

## “Quality Improvement in Higher Education through Skilled Based Programs”

**Mr. Chiragkumar Babubhai Solanki**

**Assistant Professor, Shri I. J. Patel B.Ed. College, Mogri, Anand**

### Quality Assurance - Multi-models of quality in education

Some other rapidly developing societies in the Asia-Pacific region have been facing similar problems of education quality in development of education. Also, there are different types of educational reform in search of education quality in developed countries such as the USA, UK, and Australia (Cheng, 1994a, 1996). Responding to the rapidly growing concern about education quality in the international and local contexts, this paper aims at developing a framework of multi-models of quality in education for facilitating practice, supporting policy making, and developing research agendas.

#### General conception of education quality

In the management literature, the term quality has different meanings and has been variously defined as excellence, value, fitness for use, conformance to specifications, conformance to requirement, defect avoidance, meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations, etc. There seems to be no consensus definition even though most of these definitions are highly correlated. Similarly, education quality is a rather vague and controversial concept in research and policy discussion. To different people, the definition may be different and so the indicators used to describe education quality may be different. Some may emphasize the quality of inputs to the education systems whereas others emphasize the quality of processes and outcomes. No matter whether referring to input, process, outcome, or all of these, the definition of education quality may often be associated with fitness for use, the satisfaction of the needs of strategic constituencies (e.g. policy makers, parents, school management committee, teachers, students, etc.) or conformance to strategic constituencies' requirements and expectations.

**‘...education quality is a multi- dimensional concept and cannot be easily assessed by only one indicator...’**

Borrowing the ideas from total quality management (Tenner and Detoro, 1992) and system approach, Cheng (1995a) defined education quality as follows:

Education quality is the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations.

For assessing school education quality, different indicators may be developed to give information about the performance of an education institution in different aspects of input, process, and outcome. The difference in the choice of and the emphasis on indicators may reflect the diverse interests and expectations among the concerned constituencies and also the different management strategies used to achieve education quality under certain environmental constraints within a certain time frame. In other words, based on different conceptions of education quality and different concerns about achievement of education quality, different people may use different indicators to assess education quality and different

strategies to achieve education quality. The focus of these indicators and strategies may not necessarily include all aspects of the input, process, and outcome of an education institution.

### Models of quality in education

In order to understand the complex nature of education quality and to develop management strategies for achieving it, it should be necessary to review the different conceptions or models of education quality explicitly or implicitly held by concerned constituencies in practice or by scholars in research. In the past decades, research on organizational effectiveness and school effectiveness has brought forth fruitful results and has guided many of the improvement endeavors, yet relatively little research has been done on the topic of education quality (Cheng, 1995a). If we believe that both effectiveness and quality are the concepts used to understand performance of an education institution in providing educational services, we can expect that the literature of effectiveness may be borrowed to understand and conceptualize quality in education institutions. Based on the models of organizational effectiveness and school effectiveness summarized by Cameron and Whetten (1983) and Cheng (1990, 1996), seven models of education quality can be proposed to illustrate the different conceptions that can be used to deepen understanding and develop management strategies.

#### **1. The goal and specification model**

This model sees education quality as achievement of stated goals and conformance to given specifications. The goal and specification model is often used in the assessment of education quality of individual institutions or education systems in a country. It assumes that there are clear, enduring, normative and well-accepted goals and specifications as indicators and standards for education institutions or education systems to pursue or conform to. An education institution is deemed to be of good education quality if it has achieved the stated goals or conformed to the specifications listed in the institutional plan or programme plans. Typical examples of quality indicators may include students' academic achievements, attendance rate, dropout rate, and personal developments, number of graduates enrolled in universities or graduate schools, professional qualifications of staff, etc. This model is useful if the goals and specifications used for judging education quality are clear and accepted by all involved constituencies, and that there are appropriate indicators which one can use to evaluate whether the institutions have attained the prescribed education standards. An advantage of this model of education quality is that it enables the institution management to focus attention on key components of education programmes.

