

“QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BY NAAC”

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Quality is an extensively debated subject with special reference to India. Higher education is a key factor for the prosperity, development and welfare- the status of education in a complex society is not uniform. India today can boast of a large educational manpower, which is essential for socio-economic growth of the Nation. The issue of quality in higher education is much talked about but it is least understood in its true spirit.

India has one of the largest and diverse education systems in the world. Privatization, widespread expansion, increased autonomy and introduction of programs in new and emerging areas have improved access to higher education. At the same time, it has also led to widespread concern on the quality and relevance of the higher education. In context of LPG there can be need to make shift from “Quality assurance” to “Quality enhancement”. First one is input oriented and second one is output oriented. In this context quality became the watch word and the only aim that went into the establishment of NAAC in India as an autonomous body created by the UGC in 1994. NAAC has generated quality consciousness in Higher education institutions in India with a framework for quality assessment and than its campaign for quality assurance in institutions of higher education. The NAAC has clear Vision and Mission to follow strategies which have put quality assurance procedures and programs. But in India there is regional and sub regional differences in socio-economic and educational development.

We are an emerging country with significant regional and sub-regional differences in socio-economic and educational development. We do not have uniformity in higher education system. It differs from university to university or state to state. Diversity is visible even within the university or state. In terms of location, some colleges are in metros, urban, semi-urban, urban slums, rural and tribal areas. Some of them have access to resources and modern infrastructural facilities and some others have very little access. The medium of instructions in metros and major cities in English it is state languages in rural and tribal areas. Some cater to well to do students and others to those who have very poor fee paying capacity. Learning capabilities of students too differ. With such diversity among institutions the learning outcomes will also differ. This is reflected in Grade of NAAC accredited institutions.

The main purpose of this paper is to review some of the indicators with which majority of affiliating colleges will have difficulties.

II. NAAC:

The NAAC was established in 1994 as an autonomous institution of the University Grants Commission with its Head Quarter in Bengaluru. The mandate of NAAC as reflected in its vision statement is in making Quality Assurance (QA) an integral part of the functioning of Higher education Institutions (HEIs).

The Vision of NAAC is “To make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives”.

Core Values:

The accreditation framework of NAAC is thus based on five core values detailed below:

1. Contributing to National Development
2. Fostering Global Competencies among students
3. Inculcating a Value System among Students
4. Promoting the use of Technology
5. Quest for Excellence

Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions:

The NAAC has been carrying out the process of Quality assessment and accreditation of HEI's over the past two decades. Several HEI's have gone through this process and a sizable number has also undergone subsequent cycles of accreditation. True to its commitment for promoting quality culture in HEI's in consonance with the overall developments in the field of education as well as the outside world, NAAC has strived to be sensitive to these and adequately reflect these in its processes.

III. REVISED ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION FRAMEWORK:

The Revised Assessment and Accreditation Framework is launched in July 2017. It represents an explicit Paradigm Shift making it ICT enables, objective, transparent, scalable and robust. The shift is:

- From qualitative peer judgment to data based quantitative indicator evaluation with increased objectivity and transparency.
- Towards extensive use of ICT conforming scalability and robustness
- In terms of simplification of the process drastic reduction in number of questions, size of the report, visit days, etc
- In terms of boosting benchmarking as quality improvement tool. This has been attempted through comparison of NAAC indicators with other international QA frameworks.
- Introducing pre-qualifier for peer team visit, 30% of system generated score.
- Introducing system generated Scores with combination of online evaluation (70%) and peer judgment (about 30%)
- In introducing the element of third part validation of data and the possibility of roping in multiple agencies.
- In adopting a 100% off site evaluation of HEI's applying for 4th cycle accreditation on site visits in exceptional cases.
- In revising several metrics to bring in enhanced participation of students and alumni in the assessment process.

QUALITY INDICATOR FRAMEWORK:

The NAAC continues with its focus on quality culture of the institution in terms of Quality Initiatives, Quality Sustenance and Quality Enhancement, as reflected in its vision, organization, operations and the processes. The criteria based assessment forms the backbone of A & A process of NAAC. The seven criteria represent the core functions and activities of a HEI. In the revised framework not only the academic and administrative aspects of Institutional functioning but also the emerging issues have been included. The seven Criteria to serve as basis for assessment of HEIs are:

CRITERIA	Autonomous Colleges	Affiliated Colleges
1. Curricular aspects	150	100
2. Teaching, Learning and evaluation	300	350

3. Research, Innovations and Extension	150	120
4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources	100	100
5. Student Support and Progression	100	130
6. Governance, Leadership and Management	100	100
7. Institutional Values and Best Practices	100	100
Total	1,000	1,000

IV. HINDRANCES IN THE PROCESS:

In the past, accreditation used to be carried out 100 per cent by Peer teams appointed by NAAC. They were given orientation in dealing with institutional stakeholders. The Peer Teams are generally aware of institutional context and diversities. The approach has always been to motivate students, teachers and management by encouraging them to strengthen the strengths and weaken the weaknesses. As a consequence, the institutions were improving the Grade in subsequent Cycles of accreditation.

