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Students' Perception on Quality of Indian Higher Education System*

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Abstract

Purpose - This study aims to explore students' perceptions of different quality aspects in Indian higher education, viz. tangible facilities, competence, attitudes, content, delivery, and reliability.

Research design, data, and methodology - Following a comprehensive literature review, the researchers used a well-structured questionnaire and in-depth personal interviews with 500 students. The selected sample was chosen from graduate and postgraduate programs in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, using convenience sampling; data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and frequency distribution. Hypotheses were based on the literature and empirical studies.

Result - 50.28 and 49.88 percent of students were positive towards tangible facilities and competence, respectively. Further, 48.92 percent and 48.97 percent were negative towards faculty attitudes and course content, respectively. Finally, 48.72 percent reacted positively on the overall quality, while 51.28 were discontented.

Conclusion - This study provides reliable and conclusive information to all stakeholders, facilitating systemic improvements. It reveals students' perceptions of different quality aspects of the

higher education system, and is the first study of its kind in this part of the world.

Keywords: Students' Perception, Quality, Quality Facets, Higher Education, India.

JEL Classification: I21, I23, I28, I29.

1. Introduction

The success or failure of any country in every part of the globe absolutely depends on their human resource. The development of quality human resource and their systematic up-gradation is the prime responsibility of higher education systems of respective nations. The higher education system is a multi-faceted structure which facilitates teaching, research, understanding, extension and international cooperation. Right from independence, India is the third largest higher education system in the world has gone through series of leaps and bounds. The higher education system in India has given enough impetus to the inspiring growth of the economy from the last two decades which crosses seamlessly with an aggregate of nine percent. From the early 50s, University Grants Commission (UGC) has been bringing gallant efforts to improve the situation in higher education system of the nation. This process has led to the introduction of "National Policy on Education" in 1986 and Program of Action in 1992. The 1986 policy and Action Plan of 1992 was based on two landmark reports viz., the "University Education Commission" of 1948-49 (popularly known as Radhakrishnan Commission), and the "Education Commission" of 1964-66, (popularly known as Kothari Commission Report). The revelation of both Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commissions highlighted in the National Policy on Higher Education by clearly setting five goals viz., greater access, equal access, quality, excellence, relevance and promotion of social values. Eleventh five year plan has focused on the development of "Inclusive Education System" (equitable distribution of education) of higher education. Globalization of higher education needs to be treated as an opportunity to Indian higher education system to stretch and further strengthen to congregate aspirations and demands of young generations of country.

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Subsequently, Central Government and HRD Ministry of India planned and successfully introduced "Higher Education Reform Bill-2010 (NCHER Bill, 2010) with a mission to revamp the higher education system of the nation. There is every need to enhance number of institutions and also the quality of education to achieve sustained pace in economy and core mission of higher education system.

The Ministry of Education in India establishes number of unique agencies to closely monitor the quality of educational process both in general and technical education. In the year 1994, the University Grants Commission (UGC) established National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for awarding accreditation to universities and colleges in general education based on their quality delivery of education. The technical education in India completely and closely monitors by All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) which is also establishes National Board for Accreditation (NBA) for the same purpose. Different bodies are established for accreditation of different higher education systems in India like NBA set-up by AICTE. Along with the above, concerned state universities which has given affiliation establishes fact finding committees to monitor the quality of academic infrastructure, teaching staff and other facilities provided by the educational institutions. In view of the fact that, quality delivery is a holistic and constant process in the minds of NAAC, leads to conduct many pre and after-math accreditation related training programs, workshops, conferences to all the general and technical higher education institutions in the country. The NAAC pressurizes all the educational institutions to establish Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in their institutions for continuous monitoring of areas which reflects the quality deliverance of educational service. The IQAC established institutions has already brought spectacular changes with respect to quality maintenance which has an immense fillip to educational institutions in the country. Whatever the steps has taken by the central and different state governments with the support of different accreditation bodies, there is no absolute expected level of change in the higher education system in India. Both the private and government owned institutions experiences myriad problems in delivering the excellence which engraves the dexterities of the future generations. With this class of milieu, the researchers attempted to congregate the latest perceptual displays of the receiving ends opinion on diverse aspects of quality deliver ables of the system.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Quality Perspectives in Education

