

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

by Dr Mawdudur Rahman

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QUALITY in higher education is a provoking issue in the academic world everywhere. The level of concern for quality differs in different societies. In most societies, however, the question is to prepare adequately the coming generation for a challenging and continuously changing future. It is not enough to be able to maintain and manage the present; the educated men and women must be ready to lead the future. Nevertheless, the challenge in all societies is to satisfy the incessant need for continuous improvement in quality.

The stakeholders of higher education, such as, parents, academic administrators, students, politicians, teachers, and employers are concerned for the quality in higher education in Bangladesh. They have different and at times wrong reasons behind their anxieties. Sadly enough, few people have any clear idea of what they want and far less how to achieve that. This note does not aim to identify reasons or offer solutions to the problem. The intention here is to expose some of the issues concerning the quality in higher education, which may be helpful to many of the stakeholders.

One year ago, to be exact on January 9, 1997, Dhaka University sponsored a day-long seminar for quality in higher education with the initiative of the current vice-chancellor. About 25 vice-chancellors, presidents, senior academic administrators, and deans from the private and public universities and representative from the University Grant Commission attended the seminar (at one time there were more than 40 floating participants). This writer was the seminar presenter. The seminar covered the issues and processes necessary for quality in higher education.

The seminar started with a short attitude survey. This is an analysis of the survey responses. Out of 25 participants 24 completed the survey questionnaire. The table summarises the responses.

There is no right or wrong answer. The questions were asked to survey the direction of the participants' perceptions. The discussions are presented by the areas of interest to the author and not by each question individually in order of their appearance in the questionnaire.

Positive Education Environment

The table shows that all participants agree that positive educational environment is necessary for quality education (Question 1). In other words, the stakeholders blame the deterioration in the quality of higher education on the unfavourable environment.

What Makes an Environment Unfavourable?

One simple answer given frequently is 'strikes' and the resulting closure of educational institutions, which disrupts the smooth flow of academic sessions. Think about the countries where occasionally, it becomes extremely cold or heavy snow falls without prior notice for a long time. Do people stop working and let the treacherous nature beat them? They plough the snow, go to school, and make up for the lost time.

Strikes in Bangladesh are like unpredictable and whimsical natural disasters. Time has come to beat the fall-out of treacherous strikes and do the job by redesigning the system so that the future of higher education is saved from the hands of unscrupulous people (whoever they are, definitely

they are not friends of education). Innovation in education delivery model is necessary to overcome the external threat and create an internally harmonious education system. All systems survive by adapting to the environment. Environment is a system of systems. Systems, though contribute to their immediate environment, have very little power to change the environment. Systems adapt to the environment. The antiquated educational system is responsible for lamentably poor quality of education in Bangladesh and is partly responsible for creating the discord in the environment.

Therefore, without blaming frequent strikes one should think about a delivery system that will not be hindered by frequent strikes. Answers should be sought in innovation in educational system through the use of technology, changing delivery modes, restructuring the faculty processes drastically, useful configuration of instructional resources, defining and redesigning the curriculum processes, and introducing effective student processes.

Responsibility of Teachers

Again, a large majority (87 per cent) of the respondents thinks that teachers are accountable for educational quality.

Questions	Yes	%	No	%
1 Positive Educational Environment is required	24	100	0	0
2 Teachers are not primarily responsible for quality in education	3	12.5	21	87.5
3 Students succeed only because they study hard	8	33.33	16	66.67
4 Mission does not guide the vision	5	20.83	8	79.17
5 Academic politics is conducive to quality	5	20.83	19	79.17
6 Copying foreign curricula is necessary for good quality education	4	16.67	20	83.33
7 Top administrators have answers to all questions	4	16.67	20	83.33
8 I alone cannot contribute to quality	14	58.33	10	41.67
9 If rewards are not available evaluation and feedback of faculty performance are a waste	17	70.83	7	29.17
10 Traffic jam in Dhaka city can be solved	22	91.67	2	8.33

Question 2). It should be noted that these respondents were erstwhile teachers or are teachers now. This is a fair statement that teachers are the backbone of quality in education. They not only deliver the programs they also participate in managing the institutions. Why then there are no serious attempts by the teachers in this direction? I will suggest that the answer is in inadequate and antiquated faculty processes like recruitment, development, remuneration, review, promotion, tenure (permanent status), and termination. Effective administration of these processes is essential for successful recruitment, retention, and promotion (increase) of qualified and responsible faculty members.

In the public universities faculty recruitment processes are so much maligned by the political interests that the educational goals no longer is the priority or at all a consideration. The qualified people have to wait for years for recruitment or promotion for the right political group to take the charge of the top administration. In private universities the need for cost saving or managing within available resources seriously hurt the quality. Many of them package ambitious programmes for recruiting and graduating students and not for recruiting qualified faculty. Faculty recruitment and development

suffer in the hands of people who have either political or financial motives and not the enhancement of academic quality.

