An Affiliation system, the best tool for improving Quality in Education

Dr. Rohit Manjule
Training & Placement officer, DES’S College of Engineering & Technology, Dhamangaon rly.

ABSTRACT
India in the recent Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings has not figured in the Top 200. IIT Delhi at 218th position, NIT Bombay at 225 and IIT Chennai at 281 represent some of the premium institutes in India competing with the rest of the world. QS World University Ranking may not sound immediately very important to us, here, when we are faced with several challenges and priorities in Education system of India. However, it is useful to understand the parameters used for the ranking. They were academic reputation (40%), Employer reputation (10%), Citations (20%), Faculty student ratio (20%), Promotion of International Students and faculty (5% each). These parameters are not very different from the expectations of the stakeholders in our education system.

1. Introduction:
India's challenges in education are well known and quite alarming. We have a Low gross enrollment ratio, Faculty Shortages, Scaling up Resources, Highly variable Quality of Instruction, Poor employability of graduates. Education, today, is the key driver for Economic development of any country. India is bestowed with large Human resource base in the world, next to China. There are 55 million youth between age group of 18 and 23 in India and about 15% of them have opportunity to pursue Engineering Education. Though the focus is to increase access, equally important it is, to ensure quality of education.

2. The Affiliating System:
India has evolved an educational system for itself over the past six decades keeping its priorities and global trends into consideration. The major conflict we see in Indian Education system today, is between quality and Scale. Post independence, we started off with quality as the primary factor in establishing NITs and RECs. This was followed by a phase with focus on large scale increase in educational institutions. With private participation in establishing institutes and large scale demand from middle class, the past decade has witnessed a tremendous growth in the number of private institutions in the country. The governance of these Institutions and the degree granting authority has been delegated to the Universities established by states. Consequently, majority of the Institutions today, are in an affiliating system offering mostly undergraduate programs in various disciplines. Today, we have 33000 Institutions and 600 Universities. Colleges that are affiliated to a University form the bulk of the Higher Education System comprising of 80% of the total enrollment. It thus forms the critical component reflecting every aspect of our Education System including Quality.

An Affiliating system comprises of a governance structure, well defined regulation and monitoring procedures laid out by the affiliating University for functioning of the institutions which are mostly run by private managements. The University conducts physical inspection of colleges at regular intervals to verify the availability of Infrastructure, Human Resources, Laboratory and other Resources required to start courses. The curriculum, academic calendars, conduct of examinations and evaluation of students is done under the control of the university as per norms laid out by it from time to time. Learning is by rote method rather than application oriented. The objective of the University with respect to an affiliating college is confined to monitoring and regulating the activities in the college to ensure certain minimum levels of standards and uniformity across heterogeneous group. The accreditation of the courses is not considered mandatory. Though the affiliation system has been successful to a great extent in ensuring the availability of requisite resources, monitoring of examinations, and evaluation and ensuring uniformity, it is often criticized to be very rigid giving no opportunity for creative and innovative ideas. Universities often recognized Colleges affiliated to them as sites of dissemination of ideas and not as sites of creativity. There is often a mistrust on the privately managed institutions creating an unhealthy relationship which further evades initiatives to promote excellence in academic institutions.

The problem is often compounded with the fact that the universities are often overloaded with the unwieldy affiliation system with as many as 700-1000 colleges affiliated to each university. The University of Pune has as many as
800 colleges affiliated to it. This huge numbers has been found hampering the Quality of Education in the University itself with the majority of the university faculty members spending their academic time in monitoring and conduct of examination work and inspecting the facilities provided in the colleges.

It is time that we stop looking at only few centers like IITs when we think of quality and start looking at how to promote and nurture excellence with the critical affiliating system of the Indian Educational System. It is indeed a good trend today to find every conference comprising a theme on improving the quality of education. It is time that we radically alter the affiliating system we have been attached to, to evade rigid uniformities and promote dynamic and innovative systems. University affiliation System should be a facilitator to foster collaborations and Innovations. A model for hand holding rather than fault finding is desirable to make the Institutions Competent in achieving the desirable results. New Models and transformation of the affiliation system becomes inevitable if the desired uniformity in Quality and Excellence in Education is to be achieved.

3. To achieve Quality and Excellence in Engineering Education, the following measures are recommended:-

3.1 Reorganization of the Governance Structure:
The governance structure of the affiliating system needs to be revamped. The quality time of the University Faculty should be devoted towards capacity building of the Institutions rather than the present structure of monitoring the laid out norms. Management Capacity Building programs should be conducted to empower the institution heads to plan, predict and implement robust programmers for enhancing quality and promoting excellence through healthy competition. Handholding for initiatives to enhance quality such as faculty enrichment, curricular and evaluation reforms, research and innovation should be encouraged rather than insisting on uniform and rigid regularity framework. Internal Quality Audit Cells with mandatory disclosure of the quality initiatives and progress need to be included to enhance efficiency in the regulatory framework. The system should prepare the Institute to run autonomously over a period of time.

