An Exploratory Re-Search for Variables Representative Of Academic Quality

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Abstract

Academic institutions have been fundamental contributors of education in the society. From tapping the talents of potential students to shaping them into responsible citizens, academic institutions have at all times played a vital role. This is the reason why quality of academic institutions has been under steady scrutiny for quality. What an institution of higher studies has to offer to students seeking to pursue their studies with it then becomes imperative. The purpose of this study is to provide an insight into the various perceptions as perceived by individuals with respect to quality of academic institution. The objective of this paper is to re-present an overview of the variables critical to the quality of an academic institution of higher studies and to indicate and /or re-emphasize upon factors that stand out important to quality in this domain. A random sample of 398 graduates from varied areas of work and study expressed their opinion about factors that they considered was most significant to academic quality. Interactions, Discussions, interviews, dialogues and questionnaires were used to consolidate the results. This paper presents a list of most extensively cited variables perceived as essential to quality education. These variables are generated from a pilot survey conducted in UAE and is a segment of an ongoing research in the areas of academic quality.

Keywords: Academic quality, Academic Quality Variables, Definitions of Academic Quality, Perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality in academics is a highly contested concept and has multiple meanings for people who both are providers and users. Relying on different authors we could divide the definitions of quality into categories. When defined in terms of excellence, the definition sets a goal for Universities and academies of higher education to be the best. It can include admitting the best school leavers according to specific rankings as presumably the higher quality of input affects the quality of output. (European dimension of institutional quality management 2000) Quality again is irrefutable: a person recognizes quality instinctively (Harvey, Green, 1993). Traditionally, quality is synonymous to special (Lomas, 2002). The Goals of higher education is presented by accreditation councils on a generic note in their mission statements in terms of the program objectives and expected learning outcomes (NAAC other et al.) i.e. the institution says what it does and does what it promises (Scott C Burns, 1996). On the contrary some institutions choose to set a threshold that it proposes to cross in order to certify quality standards (Dill, 2003). Subject to the limitation that this will vary under rapid changing market circumstances, minimum standards are often briefly defined in order to ensure the particular minimum quality of higher education and curricula comparability. Such refinement though excellence stresses academic freedom and autonomy of university in quality assurance (Westerheijden. D, 1998). Autonomous

institutions focus on constant development and thereby raising the threshold by adding goals and increasing the quality by meeting these goals. In higher education the quality of teaching is linked to the effectiveness and of efficient teaching. Effectiveness is connected with the objectives of the curse while efficiency is connected with the resources used in order to meet the objectives. While viewing quality as transformation (Harvey, 1995), the understandings, attitudes and objectives of the student change and evolve in the course of the study processes. The students are the focus of attention and so are their educational needs. The better the university, the better it can meet the goals that include equipping the students with special skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to work and live in the society of knowledge.

1.1 The objective

The purpose of this research is to investigate what individuals seek in terms of quality from an academic institution. The need to reconfirm on the (changing) expectations from the academia is the key drive of the study. The variables that flash to the mind instantly, when academic quality is mentioned were recorded from the participants in the survey. With many of the variables being re-stated as important, this paper will also make an attempt to understand the citations (by the participants) as indicators of more fundamental variables. Considering that universities more often (than not) offer substantially most of what is required, it is interesting to know what parents and students would consider as important when being provided.

2. THE METHODOLOGY

The study was initialized through dialogues with individuals (on a broader beginning) to gather generic information. This was followed by both casual dialogues and focused discussions. Eventually a questionnaire with the fundamental question was distributed and responses gathered. What an educational institute must offer and what it should be doing is a part of the nomenclature. An open question as to what comes to a person's mind when one says 'quality of an academic institution' helped amass an inventory of parameters.

