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HEALTHY PRACTICES IN CURRICULAR ASPECT

Introduction

"Healthy quality practices" can be considered as "best practices" in the field of education. The name "best practices" needs a little explanation. "Best" implies the unique or the "topmost", the term "best" being in the "superlative degree" of comparison. "Best Practice", when it is not derogatory in meaning, implies according to the Oxford dictionary, not something unique to an individual or an institution but a "way of doing something that is the usual or expected way in a particular organization or situation: common/ current/ standard practice". The connotation of "best practices", as used by the NAAC, is broader; it does not reflect either meaning because they are best as a class of practices, not individually, and they are the best chiefly because they are found to enhance quality in general. In other words, best practices are quality enhancing academic/ administrative/ infrastructural strategies adopted by highly accredited institutions of higher learning in the present instance. While this is the general meaning, one has to describe the practice in terms of specific characteristics, which go to make it. These characteristics therefore, may be treated as criteria which determine the practice. Now let us discuss about curricular.

Curriculum is the essential ingredient of any education system regardless of the education level. All other aspects whether teaching, learning and evaluation or research and development, infrastructure and learning resources, student activities and support system revolve around it. Therefore, curricular aspects and the best practices connected to curriculum design and development play a very significant dimension of the quality of higher education since the curriculum has a decisive role in steering the other elements of quality. In other words the curriculum is the notional foundation of an educational activity conceived by a provider and it may be spiritual, social or any other. However, the realization of the notion - or policy - depends entirely on the community of stakeholders of an institution who are directly involved in operationalizing it: students, teachers, administrators and workers. The operationalization, however, depends on the best curricular practices.

Reviewing and updating of the curriculum is the essential ingredient of any vibrant academic system. There ought to be a dynamic curriculum with necessary additions and changes introduced in it from time to time by the respective university with a prime objective to maintain updated curriculum and also providing their inputs to take care of fast paced development in the knowledge of the subject concerned. Designing of the curriculum to suit the clientele is important. Revising the curriculum should be a continuous process to provide an updated education to the students at large.

Leaving a few, there have been many universities where this exercise has not been done for years together and it is not uncommon to find universities maintaining, practicing and teaching still on the curriculum as old as few years or even more than a decade. In order to overcome these lacunae NAAC has made efforts to compile the best practices in each of the criterion of quality and disseminate the same through publications, seminars, workshops and conferences across the country.

The best practices have been compiled to introduce innovative concepts, to provide a multi-disciplinary profile and to allow a flexible cafeteria approach including initiating new papers to cater to frontier development in the concerned subject. Attempt has been made to capture the best in the current context with the need to observe high standards to provide knowledge in the frontier areas of each discipline.

While goals and trends of global knowledge has been given importance, the pride in the Indian

heritage, values and India's unique contribution in this respect has been incorporated in the design of curriculum development. Today, all knowledge is interdisciplinary which has been given consideration in selecting the best practices. Flexible and interactive models have been presented for the universities to extend further as they would like. Each institution may have to work out certain uniform structure for courses at the same level so that effective interaction lecturers, students and faculty is possible. The tendency across the country is now to move from the annual to the semester system and from award of marks to award of credits. There is perceptible growing interest in modular framing as well.

Following are some points which should be kept in mind while thinking about a curricular aspect:

The institution has clearly stated goals and objectives that are communicated systematically to all its constituencies.

- The programs of the institution are consistent with its goals and objectives.
- The institution has a wide range of program offerings that provide adequate academic flexibility.
- Feedback from academic peers and employers is used in the initiation, review and redesign of programs.

There are curricular healthy quality practices and they cover a wide range of activities, which the institutions have found to be quality-supportive. The criteria used to define them fall into two categories:

- Universal Criteria and
- Contextual Criteria.
- Universal Criteria:

Excellence:

It means the quality of something being extremely good. In an academic context it means the pursuit of the best strategies to reach higher knowledge and, in a pedagogic context, the best ways of imparting it to learners. This is a universal criterion because in any sphere of life anyone would want the best and none would settle for the second best, if they could so manage. The same is true of a course, a teacher, a student or an institution. If, however, one is compelled to relatives' excellence in order to meet unavoidable needs, that is, when excellence is made to accommodate utility, in a socio-human context, the criterion ceases to be universal in application although it remains so in principle.

