Need for Equipping Teachers for Quality Higher Education: Exploring how teachers in Kerala perceive Quality Practices in Higher Education

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Abstract

Over the past few years, India's higher education sector has witnessed remarkable progress. Though the country has the largest and the second largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number of institutions and enrolment respectively, it still faces challenges on several fronts. Quality of higher education (HE) is a function of infrastructure, accessibility and recruitment of good teachers, ability to cater to societal demands, motivation of students, employability of the programme, and flexibility for administrative and academic reforms and freedom for innovations. Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017) recognizes the challenges facing India's HE system. The plan has made several proposals to resolve the challenges in expansion, equity and excellence. This paper discusses teachers' perception of quality of teaching in colleges and the suggestion for improvements thereof. Many factors that contribute to quality of HE can be viewed from a teacher perspective. This investigation recognized five major areas that have a bearing on quality of HE. They are effective teaching, meeting special learners in HE, assessment in HE, classroom problems and innovative solutions and using ICT in classrooms. How teachers in Kerala perceive these dimensions of HE were explored through unstructured interview. Results evidence many challenges in quality of HE. Teachers being doorkeepers of thoughts can play a good role for the improvement of HE. One way to overcome these challenges is to equip teachers with enough in-service courses in problem areas. An orientation course once for all is not sufficient to cater to enhance professional competencies of teachers for quality HE.

Context of this study

The higher education system in India has full-fledged in an outstanding way, predominantly in the post-independence period. Today, the country has the largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number institutions and the second-largest in terms of enrolment. Policy papers recognises that private sector has played an influential role in this growth, with private institutions now accounting for 64% of the total number of institutions and 59% of enrolment in the country, as compared to 43% and 33%, respectively in 2003. The expansion in institutional capacity in terms of number of universities/colleges and teachers has provided greater access to the students to post higher secondary education. The access to higher education is measured in term of gross enrolment ratio (GER) which is a ratio of persons enrolled in higher education institutions to total population of the persons in age group of 18 to 23 years. The estimate of GER is generally based on the data collected by MHRD/UGC from the educational institutions. The estimate based on Selected Education Statistics (SES) indicates that the access to higher education measured in term of GER increased from 0.7% in 1950/51 to 1.4% in 1960-61. By 2006/7 the GER increased to about 11 per cent.

Most observers agree that Indian higher education, the significant and impressive developments of the past few decades notwithstanding, faces major challenges in both quantitative and qualitative terms (Singh, 2012). Perhaps the clearest and boldest statement of this issue can be found in the "Report to the Nation 2006" of the National Knowledge Commission which concludes that there is 'a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs

deep', and that it has to do with both the quantity and the quality of higher education in India. Recognizing this dual challenge, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh severely criticized in a recent speech the serious qualitative deficiencies in Indian higher education, while at the same time announcing plans for a major expansion of the system. Reflecting on the findings of a confidential report by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, which is affiliated to the University Grants Commission (UGC), he expressed his concern over the fact that two thirds (68%) of the country's universities and 90 percent of its colleges are "of middling or poor quality" and that well over half of the faculty in India's colleges do not have the appropriate degree qualifications. Knowledge is the base for overall growth and if the nation has to be competitive and to be at par with the globalization pace, we will have to respond to the market forces.

The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017) recognizes the challenges facing India's higher education system and proposes several initiatives to resolve these, e.g., through increased funding for disadvantaged groups, deployment of cutting-edge technologies, faculty development programmes, improved governance structures and provision of incentives for research. The Government intends to achieve enrolment of 35.9 million students in higher education institutions, with a GER of 25.2%, through these initiatives by the end of the Plan period. It also intends to significantly improve the quality of the system, while enabling the co-existence of multiple types of institutions including research-centric, teaching and vocation-focused ones. The extant policy postulates that, private sector can be expected to play an instrumental role in achieving these outcomes through the creation of knowledge networks, research and innovation centres, corporate-backed institutions, and providing support for faculty development.

Need for this study

Despite the commendable service of private sector in the expansion of higher education, in India as elsewhere around the globe, globalization, privatization, funding, dilution of academic rigour, social equity issues are having their impact on higher education. There is a lot of bipolar polemics around the ways in which such issues are influencing the Indian higher education. Owing to the higher HER, the frequencies of debates on such issues are relatively high in Kerala. The equity issues emerging from self- financing courses, the desirability of mushrooming technical courses and programmes, and the not yet clear definition of proposed autonomy to higher education institutions merits further social scrutiny too.

