

Quality and Relevance in Higher Education

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Abstract— We conceptualize "Quality" as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. "Relevance" refers to relatedness, appropriateness or suitability of something taken in its context¹. Education is expected to help learners identify, enhance and utilize their rational, creative, social and moral powers in a manner that fulfills them individually as well as facilitating national development. Such empowerment would lead to independence or autonomy in thought or action. Quality and Relevance concerned education would therefore emphasize independent, analytical and creative thinking that leads to transformation of the learner to become an autonomous and responsible actor in human affairs.

Quality and Relevance in education is the point where human skills and interests, technology, management and the social and business environment all converge. It is necessary to recognize the importance of all the major factors which contribute to or put barriers against the improvement of Quality and Relevance at the macro level in the educational institutions. University is the place where Quality and Relevance concerned skilled manpower development is really created. This is the place where the whole range of available knowledge and its applicability for quality living come together to generate sustainable ideas suitable applications to make life worth living. The effectiveness of their combined functioning reflects popularity of the university in the society as a provider of reliable skilled manpower having Quality and Relevance for the upliftment of the living standards of the society.

Index Terms— Higher Education, Individual interests, Quality, Relevance, Skills, Social environment, Living standards of the society

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has never been as important to the future of the developing world as it is right now. Today, global wealth is concentrated more on the knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness of people than in factories, land, tools, and machinery. Human capital is now increasingly critical to the world economy. This discovery has led to the political priority for developing quality Higher Education systems, for providing the relevant advanced knowledge and skills that command a premium in today's workplace.

Systematic knowledge creation has gradually replaced the use of experience in furthering technology. Advances in information technology are spreading information around the world with dazzling speed and more knowledge than ever is in circulation. Utilization of this systematically available knowledge requires a new set of human skills. People need to have higher qualifications and to be capable of having greater intellectual independence. They must be flexible and be able to continue learning well beyond the school and college campus. The new generation demands excellent academic education; well-rounded individuals, who are balanced and responsible citizens who understand and appreciate social, political, economic, technological and environmental contexts².

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nayyar (2008) found that technological revolution and globalization has exercised “an influence on the nature of institutions that impact higher education”, and on the “ways and means of providing higher education”. *Duderstadt et.al(2008)* states it has also come to shape “education both in terms of what is taught and what is researched, and has shifted both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes”. *Barnett(1992)* *Staropoli(1991)* found that today there are many different stakeholders, besides academics, that want to have their say in deciding what quality in higher education is - e.g. students, parents, future employers, the State and funding bodies. *Barnett (1992)* states that: We cannot secure ideas about the quality of higher education unless we first have a reasonably clear conception of what might be included under the umbrella concept of “higher education”. *P.K.Dutta (2007)* writes that quality impacts the content of higher education, its processes, its output or product, as it seeks to develop human resources with required skills, excellent in performance and capable of, delivering the goods as a unit of the work force. *Margenis (1993)* concludes that: “If we wish to arrive at a definition of quality in teaching in higher education we will be better served by an analysis of teaching than by an analysis of quality.”

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www.up.ac.za/beta/about/eng/strategic_plan.pdf

² *University of Pretoria Strategic Plan Inspiring the Innovation Generation 2002 - 2005* 24 September 2002 ©

Relevance

Relevance is about deep connections between the student, his emerging interest in a given area and the complex learning challenges that define that area. Relevance starts and ends with what the student really wants to learn and broadens out; as the student makes connections and wants to learn more. Determining what is relevant is itself an essential part of each student's learning. It is extremely important, however, to blend 'text to life' with 'life to text'. The world of action, and the student's interest in that world of action, will lead him to the textual knowledge he will need to deal successfully with future challenges in his life's work. Addressing what is relevant requires a special student-teacher relationship, in which the teacher establishes a relationship with the student through the student's interests. As this relationship builds the level and quality of the student's motivation to learn, both the student and the teacher can more successfully understand and pursue rigorous learning strategies (Dr Elliot Washor 2008)³. There is a general perception of the degrading quality and relevance of higher education. Hardly any study has been conducted to identify the causes of declining standard of University Education in Assam (Das B.C, 2007)⁴. According to article 11 of

the World Declaration on Higher published by the United Nations, quality in higher education, is a multi-dimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, faculties, equipment, services the community and the academic environment. It should take the form of internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, which are vital for enhancing quality. These stakeholders have varying interests and give priority to different aspects. Sometimes it is possible to agree on a combination of aspects, to give a fuller picture. But sometimes it might happen that perceptions are so different; a combination is not possible: we have to choose one or the other. Another cause of varying perceptions is that higher education by itself is not as homogenous as it was previously. Today, following the ongoing extension and diversification of higher education, there are many different kinds of higher education institutions. Thus quality in education is "multidimensional" and through higher education it strives to develop human resources of global standards. Perceived thus, quality defines the goals and purposes of education. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies the following key success ingredients as fostering successful transition from education to work:

