

Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: Indian experience

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The Indian system of higher education has always responded well to the challenges of the time. Two decades ago, when the system came under severe criticism that it had allowed the mushrooming of higher education institutions (HEIs), compromising the quality of educational offerings, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) took initiatives to restore the standards of higher education. Consequently, the National Policy on Education (1986) that laid special emphasis on upholding the quality of higher education in India noted certain policy initiatives. On the recommendations of the Programme of Action (1992) document that provided the guidelines for the implementation of the National Policy on Education (1986), in 1994, the UGC established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) as an autonomous body to assess and accredit institutions of higher education and its units thereof, with its headquarters at Bangalore.

Governance

The NAAC functions through its General Council (GC) and Executive Committee (EC) where educational administrators, policy makers and senior academicians from a cross section of the system of higher education are represented. The Chairperson of UGC is the President of the GC of NAAC; the Chairperson of EC is an eminent academician in the area of relevance to NAAC. The Executive Officer of NAAC is the Director who is its academic and administrative head, and is the member-secretary of both GC and EC. The NAAC also has many advisory and consultative committees to guide its practices, in addition to the statutory bodies that steer its policies. The NAAC has a core staff and consultants to support its activities. In addition, it receives assistance from a large number of external resource persons from across the country who are not full time staff of NAAC.

Paper presented in the NAAC-COL Round Table Conference on “Innovations in Teacher Education – International Practices on Quality Assurance”, March 17-19, 2004, Bangalore

Vision and Mission

The activities and future plans of NAAC are guided by its vision and mission that have a focus on making quality assurance an integrated functioning of the higher education institutions. Its vision 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.

The mission statements of the NAAC aim at translating the vision into action by the following engagement:

- ❖ *To arrange for periodic assessment and accreditation of institutions of higher education or units thereof, or specific academic programmes or projects;*
- ❖ *To stimulate the academic environment for promotion of quality of teaching-learning and research in higher education institutions;*
- ❖ *To encourage self-evaluation, accountability, autonomy and innovations in higher education;*
- ❖ *To undertake quality-related research studies, consultancy and training programmes, and*
- ❖ *To collaborate with other stakeholders of higher education for quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance.*

Striving to achieve its vision and mission, the NAAC primarily assesses the quality of institutions of higher education that opt for the process, through the internationally accepted methodology.

The Methodology

The NAAC follows the following three-stage process, which is a combination of self-study and peer review, for assessment of a unit:

- ❖ Preparation and submission of self-study report by the institution
- ❖ On-site visit of the peer team for validation of the report and for recommending the assessment outcome to NAAC
- ❖ Final decision by the Executive Council of NAAC

The self-study report to be validated by the peers is the backbone of the whole exercise. Manuals have been developed to suit different units of higher education, with detailed guidelines on preparation of the self-study report and the other aspects of assessment and accreditation.

Criteria for Assessment

The NAAC has identified the following seven criteria to serve as the basis of its assessment procedures:

- ❑ Curricular Aspects
- ❑ Teaching-learning and Evaluation
- ❑ Research, Consultancy and Extension
- ❑ Infrastructure and Learning Resources
- ❑ Student Support and Progression
- ❑ Organisation and Management
- ❑ Healthy Practices

The self-study report is expected to highlight the functioning of the institution with reference to these areas.

The Assessment outcome

The validation of the self-study report by the peers results in criterion-wise scores and a detailed report. The criterion scores are further used to arrive at the overall institutional score. The NAAC assigns the institutional grade on a nine-point scale based on the institutional score. If the overall score is more than 55%, the institution gets the “Accredited status” and the accredited institutions are graded on a nine-point scale. Institutions, which do not attain the minimum 55% points for accreditation, would also be intimated and notified indicating that the institution is “Assessed And Found Not Qualified For Accreditation”. The assessment outcome is valid for a period of 5 years. With these methodological elements NAAC has seen various stages of development.

From Apprehension to Appreciation...

