

Quality Assurance And Mass Higher Education – Learning From Experiences

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Abstract:

The old debate of Quality verses Equality remains valid even as the Quality Assurance in HE is coming of an age. The paper attempts to reflect on how these maturing QA mechanisms have succeeded in responding to quality concerns while accommodating the nuances of massification of higher education.

By taking NAAC, India as a case in point, the paper makes reflections on issues like:

- ❖ Whether Quality Assurance and Concerns for Equality & Participation still confront each other?
- ❖ Can affirmative action be an excuse to offer low quality Higher Education provision?
- ❖ If scarce national resources in developing countries are being invested in Higher Education, then is not it more relevant to demand quality as value for money?
- ❖ If the present models are inadequate, then are there any alternative models to take care of huge number and diversity?

The paper aims at contributing to the efforts of QAAS in addressing such concerns by collecting and collating experiences to draw the lessons for further fine-tuning the QA methodologies, policies and practices.

Keywords : Quality Assurance, Diversity , Massification, Equity, higher education

Introduction:

Even as the quality Assurance in HE is coming of an age, there exists a different world where higher education itself is struggling to come out of infancy. The old debate of quality verses equality remains valid with added dimension of quantity. Despite different issues and priorities, for the developed world and the developing ones, there is growing awareness about need of quality in higher education {HE} across the board, thanks to efforts Quality Assurance Agencies [QAAs]. The paper attempts to reflect on how these maturing QA mechanisms have succeeded in responding to quality concerns while accommodating the nuances of massification of higher education.

It focuses on quality concerns of policy makers where issues of access and equity are equally or more important to serve the societal and individual needs. It also examines Indian experience of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) which is in process of reviewing its model after experience of over a decade in experiments of quality assuring in huge and diverse HE system.

Need for massification:

The UNESCO's 1998 World Conference has adopted a *World Declaration on Higher Education*. It indicates that there exists a great discrepancy between the proportions of people who have access to higher education. 40-50% age participation rates are becoming the norm in developed countries, whereas in some developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, APRs remain below 5%. India, which boasts of having the third largest HE system in the world has enrolment ratio that hovers around 10%. (UNESCO, 1998)

This has resulted into demand for massification of higher education in many countries.

Quality, Equality and Quantity:

In this context of ground realities, the HE systems in developing countries are facing new challenge of cross-border offerings. Thus the challenges are manifold - addressing the issues of access and equity locally and competing with quality globally.

In the context of mass requirement of higher education, quality is not to be described in terms of excellence of a few but in terms of uniformly good performance across the sector. Quality education at affordable cost is also an equally critical issue.

Some reflections:

When we talk about maturing of Quality Assurance systems we need to reflect on following:

- ❖ Whether Quality Assurance and Concern of Equality & Participation still confront each other?
- ❖ Does Quality Assurance remain an elitist process or it is embracing inclusive approach?
- ❖ Can affirmative action be an excuse to offer low quality Higher Education provision?

- ❖ If scarce national resources in developing countries are being invested in Higher Education, then is not it more relevant to demand quality as value for money?
- ❖ How far is Peer review process feasible in HE systems like that of India's size?
- ❖ Are there any alternative models to take care of huge number and diversity?
- ❖ Will online Assessment and Accreditation be reality in a near future?
- ❖ Can voluntary accreditation work in Mass HE systems?
- ❖ Which pattern of outcome and usage of accreditation result is more appropriate and sustainable?

Experience of NAAC in India:

The large size with 356 Universities and 17,625 Colleges enrolling more than 10 million students and the huge diversity of HEIs in the federal setup of India gives a good example to draw lessons from. (*India Summary of HE report*). Established in the year 1994 the NAAC has made several experiments in its history of over decade. [Antony Stella , 2004] Accreditation of about 3085 Institutions including 131 Universities and 3074 Colleges has been completed till date.

From the initial phase of apprehension, the NAAC has gradually been able to build a greater appreciation for intrinsic benefits of accreditation. In its decade long existence NAAC has introduced and popularized concept of external peer review in HEIs in India It has Facilitated innovations and promotion of good practices across the HE sector. [NAAC 2011]

The Concerns:

The list of apprehensions and concerns of NAAC is also quite illustrative.