Healthy economy and labour market

³ Perspectives on relevance and the quest for rigorous student learning: balancing life to text and text to life
http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/perspectives_on_relevance_and_the_quest_for_rigoro.22205.html?issueID=11301

⁴Das B.C., Declining Standard of University Education in Assam University News, 45 (41), October, 08-14, 2007 pp 11-15

Well-organized pathways from education to work and further study

Opportunities to combine study and workplace experience

Safety nets for those at risk

Effective information and guidance systems

Policy processes that involve government stakeholders. (OECD 2000b)

METHODOLOGY

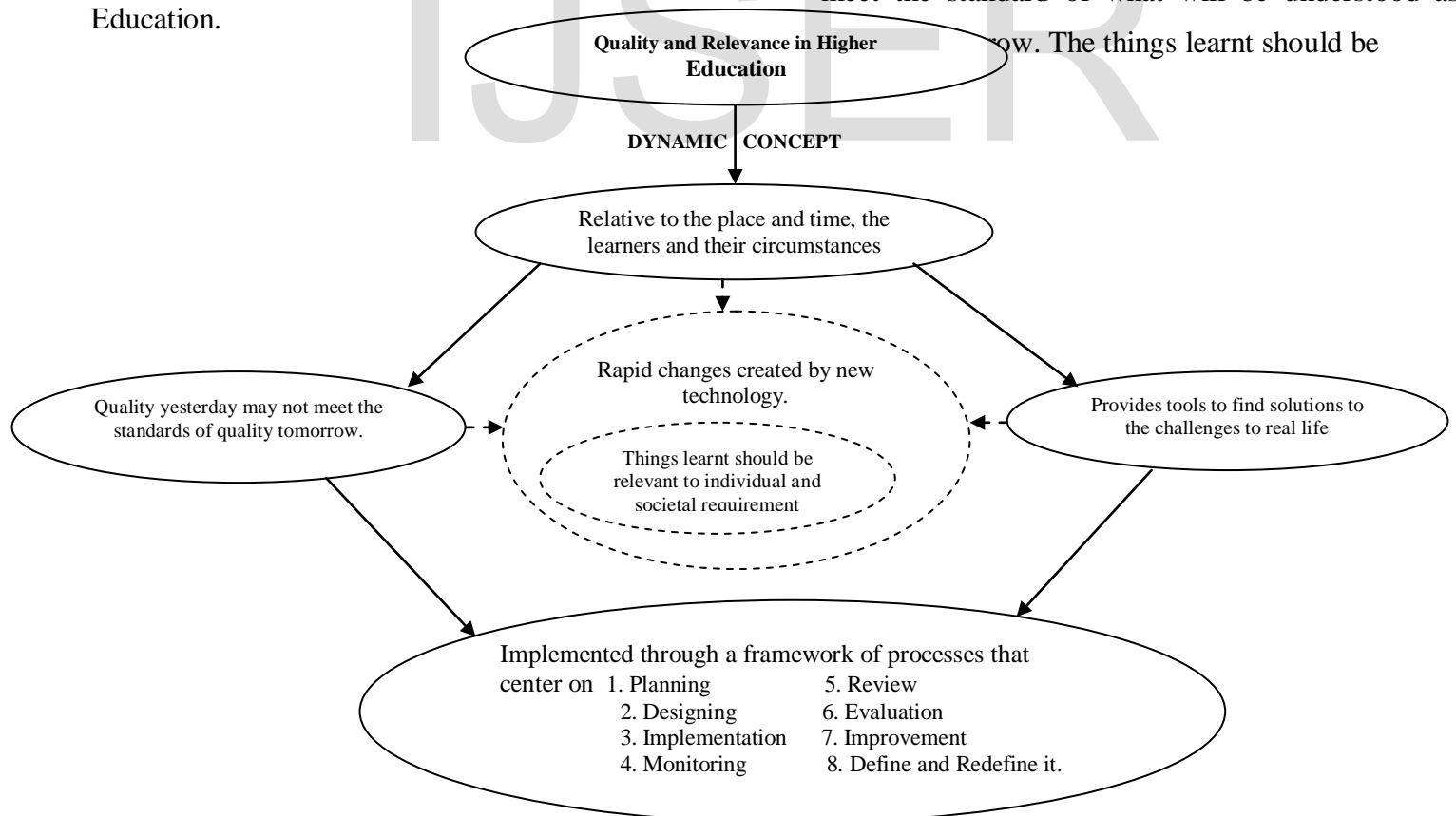
The study is based on the secondary data and information available in different books on Management and Quality, journals, articles, statistical handbooks and e-journals. The study makes an attempt to understand the concepts of quality and relevance in the context of Higher Education.

