REFORMING THE EVALUATION SYSTEM: ACTION PLANS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Evaluation in higher education in India has so far been largely centred on examinations. Assessments only at the end of the academic session or year, more often than not, insulate students from the quest of knowledge, the excitement of discovery and joy of learning, they often, along with marks and divisions, lead to insensitive cramming up of superficial information. Realising these flaws in the prevalent system, the need is to move away from use of traditional approaches towards alternative, more inclusive means of determining what learners know and can do. We have to modify the past principle of evaluation from 'survival of the fittest' to suit the current need as 'fit all of them to survive'. To accomplish this several action plans need to be introduced and incorporated in the prevailing evaluation system.

Keywords: *Reforming, Evaluation System, Action Plans, Higher Education, India*

Introduction

In India, examinations play a pivotal role and are a major deciding factor of career choices of students, their ability to pursue the right higher qualifications and to determine the degree of knowledge attained by them. The global competitive forces and the wave of disruptions in various sectors, primarily services and industry, have brought in sweeping changes both in terms of skill requirement and the decision making capabilities of human resources, thereby exerting tremendous pressure to perform in complex situations. However, evaluation system currently existing in the higher education sector fails to assess students comprehensively and is a matter of concern. Prevailing examination system tests rote learning and emphasises memory based recall and recognition. Demands from new-age professions require students not just to possess information but apply it to every situation either routine or complex. This necessitates pressure on students to perform to the best of their abilities. Memory-based learning may be required but not adequate to perform in the challenging environment that currently prevails. There is, therefore, a need to impart and assess knowledge and skills of higher order thinking and ability.

Standardisation of assessment has its flaws as every student differs in terms of intellect and ability and as such one tool of measurement is akin to 'one size fits all', which fails to identify genuine abilities and potential of students. Evaluation system, in its current form is a cause of stress and anxiety for students. Coupled to this are issues of malpractices which impact its credibility. Parameters of testing and assessment need a relook and reorientation so as to create the new generation knowledge workers. Ameliorative steps have become necessary to ensure credibility and the desired outcome of the evaluation system. There is a need to have more horizontal assessment modes rather than one single vertical mode that decides fate of students. Reforms in evaluation system should thus aim at overall development of students and at the same time maintain national and global standards of higher education.

Rationale for Evaluation Reforms

Education is conceptualized as a tri-polar process with its three poles being:
- Educational Aims and Objectives
- Curriculum, Methods and Materials
- Evaluation and Feedback

The three are closely inter-connected with mutual synergic interdependence. In this triangular structure, evaluation is the process of assessing how far the students have progressed towards educational goals as a result of the implementation of various curricular and co-curricular activities. It involves a series of activities that are designed to measure the effectiveness of the teaching-learning system as a whole. The key stages in evaluation are collection of evidence, its interpretation, judgement of value and follow-up action. Each stage is essential, but over the decades, in India, evaluation in higher education has mainly centred on annual or term-end examinations. The entire effort put in by the teachers on teaching and the student on learning is centred on getting good results in the examinations. The prevailing system aims at finishing the syllabi without any consideration of adding value to the students or the system. The existing structure leads to cramming of 'superficial' information and its reproduction. Thus, examinations have been overriding the process of education and its evaluation, and are a matter of concern for stakeholders. Several committees and commissions have been constituted from time to time to suggest reforms in education in general and evaluation in particular. The basic aim of these reforms is to develop and maintain physical, mental and spiritual aspects of our future generations and make them responsive and reflective individuals.

Objectives of Evaluation in Higher Education

The latest concept of evaluation distinguishes between three notions of assessment:
- Assessment of Learning (Summative, judgemental)
- Assessment for Learning (Formative, improvement oriented) and
- Assessment as Learning (part of the learning process)

In view of the recent focus on Learner-Centric Education, 'Assessment as Learning' is gaining increasing importance as in this approach the students, being partners in the assessment process, use opportunities of evaluation to sharpen their own metacognitive and higher order thinking skills. There is, thus, increased interest in moving away from assessment of learning, not only towards assessment for learning, but also assessment as learning where the assessment process becomes part of learning and students reflect on and assess their own learning. Therefore, our evaluation system needs to be reformed on priority bases considering the following objectives of evaluation in higher education:

- To help implement a sustainable assessment process to promote flexibility and freedom for students to acquire knowledge, skills, desirable attitudes leading to high order decision-making and problem solving abilities.
- To assure the pursuance of a Quality and Value-Based system of Education.
- To inquire, demonstrate, and improve student learning and performance.
- To provide feedback and insight for continuous improvement in the teaching-learning process.
- To determine the merit, value and worth of the educational system and its components.
- To ensure advancement towards national and global concerns/ goals.
- To evaluate and report programme and course learning outcomes.
- To provide opportunities for display of different attributes of learners.
- To promote valid, reliable and transparent assessment procedures.
- To establish and maintain national and global standards in Higher Education.