The above issues need not prevent us from discussing the other relevant issues in higher education in Kerala. The relevance of such debates go beyond state boundaries as surely such problems are to a large extent common to the national scenario as well. Higher education in this state and nation has existed with and without the so-called issues for sufficiently long time for us to realize that the problems that haunt us in higher education will not dissipate one fine day with or without these reforms. The debates have not helped us in solving the problems that lead us to experiment with such hot policies.

Hence, aspects of education other than these policy dimensions have to be considered by academics, in their search for ways to improve higher education and its influence on

society, especially younger generation. One such area that is often neglected is the process aspect of education, the educational process in our colleges. Colleges, than university campuses provide higher education to more than 90 percent of students in Higher education, in Kerala. This investigation recognized five major areas that have a bearing on quality of HE. They are effective teaching, meeting special learners in HE, assessment in HE, classroom problems and innovative solutions and using ICT in classrooms.

Objective

Objective of this paper is to generate further discussion on process aspects of higher education by exploring and depicting what higher education teachers perceives as the strengths and weaknesses in the five areas viz., effective teaching, meeting special learners in HE, assessment in HE, classroom problems and innovative solutions and using ICT in classrooms.

Method

Sample

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 college teachers from around the state of Kerala, who were participating in a professional development programme. The average experience in teaching of the sample was 4 years. The ratio of female-male teaches 3:2. The sample included language, social science and science teachers from government and government-aided colleges.

Data collection

Questions raised   during the semi-structured peer interview on the five process areas that were the focus of this study included the following. 1. What is your view of effective teaching in higher education? What method of teaching you most often use? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? How do you meet these weaknesses? You would have used some other method as an innovation and found it better and effective. 2. Please list the problems you often face in your classroom, identify their causes and the ways in which you manage them. 3. How do you perceive the use ICT in your classrooms? What are major problems and causes? What are the innovations you employ in this regard? And, suggestions you have to improve the use of ICT. 4. What in your view is effective assessment in higher education? What method of assessment you most often use? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? How do you meet these weaknesses? What are the merits /demerits of today's assessment practices in higher education? What are your suggestions for improving classroom and terminal assessments in higher education? 5. Please comment on Type of special learners in your institution, their frequency, the facilities your institutions provide to them, problems you feel in relation with these students, and suggestions for improvement. Lists of the possible responses were kept with interviewer in order to make the respondent get over the inertia, if any, to begin with the answer.

Results

Teacher perception of effectiveness of teaching in HE

The percent of teachers who use lecture predominantly, who at the least occasionally use activity or group based methods of teaching, who claim that time constraints the use better effective methods, and those who felt that their competence in their subject is sufficient for effective teaching are plotted in figure 1.
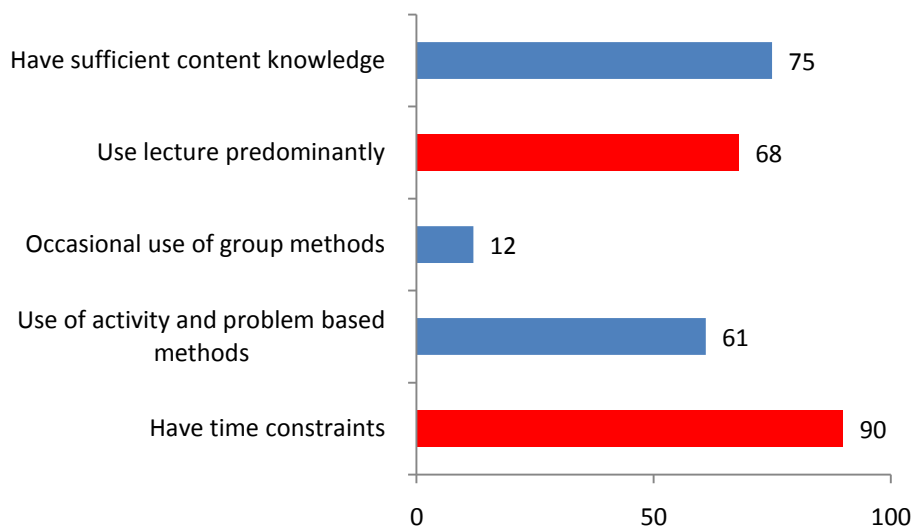

Figure 1. % of Teachers identifying factors (selected via analytic induction) of effectiveness of teaching in HE

Majority of the teachers use lecture method and only a few employ newer methods like activity oriented, demonstration, ICT, and case study. Many teachers spend nearly 40% of lecture time for informal discussion on subjects other than the topic. The teachers are aware of the methods that are used at school level only. Practically, only two of the 50 teachers interviewed mentioned some innovative methods they have experimented in their classrooms. Lack of awareness and knowhow of the choices of methods available for them is perceptible in the teacher responses.