DISCUSSION:

Quality and Relevance:

Quality and relevance cannot be seen as a static concept⁵. Quality and relevance are in fact relative matters - relative to the particular time and place and to particular learners and their circumstances. Quality education is an education that provides students with the tools to deal with and find solutions to the challenges in real life. In a changing world this means that what was considered quality education yesterday may not meet the standard of what will be understood as

quality education today. The things learnt should be



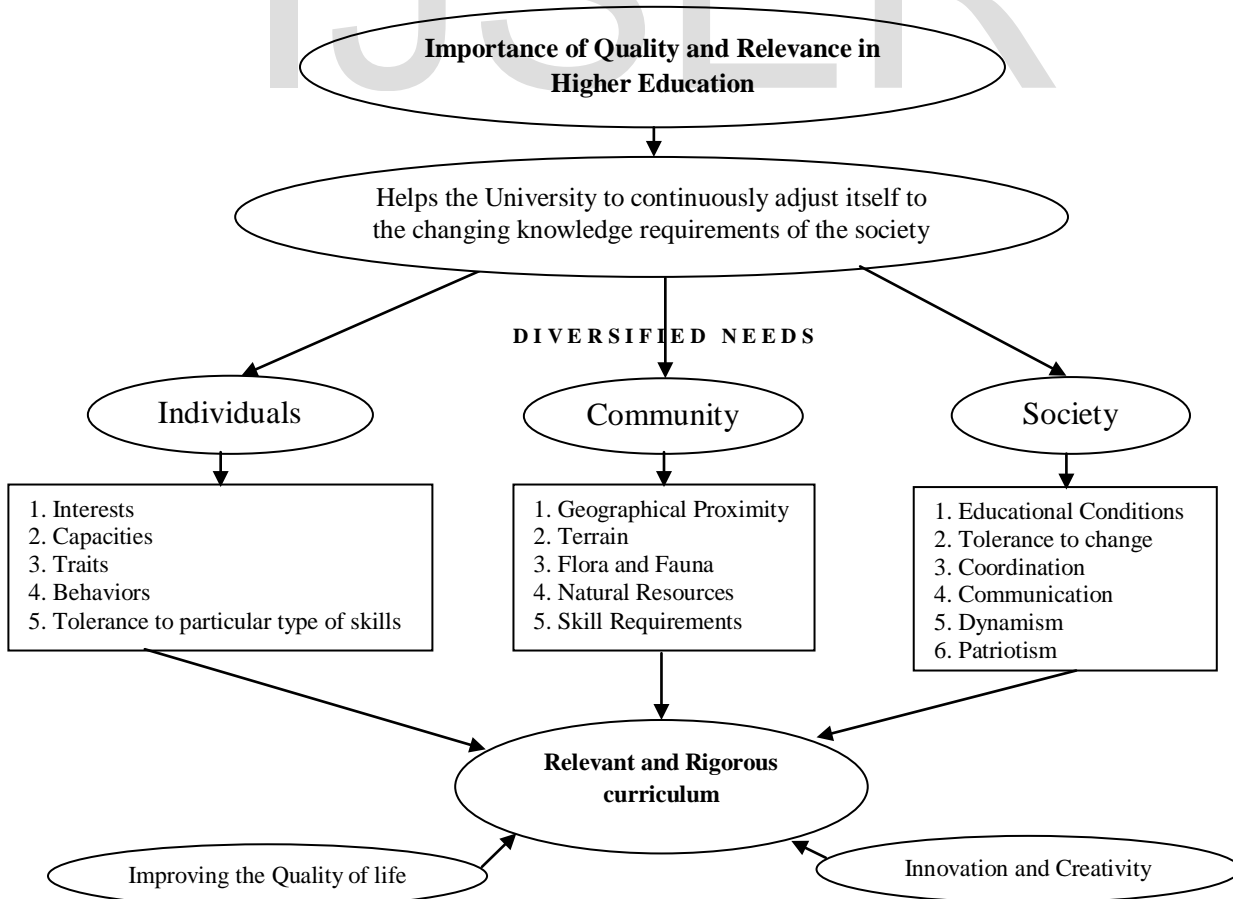
⁵ Commission I Relevance for Higher Education, UNESCO Final Report, 6 Oct 1998.

