

IMPORTANCE AND WAYS OF ENSURING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Education especially in India is considered as the defining tool for bringing necessary reformations and revolutionary variations for generating such a human resource that will be instrumental in expediting the pace of development and progress of the country. One of the major aims of these reformations is to enhance the quality so as to bring the educational standards at par with the global level. Though there has been substantial increase in the number of people enrolling for higher education yet there remains a big question mark as far as the quality is concerned. Quality in education, being a major issue of contemporary India, has drawn attention of government, NGO's and individuals to find out suitable measures to ensure its enhancement at all levels. As the conception of this word "quality" differs from individual to individual, area to area and subject to subject, it remains a topic of constant discussion. The reason behind this is the elucidation the term "quality" in the pretext of education connoted by several other adjoining dimensions such as assurance, enhancement, learner, content, processes, outcomes, etc. The, emphasis is upon bringing into forefront a trained and well equipped workforce to face the upcoming challenges of the modernized technological world keeping in concern their eminence. So the present paper will be focussing upon the origin particularly along with the importance and ways of ensuring quality in higher education in India.

Keywords: quality, assurance, process and learner.

Introduction

Quality is never an accident but it is always the result of intelligent effort.

-John Ruskin.

The origin of the term quality can be traced back to its inception. In 45 B.C., Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero created the term in Latin language “qualitas” which means “character” or “essential nature”. Further Plato was of the view that the term “quality” is difficult to interpret and describes persistent characteristics of one’s reality that exists in and by itself; irreducible to something else for example, whiteness exists as a characteristic in itself. This philosophy of nature was concentrated around the qualities and described each and every physical aspect of the universe.

Definitions of Quality

There are different definitions of the word “quality” as elucidated by various philosophers and scholars.

As per British Standard Institution (1991) quality is “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”.

Goddard and Leask (1992) highlighted the definition of quality as “simply meeting the requirements of customers. They have included different customers for education—parents, government, students, teachers, employers, and institutions—who look for different characteristics of quality.”

Perceptions of quality

- Stakeholders’ perceptions of quality: this concept of stakeholders implies that those who have are concerned, an influence on, or are users of’ the function of higher education institutions. Shanahan and Gelber, (2004) in their study mentioned about two stakeholders i.e. academics and students in the higher education institutions.
- Academics’ perceptions of quality: Anderson (2006) in his study depicted that academics explicated quality as comprehended within traditional academic discourses of excellence in scholarly endeavour. In lieu with Anderson’s results, two outstanding research contributions were explicated by Newton (2002) focussed on how academics were coping with quality by conducting interviews with frontline academics. It indicated the general patterns of the academics’ perceptions of quality which include: quality as ritualism and tokenism, as impression management; as a burden; as a failure to close the loop; as suspicion of management motives; as a discipline and

technology; as frontline staff resistance; as lack of mutual trust; as a culture of getting by; and as constraints on teamwork. Cheng (2011) in his study suggested that quality must be viewed by academicians as beneficial to students' learning only if the crucial factors affecting it could be considered in building up a model for quality.

- Students' perceptions of quality: the most significant outcomes of the study done by Gatfield (2000) which indicated that recognition and academic instructions were of crucial importance to students. It was confirmed in a study by Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003) who also emphasized that when students contemplated about quality as a concept, they gave utmost attention to the quality of their lecturers. It was concluded that teaching, learning and lecturers' performances were pungently emerging as elements of students' perception of quality.

Quality in Education

Quality in education is explicated by two aspects. The first being quality of the education system as a whole which includes schools and related bodies, teaching and learning environment, policies, etc. The second one is the quality of what the system offers to the students/learners (i.e. quality of teaching and learning process, curriculum etc).

Importance of Quality in Education

According to a report by World Bank in 1995, quality in education is complex to define and measure. As mentioned in the report, it must include student outcomes but most educators would also incorporate the nature of the educational experience that assists in producing the outcomes that is the learning environment.

