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Rethinking built-in quality in higher education: Strategies for success

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The modern concept of quality, which evolved from the original “fitness for purpose” or “exceptional nature with zero defects” to a “process of transformation providing value for money”, is now considered a desirable attribute of every human activity including higher education. However, unlike the industrial model of quality where precise control is expected of its product, in the role of Universities and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) as providers of knowledge generation or innovation, the concept of quality is applied to the education service and not only to the output of the process - it is graduate. Hence, the concept of quality in higher education has to be viewed for its multi-dimensional nature, which encompasses all its functions and activities including teaching/learning, research, and community service.

At present, Sri Lanka is in an unprecedented critical situation amounting to a crisis. Hence, I strongly believe that rethinking built-in quality in higher education would be an appropriate topic for us to consider, especially to strategize how we could succeed to contribute to recover/overcome the situation and move towards better times. The higher education system must produce graduates/citizens who would contribute to the economy and society to ensure that such crises do not come in the future.

Quality of higher education can be described as the degree to which the education meets the client’s needs and demands. In this respect, higher education has two different clients: students and society. Quality assurance in higher education includes all policies, procedures and practices through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed.

Let us now consider how we can meet the clients demand successfully. Has Sri Lanka’s higher education been able to achieve this?

Currently in the QA framework for State Universities in Sri Lanka, a five-pronged approach is taken. These are the external quality assurance (EQA) conducted by the QAC of the UGC, internal quality assurance (IQA) expected of all Universities, compliance with the Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF), use of subject benchmark statements (SBM) in curricula design and codes of practice (CoP) adhered to and respected by all aspects of governance and management.

Since our topic is built-in quality, I hope to limit this speech to the IQA, SLQF, and the SBMs and discuss how strategies could be developed in these for success.

Three important criteria included in both Institutional reviews and program reviews, which must be considered in this respect, are Curriculum Development, Teaching and Learning, and Assessments and Awards. In my mind, strategies for success to achieve built in quality lie to a high degree with these and naturally, staff development should follow. As such, the Center for Quality Assurance (CQA) in any State University must strive to ensure these processes are at an optimal level if in-built quality is to be achieved. The requirements of the SLQF and SBMs will be automatically satisfied if such optimal systems are operational.

Let us look at some issues of concern.

- Increasing graduation rates and levels of educational attainment will accomplish little if students do not learn something of lasting value contributing to societal development.
- University students today seem to be spending much less time on their course work than their predecessors did 50 years ago.
- Employers complain that many graduates they hire are deficient in basic skills such as writing, problem solving, and critical thinking.
- Most of the thousands of additional students needing to increase educational attainment levels will come to campus poorly prepared for university work.
- A majority of university teachers and instructors do not have adequate training in curriculum development, teaching/learning/assessment strategies to design curricula, which would produce graduates who could serve society effectively.
- Governments have made substantial cuts in support per student over the past 20 years for public universities.
- While some university leaders are making serious efforts to improve the quality of teaching, many others seem content with their existing programs.

So, how do we strategize for success and achieve built-in quality?

Some immediate improvements;

Many Universities/HEIs provide a formidable array of courses, majors and extracurricular opportunities, but first-hand accounts indicate that many undergraduates do not feel that the material conveyed in their readings and lectures/lessons has much relevance to their future employment opportunities or lives.

Now that most faculties have defined the learning objectives/outcomes of their faculties and its various departments and programs, it should be possible to review recent examinations to determine whether individual professors, programs, and departments are actually designing their courses to achieve those goals.

In addition, the average time students devote to studying varies widely among different HEIs, and many HEIs could require more of their students. Those lacking evidence about the study habits of their undergraduates could inform themselves through confidential surveys that faculties could review and consider steps to encourage greater student effort and improve learning.

The vast difference between, how well senior students think they can perform, and their actual proficiencies (according to tests of basic skills and employer evaluations) suggests that many HEIs are failing to give students an adequate account of their progress. Better feedback on student papers and exams will be even more important in order to give undergraduates a more accurate sense of how much progress they have made and what more they need to accomplish before they graduate.

More substantial reforms;

More fundamental changes will take longer to achieve but could eventually yield even greater gains in the quality of undergraduate education.

They include;

- Improving teacher training
- Universities/HEIs need to reconfigure staff development programs to better prepare aspiring professors for teaching
- Aspiring college instructors also need to know much more now in order to teach effectively

In closing, the CQA in State Universities have an important if not unparalleled role to play in achieving built in quality. It is appreciated that at present the management committee of the CQA serve in a voluntary capacity. If the CQA is to make a significant impact it is imperative that these members have very good knowledge on curriculum development, teaching/learning, and assessment and that they make regular input to the university's higher education strategies. As such, it would be to the advantage of the University to select individuals who have a passion for enhancement of the quality of higher education, provide them with adequate and effective training, permit them to propose and formulate strategies for success and appreciate their efforts by adopting them and crediting them when success is achieved.