The new Framework notified in July 2017 is a significant departure from the previous ones. The new approach is more Quantitative, currently to the tune of 70 %. But it is made on a wrong assumption of uniformity of conditions of higher education system in India. Some of the issues brought out in the manual of affiliating and constituent colleges need to be reviewed to bring in some sort of level playing field. This will facilitate average to below average colleges particularly located in less development regions of the country, to come forward to get accredited. Many of them may not be able to get accredited as some of the assessment indicators are beyond their scope. This paper is made in good faith in the interest of development of a better quality system in higher education in the country.

Now we shall discuss criteria wise indicators:

Criterion I: Curricular Aspects:

Some universities in India do not approve autonomous certificate and diploma programs offered by affiliated colleges. Code number is not given by the university. Due to semester system workload has been increased. In addition to this these additional unofficial work creates work pressure on teachers. For colleges self financing certificate/Diploma programs may not viable due to very poor paying capacity of students.

Assessment indicator to Choice based credit system, carries 10 weightage, but the universities have not yet introduced this CBCS. All the affiliated Colleges are forced to offer only graduation with fixed combinations. Due to this colleges suffer from accreditation.

Colleges with traditional courses will not have any provision for field work or internship.

Criterion II: Teaching Learning Evaluation:

Students from other states will ever seek admission in traditional colleges. Majority of colleges may lose 10 weightage.

No aided colleges are allowed to appoint regular full time teachers by the state, so student full time teacher ratio will suffer 10 weightage.

If there are no differently abled students admitted to the college, due to factors beyond the control of the college they may suffer 10 weights.

No interstate mobility of teachers is possible because of medium of instruction is in local languages.

There is no provision for continuous internal evaluation by the university due to semester system.

Higher education institutions in the general streams do not follow outcome based approach. They are related to only learning outcomes. Even as this has not been done by universities so far, denying 20 weightage for affiliating colleges is not justifiable.

The online students satisfaction survey carrying 50 weightage may pose a lot of problems for women's college. All students may not be in possession of mobile, Aadhaar ID, email Id, and communication skills in English. They may not be able to independently respond to any direct online survey that NAAC is proposing to carry out. The college will get weightage assigned only if at least 10% of the students respond to the survey.

Criterion III: Research Innovation and Extension

The teachers have taken up research in a big way. They have become research guides, department got recognized for research, and number of teachers with Ph.D has been increased. The weightage has been reduced from 150 to 120.

The innovation, incubation, intellectual property rights and industry academia innovative practices which carry 10 weightage are beyond the control of traditional colleges.

Universities recognize teachers in UG colleges as research guides. There is no reason for excluding this question for UG colleges.

Under affiliated and grant in aid colleges such faculty and student exchange programs is not possible without permission of the University and State Government.

Criterion IV: Infrastructure and learning Resources:

The colleges have collection of rare books, manuscripts, special reports etc is a wishful thinking. This carries a weightage of 2.

Criterion V: Student support and Progression:

Placement of outgoing students generally happens in professional colleges and well established colleges in cities. Direct employability of undergraduate arts, science and commerce students is not yet established in India. Average percentage of placement of outgoing students during the last five years with 20 weightage, is too much for average colleges in India.

Criterion VI: Institutional Values and Best Practices:

There are 2 questions here (1) Number of specific initiatives to address locational advantage and disadvantages during last five years. The data needed for the 2nd question include the number of initiatives to address locational advantages and disadvantages. Both these questions address more or less the same issues.

The issues listed above account about 260 weightage out of 1000. Some of these questions were asked in the previous manual as well. But the weightage were assigned on key aspects with 7 or 8 questions and not per question. This has worsened the position further in view of accreditation qualifiers introduced in the new manual.

Uploading of Documentary and Data Evidence:

There are over 120 Assessment indicators, out of which nearly 80 are quantitative. Data verification and Validation (DVV) of quantitative indicators will be carried out by the online system. DVV will not be possible without appropriate documents. This will require the institutions to upload huge volumes of specified documents for a period of five years. It may pose lots of problems particularly for not so well equipped institutions. Some

information inputs for Data verification and Validation (DVV) is unnecessary and Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) has functional problems.

