

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY OF MPhil ENGLISH WEEKEND PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This study is intended to present rudimentary empirical evidence on how students perceive quality of their *MPhil English Weekend Programme*. Dearth of literature in local context provided sensible pretext for this study. A random sample of 100 students of *M. Phil English Weekend Programme* at *private* and *private public partnership* (PPP) higher education institutes (HEIs), has been investigated on a purpose built questionnaire taking into account *input*, *process* and *output* indicators for *quality* of their educational programme. The respondents, being considered mature enough, and having no fear of harm (either in grades or any other form), provided a thoughtful rationale to sampling frame as well as additional benefit of the most direct source of information. Although it is hard to retain anonymity of the respondents in such a focussed and ostracised backdrop, nevertheless, every effort has been made to retain it to the maximum. Findings confirm that MPhil English is an effective degree (*output*) whereas its monetary benefit remains the most popular (*input*) indicator among the respondents. Students show high *aspirations* i.e. to continue their studies to PhD. They have been meeting *qualified teachers* in their classroom interface in routine. During the *process*, *easier academic progression*, despite *competent faculty*, worked negatively together with their inevitable *social preoccupations* against their anticipated further (language, research and generic) *competence* development; further, the respondents are modestly able to apply their acquired *competence* at their workplace. This signifies impotent academic process in the passage of a very prestigious academic programme. Therefore, the study suggests that the students, course planners, teachers, administrators and the other stakeholders involved in the *MPhil English Weekend Programme* at private and/or PPP HEIs should revisit the whole mechanism to produce capable graduates in the field of English language, linguistics and literature. Policy documents including scheme of studies and course outlines are required to be reconsidered in order to define afresh the focus of the degree among these three closely related disciplines i.e. language, linguistics and literature; so that *quality education* in such a specialised and highly demanded field of learning may be promoted systematically, progressively and continuously. For a better picture, we would have taken all stakeholders on board, following the quality assurance cycle in a new practical mode of inquiry into the *M. Phil English Weekend Programme*. An extended sample of students including both genders with socioeconomic variability would have been of more value. More HEIs in public, private and PPP sectors may be of superior significance.

Key Words: Quality, M. Phil English, Weekend Programme, Language, Linguistics, Literature

Introduction

Debate on quality is not a new subject of concern. It is the relationship between higher education and society (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). However, it

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is really hard to define *quality* in absolute sense of term. For Newton (2006) “quality is a philosophical concept” (Green, 1994) and “no authoritative definition of quality in higher education is possible” (Scott, 1994); he further says that *quality* of an educational programme is what is experienced by the students. The student is pivotal to the entire process in discourse of quality in education. Students at higher education are supposed to be better aware of their academic potential and they are supposed to be seriously oriented towards their academic outcome. They understand the academic milieu they are in, and they know what is going on in society out of their academic milieu. Most of the postgraduate students have direct experience of what is required out of their degree in the labour market because they are working or have worked therein. Therefore, student perspective on quality of an MPhil programme, although subtle in disposition, appears sensibly reasonable in theory as well as practice. As a matter of fact, gathering feedback from the learners (and other stakeholders) is an essential part of the quality assurance cycle. However, we believe that, although, student feedback is central to improving quality, nevertheless it is not the only method or indicator (<http://www.faculty.londondeanery.ac.uk/e-learning/assuring-maintaining-quality-in-health-professions-education/to-sum-up>; accessed on May 05, 2017). It is not a *sufficient* but indeed a *necessary* condition for assurance and enhancement of *quality*.

If we take *quality* in terms of *indicators*, student perception on the performance makes an integral part of quality indicators. Schindler et al. (2015) review *student performance indicators* as follows:

A set of *quality indicators* that pertain to student engagement with curriculum, faculty, and staff, and increases in knowledge, skills, and abilities that lead to gainful employment (e.g., increased critical thinking skills; Bogue, 1998; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Iacovidou et al., 2009; Scott, 2008)

We intend to investigate student perspective in cyclic process (i.e. input, process and output) of *quality* of MPhil English Programme. Student *aspiration*, *expectation* (student entry behaviour) and *teacher's qualification* are taken as **input indicator**; **process indicator** here, is concerned with the variables/factors related to the academic process for the entire duration of the programme (inculcating required competences

among students) and its *effectiveness*; and **output indicator** (student exit behaviour) comprises students' acquired *competences* and their perceived *effectiveness* of the degree.

