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QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT REALITY SAYS

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ABSTRACT

Quality in higher education has become a grave concern at the present moment. The necessity of achieving quality is knocking at the door with the advent of Globalization. Quality is a big term. First of all we have to define quality. Then we have to proceed for achieving such quality. So we must have some clearly pre-defined objectives. Basically quality is measured by contribution of the learner after completion of learning. Now in order to measure a learner's contribution we may identify some specific fields where a learner uses to contribute. These fields may be job market, family life, locality, society or country. The main key of achieving quality in higher education is to pay attention to the contribution to be made by a learner. In this line of thinking the present day educationists in our country are keen on propagating some innovative steps, which they claim to be instrumental to ensure quality in higher education. These steps include: introduction of employment oriented courses, improvement of academic qualifications on the part of teachers, admission through counseling, conduct of regular class tests, development of inquisitive mind among learners, extraction of potentialities of the learners, development of thinking ability among the learners, organizing Guardians' meet, exposure to enriched resources through modernized equipments both on the part of teachers and students, career counseling and so on. Only sincere dedication and devotion to teaching can bring about success provided they are supported by the peripheral commitment to achieve quality education. Obviously the peripheral commitment must come from the top two tiers of the pyramid. Present day education policy lacks commitment and is full of ornamental suggestions. These suggestions are simply to divert attention from the core of the problem.

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INTRODUCTION

Quality in higher education has become a grave concern at the present moment. The necessity of achieving quality is knocking at the door with the advent of Globalization. Quality is a big term. First of all we have to define quality. Then we have to proceed for achieving such quality. So we must have some clearly pre-defined objectives. Basically quality is measured by contribution of the learner after completion of learning. Now in order to measure a learner's contribution we may identify some specific fields where a learner uses to contribute. These fields may be job market, family life, locality, society or country. The main key of achieving quality in higher education is to pay attention to the contribution to be made by a learner. In this line of thinking the present day educationists in our country are keen on propagating some innovative steps, which they claim to be instrumental to ensure quality in higher education. These steps include: introduction of employment oriented courses, improvement of academic

qualifications on the part of teachers, admission through counseling, conduct of regular class tests, development of inquisitive mind among learners, extraction of potentialities of the learners, development of thinking ability among the learners, organizing Guardians' meet, exposure to enriched resources through modernized equipments both on the part of teachers and students, career counseling and so on. If we analyze the entire education system we find a Pyramidal structure with three tiers. At the bottom there lies educational institutions and at the top there is Government. In between these two tiers there lies various bodies to take decisions on educational policy making. If we keep a sharp look at the functioning of these three tiers we note that Government determines a clear-cut objective of education. Keeping parity with that stated objective the second tier, that is, various bodies, formulates the courses of actions to be followed by the third tier. It is then obvious that the third tier has nothing to do with the formulation of courses of actions. The members of the third tier are blind followers of those stated courses of actions. They are simply the puppets in the hands of the members of the second tier. With the advent of Globalization the second tier has been made to be much concerned about the quality of higher education.

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Consequently they have advocated various measures to improve the quality of higher education. These measures include: introduction of mandatory participation of teachers in Orientation Programme & Refresher Courses, introduction of Performance Appraisal and Teacher's Accountability (PATA) test, mandatory evaluation of educational institutions by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), introduction of employment oriented courses, improvement of academic qualifications on the part of teachers, admission through counseling, conduct of regular class tests, development of inquisitive mind among learners, extraction of potentialities of the learners, development of thinking ability among the learners, organizing Guardians' meet, exposure to enriched resources through modernized equipments both on the part of teachers and students, career counseling and so on. Now the question is how far such measures are successful in achieving their desired goal. Let us take-up the cases one by one. First, nowhere counseling for admission is used in true sense of the term. What is actually done is to select students only on merit basis, nothing else. Theoretically admission through counseling has an obvious advantage of having proper manpower planning and it involves a lot of time. Unfortunately educational institutions are not having proper infrastructure to implement counseling in true sense of the term. They have become compelled to use counseling for name's sake. Therefore one can easily understand what will be the fate of the suggested measure of counseling.