Quality is much-debated term in these days. As suggested by Pfeffer and Coote (1991), quality as a 'slippery concept which has a diverse essence and implications. Defining quality in education sector is a complicated task because the quality of serv-

ice delivery not only depends on the service provider but also expected high and required degree of concentration from the service receiver. Adams (1993) postulated efficiency, effectiveness, equity are the frequently used inter-changeable words for quality. The stakeholders' community has diverse views and meanings on quality in different contextualized thoughts including quality aspects of education (Motala, 2000). Educational institutes has to treat the quality is not just only as a concept; it should be the institute's philosophy which is going to acquire with a committed application and determined effort in implementation of different quality aspects of education service viz., tangibles, competence, attitudes, content, delivery, reliability etc. The word quality is not at all related to the product or service it also associated with people, processes and organizational environment. The superiority of any educational institution for example, is judged not only by the excellent faculty, staff and course offerings but also by the efficacy and truthfulness of processing paper work. The quality in educational institution mostly depends on the contributions from faculty, students, administrators and companies which recruit students as a part and parcel of education system (Stoner et.al. 2008). In other words, quality is hundred percent purity of knowledge acquired by faculty and standards set up by the higher education institution to transform the present state of knowledge of the students'community to face upcoming challenges effectively and efficiently.

2.2. Higher Education

Most of the countries in different parts of the world are seriously debating whether their higher education system would apoposite to the present day's societal requirements. In developing countries where resources are scarce, improving quality in higher education is an uphill task to the governments. Even though it is practically difficult to maintain, it is an imperative situation to infuse quality consciousness as a major concern in the minds of all the relevant stakeholders of the education sector. And the expected level of quality should be achieved by considering the compatibility, costs, fairness and international standards of the system. Based on the level, colleges and universities come under this category which involves teaching-learning process with students' to award higher qualifications. This education infuses profound knowledge and intuition to students towards novel dimensions of knowledge in diverse subject spheres. It is about knowing more and more about less and less (Mishra, 2006). With a mission in mind, the higher education is to enrich knowledge instruct, undertake, explore and offer service to the community. In a rapidly changing global scenario, the enunciation is on change and much more than that adopting to change through enabling operational structure. Barnett (1992) gave emphasis to four principal concepts of higher education which advocates a crystal clear cohesiveness on the concept:

1) Higher education as the production of qualified human resources. In this context, higher education is seen as a process in which the students are counted as "products"absorbed in

the labor market. Thus, higher education becomes an input to the growth and development of business and industry.

ii) Higher education as training for a research career. In this view, higher education is preparation for qualified scientists and researchers who would continuously develop the frontiers of knowledge. Quality within this viewpoint is more about research publications and transmission of the academic rigor to do quality research.

iii) Higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision. Many strongly believe that teaching is the core of educational institutions. Thus, higher education institutions focus on efficient management of teaching-learning provisions by improving the quality of teaching, enabling a higher completion rate among the students.

iv) Higher education as a matter of extending life chances. In this view, higher education is seen as an opportunity to participate in the development process of the individual through a flexible, continuing education mode.

Higher education is not only meant for teaching at higher institutions like colleges and universities, it is much more than that. It is a mandate to impart comprehensive knowledge transformation to mould the careers or future of students' community with the support of continuum research. Higher education has to rejuvenate the learners' intellectual powers and should improve their life-skills within their specialization as well as a wider perspective of the world around him. The Indian higher education system is incessantly, steadily transform and striding into the apex level of quality with a dedicated implementation of all the aspects in this regard in general and teaching, research and community service in particular by using information and communication technology. The present situation in the Indian higher education system absolutely entails high level of application, fortitude and deliberation from the policy makers of the human resource ministry based on the most imperative exigency of the system.

