

**ความเป็นเลิศทางวิชาการ:
สิ่งท้าทายหรือข้อจำกัดสำหรับอุดมศึกษาไทย**
***Academic Excellence: Challenges or Constraints
for Thailand's Higher Education***

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Abstract

Quality assurance has become a familiar term in Thailand's higher education and has gained increasing popularity in recent years. Particularly in times of pressing needs to cope with the scarcity of resources and increasing public concern over the quality and employability of graduates, colleges and universities in Thailand are expected to demonstrate educational excellence as another important priority to institutional survival. In response, the Ministry of University Affairs has spearheaded the quality movement by proposing the establishment of the National Quality Assurance Bureau to safeguard quality education offered by public and private universities under their jurisdiction.

To ensure common understanding and practices of "excellence", a multifaceted term with many interpretations, this article was prepared to provide an overview on the notions of excellence mainly derived from the views of profound educators. Traditional concepts and criteria of excellence were brought to the attention along with indicators of excellence and characteristics of excellent institutions that need to be considered on the road to excellence. In all, excellence has become an emerging issue or a matter of necessity rather than an option for institutional survival.

บทคัดย่อ

ในระยะ 2-3 ปีที่ผ่านมา ประเด็นสำคัญประการหนึ่งของการบริหารจัดการอุดมศึกษาคือการเร่งประกันมาตรฐานคุณภาพการจัดการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษา โดยเฉพาะท่ามกลางภาวะขาดแคลนของทรัพยากรและความคาดหวังที่เพิ่มมากยิ่งขึ้นของสังคมที่มีต่อระบบอุดมศึกษาทั้งในด้านคุณภาพของบัณฑิตและองค์ความรู้ ตลอดจนความสามารถในการได้รับการจ้างงานของบัณฑิตที่ผลิตออกไป ทำให้ความเป็นเลิศทางวิชาการจัดเป็นวาระสำคัญและจำเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่สถาบันอุดมศึกษาจะต้องทบทวนและเร่งพัฒนาให้เกิดขึ้นอย่างจริงจัง เพื่อเป็นหลักประกันความอยู่รอดของสถาบันเองในภาวะการถดถอยของความแปรปรวนและการแข่งขันที่ทวีความรุนแรงมากขึ้น ในระดับนโยบายความเป็นเลิศทางวิชาการนี้เป็นประเด็นที่ทบวงมหาวิทยาลัยให้ความสำคัญและอยู่ในระหว่างการจัดให้มีกลไกการประกันคุณภาพและมาตรฐานการศึกษาอย่างเป็นระบบสำหรับสถาบันอุดมศึกษาทั้งภาครัฐและเอกชน

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บทความนี้มุ่งให้แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับความเป็นเลิศทางวิชาการจากทัศนะที่หลากหลายของนักวิชาการในแวดวงอุดมศึกษาต่างประเทศ โดยนำเสนอที่มาของแนวคิดในแง่มุมต่างๆ เว็อนไซ สภาพแวดล้อม ตัวชี้วัดความเป็นเลิศ คุณลักษณะที่พึงประสงค์ขององค์ประกอบปัจจัยต่างๆ ที่ควรพิจารณาในการพัฒนาสู่ความเป็นเลิศทางวิชาการ

Quality assurance has become a familiar term in Thailand's higher education and has gained increasing popularity in recent years. Particularly in times of pressing needs to cope with the scarcity of resources and increasing public concern over the quality and employability of graduates, colleges and universities in Thailand are expected to demonstrate educational excellence as another important priority to institutional survival. In response, the Ministry of University Affairs has spearheaded the quality movement by proposing the establishment of the National Quality Assurance Bureau to safeguard quality education offered by public and private universities under their jurisdiction.

To ensure common understanding and practices of "excellence", a multifaceted term with many interpretations, this article was prepared to provide an overview on the notions of excellence mainly derived from the western literature. The results of a survey to detect discrepancies in perception, if any, on perceptions of excellence in Thailand's undergraduate education was summarized in the latter part to help policy makers refocus their attention on the road to quality or excellence.

Trends and Forces towards Excellence?

A recent ranking of higher education institutions by Asia Week has somehow sent an important message to university administrators, both public and private, that to remain competitive in the future arena of higher education, it is of great necessity and urgency to redefine excellence and ways to realize it. Upon his visit to NIDA last February, Chancellor of University of California at Berkeley Robert Berdahl also reaffirmed that academic excellence will no longer be a matter of choice but an increasing necessity for survival.