Second, teaching-learning process is not at all commensurate with the development of inquisitive mind among learners, extraction of potentialities of the learners as well as development of thinking ability among the learners. At different points of time the third tier has been suggested to introduce innovative steps to extract the potentialities of the learners. Unfortunately both syllabus and examination pattern are not so motivated. In-depth study habit is not being developed due to faulty examination system. In the existing system of examination there is no room for giving weight age to regular class tests, project assignment, dissertation and so on. Moreover thought provoking exercises have got very little place in the process of evaluation of learners. One can easily note with broken heart that these are the essential ingredients for achieving quality in higher education. Continued academic progress and professional advancement on the part of teachers have been suggested with a view to provide quality education to the students. Obviously this type of suggestion is based on the presumption that professional advancement is sufficient to ensure quality in education. But the proponents of professional advancement have failed to keep in mind that these are necessary but not sufficient to ensure quality in education. Without giving proper weight age to formulation of needful syllabus, reform in evaluation pattern & measurement of effective contribution of teachers in teaching only mention of those glamorous words will bring about no fruitful outcome.

Most alarming is the fact that market is over flooded with books of question-answer type. These books are readily available to the students and therefore a considerable proportion of learners are not acquainted with the university recommended textbooks. In order to ensure quality in higher education there should be ban on those books, as those books are not meant for qualitative up gradation of the learners. Rather those are paralysing the ability of thinking of the students. These books are gaining popularity in the market, as the paper-setting pattern is not motivated to test the ability of understanding the subject matter on the part of the learners.

A considerable proportion of questions are set from a set of suggestive questions only to test the ability of memorization of the learners. Therefore majority of the students are interested in collecting suggestive notes or motivated to follow question-answer type books. Without the reform in examination system, especially in paper setting pattern and evaluation, development of inquisitive mind, development of in-depth study habit and to be more precise, achieving quality in education will remain a far cry. My evil spirit can not but be critical on the suggestion of introduction of employment oriented courses. This type of suggestion provides no long-term solution to the problem. In near future these courses will also be over crowded and there will occur high level of unemployment. Then there will arise fresh thirst for employment-oriented courses. Only long-term solution is to create job opportunities and therefore one can take a serious note of the fact that government as well as its counterpart, the decision making bodies, are deliberately attempting to hide the failures of the government in creating adequate job opportunities.

Assessment and Accreditation of institutions of higher education has been recognized as a quality ensuring mechanism. On the recommendations of the Programme of Action document that provided the guidelines for the implementation of the National Policy on Education (1986) the University Grants Commission established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994 with its head quarter at Bangalore. NAAC has formulated a three-stage process for assessment and accreditation. The first stage is preparation of Self-Study Report by the institution to be submitted to the NAAC. Second is the validation of the Self-Study Report by peers visiting the institution. The third stage is awarding grade by the NAAC on the basis of Self-Study Report submitted by the institution and observations drawn by the team of peers. NAAC has identified seven criteria to serve as the basis of its assessment procedure. These seven criteria include Curricular Aspects; Teaching-learning and Evaluation; Research, Consultancy and Extension; Infrastructure and Learning Resources; Student Support and Progression; Organization and Management; & Healthy Practices. The Curricular Aspect deals with how the institution plays its role in initiating and redesigning courses offered to translate its mission into practice. In other words this criterion seeks to observe how far the programmes of teaching and learning are consistent with the goals and objectives of the institution. No doubt as a basis of assessment of an institution this criterion finds its glamorous position. But in reality the task of translating mission of an institution into practice and the task of curricular designing are not vested on the same hand. Without assigning both the tasks to the institution itself assessing an institution on the basis of this criterion does not carry any meaningful sense at all.