Teacher perception of ICT in HE classroom

The teacher responses revealed that there are adequate number of computers, projectors and infrastructure for use of ICT aids in teaching. The common threads in the teacher responses that the teachers mention in their response on questions regarding use of ICT in classrooms are depicted in figure 2.
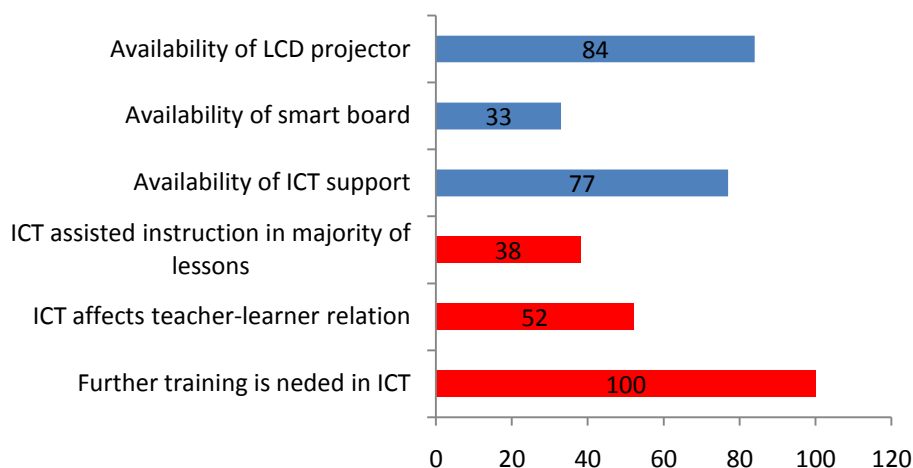
Figure 2. Percentage of teachers who mentioned six factors affecting ICT use in their classrooms

One area mentioned as weak was smart classrooms. In spite of the availability, teachers are not using smart-classrooms for most of their lessons. They feel that use of presentations affect teacher pupil relationship negatively. In spite of this, all of them ask for further training in use of ICT. Whenever these teachers go for presentations to supplement their teaching, 40% of them take 2 to 4 hours for preparing the required materials. Teachers have only very little idea about the ICT facilities and financial and academic supports from various agencies for different categories of special learners. Online video streaming, Podcasting, Audio books, Movie making, and Classroom blogs were not mentioned as available methods for teachers.

Teacher perception of factors affecting their classroom management

While in this study almost all teachers listed a host of factors as affecting learning environment in their classrooms, majority of them take these distractions as granted and feel that they as teachers are not responsible for improving those situations.

The major issues raised by teachers in this respect were:

- Students challenges their knowledge of subject matter
- Student intimidate/disrespect you (teacher)
- Student take advantage of your (teacher) goodwill
- Irregular attendance in classes
- Late coming
- Skipping work, classes, tests
- Cell phone use
- Side conversations during the class
- Disregarding the deadlines

Evidently, classroom management and motivation are areas that need further attention in professional development programmes of teachers in higher education. Teachers have listed

an array of classroom problems and their helplessness in solving these problems. Many site students' lack of motivation and interest in the subject of study as important causes of indiscipline in and out of the class.

Teacher perception of Meeting special needs learners in higher education

The following are the major findings derived from the teacher responses on the state of learning supports for specially-abled learners in their institutions,

Identifying physically challenged and socially challenged learners in classrooms	Physically challenged as many, blind as a few, others very few.
Facilities for SEN learners	Insufficient
Learning supports provided by teacher (other than administrative, financial and library facilities)	Tutorial, peer mentoring (only a few teachers)
Adequacy of counselling centres	Inadequate
Availability of a special co-ordinator for SEN learners	Nil

Teacher responses generally indicated that it is the task of administrators and the government to meet the requirement of special learners and they are more concerned with learners other than SEN categories.

