

NAAC Accreditation: A Quality Initiative Reform in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract:-

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has been set up to facilitate the volunteering institutions to assess their performance through introspection. NAAC is taking efforts for assessment and accreditation with an objective of continuous improvement of quality in higher education since two decade. It has made significant impact on improvement of quality in higher education. NAAC has revised its accreditation framework and made ICT enabled, objective, transparent, surmountable and robust. The self study report has been made qualitative and quantitative matrix oriented. AQAR is also proposed qualitative and quantitative matrix oriented from academic year 2020-21.

This paper presents some points related to accreditation process of Indian higher education system with some of the revised accreditation framework of NAAC. This framework deals with various innovations and reforms brought in the accreditation process. The revised accreditation framework has introduced several concepts in quality assurance such as Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS), Data Validation and Verification (DVV), Quality bench-marking, Innovation, Ecosystem, Alumni Engagement, Institutional Values and Distinctiveness in the accreditation process. It is useful to all educational institutions for their quality management to create new policies of quality management and to inculcate innovation in the mind of stakeholders. It helps to improve the employing ability and new trends in the market of higher education for global competency.

Keywords:-

Higher Education; Quality Assurance; Revised Accreditation Framework (RAF); Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Assessment and Accreditation (A&A)

I. INTRODUCTION

The three main objectives of higher education, as pronounced by the University Grants Commission (UGC) are Acquisition of academic knowledge, Development of personality and Contribution to society.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had stated that education stood on four pillars:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to be good (to fellow human beings) and
- Learning to live together (with other family members and society).

Education should not be in terms of examination and marks. It must be fulfilled with emotions to accept the challenges in the society for serving them. Education is not like a bucket to fill up. It is like a fire to kindle i. e. "Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya".

Some great thinkers expressed their thoughts about Education. Aristotle thought that, "The roots of Education are bitter but the fruit is sweet". Mahatma Jyotiba Fuley expressed that, "There is no path for success in life without Education, it is only a tool to become smart and live as human". Mahatma Gandhi advised that "Study as if you were to live forever, live as if you were to die tomorrow". Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said that, "Education is the milk of tigress, one who will assimilate it definitely roars". Dr. Bhausaheb Panjabrao Deshmukh stated that 'Education is the prime source of living life' and Swami Vivekananda expected that 'Education must be human being creator'. Indira Gandhi advocated that "Education is continuous process from a minute we born until we die". In Bhagwatgita shloka, it is stated that, "You have a right only to action, never the fruits thereof; let not the fruit of your action be your motive nor let there be any attachment to inaction". Upanishada tells that, "Na Hi Dhnyanen Sadrushyam Pavitraniha Vidhya Te". Thus Education is only the means which teaches us a lot and leads to humanity.

Higher education plays versatile role in emerging knowledge economies allover the world. Quality education is vital for the social and economic development of any nation and has greater importance for humanity. Accreditation is important for every institution to know its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities through an informed review process, the identification of internal areas of planning and resource allocation collegiality on the campus, funding agencies look for objective, data for performance funding, institution initiates innovative and modern methods of pedagogy and new sense of direction and identity for the institution, provides society with reliable information on the quality education offered and employers reliable information on the quality of education offered to the prospective recruits and infra and inter- institutional interactions. NAAC is exploring the prospects of bringing excellence in Indian education system through innovations in accreditation. Assessment and Accreditation (A&A) by NAAC has become mandatory for all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

II. REFORMATION OBJECTIVES

The revised accreditation process and its implication provides the method in making Indian higher education system a world class higher education system. In India, the mission and goal of providing education to increasing numbers of the population has become a priority because growth and expansion in Indian higher education have been exponential in the last few decades. The revised accreditation framework is launched by NAAC signifies a massive paradigm shift in approach towards quality assurance in higher education.

