

## Assessing Impact of Governing Boards on Educational Institutions through Focus Group Discussions

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### ABSTRACT

*Good governance of educational institutions is essential to achieve optimal institutional performances. Several weaknesses exist in some Governing Boards (GBs) of educational institutions that need rectification through a careful analysis of the structure and functioning of GBs to identify changes that could make them more effective. Based on review of existing literature and background of the educational institutions in Meghalaya state, an in-depth, cross-sectional study was done during 2009-10 on a representative random sample of 36 church-operated educational institutions using mixed method approach. The quantitative aspect of the study involved in-depth interviews with members of the GBs, and Institutional Administrators on the composition, functioning and institutional outcomes and performances. Significant correlation was observed between the Characteristics of the GB and the Institutional performances, despite certain lacunae and cogent recommendations made. The details of this quantitative survey were published earlier and the qualitative part is now presented in this paper. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with three main stakeholders, the GB members, administrators of the institutions and senior teachers were conducted on the objectives of the research. The FGDs confirmed the findings of the quantitative survey but also added newer and more significant observations thereby leading to substantial recommendations. FGDs of other stakeholders such as parents and public may shed more light in improving the functioning of GBs. Qualitative approaches such as the FGDs can be usefully integrated into management research especially on sensitive issues that are faster, convenient and cost-effective.*

**Keywords:** Governing Boards, Educational Institutions, Qualitative Research, Focus Group Discussions.

### INTRODUCTION:

Governance per se as well as its role in educational institutions has been reviewed extensively over the past few decades globally and in the context of enhancing its effectiveness (Khoday, 2016; Hess, 2002). Despite its importance, data to support the claim that governance is a useful concept has been lacking (Hyden et al, 2005; Carver, 2006; Gisselquist, 2012). Most organizations have governance structures in place but it is often focused on conformance with the regulations only but not growth and development (Islam & Arefin, 2007). There have been reports that a few educational institutions have had to struggle for survival because of poor or weak governance (Anand, 2009; Khoday, 2016). Although Meghalaya attained its statehood in the year 1972, it had no education rules and regulations of its own adopting the 1922 rules and regulations of Assam state (Assam Education department, 1922), which only acts as a referral document or simply a guideline to the education sector of the state. (Nongsiang, 2010). It is hoped the new Education policy (Meghalaya Education Department, 2018)

will improve matters but the policy does not provide detailed guidelines on governing boards, their composition and functioning. To make any sustainable changes relating to proper governance, especially of minority institutions, there is an urgent need to carry out a proper study on the ideal structure and correct functioning of governing boards in terms of responsiveness to ground level realities, problems faced, efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, etc.

Based on a major research project was done during 2009-10 on a representative random sample of 36 church operated educational institutions in Meghalaya interviewing in depth the members of Governing Boards (GBs) and institutional heads it was found that despite several lacunae in GB membership and deficiencies in optimal functioning, there was still a statistically significant bivariate and multivariate correlation between the GB rating and institutional performance (Marwein & Rao, 2019). The quantitative research strategy adopted was quite intensive, time-consuming and relatively expensive and in this paper we present and discuss the merits of using a qualitative research technique, which was also adopted in this research project. Abro et al (2015) clearly explain that how the researchers can mix two different types of methodologies (Qualitative and Quantitative) in the banking and finance research to validate their findings pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of both the research methodologies.

Qualitative methods especially Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been gaining prominence in management research to provide more valid information and better insights into critical issues as compared to individual interview surveys (Boateng, 2012). Focus groups usually provide immediate ideas for the improvement of particular concepts (Writing, 2019). One often stated advantage of using FGD lies in the fact that they permit researcher to observe a large amount on interactions on specific topics in a short term (Smithson, 2007). Several investigators have adopted mixed methods approaches to supplement their quantitative surveys through focus group discussions thereby enriching their conclusions (Feruglio & Nisbett, 2018; Gupta et al 2019; Lee et al, 2019).

Three Focus Group Discussions were conducted with three major stakeholders using standardized methodologies which are described and discussed in this paper to show how the qualitative approach complemented and enriched the quantitative data leading to more substantive recommendations for re-engineering the Governing Boards to function better for higher institutional outputs, especially in the performances of the pupils.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

The research was carried out during 2009-10 in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya state where Shillong the capital is also situated. The Martin Luther Christian University, a developmental university is located in Shillong offering doctoral programs, one of which is the present research. A mixed methods research design was used, and the quantitative part was described earlier (Marwein & Rao, 2019).