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relevant to the requirements of the individuals and also that of the requirements of the society. One important aspect of quality is the relevance of the curriculum and the objectives of education. This is particularly true at present if we take into consideration the rapid changes created by new technologies. Quality and Relevance in higher education can be implemented with a framework of processes that centre on planning, design, implementation, monitoring, review, evaluation and improvement. There is a need to discuss this concept continuously and to define and redefine it.

Importance of Quality and Relevance:

A Quality and Relevance concerned University helps the system to continuously adjust itself to the changing knowledge requirements of the society. As a society ages, its knowledge requirements also changes. Also the knowledge requirements of all the societies, communities or individuals differ as they come from diverse regions. Individual interests in the gathering and utilization of knowledge for development varies. It is meeting the knowledge requirements of the diverse demands where Quality and Relevance in education is concerned.



The future concerned University system tries to find out the requirements of the students, their interests, capacities, individual traits and behavior, and tolerance to a particular type of skills, and train them accordingly. There should be rigor in the curriculum such that the students find time to expose their latent qualities within them in their pursuit for getting a degree. Only then the students will be able to gain profitably from the educational process. The innovation and creativity of the students should be inspired and taken into account while evaluating them for giving the graduation degrees.

The Indian Scenario

Indian Higher Education is facing acute challenges for providing quality and relevance concerned system. The lack of relevance of the training provided, and no proper policy for focusing on the changes in the educational requirements of the society, is responsible for the huge unemployment problems of its graduates. The lack of quality and relevance in these educational programs remains a concern, which restricts labor market rewards. This leads to a socio-cultural misunderstanding whether the Universities are a problem or a solution to the unemployment problems of the country. To face the new challenges the system must tear itself out the cocoon of the

rules and regulations which it itself had created and restructure itself to expand in all relevant directions.

To know what the University knows, it should position itself in the educational market in order to attract the students and retain them. It should review its alternative positioning to take into account the students and the competitors perspective of the University. Strong and innovative staff development is one strategy which guarantees the quality and relevance of higher education in a changing world.⁶

Knowledge is not only a driver of national development, but also the decisive determinant of citizens' access to world economic and cultural resources. The economy of a society depends on the quality of the skills and actions of its educated elite. These groups of people on the other hand are trained in the Universities. Thus the Universities must constantly upgrade itself with the changes in the society and provide the future citizens with relevant quality education. In this context Universities are challenged to reposition themselves to respond to the demands of a different type of learner-cadre. Such a cadre wants to be multi-skilled as well as be constantly re-skilled through life-long learning in order to keep pursue with the fascination of a continuously changing work environment. Thus, appropriation of knowledge is