Recently, the development of higher education in India has become remarkable in Indian Higher Education Scenario . The number of HEIs and enrolment capacity has posed a greater challenge to the nation in maintaining better quality of education in the country. The Indian higher education system is facing an unprecedented transformation in the coming decade. This transformation is being driven by economic and demographic change: by 2020, India will be the world's third largest economy, with a correspondingly rapid growth in the size of its middle classes. Currently, over 50% of India's population is under 25 years old; by 2020 India will outpace China as the country with the largest tertiary-age population. (British Council 2014). According to AISHE report 2017-18 there are 903 Universities, 39,050 Colleges and 10,011 Stand alone institutions in India. Total enrollment in higher education has been estimated to be 36.6 million with 19.2 million boys and 17.9 million girls in the same period with this, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the students has gone up to 25.8% in 2017-18. (AISHE, 2017-18). GER is far behind countries like China which has a GER of 43.39%, in Canada 88%, USA 80.9%, Australia 79.8%, UK 52 %, and France 50%. (Singh & Ahmad, 2011). There are 12, 84, 755 teachers are working in all over India. Only 3.6% colleges run Ph. D. programme and 36.7% colleges run PG level programme across India. 34,400 students were awarded Ph. D. level degree during 2017. By 2030, India will be amongst the youngest nations in the world with nearly 140 million people in the college-going age group, one in every four graduates in the world will be a product of the Indian education system. NAAC: Two Decades of Pioneering Experience The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an autonomous body which was set up in 1994 by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to address the issues of quality and to assess and accredit the HEIs in the country. The experience of NAAC in the area of A&A with an objective of continuous improvement of quality in education has made a significant impact. NAAC is continuously striving to improve its methodology for assessment and accreditation, taking into cognizance changing trends in higher education, the rapidly transforming global scenario, feedback from the stakeholders and lessons learn from experiences. The fundamental objective of NAAC's assessment is to improve the quality of HEIs in the country. In order to set the assessing parameters, NAAC has organized various brainstorming sessions with experts of higher education to design the methodology. To create awareness about assessment and accreditation, it has also organized several seminars and programme. The UGC has made accreditation mandatory for all higher educational institutions. NAAC has accredited 11,616 colleges and 554 universities as of 26th September 2018. This includes 3,321 colleges and 159 universities for Cycle II and 737 colleges and 66 universities for Cycle III and 11 colleges for Cycle IV, respectively (NAAC, 2018). Over 1600 HEIs accredited during the year 2016-2017. Currently, the NAAC is in the process of a complete renovation and reform of its processes.

III. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SELF-EVALUATION AND PEER EVALUATION

Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), established in every institution is the authority to process the Assessment and Accreditation process. IQACs execute the series of good practices and quality initiatives. It is Continuous quality enhancement and quality culture process through IQACs. It formalizes the quality assurance mechanisms. State government's use of the outcomes as inputs for planning state-wise analysis. Many policymakers have used the accreditation results for funding and for other decisions- UGC, MHRD, National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE), Dental Council of India (DCI), State governments.

a) Developing the Quality Indicator Framework

NAAC considered the views from various stakeholders through survey. Core Working Group (CWG) and Sectoral Working Groups (SWGs) were set up for Universities, Autonomous Colleges and Affiliated/Constituent Colleges to evolve the QIF and a series of CWG and SWG meetings were held. A pilot study was conducted to test the QIF involving about 100 HEIs across the country to calibrate QIF benchmarks. Finally, a national consultation was organized to fine-tune and finalize the revised accreditation framework. Key Features of the QIF Qualitative and Quantitative Metrics proposed under each key indicator with pre- determined weights. Each Metric is provided with a benchmark range on a 5-point scale (very high to very low) or binary scale (Yes/No). The calculation method remains the same as per the current grading pattern except in case of binary scale indicators where 'Yes' results into highest value, 4 and 'No' results into lowest value, 0. Indicators are expected to be supported by a data sheet providing evidence for the quantitative response submitted by HEIs. To assess subjective elements such as teaching-learning process, student services, etc., a new component of online student satisfaction survey is introduced. The draft set of indicators is pilot-tested on select HEIs. Based on the analysis of pilot tests further, fine-tuning of benchmarks is done. The number of criteria, i.e. seven, remains the same for the new QIF; only the name of Criteria III and VII has been changed, i.e. Criterion III has been renamed as 'Research, Innovations and Extension' and Criterion VII will be called as 'Institutional Values and Best practices'. Introduction of new Key Indicators such as Student Satisfaction Survey, Alumni Engagement, Innovation ecosystem, Institutional values and social responsibilities, and Institutional Distinctiveness. The total weight of the A&A process remains the same, i.e. 1000 points. The criterion- wise weight of all the seven criteria also remains the same. The Key Aspects will now be known as Key Indicators, and the measures/questionnaire under Key Indicator will be called as Metrics. The same