The effectiveness of a Focus Group depends on the number of participants, their qualifications, representativeness and preparation, experience of the moderator, the setting and adequacy of time/ Standard guidelines are available for formation and implementation of successful focus group discussions (Breen, 2006; Morgan, 1996; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Adams & Cox, 2008, Alaya, 2011). Summarization and analytical methods are also available (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003; Rabiee, 2004). Unlike in quantitative surveys, random sampling is un-necessary but careful purposive and meaningful sampling would be essential (Richter et al, 1991, Onwuegbuzie, 2009). After discussions with the members of the Governing boards, institutional administrative committees and other experts, it was decided to have 3 focus group discussions, one with GB members, one with institutional administrators, and the third one comprised of teachers in the concerned institutions. Informed consent of all the participants were obtained suitable dates and timings decided according to the convenience of members, detailed general orientations given to ensure that the members were sufficiently educated and satisfied with the arrangements made for security and confidentiality of the information collected (Adams and Cox, 2008; Eeuwijk et al 2017, Escalada & Heong, 2014). All participants were given the opportunity to participate (Escalada & Heong, 2014). A suitable acceptable member was nominated as the moderator for each group and given necessary guidance and instructions to run a successful discussion (Pérez-SindínLópez, 2013). A rapporteur or secretary was also appointed for each group to record all statements, remarks and opinions (Pickering & Watt, 2001). The author and chief investigator of this research project took all precautions and steps for ensuring smooth and successful outcomes (Krueger, 2002). Management of nominal and narrative data followed acceptable procedures (Krueger & Casey, 2000) to summarize the results.

## **FINDINGS:**

### **THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP I:**

The group was formed with the chairpersons, secretaries and members of Governing Boards. One person was nominated as moderator and one other as rapporteur. After preliminaries on clarifications of the purposes of this meeting and introductions, the group engaged in a lively discussion covering the whole ambit of the responsibilities of the Governing Boards. The participants discussed whether acceptance of financial aid from the government restricts their independence and act as an agent of government. It was generally agreed that this was not so and so long as the GB abides by the rules and regulations stipulated by the government, its role still remains intact and significant. There was divided opinion on whether the members of the GB should be of high qualifications, especially when it is rather difficult to get highly educated members particularly in the rural areas. However, the participants felt that it would be good to have GB members who have experience and administrative comprehension and also changed from time to time. It was also recommended that decisions involving technical details should be dealt with by experts inducted in relevant sub-committees eg, finances, building & infrastructure, interview board etc. The participants accepted the fact that the sponsoring bodies of institutions have solely entrusted the governing of the institutions to the respective GB without intervening and interfering into their affairs. The participants suggested therefore that it is time that the churches as sponsoring bodies should frame the principles to direct institutions to function and subsequently the GB of institutions can frame policies to govern their respective institutions. The participants concluded after discussion on conflicts and lapses, that there should be a proper coordination and cooperation between the president/chairperson and the secretary of the GB, to avoid such problems. It was suggested that the GB has to focus on the road map etched by the previous GB so as to be able to fulfil/implement the preceding aspirations or decisions.

In general, the institutions were happy with the governance, and interaction of the GB members, although there was room for improvement.

### **Analysis of the FGD and Consensus:**

There should be proper coordination and cooperation between the president/chairperson and the secretary of the GB. GB has to focus on the road map etched by the previous GB so as to be able to fulfil/implement the preceding decisions. Decisions that require technical details should be dealt with by experts by introducing relevant sub-committees, eg, finances, building & infrastructure, interview board. Induction of GB members with experience and administrative comprehension and should be changed from time to time.

**New Insights:** The sponsoring body should frame the principles to direct institutions to function and GB of institutions can frame policies to govern their respective institutions.