In India, greater importance is being laid on providing free and compulsory primary education for all children. This led to the need for implementation of initiatives taken by Indian government such as Right to Education (2009) and Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan (2001) has resulted into substantially enhanced enrolment of students in school. Undoubtedly the figures of school enrolments are very encouraging but there is a big question mark as far as quality is concerned. Reports of educational survey carried out by NGOs like ASER and PRATHAM paint a grim picture of the low standards of quality in education at all levels.

In fact on a global platform it was thought that access and quality don't go hand in hand instead it was envisaged the role of quality being influential in recuperating success.

Due to the present position of education in both developing as well as developed countries, this issue of quality has become the cause of concern. The Jomietian Declaration in 1990 and more specifically, the Dakar Framework of Action in 2000, through its sixth goal has also emphasized on quality of education.

In the Indian context, particularly there is a growing concern about the quality of education that the present education system is able to provide (NUEPA, 2014). According to Education for All (EFA, 2014) report one of the major requirements facing the Indian education system is the quality-related inadequacies at each stage leading to dissatisfaction of student learning. The phenomenon of under-achievement among pupils depicts the quality-related inadequacies of the education system. In the present context lower level of achievement amongst children due to absence of quality education do not have school-readiness competencies in cognitive and language areas thus revealing the deteriorated quality of the curriculum, deficiencies of the teaching-learning process and non availability of quality teachers.

If the base of children at the school level is feeble, there are possibilities that potential from later educational interventions get reduced. Therefore, it is necessary that apt interventions need to be formulated and implemented to eradicate quality-related deficiencies at school-level education. There is wide barrier between quality education and quality students. A large population of unskilled students hailing from the 'well to do families' are studying in good schools whereas the access of children from poor background to such schools is still a distant dream. It is crucial to understand that there should be equality and equity as far as the quality of education is concerned. As per Right to Education as enshrined under article 21A of the Constitution, it implies that education is the right of every child.

Apart from school level even in higher education quality is a multi-dimensional, multilevel and a dynamic concept that is linked to the contextual settings of an educational genre, to the institutional mission and its objectives along with this to particular standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. The connotation of quality may vary that is at times it becomes conflicting in meaning depending upon:

- the comprehension of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education
- its references which include the inputs, processes, outputs, missions, objectives etc

- the features or characteristics of the academic world worth appraisal
- the history in the development of higher education

Apprehension relating to the quality of higher education has been a matter of extensive discussion since a long time. Over the years several innovations and developments have taken place in relation to the assessment, monitoring and improvement of the quality of various components of higher education especially including its governance, contents, forms of pedagogy and the services offered etc. The term quality is these days widely connoted with concepts such as “quality assessment”, “quality evaluation”, and “quality assurance”. The higher educational institutes are endowed with the primary responsibility of the maintenance of quality of their provision as well as its assurance. These may differ in size, quality, resources, number of teaching staff and students, etc., but have to strike a balance between the conflicting stakeholder demands as well as institutional values.

Quality in Indian Higher Education

As Misra (2006) explicates in the report entitled ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ states that the University Grants Commission (UGC) possessing statutory powers is most likely to maintain its quality in Indian higher education institutions as mentioned in Section 12 of the UGC Act of 1956. Under this act the agency is required to be held responsible for determining and maintaining the standards of teaching, examinations and research in universities. For the achievement of this goal, the agency has been devising mechanisms to check quality in colleges as well as in universities directly or indirectly. In order to enhance quality, national research facilities have been created and Academic Staff Colleges are directed to re-orient teachers along with provide refresher courses in subject areas. Various other committees and commissions on education since past few years have been emphasizing directly or indirectly the requisite for improvement and recognition of quality in higher education system of India. On the recommendations of Kothari Commission (1964-66) the model of initiation of autonomous colleges has its roots in the concept of quality improvement. The growth of educational institutions led to the concern for quality. The constitutional amendment (1976) brought the subject of education to the concurrent list making the central government more accountable for quality improvement (Stella and Gnanam, 2003). The New Education Policy (1986) stressed on the recognition and reward of excellence in performance of institutions and examining of sub-standard institutions. As a result, the Programme of Action (1986) it was mentioned that, “As a part of its responsibility

for the maintenance and promotion of standards of education, the UGC will, to begin with, take the initiative to establish an Accreditation and Assessment Council as an autonomous body". After several years, the UGC set up a governing institution National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) at Bangalore as a registered autonomous body on 16th September 1994 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. The main highlights in the emergence of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) can be identified as follows (Stella, 2000):

