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Accelerating Quality Improvement and Innovations in Higher Education – The New Framework of NAAC

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Abstract

Improving quality and relevance of education continues to be the principal challenge for India. In overcoming this challenge various strategies were evolved especially during the 11th plan period. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) as an evolving and growing EQA has responded to the changing needs of the higher education of India by adopting a multifaceted approach.

In this paper while discussing the chronological development in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in India and the evolution of the processes of Assessment and Accreditation (A&A), we will also review the development taking across the sector nationally and globally. In the process we would touch upon the challenges from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in achieving the Quality Education mandate and the impact of the Teacher Quality, Governance and Management, Student Learning and Innovations in HEIs. Also we would review on how in the process the NAAC has facilitated the Quality improvement through various tools and instruments developed in the last decade.

Introduction

Improving quality and relevance of education continues to be the principal challenge for India. In overcoming this challenge various strategies were evolved especially during the 11th plan period. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) as an evolving and growing EQA has responded to the changing needs of the higher education of India by adopting a multifaceted approach.

The constant efforts of NAAC in maintaining the Assessment and Accreditation (A&A) processes at internationally acceptable levels and to align with the reforms taking place globally and nationally are expected to contribute for an “inclusive and qualitative expansion of higher education” in India. The recently revised framework of NAAC, focuses on three prioritized areas – Institutional Social Responsibility (ISR), fostering a climate of innovation and experimentation and learning impact. These as detailed below are expected to inculcate values critical for social and economic development and revitalize HEIs for contributing to the national goals and social development. Also to strengthen the elements of objectivity and transparency in the process of assessment, NAAC revised its framework making it more robust and objective and introduced more quantifiable parameters.

Overall the Assessment and Accreditation (A&A) process of NAAC facilitate continuous quality improvement of HEIs and the Institutions *Journey to Excellence*. In view of the recent changed Policies including the decisions making A&A as mandatory for all the HEIs and the ongoing reforms and developments at National and global levels, NAAC initiated several changes including review of its processes and governance for accommodating the new developments.

Higher Education in India

Indian Higher Education System is the second largest in the world. The Higher Education System in India at present has approximately 621 university level institutions, 33,000 colleges and 33 Institutes of National Importance. It is worth mentioning that around 1800 colleges are exclusively for women. Apart from these we have a large segment of distance learning and open education system regulated by the Distance Education Council (DEC). The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is the largest university in the world in terms of student enrolment through open and distance mode approximately enrolling 4 million students for open and distance learning. This apart there are around 11 State Open Universities enrolling approximately another million students. Also we have more than 10 million Indians enrolled in foreign Universities.

As per global experience for sustaining economic growth the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education needs to be minimum of 20%. In India the GER as

of 2009-10 is around 17.3% much below the level of 45% in advanced countries. This calls for not only expanding opportunities in HE but also serious reforms in improving quality in HE. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of Government of India (GOI) has initiated various measures for increasing the GER such as encouraging privatisation Public Private Partnership (PPP) models etc.

During 2009-10 the share of expenditure on education for the University system was 13%, for Technical Education 5% and the General Higher Education system around 12.76%. In terms of percentage of GDP spent on Higher Education is much less than the 6% recommended. The low share of expenditure and the percentage of GDP spent on higher education poses a major challenge in implementing various policies for improving quality of Higher Education.

Higher Education in India is regulated by multiple agencies setup from time to time. To list a few we have the University Grants Commission(UGC) one of the oldest body established in the 1950s, the All India Council for Technical Education(AICTE), for Engineering, Technology and Management Institutes; The National Council for Teacher Education(NCTE) for Teacher Education, the Medical Council of India(MCI) for Medical Education, the Pharmacy Council of India(PCI) for Pharmacy programmes, the Council of Architecture(COA), the Dental Council of India(DCI) and many more. These regulatory bodies prescribe norms and standards for establishing HEIs and the programmes offered and ensure their compliance. At the national level the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) along with the statutory agencies like AICTE, NCTE, MCI, DCI, etc. are responsible for regulating the qualitative and quantitative growth of the tertiary education system. At the state level state ministries of education and their directorates of Higher Education are responsible for the system in that particular state including coordination with the national level agencies. Thus we can see how fragmented the Higher Education sector is especially in terms of its regulation.

Some of the major reforms in Higher Education

As commented by Hon'ble Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Government of India Shri Shashi Tarror " India is entering the global Employment market place with a self imposed handicap of which we are just beginning to become conscious- an acute shortage of quality institutions of HE". The MHRD focus in its XII plan initiatives is thus on ensuring and improving access to quality Higher Education to all. UGC in its document "Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher Education - XII five year plan (20012-17)" proposes to not only improve the GER but also the quality of Higher Education through various regulations and norms.