#### **2. The resource-input model**

This model is useful if the connections between quality of inputs and outputs are clear (Cameron, 1984) and the resources are very limited for education institutions to achieve stated goals or conform to given specifications. In some Asian countries and cities (e.g. Hong Kong), quality student input is often seen as an important indicator of an education institution's success. Attraction of high quality student input seems to be a "necessary" condition for some institutions to become successful or achieve high academic performance in examinations. It is often believed that students from low socio-economic status families may bring a lot of behavioural and criminal problems from the community, which seriously

hinder the educational process. In order to help problem students, more resources are needed, if they are not reallocated from other institutional purposes. The capacity of acquiring scarce and quality resources represents the potential of an education institution that can promise high education quality particularly in a context of great resource competition. To some extent, the model redresses the limitation of the goal and specification model, linking education quality to the environmental context and resources input.

**‘...the process model assumes that an educational institution is of high education quality if its internal functioning is smooth and “healthy”...’**

Obviously, this model has its defects because its overemphasis only on acquisition of inputs may reduce the institutional effort put into educational processes and outputs. The acquired resources may become wastage if they cannot be used efficiently to enhance quality of process and outcomes.

### **3. The process model**

In this model education quality is seen as smooth and healthy internal process and fruitful learning experiences. The process in an education institution is a transformational process which converts inputs into performance and output. A smooth internal institutional process enables staff to perform the teaching task effectively and students to gain fruitful learning experiences easily. The nature and quality of the institution of process often determine the quality of output and the degree to which the planned goals can be achieved. Particularly in education, experience in process is often taken as a form of educational aims and outcomes. Therefore, the process model assumes that an educational institution is of high education quality if its internal functioning is smooth and “healthy”. Important internal activities or practices in the educational institution are often taken as the important indicators of education. Leadership, communication channels, participation, co-ordination, adaptability, planning, decision making, social interactions, social climate, teaching methods, classroom management, learning strategies, and learning experiences are often used as indicators of education quality. The process in an educational institution generally includes management process, teaching process, and learning process. Thus the selection of indicators may be based on these processes, classified as management quality indicators (e.g. leadership, decision making), teaching quality indicators (e.g. teaching efficacy, teaching methods), and learning quality indicators (e.g. learning attitudes, attendance rate).

The process model has its limitations, such as the difficulty in monitoring processes and gathering related data, and the focus on quality of means instead of quality of ends.

### **4. The satisfaction model**

According to this model education quality is defined as the satisfaction of strategic constituencies. The satisfaction model assumes that the satisfaction of strategic constituencies of an educational institution is critical to its survival (Cheng, 1990) and therefore education quality should be determined by the extent to which the performance of an educational institution can satisfy the needs and expectations of its powerful constituencies. In the school setting, the powerful constituencies may include teachers, management board members, parents, students, alumni, and officers at the education department. Education quality may be a relative concept, depending on the expectations of concerned constituencies or parties. If expected education quality is high and diverse, it will be difficult for institutions to achieve it

and satisfy the needs of multiple constituencies. If expected education quality is low and simple, of course it will be easier for educational institutions to achieve it and satisfy the expectations of constituencies so that educational institutions may be perceived as high quality more easily. Furthermore, the objective measurement of quality achievement is often technically difficult and conceptually controversial. Therefore satisfaction of powerful constituencies is often used instead of some objective indicators as the critical element to assess quality in education institution. This model emphasizing satisfaction of clients or conformance to clients' expectations or specifications is the very popular model used in the business sector to assess quality.

**'...if the demands of powerful constituencies conflict and cannot be satisfied at the same time, the model may not be appropriate...'**

### **5. The legitimacy model**

**The legitimacy model assumes that an educational institution needs to be accepted and supported by the community in order to survive and achieve its mission. Along this line of thinking, the indicators of education quality are often related to the activities and achievements of public relations and marketing, accountability, public image, reputation, or status in the community, etc. Educational institutions should operate educational programmes which conform to the ethical and moral norms of the community in order to gain legitimacy. They also need to promote their own image, in such ways as participating in district-wide contests, organizing exhibitions of students' work, maintaining a good relationship with district leaders, etc.**

The model is useful when the survival and demise of educational institutions must be assessed in a changing environment. For example, in some old districts, the student population reduces quickly and some education institutions or schools have to be closed if not enough parents are willing to send their children to them. Among the educational institutions at risk, only those successfully striving for legitimacy or better public relations with the community can survive. From the standpoint of this model, educational institutions are of high education quality if they can survive in a competing environment.

