

## **UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN INDIA: THE QUALITY ISSUE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper discussed the quality issue in education in the light of the New Education Policy recently formulated in India. NEP 2020 has proposed multiple cherished goals and calls for reforms in the content, process, and delivery of education. However, it is easier said than done. The existing quality of education is far from satisfactory as indicated in the growing number, nearly 70%, of unemployable graduates. There seems to be a wide gap between the industry requirements and the competencies of students. The education system suffers from several inadequacies and challenges. The reform is needed in the content of education as well as teaching methods. Improving quality requires better trained teachers and innovative teaching methods. This should help students develop critical thinking skills and the ability to evaluate any piece of information. Moreover, development of soft skills, such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills have so far not received any serious attention. It should be introduced and integrated in the curriculum. Teachers should change from lecture to more of discovery and discussion-based teaching. The paper discussed several qualities of a good teacher. Preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century job market is yet another big challenge. The big question, however, is how to ensure the implementation of the NEP plans without infrastructural transformation, procedural modifications, and resource allocation. All these require serious changes, interventions, and resources.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020, Quality of education in India, Teaching, Employability, Higher education

### **INTRODUCTION**

The quality and employability aspects of higher education in India has been very low for a long time. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) (2019) released by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) highlighted several shortcomings. These included low quality of teachers, their slow process of recruitment and selection, and inadequate training, mushrooming of low-quality private education providers, scant representation of overseas students, inadequacy of infrastructure, low number of quality research output and many more. All this has led to the ‘crisis of legitimacy’ of the educational attainment and resultant employability of graduates. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in its assessment report for 2019 pointed out that 68% of institutions in India are of middle or poor quality. As a result, nearly three-fourth number of graduates remain unemployable because their knowledge and skill set do not match with employers’ requirements. We all know that quality is defined in terms of the degree of satisfaction that consumers have with the available product and services.

The New Education Policy of 2020 recently released by the government of India has tried to address several of these weaknesses. A number of long-cherished goals are mentioned such as

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development of good, well-rounded, thoughtful and creative individuals. Furthermore, a quality higher education must enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to the society. It must prepare students for more meaningful and satisfying lives and work roles and enable economic independence. Accordingly, it is suggested that the curriculum content has to be reduced in each subject to its core essentials – key concepts, ideas, applications and problem solving. Emphasis is to be placed on critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning. The achievement of these cherished goals requires multi-dimensional and concerted actions.

### ***Outdated Teaching Models***

So far, the teaching and evaluation system in universities have largely been outdated. It is based on teacher centric rather than student centric models. The teaching is mostly lecture based and students are expected to cram information. The fact is that today everyone is flooded with contradictory information, including misinformation thanks to the digital mode of communication. There is an unprecedented explosion of knowledge. The need is to teach the students how to make sense of them and differentiate between the important and unimportant as well as combine bits and pieces of them to make more sense. All these require thinking skills to be developed. Similarly, the examination system is outdated. The students are taught to evaluate rather than evaluate to teach. In other words, continuous evaluation of students' progress is rare and the purpose of end term summative examination is just to put them in different baskets. Therefore, rethinking on the teaching, learning and evaluation process is essential.

### ***Education and Future Challenges***

As has been highlighted in the NEP 2020 education should be designed to prepare the students for the future challenges. John Dewey, the famous educationist, advocated to build a bridge between the abstract and the real experiences of the learner. He asserted that “all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their *minds* are concerned ... is to develop their ability to think” (1966). According to him, teaching of factual knowledge and intellectual skills cannot be separated from the development of the student's ability to think. In fact, “information severed from thoughtful action is dead, a mind-crushing load” and “a most powerful obstacle to further growth in the grace of intelligence”. Dewey maintained that a skill “not connected with any sense of the purposes for which it is to be used” leaves an individual “at the mercy of his routine habits”, without nurturing the capacity for initiative and independent application. Education should focus upon developing our students' ability to think. We need to emphasize this when designing the curriculum, in pedagogy and in assessing student performance.

### ***Information Age and Critical Thinking Skills***

Emphasis on developing inquisitive mindset has become even more relevant in today's electronic world where students are bombarded with all kinds of information. They need to develop critical thinking skills in order to assess unfiltered information, and critically examine the alternatives. If

not, they will not have the powers of thought that are necessary to deal effectively with the information and opinions with which they are continuously bombarded.

Similarly, students who are subjected to reproducing set answers and solving routine problems, will not be served well when they live in the world of unpredictable and rapid changes. Most of the problems that they will face do not have established right answers, or algorithms for computing them. Besides the subject matter knowledge, they will also have to be able to analyse issues and articulate problems, to probe into them by asking insightful questions, and to be able to look at issues and problems from different points of view, to critically assess alternative possibilities and to exercise good judgment. In short, they will need to be able to do the kinds of things that an inquiry-based education equips them to do. Dialogue between groups of students on relevant issues can help them understand different points of view, evaluate different arguments and construct hypothesis to be tested in real life. I have always found that this exercise was well received and enjoyed by the students.

### ***Discussion Teaching: A Better Teaching Method***

The art of discussion teaching is an art of managing spontaneity. Here the teacher has multiple roles. He is a planner, host, moderator, devil's advocate, fellow student, and judge. It is difficult to become a true discussion leader, but not impossible. According to Gragg (1994) four principle are fundamental to discussion teaching.