In this process of refining the quality of the system as a crucial step, in the year 2004, National Assessment and Accreditation Council was established which has framed the major principles for country's progress, enhancing dexterities, instills a value system in the young minds and encouraging the use of technology and search for excellence. The higher education in India is in a prosaic mode of transformation because of abysmal governmental support, inefficient administration, too much delay in bureaucracy, scarcity of quality faculty, lack of commitment from the faculty, casual nature of students etc. With thorough introspection and cautious introduction of requisite changes in all the facets of higher education viz. teaching, research and community service leads to progressive level of brilliance and efficacy. The NAAC designed seven criterion to assess superiority for mounting the competencies of an institution viz., curriculum related facets teaching, learning and assessment research, consultancy and extension; infrastructure and learning resources; student support and progression; governance and leadership; and inventive practices. The establishment of an internal quality assurance cell in every higher education institution facilitates to foster and raise the potentialities of an institution for delivering

the best education service. With an intension to monitor and improve the institution's internal quality in all the above mentioned seven criteria given by NAAC, establishment of internal quality assurance cell is imperative. The IQAC has to involve continuum of internal quality checks and robust functioning in up-grading specific areas viz., curriculum design and development, teaching, learning and evaluation process; research and consultancy; infrastructure development which are essential to get a prominent response from NAAC with its grade. The NAAC also has an effective and efficient internal coordinating and monitoring mechanism which is closely monitors the IQAC's efforts in improving the quality of education. As per NAAC guidelines, establishment of IQAC in every higher education institution who is planning to get NAAC grading is an imperative task to continuously monitor the quality of education. Quality delivery of the education is the nucleus job of all domains in an educational institution, though the think-tank of the institution sets the policies and priorities. The promising level of quality education should be an incessant and enduring process in delivering the best services in any higher education institution which is not a onetime action just for accreditation purpose. Hence, IQAC has to take up the responsibility to maintain consistency in delivery of quality educational services to the students' community by frequent monitoring of all the quality horizons in higher education viz., various tangibles, competence of academic staff, attitudinal displays of all the staff in the institution, relevance of content and its delivery, and reliability in every aspect.

2.3. Quality Dimensions in Higher Education

The word quality first developed for the manufacturing sector. In the process of enhancing the popularity and competitiveness among the service firms in general and education institutions in particular, has to think about the concept of quality just like a corporate sector. There are significant reasons for this kind of attitudinal change in the promoters of educational institutions in the private and public sectors because of competition, customer satisfaction, maintaining standards, accountability, improve employee morale and motivation, credibility, prestige and status, image and visibility. In the sphere of higher education, the implementation of quality control has been superficial and diluted by the exercise of academic freedom (Largosen, et al, 2004). Additionally, the present culture of universities is frequently based on individual self-rule, which is ardently guarded (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Boaden and Dale (1992) felt that it is usually difficult to apply the features of quality to higher education considering the fact that quality requires teamwork. Though, excellence in higher education is extremely imperative to providers (funding bodies and the community at large), students, staff and employers of graduates (Srikanthan, & Dalrymple, 2003), the present situation in the country is almost outrageous. Education is also one of the crucial services in the service sector, the same framework developed by Parasuramna et.al. (1985) with different facets of service quality like reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesies, communication, credibility, se-

curity, understanding the customer, tangibles is also applicable to teaching because of its service nature. Based on the meticulous review of service quality dimensions, Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) presented total fourteen facets of quality which were later confined to six viz., tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery and reliability. The researchers select the same list of six criteria with total 30 points for conducting a research to explore the perceptual displays of both graduate and post-graduate students.