There are certain healthy practices adopted by institutions which promote excellence through curricular aspect:

- Rigorous Curricula

The rigour of curriculum that makes heavy demands on learner time and effort may be illustrated by the healthy quality curricular practices of one of the HEIs based on a multifaceted, comprehensive and well-defined curriculum periodically updated with student and faculty feedback. This is just one of the many prevalent healthy quality practices and there are many others with varying degrees of perfection.

- Collaboration with Institutions of Quality

Collaboration with institutions of acknowledged repute known for the rigour of curricula and other academic strategies often enhances the quality of the programs of an institution. Illustrations are many but only some are highlighted here. Another university's twinning program with Agricultural Research Advisory Board, Malaysia; the unique curriculum put together and has been successfully operated over more than a decade by an autonomous college for Davidson College, North Carolina in order to offer a 'Semester-in-India' program for the benefit of about 25 students from reputed colleges and universities in the USA; and a similar program offered by the Central University of Hyderabad are just a few examples of the best practice of inter-institutional co-operation to promote academic excellence.

Values:

The second criterion is cultural specific. Making something more important and useful than it is now is otherwise described as 'value addition'. This term is frequently used in academic parlance today. Thus value-addition can make a course of study more relevant to given needs.

Values, on the other hand are not directly skill-enhancing. They are personal, social and spiritual. Hence they are highly subjective and contextual. Societies with spiritual and religious traditions and predilections lay great emphasis on these. For instance such societies insist on the necessity of discipline which on liberal campuses is ignored. Nevertheless the indirect benefits of values to individuals which accrue in terms of a balanced personality or integrity of character are universally acknowledged. Ethical values underlie any system of education everywhere.

Goal-Orientation and Process-Building:

Goal-orientation is nothing but keeping a chosen purpose in focus. The corollary of this is process-building, the means adopted to achieve the purpose. In order to reduce the awkwardness caused by ancient goals which are left non-updated and non-interpreted, in spite of the universal relevance of their underlying values, a paradigm of goals may be set up by way of updating and reinterpreting them. This does not mean dispensing with the basic policy of education pursued but it only emphasizes the need to make goals universally relevant within the context of such a policy. The process building should match the stated goals.

Goal-orientation reflected in mission statements triggers curricular processes of which curricular structuring is foremost. Each HEI has more than one goal. Their functioning makes the hidden presence of such goals evident. Their goals generally go to make a paradigm: (a) institutional goals laid down by founders which determine its educational policy (b) goals determined by learner needs such as career enablement; (c) goals which contribute to national development; and (d) those which foster social and spiritual values. Underlying this paradigm is the quest for excellence which is found to be an academic necessity, for, without it, globalization of Indian higher education is bound to suffer. One cannot opt out of it.

Contextual Criteria:

Contexts may be temporal, spatial, socio-cultural or discipline-specific. As all of them are subject to change, the criteria which govern them cannot be universal although relevant. Nonetheless they are useful here and now.

Utility:

Education for a job, knowledge for utility is a post-renaissance criterion with which the quality of education is assessed in many cultures across the globe. With the advancement of modern technology and market economy the need for mobilizing an enlightened work-force has become more important. Accordingly, academic activity in these areas is governed by this criterion. Employability, more than the renaissance rigor of pursuing knowledge for its own sake, has come to stay for the time being as a goal of the academia.

Apart from the utility of career generation some courses meet specific needs, which are not often met by courses in general programs. These are many and varied.

- Cultural and aesthetic needs:

Temple architecture, fine arts, performing arts, jewellery design, theatre arts, folk literature, art history, travel and tourism, health education, yoga, teaching visually impaired children, education for the mentally retarded child development and other courses which fall under this category meet immediate basic needs besides satisfying cultural and aesthetic expressions. They are not so much either professional or commercial as they are designed to meet basic human needs and the need for cultural expression in one's milieu.

- **Rural needs:**

All courses related to agriculture, farming, and cottage industry meet rural needs besides initiating learners to entrepreneurial skills. The entire program of Gandhigram Deemed Rural University has a wide range of courses including artisan skill development and building construction. Many other universities and colleges offer these and more.