### **THE SECOND FOCUS GROUP (II):**

The group was formed with the teachers Governing Boards. Again one member was nominated as chairperson or moderator and one other as rapporteur. After introductions and necessary clarifications on the procedures and research objectives, the group discussed the functioning and effectiveness of the Governing Board and debated on the frequency of meetings and full participation of all members. While the Board needs to meet at least quarterly, some felt more frequent meetings might help in monitoring certain administrative aspects of the institution, such as appointment of teachers, financial irregularities, etc. There was lively discussion on the need for the GB members not merely attend the meeting, but interact with the teachers and other staff of the school and also have an opportunity to meet the students' parents. It was unanimously agreed that it is vital to have a healthy interaction between teachers, parents and GB members. A good rapport among them will help shed light on the in-depth problems faced by the teachers and parents, which will then be addressed during the GB meetings. It was also suggested that apart from the formal meetings held, the GB members should interact well with the head of the institution to identify the practical problems and needs of the students. The participants discussed the important role of the GB in ensuring a sound financial basis for the running of the institution. It was generally agreed that the GB should strengthen the fund position to be able to meet the salary of teachers according to the revised pay scales. In this connection, the group felt that the leadership role of the president/chairman was crucial not just to preside over the meetings but also to frame the agenda, moderate proper discussions and to take the final decision on any matter.

There was some discussion on the need to take speedy action on important issues without neglecting the other long run decisions made by the GBs. Lastly, it was suggested by all that the supporting papers of GB meetings

along with the agenda should be intimated to the members well ahead of time, at least 1 week or 2 weeks before the date of the meeting.

#### **Analysis of FGD and Consensus:**

GB members not merely attend meetings, but to actively involve in healthy interaction between teachers, parents as issues will be addressed during the GB meetings.

The role of the President/chairman was crucial not just to preside over the meetings but also to frame the agenda, moderate proper discussions and to take the final decision on any matter.

To take speedy action on important issues without neglecting the other long run decisions made by the GB. Supporting papers of GB meetings along with the agenda should be intimated to the members well ahead of time, at least 1 week or 2 weeks before the date of the meeting.

**New insights:** More frequent board meetings will help monitoring certain administrative aspects of the institution, such as appointment of teachers, financial irregularities, etc.

GB members should also ensure a sound financial basis for the running of the institution.

#### **THE THIRD FOCUS GROUP (III):**

The group consisted Principal, vice -principal and teachers. One member was nominated as the chairperson or moderator and one other as the rapporteur. After introductions and necessary clarifications and procedures, the members enthusiastically participated. During the first part of the discussion, the group debated on the qualifications of the members nominated by the sponsoring body, who may not be aware about the various issues facing the institution and felt that proper orientation is needed for such members to participate actively and meaningfully. A number of instances were pointed out when ignorance has resulted in a serious lack of coordination and collaboration between the GB members and the administrator. All participants were of the opinion that perhaps it is best that the secretary of the GB should be the head of the institution and if at all the secretary should be represented from the church it is their considered view that the latter be highlighted on the problems faced by the institution on a regular basis. The participants also stressed on the need of a secretary who can act as a mediator between the GB and the teachers. There was considerable discussion on the need to clarify the difference between governance and administration, avoid major overlapping of roles between GB and the administrator. It was unanimously agreed and expressed that a proper framing of roles and functions to help underline the roles to be played by the GB and the administrator. During the discussion on framing of the agenda and preparing necessary documentation, the participants unanimously agreed that preparation of the agenda should be done jointly by the secretary of the GB and the head of institution so that the teachers' and students' matters can also be included in the agenda. A participant identified another deficiency which was agreed by all, that decisions taken by the GB are either not implemented as per decision taken or not implemented at all. The discussion concluded that the GB must monitor whether necessary action was taken on all resolutions of the meeting. There was a good discussion on the roles of GB and the administration in the selection and recruitment of teachers and the great need to be transparent and avoid favouritism and nepotism. It was generally felt that appointments of teachers should be absolutely based on the merit and performances during the interviews. There was a view expressed that the head of institution and teachers should be consulted regarding vacancies so that they can be filled up according to the requirements needed by the school faculty. There was a discussion on the commitment of the GB members as they were voluntary, and a suggestion was made whether, at least the office-bearers should be provided honoraria or other incentives. There was also a discussion on the need for a separate board office, where all the records can be kept securely and in order, for any reference by any of the stakeholders; most members agreed to this idea. The participants discussed the profile of the members; some felt that members of the GB are all elderly and aged and it is time to replace them by young and creative members who are not only qualified but can contribute to the planning processes. Another participant emphasized that members of the GB should be people who are interested in education and who are concerned with the welfare of students and the overall functioning of the institution in general. As the role of the president/chairperson of the GB is equally important, the participants advised that the president/chairperson should be a person who acts democratically and take the suggestions of all the members into confidence before arriving at the final decision. There was a general consensus for all these valuable suggestions. The participants discussed the need for the GB to take a leading role in undergirding the financial base of the institution, schemes and grants by teaming up with the local politicians and government bureaucrats in the community. However, there was no consensus on these ideas. Finally, the group discussed the need for the GB to be more supportive and show greater appreciation to the institutional authorities in case of academic excellence or other credits. All members agreed to this suggestion.