3. Methodology

This research has taken up with a prime objective to know the perceptions of students' on quality aspects of higher education system in India. In fact, students are decisive for the incessant flow of success and survival of any institution, the researchers opted for the significant sample size of 500 students' of various graduate and postgraduate programs from both the genders. The targeted respondents' opinions were collected through well structured questionnaires consists of six major higher education quality attributes such as tangibles, competence, attitudes, content delivery and reliability which was adopted from the source of Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) along with the personal interviews. In addition to the primary methods of data collection, the researchers also relied on secondary methods like books, journals, magazines, committee reports, NAAC documents, unpublished articles, newspaper articles, websites etc. The collected data was analyzed with the help of Microsoft Excel software package and also by using frequency distribution. The survey conducted in all the three regions (Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana) of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh by using stratified random as well as convenience sampling methods. The researchers received a seamless support from their colleagues in collecting the questionnaires as well as opinions of targeted respondents. The corresponding author and co-author arranged a comprehensive interaction with the students and staff so as to explain about the administration of questionnaires over and above questions to be raised at the time of personal interviews with the respondents. The researchers provide necessary instructions to distribute questionnaires based on the respondents' appointment and collected the filled-in questionnaires then and there itself. Because of this inimitable care to distribute and accumulate the questionnaires, researchers received the entire five hundred questionnaires with all the columns filled-in nature. The researchers enlisted the following four hypotheses based on literature review and empirical studies.

- <H1> Students' are very much concern over competence of their faculty.
- <H2> Respondents' are pleased with the attitudinal displays of their faculty.
- <H3> Students' are opined that present curriculum is not compatible to the needs of the society.
- <H4> Respondents' are articulated their disappointment over

the reliability of academic programs.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In this portion of the study, the researchers noticeably deals with the findings and discussions based on the analysis of the data collected with instruments of questionnaires and personal interviews regarding the quality aspects of higher education related to tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery and reliability from 500 sample size chosen from graduate and post-graduate students of three regions of the state of Andhra Pradesh. The questionnaires were distributed only to the interested respondents who are willing to offer their valuable time. As mentioned in <Table 1>, out of 500 respondents, 344 are male and 156 are female. Related to the age group, 284 respondents belong to 20-25 and 124 are from below 20. The researchers also identified 363 graduate and 137 postgraduate students out of them 303 from Coastal Andhra, 98 from Rayalaseema, another 80 from Telangana regions of the state and only 19 respondents expressed their opinion from the other states of India.

<Table 1> Demographical Profile of the Respondents'

Demographic Variable	Male	Female	Total Respondents
1. Gender	344	156	500
2. Age			
Below 20		124	
20-25		284	
25-30		68	
Above 30		24	500
3. Educational Background			
Graduate Students	363		
Postgraduate Students	137		500
4. Region			
Coastal Andhra	303		
Rayalaseema	98		
Telangana	80		
Other States	19		500

As revealed in the <Table 2>, the researchers received quite significant and invariable opinions from both graduate and post-graduate students from different parts of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Regarding the quality variable tangible facilities of higher education institutions, the researchers raised questions mostly related to physical facilities viz. equipment, labs, visibly alluring environment, accessibility to those facilities developed by the institutions along with support services like accommodation, sports facilities. Out of 500 students, 50.28 percent expressed their satisfaction over various facilities provided by the higher

institutions. The remaining 49.72 percent were utterly expresses their dissent about the physical environment of the institutions. At the time of personal interviews, the researchers received some notable comments from the students regarding insufficient lab equipment, poor and unhygienic accommodation, canteen, toilets, and drinking water and most significantly inadequate library, sports, parking and internet facilities. Majority of the girl students were expressed strong discontentment over the facilities specially provided for them.

Related to the competence of the faculty, the researchers raised points pertained to sufficiency of faculty, conceptual knowledge and qualifications, practical and up-dated knowledge, teaching expertise and communication skills of their faculty. In the overall 500 respondents', meager 49.88percent responded positively over the competence of their academic staff. The remaining 50.12 percent were not in high spirits with the competence of their faculty in every aspect particularly at the outset, insufficient academic staff and their theoretical, practical and up-dated knowledge along with teaching and interactive dexterities. Most significantly, majority of the respondents' evinced their doubts regarding the qualifications of their faculty. The sorry state of affairs starts with the acute shortage of faculty and extended up to the competence levels of the existing academic staff who just simply forget to enrich the knowledge of students and consistently intervene into non-academic matters. At the time of personal interviews, majority of the students evinced their discontentment strongly on their faculty involvement in dividing the class by showing partiality based on the religion, caste, region and other matters. Some percentage of students uttered that some of the faculty members are outstanding in their theoretical, practical and teaching skills, but they are regularly irregular to handle the academic sessions with their hectic administrative duties and they are completely failed to up-date their crystallized knowledge. The <hypothesis 1> is invalid which means 50.12percent of students substantiated their opinion in a negative sense on competence over their academic staff where competence levels ought to cross the expected levels of students'.