Action Plans for Improvement

Taking into consideration the aforementioned objectives of evaluation the following action plans for its improvement are recommended:

Learning Outcome based Education and Evaluation

This is a dynamic and flexible framework which allows institutions to design their programme education objectives to evolve continuously along with the evolution of social systems, ever-changing national and global interests. It advocates the importance of establishing a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, organising the curriculum, instruction and assessment to make sure that learning happens. This approach helps to focus on utilisation of appropriate instructions and pedagogy, helps organise teaching and learning processes around career advancement and placement of students, helps in selection and design of appropriate assessment modes.

The core philosophy of this approach rests in adhering to student-centric learning approach to measure students' performance based on predetermined set of outcomes. Significant advantage of this approach is in bringing out reforms in curriculum framework that has to be outcome based, constant upgradation of academic resources, raising quality of research and teaching, technology integration in the teaching learning processes, bringing out clarity in students as to what is expected of them after completion of programme and for teachers in bringing focus on what to teach, how to teach and evaluate.

Continuous and Comprehensive Internal Evaluation

The basic argument for continuous and comprehensive internal assessment arises out of the rather fragmentary nature of much of our present day assessment. In order to evaluate each individual student as objectively as possible, it is necessary to break down the student's total performance or total behaviour pattern in relation to a particular course of study and its records need to be maintained. Continuous and comprehensive assessment in one sense simply means gaining more and better information about the student's behaviour modification in due course.

Continuous and Comprehensive Internal Assessment should be comprehensive evaluating all those aspects of the student's growth that are measured by the external examination and also his personality traits, interests and attitudes which cannot be assessed by it. It should be built into total educational programme and should be used for improvement rather than for certifying the level of achievements of the student. Comprehensive evaluation implies that it will cover all the aspects of curriculum and will assess the scholastic and non-scholastic potentials of the students. Our system of examination tends to measure the scholastic ability of the students only, and in that to, the degree of the accuracy cannot be ascertained. In Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation, the emphasis shifts from classifying the learners into classes or division in the examinations to their all-round development. Keeping this in view, various learning experiences should be provided during the course of study.

Expected outcomes of learning cannot be confined to the cognitive domain only. Other domains like affective and the psycho-motor are equally important. Comprehensive evaluation seeks to include all those aspects and areas of personality which are amenable to evaluation such as personal and social qualities, interests, desirable attitudes, health status, and proficiency in co-curricular activities.

Continuous and comprehensive assessment is not an end in itself. As it presents a happy combination of external and internal evaluation it offers opportunities to teachers to make suitable changes in their efforts. Continuous feedback also provides direction to students and parents and to all those concerned for remedial steps. The higher education system requires continuous and comprehensive evaluation system that incorporates both scholastic and non-scholastic aspects of education. It is important to emphasise that

memorization should be discouraged and improvement in a system is possible only when the right blend of internal and external evaluation is done.

On-Demand Examination

The existing system of examination being practiced in higher education is largely the annual system with some exceptions following the semester system. The future prospects of the students centre on their performance in this single examination. These exams are conducted on fixed dates as per the institutions' calendar. This examination schedule has no relation to the individual conditions and requirements of the students, however urgent these might be. This leads to building up of massive stress and anxiety among them often leading to tragic results. The purpose of the system in gauging the true ability or best performance of the leaners, at best, gets defeated. It is clear that the present examination system needs to be reformed to make it more learners friendly and flexible in the process of evaluation. ICT based On-Demand Examination can be a boon for students as it will free the examination system of its inflexible time frame allowing the students to take examination when they are prepared, creating students autonomy and enabling them rather than disabling them.

On-Demand exam is an individualized system of examination in which students opt to take an examination as per their convenience or preparedness. It is implemented through automated generation of question papers as per demand based on a comprehensive set of learning objectives to be assessed, comprehensive coverage of content to be assessed, varying difficulty levels and weightages to be given to different types of questions. It helps in reducing the stress of examination among students as the threat of failure or poor performance is reduced. There is a scope for self-improvement as one can give exam as many times as one wants till satisfied without any boundation of time frame. Students will be assessed only when they will be prepared, readiness of giving exam will depend on the learner not on the teacher or institution. In this way this is an innovative and learner centric way of evaluation. Results are communicated instantaneously which acts as a strong motivator. It will act as a medium for standardized quality testing especially if developed by experts from several universities. It will help in reduced malpractices as for each individual student, question paper will be different having comparable difficulty level and once the set of questions is given the same will be blocked for the other student. It will help in reduction in cost of duplicating large number of question papers, reducing the dependency on external paper setter and reduction in the work load of teachers. Above all, it will help in respecting the uniqueness and independence of learners.

Moderation Process

Moderation of assessment is an organized procedure which ensures use of valid assessment material and consistent application of criteria, to provide fair academic judgement and reliable outcome. It assures appropriate designing and implementation of assessment activities along with generation of valid and reliable results.