### **Analysis of FGD and Consensus:**

Emphasized on the qualifications, age, active participation, commitment and support of the board members in the affairs of the institutions.

The Secretary of the board should be clear on difference between governance and administration and to be attentive to the roles played as a secretary of GB and as an administrator as these roles often overlap. Proper framing of roles and functions to help underline the roles to be played by the GB and the administrator. The Secretary/Head of institutions ought to act as a liaison between the board members and the teachers. Preparation of agenda items and necessary follow up actions on the board's resolutions were featured by the group. As the role of the president/chairperson of the GB is important the president/chairperson should be a person who acts democratically and take the suggestions of all the members into confidence before arriving at the final decision. Addressing to the ground realities the GB and the administration are to be involved in the selection and recruitment of teachers for a fair and transparent process to avoid favoritism and nepotism. It is time to replace the board members by young and creative members who are not only qualified but can contribute to the planning processes. GB to take a leading role in undergirding the financial base of the institution, schemes and grants by teaming up with the local politicians and government bureaucrats in the community.

New insights: As GB members are voluntary; at least the office-bearers should be provided honoraria or other incentives. The need for a separate board office, where all the records can be kept securely and in order, for any reference by any of the stakeholder. Regarding vacancies the board needs to consult the teachers so that they can be filled up according to the requirements needed by the school faculty.

### **DISCUSSION:**

The findings from the three groups overlap to some extent but portray a spectrum of valuable insights into the role of Governing Boards in impacting institutional performances through specific modifications in their structure and functioning. Similar conclusions were drawn from the quantitative surveys reported earlier (Marwein & Rao, 2019). In fact, the focus group discussions offered new insights into modifications needed in the governing process. Omar, 2018; Ayala 2011; Freitas, 2019 have reiterated that the process of data collection in qualitative research gives researchers the opportunity to get unexpected data and the data can explain the issues of research topic. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Mishra, 2016).

As an important qualitative research technique, Focus Group Discussions do provide researchers with data which are not obtainable through documentation or record. According to Mack *et al* 2005, FGD completely depends on participants to generate data (McLafferty, 2004). Savin-Baden & Major, 2010 further said that FGD can be defined as "*a unique kind of interview, in that it collects data from a number of people in a manner that is non-quantitative*". The composition and number of Focus groups are therefore crucial in establishing the validity of the findings. In the present research, only 3 major stakeholders were considered. Whether other stakeholders such as the Parents and the Public could also be involved depends on what critical insights would be available to add to the present findings. The strength of the FGD method as compared to in-depth interviews are in the dynamic conversation, reaction response in a short time period and the group participants are from the identified experts that can give data or feedback that may not be found in any record or documentation (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Bloor, et al 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2000). On the other hand, in-depth interview focuses on the individual experiences, opinions, feeling, perspectives on how they see particular events, phenomena and beliefs (Mack et al, 2005).

FGD result strongly supports findings in the quantitative analysis consequences, and helps a research project to offer recommendations that would affect policy. Based on a thorough review, Vermiere et al (2002) reviewed literature in different databases from 1990 to 2000 using the keywords 'qualitative research', 'focus groups', 'methodology' and 'standards' submitted to an expert panel, its feasibility was addressed and the inter-rater agreement was assessed. Thus the methodology including analyses have been standardized and ready for application.

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

Given the time and cost implications comparing quantitative and qualitative approaches to accomplish the same objectives, it seems that focus group discussions have great potentials for

Convenient, economic usage and allows to collect data in a short period of time. Also FGDs offers more acceptable solutions in solving management issues. The research in management frequently considers Focus Group Discussions and other qualitative methods as exploratory tools which will help identify issues and address to them accordingly. FGD help to frame the factors for quantitative study and further the items which can measure

the various factors. When In case of sensitive themes the present research clearly shows the superiority of qualitative research such as the focus group discussions.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:**

I am deeply grateful to Dr.Glenn C. Kharkongor for the advice and help in undertaking this research, and for his immense support. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr.P.S.S. Sundar Rao for his expert advice and support at various stages of this research. I owe my sincere thanks to the presidents/chairpersons, heads of institutions, members of the Governing Boards and faculty for their utmost support and cooperation.

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