Quality in Higher Education: A NAAC initiative

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Abstract

The vision statement of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council states that it seeks "to make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives".* In its quest for excellence and compliance with global competencies, it is essential that institutes of higher education comply with quality markers to ensure holistic growth of all stakeholders. It is also imperative that institutes work in tandem with the higher education policies set out at the national level to ensure a comprehensive growth which provides a value based educational system that leads to higher academics, employment or/and entrepreneurship. Both internal and external audits are integral to compliance of quality assurance. Assessment and accreditation by a nationalized body is one major step in this process of self-evaluation and improvement. The process of compiling, collating and evaluating data for preparation of the Self Study Report is integral to this process. Seven aspects of the institute ranging from curricular aspects to teaching, learning and evaluation, research and consultancy to infrastructure and learning resources amongst others are evaluated in a structured manner to bring forth a cogent, transparent and cohesive SWOC analysis. This paper will not only foreground the need for such periodic assessments which, will "stimulate the academic environment for promotion of quality of teaching-learning and research in higher education institutions"* but will also lead to systemic improvement in all processes and functions of the institute and aid significantly in promoting holistic excellence.

Keywords: Assessment, Accreditation, NAAC, Higher Education, Self-evaluation

The vision statement of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council states that it seeks "to make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives" (naac.gov.in). In its quest for excellence and compliance with global competencies, it is essential that institutes of higher education comply with quality markers to ensure holistic growth of all stakeholders. It is also imperative that institutes work in tandem with the higher education policies set out at the national level to ensure a comprehensive growth which provides a value based educational system that leads to higher academics, employment or/and entrepreneurship. Both internal and external audits are integral to compliance of quality assurance. Assessment and accreditation by a nationalized body is one major

step in this process of self-evaluation and improvement. The process of compiling, collating and evaluating data for preparation of the Self Study Report is integral to this process. Seven aspects of the institute ranging from curricular aspects to teaching, learning and evaluation, research and consultancy to infrastructure and learning resources amongst others are evaluated in a structured manner to bring forth a cogent, transparent and cohesive SWOC analysis. This paper will not only foreground the need for such periodic assessments which, will "stimulate the academic environment for promotion of quality of teaching-learning and research in higher education institutions" (naac.gov.in). but will also lead to systemic improvement in all processes and functions of the institute and aid significantly in promoting holistic excellence.

Quality is the buzzword in the world today, a much used and abused term, ridden with relativity and subjectivity. It is "perceptual, conditional, and somewhat subjective attribute and may be understood differently by different people" (Q Metier, para. 3). While for consumers quality may be a reference to the desired specification of a product/service, or a measure of comparison with competition, producers may view it from the point of view of processes in production. W.A. Foster succinctly sums up,

> Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives, the cumulative experience of many masters of craftsmanship. Quality also marks the search for an ideal after necessity has been satisfied and mere usefulness achieved. (Forbes quotes)

Quality is desirable by all of us in every aspect of our lives. It is essential to our well-being. A quick look at our daily quotidian, we expect well researched and objective reportage in our daily newspapers ever morning, the milk that we drink must be free of bacteria, the water from our tap must be fit if not for consumption, must be fit for other basic needs, the mode of transport that we use for work must enable a timely and comfortable commute, our workplace must ensure an environment conducive to optimum productivity and we ourselves must deliver not only what is expected of us but also ensure that it is in tandem with collective endeavors. In every act of production and consumption, be it goods or service, good quality is a fundamental expectation and underlying principal.

Quality in a product is different from quality in service, a good quality product must be safe, long lasting, defect free, optimally priced and so on and so forth, quality in service on the other hand is directly linked with customer perception and satisfaction.

Likewise, Quality in commercial endeavours too has different parameters from quality in institutions particularly HEIs i.e Higher Education Institutes whose primary purpose of existence is not profit but a core mission to educate, provide a skilled workforce and nurture responsible citizenry. And while the Six Sigma doctrine may be ideal for an industrial set-up, a different approach is needed for an educational institution. Some key common parameters though would be satisfaction of all stakeholders, higher degree of public perception, achievement of desired goals and excellence in pursuit of objectives.

According to the FICCI Report on Higher Education, the median age of India's 1.5 billion strong population is a mere 32; a good ten years lower than most other nations in the world. No surprise therefore that, India is the largest contributor to the global workforce, its working age population surpassing 950 million. India has emerged to be the world's third largest economy whose achievement is underpinned, no doubt, by its unique demographic advantage, but also a prospect that would not have translated into reality if not for the country's pioneering reforms in university education over the past 20 years. And despite the fact that the last few decades have witnessed a spiraling increase in numbers of universities and institutions offering high quality education at relatively much lower costs than the West, with a strong focus on students, be it learning or research yet nearly two thirds of our universities are of 'poor or middling quality' and most of our graduates struggle to find employment. It is obvious that there is a significant gap in both quantity and quality of education providers.

Post liberalization and globalization, access to choices in every field has made the world a very competitive environment, with each entity engaged in the pursuit to carve a niche for themselves, to create and market their USP in a bid to grab a larger market share. Quality in Higher Education Institutes too, is integral to its growth and sustenance. Every institute in order to sustain itself has been engaged in constantly improving its processes and functions. Academics, governance and leadership work in tandem to achieve desired targets every year, they engage in self-evaluation and self-reflection through internal audits by way of department, committee and annual reports etc. The shift to an augmented and transparent evaluation by a nationalized body was necessary not just to ensure optimization of all processes but also to ensure that institutes work in tandem with the higher education policies set out at the national level to ensure a comprehensive growth which provides a value based educational system that leads to higher academics, employment or/and entrepreneurship.