In his speech delivered at the reception hosted by NIDA President Prof. Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan last February, Dr. Berdahl observed that "convergence" or the "Blurring boundaries" phenomena has become the main theme of higher education in the coming century. Interconnectedness with or reaching out to the external entities, collaboration among academic and industry, cross-disciplinary, and excellence are evident in the following four areas:

- Cross- or interdisciplinary and Multi-function departmentalization, i.e. recent merging between College of Engi-

neering and College of Natural Science. Evolution or change in medical treatment, for instance, from major surgery to microscopic operation, has by far been combining the work of physicist, engineer, and computer technologist to the rethinking of medical delivery.

- Interconnectedness with the outside world (putting the Ivory Tower era to an end). More collaboration with industry for knowledge exchange and increasing support. Also recognized the interdependence of education from primary, secondary to tertiary, collaboration with public schools to prepare a qualified pool of inputs for higher education is recommended.

- Globalization. The advent of computer technology has wiped out national boundary when it comes to education. A whole new world beyond traditional campus is opening, e.g. virtual university.

- No more distinction between public or private university. Public universities will rely more upon external funding while maintaining their public duties and functions.

In Berdahl's opinion, what lies ahead is the challenge to accept and cope with change. Successful past may hinder the needs for change. Entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to excellence are perhaps the best guardian of effective change to survive the dynamic turn into the next century.

The concept of excellence will be further discussed in details. The following

sections comprise definitions of academic excellence that will be explored from traditional to current concepts along with criteria and approaches for measuring excellence. Characteristics of excellence are presented based on the model of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools in the U.S. Essentially, excellence is viewed from four major categories including students, academic programmes, institutional environment, and external environment.

What is Excellence?

Different people and institutions may view excellence from different perspectives based on their goals and perceptions. Though it seems difficult to find a unifying theoretical context that describes what constitutes the meaning of excellence, the following review of definitions found in the literature pertaining to excellence may provide a broad base for understanding excellence.

During the past decade, attainment and maintenance of excellence have been central issues of concern among universities and the government planning agencies. Internal stakeholders of higher education are demanding evidence of academic excellence and are expecting higher education to contribute to the solution of national problems. Clearly, higher education will not be able to afford the debate before taking action to define excellence.

Policy makers are taking initiatives to improve Thailand's higher education system and the notions of excellence have been considered as instrumental in reshaping higher education. The issue of excellence itself has generated discussion in various forums to find a particular answer to the question, "Excellence in what?" Many educators share the belief that excellence is a foundation of every university; however, the criteria that define excellence depend on the nature of the institutions and on the particular time period. Astin (1985) believes that excellence has to be defined to reflect an institution's ability to significantly change or develop the talent of the students and faculty. According to Gardner (1961), excellence is not only a powerful word but one that means differently to different people.

Traces of Excellence

From a historical perspective, the pursuit of excellence has been a perennial human aspiration. According to Lindsay & Neumann (1988), the connotation of excellence can be traced back to the thought of classical Greece. By the time of Aristotle, excellence can be defined as the conjunction of virtue and knowledge. To be excellent was to have the capacity for excellence and to strive to attain it. In this sense, excellence comprises three interrelated conditions: quality of mind, performance at a high standard, and seriousness of purpose. Through the idea of quality of mind, "excellence became regarded as a human

characteristic, inferred from specific activities or performances but to some extent stable and consistent and thus generalizable" (Lindsay & Neumann, 1988, p. 14).

Excellence in Practices

The notion of excellence in modern time seems to be indicative of the vitality of the academic community. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), in the report "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform," observed that the definitions of excellence may mean several related things.

At the level of the individual learner, excellence means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. (p. 12)

The Commission on Higher Education, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1990) defines a basic characteristics of excellence in an educational

institution as "the degree of awareness on the part of all concerned of the institution's mission and goals in relation to its students, its supporters, and the community at large. Each institution operates in terms of such fundamentals as the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of information, the development of student character, and the preparation of its students to live in the world." Furthermore, the excellent institution should "introduce students to a body of knowledge, to increase their interest in intellectual matters, to enrich their cultural lives, to help them develop powers of discrimination and judgment, to foster their commitment to ethical, intellectual, social, and - where appropriate religious values, and to encourage the pursuit of lifelong learning: (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, MSACS, 1990, p. 10). All of these are considered as basic essentials of higher education and should be expressed in suitable terms and proportions in statement of institutional mission and goals.

