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Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract:

According to the findings of a recent study by the NAAC and the National Institute of Educational Planning, there are currently just a few dozen foreign institutions of education operating in India through various arrangements such as twining, mutual recognition and study center modes. Considering the stand taken by the Association of Indian Universities to oppose the entry of foreign providers, many stakeholders – including potential foreign operators and their Indian counterparts and students wishing to earn a foreign degree without having to leave India – are waiting for the union policy declaration with crossed fingers. Preempting the possible entry of greater numbers of foreign education providers into India, the NAAC established committee two years ago with representatives from the UGC and the MHRD to advice on a proposed quality assurance framework for international accreditation.

Key words: *quality assurance, accreditation, conceptualization*

Introduction

The theme of higher knowledge and higher education was fashioned in India by the ancient Rishis and sages in the Vedic Age, the date of which is uncertain but is supposed to be traceable to great antiquity. The early Gurukul system of education flourished in the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, but a huge University came to be set up at Takshashila in the 6th Century. B.C. Two other universities, namely, Nalanda and Vikramsila were established in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., respectively.

India has had a long tradition of inquiry and articulation of concepts of universe, self, role of state, economy, social order and other related matters. The methodologies adopted were subjective and objective and included observation, conceptualization, verification, articulation and teaching. As a result, India had gone further in science than any other country before the modern era – specially in mathematics, astronomy and chemistry, metallurgy and physics. Indian scientists discovered and formulated and anticipated by force of reasoning some of the scientific ideas and discoveries which Europe arrived at much later. Ancient India was well equipped in surgery and its system of medicine survives to this day. A vast literature is also available on Vriksha Ayuirveda. In Literature, in philosophy and in systems of yogic knowledge not only ancient India but medieval and modern India reached highest Levels of achievement. The higher education system flourished in ancient India well; and it continued to influence developments during its subsequent ages, in spite of diverse forms that developed under the impact of changes in religion and in social, economic and political life.

The modern higher education system is only 140 years old, when the first three universities were set up in 1857 under the British Rule. Policy guidelines given by Macaulay and Wood's Despatch (1854) shaped the scope and the role of universities in India. To begin with, colleges set up in India were affiliated to these universities.

The period 1857 to 1947 was the period of slow development of institutions of higher education in India. They were set up mostly in administrative headquarters and port towns. They provided education in literature, history, philosophy, political science, social science and natural sciences. The thrust of development was mainly on liberal arts education. Science education occupied a very small proportion. The rate of development was slow as in a period of 90 years only 18 universities were set up in the country. Most of these followed the model of the three leading universities at Bombay, Calucutta and Madras. Along with liberal arts, some engineering and medical colleges were also set up. Most of the colleges imparted education as formulated by the universities. The universities also acted as examining and degree granting bodies. The initiative in the hands of college teachers in terms of curriculum development was, therefore, very much limited. The guiding principles of colonial rulers were slightly modified by Indian scholars who desired to blend Indian culture with western thought They felt this would make Indians appreciate knowledge both from India as well as from the British point of view. These two philosophical approaches simultaneously operated during the colonial period. After independence, India adopted the approach of planned development of the country. The first Five Year Plan focused on agriculture, the Second Fiver Year Plan on industry and the Third Five Year Plan again attempted to focus on agriculture and agro-based industry for the development of the country. This approach for development called for development of the education system in the subsequent Five Year Plans, to meet the challenges of development and the needs of agriculture, industry and society in general.

At Independence in 1947, India inherited a system of higher education which was not only small but also characterized by the persistence of large intra/inter-regional imbalances. Determined efforts were made to build a network of universities and their affiliated colleges which provided tremendous outreach to a country of vast diversities in language as also in the prevailing standards of education at the at the lower levels. The feeder schools differentially impacted on the higher education system leading to significant qualitative imbalances within it. When India became independent, it has only 20 universities and 500 colleges located in different parts of the country. It enrolled around a hundred thousand students in higher education. Participation of women was limited and those who graduated annually were no more than a couple of dozen or so. The policies and aspirations of people influenced the development in the following decades.In the post-independence period, higher education has expanded first and it is mostly public in nature. Today, India ranks very high in terms of the size of the network of higher education institutions, with 6.75 million students enrolled. The teaching force numbers about 321,000.

Assessment and Accreditation Process:

In conduction the assessment process, the NAAC follows a four-stage process:

1. Developing the national criteria of assessment which varies by institution type
2. Preparation and submission of a self-study report by the institution.
3. Site visit by an external peer team, which includes the validation of the self –study report and the drafting of recommendations for the assessment outcome.
4. Final decision by the Executive Committee of the NAAC.