The Government of India in the recent past has appointed several committees to streamline higher education sector. One of the major recommendations of these committees is on the issue of quality assurance. Taking clue from these committees recommendations and recognising quality as an essential requirements in every aspect of Higher Education, be it Governance, Teaching Learning and evaluation or curriculum development etc., both the Central and the State Governments have initiated the measures to support HEIs for quality enhancement. The National Knowledge Commission (2007) observed that the Higher Education system as a whole is” over regulated but under –Governed” and emphasised the necessity to overhaul both the regulatory and governing structure of Higher Education. For this it recommended setting up an agency the Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) which would provide a single window clearance by dispensing with the multiple regulatory agencies. The Yashpal Committee(2009) constituted to Advice on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education also was of the opinion that the current highly over regulated Higher Education System tend to stifle “innovation and creativity, increase inefficiency and breed corruption and mal practices” and also the committee felt such an under regulated system will contribute to erosion of social justice and thus there is a need to “design a balanced and all encompassing regulatory mechanism that is overarching, transparent and ensures accountability which would evoke confidence in the academic institutions for this the committee suggested setting up a National Commission for Higher Education and Research(NCHER).

New Frame Work of NAAC

If we look at the total quantum of output of the Indian Higher Education sector, it is one of the largest in the world but if the quantum is to be judged in terms of quality unfortunately it does not rank fairly well in the global scenario. As commented by Mr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia Deputy Chairman Planning Commission, GOI it only through the modernisation of the curriculum and developing skilled personnel would help India to achieve the set goals. Recognising the critical role of quality higher education to keep pace with the needs of the global economy Indian Government over the past decade has strengthened its quality assurance processes. In response to the recommendations of the various committees and working on the belief that educational institutions are an integral part of the communities they serve, NAACs current focus is in sensitizing HEIs to play a proactive role in engaging and working closely with the societies. Through the introduction of the key aspect “Institutional Social Responsibility” institutions would be encouraged to introduce and integrate aspects of life skills and social values across its activities and taking a participatory

approach involve stakeholders play a proactive role in developing and enriching the local communities. The initiative apart from preparing the youth to be valued citizens with the appropriate life skills and social values, would engage the communities in making education central to society and society central to education serving the collective interests of all stakeholders and contribute to the National Development. The key variable in working towards this is the professional and social commitment of the HEIs. NAAC's experience shows that such aspects should come from within the HEI rather than as a regulation being imposed. The ISR will enable institutions to make connections with stakeholders and community and synergise activities around common priorities. For this NAAC would support HEIs by capacity building and in developing appropriate linkages and good practices.

The report of the Prof Yashpal Committee (YCPR-2009) to advise on rejuvenation and renovation of Higher Education headed lamented on shrinking of democratic space in the Universities and noted that it has all the potential; to "distort the idea of University and its role in the creation of knowledge and free and open inquiry through research and dialogue". The National Knowledge Commission Report (NKCR- 2009) also pointed that research is central in the process of knowledge generation and observed that there has been a steady decline in volume and quality of research hampering the very basic character of Higher Education in India. In an attempt to bring vigour in our institutions and instill the research culture NAAC introduced aspects with focus on institutional initiatives in fostering "innovations and experimentation". The innovations may be either those generated at the Institution level or external to the institution i.e. the community. Through this initiative NAAC intends to foster a culture of research and experimentation, encourage creativity and new ideas which would benefit the local communities and also develop the research aptitudes among the staff and students. At a larger level, it would also help funding agencies and governments in providing high level support for successful innovation and experimentation, effective transfer of the knowledge and technology to the field and local communities contributing to sustainable development. At the end of the day support for innovation should go hand in hand with well developed systems of assessment and accountability. NAAC has already modified its tools by including key elements for supporting innovations and their transfer to practice and dissemination. As all of you agree these are critical areas for the HEIs to evolve into Knowledge transfer systems contributing to the development of Human power with right values and skills for Social and National development.

Through introduction of standalone criterion - "innovations and best practices", NAAC intends HEIs to tap the potential of the students and local knowledge base, foster a climate of innovation and facilitate transfer of innovations to practice and

assist in their dissemination. Under the best practices NAAC would like institutions to actively engage students and local communities in setting examples and adoption of global concerns on environment, water conservation, climate change and technological developments etc. Through these NAAC expects to facilitate institutions to shift from the traditional approaches and incorporate best practices which would bring in positive change.

Various curriculum reforms and the new combination of subject being offered are expected to instil confidence among the students and coax them to find opportunities in newer areas and occupations. The HEIs have initiated measures to bridge the gap between industry requirement and the quality of the talent coming out of them by supplementing the existing curriculum with value added courses to suit to the market needs and student requirements.. Taking cognizance of these initiatives the revised manual lays stress in assessing the institution on the areas like curriculum planning and implementation, curriculum enrichment, academic flexibility, student performance and learning outcomes.