A study entitled "Promoting Equity, Excellence and Efficiency in Higher Education: Implications for Policy, Planning and Management" identifies excellence as a context bound concept of education which evolves over time (UNESCO, 1987). In this sense, excellence "has to be aimed, achieved, measured and promoted differentially at different stages of education and at different levels of socio-economic development of a country. . . maintains a logical

relationship with minimum required standards that are relevant to discipline, community/national needs, and individual expectations (UNESCO, 1987, p. 13).

Experts' Views on Excellence

Astin (1981) asserts that true quality resides in the institution's ability to affect its students favorably, to make a positive difference in their intellectual and personal development. The highest quality institutions, in this view, are those that have the greatest impact - add the most value - to the students' knowledge, personality, and career development. Astin (1985) further states excellence as a belief system and believes that a definition of excellence had to reflect an institution's ability to significantly change or develop the talent of the students and faculty. In regard to students, excellence refers to changes attributable to the college experience in terms of intellectual capacities and skills, values, attitudes, interests, habits, mental health, and career outcomes. Regarding faculty, excellence refers to improvement in teaching, research or scholarly skills, and productivity that results from working in the institution.

In his book, **Achieving Education Excellence**, Astin (1985), from his interviews with several higher education scholars, summarizes the multidimensional nature of educational excellence: from Arthur Chickering's definition, excellence means "significant gains in various kinds of critical thinking skills, areas of inter-

personal competence, increased clarity of purpose, increased willingness to invest yourself in something larger than yourself. [Institution should] help persons learn better how to take charge of their own learning and development so that they come out . . . knowing how to continue their own lifelong learning in a systematic and thoughtful way, how to define some objectives, how to get resources and use them, how to use authority wisely, what kinds of inquiry methods are appropriate to what problems, then how to evaluate what they've learned" : and from Howard Bowen's definition, excellence means "being knowledgeable, moral, interested in aesthetics, socially responsible . . . It just means more than having some kind of professional competence".

Ewell (1984) sees excellence as a concept that is difficult to define. To him, institutions achieve excellence insofar as they produce demonstrable changes along particular dimensions of education outcomes consistent with (1) institutional objectives, (2) student educational goals, and (3) the express needs of society and of particular constituencies within society. Folger (1984) also points out the multiple definitions of quality or excellence in relation to groups of constituents. To most of the public, a quality institution is one that educates its students well. To faculty, quality means recognition from research contributions while administrators use a resource definition of quality, trying to

maximize institutions resources by recruiting more good faculty, and getting more money per student.

According to Mayhew, Ford, and Hubbard (1990), the terms "quality" and "excellence" are used interchangeably and for over 300 years a general consensus existed regarding the characteristics of quality of higher education. Quality as a concept can take on different meanings from different industrial approaches. From the product-based approach, relative quality of an institution is judged by its students' performance. From a user-based definition, quality can be equated with consumer preferences or what Juran (1974) called as the "fitness for use". Amidst the situation where resources become scarce, a value-based approach acknowledges that quality is the degree of excellence that must be compromised because of lack of resources.

Among other approaches to define excellence, Levine (1982) sees quality as a measure of the best a particular institution can achieve. In this respect, all baccalaureate programmes should achieve both standards of excellence by having a certain universal quality and a certain individual quality. Skinner and Tafel (1986) view excellence as a fluid concept since maintaining or achieving it requires constant effort and adjustment as various goals are reached. Solmon (1981) contends that excellence is the value-added approach to quality in which an institution must determine what students bring with

them and must assess what students obtain from college in order to measure the impact of the institution in the student body. Lindsay and Neumann (1988) denote excellence as a superlative performance closely linked with moral and intellectual qualities. Mortimer (1985) proposes that criteria for assessing excellence in higher education should be based on a definition of excellence which stresses how well people, programmes, departments, or institutions perform. He also maintains that excellence occurs when people, programmes, or institutions perform beyond expected levels.