This report is necessarily a part of an ongoing survey of a wider spectrum in the areas of academic quality. The sample was random and the responses were received through mails and in written form (Hard copies). 398 individuals were posed with the question "*What in their opinion were the top 5 parameters critical to the quality of an academic institution?"* along with a host of other questions (beyond the scope of this paper). Alternatively when self administered, the question was also posed as *"What are the 5 factors that come instantly to the mind when one speaks of quality of an academic institution?"*. Discussions with members at different levels of the work-force ranging from Academicians to Physicians, Engineers, Lawyers, working professionals from various sectors, Parents and students as well, also contributed in a substantial way. Some participants insisted on suggesting more than five parameters maintaining that these variables are all bricks of the same wall, even one missing or slightly lesser in quality can make the wall weak. Individuals from different schools of study (Management / Art / Engineering / Medical Sciences etc…) mentioned factors prioritized accordingly, however factors generic to an institution / university was sought for the purpose of this paper.

The population is categorized (not necessarily in any criterion of prominence) as follows; the number indicates the number of participants from the specified group

Group A: Students **(80)**
Group B: Academicians/Researchers/Consultants **(58)**
Group C: Managers / Directors / Sr. Administrators **(66)**
Group D: Executives (Marketing/Sales/Service)/Team leaders/ Supervisors) **(43)**
Group E: Business persons **(19)**
Group F: Engineers/ Designers (Technical)/ Architects **(42)**
Group G: Physicians **(38)**
Group H: Other Professionals (Advocates/ Film makers/ Fashion Designers/ Writers/Photographers/Event Managers) **(12)**
Group I: Miscellaneous (Housewives/ Workers/ Front office executives/ Receptionists/ Personal assistants/ Foremen/ Un-specified) **(40)**

All respondents are graduates (presently employed or with work experience) with 249 post graduates 11 of whom are also Doctorates in their respective fields of specialization. The age-wise fragmentation of the sample is as follows:

Age	**<20**	**20-30**	**30-40**	**40-50**	**50-60**	**>60**
Number of respondents	**7**	**175**	**103**	**75**	**35**	**3**

TABLE 1

The sample-group classified according to the number of years of work experience is as follows:

Experience in years	**0-2**	**2-5**	**5-10**	**10-20**	**>20**
Number of respondents	**9**	**67**	**54**	**51**	**46**

TABLE 2

This survey was conducted between July 2009 and May 2010 as a part of a research study as quoted earlier. The respondents are all expatriates working in the United Arab Emirates.

3. THE SURVEY RESULTS

The respondents listed out a total of 60 factors (each in their own words – see Table. 2), though many factors were overlapping in definition or as mentioned earlier are indicators of a variable at a higher echelon. The top 10 mostly quoted parameters are

Sl. No	**Factor**	**% of respondents who quoted the same**
1	Faculty	72%
2	Infrastructure	62%
3	Placement	55%
4	Fee structure	41%
5	Industry Interface	39%
6	Institutional ranking	32%
7	Discipline and culture	28%
8	Research facilities	26%
9	Evaluation methods	24%
10	Admission process	19%

TABLE 3

4. DISCUSSION: (Refer to Table. 4)

4.1 Citation : Faculty Teaching methods, Mentors, Student faculty interaction, Peer learning, teacher student ratio Efficient head of the institution

With 72% of the respondents stating “FACULTY” as the most important criterion for the good of an institution, it is once again reinstated that good and effective faculty forms the core of an academic institution. Other mentions like ‘Mentors”, “Student-faculty interaction”, “Teacher student ratio” were also used to highlight the importance of faculty. Further, good teachers lead to good teaching methods. A committed and highly rated faculty is always well prepared, structure their lectures well and most of all will deliver effectively. As mentors they encourage student participation in learning and have them actively engaged in proactive thinking towards the subject matter (Kuh, 2003). The intellectual capital of the institutions is the largest contributor to the quality of an academic institution, re-emphasizing the ‘Engagement Theory’ (Howorth J.G & Conrad, 1997) organized around the central idea of faculty involvement in teaching and learning. Intuitively high quality programs (institutions as well) are those which contribute to the learning experiences for students by the faculty that have positive effects on their growth and development.

