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## From Rhetoric towards Reality: Quality Assurance in Indian Higher Education

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### Abstract

*Democratization of higher education with its significant constituents such as productivity, performance and control, impelled in the 1990s in India with its tripartite pillars-expansion, equity and excellence in fact brought forth a paradigmatic shift from thin elite to mass higher education. In terms of quantity India has obviously made appreciable growth; but it is equally if not more fundamental to assess the quality and not quantity of Indian higher education system as it is a potential tool instrumental in building knowledge-based society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence this paper succinctly attempts to deliberate on the issue of “quality” in Indian Higher Education system as countries across geopolitical borders vie one another to excel in an age marked by unprecedented pace of change and development.*

Fashionable terms such as “Centre of Excellence”, “Centre with Potential for Excellence”, “Accredited with ...Grade” and “... Approved” are some of the glitzy phrases suffixed with the names of educational institutions in India. Undeniably these expressions are granted by the approving agencies as part of their dynamic interventions to ascertain the efficiency and effectiveness in the realm of higher education that affirm a modernized economy, a just society and a correspondingly vibrant polity.

All India survey on higher education in India (2011-2012) initiated in 2011 with its major stakeholders subsuming University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Medical Council of India (MCI) and all state governments, records that the country has 642 Universities, 34908 Colleges and 11356 Stand Alone Institutions (7). Stand Alone Institutions are those institutions that are not empowered to provide degrees and therefore only run Diploma Level Programmes. The survey also estimates the total enrolment in higher education to be 28.56 million with 15.87 million boys and 12.69 million girls. These attributes confer India the third largest higher education system in the world after China and the United States. In terms of quantity India has obviously made appreciable growth since independence. But it is equally if not more fundamental to assess the quality and not quantity of Indian higher education system as it is a potential tool instrumental in building knowledge-based society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the normally accepted benchmarks to evaluate the quality of an education institution is to figure out its position in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings.

Noticeably it is disappointing to see that in the 2014/15 QS World University ranking, no single Indian education institution figures in the list of top hundred or even top two hundred institutions while many institutions belonging to other Asian countries take their positions in the top hundred. IIT Bombay is the first Indian institution to find a place in the list and it takes 222<sup>nd</sup> position while IIT Delhi takes the 235<sup>th</sup> rank. Moreover, in the QS Asian University Rankings, equally depressing, no single Indian education institution finds a place in the first ten or twenty five institutions. The two Indian institutions to find places among the first fifty Asian rankings include IIT Delhi and IIT Bombay in 38<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> positions respectively. Leave behind the technical universities, the only Arts and Science University that gets enlisted in the first 100 Asian University rankings is the University of Delhi with the 81<sup>st</sup> position.

Democratization of higher education with its significant constituents such as productivity, performance and control, impelled in the 1990s in India with its tripartite pillars- expansion, equity and excellence in fact brought forth a paradigmatic shift from thin elite to mass higher education. Tilak and Varghese write, “By the end of 1980s, higher education in India has become one of the largest systems in the world with about 10 million students enrolled in 188 universities and about 14 thousand colleges and with 400 thousand teachers (83). Hence along with quantity, quality is also a serious enterprise to cogitate.

Five major concerns the paper attempts to bring into focus within the domain of higher education leaving behind a host of other significant issues that could be equated with or more include:

- (i) Integration of teaching and research in universities and affiliated colleges
- (ii) Focus on placements/internships
- (iii) Mobility of students and teachers
- (iv) Internationalization of higher education institutions
- (v) Maximization of student potential for expression

Before entering into such a discussion, the rationale behind this paper as echoed in the beginning has to be succinctly detailed. Historically locating the issue pertaining to the unprecedented expansion of higher education system reveals that, during 1970s and 1980s arose a formidable demand for skilled manpower to further the occupational exigency of industrializing societies and also to reckon with equity. Referring to a similar context writes Ved Prakash:

In the 1970s and 1980s, growth of institutions of higher learning was relatively slow, it picked up in the 1990s onwards. This has happened because of increased demand for higher education and participation of the private sector, particularly in technical and professional education. (3250)

The concept *quality* has turned to be a universalizing meta-narrative and all nations are on the fray to improve the quality of their respective education institutions and thereby face the challenges of global competitiveness. In this era marked by dominant ethos such as performance orientation, corporatization syndrome, stakeholderisation and commodification of research knowledge, India cannot remain far behind.