Another view of excellence is offered by Fantini (1986). He considers excellence as containing five key ingredients: quality, equality, effectiveness, efficiency, and participation. In this sense, he has stated excellence in the form of an equation as: Excellence = Quality + Equality + Effectiveness + Efficiency + Participation. To illustrate, excellence will be achieved when the institution is able to offer quality to most students, in the most productive and economical form, while utilizing both the substantive and procedural dimensions of democratic participation. By quality, Fantini means the goal of quality education is to develop the full capacities of the learner and to support the unfolding of individual potential. This concept of quality is based on the nature of the learner, the curriculum, the professional staff, and the educational outcomes. The equality concept was taken from the standpoint that it must

coexist with the pursuit of excellence. Both concepts have become tenets of the public school system. Being more recent ingredients in the equation of excellence, effectiveness centres on the most productive approach, while efficiency looks to the most economical. Finally, Fantini believes no definition of excellence in a democratic nation can exclude citizen participation or involvement from parents and community. From these ingredients, Fantini concluded that "excellence in education may be considered more nearly realized when all are learning what they need to become all they are capable of becoming, in the most up-to-date way, using the best available resources in ways that are consistent with democratic procedures and dedicated to the further cultivation of a free, just, and compassionate civilization" (p. 60).

Traditional concepts and criteria of excellence

According to Astin (1985, 1991), colleges and universities have been classified as excellent on the basis of the four traditional concepts: (1) reputation, (2) resource allocation, (3) curricular content, and (4) outcomes. Especially the first two conceptions, the resources and reputation, are more important and implicit in many policies and practices. Moreover, they both tend to produce very similar rankings of institutions. However, it should be noted that each of these approaches has certain weak points that cause the excellence

criteria to be questioned.

The Reputation

Regarding the reputation concept, assessment of excellence is on the basis of what people believe constitutes the best or most "excellent" institution. From this perspective, the most excellent institutions are the ones that enjoy the best academic reputations and consequently elite universities will always be ranked as excellent institutions.

The Resource

Resource allocation includes the amount and quality of faculty (the proportion of doctorates, research and publication rates); students (their performance on standardized tests, outstanding high school records); physical plant (quantity and quality of classrooms, library resources and facilities); and fiscal resources (large endowments and student expenditures). These variables tend to be closely correlated with one another and with other measures of institutional affluence. Under this notion, excellence depends primarily on having lots of resources; the more resources one has, the more excellent the institution.

The Content

The content view defines the quality or excellence of an institution in terms of what it teaches. Cited American higher education institutions as example. What constitutes excellent content is remarkably homogeneous. A report by the Higher Education Research Institute (Astin, 1985) on institutional selectivity level in bacca-

laureate degree fields showed that institutions at different levels in the hierarchy do differ markedly in the kind of degrees awarded.

The Outcomes

The outcomes concept deals with the quality of its product such as the proportion of its alumni who get graduate fellowships or who pursue and obtain doctorates or alumni high lifetime earnings. In other words, excellence is measured in terms of proxy measurements (MSACS, 1990). This measure has become popular as alternatives to the reputation and resource approaches. However, the main reason why the outcomes view has a special appeal to faculty members is because the measures turn out to be highly related to reputational measures and to an institutions's position in the hierarchy (Astin, 1985).

Overcoming Criticisms

Though the traditional approaches to excellence have their own merit, they are limited because they do not reflect the total quality of a given program (Skinner & Tafel, 1986). Criticisms arose that these traditional ways of defining and measuring institutional excellence are not necessarily effective in developing the talent of both students and faculty. None of these views, argues Mortimer (1985), had any implications to what students actually learn from their college experience and therefore are of little importance and should be rejected. On the contrary, "it makes great sense to

stress performance standards and view excellence in terms of how well people perform in relation to their potential" (p. 23). This idea is congruent with that of Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) who state that achieving high quality in the education process requires that serious attention be given to what has been done to promote or inhibit the cognitive and affective development of each student and the professional growth of the faculty.

The weakness of both reputation and resource allocation is that once any university meets the above criteria, it will always be "excellent" regardless of their other important factors. Astin (1985) does not consider these factors as necessarily effective in developing student and faculty talent. He reminds us that the pursuit of excellence in terms of reputation and resources can do little to improve the overall excellence of the system. Furthermore, neither of these two measures effectively predicts the amount of learning that occurs at an institution (Astin, 1985; Bowen, 1980). For the resources and outcomes, Astin (1985) further poses a question using an analogy from the corporate world: "Is it legitimate to conclude that a given company is excellent just because it produces a lot of products (high output) or because it spends a lot of money to produce these products (high resources)."