4.2 Citation : Infrastructure, Laboratories, Library, Resource availability

Following closely at 62% is the need for good infrastructure - an apt physical structure that aids effectual learning. Well equipped Library with easy access to resources both in terms of text books and online resources is next most important factor that individuals look for in an institution that claims of quality. University libraries play a central role as the nucleus of scientific literature (Matos, 1999) and technological advancements in information and communication has hugely raised the significance of a library in university. Equivalently, adequetly facilitated laboratories in universities help both students and their facilitators to be able to conduct research in a less constrained environment, driven less by mission and more by intellectual curiosity, enhancing their scientific productivity. The laboratories were viewed by many as having a strong connection to understanding and comprehending real-life work-situations. (Academics, 2005). It goes without saying that access to up-to-date scientific information is the first condition to quality education and research. Dialogues revealed that while good infrastructure costs, individuals look for the availability before they pay the price. Good physical facilities help create an ambience for good learning and also contribute towards the overall student learning experience.

4.3 Citation : Placement, Industry Interface, Internship, Hands-on experience, Dynamic management sensitive to market changes and industry requirements, Exchange programs & Global interaction, Research facilities

Highly influenced due to recession, respondents have quoted Placement (55%) as the next most potential criteria for academic quality. Campus recruitments should be a part of the package opined most of the professionals from the management and engineering background. What started off as a USP for academic institutions to market themselves is turning out to be a necessity. The need to congregate as much realistic knowledge rather than mere bookish information was also reflected in responses that quote industry interface (39%), internships, hands-on practical experiences, sensitivity to market changes & industry requirements, full-time research conveniences (26%), Exchange programs & Global interaction. This mirrors a certain aggressiveness that is gathering momentum to be able to sustain the rigid competition that explicates today's job market. All Academicians and researchers included in the survey have quoted research facilities as an important factor. Business entrepreneurs and top management members spoke of how important it is for students to be exposed to work culture and job environments before they actually are employed. One of the discussions accentuated the reasons why internships and industry interaction are important quality factors. This has a dual effect said the participants of the discussion-firstly the employer is more at ease to employ graduates who are familiar with work settings in general and secondly a student is more confident as this usually is her/his first full time job-venture. Ample exposure to the industry in terms of the market changes, interactions and opportunities of work (internships and internal research) will broaden the students potential opined the Director of an advertising agency.

4.4 Citation : Fee structure, Scholarships & Economical

"Quality education is an expensive affair", assert parents who are a part of this survey. Despite the high costs of education, demands for good colleges remain high. (Transworld). Though most of the respondents have expressed that they do not want to compromise too much and would as much go to any extent to provide (to themselves or to their kin) quality education, yet it is one of the factors that they will pay attention to. Interestingly, most respondents also acknowledged that after the economic recession that had a world-wide detrimental effect, both *fee structure* and *placements* have escalated up the priority list. Corroborative to this viewpoint is also the need for scholarships and financial aid, be it need based or merit based. Such a facility by the institution not only motivates students to develop a competitive spirit (when merit based) but also opens out the doors to deserving who less privileged (when aid is need based). Education being a private good, one can argue that the economic benefits which a college confers on an individual are sufficient to offset tuition payments-even if the costs are higher than they need to be. (Massy W. F., 2003) An extremely costly course with not much ROI (subject to elucidation) is not preferred. Alternatively, the convenient modes of payment of fees, an economical fee structure, merit-scholarships and financial aid act as antidotes to the ever-increasing cost of education.

4.5 Citation :Institutional ranking, Global recognition, Previous result trends, value of educations, Affiliation and credibility, Accreditation, College reputation, Brand image, Co-education, College management & Administration staff, Admission process Quota free education, Quality of incoming students

Affiliation and accreditation are rightfully the expected parameters of a quality institution. Brand Image, Institutional ranking (32%) and global recognition are tools synonymous of competitive advantage. These parameters ease the decision making process. Other internal factors that govern the quality were quoted as Admission process (19%), un-reserved/Quota free education (owing to the governing rules of the education system the respondent has been to) and the quality of incoming students. Contrary to this some respondents clearly stated that the quality of incoming students is not reflective of the output. An institution of high quality will make the best of the students no matter what the incoming quality is. The outgoing quality is truly reflective of teaching processes and the student learning experiences within the four walls of the institution. This is beneficial for the brand image of the institute thereby affecting the institutional ranking. Accreditation plays a vital role as the community and the government use the system to promote and assure quality and protect public interest (vi). Participants were of the outlook that awareness of the brand image and the global rank of a academic institution makes the job of the choosing between institutions a lot easier. These factors act as value add variables.