In India inclusive of specificities such as value democratic and pluralistic society, the main objective of massification of higher education was to “promote and sustain self-reliant socioeconomic development” (Tilak and Varghese 84). From a dismal condition at the time of independence, Indian education system in general has ascertained bold and appreciable strides; the last important milestone being the passing of legislation, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 that became operative on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2010. The UGC report on Higher Education in India records that, while the total enrollment of students in higher education in 1950 was only 3,97,000, it increased to 83,99,000 in 2001 and stands doubled with 1,69,75,000 students in 2010-11.

Subsequent to the expansion of higher education system and the economic setbacks worldwide, emerged serious deliberations on quality assurance in higher education occasioned by limitations on public funds availability and demands for greater accountability. The distant aim of such measures was to expand the latitude of institutional autonomy and thereby increase institutional performance. As part of initiatives towards quality assurances, several policy measures were set about in Europe as Vught and Westerheijden account:

In the United Kingdom (in 1984) quality was declared to be a principal objective for higher education. In France the '*Comite National d' Evaluation*' was set up. In the Netherlands an influential policy paper was published in which quality played a major role. In Denmark, Finland, Spain and several other countries the first steps were taken to design a quality assessment system. (356-57)

*A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions* prepared by UNESCO defines “Quality” in higher education as:

. . . a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. Quality may thus take different meanings depending on: (i) the understandings of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education (quality requirements set by student/university discipline/labour market/society/government); (ii) its references: inputs, processes, outputs, missions, objectives, etc.; (iii) the attributes or characteristics of the academic world which are worth evaluating; and (iv) the historical period in the development of higher education.(46)

Therefore there are four fundamental reasons for the wide-ranging focus provided on the quality in higher education; that includes a) dramatic expansion in the growth of students and a corresponding increase in higher education institutions; b) greater industrial and market demand for skilled labour force; c) restrictions in the allocation of funding towards public expenditure wherein lie the education system and the subsequent retrenchment operations; d) the tidal wave of commercialization directed, technology oriented, fast developing nations to customize their education system towards market needs.

Recounting the challenges faced by Indian higher education, Elizabeth Vergis writes:

The rapid expansion of higher education in India has had a detrimental effect on its quality. There is a wide variance in quality across institutions in India. Although there has been an overall deterioration in quality, some institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology, the Indian Institute of Management, a few university departments, and some affiliated colleges have continued to maintain high standards. This deterioration in quality is most obvious in state universities, and affiliated colleges especially at the undergraduate level. (104)

In order to way out such quality issues in Indian higher education system, a few external quality assurance agencies have been set up by the Government of India. Initially, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), an autonomous body was set up by the University Grants Commission of India, to assess and accredit institutions of higher education in the country that came into effect in 1994, with its headquarters in Bangalore. The NAAC advocates 7 steps to maintain quality that includes quest for excellence, understanding the concept, action-orientation, learner-centric approach, innovation for change, training to build competencies, and year-round activity. National Board of Accreditation (NBA) was the second initiative established in 1994 to accredit programmes in engineering and related areas. And, finally, the third body, the Accreditation Board (AB) was set up in 1996 to accredit institutions. (105)

Having been situated the graveness of the quality issue, let us get back to the earlier highlighted concerns. To underscore, these alone are not the only issues though they form the fundamental constituents attributing to the quality considerations. Nevertheless they embody:

#### **(i) Integration of teaching and research in universities and affiliated colleges**

The present higher education system in India to take note of is undeniably rooted in the British paradigm, primarily conceived from the politico-economic and administrative standpoint and hence negligible focus has been shown to research endurance and knowledge construction. Hence, Indian higher education institutions, especially colleges primarily focus on teaching alone and research activities are hardly aspired, encouraged or initiated.