Indicators of Excellence

The pursuit of excellence can be viewed at various levels of the higher education system. In a report, *Involvement in Learning*, prepared by the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (1984), excellence in higher education requires: (1) that institutions of higher education produce demonstrable improvements in student knowledge, capacities, skills, and attitudes between entrance and graduation; (2) that these demonstrable improvements occur within established, clearly expressed, and publicly announced and maintained standards of performance for awarding degrees based on societal and institutional definitions of college-level academic learning; and (3) that these improvements are achieved efficiently, that is, that they are cost-effective in the use of student and institutional resources of time, effort, and money" (p. 16). In this respect, adequate measures of educational excellence therefore are focused on the student outcomes principally including knowledge, intellectual capacities, and skills as well as on other dimensions of student growth, i.e., self-confidence, persistence, leadership, empathy, social responsibility, and understanding of cultural and intellectual differences.

Conditions of Excellence

The study group further outline three critical conditions of excellence: (1) student involvement, (2) high expectations, and (3)

assessment and feedback. Student involvement is considered the most important for purposes of improving undergraduate education. By involvement, they mean how much time, energy, and effort students devote to the learning process. They believe highly involved students demonstrate the commitment in a variety of ways: by devoting considerable energy to studying, by working at on-campus rather than off-campus jobs, by participating actively in student organizations, and by interacting frequently with faculty members and student peers. Regarding high expectations, it describes the educational outcomes sought by students and institutions that include graduation requirements and standards of performance. The key is that institutional and faculty expectations about the requirements of college-level learning and development in all courses and programmes be public, meaning that students, their families, and others must know not only what is expected, but how well it is to be performed. Then, a regular and periodic assessment and feedback are required for faculty to monitor the progress of students and for administrators to identify the educational strengths and weaknesses of a college/university and its academic programmes.

Proposed Indicators of Excellence

Indicators of excellence may be perceived through the college environment. In his book, *What Matters in College?* Four

Critical Years Revisited, Astin (1992) offers a total of 192 indicators of the college environment and most of them fall into the following five categories:

(1) institutional characteristics which include instructional and student services expenditures, size, type and control, race, gender, student-faculty ratio, percentage of graduate students, and average faculty salary;

(2) curricular characteristics which cover general education and major subjects, variety of course offerings, independent research, and specific requirements, e.g., internships and comprehensive exams;

(3) faculty environment which includes a mixture of faculty members' orientations, behaviors, and perceptions about their students and their institution, e.g., research orientation, morale, and perceptions of their institution's emphasis on resources and reputation; use of active learning techniques; student-oriented attitudes; and perceptions of students' academic competence;

(4) student environment which includes personality of the student body on a set of behaviors, attitudes, and life goals, such as intellectual self-esteem, materialism and status, altruism and social activism, feminism, and artistic and scientific interests;

(5) individual involvement which includes those measured at entry - residence, financial aid, major - and those measured subsequently in college - academic involvement, involvement with faculty, involvement with other students, involvement in work and

time spent in volunteer work, etc. Overall, Astin emphasizes the importance of direct interaction with faculty as having significant effects on every academic outcome.

Characteristics of Excellence

Based on the report, *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS, 1990), there are certain indicators of excellence inherent to the different areas of university life which are described qualitatively, rather than quantitatively. Several major categories can be summarized from the above characteristics for further discussion: students, academic programs and faculty, institutional resources and administration, and external environment. These groupings are also used as the major categories for this research survey questionnaire.

Students

Traditionally, student quality has been measured in terms of skills and knowledge when entering the higher education system. Institutions claim they are excellent when they enroll highly talented students. According to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1990), an excellent institution is one that considers potential, motivation, and will to learn when selecting the students. Until the 1980's, researchers paid little attention to measuring the impact of college experience on students. However, a study by Mingle (1986) indicates that institutions have to measure how much

value they are adding to enrolled students. Skinner and Tafel (1986) point out that high ranking performance examinations, outstanding written works, and active participation in students' professional organizations, are some of the indicators of quality of students. Astin (1985) asserts that student satisfaction should be one of the indicators of institutional excellence coupled with the enhancement of their cognitive and affective development.