3.2 Accreditation should be made mandatory:
The existing framework of affiliating system though has mechanism to ensure minimum standards of Education, has no mandatory component of accreditation of the programs and the Institutes. Much of the reason can also be attributed to the fact that there is lack of uniformity on the parameters and accreditation mechanisms by various agencies. However making accreditation mandatory, promotes academic and nonacademic reforms which in turn to promote quality advancement.

3.3 Autonomy with Accountability
Academic autonomy has always been regarded as a fundamental necessity for institutions of higher education worldwide. The conspicuous absence of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the case of colleges in India is often criticized as the greatest dysfunctional factor responsible for the decline of standards. This was also acclaimed as the factor which differentiated institutes in Europe and USA and the success mantra of institutes in USA. Teachers need more academic freedom and Stake holders should be provided with more responsibility. The rigid and centralized evaluation and prescription of curriculum by universities not only hinders the creativity, but from a student's point of view, a dichotomy is seen between the college's role in providing education and the University's role in examining. The role of the college in providing education may diminish, because its teachers cannot participate actively at University level. At the same time, the role of the University in providing education - as opposed to examining - is limited because of its size, the distances involved, and facility limitations. Since instruction and examination are two inseparable parts of the process of education, a suitable model of continuous evaluation system by the Internal examinations needs to be adopted. Colleges which are more than 10 years old and having adequate Infrastructure and experienced faculty should be considered for the grant of autonomy with accreditation made mandatory without compromising on the quality.

3.4 Cap on the Number of Colleges
Neither students nor the cause of quality education is served by standardization through a large university with unmanageable number of affiliated colleges. The University which is considered as a temple of learning has become a regulatory authority and degree granting institute with the increasing numbers of institutes affiliated to it. With the realization that decentralization of management is a rewarding policy, the expert panel of UGC in its interim report has recommended putting a cap on the number of colleges to 100 under any University. The Universities may be split into campuses based on their geographical positions and affiliate the colleges around the area.

3.5 Networking of Colleges-Cluster Colleges
The current affiliation system for ease of management, monitoring and regulation of the activities has imposed uniformity across colleges leaving little scope for collaborations across colleges of different Universities, mobility of
faculty and students. These norms and regulations have promoted undisciplined universities lacking multidisciplinary collaborations. The Cluster College concept proposed in the recent UGC Committee Interim report is expected to not only alleviate this problem but also in a bottom up fashion, establish a dynamic and elastic University System promoting specialized courses especially at the post graduate level.

3.6 Public Private Partnership Models
Resource constraints are often quoted as one of the major reasons for varying quality of instruction with increase in the scale of the institutions. The private participation in the past decade in establishing universities has been driven mostly by market and middle class demand. The institution policies where mostly devoted to compete with the others in the market and less on quality enhancement and excellence in education. To foster these requisite parameters, new models of Public Private Partnership need to be evolved. Some of the schemes under consideration by UGC are basic infrastructure model in which the private sector invests in infrastructure and the government runs the operations and management of the institutions, in turn, making payments to the private investor. The outsourcing model in which private sector invests in infrastructure and runs operations and management and the responsibility of the government is to pay the private investor for the specified services. The Equity or hybrid model is the third model in which investment in infrastructure is shared between the two sectors while operation and management is vested with the private sector. Reverse outsourcing model in which government invests in infrastructure and the private sector takes the responsibility of operation and management is also known.

3.7 Virtual University
New technologies are not adequately tapped by universities to enhance quality of Education in the affiliating colleges. With the innovative use of technology it is now believed to achieve flexibility in time, space, pace, medium, access and content. The global trends give a growing confidence in open and online Learning in achieving equity, access and quality. The trends of open access, Learner Centered Education and flexible learning support different styles of learning. The Learning opportunities on the Internet connect learners with distributed resources expanding the flexibility of learners. In most of the cases the availability of a PC and Internet Connection is sufficient to register for courses, attend classes, submit assignments, take examinations, ask questions, communicate with experts, discuss cases with peers, create and share educational content and resources on a global level. The Successful conduct of Remote Labs such as the I Labs model of MIT has remarkably reduced the resource and cost constraints. The trend is a technology empowered effort towards the creation of a VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY. The Universities should thus evolve models like this rather than build mortar kind of institutions to promote quality and excellence along with improve scale and access to education.

4. Concluding Remarks:-
Creativity and Innovation are the demands of the Knowledge Society in the twenty first Century. In the quest to excellence in Education, India should rather than focusing on few pockets of excellence in star Institutions must devote its efforts to progressively enhance and nurture quality in the bulk of the institution under the affiliating system. The rigidity of affiliating system is criticized as one of the major hindrances to take initiatives for creative and imaginative activities. The existing centralized structure of University has to be radically altered to avoid delays, to evade attempts at rigid uniformities, to create elastic and dynamic system and to promote innovation, quality and excellence. Right Integration of Technology coupled with positive policies of the affiliating and regulating bodies give Indian Education System a distinctive edge in the Knowledge Economy.

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