ACADEMIC AUDIT …THE CHALLENGE OF INSTITUTIONAL INTROSPECTION AT A GLANCE ....!

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Abstract –
It is a well-known fact that higher education system in India has become stagnant since 1960. Although the number of institutions has grown by leaps & bounds over last twenty years no much changes have been done to the curriculum/syllabus. The wide gap between what the industry or work arena wants and the skills, knowledge and aptitude of the graduates, engineers or post graduates of any stream is seriously alarming. Un-employability is the root cause of massive unemployment in our country today. The unending blame game begins with teaching pedagogy at School levels and ends with organizing of high scale debates, conferences seminars of intellectuals pondering over the facts & figures, time & again.
The concept of academic audit is relatively new for the higher education sector in India while it has been already in practice abroad.
An academic audit is a systematic analysis of teaching pedagogy, curricula content and changes or modifications needed therein for creating sound knowledge base and improving employability of the graduating candidates of any stream.

This article is an honest effort to address the need of academic audit in higher education in India and also to put forth few suggestions for planning and implementation of the same.
Keywords: Academic Audit, the need of the hour, education, challenges in, technical education, employability.

Introduction
Academic audit should be a regular exercise for every educational institution. In a vast country like India it is quite difficult to introduce an uniform methodology to conduct academic audit. Mostly the routine inspection done by officials of higher education department or concerned universities at the time of renewal of affiliation, is considered to be good enough for validation of the credibility of the given institution. However, it is surely an inadequate measure to establish the authenticity of course curricula and the related contribution it makes to students’ progress, learning & development.
The educational system in India is today in a critical state – resistant to change. It is in danger of soon becoming irrelevant. Since Independence, though many commissions have submitted their reports and many eminent men have propounded their plans for rejuvenating the system, there has always been a wide gap between the plan and the action leaving the system still stranded on the roads. This large system of higher education deserves that action must be taken
periodically to assess its performance, to conduct academic audits and also provide a system for its assessment and accreditation. The country is now becoming a global hub for educational activities and a main centre for all kinds of international man-power requirement. There is a growing need for providing quality education with standard curriculum which is globally acceptable. The NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) of India has evolved certain benchmarks for ascertaining and ensuring quality at different levels of Higher Education. During the last decade, Universities in India have taken serious note of these emerging needs and demands and trying to update the curriculum, design new Programs and offer better educational services. By establishing Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQAC) and conducting External Quality Assurance checks it has been possible to go for a Total Quality Management (TQM) in an Academic Institution.

The educational institutions are required to take care of three stakeholders — students, faculty members and the industry. Industry - academic interface is extremely important as it can enhance the employability of students. Usually it is limited to providing quality inputs through guest lectures or visiting faculty. Such efforts are not enough and the learning received by students is short-lived or negligible. Senior officers retired from the industry who like to “contribute to the society” are readily available as guest lecturers or visiting faculty. This implies that the burden of providing quality education lies mainly on the faculty members along with training & placement officers. It is necessary, therefore, that the teaching faculty has some industry experience and practical knowledge about the concerned subjects. This is possible only when mere academic qualifications would not suffice for getting a teaching job particularly in college providing higher education. Actually value education and soft skills training should begin right from class fifth onwards so that the students are equipped to become job ready after graduation.

Generally speaking, the fundamental objective of students is to get a good academic record and a graduate or post graduate degree certificate. The faculty aims to get a good feedback. Students believe that they have taken admission mainly for getting a degree. They perceive that the degree certificate is a passport for getting employed and they can get it by paying the fees and passing the examination. Tuition or coaching classes are a big business due to high demand from students as they need additional lessons to understand the given subjects. This means students largely feel that regular class room teaching by faculty members is inadequate to obtain good grades in the examinations. Guides, notes and e-books are available in plenty. Excessive information available on the Internet and the ease of reading casually before the exams has certainly aggravated the problem. Students presume and understand conveniently that the syllabus is outdated and the gap between what is taught and what is actually required by industry is huge. Higher education being very expensive, a large number of developing countries including India cannot offer it to all who want it. It will be much worse to provide higher education without proper and reasonable facilities. In fact this is what is being actually done by many of the universities and colleges with the regrettable result that unemployable graduates are being produced in large numbers.