Academic Programmes

Skinner and Tafel (1986) and Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) observe that programmes judged to be of high quality show the following common characteristics:

1. Purposes and objectives related to the needs and interests of their current and potential students;
2. Match between student characteristics and the quality and type of resources essential for students to be successful in the programme;
3. Faculty who pay attention to their role in undergraduate teaching, curriculum development and implementation, and student-teacher relationship;
4. Acknowledgement of faculty, students, staff and the surrounding community;
5. Undergraduate student involvement in scholarly activities;
6. Systematic internal programme review with feedback used to improve the programme;
7. A consideration of the history.

mission, purpose, style, resources, and the future in the design of the programme;

8. Intended learning outcomes clearly defined and the achievement of them fully documented and communicated;

9. Provides opportunities to assess each learners' knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behaviors, and needs in order to enhance his/her personal and professional development

Besides these characteristics, a high quality or excellent programme must show congruence among the curriculum described in the catalogue, the curriculum taught by the faculty, and the curriculum learned by students (Cross, 1975).

Within the academic programme, faculty is another key element to excellence. During the 60's and 70's, faculty research productivity was one of the most used variables to measure quality. Sherman, Armistead, Folwer, Barksdale, and Reif (1987) identify six characteristics that describe excellent teachers or college instructors:

1. Enthusiasm refers to faculty's enthusiastic attitude and interest towards the subject matter they teach;

2. Clarity refers to the ability to clearly explain concepts;

3. Preparation and organization refers to the structured activities professors performs before delivering the lesson;

4. Stimulating refers to the development of students' critical thinking skills, interest, and thoughtfulness in the subject

matter;

5. Knowledge refers to the deep understanding and love for the subject they teach; and

6. Experience refers to the cumulating enriched teaching repertoire.

Besides these characteristics, Lindquist (1981) found that a qualified faculty will use teaching strategies that respond to student learning styles and developmental levels.

Institutional Environment

According to Tan (1986), there are few studies conducted to measure quality in terms of institutional and human resources and less evidence existing of the linkage among them. Astin (1985) questions a popular belief that an institution with massive resources is an "excellent" institution. He further indicates that the quality of the resources available in an institution must be measured in terms of how those resources are used to enhance cognitive and affective development of students and faculty.

Furthermore, effective administration is another major index of an institution's quality. The basic necessity is an organization and administration that facilitate teaching and learning and foster their improvement with a clear definition of administrative and academic responsibilities within a secure framework of academic freedom. The foremost concern of an academic administrator at a college or university with regard to the advancement of educational excellence is to provide well-

prepared, student-oriented, intellectually active faculty members and to develop strong academic support services in four areas: library, computing centre, media centre, and advising system.

External Environment

At the time of this literature review, not much prior research was found to relate the influence of the external environment to excellence in higher education. To some extent, the quality of learning provided to students depends on the elements surrounding the educational institutions. An excellent academic programme is, therefore, one that considers the current and future needs of the society and that designs its curriculum to current technology and innovative knowledge.

Lindsay and Neumann (1988) harmonize the concept of excellence with utility. To them, criteria of excellence should encompass outstanding contributions to solving society's problems as well as to the advancement of knowledge. For utility, it should encompass social and cultural contributions, and economics directly and indirectly in both short and long term. Greater collegial responsibility should be taken into consideration. A new form of organization must be encouraged to link the frontier of knowledge to society's problems. In this regard, the authors urge higher education institutions to be more responsive in balancing between the competing interests of their constituencies and the national needs.

Approaches to Measuring Excellence

Notions of excellence have become a central element in higher education reform. According to Mayhew, Ford, and Hubbard (1990), currently every institution claims excellence or quality as its primary goal. In a practical sense, the search for excellence should be a continuous and unifying effort, not a problem to be solved (Seymour, 1991).

Webster (1981) summarizes six most commonly used approaches to assessing excellence: (1) reputational rankings; (2) faculty awards, honors, and prizes; (3) citations in citation indexes; (4) students' achievements in later life; (5) scores of entering students on standardized tests; and (6) institutional academic resources. These approaches were reported as having both advantages and disadvantages. For example, one obvious advantage of student entering scores is that the data are easy to obtain and these rankings also show the academic ability of the students the university is attracting currently. However, such rankings are based on the ability of students before they enter a university with no further consideration of what the university does to educate these students.