1986	UGC constituted a 15-member committee on Accreditation and Assessment Council under the chairmanship of Dr. Vasant Gowarikar.
1987-1990	Nine regional seminars and a national seminar organized to debate Gowarikar Committee report.
1990	Dr Sukumaran Nair's project report submitted to UGC that reflected a consensus to have an accreditation agency accountable to UGC.
1992	The revised New Education Policy reiterated all round improvement of educational institutions.
1994	Prof. G. Ram Reddy committee appointed to finalize the memorandum of association and rules and regulation of the accreditation board (July 1994).
1994	National Assessment and Accreditation Council established at Bangalore (September 1994).

Like NAAC (which is responsible for accreditation of colleges and universities), there are other statutory agencies in India to ensure quality especially in professional education. These are All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), Medical Council of India (MCI), Indian Nursing Council (INC), Bar

Council of India (BCI), Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and Distance Education Council (DEC).

Also, a major step has been taken that includes the establishment of the National Mission on Education through Information Communication Technology (NMEICT) and the National Knowledge Network (NKN). Their purpose is to connect as many of the educational establishments in India as possible. In the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) remarkable growth has been done in making instruction in a variety of technical subjects widely available through the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) (Kumar, 2015).

Features of Quality Education

Eze (2009) in his paper puts forth that for maintaining quality in education following crucial conditions need to be taken care of which are as follows:

- Learners, who are sound mentally and physically voluntarily participate as well as learn and have a supportive background in learning;
- Environments that is secured, responsive and fulfils all the needed requisites;
- Content that indicates in relevant matter for attaining the basic expertise and proficiency especially in diverse areas.
- Processes involve the usage of child centred teaching approaches by the teachers in managing the classrooms and schools. It also involves the proficiency of providing assessment which assists in learning and reduce disparities.
- Outcomes that includes knowledge, skills and attitudes which are linked to national goals of education as well as participation in society.

Factors of quality assurance

Cheng (2001) elucidated certain factors to ensure quality in education. Some of these are teacher related factors which comprise of competence and performance; process of learning related factors which comprises of student learning experience and student learning outcome; curriculum related factors which consist of curriculum and its characteristics; evaluation related factors which encompass evaluation of teaching & learning; classroom environment related factors which include classroom environment for teaching and learning; school management related factors which include organizational environment for teaching and learning; teacher education and quality related factors which cover the teacher personal

characteristics, school-based teacher education / staff development, external teacher education.

Issues of Quality in Indian Higher Education

Even after independence not much progress has been made as Indian Universities are still not accounted in the top ranking institutions. Sheikh (2017) in his work mentions about the major reasons for this are the existing challenges in the Indian higher education. These are as follows:

- **Enrolment:** This is a major concern as the enrolment ratio in developing countries at school level is low as compared to the developed countries. Due to this, the higher education institutes are not sufficient to meet the increasing demand in the country.
- **Equity:** There is no equity among different sects of the society, even male and female variations are observed to a greater extent. Regional variations across states also account for significant imbalances within the higher education system particularly in India.
- **Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure is a crucial challenge for the higher education system of India, in particular the institutes run by the public sector which has relatively poor physical facilities and infrastructure.
- **Political interference:** Most of the educational Institutions are controlled by the political leaders who indirectly exercise their powers especially in the governing bodies of the universities.
- **Faculty:** Faculty shortages and the inadequacy of the state educational system to retain well qualified teachers have been major challenges to ensure quality in education for several years as of now. Many deserving candidates are unemployed even if there are lot of vacancies in higher education and they are now applying in several other departments which in a way are a great loss for the higher education system.
- **Accreditation:** Despite the fact that several funding and service providing agencies as well as councils are operating at national level with the sole aim of improving quality of education at all levels still the effective accreditation remain a crucial issue. There are several institutes of accreditation such as National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), Medical Council of India (MCI), Indian Nursing Council (INC), Bar Council of India (BCI) and Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), etc. but the process of grading and assessment of the educational institutions and programmes is not proving

effective enough to facilitate in bringing about desirable changes that can enhance the quality of education to the envisioned standards.