has been drastically reduced from 220 to around 130. Pre-Qualifiers for Peer Team Visit have been pioneered. Student Satisfaction Survey As part of QIF, the NAAC has endeavoured to conduct a Student Experience Survey, the results of which will be included in the accreditation process. The students will remain anonymous throughout the process. The institution is supposed to send a list of total student strength, with details of their student identity (ID) number, Aadhaar ID number (any other valid ID number in the absence of Aadhaar), degree programme student is enrolled in, email id and mobile number. The NAAC will send an online link of this 'Student survey' to the email address/mobile number of the student and the student will have to fill the survey before a stipulated date. The questionnaire consists of several facets of the teaching-learning process. (Metric No. 2.7.1) Analysis of the student survey will be done using a customize software which will aggregate the responses and generate the score.

b) Alumni Engagement

The key indicator 'Alumni Engagement' emphasizes on the association of alumni with the institution for academic and other financial matters. Alumni is essential part in the quality improvement, various contributions of alumni are covered in this key indicator such as financial assistance in the form of gifts or donations for development of the institution.

c) Innovation Ecosystem

Innovation Ecosystem is an important key indicator in improving the quality of an institution, which describes the innovative and pioneering practices. It addresses innovative initiatives of the institution, like incubation centre, workshops/seminars on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), industry-academia innovative practices, innovation awards and encouragement of start-ups in the campus etc.

d) Institutional Values and Social Responsibilities

The inclusion of 'Values and Ethical Practices' is an independent parameter of quality assurance for assessment/accreditation of HEIs. It will provide a strong momentum to quality initiatives and good governance. Our regulatory bodies and networks will have to adopt a much broader role in sharing their wisdom and practices for evolving value-based ethical practices for quality assurance. This key indicator highlights the social issues and concerns such as gender equity, attitude towards the differently abled, inclusion and situatedness, human values and professional ethics. It also covers issues related to the environment.

e) Institutional Distinctiveness

This key indicator refers to the differentness of an institution from other institutions. An institution is characterised by its reason for its existence, vision, mission, nature of stakeholders, access to resources, cultural ambience and physical location etc. An established institution will be recognised for its certain and distinct attributes which make it different from others with regard to its characterization which will be reflected in its activities.

f) Data Validation and Verification (DVV) and Pre-qualifier Score

At the second level, data/information submitted in the SSR will be subjected to an online assessment mechanism/process with the DVV process after an online evaluation generating a pre-qualifier score. Institutions securing 30% on the quantitative metrics will qualify for onsite peer review/assessment. The pre-qualifier scores are exclusive of the SSS.

g) NAAC Accreditation Outcome Document

The NAAC Accreditation Outcome Document has three parts:

Part I: Peer Team Report

- Section 1: Gives the general information of the institution and its context.
- Section 2: Criterion-wise Analysis based on peer evaluation of qualitative indicators. This will be a qualitative analysis of descriptive nature aimed at critical analysis, presenting the strengths and weakness of the HEI under each criterion.
- Section 3: Overall Analysis, which includes institutional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges.
- Section 4: For recording 'Recommendations for Quality Enhancement of the Institution' (limited to ten major recommendations).

