

Mass Conversion of Indian Higher Education

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Introduction

Indian higher education sector consists of few public universities and central institutes, large number of private unaided colleges and some recently declared deemed-to-be universities. The government strictly controls the entire sector through various bodies. The state government, affiliating university, professional bodies like UGC, AICTE and accreditation agencies like NAAC and NBA are all part of this multi pronged regulatory mechanism. They are also bound by courts who pronounce their say on issues like eligibility, accessibility and affordability. The highly competitive market environment also impacts the working of institutes. So it is not an exaggeration to say that the institutes face a tough time in operating amidst complex set of influencing forces.

The issue of private participation in higher education is looked at with suspicion because of their inherent profit motives. There is a genuine concern regarding exploitation of students by private educators. Influenced by Nehruvian model of governance, the thought of education sector being controlled by state was considered not only desirable but also necessary. The stringent norms laid down for private players and high-handed regulatory mechanisms at times acted also as a deterrent for many. But with the explosion of new economy and the the subsequent demand for trained workforce led many enterprising players to venture into education sector.

While all institutes must ensure minimum standards as laid down by appropriate agencies, there is also need to differentiate the better performing ones from the ordinary others. Institutes demonstrating proven quality standards gain an edge in the market and also stand to win government funds. Institutes have tried implementing ISO standards but their effectiveness among target audience of public and government is yet to be studied. Government has started the accreditation programs via NAAC and NBA with a focus on quality. Accreditation process is fast getting acceptance among institutes in-part due to indirect coercion by the government.

The terms of reference for determining quality in earlier accreditation process was input and resources of the institute. Since most of the institutes had no role in selecting majority of their students, the onus was mostly on infrastruc-

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ture. There was a prevailing thought that having good environment will lead to positive leaning outcomes. Though in hindsight this model can be criticised, it should be understood that the focus on infrastructure forced many otherwise reluctant management to spend on essential physical and human resources.

With the global movement of educated workforce becoming regular phenomenon, the need for benchmarking the education received across different countries became necessary. Equivalence of degrees was needed for employment and educational reasons. The problem of ensuring common standards across the spectrum was answered by having agreements like Washington, Sydney and Dublin accords. The accreditation agencies of each country were to be the signatories of these accords. This practice is slowly gaining momentum and currently India (through NBA) has become provisional member of Washington Accord.

One of the main theme in Washington Accord is to re-orient the quality debate in education from input-resource framework to measuring outcomes of the program. Proponents of this school claim that by focussing on actual outcomes, institutes become more accountable for the stakeholders like paying public and regulating state. In a market-driven economy it is expected that everything is measured by benefits and profits. But the notion that education can be labelled with quality based on outcomes needs be questioned. The Outcome Based Education (OBE) has a troubled history with documented instance of failures. To impart a process on entire education sector without proper debate seems wrong. This article provides a critique on the process of OBE framework from various perspectives.

1 The process of OBE

The institute defines a vision and develops a set of mission statements clearly specifying its intent and strategy. Every program offered by the institute derive their respective vision and mission statements from that of the institute. Further they describe the broad aspiration of the program in PEO (Programme Educational Objectives) and mention the specific skills imparted to students in PO (Programme Outcomes). The curriculum development is guided by the objectives set by vision, mission, PEO and PO. For each course, the instructor specifies the objectives and outcomes of that course. The course delivery and assessment techniques are defined. Finally the success of the course is assessed by calculating its contribution towards the attainment of PO defined for that program.

2 The Big Brother

The entire process of OBE is strictly top-driven and entities in the lower end are forced to follow the diktat of the above ones. Courses are designed to satisfy PO and PEO. They are derived from department vision and mission which in turn are mirroring the vision and mission of the institute. In truth the main

driving force in the entire narrative is PO which reflects the graduate attributes given by state agencies. So everything is oriented to meet the needs defined by the state.

The intervention of state in education should be resisted because state always tries to implement its agenda rather than uphold universal principles in education. This act by state is also an encroachment into the autonomy of guilds who should be the real custodians of the profession. The state is wielding a powerful tool to control the higher education in this country through PO. By defining the PO to suite its requirements it can cause long term irreversible changes in education sector. With change in power equations the PO may be redefined according to agenda of new regime. With OBE the education sector will become an agency for implementing political agenda rather than impart true knowledge to students.

3 Manufacturing consent

Accreditation which is a means of verifying and certifying quality in pre-defined terms should be a voluntary act. The concern for maintaining minimum standards in educational institutes is effectively addressed by affiliation mechanism. Their regular inspections ensure continual adherence to standards laid down by the state. The accreditation process should be reserved for few those who are interested in benchmarking their work with global standards in order to differentiate themselves in the crowded and competitive marketplace of education.

Though the accreditation is publicly stated as voluntary by agencies, there is an attempt to coerce institutes to accept this by various means. The government agencies use accreditation as a parameter for sanctioning funds for research. It is also trying to promote this as the sole label of quality denying the chance for institutes to prove their quality through other competing alternatives. The perceived benefits of accreditation comes at a very high implementation cost. On the other hand the premium of not getting accredited is set high by denying funds for research. Using its might and reach, the state is artificially trying to manufacture consent from stakeholders to OBE program whose benefits are doubtful.

