Ideal and best Practices in Higher Education for Promoting Excellence in Higher Education

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Abstract

Ideal and best practices should be implemented in higher education for promoting excellence in Higher Education. Excellence can be identified at the level of the institution, faculty, department or individual members of staff and can be applied in the context of the many different roles and functions of higher education institutions. Excellent institutions may also gain recognition in an international context and demonstrate the capacity to compete with other countries.

Key words: Ideal and Best practices, Higher Education and Excellence.

Introduction

Education is recognized as one of the critical elements of the national development effort and Higher education, in particular, is of vital importance for the nation, as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge-based society of the 21st century[1].

Definition of excellence should take into account the use of quantitative and qualitative parameters or the use of objective and subjective indicators. To 'excel' means to surpass, to be pre-eminent, and hence 'excellence' in teaching and learning implies being pre-eminent in teaching and learning. The term connotes a sense of certain distinguishing features such that those exhibiting excellence stand out from the rest[2].

The concept of 'excellence' is well established in many fields of activity, and the term is used frequently to refer to very good or outstanding performance. In higher education it means different things in different contexts. Excellence may be equated with the reputation and standing of institutions, but much depends on the perception of student experience and the varying missions of institutions. There are numerous definitions suiting different purposes and different areas of quality assurance and stakeholder's Involvement. The concept is vague enough to offer plentiful grounds for both theoretical and practical research. In the view of the working group, it is important to consider excellence as a social phenomenon based on theoretical and cultural considerations, but is the group also recognizes that the concept has practical applications in the context of management and technological development.

Excellence is a concern for higher education because the dynamics of development are entrenched in the search for pursuit of excellence in the education system as a whole but with added emphasis in the higher educational institutions which represents the cumulated potential and realizable capacity of the system at its ultimate point.

During the past few years, politicians and higher education institutions (HEIs) have discovered the concept of excellence. Rankings undoubtedly have stimulated this concept, both in positive and negative ways. One positive effect of rankings is the latest drive for enhancement. In addition, the rankings have removed the fiction of 'equality' between and within HEIs. The reality is much more complex than a one-dimensional structure. A negative effect of the concept of excellence is the ease with which politicians use the word and the idea that excellence can be quickly and easily achieved. Universities play a role by asserting in their strategic plans 'that they strive for excellence in research and teaching, thereby challenging those who have to evaluate them on whether they actually deliver what they promise. HEIs might make themselves vulnerable in this way if they do not deliver outstanding quality.

Quality has become the defining element of education in the 21st Century in the context of new social realities. Quality, as all of us are aware, makes education as much socially relevant as it is personally indispensable to the individual. In this sense quality becomes the defining element of education. In this context quality and excellence should be the vision of every higher education institution. Acquisition of quality and excellence is the great challenge faced by all higher education institutions.

Excellence can be evaluated against agreed standards that apply across the range of different academic disciplines and different types of institutions. It is a relative concept and can be applied to reflect the variability between institutions and the student context.

In this paper, the use of the term 'excellence' is explored in a number of different contexts reflecting the expectations of different stakeholders for the road map of ideal and best practices in promoting excellence in higher education.

Results and Discussion

Higher education should focus on elements essential to establishing and maintaining an outstanding institution. It is highly essential to build a framework around the integration of approaches to assessment, planning and improvement. It draws on elements from management audits, disciplinary reviews and strategic planning to provide a generic model broadly applicable across all functions and levels of an institution.

The following evaluation areas are used to define excellence in higher education:

1. Leadership 2.Purposes and plans 3.Beneficiaries and constituencies 4. Programs and services 5. Faculty/staff and workplace 6.Assessment and information use 7. Outcomes and achievements. Excellence in Higher Education provides a structured guide for reviewing each of these areas as they operate within a particular institution, department or program. Evaluation areas 1–5 are fundamental building blocks in any effective organization. Evaluation area 6 focuses on methods and procedures in place to assess quality and effectiveness in each of these five areas. Evaluation area 7 considers the outcomes and achievements that are documented through the assessment process.

This type of model can be used by an entire college or university and also by individual administrative, service and student life orga nisations. It can also be used at the level of academic departments and among programs within the institution.

The concept of excellence should be applied to the evaluation of the quality and value of research in higher education. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) should be developed by the Higher Education Funding Councils. The aim of this framework is to produce indicators of research excellence and to use these to benchmark the performance of Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) against international standards. In the country like U.K, this type of exercise has placed particular emphasis on the impact of research as a means for assessing the return on the investment in research activity[3].

In this context, 'excellence' is assessed in terms of quantitative measures of research activity, including bibliometric indicators, external research income and postgraduate student engagement. Assessments also include an element of peer review.

The primary outcome of the assessment will be an overall quality profile awarded to each institution.The purpose of identifying excellence is to assist in the allocation of research funding. The funding councils are committed to distributing funding by reference to research excellence and to fund excellent research in all its forms, wherever it is found. The Consequence of this policy is to concentrate research activity in those institutions which are able to demonstrate world-class research performance.