Regarding the criterion of Infrastructure and Learning Resources it is noted that this criterion seeks to assess how far an institution has been able to procure and use optimally the available facilities to maintain the quality of the academic and other aspects of campus life. As a criterion of assessment Infrastructure and Learning Resources deserves particular mention. But at the same time there is every possibility on the part of the assessor to be overwhelmed by the presence of modernized equipments, which may be showpieces at the time of assessment. Here judicious use of Learning Resources is much more important to ensure quality in education. Without giving much weightage to the best utilization with the help of

creating proper background and capability, indiscriminate procurement of Learning Resources is simply wastage of funds. Coming to the case of the criterion of Student Support and Progression it is noted that this criterion seeks to evaluate the performance of the institution regarding the provision of necessary assistance and support to the students. Student support services are very much essential for the progress of the students. These support services also constitute parts of the overall infrastructure of the institution. When a considerable proportion of institutions of higher education suffer from lack of full-time teaching as well as non-teaching staff, shortage of classrooms and acute financial crisis provision of such support system is bound to be beyond their imagination. Such support system may be thought of after fulfilling the prime need of the students. First and foremost duty of an educational institution is to provide adequate teaching to the students. As a criterion of assessment of institution Student Support and Progression may take a position of priority. But without making necessary arrangement for adequate teaching, which is the prime need of the students, putting emphasis on development of student support system may be criticized on the ground of diverting attention from the actual problem of attainment of quality in education.

The criterion of Organization and Management seeks to evaluate the performance of an institution in formulating policies and practices in the matter of manpower requirement, recruitment, training, performance appraisal and financial management. As organization and management is the vital organ through which an institution runs successfully this criterion requires special attention. At the same time it is to be kept in mind that all educational institutions do not enjoy equal liberty to run their own management. Management of an institution formulates policies and practices in the matter of manpower requirement, recruitment, training, performance appraisal and financial management depending on the level of liberty the management of an institution is allowed to enjoy. For effective functioning of an institution activities of its management is required to be assessed and streamlined so that the proper objective of quality education can be ascertained. As management is bound to function within the limited sphere of liberty, its working in the matter of ascertaining quality is also bound to be limited. At the same time streamlining of management must be in conformity with the stated objective, not with the intention, of the Government. In an ideal situation there should not be any gap between intention and stated objective. It is highly unfortunate to note that our education system is suffering from the very existence of such gap. Persistence of such gap will surely lead to have continuous qualitative degradation in our education system.

So far as the criterion of Healthy Practices is concerned an institution is being rewarded for its innovative and unique practices that add to its academic ambience. The process of assessment has at least helped institutions thinking of some innovative and unique practices and materializing them. In that respect NAAC has been playing an important role in extracting the potentialities of the concerned institution. Coming to the process of accreditation by NAAC it is noted that one peer team is sent to the college or university after the concerned institution has got ready to be assessed.

The team visits the institution and within a very short span of time evaluates the performance of the institution. Depending upon the assessment the team also recommends measures to be adopted for betterment of the institution. In my opinion there is no justification of such informed visit. Peer team may visit the institution without any prior intimation so that the yearlong performances and practices of the institution can be assessed and appropriate measures can be suggested for ensuring quality in education. Moreover there arises a big question how far the assessment made by the peer team as per the present practice is authentic. Authenticity is questioned as the assessment, despite the availability of specific guidelines, may involve both intentional as well as unintentional biasedness. At this juncture I may be misunderstood if I do not clarify the terms 'intentional biasedness' and 'unintentional biasedness'. By the term 'intentional biasness' I want to mean the positive or negative influence on the assessment due to personal liking or disliking of the members of the team in respect of relative weightage of a particular criterion. 'Unintentional biasness' occurs due to the very human nature of being influenced by the factors outside the stipulated criteria of evaluation. In the process of evaluation none can rule out the possibility of the very existence of these two types of biasness. As a result authenticity of assessment made by the peer team is questioned.

Last but not the least is the role of teachers in ensuring quality in higher education. Only sincere dedication and devotion to teaching can bring about success provided they are supported by the peripheral commitment to achieve quality education. Obviously the peripheral commitment must come from the top two tiers of the pyramid. Present day education policy lacks commitment and is full of ornamental suggestions. These suggestions are simply to divert attention from the core of the problem. There are so many people who are of very positive attitude on those suggestions. But very humbly I beg to differ with them in most of the cases as my understanding of the problem follows an inwardly different stream. What to do? I can't change my observations and feelings. In order to ensure quality in education the measures, which are really able to bring quality, are to be suggested and implemented. Hollow advices and so to say big words are bound to bring higher education devoid of quality.

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