Part II: Graphical representation based on Quantitative Metrics (QnM)

This part will be a system-generated quality profile of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) under consideration, based on statistical analysis of quantitative indicators as evaluated by NAAC's quality indicator framework. A quality radar and graphical presentation of institutional features would be reflected in this part of the document through the synthesis of quantifiable indicators. CGPA and Letter Grade Status is as follows:

- 3.51 – 4.00 A++ Accredited
- 3.26 – 3.50 A+ Accredited
- 3.01 – 3.25 A Accredited
- 2.76 – 3.00 B++ Accredited
- 2.51 – 2.75 B+ Accredited
- 2.01 – 2.50 B Accredited
- 1.51 – 2.00 C Accredited
- ≤ 1.50 D Not Accredited

Part III: Institutional Grade Sheet

The third part of the accreditation document consists of the institutional grade sheet which is based on qualitative indicators, quantitative indicators and student satisfaction survey using existing calculations and methods. However, this grade sheet is

generated by software employed by the NAAC without any human intervention in its creation. The above mentioned three parts would be combined to form the 'NAAC Accreditation Outcome' document. It would be made mandatory for HEIs to display the document on the institutional website apart from hosting it on the NAAC website.

h) NAAC reforms: Impacts and Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes and impact of NAAC's reforms are summarized as below:

- Reducing the subjectivity due to variance in peer team assessment.
- Inculcation of competitive spirit by providing Quantitative benchmarks as basis of assessment.
- Improvement of data management practices in HEIs.
- Increased use of ICT in Teaching, Learning and Governance for quality improvement.
- Integrating the stakeholders involvement and feedback in quality improvement. (Key Indicators like Feedback System, Student Satisfaction Survey, Alumni Engagement)
- Introduction and acceleration of Outcome Based Education (OBE).
- Encouraging the culture of innovation and start-up on campuses.
- Reinforcement of value and ethics (Institutional Values and Best practices).

i) Institutionalization of quality culture (IQAC, etc)

- Promoting gender sensitivity on the campus.
- Incentivising the inclusive practices such as reservation policy, differently abled (Divyangjan) friendly campus, etc)
- Encouraging students to participate in extension activities such as Swach Bharat, Aids Awareness, Gender Issues, etc.,
- Promoting e-resources of library for easy access to students. Focus on research in Universities (metrics on Patents, Citations, h-index, etc.,)
- Emphasis on skills and co-relation of academics with word of work.

j) Introducing new concept of Third party validation of Data by external agencies

- Encouraging mobility of students and teachers.
- Recognizing diversity (Optional Metrics).
- Relevance of curriculum with societal needs and global trends.
- Faculty empowerment (FDP, seed money, awards, etc.,)
- Encouraging eco-friendly practices on campus

k) RAF - Feedback & Issues

On developing the revised accreditation framework, the NAAC has received feedback from the stakeholders. Some of the principal concerns of the stakeholders and responses of NAAC can be summarized as under:

Diversity

A few institutions were concerned that some metrics are not applicable to them. Since a 'one size fits all model' is not feasible in a diverse higher education system, key elements needed to measure the quality of higher education are included in the QIF. A provision for distinctiveness is made and also a provision has been made so that HEIs can opt out up to 5% of metrics which are not applicable to them.

Faculty Shortage/Funding Issues

Another apprehension expressed by HEIs relates to the possibility of scoring low due to reasons beyond their control such as faculty shortage/funding issues. Since the NAAC A&A is a diagnostic quality tool, these elements are essential for evaluating quality and have been incorporated.

Systemic Limitations

A few of the stakeholders have reported that State government norms, affiliating university issues, implementation of Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS), student-teacher ratio, etc. may create limitations for institutions. Since A&A is not a homogenising tool, the issue of systemic limitations may have to be addressed at the policy level rather than excluding such factors from the evaluation framework.

l) Apprehensions from Already Higher-graded HEIs

Some HEIs have expressed their concern about the data-driven quantitative process. One of the objectives of the recent reforms is to reduce subjectivity in the current process. The concern about liberal grading in some cases is expected to be neutralized with a new framework which is robust and objective.