All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2011-12 records that out of the 28.56 million total enrolments, 79 per cent students enrolled in undergraduate level programmes, 11.8 per cent enrolled in postgraduate courses and only less than 1 per cent (84505 students) enrolled in Ph.D. Programmes (8). This data clearly suggests that Indian Universities and Colleges should no more remain as mere teaching institutions; instead they have to integrate teaching with research and must extend the student studies to research level that has to be subsequently published in renowned research journals. Only then Indian educational institutions can figure their positions in the world rankings.

### **(ii) Focus on placements/internships**

Curriculum has to be oriented towards market needs. Instead of being rigid and theory centric, it has to be temporally and spatially, specific constantly negotiating with the rapidly changing career requirements. Significant focus has to be given on the customization of the structure, content and delivery of higher education system.

In India the university degrees are only qualifiers for students to write various other examinations. Almost all government jobs to aspirants are available on the basis of marks scored in the recruitment examinations which do not adequately consider the marks scored in the university programmes. This clearly states that we ourselves do not rely on the certificates issued by the Indian universities and university degrees remain merely to satisfy eligibility conditions.

### **(iii) Mobility of students and teachers**

Mobility can simply be conceived as empowering. Recent advances in the globalizing process conflating trade agreements, transnational information and communication sharing has facilitated easy movement of goods, capital and workforce across geopolitical boundaries. Positioning this issue within the contours of the higher education scenario reveals several other facts. According to the All India census 2011 total population between eighteen and twenty three years is 14,03,17,069. At present “over 50 % of India’s population is under 25 years old and by 2020 India will outpace China as the country with the largest tertiary-age population (*Understanding India* 4). That means over 600 million people in India are young under the age group of 25 years and India can become an important pipeline for the supply of skilled labour force to the global market.

But how many Indian students pursue higher education abroad (their percentage and to which class they belong) and how many foreign students prioritize their studies in India are to be taken into account. Out of the total number of 31, 632 foreign students, the largest share of them come from the neighbouring countries that are economically less strong and technologically poor. In the All India Survey on Higher Education (2011-12) majority of them come from Nepal forming 17 per cent, followed by Bhutan and Iran with 7 per cent and Malaysia with 5 per cent

(T 20-22). It has to be noted that the share of students from developed European and Asian countries are markedly less and the total number of students from the United States who have enrolled in various programmes in India is just eighty five. This illustrates that Indian higher education system leaves much to be desired when placed globally.

#### **(iv) Internationalization of higher education institutions**

Internationalisation to put it succinctly is a dynamic process of change that envisages production of new knowledge through cooperation beyond borders. It unconditionally aims at contributing towards the human social, cultural and economic development. It envisions elevating the higher education system globally competitive. In short, as Yoka Tsuruta observes: since the mid 1990s, “Higher education institutions are expected to play a leading role in producing new knowledge, providing quality education and research, serving human well-being and enabling people to face both opportunities and challenges”(140). Some of the other aims that could be teamed up along with the recognised broader outline include the possibility of exploring chances for global collaboration, providing the state of the art education and expertise to link up the global standards, familiarising the international setting and catch on to the global mind-set. But how many Indian universities and affiliated colleges that have succeeded in acquiring international collaborations and partnerships are yet matters to be taken up around the table.

#### **(v) Maximization of student potential for expression**

It is an undeniable fact that Indian students are good in cognitive talents. But when it comes to linguistic abilities especially in presenting things in English, many Indian students shy away. Hence platforms for debates, discussions, speeches are to be regularly conducted in universities and colleges to enhance the students’ rhetorical capabilities. Also how many research journals do Indian universities and colleges have? How many teachers and students make publications?

### **Conclusion**

In order to tide away these concerns that are called into question, Indian higher education institutions should henceforth judiciously integrate teaching and research and students are to be enticed to publish their findings (creative or critical) in journals preferably in e-source since it forms the best mode of information sharing. International collaborations and partnerships are to be initiated that facilitate student and teacher mobility which consequently result in mutual empowerment. Age old curriculums are to be revised according to the global market needs and ever evolving career requisites. Student and faculty expressions are to appropriately reckoned with that make the world know the knowledge constructions conducted in India that will certainly endow global attention and recognition to the Indian higher education system.

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