Context

Higher education witnessed an unprecedented boom in Pakistan since the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002. Both public and private sectors contributed substantially to this national venture of high importance. Besides, an intermediary form known as *private public partnership* (PPP), found its way during the course of this developmental process and made its way successfully, nevertheless, to a lesser extent. Keeping in view the greater public demand, popularity of post graduate qualification and wide-ranging educational upsurge in vogue at that moment of time, some higher education institutions (HEIs) started offering weekend programmes. In such a magnanimous quantitative expansion quality concerns are apprehensible.

Like many other countries of the world, English is the *lingua franca* of higher education system in Pakistan. M.Phil English Programme turns out to be more sensitive realm of investigation in higher education and research in Pakistan, for its likely contribution to general education i.e. from school to university, providing technically trained human resource with solid and competent educational background.

Quality concerns became more sensitive for weekend programme offered at private and/or PPP HEIs. Basic motive of greater public access to higher education went controversial. It started attracting low achievers and academically less motivated students; henceforth, '*garbage in – garbage out*'. Not all but some, students with lesser ability and motivation joined M.Phil English Weekend Programme with the aim of using degree as a *token* for employment and/or monetary incentives tied with it, but in fact they lacked serious academic commitment to their further development. They inflexibly compromised competence over inflated grades during the process; thus ending up in a miserable finale.

Students in M. Phil English Weekend Programme are observed to be primarily degree oriented rather than knowledge seekers; and are particularly inclined toward neither mastering research skills, nor widening subject knowledge, or gaining English language competence according to their degree level. The main objective of the study is to find

out students' *inclination* in taking admission to MPhil English Weekend Programme; and to record their acquired *competence*, and to know the *effectiveness* of the programme as an outcome of the whole process. The study delimits itself to private and PPP HEIs.

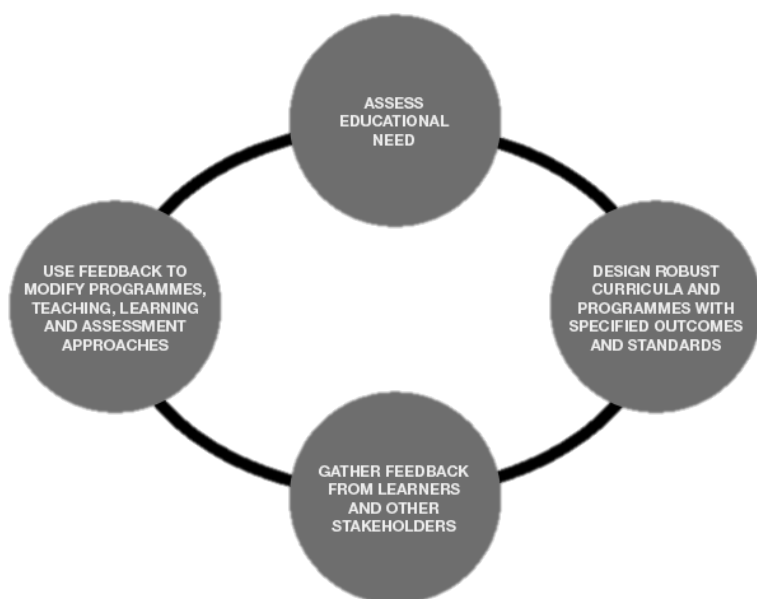
Review of Related Literature

Quality is a structured and systematic process focussing on sustenance and improvement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a). It may be characterised with perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993) as cited by Watty (2003). Usually better academics progress concludes into what determines better job; and salary comes to be the centre of the quality of the job (Schmitt and Jones, 2012) among plethora of job characteristics.

Importance of an educational *program evaluation* cannot be over emphasised for ensuring its quality. Program evaluation adds vigour to quality of an educational programme. Various methodologies have been exercised by the practitioners as well as researchers in the field. Davis (2016), for example, explains how methodologies of *program evaluation* best facilitate educators to improve teaching and learning, and suggests:

1. institutional support (funding, training, expertise, etc.),
2. institutional governance and leadership,
3. facilitative infrastructures (e.g., curricular maps, assessment plans),
4. program-level support (financial, personnel resources),
5. a prevailing program ethos conducive to educational innovation,
6. pro-assessment attitudes,
7. high-quality assessment activities and abilities

This model is, in fact, output oriented. It focuses on to provide educators a set of strategies and procedures to enhance their assessment capabilities. Harvey (2002) favours the use of student feedback considering it an indispensable component of quality assurance in educational *programme evaluation*. However, it should not be used to make judgments about the personal performance of academics (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). Following quality assurance cycle delineates student feedback as an essential component of the process.