That is why the top management of good academic institutions should be worried about using an appropriate tool for measuring the adequacy of
teaching input. “Academic Audit” with the approach of institutional introspection is the need of the time for such schools, colleges and universities. The Higher Educational Institutions in India are expected to go through stringent quality assessment procedure by an external peer review, and series of accreditation based on a set of predetermined academic and administrative audit criteria. Accreditation and Re-accreditation have become regular processes for showing continuous improvement. The monitoring and evaluation of the institutional processes require a carefully structured system of internal and external introspection. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) expects the Institutions to undertake continuous Academic and Administrative Audits by external peers, after every Assessment and Accreditation. This is an important step to evaluate independently as to how well the improvement processes are taking place and what more needs to be done. Not many Institutions are prepared to undertake this step mainly due to their reluctance to expose their weaknesses. Higher education Institutions which strive to attain excellence are always on the move to contribute more to the growth and development of Education System. Academic audit provides an opportunity for a systematic analysis and overview of an institution’s teaching-learning pedagogy. This helps the top management to re-assure themselves of the quality of the teaching process. Ideally the academic audit should be carried out once in three years.

The specific distinct features of the process of academic audit are:

- It is carried out at institutional level and is reviewed independently.
- It also involves self-evaluation carried out by the key members of the college.
- The study reviewed by an external evaluator helps in better objectivity.
- The audit comprises evaluation of the entire range of college activities which enables a balanced recommendation by the audit panel.

The academic audit focuses on the following:

- The courses and programs offered by the institution are duly approved/recognized by the concerned university, academic council or board of studies.
- The activities and programs being conducted are in line with the objectives intended by the top management.
- The academic programs are efficiently and effectively serving the purpose intended by the authorities.
- The activities and programs being conducted and funds expended are in compliance with the applicable laws.
- All the necessary operating, administrative procedures and practices, systems, are in place.
- Whether the needs of the various stakeholders such as students, parents, employers, statutory authorities, society and the top management or the trustees satisfied?

The main Principles of Academic Audit: (a) Though there is no “hidden agenda,” no “right way” to approach the Academic Audit process, the Academic Audit openly advocates the following principles as foundations of good educational practice. (b) Define quality in terms outcomes of Learning should pertain to what is or will become important for the students. (c) Focus on process i.e. departments should analyze how teachers teach, how students learn, and what can be the best approach to learning assessment. (d) Academic departments should study their discipline’s literature and collect data on what works well and what doesn’t. Experimentation with active
learning should be encouraged. Faculty should be encouraged to share and adopt their colleagues’ successful teaching innovations. Teamwork and consensus lead to total faculty ownership of and responsibility for all aspects of the curriculum and make everyone accountable for the success of students. (e) Dialogue and collaboration should be encouraged over territoriality and the “lone wolf” approach. (f) Decisions should be based on evidence and departments should collect data to find out what students need. Data should be analyzed and findings incorporated in the design of curricula, learning processes, and assessment methods. (g) Institutions should strive for coherence. Courses should compliment one another to provide necessary breadth and depth. Assessment should be aligned with learning objectives. (h) Faculty should seek out good practices in similar departments and institutions and adapt the best to fit their own circumstances. Continuous improvement should be a priority.

Some of the manifold advantages of an academic audit can be as follows:

- It helps in reducing unnecessary workload and dwells mainly on those essentially required for the success of a student’s career.
- It helps in clarifying teachers’ roles and responsibilities and minimizes conflicts.
- It ensures effective use of public money by reducing wasteful expenditure.
- It ensures availability of well-rounded students for the prospective employers.

There are three stages in the process of academic audit. Namely (1) self-study involving understanding the teaching-learning process (2) peer review and (3) evaluating the self-study and the peer review. This can be carried out by internal experts or a panel of external experts comprising of eminent academicians, entrepreneurs and social workers or leaders representatives.

Institutional introspection is essential for improving the quality and effectiveness of teaching – learning process in any academic organization. Both the high school and college level teaching pedagogy in Indian universities needs a serious audit to gauge the utility of ultimate products for the industry, society and nation.

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Basic theme taken from Article published in The Hindu by Dr. M. M. Gandhi in 2015.