- **Research and Innovation:** There is an inadequate focus on research in higher education institutes. Along with lesser resources and facilities for research work, there is a dearth of quality faculty members to advise students. Many of the research scholars are either without fellowships or not getting their fellowships on time which affects their research. Even the Indian higher education institutions are not properly connected to research centers.
- **Structure of higher education:** The challenges while managing the educational institutes in India include over centralisation, interference of bureaucratic structures and lack of accountability, transparency as well as professionalism. Consequently increasing number of affiliated colleges and students has led to increasing burden of administrative functions of universities thus; the core focus on academics and research has become insipid.

Ways and Suggestions of Ensuring Quality in Education

Benevot (2018) while elucidating in his work The Global Monitoring Report 2015 which proposed the following crucial recommendations. These are:

1. It should be made certain by all the nations that each and every child as well as adolescents should at least finish one year of pre-primary education and successively complete primary and lower secondary education by 2030.
2. Primary and lower secondary education must be completely free of cost. Fees waiver should be there and included in the cost that is for textbooks, transport also school uniforms should be insured within.
3. Programs along with funding at each and every level should be directed to fulfil the needs of the most disadvantaged children, youth and adults. Learning environments should be secure and gender sensitized.
4. Governments should most importantly extend adult learning and education opportunities along with a lifelong learning approach especially among those who have been not being given any entry to school in the past.
5. All the nations should assure that 15-20 percent of national expenditure to be spent on education.

Other necessary steps that need to be taken for quality improvement in Indian context include:

- Creating awareness about the far reaching benefits of quality in education amongst all stakeholders: the management, faculty, students, parents and the society at large.
- Along with the quantity, the educational institutions should also focus on ensuring quality for all educational ventures that are under its umbrella.
- Sensitizing the students about their freedom of thought and expression and developing a feeling amongst them that they are crucial part of the institution so they deserved to be provided the best from them.
- Creating short term and long term goals for enhancing the quality of education and preparing plan of action to achieve it.
- Examining and evaluating the quality improvement programme at different time gaps and making modifications where ever required.
- Inculcating amongst the staff members to work with dedication along with passion and commitment to achieve the goals set for enhancing and ensuring quality.
- Providing congenial atmosphere for facilitating students to bring about their best should be the top most priority of the students. If the quality of education is to be improved, the teaching/learning environment in totality has to be upgraded to the level of higher standards.
- National guiding groups and accreditation bodies such as National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Distance Education Council (DEC), etc. should manage and implement the Total Quality Management Programme.

Conclusion

Quality in education has been connoted in myriad ways by educators, philosophers, thinkers and researchers. Thus, apart from considering quality of education in terms of learning outcomes of students, the quality of inputs and processes to achieve better learning outcomes are equally crucial too.

Furthermore, one needs to have the grasp of present state of education in order to make meaningful decision and improve the standards of education thorough understanding of the state of education in contemporary. Teachers, students and administrators should be made

aware and conscious about their crucial roles in maintaining and improving of quality of education in their institutions.

India is a country which has huge human resource potential but how to turn this potential into dividends is a matter that needs immediate attention. Opportunities are available but how to reap the benefits and make them accessible to others is the matter of concern. For sustaining the rate of growth, there is an imperative need to increase the number of institutions that ensure the quality of higher education in India. To attain the envisaged goal of making education of high quality reviewing should be done at the financial resources, access and equity, quality standards, relevance, infrastructure and at the end the responsiveness.

It is very apt to conclude with what Dr. Manmohan Singh said ‘The time has come to create a second wave of institution building and of excellence in the fields of education, research and capability building’ needs to be put into practicality for maintaining quality in education.

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Jaspreet Kaur, Vandana Aggarwal

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