4.6 Citation :Discipline & Culture, College environment, Anti ragging, Value & ethics of the institution, Freedom of expression, Student unions, Healthy competition, Security & safety

28% of the respondents were of the outlook the discipline & culture contribute towards a fitting study environment in universities. Discipline transforms inherent ability and learned knowledge into achievement (Davis, 2008). Undesired behavior of students can mar the reputation of an institution and can have an impact on its selling-potential in the market. Concurrently a well-managed classroom can provide students with an exciting and intense learning experience. The Effective Management Model (Kounin, 2007) concentrates around the class-room behavior of the teacher. These above mentioned citations are representative of encouraging behavior forms for teachers which lead to better achievements among the students and fulfill lower rates of problems related to discipline. This also re-establishes the reason why faculty was quoted as the most important criteria for student quality.

4.7 Citation :Evaluation methods (fair and unbiased), Transparency in evaluation, Validity of results, Effective individual assessment, Moral support, Regularity of exams

“Evaluation in a university should be an acid test for every student before she/he strides out through the portals of an academic institution into the outer world”, remarks an academician emphasizing the importance of a meticulous and rigorous evaluation system. 24% of the respondents have included effective and fair evaluation methods as a criterion for a good academic institution. The primary purpose of assessment is for student improvement (NFA, 2007). It stands justified when Regularity of exams, transparency in evaluation, effective individual assessments and flexible grading systems were also quoted as indicators quality. To best serve learning, assessment must be integrated with curriculum and instruction, that redirecting a pointer at the faculty and teaching methods! On the contrary, individuals ascertained that good faculty and learning methods are reflective of sound evaluation. It is but obvious that valid and transparent evaluation comes as a package deal with good faculty.

5. RESULT SUMMARY

The Faculty has emerged as the most preferred variable that governs the quality of an academic institution. A dedicated and competent team of teachers pave the way for a robust education system. Efficient faculty bring with them effective thinking and valuable research thereby emphasizing the need for pertinent infrastructure and resources that facilitate their work. Excellent teaching methods and healthy evaluation practices is a derivative of superior faculty. An economic fee structure and placement facility is more the need of the hour. It is but obvious that quality is also referred to as value for money (Green, 1993); a secure job is fast becoming a quality variable in these post recession times. Graduate Placement and salaries when viewed as quality outcome measures are informative and generally valid in terms of information for potential students and could also be valuable general indicators of effectiveness for academic programs (Dill, 2007). A demand for competence in this regard is indicative of quality education and its monetary value. As is the case in all businesses, the education sector is no exception when it

comes to brand image. An institution that has evolved over time, based on its practices within and contributions to the society in general is subject to the (global) acknowledgment that follows. When an institution acquires a recognition enjoying a positive sentiment (in the market), it logically carves a niche for itself. This makes the option as that of least-risk for potential students who look for quality institutes. To be globally recognized is becoming crucial for all academic institutions in the context of the growing global demand for education and a fiercely competitive environment. Transnational agreements between universities are now common. (Chan, 2006). A wholesome study culture encompassing a healthy competitive environment, student discipline and safety will facilitate transformation of students to a better echelon during their studies and thereafter (Kuh, 1999).