4 Assembly line education

Education is a process of equipping individuals with knowledge so that they lead dignified lives and contribute to growth of society. It has been well understood that different students have varied levels of ability to learn which should be acknowledged. The society requires people with rainbow skills so that it can function effectively like the proverbial five fingers in a hand. The tolerance towards diversity in learning abilities is an uncompromising principle of education.

The OBE emphasises the application of uniform learning outcomes. It marks

the success of the program by measuring the level of outcome fulfilment. The notion that all students should display the same set of outcomes after completing a course is wrong. In this way goods can be manufactured in assembly line and not students in educational institution. Being a human centric process, education cannot emulate the mechanical process of creating uniform objects. But OBE insists on assembly line education which is unrealistic.

5 Measuring the immeasurable

The ability to measure determines whether a process can be effectively managed or not. Therefore there is a special onus on finding metrics to measure educational process. So far the attempt to quantify quality in education restricted to counting learning materials in library, lab equipment, classroom furnishing etc. The adequacy of physical resources was considered sufficient for providing quality education.

Unlike the earlier system, OBE emphasises on measuring the learning outcomes. This will later be mapped to attainment of CO, PO and PEO. But the metrics it uses to measure the outcomes are faulty and inadequate. The overt dependency on results of students in tests and exams to measure outcomes is the major drawback of OBE. Outcomes of a educational process is a highly subjective matter and no single metric can measure it effectively. The secondary measures employed by OBE such as interviews and surveys are also ineffective in measuring the fulfilment of learning outcomes.

6 The invisible hand

The benefit of education is not merely attaining some skills but enriching the mind. Educators have long understood that their concern is not immediate but long-term. Equipping an individual with a sense of self-reliance is an important duty of education. The focus on short term benefit is antithesis to the fundamental purpose of education. OBE focusses largely on measuring outcome gained immediately after the course is delivered. This does not acknowledge the late blooming of learning and rejects the after-effects of education. By focusing on quick results OBE shows how crassly it represents the aspiration of market forces whose only focus is on instant gratification. OBE's emphasis on measuring everything in terms of benefits is furthering the agenda of free market economy.

7 Holistic learning

The benefit oriented education emphasises on learning skills which are required by market. The demand-supply relation between market and education makes institutes cut the non-skills knowledge. So humanities, social sciences, performing arts, philosophy, literature have no place in education system. Even

teaching of language is limited to imparting communication skills. The OBE further aggravates the situation by forcing these subjects out because they do not contribute to the attainment of stated objectives of a programme. So with OBE the future generation of students will be deprived of entire knowledge base which would enrich their lives.

8 Educational slavery

It is acceptable that the nation decides what should its citizens study, albeit with some conditions. By controlling the number of institutes, types of programs, nomenclature of degrees the state controls the number of people who learn a specific body of knowledge. Quasi-state agencies help this purpose through controlling mechanism. But a foreign state dictating the norms of graduates of this country is completely unacceptable. As stated earlier PO are indirectly defined by state agencies and NBA has defined the graduate attributes of UG engineering programme recently. This list is 'inspired' by the similar attempt done by the accrediting agency of a foreign country. So our graduates will be satisfying the needs of some other country by implementing OBE.

9 The bait of autonomy

As a response to complaints that deserving institutes are not able to move up in quality ladder through curriculum improvements and other process innovations, the government decided to grant limited academic autonomy to select institutes after careful selection. Autonomy provided the chance for institutes to try new model of academic governance. With few years under autonomy their effectiveness cannot be measured but the changes they have introduced have to be acknowledged. After spending a long time under repressive regulatory regime which restricted their growth, autonomous institutes are trying to emerge with their own unique identities.

By enforcing OBE selectively on autonomous institutes there is a real danger of losing the early benefit gained by autonomy. OBE also removes the unique identity which each institute was striving for by forcefully enforcing itself upon them. In reality autonomous institutes should have the freedom to select the appropriate quality model best suited for itself. But state seems to have used autonomy as a bait to make institutes of respectable standards to accept OBE forcefully. The institutes which cheerfully accepted autonomy now have to take the bitter pill of OBE.

Conclusion

That quality should be the central focus of education is undeniable. But the state is in hurry to impose a doubtful model forcefully on the institutes without any debate. The propaganda machinery of state is blowing trumpets about

the benefits of OBE. It is being marketed as sure cure to all the ills of higher education in India. Questions regarding its effectiveness are treated as minor stumbling blocks in the path leading to glory. The forceful implementation of OBE is nothing short of mass conversion complete with stories of miracle turnarounds. In the spirit of democracy it is necessary that detailed analysis of OBE be carried out before implementation. Most importantly all the stakeholders including administrators, teachers, students and parents should have their say in this all important matter which is going to impact the lives of future generation of this country.