- **The unbeatable Numbers:** So far NAAC has accredited about 3000 HEIs out of total nearing 17,0000.
- **Voluntary Vs Mandatory:** The bottom line is that voluntary accreditation could not give desired results in Mass higher education set up. It has worked in states wherever made mandatory.
- **The Grading debate:** The debate over the desirability of grades as an assessment outcome is ongoing. Lack of usage of outcome has made NAAC to rethink about grading.
- **Program vs. Institution:** In reality, the NAAC couldn't venture into program accreditation due to lack of capacity in terms of manpower and infrastructure.
- **Foreign Operators — the policy vacuum:** The Indian government is yet to declare a policy position on the entry of foreign operators into the country.
- **Need for National QA Framework:** There is a felt need for a national quality assurance framework and nodal agency to coordinate and integrate the functions of the various players engaged in accreditation.
- **Frequent Reviews:** While constant examination and reflections are good to suit dynamic nature of QA in HE, it is also seen as negative sign to change the policy with changing policymakers.

The Indian growth & future of QA

HE system had slow growth till 80s and expanded rapidly afterwards. After 80s Universities grew from 110 to 356 and colleges from 7000 to 17000. Still the growth is just inadequate. National Knowledge Commission has recommended setting up target of 1500 universities if gross enrolment ratio of 15% is to be achieved by 2015. (Times of India,2007).QA system established in 1994 is quite mature but lacks adequate policy support. NAAC with experience of accrediting 3000+ HEIs has plans to cover all HEIS in five year plan. Two stage approach , use of ICT mode and select "outsourcing" of processes are the core elements of QA strategy.

South Africa's experience

South Africa's investment in education has tripled since the end of apartheid. At 6.6% of the country's GDP and 17.7% of total government spending, (Data by South African Embassy), the country's education spending rate is among the highest in the world. The state-funded National Student Financial Aid Scheme has been significantly expanded. While the scheme paid out R21-million to fund the higher education of disadvantaged students in 1991, this had risen to a total of R1.2-billion for 2005.

Yet it is fact that a skills shortage stands in the way of both the government's massive public infrastructure programmes and private investment. Professional skills in engineering, science, finance and management, as well as technical and artisan skills, are critically needed. The expansion is coincided by a very stringent quality assurance framework. Higher education Quality Committee of CHE has taken various steps to ensure the quality of HE provisions. Doors are open to foreign providers with quality checks & national safeguards.

The Chinese experiment of Massification

China launched massive expansion of higher education since 1999. In seven years enrolment has almost doubled. It is world's largest HE system as announced by NESCO at WCHE + 5. More than 50% enrolment is in technical /

vocational education. To address quality concerns National Higher Education Evaluation Centre [NHEEC} was established in 2004. (Hong Zhao, 2017)

The quality concerns after expansion included-

- problem of graduate employment,
- need for internal quality assurance mechanisms,
- need to increase role of non-government players in HE ,
- permission to open learning and
- opening the HE sector to foreign providers with regulatory checks.

Since the Chinese QA framework is relatively young as against its huge HE set up , it would be matter of great interest to see how it works.

Lessons from experience:

Experiences in India as well as other countries indicate need to device own strategies and models, which may consider:

- Adopting “ Inclusive” concept of Quality embracing Access and Equity.
- Autonomy and transparency of the QA process even though Government support is critical.
- Bringing all HEIs under the ambit of Quality Assurance and providing single point reference to international HE community is crucial to benefit from globalization process.
- National HE systems and QA mechanisms to be driven by long-term vision with clear policy objectives, with less political interference
- Internal Quality assurance systems as pre-condition for external QA.
- E-assessment systems to address the problem of assessment of large numbers.
- Concern for quality to be matched by adequate resources.
- Common understanding of terms, models, criteria and procedures for QA.
- The National QA frameworks to embrace all types of provision of HE such as private, distance, online and cross-border operations.
- Adequate Safeguards and Strategic opening to foreign providers to advance interests of stakeholders.
- Providers from developed world to appreciate that Costs are critical in developing economies.

To sum up:

The growing concern about the quality of education at all levels necessitates the policy makers to focus on quality enhancement of higher education, by promoting excellence at all levels in the education pyramid.

The Higher Education Quality Assurance policymakers have an uphill task ahead of them in coming up with convincing answers to such concerns and adopting enduring solutions, if Quality assurance has to consolidate as reliable and sustainable strategy for development of higher education in the knowledge society. It is expected that collecting and collating experiences from various QA agencies to draw the lessons for further fine-tuning the QA methodologies, policies and practices will be one of such strategies.

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