby enhance GER. The crowded colleges might be clustered to be converted in new universities.
3. The vacant post of teachers are required to be filled to improve the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) which is much lower in affiliated colleges.
4. Curriculum must be revised and upgraded on international standards and choice based credit system (CBCS) might be implemented uniformly.
5. In view of the increasing role of private sector, regulatory mechanism for private institutions must be reviewed to include stringent monitoring measures.
6. The state accreditation agencies might be established to evaluate the increasing number of HEIs. As a stop gap arrangement NAAC may open its regional centres in each state on IGNOU pattern which subsequently might be developed as state accreditation agencies.
7. IQACs might be activated and strengthened to enhance institutional quality. They may be developed as strategic planning and implementation centres.

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