In connection with 'attitudes' facet of the higher education service, the researchers elevated questions on understanding students' needs, willingness to help, availability for guidance and advice, giving personal guidance, and emotional courtesy towards students. In the total 500 respondents, 51.08 percent were having positive note on the attitudes of their faculty as against 48.92 negative opinions. Ironically, students' stated that some of their faculties are only involving in mentoring, voluntarily come-up for extending their help and showing emotional courtesy occasionally. Majority of the senior or experienced faculty won't have proper time to listen the needs and grievances of their students and time to provide guidance and advice whenever there is a great need to the students' community. The <hypothesis 2> is valid because around 51 percent of students opined in a positive way regarding the attitudes of their faculty related to personal guidance, availability for guidance as well as emotional courtesy.

<Table 2> Students' Perception on Different Quality Aspects of Indian Higher Education

	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
1. Tangibles		
1.1 Sufficient equipment and facilities	66.80	33.20
1.2 Modern equipment and facilities	50.00	50.00
1.3 Ease of access to the above facilities	37.80	62.20
2. COMPETENCE	Positive	Negative
2.1 Sufficient (academic) staff	59.40	40.60
2.2 Theoretical knowledge, qualifications	50.20	49.80
2.3 Practical knowledge	50.60	49.40
2.4 Up to date knowledge	30.60	69.40
2.5 Teaching expertise/communication skills	58.60	41.40
Average of Competence Quality Variable	49.88	50.12
3. ATTITUDES	Positive	Negative
3.1 Understanding students' needs	62.60	37.40
3.2 Willing to help	59.60	40.40
3.3 Availability for guidance and advice	48.00	52.00
3.4 Giving personal guidance	43.40	56.60
3.5 Emotional courtesy	42.20	57.80
Average of Attitudes Variable	51.08	48.92
4. CONTENT	Positive	Negative
4.1 Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs	53.00	47.00
4.2 Effectiveness of the curriculum	54.60	45.40
4.3 Containing primary knowledge/skills	56.40	43.60
4.4 Completeness and use of computers	36.40	63.60
4.5 Communication skills and team working	57.00	43.00
4.6 Flexibility of knowledge, being cross-disciplinary	48.80	51.20
Average of Content Variable	51.03	48.97
5. DELIVERY	Positive	Negative
5.1 Effective presentation	75.80	24.20
5.2 Sequencing, timeliness	75.60	24.40
5.3 Consistency, fairness of examinations	44.80	55.20
5.4 Feedback from students	34.20	65.80
5.5 Encouraging students	45.80	54.20
Average of Delivery Quality Variable	55.24	44.76
6. RELIABILITY	Positive	Negative
6.1 Trustworthiness of the program as well as promises	39.60	60.40
6.2 Giving valid award	29.00	71.00
6.3 Keeping promises, match to the goals	33.40	66.60
6.4 Handling complaints, solving problems	37.20	62.80
Average of Reliability Variable	34.80	65.20
Average Opinion on Total Six Quality Parameters	48.72	51.28

In association with the fourth quality dimension 'content', the researchers raised questions related to relevance and effectiveness of curriculum, containing and completeness of primary knowledge in the curriculum, communication skills and team work of faculty and flexibility of knowledge. In the total 500 sample, 51.03 percent expressed their positive concern over the content of their curriculum. And at the same time, remaining 48.97 percent expressed their negative opinion towards the suitable nature of their course content. The <hypothesis 3> which is regarding suitability of curriculum to the present day's needs of the society also invalid because only 48.97 percent responded negatively.