Figure 1: The Quality Assurance Cycle

Source: <http://www.faculty.londondeanery.ac.uk/e-learning/assuring-and-maintaining-quality-in-clinical-education/the-quality-assurance-cycle> , accessed on May 05, 2017

Going through the origin and interdisciplinary nature of *program evaluation*, Norris (2016) locates its progress within applied linguistics and language education in particular; and further describes current contributions of *language program evaluation*, and likely future trends in it. However, it may bring superior rewards, if it is used to support cyclic disposition of quality assurance mechanism applied in *language program evaluation*.

General English proficiency has been a question of debate among researchers over the globe, for example, Afshar and Movassagh (2016) in Iran and Becker (2016) in US. Afshar and Movassagh (2016) identify serious problems reported by students on their general English proficiency level. Becker (2016) examines the use of rubric in students' educational assessment. According to Panadero & Jonsson (2013), rubrics are good to direct students toward self-evaluation, and are found a decent tool to identify strengths and weaknesses therein. Becker (2016) suggests including students in their educational assessment process in order to have improved output (i.e. writing performance).

Student participation is not restricted to the assessment alone; for better academic performance and output (i.e. grades) they should be an active participant in the process of learning as well (Sarwar, Hussain and Shah (2015). Strategies are best practices in teaching, especially if teachers include both explicit and implicit instructional techniques in their programmes to raise awareness, provide practice, and encourage evaluation so that learners can reflect on their strategy use, and adjust their strategy repertoires accordingly (Griffiths, 2015). Study conducted by Calvert and Sheen (2015) serves as an example of how teachers can create their own tasks and of the importance of evaluating them empirically. Calvert and Sheen (2015) confirm that results noticeably improved after the task modification, and the successful implementation of the modified task leads to changes in how the teacher viewed task-based teaching. Park (2015) provides empirical evidence on using drama projects in the teaching of English, and concludes that it is a viable and effective educational tool for the foreign language teacher, from individual syllabus supplementation to incorporation into a language program curriculum.

Methodology

Norris (2016) emphasises the potential contribution of *program evaluation* as a way of ameliorating gaps in current language research and practice. Therefore, present study is envisaged to make an original, no matter how trivial it is, contribution for further development of *MPhil English Weekend Programme* at private and PPP HEIs.

Table 1: Indicators of Quality Cycle in the Questionnaire

Statement		
Input		Indicator
1.	Having MPhil English had been one of my aims since long.	Student Aspiration
2.	I joined MPhil English to be eligible for admission to PhD.	Student Aspiration
3.	My primary motive was to have monetary benefits.	Student expectation
4.	I would get better job/promotion.	Student expectation
5.	Teachers were qualified enough.	Qualified faculty
Process		Indicator
6.	More competent teachers (compared to that of MA) were there.	Competent faculty

7. My social duties were found to be major impediment during MPhil.	social hurdle
8. MPhil English helped us improve language skills to higher level.	Language Competence
9. My teachers never identified grammatical mistakes in my work.	Language Competence
10. I had been reading at least two to four books during a month.	Language Competence
11. Research skills had also been emphasised during course work.	Research Competence
12. We had been conducting research on issues in English language and literature.	Research Competence
13. I confidently demonstrated spoken English skills in class.	Generic Competence
14. Weekend programme offered easier academic progress.	Effectiveness
Output	Indicator
15. I still make (grammatical, syntactic and semantic) mistakes in writing.	Language Competence
16. My English language skills are according to my degree level.	Language Competence
17. I write better English after having taken admission to MPhil.	Language Competence
18. I feel prepared enough to produce good research in English.	Research Competence
19. My understanding of research skills are highly improved during MPhil.	Research Competence
20. I have become a good presenter and speaker in English language.	Generic Competence
21. I've improved my criticalthinking and analytical skills.	Generic Competence
22. I apply learned skills at my work place.	Generic Competence
23. I find MPhil English an effective degree.	Effectiveness

The study is a survey research conducted on randomly selected 100 students of MPhil English Weekend Programme from *private* and *private public partnership* (PPP) HEIs. We are concerned with the *quality* of the *product* i.e. students of MPhil English at *private* and/or PPP HEIs; which are seemingly contributing a lot to mass access to higher education but quality concerns would have been overlooked.