This paper is limited to the variables as prioritized by the participants. Alternatively lesser citations need not be a sign of insignificance. As is obvious and as mentioned by some of the participants all of the variables referred to are bricks in same wall called 'education'. Each variable adds value to the quality of education (and the institution) in larger or smaller proportion. What institutions would need to do is to segregate these variables as Vital, Essential and Desirable, according to their preferences. The responses are also reflective of the educational experiences and the expectations that have been met in terms of success, employment and knowledge gain to name a few. This paper is the beginning to a more intensive and inclusive study to be undertaken, encompassing specific segments of the study disciplines. It is hoped that this will provide an overview of perceptions in general among individuals concerning their expectations and experience of academia. Although this will be of interest, the main value and purpose of this survey (as is the case with any) will be of the use of the results that will indicate significant preferences. (Moller.I, 2002)

6. CONCLUSION

Academic institutions are under continuous review for what they tender terms of quality. University learning comprises of gaining a range of expertise across breadths of facilities made available in the same. Global competition and the ever dynamic market has increased the importance of higher education and synonymously the quality of the same. The aim of this paper is to create an inventory through a primary research the variables critical to academic quality. Responses based on the survey conducted brought out some of the prominent variables most important to the quality of an academic institution. Faculties, Infrastructure, Placements, Fee structure, Industry Interface were observed to be some of the most importantly sought parameters. Dialogues with several individuals also pointed out to the Faculty being the most sought variable. Discussion with respondents also revealed the fact that fee structure and placements become important in the present day scenario of the post-recession market. Although variables such as college discipline and evaluation methods have taken a back seat, it was observed through talks that these were not completely negligible. Some are vital to quality, some essential and some desirable! This paper could serve as hoped for further study and research into a fine tuned list of critical factors, their current trends both global and specific to an institution, their significances, and proposals for improvement or simply *status quo*.

TABLE 4: Table showing variables listed by respondents

Sl.no	Variable	Total number of respondents who quoted the variable	% of respondents
1	Faculty	286	72%
2	Infrastructure	247	62%
3	Placement	219	55%
4	Fee structure	163	41%
5	Industry Interface	154	39%
6	Institutional ranking	126	32%
7	Discipline and culture	113	28%
8	Research facilities	102	26%
9	Evaluation methods	97	24%
10	Admission process	75	19%
11	Geographical location	69	17%

12	Global recognition	41	10%
13	Teaching methods	37	9%
14	Course curriculum	33	8%
15	Mentors	31	8%
16	Transparency in evaluation	23	6%
17	Internship & hands-on experience	17	4%
18	College Environment	16	4%
19	Previous result trends	15	4%
20	Dynamic Management (sensitive to market changes)	12	3%
21	Scholarships	10	3%
22	Validity of results	9	2%
23	Program flexibility	8	2%
24	Student faculty interaction	6	2%
25	Sports and co-curricular activities	6	2%
26	Anti-ragging	5	1%
27	Hostel facilities	5	1%
28	Value of education	5	1%
29	Lab& Library access	4	1%
30	NCC/Community service	4	1%
31	Affiliation & credibility	4	1%
32	Extracurricular activities	3	1%
33	Values and ethics of the Institution	3	1%
34	Accreditation	3	1%
35	Peer Learning	3	1%
36	College reputation & Brand image	3	1%
37	Course popularity & demand	3	1%
38	Exchange programs and global interaction	2	1%
39	Teacher -student ratio	2	1%
40	Quality of Incoming students	2	1%
41	Efficient head of the Institution	2	1%
42	College management & Admin staff	2	1%
43	Resource availability	2	1%
44	Security and safety of students	2	1%
45	Course material preparation	1	-
46	Effective individual assessment & Moral support	1	-
47	Freedom of expression	1	-
48	Networking and tie-up with other colleges and universities	1	-
49	Student commitment	1	-
50	Student Services (Medical/counseling)	1	-
51	Student activity rooms	1	-
52	Student Unions	1	-
53	Alumni Feedback	1	-
54	Academic Performance of students	1	-
55	Time flexibility	1	-
56	Economical	1	-
57	Healthy competition (without reservations)	1	-
58	Regularity of exams	1	-
59	Co-education	1	-
60	Quota free education	1	-

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