- a) Students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching and the privilege of learning together.
- b) Must evolve from a collection of individuals into a learning community with shared values and common goals.
- c) By forging a primary alliance with students, the discussion leader can help them gain command of the course material.
- d) Requires dual competency of managing the content and process.

Harvard Business School is well known for case method of teaching which involves essentially discussion method. The cases are used to engender among students' mastery of concepts and their applications. The teacher prepares case matrix based on the course content. The case studies and reading materials are provided to the students in advance. Each class session begins with a case presentation beginning with the reasons the case is discussed that day. The teacher has the responsibility of leading the case discussion process. This requires the competency of the teacher to take the class from one *grazing field* of learning to another by raising fundamental as well as transitional questions at appropriate times. Each *grazing field* consist of conflicts, tensions, arguments, and counter arguments. The key to effective discussion leadership is the instructor's artistry, which consists primarily of mastering the details. It is to be noted that case method is not about random story telling. It also is based on the premise that there is no one best answer. Students are evaluated on the basis of their contribution to the discussion and active participation which is closely monitored and graded.

### ***Dealing with Students' Motivation to Learn***

The basic principle of motivating anyone is to address the question of 'what it is for me'? This is the primary question in the mind of students when they come to class. They hop from one class meeting to another looking for ways to enrich their knowledge and get a better grade in the exam. However, students are less focused on learning and more on exam questions because this is what matters more to them in the larger system of examination and the award of grades. Shouldn't our teaching method encourage learning through exploration and self-discovery and based on the principle of motivation rather than force feeding the curriculum. A good number of students came to the class for the sake of meeting attendance requirement in place of the thrill and pleasure of learning, which should have been the case.

### ***Qualities of a Good Teacher***

A person rich in knowledge may not necessarily be a good teacher. On the contrary with a right attitude and little knowledge a teacher may still create great learning experience for his students. A good teacher does not encourage passive reception of ideas but an active, imaginative receptivity of knowledge. Instilling respect for each other is another quality of a good teacher. Creative imagination will hardly happen between people who do not respect each other. Often teachers are very happy when a student conforms to their line of thinking but not otherwise. Such a person has the ego state what in the terminology of transaction analysis (TA) is referred as, I am OK - You are not OK type. Additionally, a person with a king size ego cannot be a good teacher. Such a person will not have a receptive mind, he will be keen to hear only what pleases him. Gragg (1994) warns that such a person poses great danger to the "vital life of an educational institution...He cannot teach others for he has shut his mind to being taught." As the quality of imaginative receptivity is the hall mark of good teacher, it is argued that such teachers should never retire. Such a teacher is bound to grow better and better until his last day.

### ***Teachers as Learners***

Teaching is a two-way process. While students are expected to listen what the teacher says, it is also important that the teacher also listen to students and learn from them. As Gragg (1994) puts it "teaching is a social art...and the success of a teacher depends upon his possessing that quality or attitude of mind which enables him to make the relationship between himself and the students a reciprocal one. Not all the teaching should be done by the teacher. Not all the learning should be done by the students." Teaching should help students engage in creative imagination as passive reception of ideas or facts constitute no education at all. The learner must create for himself the ideas that the teacher seeks to communicate (Gragg, 1994). Whitehead (1929) had rightly observed that "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." The teacher should also be a good listener as many times the students are not able to convey what they wanted to. The role of a teacher is like a doctor who always finds it necessary to take account of what patients tell them. The doctor listens, first, to what the patient wants to tell, secondly, for implications of what he doesn't want to tell, and thirdly, for implications of what he can't tell (Henderson, 1938). It is also important that the teacher has a receptive mind while interacting with students. We all have the experience of communicating to someone who is

unwilling to receive it. Persons of unreceptive minds are sorry sights in halls of learning (Gragg, 1994).

### ***Quality Improvement in Education Needs Multi-Faceted Reforms***

Meeting the cherished goals of NEP 2020 requires reforms at every levels. No piecemeal solution will be effective as education has largely been neglected over the years. Education sector need more allocation of fund as has been promised in the NEP. Next, there is need to reform the existing human resource management system so that it attracts, retains, rewards, and develops the best quality of teaching, administrative staff as well as institutional leadership. The teachers need to be trained for more interactive teaching methods. The system of students' teaching effectiveness ratings should be introduced and be made as a component of annual performance evaluation of teachers. Reform is also needed in curriculum, pedagogy, mode of delivery, examination and certification. The NEP 2020 suggest multiple entry and exit points. Universities should be responsive to learners' characteristics and learning needs. Perhaps they can also introduce "examination on demand" as a way to fast track the certification process of graduates.

NEP also calls for reducing the course content, focusing on basics of the subject matter followed by electives for branching into more specialized professional areas. The teaching method should help students develop thinking skills and the ability to critically evaluate any piece of information. Finally, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges put emphasis on developing soft skills which has so far not received serious attention although this is much needed by the employers. For example, employers welcome those job applicants who are good not only in identifying problems but also are capable of offering possible solutions. Therefore, students need to develop problem solving skills, as well as other soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and the skills of working with diverse group of individuals. Finally, the ethical component should possibly be integrated within each course. This should help students develop sensitivity towards moral and ethical aspect of any decision and action.

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