

Accreditation and its limitations for academic institutions

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ABSTRACT: Accreditation is a process used around the world to evaluate the standard of academic institutions. It is an excellent concept from several perspectives, including institutional prestige, graduates' prospects, teaching quality, requirement compliance, and others. As the number of academic institutions is increasing, it has become mandatory to get these institutions accredited in order to provide information for the benefit of stakeholders. This article presents a discussion on the merits, advantages and limitations of the present system available in India [1-3].

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of accreditation is to recognise excellence in professional education in colleges and universities at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The evaluated assessments are used by the stakeholders viz. institutions, students, employers and the society at large [4]. In India, two accreditation agencies are promoted by the government. It is to be noted that these two accrediting agencies are becoming independent with less control from the government. For evaluating the technical institutions in the country, there is an institution called the National Board of Accreditation (NBA).

Based on the provisions made in the All India Council for Technical Education Act 1987, the NBA was established to evaluate the standards of technical education in the country. According to the Act, technical education means engineering and technology courses being offered at the diploma level, degree level, postgraduate degree level and other similar programmes that fall within the ambit. This includes courses in architecture, catering technology, town and country planning, management and other such related programmes.

For evaluating the programmes under the ambit of the University Grants Commission, there is an agency called the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The role of this agency is to carry out the accreditation for all institutions including engineering, medicine, arts and science. There is some merit in the system from the management point of view, but there is also discomfort for the institutions through this accreditation process.

India is the first among countries producing graduates with English as the medium of instruction. It is a fact that more than thirty-five percent of the population are in the age level below thirty-five only. There is a growing demand for educated young people around the world and there is a growing demand for a skilled and educated labour force around the world. Also, there are great expectations from stakeholders for quality training and education. With a higher population in the employable age groups, India needs to concentrate on education and training at both national and state levels from the quality point of view; it is essential that the education and training offered to students at the university level and institution level have a greater orientation towards quality. With the growing demand in the international market, without the right kind of accrediting agencies, India will suffer with a higher employable population due to a lack of quality control.

The general perception is that accreditation is needed for undergraduate and postgraduate educational programmes. There are many countries under the banner of *developed country* where quality control measures are not adequately taken, and there are some countries where the quality control measure stops with accreditation. Quality control should not be confined to accreditation. The *quality* parameter needs special attention. This proverb will highlight the same - *small things make perfection; but perfection is not a small thing.*

Whether it is an institution that offers undergraduate programmes and postgraduate programmes in technology, engineering, arts, science and philosophy or an institution that offers skill development programmes to improve training and skills for personnel, each of these programmes needs quality control. The general understanding is that the syllabus for technology programmes becomes outdated within three and a half years. If it is in computer science and engineering, the syllabus becomes outdated in one and a half years. Under such circumstances, the accreditation is less relevant, because the teachers' knowledge becomes obsolete and the syllabus becomes outdated. Any amount of course correction in the process of accreditation would yield no improvement because of the outdated process of accreditation.

The aim of accreditation is to ensure that the institutions that offer education and training undergo a process of accreditation and ensure their quality at all times. To achieve perfection, it is essential to look into small things that constitute the whole education and training process. It is also apt that upgrading each of these components is essential.

The four components of quality assurance in education and training are:

1. Quality of every component needs attention with regard to the up-keep of quality standards;
2. Expiry of quality standards of these components with respect to the period of validity of accrediting grades;
3. Accreditation grades are valid for three/five years. This leads to outdated syllabi and obsolete infrastructure and equipment. It should be dynamic and have flexibility of upgrading or downgrading the status dynamically based on the factors concerned;
4. Accreditation should not be limited to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It should be extended to training and skill upgrade programmes and research programmes of the universities and other tertiary education institutions.

The training and upgrading of the individuals not only helps them in the execution of their work with some finesse, but also this will improve the outcome of the overall programme in its quality. Any institution can improve its quality provided the personnel in the various segments of the educational system are up-to-date in their knowledge, in particular, the quality of the research degrees they hold and the application of the same quality requirements in the teaching and research programmes of the institution.

Experience shows that institutions at which postgraduate programmes are obtainable offer undergraduate programmes of better quality. When an institution offers research programmes, the quality of its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are better. Under such circumstances, if the accreditation exercise is extended to the research programmes offered by the educational institutions, the overall quality is enhanced, thereby, achieving better recognition in society from stakeholders. When one aims at perfection in quality, it is essential that smaller factors of any system are also looked into to achieve the high quality of the overall system whether it is education or otherwise. Naturally, the results will be of a high grade in the whole assessment process of the system.

The parameters considered for accreditation are so vague that it is quite difficult to pinpoint and fix the grades for each of the parameters under consideration. What the governing council stipulated for the institutions is mostly name sake. They do not offer useful and measurable guidelines. They have no fixed guidelines regarding their work as members of the governing council. The growth of the institution is critical and has more dependence on the measures and guidelines provided by the council. In the absence of guidelines, the growth of the academic institution is skewed. In fact, there is a vacuum in the constitution of the right kind of personnel to the council and their useful and measurable guidelines.