⁶ *Higher education staff development: directions for the 21st century.*
Published in 1994 by the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP
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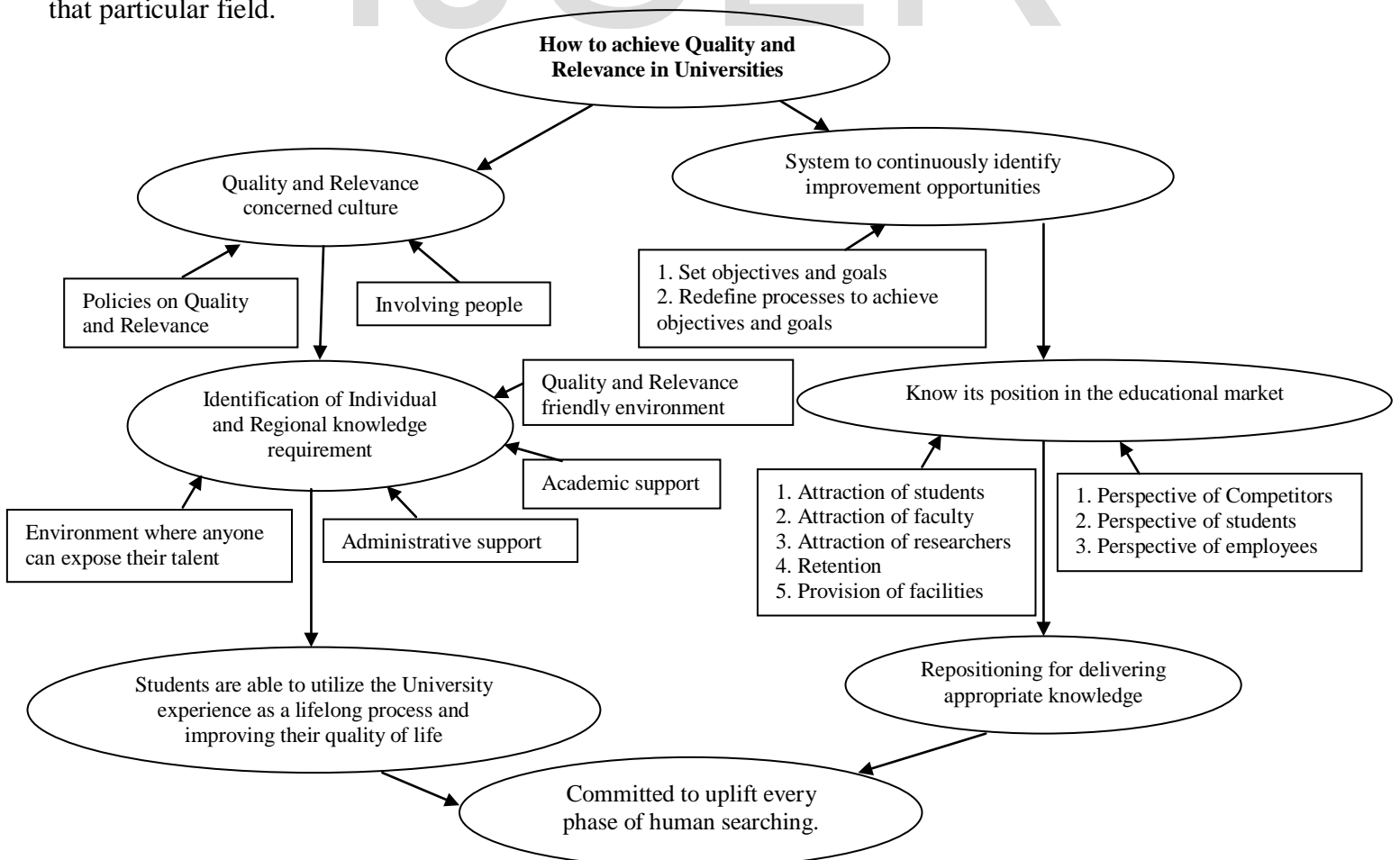
at the very heart of the quest for a better citizenship.

It is now generally recognized that the road to development, to a successful fight against poverty, passes through good quality education.

Capacity Building

The Universities are a concentrated pool of talent which needs to be properly managed to profitably tap and utilize the invaluable available human resource. This can only be done by creating an enabling environment of resources (financial, technical and human) and regulatory framework which strives for excellence and is relevant to the needs of the society. It should set up a framework depending on mission and resources of the institution and may pursue is capacity building in that particular field.

When this target is fulfilled it may renew its mission and set another target, thereby developing itself, the individuals and the society. It should be the center for the creation of knowledge where systematic knowledge is used to ignite the imagination of the students and an atmosphere is created to support innovation from any field irrespective of the academic qualifications so as to capture the talent pool in the University campus itself.