Assessing the quality of teaching has been a long-standing issue for higher education. Excellence in teaching is determined by factors such as the inspirational nature of individual lecturers, the organization of presentations, the interaction with students as participants and how well the information provided meets the learning objectives of the course. Excellence can be identified both in terms of student satisfaction and also in terms of the performance of students in assessment. There are differences between deep and surface learning. Excellent teaching may be seen as the efficient presentation of information which maximizes the students' opportunities to gain the highest marks from the course. Alternatively, excellence could be recognized as the stimulus for students to engage with the subject and to enhance their understanding and knowledge.

Conservatoire education is focused on the development of high achieving, talented students, predominantly in the disciplines of music and drama. Entry into institutions is highly selective, based not only on previous academic performance but also on the audition of candidates. The purpose of the approach is to take the very best students and develop them to a level of professional performance that compares with international standards[4].

Courses offer a high percentage of practical training and personal instruction. Student achievement is assessed primarily on the quality of performance. The development of technical skill is combined with academic study and professional development. Individual tuition forms the major component of course delivery, and students spend many hours in practicing

and developing their technical ability. Tutors are often practicing professionals who work part-time. Students consequently have access to instructors who are highly competent and are renowned performers in their own field. Conservatoires foster a vibrant and creative ethos which supports students in the development of their artistic and academic potential. In this context, the institutions should be committed to excellence as the standard for students to achieve. The definition of threshold standards with reference to common reference points does not address the explicit requirements of high achievement and exceptional ability. Such levels of performance are achieved at a significant cost in terms of the intensive nature of one-to-one instruction and the general level of resources required.

In addition to institutional accreditation, the project utilized results from online surveys completed by academic and professional staff to evaluate the quality of programmes. The online survey technology allows executing large spectrum sociologic surveys in the field of quality evaluation of study programmes.

It could be a decision involving the views of students and staff, or the perceptions of other stakeholders and the general public. However arrived at, any judgment of excellence will need to be seen as credible and appropriate, and will need to be substantiated by reference to accessible evidence. One approach would be to establish a 'framework for excellence' based on the key criteria and values and incorporating qualitative assessments of the extent to which expectations are being addressed.

The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) promotes excellence and supports change in learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions, working towards improving the student experience by celebrating and promoting outstanding teaching and by researching and embedding innovative good results.

Standards for excellence can be found in the literature. A recent survey in Romania, under the framework of an EU funded program, showed that in the United States, one group of standards refer to the institutional context and another group of standards to educational efficiency. The first group of standards looks at: mission and objectives of the institution; planning methods, allocation of resources and innovation; leadership and governance; administration; integrity; self-evaluation and external evaluation. If properly met, this group of standards would set the "obligatory (but not sufficient)" conditions under which the institution would be "eligible" to be considered as "excellent". The second group of standards examines the educational efficiency and is thus directly related to the educational activities and other services the institution offers its students: admission of students and their performance, including graduation rates; support services for students; quality of curricula and faculty; quality of educational offerings, including academic content, coherence, learning objectives, expected learning outcomes and expected skills of graduates; general education learning outcomes, including communication skills, critical thinking, technological skills etc; evaluation of achieved learning outcomes of students; and other standards related to study programmes.

A recent study of the World Bank, led by Jamil Salmi, lists, in a given order of importance, the external and internal conditions that, if met, lead to proper functioning of an educational system: equity, teaching, achieving the expected learning outcomes, research, knowledge or technology transfer to society and the acceptance of a set of values.

The methods currently used by Quality Assurance agencies are not primarily focused on identifying excellence. Agencies could include explicitly in their missions a statement such as 'identifying and developing excellence'. Consequently, the current set of standards could be re-organized and/or revised to make a definite distinction between the 'normative part', used for licensing or accreditation and the developmental part which could eventually lead to excellence.

The best practice benchmarking approach is an inductive approach to quality management in higher education institutions with a focus on practice and continuous improvement. The best as an ideal should be the vision of every higher education institution in the country. Stakeholders can contribute differently for the realization of this goal by the institutions. Policy makers in education have an important responsibility of creating an enabling policy framework for effective functioning of the institutions. The Management should ensure proper infrastructure and effective governance systems. Teachers have a critical role in building competencies of learners through best pedagogic practices. Finally, students, for whom the whole system is designed, should desire and demand the best. Then everything else will follow.

Conclusion

Ideal and best practices should be implemented in higher education for promoting excellence in Higher Education. The different approaches to excellence serve to illustrate the multi-dimensional aspects of the concept. Excellence can be identified at the level of the institution, faculty, department or individual members of staff and can be applied in the context of the many different roles and functions of higher education institutions. Excellent institutions may also gain recognition in an international context and demonstrate the capacity to compete with other countries. The overall intention would be to raise the level of institutional performance beyond the threshold standards set for the minimum requirements of common practice in academic quality and standards.

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