Both internal and external audits are integral to compliance of quality assurance.

Assessment and accreditation by a nationalized body is one major step in this process of self-evaluation and improvement. Quality as a defining marker of HEIs became a part of Governmental policies and initiatives in the 1990s in the west. Prior to the nineties, there was the external examiner system in the UK and the American system of accreditation in the US along with similar checks and balances across Europe. The systemic change in the 1990s was significant and pertinent. According to Lee Harvey & Berit Askling, the spur behind such initiatives was as follows:

> The change occurred for many reasons, in part pragmatic and in part ideological…where institutions were used to see excellence or transformation as the self-evident key indicator of higher education quality, governments now emphasized value-for-money and fitness-for-purpose… Growth of knowledge based economies and the role of higher education in being able to compete in a globalised world… (p. 69)

Based on the proposal of National Policy Mission, University Grants Commission (UGC), under section 12 CCC of the UGC Act (Act 3 of 1956), established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) as an Autonomous Institution on 16 September 1994 with its registered office at Bangalore responsible for the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations and research in universities. The vision statement of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council states that it seeks, "to make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives" (naac.gov.in). In its quest for excellence and compliance with global competencies, it is essential that institutes of higher education comply with quality markers to ensure holistic growth of all stakeholders.

According to Dr Rajpal S Hande in his book, *Assessment and Accreditation: Quality Enhancement in Higher Education*, assessment and accreditation were expected to facilitate not only the "internalization and institutionalization of quality, but also to activate the system and raise the institutional capabilities to higher levels ensuring continuous quality improvement" (p. 137). Assurance of Quality in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that fulfils expectations or measures (input, process and outcomes) up to threshold requirements. It is all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which quality of higher education is maintained and developed and enhanced.

Accreditation has been defined as a formal, public judgement made by an independant body, based upon an evaluation of quality, guaranteeing that basic

standards are met. Its functions are as follows,

- Guarantee a certain basic quality of institutions or programs

- Reinforce the existing forms and norms of quality assurance

- Create more standardisation of norms, procedures and criteria, to enhance comparability

- Improve the public responsibility function of quality assurance.

This paper also brings to the fore the parameters of assessment of constituent colleges of a University as delineated by NAAC and the weightage given to each of the defined criteria. The objectives of self assessment were to verify that the existing programs meet their objectives and institutional goals, to provide feedback for quality assurance of academic programs, to improve and maintain academic standards and to enhance students' learning. Each criterion has an intent, i.e a statement of requirements to be met along with clearly spelt out standards which describe how the intents are minimally met. The seven key criteria laid down for assessment by NAAC are as follows,

1. Curricular Aspects

2. Teaching-Learning and Evaluation

3. Research, Consultancy and Extension

4. Infrastructure and learning Resources

5. Student Support and Progression

6. Governance, Leadership and Management

7. Innovations and Best Practices (naac.gov.in)

The overall quality assurance framework of NAAC focuses on the values and desirable practices of HEIs and incorporates the core elements of quality assurance i.e. internal and external assessment for continuous improvement.

Curricular Aspects: The first criteria focused on the curriculum being taught - The permissible freedom in curricular design i.e. whether it is assigned by a university or may be supplemented by the institution or is completely decided by the institution. The curriculum should offer flexibility and inter disciplinarity to enable students gain education best suited for the needs, learning levels and skill development. The

periodic revision and updation of syllabus should have a proactive involvement of stakeholders be it from alumni or experts from the industry.

Teaching-Learning and Evaluation: This criterion focuses on the teaching learning process, the pedagogical tools used, innovative practices in using technology to augment the lectern approach. Use of smart classrooms, audio visual aids to benefit from blended pedagogy are highlighted here along with transparency and accountability in the evaluation process.

Research, Consultancy and Extension: This criterion seeks information on the policies of the institution with reference to research, consultancy and extension. It deals with facilities provided and efforts made by the institution to promote a research culture and their outcome. Serving the community through research and extension activities must be at the core of student driven research.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources: This fourth criterion seeks to elicit information on the facilities available in an institution to maintain the quality of academics and other programmes on the campus. It also requires information on how every constituent of the institution: students, teachers and staff benefit from them. And also seeks information on planned expansion of facilities to meet future development.

Student Support and Progression: The highlights of this criterion are the efforts of an institution to provide necessary assistance to students to acquire both academic and life skills in career development and seeks to maintain records of students' progression.

Governance, Leadership and Management: This is the sixth criterion and elicits date on human resources - recruitment, training, performance appraisal and finance management. It also looks into participatory management procedures and dynamic governance of human and material resources.

Innovations and Best Practices: Innovative efforts of an institution help in its academic growth. This criterion enlists key innovative practices practised in the institution. Innovations and Institutional initiatives along with extension activities to fulfill social responsibilities and citizenship roles is the key focus here.

Assessment and accreditation mark a shift towards a structured mechanism to ensure quality assurance and control. NAAC has promoted the establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQAC) at all higher education institutions as a post-accreditation quality sustenance measure. These 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 quality control. With its belief that qualitative changes should come from within, the existence of an IQAC is now required by the NAAC as pre-requisite for re-accreditation.

Self-assessment, evaluation and external accreditation will establish measurable objectives and evaluate their outcomes to assess if programs meet desired objectives and provides feedback from all stakeholders and will enable HEIs to improve quality and respond effectively to market needs. It will create an environment geared towards innovation and research and help compete with global competencies. It will also ensure wider institute/industry participation and facilitate enhanced holistic learning. Synergies of all stakeholders will be in tandem with institutional goals and objectives and lead to holistic education.

*For details, see http://naac.gov.in/index.php/about-us#vision

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