Moderation checks, acknowledges and addresses any difference in individual judgments of different markers. Assessors/ markers come together to develop a common understanding of the standards and criteria as well as recognition of performance which demonstrates that standard or fulfils that criteria.

It is an evidence based judgement of student achievement where the samples of assessed material are collected and compared against the frame of reference. It ensures that all achievements in the form of marks and grades reflect achievement of same level of standard.

Moderation acts as a form of a quality assurance by generating confidence of students and teachers in the quality of the entire procedure and outcome of assessment. Its role shall not be viewed as that of an accountability check for teachers but indeed it promotes changes in pedagogy, leading to improvements in learning outcomes. Thus, moderation is not an optional addition but an essential component of the evaluation system. It is a key element of a credible evaluation system, a quality audit for assuring validity, reliability, fairness and transparency in assessment across and within higher education system.

Technology Integration

With the proliferation of different types of access devices, technology has the potential to revolutionise learning and evaluation methods. In the conduct of examinations, institutions face tremendous challenges such as need for trained manpower, distribution of question papers without delays and errors, delays in evaluation of answer scripts, lack of infrastructure to conduct examinations on a large scale, non-availability of faculty members for assessment, security issues faced during paper setting and paper distribution, tampering of answer scripts and certificates, etc.

Automation is required right from registration of students to declaration and disbursement of results through an integrated system. Steps must be taken to implement a complete evaluation management system that considers the complete cycle of evaluation process. The use of technology will reduce dependency on humans and be error free. It will assist in assessment and evaluation in an efficient manner and lead to timely availability of information to all stakeholders.

Discussion

In the garb of evaluation, examinations have been dominating the whole educational process in higher education, and are a matter of serious concern for stakeholders. Several major interventions have been made from time to time to bring about a comprehensive and positive change in the process of evaluation. During the post-independence period, the University Education Commission (1948-49), for the first time, took cognizance of improvement of examinations seriously. It expressed, "if we are to make a single recommendation for the whole university education, it should be that of improvement of examinations". The concept of continuous and comprehensive evaluation germinated when the Commission emphasized the need of internal assessment, objective testing and construction of batteries of psychological and achievement tests. The Secondary Education Commission (1952 - 53) stressed the need for reducing number of external examinations, the subjectivity of essay type questions, emphasis on internal assessment, use of symbolic rather than numerical marking, etc. The Education Commission (1964-66) considered evaluation as a continuous process integral to the total system of education. Use of grades in place of marks, improving quality of evaluation instructions, question banks, internal assessment, continuous and comprehensive evaluation were also stressed by the UGC's(University Grants Commission) Examination Reforms Programme- An Action Plan (1972), the National Policy on Education (1986), and the NCERT's(National Council of Educational Research and Training) National Curriculum Framework (2000). Examination reforms is one of the building blocks of MHRD's (Ministry of Human Resource and Development) Rashtriya Uchchattar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) 2013 plan which lays emphasis on introduction of academic credits, important curriculum changes, new evaluation procedures and adoption of semester system.

The justification for evaluation reforms arises from academic considerations. Evaluation along with teaching and learning, in fact, constitutes the trinity of functions in the educational process. Examinations over the years have tended to be an instrument for testing memory. Learning has become a rather mechanical process of acquiring skills and teaching has been largely a process of coaching for examinations. The relationship between examinations and standards of teaching and learning are intimate. Improvement in any one of these aspects results in improvement of other aspects as well. Therefore, the objective of evaluation reforms is to make it an instrument of good education.

Evaluation reforms cannot be construed as an isolated activity to bring about process orientation. It has to go as a package along with reforms in the structuring of courses and flexibility for students to avail the restructured courses according to their convenience. The package as a whole should be implemented instead of in piecemeal and ad-hoc implementation of individual elements.

Evaluation reforms have to necessarily be contextual and evolutionary. The essentiality of evaluation reforms cannot be overstated. A strong and coordinated effort should be made by the government in this

area. The idea underlying the constitution of an Evaluation Reforms Commission is appealing which would develop an effective mechanism for coordination, monitoring and evaluation of implementation of reforms.

Conclusion

From the aforementioned discussion it is evident that after the dawn of independence, when the slogan of reorientation of education came from all quarters, the case for evaluation reforms received proper place. The subject has been of serious consideration by various committees and commissions appointed by government of India from time to time. Evaluation reforms also have their justification from the point of view of equity and social justice. The system tilts heavily in favour of the privileged, which have access to certain facilities; such as special teaching learning material, special coaching etc. It is advisable to rectify this inequitable tilt by taking steps in the right direction. Still then, the disease is too acute to find remedy in piece-meal reforms. Revolutionary changes, is the only solution for keeping at par with the rest of the world in the 21st century.

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