Accreditation – New Law and its impact

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Abstract

This vast gap in standards and facilities has been a cause of constant anxiety and concern to the policy planners of higher education in India. The issue of accessibility to quality higher education needs to be addressed in the light of the vast economic and social disparities, cultural and linguistic diversities, and extremely uneven opportunities of learning at the school level together with the aspirations and capacities of the potential students. Therefore, the question of access to higher education needs to be addressed at the local, regional, national and international levels from transdisciplinary ,inter-disciplinary and discipline-specific perspectives. The issue of accessibility of quality higher education arises in the context of the transition in the country from elitist to mass education in the post-independence period. The issue has significant implications in the sense that it demands a redefinition of the aims of higher education. Faced with similar situation, several countries have introduced accreditation to assure and enhance quality of higher education provision. Although, accreditation has been around for more than a century, and one can trace its roots to the end of the 19th century, when the first accreditation bodies were formed in the United States, however, its importance begun to be felt only when the size and variety of higher education institutions grew rapidly. A mass higher education system demanded a more formal management of quality than what was needed in small, homogeneous systems of higher education Globally, interest in quality of higher education centers on two basic questions : Are graduates getting the knowledge and skills necessary for a changing economy in the context of improved study programs to achieve more and better learning? Are higher education institutions spending public money in the right way? Thus, the quality debate is centered on effectiveness and efficiency measures. In India, however, accreditation is expected to do several other things such as address problem of inputs like staff shortage, infrastructure and facilities and tackle corrupt practices of private institutions, particularly in matters of admissions and fees. Such expectations are based on wrong understanding of accreditation goals and are misplaced.

Keywords: New law, Higher Education

Introduction

The national accreditation regulatory authority for higher education has taken under consideration a bill on mandatory accreditation of higher education institutions. This is definitely a step which is to be welcomed. There are serious concerns about the quality of higher education in the country. The fact of the matter is that the Indian elite and middle classes have not cared for making education, what to say of higher education, accessible to the other sections of society. It is ironic that the beneficiaries of privileged access to institutions of higher learning are ever ready to persuade others to believe that the Indian education system has expanded beyond reasonable limits. The fact of the matter is that the system needs to be expanded to a much greater scale to serve the needs of the Indian youth. Many institutions of higher education in the country are excellent in the

sense that their infrastructure, resources, faculty, program of teaching and research are almost as good as the best in the advanced countries. But, the same cannot be said of the average institutions of higher education in the country. They do not come anywhere near the level of average institutions of higher education in the advanced countries.

This vast gap in standards and facilities has been a cause of constant anxiety and concern to the policy planners of higher education in India. The issue of accessibility to quality higher education needs to be addressed in the light of the vast economic and social disparities, cultural and linguistic diversities, and extremely uneven opportunities of learning at the school level together with the aspirations and capacities of the potential students. Therefore, the question of access to higher education needs to be addressed at the local, regional, national and international levels from

transdisciplinary, inter-disciplinary and discipline-specific perspectives. The issue of accessibility of quality higher education arises in the context of the transition in the country from elitist to mass education in the post-independence period. The issue has significant implications in the sense that it demands a redefinition of the aims of higher education. Faced with similar situation, several countries have introduced accreditation to assure and enhance quality of higher education provision. Although, accreditation has been around for more than a century, and one can trace its roots to the end of the 19th century, when the first accreditation bodies were formed in the United States, however, its importance begun to be felt only when the size and variety of higher education institutions grew rapidly. A mass higher education system demanded a more formal management of quality than what was needed in small, homogeneous systems of higher education Globally, interest in quality of higher education centers on two basic questions : Are graduates getting the knowledge and skills necessary for a changing economy in the context of improved study programs to achieve more and better learning? Are higher education institutions spending public money in the right way?

Thus, the quality debate is centered on effectiveness and efficiency measures. In India, however, accreditation is expected to do several other things such as address problem of inputs like staff shortage, infrastructure and facilities and tackle corrupt practices of private institutions, particularly in matters of admissions and fees. Such expectations are based on wrong understanding of accreditation goals and are misplaced.

Accreditation in the national context

Evaluation = Quality improvement? ↔ Accreditation = Quality control?
No → Accreditation = Evaluation + decision on quality + approval

Accreditation

• Is a formal and independent decision, indicating that a program offered and/or an Higher education Institution is meeting certain standards.
• Is based on a previously conducted evaluation procedure that estimates the value or benefit of measures with respect to the compliance with certain standards;
• Includes quality improvement according to the evaluation results.
• Ends with a positive or negative decision.