Education being the social system plays a key role in reforming and shaping the society from time to time. In order to stir the society towards sustainable development it is important to involve stakeholders in the development process and decision making. As per the recommendations of the world summit on sustainable development the UN declared 2005 to 2014 as the decade of education for sustainable development. This has led to several changes in the organisation of HEIs and its programmes. Education for sustainable development fosters an understanding of the interconnectedness of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities (3 E's). With an aim of fostering the 3 E's inclusion of key aspects on ISR, environmental consciousness and innovation, etc. have been included in the revised framework of NAAC. Inclusion of these core issues which require active stakeholder engagement has resulted in the HEIs constant engagement with the stakeholders and their participation in HEIs management and decision making.

In view of the critical role the stakeholders have in shaping our education systems and the society at large NAAC through various initiatives elaborated encourages institutions to work in partnership with the stakeholders. An innovative multi stakeholder, learner centred participative approach has thus been evolved as a part of the A&A exercise to sensitise and empower the community and individuals especially students to be responsible citizens who could provide innovative solutions to real life issues at local national and global levels. Towards this and in line with the international agenda and aligning to the needs of the nation NAAC has developed and introduced *Student Charters, Guidelines for establishing Internal Quality Assurance Cells* wherein there should be representation of students, teaching community and

members from the industry and local community etc., ensuring interactions with all the stakeholders in the process of Assessment and Accreditation.

Transformational change towards enhanced quality education will depend upon a holistic, coherent and interrelated approach. Further the internal efficiency of any HEIs depends on the degree of autonomy, decentralisation, trust and faith put in the institutions administration and academicians. To this effect the current changes in NAAC assessment under criterion “ *governance, leadership and management*” focus on the key dimensions of HE which interact and interrelate with each other and places strong emphasis on the institutional initiatives in establishing cross functional relationships supported by enabling frameworks for planning, monitoring and evaluation, capacity development, governance structures, decentralisation, effective communication, partnerships, stakeholder involvement, etc.

NAAC evolved quality assurance tools which emphasized institutional level initiatives for quality improvement and enhancement. Establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) was one of the main instruments for encouraging institution wide cooperation in all the key areas of a HEI. The IQAC initiative makes quality assurance, planning and continuous improvement the unifying factor. The current revision brought in the internal quality assurance system (IQAS) under the governance, leadership and management criterion so that it can be evaluated along with planning, policy making, monitoring and evaluation. Also the mandatory inclusion of submission and evaluation of the annual quality assurance reports and their posting online is expected to bring in seriousness and commitment of the institution for strengthening the internal quality assurance system (IQAS).

With institutions reporting on the impact of IQACs in enhancing quality of HEIs the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India has collaborated with NAAC in developing guidelines for supporting HEIs in establishing IQACs for which it would provide start-up grants to all HEIs in a phased manner. Also recognising the potential of the A&A process which was a voluntary peer assessment process UGC has now mandated all the HEIs to undergo the process of A&A. Overall the IQAC and the student charters have triggered a movement of stakeholder participation in decision making. The Annual Quality Assurance Reports being prepared by the IQAC units of the HEIs reflect the impact of stakeholder involvement in quality improvement. The decision to upload the AQARs and the self assessment reports on institutional website is also aimed at engaging stakeholders in ensuring the transparency and accountability of the institution in all its reports and communications.

Underpinning all interventions towards effective, quality, relevant and efficient education system is knowledge and understanding of challenges, opportunities and learning impact. The introduction of submission of a SWOC analysis as a part of the

SSR and also the need to post the SSR on the institutional website will help institutions response to challenges and conceptualize and realize change in a strategically determined manner.

Further with accreditation being made mandatory and increasing number of institutions moving to second and third cycles and increasing awareness among stakeholders, NAAC had to work more on the micro details to ensure transparency and accountability of the processes. NAAC plans for optimizing the use of IT infrastructure ensure transparency making HEIs accountable and encourage participation for stakeholders. Towards this end NAAC is already in the process of developing online processes for most part of A& A activities and post and re-accreditation accountability frameworks. NAAC is piloting the submission of the annual quality assurance reports online and mandated institutions for posting SSRs on the institutions website for public access.

Conclusion

As significant societal actor HEIs shape the local regional and national environments and therefore are important partners of the society for developing responsible citizens and a sustainable future for the Nation. NAAC thus constantly endeavours in developing a public understanding and awareness on quality assurance of HEIs. NAAC over years has significantly contributed to re orienting the Indian Higher Education policy and programmes to address the social and environmental and skills issues and in integrating values through interdisciplinary approaches and taking a holistic view and involving stakeholders of all levels.

Through the above new innovative approaches and continuing its earlier initiatives NAAC envisages at infusing quality perspectives into the day to day operation of HEIs. Such an institutional environment would result in development of the new generation with potential to contribute to the knowledge society and the socio-economic development of the nation. Overall the revised framework is developed in response to the reform initiatives and new direction provided and addresses the various challenges of HEIs thereby accelerating the quality improvement of the Indian Higher Education system.

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