The self-study report and peer-team validation form the backbone of the assessment process. The NAAC distributes manuals that prepares higher education institutions with detailed guidelines on the preparation of the self-study report and the specifications of the assessment and accreditation process.

Criteria for assessment

The NAAC has identifies the following seven criteria to serve as the basis for its assessment procedures:

1. Curricular Aspects
2. Teaching, Learning and Evaluation
3. Research, Consultancy and Extension
4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources
5. Student support and progression
6. Organization and management
7. Healthy Practices

In completing the self-study report, an institutions is expected to detail its operational performance with reference to these criteria. These criteria are assigned different significance for different types of institutions. They are further subdivided with core indicators or criterion statement which provide assessors a complete breakdown of the assessment requirements.

Criteria weighting by Institution Type

Criteria	University	Autonomous Colleges	Affiliated/ Constituent Colleges
Curricular Aspects	15	15	10
Teaching-Learning and Evaluation	25	30	40
Research, Consultancy and Extension	15	10	05
Infrastructure and learning Resources	15	15	15
Student support and Progression	10	10	10
Organization and Management	10	10	10
Healthy Practices	10	10	10

Assessment Outcome

After the self-study report and external visits are completed, criterion scores are issued with a detailed assessment report. The criterion scores are used to arrive at the overall institutional score. If the overall score is more than 55 percent, the institution is awarded Accredited Status and assigned an institutional grade on nine-point scale:

Score	Institutional Grade
95-100	A++
90-95	A+
85-90	A
80-85	B++
75-80	B+
70-75	B
65-70	C++
60-65	C+
55-60	C

Institutions that do not attain the minimum 55 percent score are notified that they were Assessed and Found Not qualified for Accreditation. Provisions within the NAAC assessment framework for institutions that do not meet the 55 percent there should require that they be reassessed after three year or face the rare possibility of closure. The particular consequences of a negative assessment, however, are left to the key stakeholders/management, government, funding agencies and the public at large. To date, just 13 institution (0.05%) have been found not qualified for accreditation. This low figure is partly explained by the voluntary nature of the accreditation process and that colleges applying for accreditation must have a university affiliation plus five years of operational experience. A successful accreditation outcome is valid for a period of five years after which the institution is expected to volunteer for reaccreditation.

Reaccreditation

Building on the field of experience of other quality assurance agencies, an Indian methodology for reaccreditation has been developed. The improvements (or degradations) that have occurred during the five-year accredited period and the action taken on the assessment report are the focus of reaccreditation. To make optimum use of information and communication technology for effective date management, part of the reaccreditation process is done electronically. The first round of re-accreditations began in 2005 and approximately 20 institutions have so far been reassessed and re-accredited by the NAAC.

Continuous Quality Improvement

To achieve the goal of making quality assurance an ongoing focus and priority integral to the functioning of Indian institution of higher education, a number of post-accreditation activities have been developed.

The NAAC has for the last two years been promoting the establishment of Internal quality Assurance Cells (IQAC) at all higher education institution as a post-accreditation quality sustenance measure. IQACs are composed of administrators, academics and community stakeholders and they are responsible for a range of activities designed to promote and develop internal cultures of qualitative changes should come from within, the existence of an IQAC is now required by the NAAC as pre-requisite for reaccreditation. Two additional priorities topping the NAAC policy agenda are initiatives designed to promote best practices and student participation in quality assurance. The

NAAC is developing a database of best practices at accredited institutions and disseminating it through a promotional campaign that includes a series of seminars and publications. The NAAC had developed a Student Charter to be adopted by institutions. It outlines the importance of student feedback and participation in the promotion and internalization of an institutional culture of quality. Currently, the LAAC is leading an international project group on student Participation in Quality Assurance with the support of the Asia Pacific Quality Assurance with the support of the Asia Pacific Quality Network.

Wider participation and acceptance

From the initial phase of apprehension surrounding the philosophy of external review, the NAAC has gradually been able to build a greater appreciation from the higher education community for the intrinsic benefit in building a greater acceptance of the assessment process. This has been achieved in part by organizing hundreds of seminars throughout the country. As mentioned above, it is now the intention of the NAAC to expand student participation in the process to further widen representation. In addition to organizing seminars, the NAAC's publication programme has ensured effective dissemination of information about assessment and accreditation, while the development of manuals and guidelines through national consultations and workshops, involving a wide cross-section of academia, has lead to a greater acceptance and appreciation of the NAAC methodology of assessment and accreditation.

