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Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education

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Abstract - In today's fast changing and volatile world, quality education has become a universal goal where university education should aim at the formation of personalities and intellectual abilities of the graduates and their continuing education and must not be regarded solely as a means of providing them with diplomas and entry tickets to the job market. Striving for quality education has become critical for any nation that would not be content to be an underdeveloped dependent nation; for it is a demonstrated fact that economic growth is determined not so much by the growth of physical capital and labour as by the stock of knowledge and its rate of growth. To aspire to higher standards of educational quality is no longer a luxury, even for so-called third-world universities. Third-world universities may ignore quality education or neglect self evaluation procedures at the risk of stagnation or worse. Quality assurance is in most cases encouraged by continuous self-assessment and by seeking some form of internal or sometimes external validation or accreditation. Accreditation, in education, is the process by which an association or agency evaluates an educational institution or programme of study and formally recognizes it as having met and satisfied, or exceeded, certain predetermined requirements and criteria or standards of educational quality. Apart from ensuring quality in an educational institution, accreditation can also provide public confidence or trust and accountability. Through accreditation the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of the mobility of academic personnel are ensured. Accreditation also contributes to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, teachers and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice. An inherent danger, however, is often encountered in institutions seeking external assessment and accreditation. This danger lies in placing a premium on the production of documents, the writing of quality assurance plans and policy documents rather than the demonstrable implementation of effective means of assuring academic quality.

Keywords - Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Education

1. Aims of Higher Education

It is an undisputed fact that the world has witnessed during the last hundred years or so a tremendous expansion in the field of higher education, whereby higher education has been transformed from an elite organisation to a mass participation system. Increasingly, more and more people, including a fair number of older students, are seeking higher education, which is often associated with better careers and higher employment opportunities. For many people, university education is the only means for improving their life standards both socially and materially.

Within a few decades, the number of students jumped from 13 millions in 1960 to 72 millions in 1999 and further to around 132 millions in 2004, a tenfold increase in forty years. In China, the gross enrolment rate in higher education increased dramatically from 9.8% in 1998 to 21% in 2005. The numbers of universities and higher-education institutions have also increased as never before. In Latin America alone, the number of higher education institutions rose from a mere 164 in 1960 to over 7500 in 2002.

Now it is a fact that a promise of a "lifelong career" has always been the central selling point of higher education. It is important to take account of information from "worklife" in the planning of relevant academic curricula and in the design of instruction. As employers' expectations of graduates have increased over the years, information from "worklife" has become an important consideration in the improvement of university education. This attention to feedback from those who employ or educate graduates, and from graduates themselves, is an important new element of contemporary efforts to improve education in universities (Dill, 2000). Universities must work in partnership with industry to define key work-related skills and develop university programmes to deliver them.

Employability, however, is by no means the only factor for assessing the value of higher education. Some educators would argue that the concern with worklife represents a classical 'public-service attitude' which aims at preparing graduates for immediate employability rather than for leadership in the community (Moses, 1995). For many students, particularly older learners, going to university is a chance to

enrich their lives. Also, the value of higher education for the society at large must not be underestimated. A highly educated society is an ambitious society, an entrepreneurial society, a society of citizens who have the capacity to think and learn. University education should aim at the formation of personalities and intellectual abilities of the graduates and their continuing education and must not be regarded solely as a means of preparing them for the job market.

2. Quality in Education

In today's fast changing and volatile world, quality education has become a universal goal and striving for quality education has become critical for any nation that would not be content to be a dependent nation, "a nation that just takes what is learnt or produced elsewhere and adapts it, if it can, for its own use".

The economist Paul Romer demonstrated that economic growth is determined not so much by the growth of physical capital and labour as by the stock of knowledge and its rate of growth.

The nineties of last century can be described as a "decade of heightened interest in quality in higher education. There are more people involved in investigating, researching, auditing, applying, analysing, controlling, assessing and writing about the subject than ever before. This has inevitably led to greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of policies and practice of quality in the sector" (Roffee, 1996).

The notions of quality originated from the business practices. Many of the concepts are borrowed directly from business e.g. Continuous Improvement, Total Quality Management etc. But whereas the organisational processes in business are, by and large, amenable to measurement and control, and are predictable in behaviour, in education this is far from being the case. Much of the processes in education, particularly at the university level, take place deep within the intellects of the people involved, and are not in most cases easy to comprehend, let alone be amenable for measurement and/or control (Srikanthan, n.d.).

Deming's philosophy of quality management is based on the premise that an organisation's productivity and quality consistently rise with increasing empowerment of employees. But the reality of the work place also dictates that there has to be accountability, in order to economise the resource utilisation and also to give a direction to the organisation's response to market conditions (Srikanthan, n.d.).

Because of the perceived inefficiencies of universities, pressure is sometimes applied on the universities to institute strong managerial modes of operation. Unfortunately, this has the effect of treating the academic staff more like employees of a corporate enterprise, rather than independent thinkers of future vision (Lynn Meek, 1995).