i) Methodology-related Concerns

Benchmark values, transparency, first-time introduction of DVV and penalties are a few of the other concerns. NAAC has made best efforts to develop a reliable methodology for addressing these concerns. The analysis of results in the initial windows would be critical to assess its usefulness and remedial measures if needed can be taken.

ii) Weightages

Another concern expressed relates to the need to further classify institutions into categories of Arts, Science and Business Management. An attempt has been made to capture the functions of undergraduate and post-graduate colleges through differential metrics and weightages (for example Research, Resource Mobilization for Research and Research Publication and Awards).

iii) Geographical Location

Institutions located in geographically disadvantaged areas have expressed reservations over the framework being urban biased. NAAC has addressed this issue by according a low weightage to the metric on student enrolment from outside the state. Further, the key indicator, Inclusion and Situatedness provides scope for highlighting institutional achievements concerning location.

iv) Technology

Quantitative measurement of quality may have limitations, which is why NAAC attempts to make a judicious blend of Qualitative Metrics (QIM) and Quantitative Metrics (QnM). Metrics related to use of ICT, e-resources etc. are deemed essential in the context of national initiatives like Digital India, SWAYAM and National data repository etc. Availability of ICT facilities (classrooms with ICT facilities) is to be evaluated vis-à-vis its usage. Fourth cycle e-assessment will be taken up based on the feedback of accreditation in the first two windows.

m) RAF – Challenges and Way Forward:

While implementing the RAF, NAAC has faced several challenges during the fine-tuning process which are discussed and addressed below:

Resistance for change from stakeholders to complete transition to ICT based data driven model: NAAC has received feedback and concerns regarding the transition from peer review to ICT based data driven model from HEIs located in rural, hilly areas. The competent authorities are planning to set up Educational Media Centre to reach out all unreached areas. This centre will hold series of interactive sessions with HEIs and Assessors for the purpose of accreditation capacity building and training of assessors using digital communication technology. Need for considering feedback from the field and fine-tuning the framework Based on the feedback received from the Stakeholders/field, NAAC has taken up an exercise to revise and fine tune the framework. Present model/methodology which is used in the field is fine tuned and tested. In near future the same framework will be re-revised and field tested based on the needs of the stakeholders.

n) Suitability of framework for specialized HEIs (Sanskrit / Yoga, etc)

In order to deal with mono faculty/specialized programme institutions, NAAC has engaged in structuring the accreditation framework for institutions offering specialized programs such as Sanskrit, Yoga, dance, music. Presently NAAC has taken up development of assessment manuals for Yoga and Sanskrit programme / HEIs.

o) Concerns/litigation due to linking of CGPA with grants/recognition/status

There is a field reaction on tough results with down-grading compared to previous cycle assessment and there is also a concern regarding the linkage of NAAC results with grants from UGC, MHRD-RUSA, etc. The institution graded with better grades may get better funds but it affects the poor performing institutions, as these are already disadvantaged. This has increased number of appeals and may invite a few litigation.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the revised accreditation framework is a valued step taken over by NAAC in the right direction. New era of digital accreditation with quality indicators is a base for bench-marking-led quality improvement process in Indian higher education. The outcomes of accreditation result indicates that reforms are achieving its main goals including improvement of objectivity, increased transparency, boost in data management and use of ICT for quality enhancement process.

It suggests a need for efforts to strengthen and fine-tune its A&A processes and procedures. After two decades of groundbreaking and pioneering work in establishing an external quality assurance system of higher education in India, at this juncture, the NAAC is remodeling its approach and methodology in consonance with the requirements of a digital era. The revised accreditation framework has introduced several concepts in quality assurance such as Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS), Data Validation and Verification (DVV), Quality bench-marking, Innovation Ecosystem, Alumni Engagement, Institutional Values and Distinctiveness in the accreditation process. These concepts and procedures have to be understood by the stakeholders. NAAC also needs to design a strategy to take the revised accreditation framework ahead by reaching out to the stakeholders, who are having apprehensions about new form of accreditation, which is data driven.

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