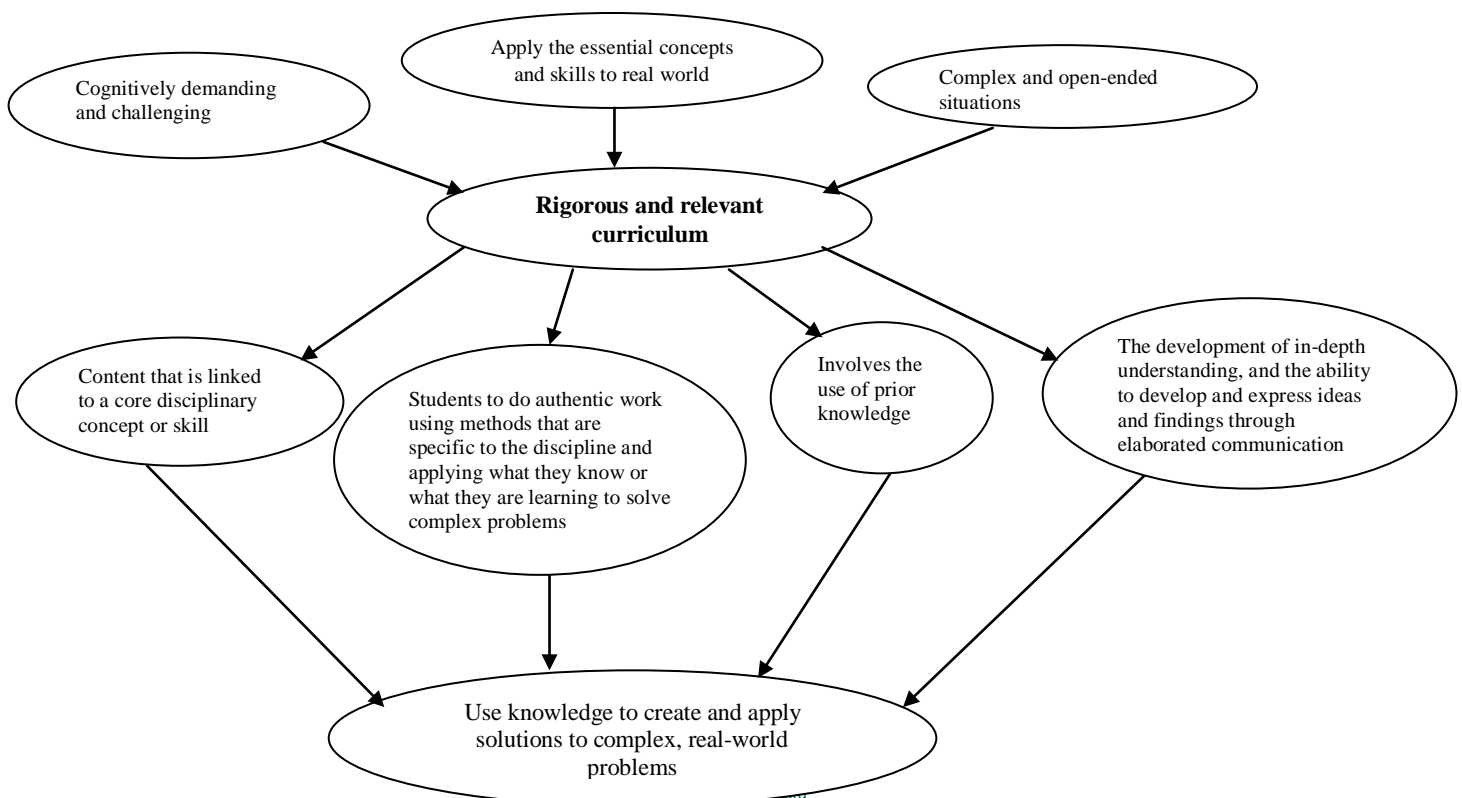
The Way Forward

Quality and Relevance for students refers to interdisciplinary and contextual learning situations directly connected to real-world problems ranging from routine to complex situations. Relevance for teachers and administrators implies establishing a vision and mission, and moving forward on improvement and change initiatives that have purpose and are focused on the agreed-upon needs of that particular institution and student

population. So, quality and relevance refers to real-world applications, as well as to the needs and interests of student and Higher Education cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

Having Quality and relevance in Higher Education means to have the goals to ensure that the students are getting what they need in terms of teaching and educational support. There should be evaluations and reevaluations in every activity in the Universities such that there is a systematic and



recorded advances it makes to find out that no time goes wasted in doing unproductive work. There should be tracer studied where the impact on target groups is traced back to specific elements of a project or programme so that effective and ineffective project components may be identified. Schomburg ⁷ (2003, p.36) notes that graduate surveys are popular for “analysis of the relationship between higher education and work.” They provide quantitative - structural data on employment and career, the character of work and related competencies, and information on the professional orientation and experiences of their graduates.

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