Social accountability in optometric education

N. Anuradha and R. Krishnakumar

Medical education needs to be socially responsible, socially responsive and accountable according to Global consensus for social accountability of medical schools document. Social responsibility is to be aware of the needs of the society. Social responsiveness is aligning the education, research and service arenas with the needs of the community. Social accountability is aiming for the better health of the society through partnerships with the Government initiatives, non-government organizations and community partnerships.

Based on these expectations from the medical education, vision of optometric institutions should realign with these needs. Keeping up with this goal, Elite School of Optometry (ESO) defined its ‘Vision’ as:

Be always a foremost and distinguished leader with social responsibility, responsiveness and accountability in optometric education, vision care service and vision science research in India.

This article aims to project the model by which outreach initiatives of ESO are intertwined with academics and research environment to provide an integrated solution to the society’s needs and its march towards social accountability.

Integrated approach of outreach activities with the optometry curriculum

Its implementation at ESO

Education should understand the developmental priorities of the nation and align the curriculum with the promotion and development of communities’ needs specifically in health care. Societal needs are constantly increasing. Elimination of poverty, improved quality of life, disease prevention and health promotion are few of the needs faced by the society. To provide a solution to these needs, institutions should provide a platform for development and application of expertise. Education should also ensure participatory learning through authentic experience.

With easy availability of knowledge, access to information to all the societal members, and expectation of lifelong learning from the health care providers, the role of institutions becomes important in realizing the critical needs of the society, upgrading knowledge, dissemination of knowledge, application of knowledge and partnering with organizations for sustaining knowledge application. Outreach activities are such platforms where scholarly expertise are generated, extended, applied and shared. It is an extension of the expertise to the society’s needs with social responsibility and responsiveness.

On the other hand, it is not always one sided, knowledge also has to flow into the institution from the society. Outreach activities need to be evaluated to understand its success and impact. The outcome measures of the impact or success of the research and service must be acceptable to the society and therefore should come from the society, which makes knowledge inflow crucial. Hence the broad areas of outreach are not limited only to service but also include academic and research initiatives.

Institution, faculty, students and community are all part of the integrated approach in outreach. Though exact data on the proportion of contribution of each faculty and participation of students in these three areas are yet to be measured, faculty and students contribute to the entire three arenas with the dominance of clinical service owing to the attachment of ESO to the tertiary eye care centre, Sankara Nethralaya. Keeping in mind the needs of the society, projects were designed in all the three fields, which are briefly outlined.

Academics

The need for primary eye care in India is ever increasing and robust training is essential in the delivery of such services. Early clinical experience and bed side learning are emphasized to achieve it. Evaluation of the training process and examination of the adequacy of the training warrants special attention. Competency standards extended by the associations of the profession also clearly elaborates the objectives of the courses, enumerates the hours of clinical training, planning for evaluations, and expectations from the candidates at the end of the programme.

With the intent of complying with the objectives required of the profession, curriculum of the institution is revisited to make sure of its relevance to the context needed for the society. Scope and objectives are laid down not only for the lecture courses but also for the clinical training sessions. Target numbers to be achieved in each of the clinical specialties are enumerated for all the undergraduate courses. Maintenance of log books and continuing medical education is mandatory to ensure systematic learning and constant updating of knowledge. Visit to industries related to the optical and contact lens fields, industries for understanding occupational health set-ups, rehabilitation centres adds value to the knowledge acquired in those courses and also paves way for
real life understanding. New initiatives like “Basic Clinical Optometry skills Training” (BCOST) was introduced to initiate early learning of the optometry procedures. It is an attempt wherein senior undergraduate students teach the juniors and vigorously practice the enumerated procedures. Teaching ensured that the senior students understand the procedures and pass it on to the juniors and the activity is monitored by the post-graduate students and faculty. Clinical evaluations are made rigorous by methods like OSPE/OSCE [Objective Structured Practical Examination/ Objective Structured Clinical Examination]. OSPE/OSCE, a common evaluation tool in medical education, has been in use at ESO for 4 years, ensuring every component of the skills to be evaluated for each student within a short span without any bias.

Attempts are not limited to providing education to the students of the institution but also extended to the community, where in interested students of the schools, colleges and volunteers from the companies are given training for Basic Vision Screening and also given awareness. These volunteers help not only in screening for vision impairment but also act as ambassadors of the institution to the society on eye care. Vision ambassadors who underwent such training are an asset to the institution and help partner with other organisations and also carry forward the vision of the institution to a wider audience.

Research
Research activities should aim at identification of the needs of the society and development of a response to the need. If not, the results of the research might not be appealing to the society and the connect between the institution and the society will be at stake. Sankara Nethralaya, our alma mater has always been in constant support of India centric research, appealing to the masses of the country.

Research initiatives of ESO are introduced right from the undergraduate level and extend as post graduate and Doctorate programmes. Identification of research projects are done with the objective of India centric research in mind. Needs in the society like lack of vision standards for various occupations, lack of compliance to management strategies in school vision screening, lack of man power resources in community service, lack of validated charts for assessment of vision impairment, lack of understanding about the preferences of the beneficiaries about the management strategies has led to various projects like vision standards of various occupations like watch-repairers and goldsmiths, innovative approaches in improving spectacle and referral compliance in school screening, role of optometry students in single day school screening, understanding about eye care seeking behaviour and construction and validation of various visual acuity charts in the vernacular languages. ESO has also considered knowledge-sharing to the extended nation and the world with other optometric fraternity through its national and international conferences.