Access:

The expansion of higher education with its democratization in the sixties has made it necessary for educational agencies to make higher education accessible to all. However, the uncompromising yardstick of quality, namely, merit in a competitive context, cannot be changed under any circumstance. If it is so, as it is truly desirable, the new challenges are those of making access go hand in hand with quality and merit. It is here strategies like remediation, discriminative but benign pedagogy become features of recognizable quality.

Relevance:

Suitability to a given situation is another criterion to identify a good academic strategy. If it suits the situation that is present across countries — such as the trend to seek employment in specific areas, or a national context — such as developmental activity in our own country, or a regional need — such as marine activity in coastal Andhra Pradesh, or a local need, the educational activity acquires a dimension of quality. This is true of relevance to social and cultural situations as well.

Service:

Programs of higher education institutions which offer enabling services to stakeholders without expectation of economic returns may be said to enhance access. The learner-enhancement, employer-enablement and society-enablement services acquire a dimension of quality. "Service-learning" has become an important quality feature in many institutions in the world today. Learner-centered pedagogy, neighborhood-centered sustainable services, recruitment-enabling placement services and such strategies help an agency serve its stakeholders.

Preservation and Promotion of Heritage:

Preservation of ancient languages and literatures, of traditions which shaped the thought of the world in the past, of documents and manuscripts no longer extant and of systems of medicine, philosophical thought and other treasures such as archeological findings is a task of learned men and institutions committed to it. When education provides the necessary skills and scholarship for such a task, it acquires a recognizable quality.

Performability:

Performability is a two-fold criterion. It is a process-criterion when a highly preferred academic strategy is easy to operate. It is a product-criterion when the output of the strategy really performs well to make a positive impact. When for instance, the decision to offer on-the-job training for those who do a vocational course is made easily operable because of the human and material resources available on the spot, the process is performable - as in polytechnics and technical institutions. The output will then be adequate and usable for the purpose it was designed. As these two are obviously complementary, performability is here set up as a single criterion.

Context-specific criteria are many and varied but most of them can be subsumed under one or the other of the criteria listed above. It may be seen that these criteria help extend the limited connotation of the collocation 'best practices' to mean 'the most highly favored academic strategies used by some of the best institutions in the country to enhance quality in performance'.

Impact:

Positive feedback on impact alone can make any system dynamically effective. Certain conclusions

may be drawn from the data provided.

The most comprehensive and helpful change that has come about in the system of higher education in our country in recent years is the shift from conventional and classical curricula to a more dynamic and learner-friendly system of curricular choices. Almost every HEI, in both rural and urban areas, has become sensitive to learner needs in a global and national context. Curricular options, electives, vocational programs and modular courses appear to be numerous. Never before was the utility of higher education for acquiring employment potential as unmistakably evident as it is now.

Also evident is the improvement of curricular processes, at least in some HEIs, in the direction of greater flexibility in order to accommodate learner interests. Reinterpretation of older mission statements to serve aspirations of youth, the Choice-Based Credit System (although that which is in vogue needs substantial refinement to ensure its true purpose), more flexible curricular models, semesterization, and unitization of syllabi into modules, continuous internal assessment and other best process-practices are evident.

Curricula have become more sensitive to specific needs in addition to the commitment to enhance the employability of students. There are many courses designed to meet not only national, regional and local needs but those of the disadvantaged sections of society as well.

Another salient feature of the cultural impact of our curricula is the sensitivity to the preservation and promotion of the culture and ethos of our tradition. Almost every curriculum is wedded to social, spiritual and ethical values without being sentimental and fanatic.

However, it is too soon to affirm either any significant social change that curricula have brought about or any lasting global impact except perhaps, marginally, for the reason that studies have not yet been made of them. Given the trend of the progress made so far, hopefully, they will not remain dreams for long.

Conclusion:

The healthy quality practices presented here are not exhaustive as observed earlier. They are only representative of the different criteria statements. While one may be sensitive to their context specificity and other possible difficulties in borrowing them, one may find nevertheless, that the principle behind each of them together with the institutional/individual effort in implementation has proved that it has worked. Most of the healthy quality practices are easily implementable and they do not require much material input. Of course voluntary involvement goes a long way to obtain benefits from the practices. In addition, strategic planning to accommodate the practices in and outside regular work schedules is necessary.

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