Apprehensions and Future Direction

While the list of NAAC achievements in its short ten-year history is encouraging, the list of apprehensions and concerns is also quite long. There are a few concerns that have haunted the NAAC from its inception and now, even with increased acceptance from academia, nw challenges are emerging. A brief summary of some of these challenges follows:

The Numbers Game:

It is often asked whether it is possible for all Indian higher education institutions (HEI) to be accredited by the NAAC in a reasonable time frame? If yes, then what is that time frame? In response, the NAAC maintains that because accreditation is voluntary it is unrealistic to expect all 17,000 of the country's HEI's to undergo the accreditation process. Therefore the Council has restricted its focus to institutions that receive development grants from the UGC. This number comes to approximately 6,000, which is well within the reach of the NAAC in five-year cycle with its proven capacity of assessing 1,5000 institutions per year. The NAAC is of late advocating the formation of regional and specialized accreditation agencies that well operate as an umbrella organization for accreditation organizations not unlike the U.S. Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

To Grade or not to Grade?: The debate over the desirability of grades as an assessment outcome is ongoing, however, the NAAC has justified grading, almost from the outset, as a necessary element of a system chocked with regulatory mechanisms where a mere Yes/No status provides insufficient feedback. Grading has been proven as motivation factor in large higher education systems where the

quality of providers varies to extreme degrees: from below average operators to world- class institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology. Knowing where you are on the quality scale can help institution and students plan for the future.

In practical terms, less than 1 percent of NAAC grads have been challenged before the grievance redressing committee set up by the Council and no lawsuits have been filed to dispute an NAAC grade. These facts help to demonstrate that the relevant debate should not be about whether or not to grade, but about now to use the accreditation status and the grade awarded by the NAAC. For instance, NAAC efforts to promote the use of the assessment outcome for decision –making purposes can be witnessed in the UGC's decision to link the outcome sof assessment and accreditation to the award of a portion of its institutional development grants. Furthermore, NAAC accreditation with a suitable grade (B++ and above) is now linked to the granting and continuation of 'autonomous' status and 'deemed-to-be' university status. Different organizations are now using the NAAC grading system for a variety of regulatory purposes. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), for example, has made it mandatory for all teacher-training institutes to secure a minimum of a B++ grade before they are allowed to expand or implement new courses. In the state of Karnataka the government requires all its aided colleges to secure a minimum of B grade in order to receive state subsidies, while in the state of Maharashtr, institutions must have undergone accreditation (with a positive assessment of 55%+) in order to continue operations. Thus the perspectives vary according to the stakeholder and more decisive efforts are expected in this direction. In addition to the use of NAAC assessment outcomes domestically, it would be interesting to see how overseas agencies differentiate or relate accreditation grades given to particular higher education institutions.

Programme vs. institution: Because the NAAC is engaged in institutional accreditation, it is often difficult to address international queries regarding the status of programmes offered by accredited institutions. One justification given is that institutional accreditation takes into consideration the standards of all constituent departments and programmes offered at a particular institution. In reality, the problem with individual programme accreditation is one of capacity in terms of manpower and infrastructure which the NAAC does not currently have, even though it has the expertise. Independent programme accreditations is an NAAC consideration for the future.

Top Institutions are not Undergoing Accreditation:

Another issue that concerns the NAAC is the reluctance of a few publicly funded institutions, including a handful of elite universities, to come forward for assessment and accreditation. Even though the total number is relatively small and primarily in and around Delhi, it is worth nothing that despite directions from the UGC, these universities have not complied thus far. This is partly because the UGC and NAAC lack the necessary teeth to require institutions to undergo the accreditation process. However, given the fact that approximately 60 persent of Central Universities and most State Universities-including bastions such as the University of Calcutta, Mumbai and Madras-stand

accredited by the NAAC, there is no general concern within the Council surrounding the acceptance of NAAC assessments. The NAAC maintains that it is the concern of top policy-makers to decide whether to insist on accountability from institutions receiving large portion of public funds.