Be that as it may, the goal of improving teaching and student learning should be pursued vigorously. It is no longer a luxury, even for so-called third world universities, to aspire to higher standards of educational quality. The means at the

disposal of such universities may not be much to speak of, and the difficulties they have to face may not be easy to overcome or few in number, but to ignore quality assurance altogether and to neglect self evaluation procedures may lead sooner or later to stagnation or worse. Even renowned old establishments need to be wary of trusting too much to their traditional ways and past glories.

Towards a generally-accepted definition of quality, a number of recognized higher education organizations have formulated quality standards and guidelines. In general, quality in education may be defined as specifying a mission and worthwhile learning objectives and enabling students to achieve them. Specifying worthwhile learning objectives involve articulating academic standards to meet (1) society's expectations and the demands of government, business and industry; (2) students' aspirations; and (3) the requirements of professional institutions.

Enabling the students to achieve these objectives would require good course design, an effective teaching/learning strategy, competent teachers and a suitable learning environment.

3. Quality Assurance in Education

Increasingly, quality assurance in education is becoming of paramount importance.

4. Accreditation

As maintained by many authorities on education, quality assurance is in most cases encouraged by continuous self-assessment and by seeking some form of internal or sometimes external validation or accreditation.

The words accreditation and validation are often used interchangeably, but for some associations and agencies there are significant differences between the two terms. Whereas the emphasis in validation is on output criteria such as student portfolios, examination scripts, course work etc, the emphasis in accreditation is on input criteria such as the nature of the curriculum, the quality and quantity of teaching staff and teaching, information and technical resources.

To accredit is officially to recognise a person or organisation as having met a standard or criterion. Accreditation implies demonstrated progress toward quality improvement beyond the minimum standards specified by the accrediting body.

Accreditation, in education, is the process by which an association or agency evaluates an educational institution or programme of study and formally recognizes it as having met and satisfied, or exceeded, certain predetermined requirements and criteria or standards of educational quality. These agencies establish basic standards designed to reflect the qualities of a sound educational programme. The agencies then develop procedures to determine whether educational programmes and institutions meet these standards. In addition

to establishing criteria, accrediting associations have responsibility for visiting and evaluating institutions, and awarding accreditation to those programmes and institutions that meet their criteria.

Accreditation, properly understood and practiced, has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or programme, and to assist in the improvement of the institution or programme.

There are two basic types of educational accreditation: (1) institutional and (2) specialized.

Institutional accreditation indicates and verifies that the entire institution has met certain accreditation standards of educational quality. It assesses both institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes and it suggests that each of an institution's parts, such as its academic departments or degree programmes, contributes to the achievement of the institution's general educational objectives. Besides the educational offerings of the institution, other characteristics are also reviewed and assessed such as governance and administration, recruiting practices, financial condition, institutional resources, admissions procedures and student personnel processes, and relationships with outside communities.

The main purpose of institutional accreditation is to ensure quality in an educational institution through the use of standards and rigorous evaluation criteria. External assessment can also act as an incentive to direct the wavering universities into some action for seeking quality assurance.

Through accreditation the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of the mobility of academic personnel are ensured.

To students who want to study in other parts of the world, accreditation provides assistance in the transfer of credits between institutions, or in the admission of students to advanced degrees through the general acceptance of credits among accredited institutions when the performance of the student has been satisfactory and the credits to be transferred are appropriate to the receiving institution. Student exchanges, summer schools and joint project work are also increasingly common. A network of schools across the world with mutually agreed standards provide students with opportunities for international exchange and dialogue between schools.

For students who want to work in other parts of the world, an accredited qualification is necessary for their professional practice, and can help in interview and selection procedures. It may also lead to a wide range of opportunities across the globe.

Finally, accreditation is a system or process for providing public confidence or public trust and accountability. It can help to market the success of the institution within the local, national and international context and assist institutions recruit students and staff. Accreditation could in theory lead to a system of classification of educational establishments whereby top institutions are marked off from other less favoured institutions in a manner similar to the way hotels and restaurants are marked with variable numbers of stars. One

could even speak of a five-star university or a two-star college.

Accreditation is also a tool for improvement used by educational institutions. While the certification of accreditation indicates an acceptable level of institutional quality, any institution, however excellent, is capable of improvement, which must come from its own clear identification and understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Institutional improvement is encouraged by an institutional accrediting body through the requirement that the accredited institution conducts periodic self-evaluations. Institutional improvement is also encouraged by the institutional accrediting body through the advice and counsel provided by the visiting team, which comprises experienced educators drawn primarily from accredited institutions, and by the publications of the accrediting body. The assessment results are often used to promote institutional improvement and to stimulate institutions toward higher levels of quality and efficiency.