Aim of accreditation

• To assure that the institutions meet their responsibility for the quality of the programs offered.

• To guarantee students, society and employers that the programme has to undergo a quality assurance procedure before it is approved or reapproved.

Now the central government has planned a law on above bill of accreditation "to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies".

In a system where demand far outstrips supply and perverse incentives mark the funding and regulatory arrangements, quality of higher education provision gets a raw deal. It is therefore not surprising that there has been a continuous deterioration of academic standards in the country.

Current arrangements and new law

National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) – that begun accreditation in 1998 – has so far completed accreditation of only 148 out of the over 480 universities and 3941 out of the over 22000 colleges. National Board of Accreditation (NBA) has so far covered about 20 percent of the eligible programs in engineering and related areas. The law provides for mandatory accreditation by a registered agency to assess quality. While, the intent is right, the bill errs on making accreditation obligatory and overlooks important issue about unit of accreditation and need for graded system for accreditation for various categories of institutions. The law however rightly suggests multiple accreditation agencies and independence of these agencies from the government. Current system of voluntary accreditation by NAAC is based on the Sukumaran Committee Report (1990) that modified the earlier Gowarikar Committee Report (1987) after three years of consultations. The 1987 report has recommended mandatory accreditation, linking it with all central funding and closure of institutions if not accredited. It had recommended a self financing body for accreditation, entirely funded from the fees collected from its member institutions. Gowarikar Report was found too radical, thus it was not accepted at that point in time. Now that we are back to making accreditation obligatory, there is a need to revisit the reason why the 1987 report was not accepted. Universities in India gain their right to exist through a recognition process that needs a law passed by the Parliament or State Legislatures or authorized by the central government under the UGC Act. Thus, according to Gowarikar Committee, accreditation was not assigned the "gate-keeping" role as in the United States. The position continues to remain the same, thus there appears to be no reason to make accreditation mandatory now. The new law attempts to address the quality issue without understanding of real issues. Besides, the bill does not specify consequences for an institution not subjecting itself to accreditation. It is believed that penal provisions are part of yet another law

that relates to curbing malpractices in higher education. Even if penalties and coercion are brought in through this convoluted route, it is usually not practical to apply such measures, as recent experience with the „rogue" deemed universities seems to suggest. It also needs to be recognized that the existing accrediting agencies have limited capacity. There is no way that they can accredit about 22,500 institutions periodically, say every 5 years, as is usually the practice. Currently, NAAC accredits about a few hundred institutions every year. Thus, it is not clear as to how the new law would ensure that all institutions undergo mandatory accreditation and if so, in what time frame?

Way forward

From above, it is clear that voluntary and not mandatory accreditation with clear and significant consequences is the way forward. For this purpose, there is need for a holistic approach and funding and regulatory arrangements need to be reviewed while designing an effective accreditation system. Considering the mammoth task of accrediting about 22500 institutions, one cannot perhaps move forward unless a basic classification of the institutions is done to identify their common characteristics in terms of their size, offerings, research intensity and so on. This would enable adoption of a decentralized approach with multiple agencies working in tandem with each to assure and accredit quality of higher education in the entire country. With mass expansion of higher education, such classification is common in several countries. For mass systems serving multiple functions, classification becomes a way of articulating and systematizing different institutions that may serve different functions and thus maintain system diversity pursued as a goal by itself. Once the institutions are suitably grouped, several agencies would be required to accredit them periodically. It would be naïve to presume that private accreditation agencies will suddenly emerge and take responsibility for accreditation as soon as a system of registration of such agencies is put in place.

In India, responsibility of accreditation could be assigned at various levels. For instance, accreditation of arts and science colleges in the States (other than those affiliated to the Central institutions) may devolve on the States. Specialized stand-alone institutions offering programs in particular areas of study, such as engineering, architecture, pharmacy, nursing could be accredited by the concerned professional agency avoiding duplication of efforts. There is possibility of roping in private agencies for specialized programs of study like insurance, maritime education and so on.