We use a questionnaire (see Table 1) to record student *entry* and *exit behaviour* to look into their quality of education. The questionnaire basically accommodates *student perspective* to the process of *quality* i.e. *input*, *process* and *output*. Student *aspiration*, *expectation* (student *entry* behaviour) and *teacher's qualification* are taken as ***input*** indicator; ***process*** indicator concerns with the *effectiveness* of the programme, other

related *factors* and the *targetcompetences*; and **output** indicator (student *exit* behaviour) comprises students’ acquired *competences* and their perceived *effectiveness* of the degree.

Results

Student responses are collected on a rating scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Percentages of their response are being presented here in the Table 2.

Table 2: Percentages of Responses on the Scale

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, + = (SA+A), N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, - = (D+DA)

Statement		SA	A	+	N	D	SD	-
Input	Indicator							
1. Having M.Phil English had been one of my aims since long.	Student Aspiration	30	15	45	20	20	15	35
2. I joined M.Phil English to be eligible for admission to PhD.	Student Aspiration	53	13	66	14	5	15	20
3. My primary motive was to have monetary benefits.	Student expectation	34	26	60	20	12	8	20
4. I would get better job/promotion.	Student expectation	46	24	70	20	5	5	10
5. Teachers were qualified enough.	Qualified faculty	45	25	70	5	10	15	25
Process	Indicator							
6. More competent teachers (compared to that of MA) were there.	Competent faculty	45	20	65	10	15	10	25
7. My social duties were found to be majorimpediment during M.Phil.	Social Hurdle	48	10	58	15	17	10	27
8. M.Phil English helped us improve language skills to higher level.	Language Competence	38	12	50	12	28	10	38
9. My teachers never identified grammatical mistakes in my work.	Language Competence	10	14	24	20	18	38	56
10.I had been reading	Language	14	6	20	10	15	55	70

at least two to four books during a month.	Competence							
11. Research skills had also been emphasised during course work.	Research Competence	15	10	25	10	20	45	65
12. We had been conducting research on issues in English lang. & lit.	Research Competence	18	3	21	15	26	38	64
13. I confidently demonstrated spoken English skills in class.	Generic Competence	18	15	33	5	22	40	62
14. Weekend programme offered easier academic progress.	Effectiveness	40	20	60	20	10	10	20
Output	Indicator							
15. I still make (grammatical, syntactic and semantic) mistakes in writing.	Language Competence	47	15	62	10	10	18	28
16. My English language skills are according to my degree level.	Language Competence	12	18	30	10	22	38	60
17. I write better English after having taken admission to MPhil.	Language Competence	44	16	60	22	10	08	18
18. I feel prepared enough to produce good research in English.	Research Competence	40	16	56	20	12	12	24
19. My understanding of research skills are highly improved during MPhil.	Research Competence	10	10	20	20	23	37	60
20. I have become a good presenter and speaker in English language.	Generic Competence	38	18	56	12	20	12	32
21. I've improved my critical thinking and analytical skills.	Generic Competence	25	10	35	20	15	30	45
22. I apply learned skills at my work place.	Generic Competence	22	18	40	12	18	30	48

23. I find MPhil English an effective degree.	Effectiveness	50	25	75	12	7	6	13
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Input Indicator: It has been noted that the students have been *aspiring* (however, cumulative percentage response of *agree* and *strongly agree* is modestly higher) to have M.Phil English since long; and they are desirous to go further for PhD. Students *expect* monetary benefit, better employability and promotion (on professional ladder in their respective job) through this degree. They largely agree that suitably *qualified teachers* are available to teach students of M.Phil English Weekend Programme at private and PPP HEIs.

Process indicator: Although MPhil English Weekend Programme offers an *easier academic progress*, and *competent teachers* are available, as marked by majority of the respondents; nevertheless, neither *research competence* nor *language competence* has been reportedly emphasised sufficiently during the educational process. Major *impediment* is reported to be their *social duties* (responsibilities and engagements) which are hard for them to be evaded. It is stated that there is no systematic emphasis on *reading* (relevant books), practical *research* and spoken English activities. Despite all, students surprisingly report that MPhil English Programme help them *improve their language competence* because the *teachers have been keenly identifying grammatical mistakes* in students’ work. Another plausible explanation to this phenomenon may be extended henceforth. It appears that the students would have unconsciously (or subconsciously) experienced psychological development in their English language competence.