The pursuit of excellence for most higher institutions, according to Astin (1985), is often the mere pursuit of resources, for example, money, facilities, highly trained faculty, and bright students. But excellence should focus more on the outcomes. Astin's idea is congruent with those of Bergquist and Armstrong (1986). They believe that

excellence helps reflect an institution's ability to significantly change or develop the talent of the students and faculty. An outstanding case is the implementation of a value-added programme approach at Northeast Missouri State University demonstrating a strong commitment to education excellence (In Pursuit of Degree with Integrity, Northeast Missouri State University, 1984).

Gilley, Fulmer, and Reithlingshoefer (1986) conducted the search for models of institutions moving toward new levels of excellence. They asked 30 prominent higher educators to nominate excellent schools. Twenty-four educators nominated 112 institutions from all over the U.S. and only 20 institutions were studied in depth. The results of the search show ten common characteristics:

(1) a mission, well known to the community;

(2) the presence and recognition of leadership from the president;

(3) dynamically supportive boards;

(4) significant emphasis on teamwork and the creation of strong administrative teams with high spirit of collaboration;

(5) deep concern to community needs and its support;

(6) an atmosphere that promotes individual initiatives and recognition;

(7) commitment to the institution;

(8) an intense concern for the quality of the education provided to students and the experience earned by the faculty;

(9) the capacity to be responsive to the external environment opportunities; and

(10) the focus on excellence in their present and future programme.

However, criticisms arise because most studies on excellence have been conducted either for the purposes of resource allocation or accreditation (Pace, 1984). Few studies have attempted to assess excellence as an important component of a more encompassing evaluation effort and even fewer attempts have been made to evaluate excellence as perceived by significant constituent groups. Furthermore, Astin and Solmon (1979) confirmed that approaches to quality research like reputational ratings are heavily influenced by a halo effect - the effect whereby raters would rate an under-graduate department as strong if the counterpart graduate department was rated strong.

In recent years, there have been more studies attempting to underscore the criticisms that the cross-institutional approach has little benefit for single institutions. In addition, there has been an increasing trend to use cross-institutional longitudinal studies to single-institution studies (Snyder, 1985). Henson (1980, p. 19) further states that single institutional studies "provide no real basis for assessing college environment impacts."

To overcome the criticisms over the traditional conceptions of excellence, Astin (1991) urges the focusing of institutional

energies more directly on the fundamental mission of the institution, the education of students and the cultivation of knowledge. He offers the alternative approach, the talent development conception of excellence. Under this talent development view, "excellence is determined by our ability to develop the talents of our students and faculty to the fullest extent possible. The fundamental premise underlying the talent development concept is that true excellence lies in the institution's ability to affect its students and faculty favorably, to enhance their intellectual and scholarly development and to make a positive difference in their lives. As far as educational excellence is concerned, the most excellent institutions are, in this view, those that have greater impact - add the most value as economists would say - to the students; knowledge and personal development " (pp. 6-7).

Implications for Practices

The above review has provided a broad-base understanding and western view of academic excellence, a multi-faceted term with many interpretations and approaches when putting into practices. Different institutions have pursued an excellence in ways that are congruent with their perceptions and institutional requirements. External forces, especially the current movement towards quality assurance led by the Ministry of University Affairs, scarcity of resources, and the non-governmental status' movement, have intensified the

needs for institutional survival. Excellence is therefore becoming a matter of necessity rather than an option for university administrators.

Despite varied definitions and interpretations, the author is of the opinion that each educational institution should familiarize itself with academic excellence and design their own approach to accomplish excellence in ways and means that are best for them. In this sense, excellence must be pursued on an institutional-wide basis and ensured consensual participation of all concerned parties and stakeholders. More importantly, academic excellence needs to be approached holistically, like having a "built-in" mechanism, in every aspect of higher education administration.

In an era of retrenchment, the foreseeable trend toward "privatizing" public higher education has intensified the needs to ensure excellence. To cope with the transition, higher education institutions need a good strategy to guide them out of the tunnel. A ray of hope is perhaps the revival of academic excellence as a matter of necessity rather than an option for university administrators.

Academic excellence in the new era will cope not only with declining resources but also with increasing public demand for efficiency and effectiveness. They are expecting to do more with less. The essential goal of the transformation efforts, however, should be steered by the notion of excellence, meaning that excellence should

be the prime reason for all institutional change efforts. Strengths of higher education shall be resided on the capability to be responsive to the societal needs. That is, the reformed university will only be recognized upon its ability to demonstrate excellence in balancing between competing interests of their constituencies and the national needs.

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