From the initial phase of apprehension about the philosophy of external review, the country has gradually moved to the current phase of appreciation for the intrinsic benefits of accreditation. Hundreds of seminars organized by NAAC throughout the country, have created awareness among the stakeholders on quality related issues. The publication program of NAAC has ensured effective dissemination of information about assessment and accreditation. The way NAAC developed the manuals and guidelines through a large number of national consultations and workshops, involving the cross-section of the academia, has led to the acceptance and appreciation of the methodology of NAAC. With stakeholder behaviour making it clear that the outcome of assessment by NAAC will form the basis for some of their decisions, large number of institutions have approached NAAC for assessment. The following characteristics of NAAC that have greatly contributed to this acceptance and appreciation deserve a mention:

Quality Assurance Framework: The overall quality assurance framework followed by NAAC incorporates elements of all the three basic approaches to quality assurance – accreditation, assessment and academic audit. NAAC *accredits* institutions and certifies for the educational quality of the institution. It also goes beyond the certification and

provides an assessment that classifies an institution on a nine-point scale indicating where the institution stands in the quality continuum. A small team of external peers is sent to the institution mostly as generalists and the *report is made public as in the case of academic audit*. In practice this has been found to be the best choice for the huge and diverse system of higher education we have.

Unit of Assessment: The unit of assessment appropriate to the objectives of assessment and the national context has been chosen based on clear rationale. Since putting systems in place was seen as the major objective to met first, NAAC decided to promote institutional accreditation in the first cycle. Further, the Indian context with regard to the following also strengthened the leaning towards institution as the unit of assessment: Feasibility of Coverage within the cycle of assessment, Usefulness of outcomes to Stakeholders, Size of beneficiaries, Impact on Policies, Centralised Facilities at the institutional level, Collective Impact being more than the sum of parts, Inter-disciplinary Approach to Programs, Linkage to Funding, Critical Mass of the unit, Sustainability and Public Consciousness of Quality.

Reporting Strategy: The reporting strategy of NAAC is an overall institutional grade supplemented with a detailed assessment report, which is made public. NAAC was aware that “confidentiality Vs public disclosure” of assessment report is a bone of contention in many countries, and that both the points have valid arguments. However, the evolving systems are more towards public disclosure and NAAC consciously opted for public disclosure. After ensuring through appropriate safeguards that the report qualifies to be a NAAC document, the full report is made public.

Role of the council in Steering Assessment: Some agencies keep their role in assessment per se minimal and only co-ordinate the assessment visits and in other agencies the agency staff participate in assessment. NAAC started its assessment visits with the assumption that the staff of the agency need not be directly involved in assessment per se. Minimising inter-team variance in this model is a substantial task and it has been achieved through training of the assessors. To further ensure the consistency and credibility of the assessment process, NAAC plays a major role in planning the evaluation framework, development of instruments and methodology, fine-tuning the implementation and ensuring the objectivity of the process before the outcome is made public. Thus NAAC does not stop as a mere co-ordinating agency but strikes a balance between the co-ordinating functions and steering the assessment and this stand has been found to be appropriate.

Multi-prong approach: While working towards the support of the academia, NAAC was aware that it would not be possible to expect 100% acceptance of all its efforts. Whatever be the strategy followed, there would always be a minority group to criticize it. The reason need not be based on ignorance or lack of conceptual clarity or skepticism but may be due to genuine concerns also. Keeping this in mind, NAAC followed a multi-pronged approach for information dissemination on the assessment philosophy and principles targeting the various stakeholders. Care was taken to ensure that its strategies had the following elements:

- Broad involvement and consensus building to ensure widespread support in evolving the norms and criteria
- Careful development of the methods and instruments for assessment
- Transparency in all its policies and practices
- Rigorous implementation of procedures
- Safeguards to enhance the professionalism of assessment

Incorporating these elements, NAAC applied multi-pronged strategies at various levels—awareness programs to reach out to the academic community, publication programs for dissemination of information, workshops on development of instruments, training the experts for assessment, discussions with administrators to rope in their support for the HEIs, consultations with policy makers to ensure government support and so on. Involving people from various backgrounds and interests also helped to enhance the insights of the group process.