V. THE NEW FRAMEWORK, 2017:

Earlier we had letter of Intention (LOI). This is replaced by Institutional Information for Quality Assessment (IIQA). In the past SSR was to be submitted to NAAC only after LOI and or Institutional Eligibility for Quality Assessment (IEQA) were accepted by NAAC. The new Framework envisages the institutions to submit online IIQA and SSR simultaneously. It also allows the institution to resubmit IIQA two more times if the first one is rejected. What happens if modifications in IIQA call forth modifications in the SSR which is already submitted along with IIQA? It could have been ideal if the SSR is to be submitted only after acceptance of IIQA. This is important in the context of payment and refund of accreditation fees.

As the restriction of online submission to just months in a year have increased anxiety levels of institutions. The new methodology is about 70 percent quantitative and 30 percent qualitative. The 70 percent quantitative includes Student Satisfaction Survey carrying 50 weightage. Appointment of Peer Team will depend on the institution getting minimum 30 percent of qualitative weight (excluding student satisfaction survey). The new metric system devised is based on 70:30 ratios. What will happen to accreditation if the institution does not get 30 percent qualifier? Why 70:30 metric ratio? Why not 80:20 or 40:60 or 50:50? What is the rationale behind it? The question of right metrics for HEIs excellence is always debatable. It is well known that ICT system and networking in undergraduate colleges, particularly in rural areas are very poor and mostly nonfunctional. There may not be even competent teaches or other personnel to efficiently handle the system. Electricity connectivity is poor which will adversely hit online submission.

There is need for huge documentation in support every claim we make. Most of these could be kept as in the past hard copies for physical verification by the peer team. They need to be converted into soft copies for online submission. The system may reject the documents due to inappropriate size. If the data and documents are not appropriate, the online submission will not proceed further. Such interruptions create a lot of problems and delays. This might even de-motivate average colleges from proceeding with accreditation.

Another issue is the Grade qualifier. For an affiliating college, it should get minimum grade points of 3.01, 2.01 and 1.51 in Criteria II and V for getting A, B or C as the case may be respectively. What will happen to a college if the overall CGFPA is, say 3.25, but Criterion Grade Point II and V or any one of them is below 3.0? The situation might lead to plethora of appeals and litigation.

Consider the results of reaccreditation of HEIs under the new mechanism that came into effect from August 2017. A careful study of the reaccreditation results provided on the NAAC website reveals some disturbing trends.

Several colleges that were accredited by NAAC in the 2nd /3rd cycle under the previous methodology and graded A/A+ with CGPA above 3/3.5 have fared poorly under the new system; with a few losing even their 'A' grade. This can mean one or more of the below mentioned things:

1. The old methodology was too liberal and therefore flawed.
2. The new methodology is also faulty and unrealistic
3. There is room for course correction in the new methodology itself.

VI. SUGGESTIONS:

It appears that NAAC followed AICTE framework of online accreditation, without realizing that traditional Arts Science Commerce colleges are not as ICT driven a engineering colleges located in similar areas.

It is important for the HEI to download the relevant Manual/ Guidelines and study each of the Assessment Indicators, weightage/ Instructions carefully. Collect all the required data and ensure that they are all inclusive/ relevant with respect to the Assessment Indicators. Analyze the data and do appropriate calculations to ensure proper Data Validation and Verification (DVV) to get the maximum weighted score. There is a need to double check the data and values before filling the respective quantitative formats. Face to face interaction with the peer

team could have been retained as part of onsite evaluation. A dynamic exchange with the members often brings out the best and honest responses from the students about their institutions. It gives to the student the most important stakeholders, a sense of ownership and participation in the exercise about quality education. Ensure good internet and electricity connectivity for uninterrupted online submission. Technical System issues may come up during online data entry/ submission; train a few faculty members to overcome such issues for smooth uploading.

VII. CONCLUSION:

Most of the average colleges specially located in under developed areas may not be able to cope up with the technology driven information and document management system newly envisaged by NAAC. Some of the issues raised above need to be addressed to motivate them to get accredited. Failure to get accredited will be lose to the disadvantaged student community. The institutions are left under panic as everything is shrouded in mystery. From the above discussion, it appears that the new Manual is far away from contemporary reality of affiliating system of undergraduate education. The framers don't seem to have anticipated these practical hurdles in their mission to make the process theoretically simple but practically complicated.

The best way to forward for higher education in the country is to continuously evolve more effective mechanisms of assessment and accreditation. The benefits and results of assessments cycles are commensurate with the time, cost and resources that are involved in the processes. The NAAC has been admirably shouldering the responsibility of ushering in a 'quality revolution' for nearly decades. It is hoped that it continues to help HEIs in turning mandate into milestones.

References:

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