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Mechanism for quality improvement

Our first task should be to set simpler goals of competencies for the students. We should leave a lot to the students to discover and learn, rather than attempt to teach everything, thereby taking away the responsibility for learning from the students.

QUALITY IN education is generally associated with rigour, hard work, excellence and such other notions valued by society. These associations create spurious cause effect notions or myths on quality that constitute the attitude our policy makers and educationists hold. The biggest stumbling block in our movement towards a better quality higher education is the attitude of educationists and policy makers of education or in other words the myths that constitute this attitude. Here I attempt to highlight some of these myths that cover the spectrum of education from entry point to exit.

(i) The myth that pursuit of excellence will lead to achievement of high quality.

In India, when you believe in this myth, you tend to emulate IITs and IIMs. This is done with the hope that either your institution will attain the level of quality of IITs or IIMs or will attain a level better than its current level of quality. This does not happen for many reasons. Firstly, the quality of entrants to higher education is not homogenous. The best go and join IITs and IIMs and the universities have to be content with the mid 90 per cent of the normal distribution. Hence, if you want to attain quality levels comparable to those of IITs or IIMs, you require a pedagogy different from that of IITs or IIMs and appropriate for entrants of a lower quality. Since, for obvious reasons, universities usually attract lower quality teachers, one cannot expect such pedagogical innovations to emerge in universities. You also require higher levels of resources since efforts required will be more than that of IITs or IIMs. For example, one may have to conduct a three year post-graduate degree course than a two-year course to attain IIT/IIM level of quality. Paradoxically, universities or lower quality institutions attract lower levels of resources than higher quality institutions.

Secondly, one assumes employment opportunities for unlimited supply of highest quality personnel. Unfortunately, firms or the employers are also hierarchically ordered from excellent to poor performers. Since there is very little room at the top, many will have to work for lower levels of pay in low performance firms. Hence, there is very little societal incentive for sustaining excellence. These

arguments clearly indicate the inconsistency between the rhetoric of excellence on the one hand and, the economic and social reality on the other hand. Though the above arguments indicate the futility of every institution striving to achieve excellence, one may wonder whether there is any harm in pursuing it. What this pursuit has done to society is to dichotomise its institutions into excellent and non-excellent ones. You can have only excellent IITs and bad engineering colleges. There is nothing in between. Hence, you try to replicate IITs with teachers and students of a lower calibre leading to perpetual mourning on something you never achieve.

To get out of this rut, you have to celebrate mediocrity, consciously and deliberately. You have to set simpler and achievable goals for universities and similar institutions and strive to achieve those simpler goals. You have to identify employer segments that do not need the type of output from IITs and IIMs, identify their special needs and try to meet them. There has to be a drastic shift from role modelling IITs and IIMs to focussing on your specific customer segment, the specific group of employers you are targeting. That will help in achieving appropriate quality and more importantly it will put a stop to the rhetoric on pseudo-quality in the name of excellence.

(ii) The myth that everything has to be taught

Many educationists feel unhappy if the syllabus does not get updated to include contemporary developments in the field. The assumption is that the product, the graduate, will not be able to tackle affairs in his/her work-life unless all eventualities of her/his work-life are taken into account in training the person. This further assumes a mutually exclusive learning-work dischotomy in which all learning has to happen before employment thereby discounting notions of `learning while working' and `work as learning'.

As educationists, our job is to identify the core learning required for work in any particular field. For a programmer's job, the fundamental logic of programming is more important than learning `n' number of languages. The purpose should be to minimise the time the programmer would take to learn a new language than try to eliminate it totally. First of all, in a fast changing world, one cannot even anticipate what is required to be learned for one's work-life. Hence, one can only give a false feeling to the student and the employer that what is required has been taught. Further, one may not get an opportunity to use whatever one has learned. This leads to the student spending his valuable years in educational institutions learning things that are unnecessary. These years are otherwise productive years lost to the larger society. Also by trying to teach everything, we take away the student's ability to discover and learn on his/her own. In short, education can be much simpler and productive if we confine to two objectives. Firstly, help students acquire the fundamental frameworks of the particular discipline. Secondly, create desire as well as the ability to learn. In this scenario, education becomes successful if the student picks up the book more so after the examinations than before.

(iii) The myth that examinations should be rigorous

Educationists assume that quality can be enhanced by tougher examinations. By tougher examinations, they usually mean three things. Firstly, students have to be prepared with large number of topics. Secondly, question paper setting and answer paper evaluation should be done by persons unknown to the students. Thirdly, students have to necessarily prepare for examinations. If education is meant to enhance competence of students to deal with work situations in their career, then the above requirements are unrelated to this objective.

In one's work-life, one does not have to depend on one's memory for information, as there are more efficient information storage and retrieval mechanisms. Hence, the competencies, that are to be evaluated in educational institutions, are the frameworks of a discipline that have a lasting value for the learner or required to be part of one's reflex actions and the competence to learn on one's own. These competencies are better tested using open book type of examinations in which information resources are freely available with the student. Hence, what information is used, in what manner and for what purpose are the skills that are tested. While these types of examinations look less rigorous, they test the appropriate competencies required for a successful career. They tax the thinking capability rather than the memory of the student thereby making such examinations more interesting and less of a burden.

(iv)The myth that enhancing passing requirements will enhance quality

For many educationists, this is the easiest way to enhance outgoing quality of students. The assumption is that if we increase the percentage of marks required for passing, fewer students would pass and hence those who pass are those who perform better. An empirical study using a small sample conducted by the author indicates that the proportion of students who pass remain more or less constant and is independent of the percentage marks required for passing. In other words, the psychology of the evaluator is always to enhance or lower the expected performance of the students for them to get a pass, in relation to the percentage marks required for pass. Thus, if we increase the percentage marks required for passing, the evaluator lowers his/her expectations and awards marks liberally so that the proportion of students, who fail, more or less remains constant. This is due to the evaluator considering failure in examination as a costly affair for the student and hence failing students only if absolutely necessary. This psychology of the evaluator leads to inflation or deflation in marks, making absolute figures of marks meaningless.

The ideal way to get out of this is to do away with pass-fail system and award degrees just indicating the marks or grades obtained. Those who are awarded degrees with low marks or grades will find their degrees as not much of a value in society and, given further opportunity, will return to educational institutions for improvement of performance and grades. It would thus become an in-built mechanism for quality improvement. To conclude, if we shed these popular myths, we have the opportunity to re-engineer higher education using simpler means to enhance quality of the large majority of graduates who come out of our institutions. If we leave aside the cream of our students to mend themselves or

leave them to institutions of excellence such as IITs and IIMs, we are left with the large majority who attend the next lower grade institutions or the mediocre institutions. Our first task should be to set simpler goals of competencies for the students of these institutions. Given these simpler goals, we should leave a lot to the students to discover and learn, rather than attempt to teach everything, thereby taking away the responsibility for learning from the students. If we also limit our examinations to test only the core competencies, we will be able to have simpler, less taxing but more valid examinations.

Lastly, let us just tell the students what they are worth rather than tell them whether they are worthy enough for admission to the club of graduates. Let the market determine their worth and if they are not worthy enough they will come back to you for quality enhancement.

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