Related to the next quality facet delivery of the lectures, the researchers raised questions related to the effective presentation, sequencing and timeliness of curriculum arrangement, fairness of examinations, considering students feedback. A 55.24 percent of students' responded positively and 44.76 negatively in the total sample of 500. Regarding the final quality attribute of the higher education 'reliability', mere 34.80 expressed favorably regarding trustworthiness of the program, giving valid award, keeping promises, handling complaints and solving problems. The <hypothesis 4> which is related to the reliability of academic program is valid because 65.20 percent of students were utterly expressed their dissatisfaction. Finally, the researchers measure the average of selected six quality parameters of Indian higher education, only 48.72 percent of Indian students expressed their positive opinion as against 51.28 percent reacted awfully.

5. Practical Implication

The present research study offers confident insights into the perceptual displays of the students' community regarding higher education quality aspects viz., tangible facilities, competence of the academic staff, attitudinal displays of their faculty, course content and its relevance to the present situation, and reliability. In light of the heavy flow of students to the western world to obtain a quality higher education, knowing the opinions of both students and their parents to be acquainted with the loopholes of the system which are valuable to bring back the higher education system into the main track. Even though set right the derailed education system is an up-hill task, keep in mind the country's human resource requirements, it is a must situation. This is not only the responsibility of central and different state governments but also requires intense support from all its stakeholders viz. corporate sector, higher education institutions from both public and private sectors, funding agencies, community at large, faculty, administrator of the system along with students'community. Even the physical facilities to this crucial sector has tremendously enhanced in the last two decades, those were not sufficient enough to the present requirements of the system. To take up this committed task of improving the excellence in privileged education, all types of governments have to take precautionary measures to stop the brain drain in the

higher education sector, and augment the required amenities which are essential to the faculty. Along with this, universities as well as controlling bodies has to design their own faculty improvement programs persistently with an eclectic approach. The study environment in the state universities is in a pitiful state as 'the temples of learning' face shortage of teachers due to the dearth of funds and lack of initiative from the state government. Added to this, most of the varsities are "headless" as they are functioning without vice-chancellors and executive councils for periods ranging from four months to two years (Reddy, 2011). To avoid this kind of drastic situation, both state and central governments has to take decision on war footing basis to fill all the faculty positions as well as vice-chancellors and executive councils to all universities. The Indian higher education institutions also continuously monitors the existing curriculum and modifies when ever required based on the requirements of both the industry and society by imparting practical oriented life-skills in the present curriculum. Along with the above system changes, faculty members also should treat this profession as their passion and change their attitudes towards students by extending their supportive hand in understanding the cohesiveness of receiving end, to provide continuous guidance, clear the doubts, and enrich the young brains to settle in their life with required emotional courtesy. Students have to demonstrate great commitment while learning and earning degrees which should support for meeting his life goals. Hitherto, governments have neglected to improve the quality of higher education due to the extreme pressure and requirement from the corporate sector due to the introduction of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Whereas the private institutions work with a profit motive but they failed to properly check the quality delivery of this crucial service. Keeping in mind the country's human resource requirements, both public and private sector educational institutions have to change their mind-set and work with great synchronization to improve the present situation of the education sector.

6. Conclusion

With a view to face an intense competition from the western world's higher educational institutions, it is an outright and forceful situation to improve the eminence of the education field with committed and determined support from stakeholders to mould future generations. The Indian higher education system whenever has confidently whitewashed the age old teaching and admin systems and curriculum, then only there will be a chance to keep the system in the right track. At the same time, every stakeholder in the sector has to concentrate and invest their immense efforts to eradicate corruption, eliminate nepotism, minimize red-tapism, and most significantly avoid too much political intervention in the administration of higher institutions. With the introduction of all the above changes, there will be a great opportunity to recover the situation in this most crucial sector with dedicated and determined approach. If our governments, funding

agencies, faculty, administrative bodies, students assertively changes their attitude and demonstrate high level of commitment, fortitude, dedication, with whole heartedness, certainly there is a chance to set right the things in the present education system. This kind of sorry state of affairs from the Indian higher education system entails continuous research from all the dimensions based on which the policy makers has to take rigorous and needy measures to reengineer the system in a formidable manner. This present research provides confident perceptual displays of students' on the quality of higher education which is also more constructive to all the stakeholders, as well as to the future researchers.

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