State or centre, Who Has the Influence?:

Any central monitoring or uniformity initiative in Indian higher education involves painstaking efforts owing to complex legal provisions. In the federal structure of Indian governance, higher education is under the regulatory and financial control of both state governments and the Central government. Of the 17,000 higher education institutions in India, more than 90 percent receive funding from their respective state governments, while approximately 6,000 are recognized and receive development grants from the UGC. These development grants constitute only a minor protion of institutional operating budgets in relation to grants from state governments. As the NAAC accreditation processis a central initiative, it is widely considered that unless state governments intervene to make accreditation compulsory, higher education institutions will be less likely to volunteer to undergo the accreditation process

Foreign Operators – the Looming Business Opportunity : With just 12 percent of the tertiary student – age population enrolled in higher education, India is seen from abroad as a tertiary education market with great untapped potential. The Indian government is yet to declare a policy position on the entry of foreign operators into the country, however, draft legislation based on the recommendations of the CNR RAO Committee- established by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is currently in the consultation process. According to the findings of a recent study by the NAAC and the National Institute of Educational Planning, there are currently just a few dozen foreign institutions of education operating in India through various arrangements such as twining, mutual recognition and study center modes. Considering the stand taken by the Association of Indian Universities to oppose the entry of foreign providers, many stakeholders – including potential foreign operators and their Indian counterparts and students wishing to earn a foreign degree without having to leave India – are waiting for the union policy declaration with crossed fingers. Preempting the possible entry of greater numbers of foreign education providers into India, the NAAC established committee two years ago with representatives from the UGC and the MHRD to advise on a proposed quality assurance framework for international accreditation.

Towards a Quality Assurance Framework: The multiplicity of accreditation agencies in India is another concern. At present, the NAAC, established by statutory authority, is the country's premier external quality assurance agency. Other accreditation bodies tend to be in-house mechanisms of different statutory authorities, e.g. the National Board of Accreditation of the All India Council of Technical Education and the accreditation boards of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the Distance Education Council. While these agencies conduct assessment and accreditation of programmes or institutes within their respective be domains, many

specialized institutes that they accredit also volunteer for institutional accreditation by the NAAC. Quite a few engineering, medical, fine arts, law and management institutes, for example, have been accredited by the NAAC. Indian higher education policy-makers have an uphill task ahead of them in coming up with convincing answers to such concerns and adopting enduring strategies as the liberalized Indian economy moves to new global frontiers.

NAAC at a Glance:

- The NAAC performs institutional accreditation based on self-study and peer review.
- Accreditation on nine-point scale is valid for a period of five years.
- Assessments reports and grades are available to the general public.
- It is still a voluntary process, but a few states have made it mandatory.
- Assessment and accreditation is viewed as a development oriented process.
- Assessment & Accreditation processes by the NAAC have triggered several innovations and healthy initiatives on campuses.
- Accreditation is not precondition to operate in India. It is a periodic quality assurance mechanism over and above the regulatory checks and balances built into university and government agencies.
- The consequences of failing an accreditation assessment or not volunteering for accreditation are left to the Government and funding agencies.
- The NAAC has so far accredited 122 universities and about 2500 colleges, probably the largest accreditation figure in a cycle by any QA agency.
- The Second cycle of accreditation commenced in 2005.

NAAC Achievements after a Decade of Assessments:

- The NAAC has established the capacity to handle an large number of institutions. The last two years consecutively, it assessed and accredited more than 1000 institutions.
- In partnership with stakeholders, the NAAC has been encouraging institutions to be pro-active in promoting quality cultures. By way of example, many states have established State Quality Assurance Cells to promote assessment.
- The NAAC has published nine statewide Analysis of Accreditation reports providing policy inputs to state governments, universities and other key policy – makers. Thus moving beyond accreditation, the NAAC has expanded its scope by strengthening its advisory role.
- Collaborations with other national professional bodies for accreditation of specialized subjects have been initiated. The National Council for Teacher Education has an MOU with the NAAC for accreditation of teacher training institutions. The NAAC is working with regulatory bodies from other professional/specialized fields to explore potential avenues of collaboration.
- The NAAC is active in international forums. As a member of the International Network for Quality

Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the NAAC organized the sixth biannual meet of the member agencies in 2001 in Bangalore. In addition to being on the Governing Board of INQAAHE, NAAC Director Prof. VS Prasad is the Vice-president of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network, a regional network of the INQAAHE.

In conclusion it is worth noting that distance education and web based learning has tremendous potential for providing education and training programmes to different categories of radiological sciences professional all over the country even if they are working in remotest village and have access to Internet. Continuing Professional Development must become part of professionals activity wherein they complete the minimum set hours and improves on their Curriculum Vitae, which should help them for promotions and new jobs.

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