Service
Service is a platform encompassing the four areas of outreach: identification of a need, developing a response, planning a strategy and implementation. Knowledge gained through the academic curriculum and insights from the research need a platform to be extended and implemented so that the benefits accrued are shared with the community to whose needs these results were aimed at. Outreach activities aim at such implementation with the design of a strategy and present or carry out the implemented plan. Optometry curriculum combines various courses classified as Basic sciences, core optometry courses, applied optometry courses and support courses. Though the learning objectives of all these courses aim at delivery of knowledge in the relevant fields, it requires an interdisciplinary approach to converge it to achieve the aims of the outreach. Community also provides avenue for new research ideas and open up opportunities for funding.

Service programs of ESO include school screening, comprehensive eye camps, awareness campaigns on health promotion and disease prevention. When the need for elimination of refractive error arose, ESO started its school screening initiatives partnering with the Government’s initiatives under the “National programme for Control of Blindness”. Designing a protocol for the school screening, introducing novel methods like involving optometry students in the screening, formulating cost-efficient strategies like single date screening, upgrading the protocol like binocular vision anomalies screening are all responses to the identified needs in the school screening programme.

ESO also partners with non-governmental organizations to provide comprehensive eye camps and ensures a sustained model for the benefit of the public through the partnership. Ensuring the support of infra-structure and running the camps through the NGOs have ensured sustenance. An added advantage is the involvement of volunteers in such service initiatives from the partnering institutions. This has also helped in fund-raising and infrastructure building of the institution.

In a unique delivery design strategy awareness initiatives have employed innovative models like door-to-door awareness campaigns, installation of vision charts in the public places and creation of calendars with vision tests for use by public. Such strategies ensure exploring new ideas to be implemented, new strategies to be designed, aid in
public exposure initially, enlighten the students of their role as primary care provider in health education and disease prevention, help in applying concepts learnt and integrate the learning from various streams to implementation.

A unique initiative by ESO on the service delivery is the utilization of all academic faculty and non-academic staff into the service initiatives. Aptly named “Aikya” which means integration, it imparts the idea of social accountability and responsibility among everyone in the institution and therefore makes an inspiring model for the students. Such initiatives stimulate the students to be naturally responsive to the needs of the society and the nation at large. This also provides opportunity for sharing other subject matter faculty’s expertise with community partners. Session on improving communication among students and teachers was held by the communication faculty in a school where the screening activity took place.

Such activities motivated the students to show their commitment to the society through Rotaract Club activities like arranging guest lectures on diverse topics, visit to orphanage and spending a day with them, and visit to a home of HIV affected children for Diwali celebration.

Benefits earned
It is essential that such benefits are analysed and spread to the society at large to ensure the widespread reach of the importance and need of outreach initiatives to the community.

STUDENT BENEFITS

Academic benefits
Outreach provides an opportunity for holistic approach, understand relevance of academic course work, apply research skills in community, able to adapt to limited technology to address issues, gain newer knowledge which are not confined to text books and understand the limitations of academics and ability to face real-life scenarios.

Skill-based benefits
It also ensures adequate practice of skills under supervision, improvement in language ability, learning to work as a team and explore different places through travel to service sites.

Impact on attitudes
Students feel great having helped the needy, gain advantage of enhanced critical thinking, develop inter-personal relationships, ability to socialize, can overcome conflicts, understand adjustments needed in real-life practice, get rid of fear of facing people, ability to face problems, develop sensitivity to critical and pressing societal issues and understand needs, change in mind-set for future career and enhanced empathy, patience, tolerance and confidence.

Professional benefits
Experience gained through the outreach initiatives add to the curriculum vitae and enhances employment or higher education opportunities.

FACULTY BENEFITS
Outreach also opens up possibilities for new research in a resource limited setting, way for limited budget projects and also provides an opportunity to interact and understand the students better.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS
Motivated individuals are usually part of satisfying the needs of the community and volunteer for such initiatives. It ensures completion of target actions, emergence of sensitised individuals to community needs, who will be able to deliver better to the community. Innovative, creative thinking brought about by diverse players and volunteers brings about a new outlook of the needs and “out of the box” ideas to face the challenges and provide solutions. Increased awareness on potential issues is an added benefit.

“A mediocre teacher tells. A good teacher explains. A superior teacher demonstrates. A great teacher inspires.” As this famous saying goes, outreach programmes not only pave way to explain and demonstrate what was taught in the class rooms but also inspire the students towards value-based education. It forms the platform on which the knowledge and skill gained by the student is rightly implemented with the necessary attitude.

In the long run, institutions will have to play a bigger role in contributing to the better of the society and the nation. Looking at a broader picture, a new outlook on the curriculum reflecting the needs of the nation, redefining our scopes and objectives, recognizing teaching strategies and planning for country-centric research is essential. This should aim at preparing the student for the world through streamlined educational experience and kindle him for life-long learning and contribute to a global outreach.

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