It is important to plan and put in place a multi-layer institutional arrangement to maintain academic standards in Indian higher education to make new law on accreditation effective.
We must bear in mind that accreditation implies setting of "standards" for an activity, which traditionally prided itself in being above "standards". It is not too difficult to set minimal requirements in terms of number of permanent faculty, libraries, laboratories and other facilities. Much more difficult is to indicate reasonable standards of performance for a university. Let me state in this context just two of the many problems which could be raised. One serious problem is the definition of the level of instruction suitable for a higher education system. Should it be defined independently of the level of competence and prior education of entering students? Or should it be calibrated on the actual level of the student body, no matter how low? In India , higher education system is no longer reserved to a élite. It is expected that the university system address itself to a high percentage (at least 40-45%) of the population of young people. Under these circumstances the level of instruction must adapt to many different needs, expectations, and prior education of a diversified student body. It seems reasonable not to deny accreditation to an institution which takes upon itself the task of teaching students who do not meet the highest standards in terms of prior education. But if mandatory accreditation is supposed to have any relevance outside the higher education system, it should say something about the level of competence, which is expected of the graduates. We are registering here a conflict between the duties of the education system to address itself to a larger and larger percentage of the student population and the need to be accountable to the public and the prospective employers for the level of competence of the graduates.

Statements of Objects and Reasons

Assessment and accreditation in the higher education, through transparent and informed external review process, are the effective means of quality assurance in higher education to provide a common frame of reference for students and others to obtain credible information on academic quality across institutions thereby assisting student mobility across institutions, domestic as well as international. Presently, accreditation is voluntary as a result of which less than one-fifth of the colleges and less than one-third of all universities have obtained accreditation. Mandatory accreditation in the higher education would enable the higher education system in the country to become a part of the global quality assurance system. Mandatory accreditation in the higher education would require a large number of competent and reliable accrediting agencies to be recognized, monitored and audited for academic competence through an independent but accountable institutional mechanism. Such a mechanism would find acceptability among peer group of international accreditation bodies, necessary for student and teacher mobility and institutional collaborations, within and across borders. *Accreditation process is valuable when:*

• They focus on the professional rather than the academic side of the program (though it has to be acknowledged that the boundary is usually fuzzy).

• They explicitly acknowledge that the students are being educated and not just trained for a profession.

• They are conducted by peers (i.e. have at least one academic on the panel alongside the practitioners). • They ask to see only strictly essential documentation.

• They are willing to respect and take on trust the expertise and judgements of, for example, external examiners.

They can be harmful and irritating, though, when the opposite of any of the above happens. I think it is a matter of particular concern when professional bodies try to overrule academic judgements on academic matters, for example, curriculum design and content and assessment of academic aspects of the course.

Bureaucracy and burden

I would go even further by suggesting that accreditation institutions should NOT insist on any particular format in which the information is submitted, but they of course should expect that information does exist and they should indeed be making judgements and assessments whether the way in which information is kept is appropriate or not. Currently there is far too much duplication of presentation of the same information in many different formats. Others, noting the amount of work required, were less negative in the connotations of their remarks: Yes valuable – although one has to put up with the inevitable requirements for oodles of paperwork (since we had lots of that, it was not problematic!).

The introduction of the new law requires a period of adjustment, and it is necessary to adapt institutions and their high education programs to the new reality. That is why it would not be so wise at the moment to determine rigid and detailed accreditation standards; it seems more convenient to use simple quality standards that can be helpful to guide the universities and the stakeholders in the transition. There is not an enough experience of the new system to allow a systematic mandatory accreditation of universities and institutes. One of the problems, definitively to be solved.

Quality

Quality in University formation concerns, obviously, the caliber of the results of the teaching and learning process. This definition reveals its difficulties when we try to define the system of values and the relative indicators that "bite" into the problem of quality:

• The competence of the teachers.

• The suitability of the facilities.

• The existence of an organisation able to control and intervene in the formative process.

• The acquisition of knowledge by the students.

• Their good results in exams, their pass rate etc.

Conclusion

In sum, there is a need for clear consequences and multiple agencies with clear mandates for effective accreditation. Expectations from the accreditation process have to be grounded in reality. A classification of institutions would enable in designing a graded system of accreditation with multiple agencies to review and accredit all institutions periodically. A detailed roadmap for accreditation is thus far more important than enacting a law. Attention must be given to peer review as basis of accreditation:

• Renewal peer review panels periodically.

• Allow young professors to enter into the panels.

• Training of peers by some professional agency should be involved.

• The agencies should facilitate the panel during the whole procedure, including update Information.

• International peers can be called for betterment, but be aware of the threat of cultural imperialism . And last but not least, take your own medicine „practice what you preach! Not only transparent procedures and reports are useful, an external evaluation of the agencies themselves would be of value for the recognition of the system.

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