The current emphasis on parental choice and accountability in educational reforms in both Western and Eastern societies seems to support the importance of the legitimacy model for assessing school education quality. Increase in parental choice of educational institutions may create a competitive market environment in which educational institutions have to compete and try their best to provide high quality educational services for the needs of parents. Also, the implementation of accountability systems or quality assurance systems provides a formal mechanism for educational institutions to gain the necessary legitimacy for survival. This can explain why so many educational institutions nowadays are paying more attention to public relations, marketing activities, and building up school-based accountability systems or quality assurance systems.

## 6. The absence of problems model

According to this model education quality means the absence of problems and troubles. Borrowing the idea of the ineffectiveness model (Cameron, 1984), it is often easier to recognize problems in an institution than to identify its quality because appropriate indicators and measurement techniques which can provide concrete evidence of quality are often difficult to obtain. Hence, instead of looking for quality in an education programme, one inspects the educational institution to check whether problems exist.

**‘...identifying strategies for the improvement of an educational institution can be more precisely done by analysing problems and defects as opposed to education quality...’**

The absence of problems model assumes that if there is an absence of problems, troubles, defects, weaknesses, difficulties, and dysfunctions in an educational institution, this institution is of high education quality. Problems and deficiencies signal warnings to the administration that some aspects of education quality may be lacking. Hence, during a inspection on an education institution, if no apparent problem arises from its operation, then this institution is assumed to be running smoothly and is fulfilling its educational objectives. This is perhaps the oldest concept of quality in use in industry (Feigenbaum, 1951). Quality control experts tend to look at quality as meaning less scrap, rework, warranty costs, etc., for the final product. The management team of an educational institution may set up stringent quality assurance and monitoring system in order to ensure a deficiency-free environment.

## 7. The organizational learning model

Here education quality is considered to mean continuous development and improvement. The changing educational environment is producing great impacts on nearly every aspect of functioning in education institutions. There seems to be no static factor or single practice that contributes to education quality forever. Some practices may be good at a certain time but not at another. Therefore, how to deal with environmental impacts and internal process problems is an key issue in assessing whether an educational institution can provide quality service continuously.

The organizational learning model assumes that education quality is a dynamic concept involving continuous improvement and development of members, practices, process, and outcomes of an educational institution. A number of researchers have indicated that organizations, like human beings, can be empowered to learn and innovate to provide quality services

To some extent, this model is similar to the process model. The difference is that this model emphasizes the importance of learning behavior for ensuring quality in education; whether the internal process is currently smooth is not so critical. This line of thinking supports the current emphasis of strategic management and development planning in education (Dempster *et al.*, 1993; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991). The model is particularly useful when educational institutions are developing or involved in educational reform, particularly in a changing external environment. The indicators of education quality may include awareness of community needs and changes, internal process monitoring, programme evaluation, environmental analysis, development planning, etc.

**‘...procuring scarce resources for effective functioning and ensuring smooth and healthy internal processes and fruitful learning experiences are critical in order to achieve stated goals and produce high quality educational outcomes...’**

In developing countries, there are many new educational institutions because of the expansion of the education systems. The new institutions have to face many problems in establishing organizational structures, educational processes, dealing with poor quality students, developing staff, and struggling against adverse influences from the community. Also, changes in the economic and political environment demand an effective adaptation of the education system in terms of curriculum change, management change, and technology change (Cheng, 1995b). Against such a background, this organizational learning model may be appropriate for studying education quality. Obviously, the usefulness of this model will be limited if the connection between organizational learning process and educational outcomes is not clear. For example, some old educational institutions have their prestige traditions that can attract a high quality student input. Even though they may lack organizational learning, they can still win relatively high student achievement and high status in the community.

#### Conclusion:-

The seven models have their own strengths and weaknesses, with emphasis on different aspects of the process for pursuing quality in education. Their applicability is not universal in all situations and their usefulness is often limited by contextual conditions. One model may be applicable in some specific contexts but not in others. As discussed above, some illustrations of the conditions for usefulness of these models have been summarized.

The above seven models can provide a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing and understanding education quality from different perspectives. Obviously, the above analysis is based on the transfer of management theory to the field of education. The limitations and implications of this international or cross-cultural transfer for education institutions at different levels may need further analysis and testing in a future study. Hopefully, this preliminary framework can contribute to the development of research, practice, management, and policy for education quality in current educational reforms in both local and international contexts.

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