

Triggering Excellence in Higher Education through Assessment and Accreditation

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Sitting pretty as the third largest system in the world in terms of its sheer size and diversity, Indian Higher Education follows China and the US, making it one of the most complex, varied and highly pursued entity by the insiders and outsiders alike. It is poised to be the largest in the world with its potential for expansion, growth, promising platform for reforms and the thrust that the knowledge economy gives in terms of planning and allocation; while prioritizing the country's requirements. Indian Higher Education has recorded unprecedented growth in myriad ways.

Higher Education plays a pivotal role in the making up of a nation. It contributes not only to the requirements of the ever important human resource for country's progress and economic development, but it provides for the social, cultural and political wellbeing of its people. Ever since, sincere efforts were made by the country to prioritize its national goals and the role of higher education in realizing the set goals, a sense of direction and purpose have formed the theme in a positive direction. Starting off with Radhakrishna Commission Report, Kothari Commission Report to the latest Prof. Yashpal Committee Report- without failing to make a mention of CABE recommendations- a sense of urgency has set in the whole process of planning, provisioning, and policy formulations in an effort to educate millions of people of this country.

Propelled by increased funding, laudable studies made by different educationists, extensive reports by various committees, efforts aimed at structuring and restructuring of higher education, positive interventions made by various agencies and bodies for improving and bettering the higher education, the system has evolved to a great extent and has attracted the attention of the world with the advent of 'Knowledge economy'. Though all is not well with the system, it is also true that it has provided for the country's requirements at all important junctures. India is one of the leading providers of human resource to the world and its success in

providing the necessary personnel for the IT, BT and allied sectors is proof positive that regeneration is possible and that, it is still breathing-alive and kicking; as against the views of certain critics who opine that, it does not offer anything to cheer about.

Any system that is not open for verification (both intrinsic and extrinsic), validation and value addition is bound to perish and such a system cannot achieve any improvement, i.e., quality enhancement and excellence. Higher education is no exception to this generic principle. Without verification, validation and value addition, education system degenerates and stinks from within and undoubtedly loses touch with times and finally collapses beyond recovery.

Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education is an effort to ensure the nation that the task of educating its people and creation of a pool of resourceful human beings is being persuaded in a right direction. Providing education without quality assurance is no good than not providing education at all. Quality assurance has assumed great significance due to rapid strides made by knowledge economy. The edge established by the knowledge economy over others, has made countries seek knowledge in a wide variety of ways and the craving for the best in field. This has set the system in search of quality and more so for parameters and processes that help quality achievement, sustenance and enhancement in the light of high impact significance of resourceful, skillful and evolved human beings on the nation's destiny, no country can afford to have a sub-standard system of higher education.

Quality is defined variously by various people. In terms of higher education, quality is multidimensional. Committed students, empowered teachers, necessary infrastructure, laboratories, highly sensitized management structure, procedures and practices in terms of admissions, student welfare, staff welfare, placements, imparting plethora of skills, evolving leadership, outcome of various processes and procedures- all these and more constitute the measurable parameters for Quality in a higher educational institution. In the light of globalization and GATS, India has to look at quality in terms of global practices and benchmarks. Institutions need to gear up to meet the challenges posed by international institutions. The country needs to take advantage of technology and the tools it offers for massification and rejuvenation of higher education. But how does one measure quality? An institution has to consciously and concertedly

make efforts to achieve quality on a day-to-day basis. Quality is a ‘moving target’, to borrow the expression from the highly appreciated title of the auto-biography of the Nobel Laureate William Golding. Though, no single definition can suit the purpose of defining quality in higher education, it is felt both; when it is present and absent from a process, activity, institution, product, individual or a society in general it is said that: “All the proof of a pudding is in the eating”, and more so appropriate in terms of quality in higher education. Quality has to be experienced by improving every activity, thought process, practices and procedures, in terms of people, institution and activities involved. Conscious efforts have to be made by all the stakeholders to improve things on a regular basis, i.e., 24x7 on all time and every time, as emphasized by the quality guru **Philips B Crosby** in his famous book ‘**Quality is Free**’ (1979). Crosby talks about ‘zero defects’ and says that quality is getting a job right ‘first time and every time’.

Quality Assurance is possible only when it is enhanced and that too enhanced on a continuous basis over a period of time. As **Prof. Mantz Yorke**(2009) elucidates on Quality enhancement and quality assurance and says that quality assurance (QA) pertains to accountability. Whereas quality enhancement (QE) pertains to improvement. He says that it is absolutely possible to measure quality when there is improvement in quality. Profiling the benchmarks and bettering them only to further demolish them and set new parameters for improvement and excellence is the pathway to excellence in higher education. **Sally Brown et.al**, say in their book “**500 Tips for Quality Enhancement**” (1997) that yearning for quality has to be continuous. They say “While it is essential for institutional survival to fare well in quality assessments, in the long term it is even more important for the quality enhancement product to be realized, and reflected in the quality of the process of teaching, learning and assessment in colleges and universities”.

Efforts made by the UGC in providing policy directions and financial support to achieve accessibility, equity and quality in higher education deserve kudos. Quality Assurance (QA) through adherence to norms like 2(f) and 12(B) for Universities and Colleges is a meaningful effort by the UGC for maintaining certain minimum standards in higher educational institutions (HEIs). With the advent of NAAC in the year 1994, things starting looking upbeat, though

NAAC had to undertake excruciating efforts to make the stakeholders open to the idea of external assessment. Through a series of seminars, workshops and sensitization programmes, NAAC was successful in spreading the quality culture and bringing the international standardized processes and practices adopted for assessment and accreditation “face-to-face” with the stakeholders. Though what is to be achieved by NAAC looks greater when compared to what is achieved, the efforts of NAAC cannot be undermined in taking up the task of assessing and accrediting more than 172 Universities and 4867 Colleges in the country. Though the numbers look simple when the system has more than 35,000 Colleges whose quality is yet to be ascertained; NAAC has its task cut out and its goals well defined.

Assessment and Accreditation process aided by NAAC’s advocacy for the establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in each College has really made lot of difference to the way quality assurance and enhancement was viewed by the stakeholders in an institution. The efforts by NAAC to continuously fine-tune its methodology and manuals to suit the dynamics of higher education in India, deserve appreciation. The concept of ‘Institutional Social Responsibility’ on the lines of ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ adopted by the new manual of NAAC has opened up new vistas for institutions to diversify their activities and the possible role that can be played by students, teachers and institution as a whole. Though there are apprehension about the proposed new bill called: “The National Accreditation Regulatory Authority for Higher Educational Institutions Bill, 2010”, and the issues of ethics and fair practices will be called in for question with regard to assessment, it goes without saying that assessment and accreditation process; both intrinsic and extrinsic-holds the key for the survival of higher education in India.

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