Output Indicator: Students confess that they do not have adequately developed their competence – neither *research competence* nor English *language competence*; and they find that still *there are grammatical, syntactic and semantic mistakes in their writing*. Contrary to this finding, they do believe that they are now *able to write better English* and consider themselves *prepared enough to produce good research in English*. Students believe that they *have become good presenter and speaker in English language* beside a slight development in their *generic competence* (critical thinking and analytical skills and ability to apply their learned skills at their work place). But the development is not of as much value as it is expected to be at this level at all. Finally, students conclusively declare that M. Phil Degree is *effective*, nevertheless.

Students of M.Phil English Weekend Programme are showing high *aspirations* i.e. to continue their studies to PhD. They meet *qualified teachers* in their classroom interface in routine. They have obvious *expectation* of monetary benefit, better employability and further promotion on their professional ladder. *Easier academic progression*, despite *competent faculty*, worked negatively together with their inevitable *social preoccupations* against their anticipated further (language, research and generic) *competence* development. This signifies impotent academic process in the passage of a very prestigious academic programme.

Discussion and Conclusion

Undoubtedly, higher education is a catalyst for socio-economic development in a society but it is also important to know if quality education is ensured. English in Pakistan is being taught as a compulsory subject from grade 1 to graduation (i.e. grad 14). It has a long linguistic history in the subcontinent. Like many other countries of the world, English is the *lingua franca* of higher education in Pakistan. M.Phil English Programme turns out to be more sensitive realm of investigation in higher education and research in Pakistan; as it produces future teachers, teacher-educators and researchers in such a specialised discipline of high demand in local social, academic and economic milieu. More and more graduates are fascinated to have M.Phil and PhD in English (Linguistics, Language and/or Literature) in the wake of current upsurge in higher education indigenously.

Higher education in Pakistan witnessed an exceptional boom since its reinvigoration in early 2000s. Magnanimous quantitative increase resulted in new HEIs. Capacity of existing HEIs was increased to accommodate more graduates. Both public and private sector contributed substantially to this venture. Besides, an intermediary form known as *private public partnership* (PPP) found its way during the course of this developmental process and survived successfully, nevertheless, to a lesser extent. Many HEIs opened new satellite sub-campuses to join the race. Further, some HEIs started offering MPhil Weekend Programme without ensuring quality standards. In such a magnanimous quantitative expansion quality concerns are apprehensible.

Key challenges of *access*, *quality* and *relevance* in tertiary education (NAHE, unpublished) were identified after 1st 5-year Medium

Term Development Framework (MTDF-I) was launched in 2005. Although, Khawaja (2015) noticed successful intermediations of HEC in promoting quality of learning/instruction and research during the period 2005-10; but the situation later on worsened gradually. Measures to enhance quality were overlooked in the race to surpass in quantity. Beside many other programmes, initiating M.Phil English Weekend Programme without ensuring quality has become a big question, and it will continue to be in the coming years, unless, addressed intelligently. Norris (2016) emphasizes the likely impact of *program evaluation* as a way of making improvement in language research and practice.

Higher financial cost incurred upon the student in *weekend programmes*, especially at private and PPP HEIs, contributed to boost pseudo economic development in the name of higher education. But basic motive of greater public access to higher education controversially attracted low achievers and academically less motivated students; henceforth, '*garbage in – garbage out*'. Students with lesser ability and pseudo lofty motivation joined MPhil English Weekend Programme with the aim of using degree as a token for employment and/or monetary incentives tied with it. **Input** was not of required/expected rank and quality. They inflexibly compromised competence over inflated grades during the *process*; thus ending up in a miserable finale. Consequently, the **output**, though developed but, was not adequately developed in fact.

Students in M. Phil English Weekend Programme are primarily degree oriented rather than sincere knowledge seekers; and are particularly inclined toward neither mastering research skills, nor widening subject knowledge, or gaining English language competence as it is required to do for M.Phil degree level.

The situation looks further aggravated due to shorter academic student-teacher contact in *weekend programmes*; longer and hectic activity stuffed in 2 to 3 days, lack of sufficient administrative support and loosely structured and inappropriately administered academic plan for the obvious reason of scarce logistic support; these factors add fuel to fire. Unusual burden of higher expenses on students and increased monetary incentives to teachers (support staff involved in) may have damaged the spirit of the programme in terms of quality. And the sacred knowledge seeking activity of sincere and pure sentiments is going into

waste for getting it intrinsically polluted with overarching meaner and vicious desire of wealth and untrue and impolite wish for pride.