Copying Foreign Educational Systems

Bangladesh education system should not continue to copy the antiquated British system or model itself based on the US or other foreign systems. Question 6 asks the participants about copying foreign curricula. Copying foreign curricula is not a desirable option in the opinion of 87 per cent of the respondents. But if one looks at the reality, the unrelenting copying of foreign curricula is going on everywhere. Indiscriminate copying of US systems will not be appropriate for Bangladesh environment nor the continuous intrusion of British systems. The leaders in education in private and public sectors should seriously consider this issue. The new private universities may not be delivering what they are promising. They may be selling what is called the old wine in a new bottle. The parents and the students should carefully evaluate the value of a degree from any institutions. Questions 6, 8, and 9 also address the systems issues.

Students

Do the students study diligently enough (Question 3)? No, they don't was the majority answer. Who knows why the don't? Did anybody try to know the reasons behind this? Of course not. Again, the answer is not in the environment but in the student processes that are used to admit, retain, teach, graduate, and motivate students for life long learning. Many forward thinking academic institutions that care to deliver value-added education, treat their students as customers. "Customer satisfaction" and "customer intimacy" is the two key phrases frequently heard in such academic atmosphere.

Their needs are carefully monitored; they receive instructive advising, tutoring, and study group helps to meet the demands from the programs and the teachers. Students need more than a few class visits by professors to learn from a course. Four walls, some chairs and desks, and a talking body do not make a learning classroom for students to study diligently. Their needs are carefully monitored; they receive instructive advising, tutoring, and study group helps to meet the demands from the programs and the teachers. Students need more than a few class visits by professors to learn from a course. Four walls, some chairs and desks, and a talking body do not make a learning classroom for students to study diligently.

Probably like everywhere, universities suffer from acute delegation upward and centralization in decision making. People must be able to take decisions and must take responsibility. If the vice-chancellor remains very busy signing files after files and is obliged to engage in political negotiations, where will he/she have time to think and lead.

Personal Responsibility and Compensation

The answer to "I alone cannot contribute to quality" is almost equally divided (Question 8). What else would have been the answer? If each person do his or her job right without looking for others to do theirs, that will contribute to quality. Doing the preparation for the class, learning to teach, the right thing, being aware of the student's needs (customer intimacy) all will contribute to quality. Question for quality is an endless pursuit. In a quality oriented institution individuals accept full responsibility to accomplish the institutional objectives with the framework of personal mastery and shared vision. Personal mastery is one's personal vision within the current reality and the ability to reduce the gap between the two. Shared vision is what organizational participants want to do and create together.

Academic Politics

Of the total respondent administrators, 79.2 per cent think that academic politics is not conducive to quality education (Question 5). No academic system is pure from politics. Healthy academic politics helps raise the quality. When faculty recruitment and promotion are used as tools for political support this must contribute to the deterioration of quality. Academic politics is self-destructive when the institution is driven by political ambitions of the academic administrators and not by the academic mission of the institutions. Selection or election of top administrators should be based on the relevant quality of the person needed for the position. This is true for both private and public universities. People who do not have any academic administrative background head many of the newly-established private universities. The entrepreneurs of private universities in most cases are not academic administrators. For the sake of quality they need qualified top academic administrators and keep the control of the organizations for themselves.

Who is the Boss

Top administrators believe that they don't have the answer to all questions (Question 7). Yet everybody goes to them for any simple decision. Nobody wants to take responsibility or nobody wants to give up authority. Probably like everywhere, universities suffer from acute delegation upward and centralization in decision making. People must be able to take decisions and must take responsibility. If the vice-chancellor remains very busy signing files after files and is obliged to engage in political negotiations, where will he/she have time to think and lead.

other 22 per cent do not think so. It shows that majority of the people have positive outlook about many serious problems. It also has given some measure of validity to the responses. The suggestion is that no problem is unsolvable. There will always be some unbelievers. The traffic jam can be solved through system redesign, within the same environment. Then, why not the quality problem in education. It is not different from any other problem.

Vision and Mission

I did not discuss the question on vision and mission. The purpose of the question was to assess the awareness among people about vision and mission. The number of responses shows that knowledge of vision and mission is not widespread. How does each private or public institution differ from the other? They are different because they differ in their missions and visions. What are the mission and vision of a public university or any private university?

Conclusion

The conclusion is obvious. Educational administrators and faculty members are aware of and concerned about the quality problem in higher education. There is genuine interest in doing something about it. The problem is that hardly anybody knows what that something is and how to implement any change.

- Quality assurance in higher education needs three things:
1. Strong and dynamic leadership
 2. Long-term perspective, and
 3. Commitment to quality
- I suggest that each institution should address the issue through innovative systems and appropriate long-term strategies. Some bold and drastic measures are necessary to assure the quality of higher education. If quality cannot be assured real and virtual migrations of students to foreign universities will only accelerate.

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