Specialized accreditation, also called professional, programmatic, or programme, accreditation usually refers to the assessment of specific programmes, departments, or schools that make up an institution. An accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university, or as small as a curriculum within a specific academic discipline. Specialized accreditation focuses on a narrower set of standards particular to the field of study under consideration. It is often associated with professional associations, such as those for engineering, medicine, and law, or with specific disciplines, such as business, teacher education, psychology, or social work.

Because of the limitation of focus to a single programme, many specialized accrediting bodies require that the institution offering the programme be institutionally accredited before consideration can be given to programme accreditation.

Accreditation serves the professions by providing a means for the participation of practitioners in setting the requirements for preparation to enter the professions; it also contributes to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, teachers and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice.

Institutional and specialized accreditations are complementary. The focus of an institutional accrediting body on an institution as a total operating unit provides assurance that the general characteristics of the institution have been examined and found to be satisfactory. The focus of a specialized accrediting body on a specific programme provides assurance that the details of that particular programme meet the external accreditation standards. Institutional accreditation, concerned with evaluating the institution as a whole, does not seek to deal with any particular programme in great detail although programmes are reviewed as a part of the consideration of the entire institution. Specialized accreditation, speaking to a specific programme,

does not seek to deal significantly with the general conditions of the institution, although certain general conditions are considered in the context in which the accredited programme is offered.

Despite the advantages and benefits that can accrue from seeking external assessment and accreditation, this process has its critics. Overall, the critics conclude that a single-minded checklist-approach to safeguarding quality is misguided and pernicious. To Rickett (Rickett, 1992) the disadvantages of a costly bureaucracy and the danger to academic freedom inherent in external assessment outweighed any advantages that might accrue from external validation. Alderman considered that it no longer mattered 'how well an academic teaches', and that the 'paraphernalia of futile bureaucratization required for assessors' has become more important (Alderman, 1996). Certain external assessment processes also appear to place a premium on the "production of documents," the writing of quality assurance plans and policy documents rather than the demonstrable implementation of effective means of assuring academic quality. This may encourage a "culture of compliance," in which departments produce documents that will meet a framework specified by the external assessors or the accreditation agency, but engage in little genuine improvement or commitment to student learning. Certainly the students in several departments where quality assurance reports had been produced claimed that they saw little evidence of these plans "in action." (Dill, 2000).

Other critics maintain that it is vital for the quality evaluation systems to be run, not by an external agency, but by the institutions themselves, and that the universities must take the initiative by starting their own evaluation process. The Dutch have a sophisticated assessment system where the reward for the individual institution is more autonomy for organising its own assessment (Van Der Weiden, 1995). The individual universities would appoint their own evaluation teams, comprising external members, both national and international, who look at both research and teaching. The outcomes of the assessment are invariably critical, and usually tend to lead to a substantial review of activities.

The strategy for quality assurance at some universities emphasizes that academic quality is not solely the responsibility of the institution as a whole. Each department or programme and each faculty, as well as the collective university faculties need to take responsibility for improving teaching and academic quality. It is an essential responsibility of each academic department or programme to design a quality assurance process that is appropriate to its own needs and requirements. This department or academic programme focus is characteristic of the most successful efforts at quality improvement in many countries such as the UK, Finland and Hong Kong. External quality assurance efforts that have instead focused on quality assurance process at the level of the institution as a whole (e.g., in Sweden) have proved less successful in generating improvements in teaching and student learning.

Finally, accreditation, as defined above, presupposes the existence of accrediting bodies or agencies who have the right and capability to determine the requirements and criteria of educational quality, and who have the right to grant accreditation status to educational institutions or withhold it. But how do these accrediting agencies arise and who gives them the right to grant or withhold accreditation? Further, on what do they base their predetermined criteria or standards of educational quality?

There is currently much debate on the formation and affiliation of accrediting agencies. While many favour non-governmental or international organizations that are independent of the universities and the governments, others are of the view that it is the responsibility of the government to strengthen its own quality assurance framework.

Standards and criteria of educational quality are by no means predetermined or self evident. In theory such standards and criteria may be based on pedagogical principles regarding efficient methods of teaching and education, but there are also many other principles on which such standards and criteria may be based, including the satisfaction of the customers, who are in this case the students. But we all know that students value of their teachers those who teach them less and demand less of them. Students' satisfaction can hardly be the proper basis on which to establish quality education.

Accreditation is sometimes defined with reference to standards set by the institution itself that is seeking the accreditation. Accreditation would then mean no more than that the institution in question has met the standards it had set itself. Obviously this defeats the whole purpose of the exercise, since the institution may set such standards as are easily, or even already, satisfied.

5. Conclusion

Quality assurance and educational quality are no longer luxuries in today's world where quality education has become a universal goal and can only be neglected or ignored by higher education institutions at the risk of stagnation or worse. Quality assurance is in most cases encouraged by continuous self-assessment and by seeking some form of internal or sometimes external validation or accreditation. Accreditation can also provide public confidence or trust and accountability. Through accreditation the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of the mobility of academic personnel are ensured. Accreditation also contributes to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, teachers and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice.

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