Contextualising Assessment: During NAAC’s early studies it was found that instruments and standards set should not be followed blindly. The broad guidelines by NAAC may provide an external point of reference for evaluating the quality of the institution under assessment, but they cannot be interpreted in void. Contextualizing, synthesizing and sensitizing the data to objectives are essential, and for this, peer assessment is inevitable. For example, NAAC had developed some indicators to guide peer assessment. But, the peers have an important role in synthesizing the outcome on individual indicators to arrive at an overall assessment and also in evaluating the contextual framework of the institution.

Collaboration with other Professional Bodies: The Indian system of higher education has many regulatory mechanisms to ensure the satisfactory functioning of the HEIs. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) is a statutory body established in 1995 to regulate and maintain norms and standards in teacher education. The NCTE signed a MoU with the NAAC in 2002 for all teacher education institutions to undergo collaborative assessment. The methodology is the same but the criteria have been slightly

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modified, to suit the context of the teacher education institutions. Combining the subject expertise of NCTE and the quality assurance expertise of NAAC, the methodology has been implemented for the teacher education institutions of the country. The efforts of NCTE and NAAC to ensure and assure the quality of teacher education in the country are complementary to each other. While the norms of NCTE ensure the minimum requirements that is essential for quality education, NAAC's framework for assessment looks for the quality and excellence of the institutions. In the years to come, NAAC will enter into agreements with professional bodies for collaborative assessment, in areas where it is required.

The fact that the NAAC's model given above suits the national context and the other considerations of the Indian higher education system is evident from the acceptance and appreciation academia have demonstrated towards NAAC's process. The impact analysis conducted by NAAC brought to limelight that there are two major areas where NAAC's process has made a significant impact on the HEIS – the value framework of the HEIs and the various innovations triggered by NAAC's process; they stand testimony to the suitability of NAAC's model to Indian Higher Education.

Value framework of NAAC

In this era of values losing their significance, the accreditation framework of the NAAC has made higher education institutions in India think about the values they practice. The focus on values practiced in the functioning of higher education institutions has been rekindled due to the salient features (critical elements) of the NAAC's model that are based on certain assumptions of values, i.e. desirable practices. The appreciation of the desirable values is expected to result in a better understanding of the practices, particularly in the context of varying realities.

The value framework of NAAC starts with its right choice of 'unit' of evaluation, namely institution as a whole, which promotes a holistic value. The institutional accreditation that focuses on the policies, facilitating aspects and evidence of healthy practices of the whole system strengthens a healthy interdependence among the campus community. Gradually it promotes the holistic mindset that is essential for developing institutional excellence and institutional 'dharma', subsuming individual excellence and individual 'dharma'.

Added to the holistic approach to assessment, the criteria-based assessment of NAAC that forms the backbone of the whole assessment exercise promotes judgment based on values. The key aspects identified under each of the seven criteria serve as Indicators of Quality and they reflect the values of the system on which assessment is made. For example, the criterion on "*Research, Consultancy and Extension*" promotes the values

such as *Knowledge Creation, Knowledge Dissemination, Knowledge Application, Social Responsiveness* and *Community Orientation*. The criterion on “*Organisation and Management*” promotes the values such as *Participation, Transparency, Integrated View of Things, Team Work, Justice, Self-reliance and Probity in Public Finance*. The values to be promoted by NAAC are also made explicit in the criterion statements.

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The process of undergoing the accreditation itself has been a rewarding experience for the institutions to rethink the values they should be practising. When institutions worked on the accreditation framework of NAAC and prepared the self-study report, they realized that it promoted the values of Self-realization and Participation. Gradually it has triggered an objective ‘self critical’ approach to one’s own behaviour and has led to self-realisation, which is very essential for an educational institution that stands for autonomy and self-regulation. Self-knowledge has to precede self-regulation, which in turn is a prerequisite for self-realisation.

Innovations Triggered by the NAAC’s process

The impact analysis revealed that the NAAC’s process made a significant change in all aspects of institutional functioning – pedagogical, managerial and administrative. One could see that the institutions had become more open and sensitive to the needs of the stakeholders. The need to keep abreast of changing trends was felt by one and all, and institutions now found it easier to introduce innovations as every one realised the importance of coping with the needs of the present world. The autonomous institutions that had the freedom to innovate in curriculum and the affiliated colleges that were offering additional programmes of their own restructured the curriculum. In the scheme of assessment of NAAC, the criterion *Teaching-learning and Evaluation* carries the maximum weightage. It gave a positive stimulus to institutional attention and oriented the institutions to improving their quality of teaching-learning by going beyond the routine examination-oriented outcome. Improved teaching methods using educational technology, projects and student seminars, providing of computer skills, encouragement of co-curricular activities, and incorporation of community orientation were observed.