Teacher perception of learner assessment in HE

The major themes that were part of teacher responses on assessment in higher education and their percent of occurrence are plotted in figure 3.
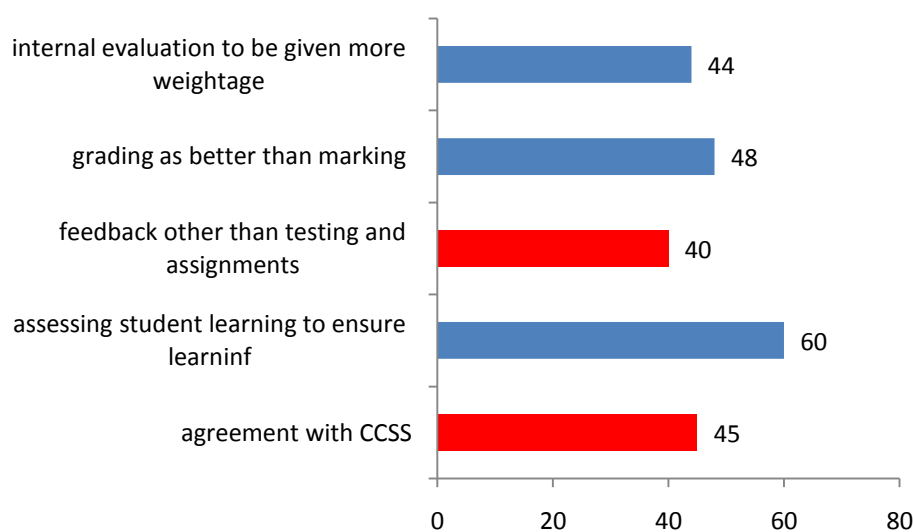

Figure 3. Teacher observations of evaluation system in HE in terms of percent of teachers

Most of the teachers are unaware of the assessment methods other than testing, questioning and assignments. Teachers reveal their inability to correct all the assignments properly owing to time constraints. Generally, teachers feel that assessment of learning is not part of teaching. Only a few collect feedback from students on classroom processes.

Conclusion

As India strives to compete in a globalised economy in areas that require highly trained professionals, the quality of higher education becomes increasingly important. In India, the main governing body at the tertiary level is the University Grants Commission, which enforces its standards, advises the government, and helps coordinate between the centre and the state. Without any doubt, there is a national consensus about the challenges that the higher education sector faces under the present phase of globalization. Majority of the HE teachers use lecture method and only a few employ newer methods like activity oriented, demonstration, ICT, and case study. Many teachers spend nearly 40% of lecture time for informal discussion on subjects other than the topic. Teachers are not aware about the extent of learners with special needs in their classroom. Only very few teachers render special care and attention to these students. Teachers have little idea about the ICT facilities and financial and academic supports from various agencies for different categories of special learners.

ICT increases the flexibility of delivery of education so that learners can access knowledge anytime and from anywhere. It can influence the way students are taught and how they learn as now the processes are learner driven and not directed by teachers. This in turn would better prepare the learners for lifelong learning as well as to contribute to the industry. Facilitating self-learning can improve the quality of learning and thus contribute to the economy. It provides several tangible and intangible benefits for all stakeholders involved in the economic growth of the country. Especially in developing countries like India, effective use of ICT for the purpose of education has the potential to bridge the digital divide. While majority of the teachers identify present evaluation system as ineffective, only a few teachers are aware of alternative methods of evaluation like open book exams, projects and assignments. Many realize the importance of making evaluation flexible, especially in consideration of student background and capacity. Almost all the teachers respond that internal evaluation is farce, owing to the crowded classrooms, lack of time and inter-institutional competition to award high marks. Teachers are unaware of formative evaluation and of how evaluations can facilitate learning.

Teachers have listed an array of classroom problems and their helplessness in solving these problems. Many site students' lack of motivation and interest in the subject of study as important causes of indiscipline in and out of the class. ICT facilities in the classroom and their utilization demonstrate the divide among teachers. Though personal computers and LCD projectors are available in their departments, only 40% of teachers use ICT presentations in their classes. The findings indicate that the process aspect of education has to gain importance in reforms in higher education at par with the administrative, infrastructural and examination reforms.

It is very clear that proper use of methods of instruction only will lead to effective learning. Adequate in-service training should be given to HE teachers to enable them to meet

the classroom problems effectively. Teachers should get training in ICT to meet the technological advancement in the current scenario. Teachers should get a proper awareness of the use of alternative methods of evaluation. A learning supportive environment is required for specially abled learners.

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