

IQAC – An Ace Strategy for Quality Sustenance and Enhancement in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Quality is variously defined by various people from varied domains. If it is ‘zero defects’ for someone, it is ‘customer satisfaction’ and ‘customer delight’ for somebody. It is a moving target, it is the journey towards quality that makes one achieve Quality in the real sense of the term. NAAC, armed with the mandate provided by the UGC, set off in its efforts to assess and accredit institutions of higher learning in 1994. World over, accreditation bodies use Internal Quality assurance as a tool for quality sustenance and enhancement. NAAC, right from its inception has promoted the concept of IQAC in accredited Colleges as a post quality sustenance measure. IQAC is undoubtedly, a well thought over strategy to ensure that every HEI takes care of quality sustenance and enhancement.

Quality in Higher Education is of paramount importance for any nation to progress. In the light of emerging knowledge economy, higher education is poised to provide highly empowered human resource necessary to don responsible positions and responsibilities profusely contributing to the progress and development of the nation. India, which always attached great importance to access and equity, started focussing more on the quality aspect after the 1960s, in the aftermath of the Kothari Commission. Though, as a nation, we have failed to provide the necessary funding for ensuring quality as per Dr. Kothari, who recommended 6% allocation of national income towards education¹.

Quality in Higher education constitutes qualified and committed teachers, highly planned curriculum and pedagogical methods, continuous training to teachers, well provided infrastructure in terms of classrooms, clean toilets, potable drinking water, library resources, laboratories, computing equipment, internet connectivity, research facilities, playground and

¹Kothari Commission Report, 1966

other facilities that facilitate healthy body and mind among the students. Unfortunately, many of the higher education institutions do not have the required number of teachers and the number of vacancy positions is alarming.

Many institutions have not seen proper classrooms, good quality blackboards, playgrounds, drinking water facilities etc even after many years of their establishment. UGC's 12(B) recognition is a means of funding the HEIs, which can go a long way in providing the necessary support to the HEIs, but there are limitations to the strategy. 12(B) recognition is accorded only to those institutions which have permanent affiliation accorded by the affiliating university. The sanction of permanent affiliation again demands certain basic facilities so that the institutions become 'fit to receive' the central assistance. However, they are contradictory that basic facilities can be acquired by certain institutions only through central assistance, but that assistance is subject to certain status accorded by the affiliating university.

Quality assurance in higher education is possible when there is liberal funding and support from both the Central and state governments. Grant-in-aid schemes are archaic and need immediate revision. From 'block' grant to 'salary' grant, the grant-in-aid schemes of the governments to fund HEIs, have not much changed the status of institutions. Further, it may be noted that the insistence of the governments on primary education also has been detrimental to the quality in higher education. In the face of haunting scarcity of funds to education, successive governments have declared that primary education is the priority and hence the higher education sector has been found wanting for attention and support. It is important to realise the fact that the pyramid of education cannot be neglected with emphasis on primary education and 'literacy'. The 'demographic dividend' can be put to best use, only when the literate people move on to become empowered citizens and that becomes possible only through higher education, professional skills and domain specific skills that are provided to the students who come out of the portals of primary education.

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), since its inception in 1994, has been playing a pioneering role in preparing the 'mindset' and ensuring quality culture among

higher education institutions. Through its concerted and conscious efforts, NAAC has been conducting awareness programs, orientation programs and has been funding activities that promote the quality culture and prepare institutions for seeking accreditation status. Established as an autonomous body under the UGC, NAAC is the first official autonomous body which took up the accreditation of all types of institutions including technical education. NBA which was established in 1994 was operating under the AICTE and became autonomous only in 2010. With its initial success, NAAC chartered its ways in more ways than one, by changing its methodology, grading pattern and tools of accreditation in tune with the stakeholders' feedback and domain demands.

Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) is the ace strategy of NAAC which floated the idea of internal quality assurance at institutional level, once the accreditation of an institution is completed by NAAC. Quality cannot be driven by external forces, but it should be an outcome of conscious and concerted efforts of the stakeholders within an academic institution is the idea which forms the basis of IQAC. Though, sporadic efforts were made by certain state governments to take up 'audit' of institutions or bringing in the concept of TQM, NAAC provided the necessary food for thought and wherewithal for institutions to seriously think that quality is not a luxury but a necessity.

Assessment and Accreditation by NAAC, as it exists today is a once in five years affair. NAAC's methodology makes space for re-accreditation of an institution after the completion of five years. Though NAAC grades an academic institution at certain level or CGPA, it is important that the HEI sustains the level of quality or the benchmarks it has achieved in terms of quality assurance. Hence quality achievement and then accreditation by NAAC must not reach the cul-de-sac with the status of accreditation given by NAAC, but the HEI must continuously strive to sustain quality and then enhance quality. Of course benchmarking concept will come in handy for HEIs when it comes to enhancement of quality. Continuous efforts to enhance quality will obviously result in excellence, which is the ultimate aim of NAAC, governments and the stakeholders of higher education.

As per the IQAC concept paper floated by NAAC, every accredited institution should establish IQAC as a 'post-accreditation quality sustenance measure'². The prime task that NAAC bestows on the IQAC is to develop a system for conscious, consistent and catalytic improvements in the performance of an institution. Thus, NAAC yearns to internalise the quality, and accreditation by NAAC once in five years should not become a benchmark for quality sustenance and enhancement. It is the duty of the IQAC to prepare a strategic perspective plan for the institution with wide consensus among the stakeholders and mobilise resources and efforts to achieve the same. NAAC encourages institutions to prepare Long Term Vision Plans and Short Term Plans, ie, Strategic Perspective Plan of an institution and work towards realisation of the same. This requires a prime role for the IQAC in terms of planning, executing, monitoring and review for continuous improvement. It is here that certain statutory provisions are required. It is very interesting to note that the NAAC provides funding to the State Level Quality Cells or SQAC, but the same kind of funding through NAAC is necessary for each IQAC to realise the plans made by itself.

Further, NAAC provides a broad framework for the composition of the IQAC. NAAC's guidelines on the composition of the IQAC also tries to define the role of the Coordinator for IQAC. However, the context in which the IQAC Coordinators work in HEIs does not provide the necessary wherewithal for them to achieve the intended effect. It is very important that NAAC mandates the appointment of experienced faculty as full-time Coordinators/Directors of IQAC. Part-time IQAC Coordinators/Directors with teaching workload on par with other faculty in an institution will have no time to plan, execute, review and bring in mid-course corrections and conduct impact analysis of the strategies adopted by the IQAC to rein in quality.

The mandate that the NAAC provides for IQACs to submit AQAR through e-mail to NAAC is also a well thought over strategy. Through the preparation of the Annual Quality Assurance Report and the submission of the same to NAAC, it is trying to ensure that managements, academic leaders and all the stakeholders realise the importance of quality sustenance measures to be adopted by the HEI. The AQAR format provides space for Part-A

²NAAC website. IQAC Handbook. www.naac.gov.in

which is the Plan that is prepared by the IQAC and Part-B provides space for rerecording the efforts made by the institution to comply and achieve the action points in the Plan.

However, it is important that the IQAC coordinators are empowered in terms of their place, position, their role in planning and monitoring, budgeting, and introducing mid-course corrections in the quality process by conducting impact analysis. Full time IQAC Coordinators/Directors and funding the IQAC directly by NAAC or UGC based on the Institutional Development Plans or Vision Plans that are prepared with five years in perspective. Thus IQACs can play a pivotal role in the quality substance and enhancement efforts of an academic institution.