While the characteristics mentioned above and the impact the process has made among the accredited HEIs is very encouraging in the case of first timers of the first cycle of assessment, the way NAAC moves forward with the re-accreditation also needs a mention here. Based on a large number of national consultations and building on the lessons of experience, the re-accreditation methodology is being firmed up.

Re-accreditation Method

The discussions held so far have recommended that the same three-stage process – submission of self-study report, peer validation and final decision by NAAC – should be followed for re-accreditation. The value framework regarding the obligations of the institution in nation building and serving the various stakeholders also have to remain the same. However, the point of time when re-accreditation is initiated may warrant a re-look at the assessment framework. First assessment has already initiated a quality culture among the HEIs of the country and re-accreditation has to further strengthen those initiatives. Therefore, along with the core values to which all higher education institutions should relate themselves in the changing context, the framework for re-accreditation should also consider the impact of first assessment. In other words, the framework for re-accreditation has to be built on two major considerations – core values in the changing context and impact of first assessment.

The following five core values have been identified for the re-accreditation process:

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

In general, the re-accreditation framework will assess the institutional functioning with reference to the contributions the HEIs make towards the five core values mentioned above. The HEIs are expected to demonstrate how they contribute to the core values through data collected during the accredited period. The evidence to the realization of these objectives may be in terms of inputs, processes and outputs. The re-assessment by NAAC will take a holistic view of all the inputs, processes and outputs of an institution and assess how the HEIs have progressed during the accredited period. In particular, the re-assessment would have a shift in focus in assessing three aspects – quality sustenance, quality enhancement and acting on the assessment report – that relate to internalizing the quality culture.

Quality Sustenance: During the first assessment, the NAAC's process has triggered quality initiatives in many aspects of functioning of HEIs. The preparation of the self-study report has served as a catalyst for institutional self-improvement. The participation of the faculty members, administrative staff, students, parents and alumni has lead to new initiatives. Interaction with the peers has assisted this process and also provided a means for the wider dissemination of information about educational development. It has triggered many innovative practices and paved way for institutionalising those practices.

Establishing internal quality assurance cells to coordinate the quality initiatives and use of technology in the learning process as well as for administration are a few such initiatives. These changes have a direct bearing on the quality of education and the re-accreditation will consider how these initiatives have been sustained during the accredited period.

Quality Enhancement: It is proper and educationally sound to expect that re-assessment has to bring to limelight how institutions have progressed over a period of five years with accredited status. It is reasonable that the re-assessment will give a due place to the quality initiatives promoted by the first assessment and the consequent quality enhancement that has taken place.

Acting on the Assessment Report: Much of the quality enhancement has been a result of institutional efforts to act on the assessment report and the re-assessment has to take note of that too. The post-accreditation reviews, feedback from the accredited institutions and the outcome of national consultations indicate that the first assessment report has been a useful document to initiate quality enhancement activities. The re-accreditation has to address how the HEIs have taken steps to overcome the deficiencies mentioned in the first assessment report and also build on the strengths noted in the report.

With the special emphases discussed above, the methodology for re-accreditation has been evolved in consultation with the academia and there is a consensus that the methodological elements have to be similar to the first assessment. The existing seven criteria will be followed with revision and re-organisation in key aspects. The current nine-point scale will be continued to award institutional grades. To facilitate the HEIs to move towards demonstrating the special emphases mentioned above, institutional preparations for re-accreditation have commenced recently.

Milestones of a Decade...

Promoting a dialogue on quality related initiatives, during the past decade, NAAC has promoted partnership with stakeholders for pro-active measures to promote assessment and accreditation is a significant achievement of NAAC. Many states have established quality cells to promote assessment. Moving beyond accreditation, NAAC has expanded its scope by strengthening its advisory role. In states where at least 20% of higher education institutions have been accredited, state wise analysis of accreditation reports have been initiated for policy initiatives.