The position of the principal or head of the institution has been a decorated one without any involvement in the growth of the institutions. The vision as presented by the head is quite laudable; the vision of the head of the institution, the head of the department and the individual teachers has no relevance to the vision of the institution. On paper, great vision is presented. On paper, great details about qualification of the teachers are presented. However, these details do not contribute to the overall assessment of quality.

Fast changing developments in science and technology make a formidable dent in the growth of academic institutions. Fast growth in technology makes for a big gap between the subjects learnt and the corresponding developments in the field. As a matter of knowledge, this phenomenon is not restricted to colleges/universities in India or third world countries' educational systems. This phenomenon is common to all institutions across the world. On the one hand, institutions are working hard to maintain the standard stipulated and on the other hand, technology advancements make the existing curriculum and syllabus outdated and obsolete.

Keeping this aspect in mind if one wants to carry out accreditation and make this information available to the stakeholders, one will be doing partial job for the stakeholders. On the one hand, there are few loopholes in estimating the standards of institutions based on the scales provided by the accreditation agencies. On the other hand, the evaluation becomes redundant for stakeholders with advancements in science and technology. Attempts are made to reach the true standard value of an academic institution. However, the accreditation agencies find it difficult to apply a uniform yard-stick to measure the standards of academic institutions.

The grades for each parameter vary from zero to four. This restricts the evaluation/accreditation exercise. If one has to realise minute changes in status, then, the grade variation has to be from zero to 100. This enables the assessor to pin

point the grading and makes the valuation more precise. If the grading is dynamic, based on changes in the syllabus, changes in the equipment, changes in the laboratory and changes in the outlook of the teachers based on the growth in industry, one would be able to achieve real-time grading of the accredited programmes/institutions.

In the case of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, the grades awarded to each criterion are 0 - 4. The weight of each grade is anywhere from 10 to 100, assuming that each grade point carries 100 marks, the assessors/evaluators are given the freedom to award either two or three and nothing in between. This is a constraint and, hence, the final grade of the institution does vary significantly on the wrong side because of the constraints given in the grading.

This grading not only depends on the ground reality, but is also subjective on many occasions, because of the evaluators/assessors. Evaluators vary in their assessment based on their background education. This also varies with age of the assessors and, finally, these assessors tend to be rigid in their assessment for varied reasons. The final grading appears to suffer in quality for varied reasons. Here one has not included the change in grading that could be considered to be due to obsolescence in science and technology in the subjects studied, because of variations in the system of education and in the content being delivered to the students.

If one considers a university that offers a range of programmes within the ambit of the university, the grading methodology has to change due to the programmes being offered in various faculties. The accreditation agency (NAAC) does not allow such freedom to evaluate with a different yardstick for different programmes, and does not allow for independent evaluation of each independent faculty. The quality assessment methodology suffers in quality due to this discrepancy.

On the whole, quality assessment for accreditation is skewed and not as straight as anticipated. Unless one makes this assessment more objective and less subjective, the outcome of accreditation is skewed and, hence, one will be presenting a picture on higher education far away from the truth. There is a big gap between the stakeholders' understanding of the higher learning institutions and the true value/standard of these higher education institutions.

The National Board of Accreditation (NBA), an accreditation institution has been established by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). The NBA has its role well defined and restricts itself to technical institutions as approved by the AICTE. Here again, the accreditation process is confined to programmes offered by an institution. Initially, when it was established, the NBA had a system of awarding grades: A, B, C and not accredited. Also, the NBA fixed the period of validity for three years in some cases and five years in other cases depending on the quality parameters.

Recently, the grade system has been modified into a simpler system of marking an institution as either accredited or not accredited. With respect to validity, they give a grading for three years or five years depending on the quality parameters. However, comparison between the NAAC and the NBA has not been made possible. For those who are interested in knowing the quality of individual programmes, this is possible through the NBA. However, the NBA has a limitation in that the NBA confines its accreditation process to technical institutions only. The NBA assessors are drawn from academics and industry professionals for each of the programmes. The overall grade of an institution or a university is not possible through the NBA. Among the accredited institutions, it is difficult to find the academic level differences between the institutions, because all of them are accredited. These systems do not provide better understanding of the institutions by stakeholders.

However, one does have lacunae in the accreditation of management institutions. Quite a large number of management institutions is there for accreditation; there are more than three thousand management institutions. There is no credible agency to carry out accreditation specifically for management institutions, particularly, when the management fields go through a lot more transformation. With the influx of information technology in the management field, there are many classifications in the management field and, hence, a separate accrediting agency is needed to carry out the accreditation.

In respect of catering technology courses, there are more than one thousand institutions that offer the course across the country. There is dire need for a separate accrediting agency to evaluate these institutions critically.

However, whether they are new or old, these accrediting agencies need to undertake a critical review of the parameters, and increase the objectivity and reduce the subjectivity of the process [5-7]. Also, these agencies need to understand the basic fact that the institutions are bound to change their structure and curriculum based on the advancements in science and technology and keeping technological obsolescence in mind. Under the circumstances, accrediting agencies have to be aware of the fact that granting the validity of accreditation for either three or five years cannot be a rigid system. Dynamism has to be introduced into the accreditation process. One may call it *on-line dynamic accreditation*. This approach could eliminate the subjectivity in the process.

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