It is hard to say, if it is fortunate or unfortunate, that we are not alone on the globe to face such a challenging situation. Afshar and Movassagh (2016) conducted a national level large scale research projection *English for Academic Purpose* (EAP) in Iran; serious problems are reported by the students on their general English proficiency level, duration and timing of the classes, motivation level. Their findings are congruent to what we have identified in our study. Fortunately, Norris (2016) highlight how changing global circumstances, technological affordances, and contexts and purposes for language learning and language use are both impacting the nature of evaluation and presenting challenges for which evaluation is uniquely suited to respond.

The results of our study are alarming as most of the students consider doing MPhil by sparing only two days in week which is easier as well as profitable in terms of monetary and academic gains. But it is also significant to note that whether the students have sufficient time to spare after five (or six) days' continuous work to meet academic demands of the degree. Additionally, the courses are not less than a challenge; nonetheless the responses reflect that they cannot come to stand the test of fire.

Subjects also state that they have not been engaged in conducting research in true letter and spirit during course work whereas it should be the primary focus of MPhil Programme. Reflecting on their present knowledge about English language proficiency the respondents say that they lack in English language proficiency, particularly, spoken English. It throws light on the teaching techniques and strategies adopted inside the classroom to teach an MPhil class. It is comprehensible that there is a stringent time constraint in MPhil Weekend Programme where teacher is to meet the students once in a week only; whereas regular programme offers students healthier opportunity to visit and have constructive academic discussions with the faculty if they want to take greater benefit of it. As a result we come to know that students are not found ready to take up even small scale research project after completing course work.

It is also important to mention that the underlying philosophy in offering M.Phil (before PhD) programme is to acclimatize the graduates

with the very culture and tradition of research. But the results of our study reflect that the students have not been primarily focussing on subject knowledge and/or required language and research skills. It can be argued that how they will be able to respond to the demanding PhD programmes in future.

In light of the above, it can be said that admitting a large number of students to M.Phil English does not fulfil the vision of producing quality post graduate researchers. It may bubble up the number at first instance but will immediately go out of scene consequently. We believe that such trends may lead HEIs compromise quality education which cannot be justified at the cost of revenue generation.

Way Forward

We have been looking into some successful practices around the world to seek light for a probable adaption into our system for potential future betterment. Propagation of research culture is central to the idea of MPhil programmes in all fields of education. Attracting genuinely serious and committed students to such a demanding challenge of MPhil English, particularly to *weekend programme*, is deemed inevitable. MPhil English Weekend Programme needs to be redesigned to use instructional strategies more effectively. There are surely empirical evidences on successful and effective use of strategies in language learning by the researchers. For example Griffiths (2015) explained how strategies might be taught more effectively and how this makes a difference in terms of 'good language learning'. The students should have better access to the teachers, and academic resources in library as well as online exclusively made available to the researchers at HEIs.

Task-based teaching may be effective to be implemented at M.Phil English Weekend Programme. Study of Calvert & Sheen (2015) serves as an excellent illustration of how teachers can create their own tasks and how to evaluate them empirically. Smaller 2 days span of weekend programme may also be extended to 3 days or more. Nevertheless, task-based teaching is supposed to be a promising intervention in the programme. Project method of teaching though critical but is favourable to advance learners. Park (2015) reveals that the drama project is a workable effective device for the teacher in a language program. Park discovered that rather than resisting the innovation presented by drama projects, the adult students received it genially for its

creativity, autonomy, group work and performance. It appears hard but if implemented wisely, will bear surprisingly highly favourable results. Becker (2016) found that students involved in their assessment process, resulted in improved writing performance. Therefore, students in weekend programme should be made to play participatory role in their educational assessment.

Therefore, the study suggests that the students, course planners, teachers and administrators involved in the *MPhil English Weekend Programme* at private and/or PPP HEIs should revisit the whole mechanism to produce capable graduates in the field of English language, linguistics and literature. Policy documents including scheme of studies and course outlines are required to be reconsidered in order to define afresh the focus of degree among these three closely related disciplines i.e. language, linguistics and literature; so that quality education in such a specialised and highly demanded field of learning may be promoted systematically, progressively and continuously.

For a better picture, we would have taken all stakeholders on board, following the quality assurance cycle in a new practical mode of inquiry into the M.Phil English Weekend Programme. An extended sample of students including both genders with socioeconomic variability would have been of more value. More HEIs in public, private and PPP sectors may be of superior significance.

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