In addition to promoting the cause of quality education in the country, NAAC is a leading QAA in the international arena with valuable lessons of experience for the emerging

QAAs of the other countries. It is active in the international forums and as a member of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which is the largest network of quality assurance agencies in the world, NAAC organized the sixth bi-annual meet of the membership in 2001 at Bangalore. The NAAC is the co-convenor of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), which is a regional sub-network of the INQAAHE. While the developments present a rosy picture, the path taken by NAAC has challenges also.

Issues of Concern...

The points highlighted so far indicate how NAAC is making a steady progress in the field of quality assurance in higher education at both national and international levels. The developmental path is not free from concerns, but most of the concerns NAAC is dealing with today continue to be the concerns world over. A few of them are as below.

Large Volume Assessment: As on 16 February 2004, 1138 HEIs — 104 universities and 1034 colleges have been accredited by NAAC. With the UGC's decision to extend financial support for assessment and accreditation of universities and colleges through NAAC, with effect from 1 April 2004, more and more colleges are expected to volunteer for assessment. The implication is that NAAC has to assess a large number of HEIs without compromising the quality of the process. Consequently, alternative models of co-ordinating assessment visits and ICT enabled strategies to meet large volume assessment are being worked out. Following the alternative model of employing the services of external member conveners and Chair-cum-conveners, the capacity of NAAC to assess institutions has already been enhanced to around 200 institutions per month. If this trend is maintained, NAAC can assess all the UGC recognized colleges in a period of two years, provided they submit the reports to NAAC. To support the new model of on-site visit with member-conveners, the database of experts has been expanded through nominations, rigorous training programs, orientation programs and roundtables.

Professionalising the Process: Quality assurance being an evolving area the question—“is there a better way of doing things”— is always a concern for all the QAAs. Fine-tuning the instruments and reducing the inter-team variance in peer assessment are the two areas where the QAAs look for better ways of steering the quality assurance processes. To address these issues, NAAC continuously fine-tunes the instruments based on field experience and feedback collected from the accredited institutions, at the same time maintaining the consistency of its evaluation framework.

Subjectivity that creeps into any assessment involving human factors has been well understood. However, the world over, none of the quality assurance agencies have found

a better alternative to the central place given to peer assessment in the quality assurance procedures. Having accepted peer assessment as an integral part of its methodology, NAAC brings in consistency among the peers by appropriate safeguards, training strategies and discussions. A notable effort towards this direction is the development of the 'National Cadre of Assessors'. Experts from different parts of the country are selected through nomination and advertisements and through a rigorous selection process. For the assessors thus selected, NAAC organizes a 3-day residential training program to induct them into the 'National Cadre of Assessors'. This training strategy has given a professional dimension to NAAC's process. Further, developing indicators of quality that can guide peer assessment is an ongoing exercise. In addition, roundtable discussion for the Chairs of the assessment teams to discuss the issues of concern is an annual event. Continuous efforts are taken to reduce the subjectivity and to strengthen the professionalism of peer assessment.

Sustenance of Quality: As mentioned earlier, the quality assurance procedures of NAAC have triggered a lot of healthy practices in the system of higher education and the HEIs that have undergone the process have become quality conscious. At this juncture one of the biggest challenges for NAAC is to help HEIs in sustaining these efforts. Institutionalising and internalizing the quality assurance processes has the key to this challenge. To make quality assurance an integral part of functioning of institutions, NAAC is promoting the establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in all higher education institutions in general, and in accredited institutions, in particular. Establishing an IQAC is a pre-requisite for any institution that comes forward for re-accreditation.

To conclude, during the past nine years, the NAAC has made a niche in the higher education scenario of India. It will continue to uphold its upward growth to ensure its leadership at the international level in general and in the Asia-Pacific region in particular. The next few years will show how NAAC moves ahead successfully balancing both the national context and the international expectations. With the support of the enlightened academia, policy makers, and dedicated staff, one can be sure that NAAC will face the challenges reasonably well and prove its mettle.

There are many miles to go.....