

Challenges & Issues for 21st Century in Indian context to Accreditation & Quality Control: A Review

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, quality assurance (QA) and accreditation include strategic method and evaluation of procedures to evaluate the progress of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and to identify areas that need improvement and further advancement. In the era of international and globalization of higher education, it is difficult to claim credit transfer and student mobility, identify future requirements, or boost social productive capacity without ensuring the quality of higher education programs. In today's fast changing and unpredictable world, Quality Assurance has become a significant component in Higher Education. Even though a considerable number of studies have been conducted, there are many unanswered issues about how Quality Assurance (QA) & Accreditation improves the core processes involved in Higher Education.

This study provides a comprehensive review at what is meant by quality assurance in Education, a brief on the regulatory framework of India & challenges & issues of the current procedures of Accreditations. The emergence of transnational institutions, Liberal Education, Hybrid online learning, and use of Open Learning platforms and digital media for learning and teaching education pose major challenges to quality management agencies in (i) Alternative Services for Higher Education, (ii) Framework, Interpretations, and Indicators of Quality, and (iii) Community Transparency and Accountability.

A most essential issue is whether quality control has enhanced performance - a critical issue for the twenty-first century.

Keywords

University Grants Commission, National Assessment and Accreditation Council, National Education Policy, Accreditation.

Introduction

Most government agencies in developed countries are currently under enormous pressure to reduce public expenditure on higher education. The educational scenario in India today is at a turning point. As India's economy continues to expand by 9% plus GDP, India's higher education sector needs to respond to dynamic changes in order to meet the increasing shortage of qualified and trained people [1]. Students who would like to be 'industry-ready' are now expecting world-class learning in both traditional and non-conventional streams of education. Although as India continues to address the information demands of the 21st century, higher education portrays a very dim view [2]. As per the ministry of human resources department, India, only around 10-11 % of the total population in the appropriate age group is registered in higher education and about 5% of them are holding highest degree [3].

India currently had around 993 universities, including 10,725 Deemed Universities, 11 open Universities and 39,931 colleges, with

approximately 11 million students and 1 million teachers [4]. It is because of this that it has the world's second largest education system. Overall, advancement has been considerable over time, with student enrollment raising at an annual rate of 8% during the last two decades. The quality of educational institutions is a rising issue. Quality control is a vital challenge for higher education, especially in Asian economies such as India. The current literature review on higher education standards in India has highlighted a range of issues related to technical examination results in situational factors like accreditation, enrollment rates, common amenities, academic staff credentials, and so on. These factors derive the need of improvement of policy in HEI [5]. Both HEIs as well as the state must provide information directly through local and national organizations that collect all data on HEIs and allow it accessible to all students and individuals who wish to join HEIs. These institutions should release reports on HEIs where specific technologies, services and research potential of HEI are advocated [6].

The study presented in this paper reveals the major challenges of quality assurance in HEI of India. Based on the literature survey, the alternative providers for higher education, scope, definitions & measures of quality, public accountability and transparency, accessibility and institutional autonomy, academic freedom & decentralization are the key driving factors that should be addressed for ensuring the quality of higher education in India. The organization of paper as follows: section 2 provides a brief about quality assurance in education. In section 3 authors explain the regulatory framework adopted for measuring the quality of education in HEIs of India. The challenges and their types are discussed in section 4. Finally, section 5 gives a conclusive remark to summarize the paper.

Quality Assurance in Education

In an age of mass and increasingly internationalized higher education, it has become the norm that both universities and quality assurance Accreditation bodies are subject to external scrutiny. Yet it has become increasingly difficult to assess quality and to demonstrate the impact of external quality assurance. In this diverse society where there is variation in ideas, opinions, views, the meaning of higher education means different to different people. But when we want to talk and discuss about quality in higher education, we should also be aware about what is higher in higher education. So, as a teacher, educator, and higher education stakeholder, we would realize that it is not only the high standard of knowledge, but also college and university teaching – towards everybody who progresses to obtain higher education. Higher education entails in-depth knowledge that exposes the learner to new frontiers of awareness in a variety of fields.

Higher education develops the student's ability to inquire and seek answers and makes him/her competent enough to analyze & understand the issues in a critical detailed manner. A search for the definition of quality has yielded inconsistent results. Quality has been defined as value loss avoidance [7, 8], fitness for use [9], conformance to specifications, conformance to requirements, and meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations [10]. Regardless of time or

relevance in which it is analyzed, the concept of quality has had numerous and frequently cluttered interpretations and has been used to cover a wide variety of concepts.

The UNESCO International Commission on Education in the Twenty-First Century report, titled "Learning: The treasure within" (also known as Delors Commission) focused on 4 elements of education: Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. The report highlighted the four functions of higher education:

- To get students ready for teaching and research.
- To provide specific training programs that are tailored to the needs of the economy and society.
- To cater for the main aspects of lifelong education in the widest sense.
- To promote international cooperation through internationalization of research, technology, networking and mobility of persons and scientific ideas.
- The teaching, evaluation techniques, results, and placements of the institution are all important aspects of performance improvement in the educational system. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established underneath the auspices of the University Grants Commission, has introduced a new amended method for assessing various types of institutes in India [11]. The major shift of Quality Measurement proposed by NAAC entails a constant change of institution assessment. Faculty members, employers, and parents all play an important role in the institution's evaluation process. Looking at the diversity of the kind of Institutions and statutory regulatory framework, NAAC has devised separate manuals for different Institutions, for instance, manual for general Institutions, Manual for Health Science, Institutions, Manual for Sanskrit Institutions, Manual for Open University, Manual for Dual Mode Universities Manual for Teacher Education Institutions.

There are in total 115 assessment indicators (Qualitative & Quantitative) with a subsequent decrease for the Autonomous colleges and

Affiliated colleges on which the assessment of higher education institutions is made [7].

Table 1. Benchmark established by NAAC for universities and colleges [7].

Type of HEIs	Universities	Autonomous Colleges	Affiliated/Constituent Colleges	
			UG	PG
Criteria	7	7	7	7
Key Indicators (KIs)	34	34	31	32
Qualitative Metrics (Q₁M)	36	35	35	36
Quantitative Metrics (Q_nM)	79	72	58	60
Total Metrics (Q₁M + Q_nM)	115	107	93	96

The NAAC accreditation process has played a significant role in streamlining the Quality of HEIs by changing the mindset of all stakeholders toward more Quality and its sustenance and involving them in contributing to its accomplishment.

Quality cannot be defined in isolation. Hence, to define “quality” one must understand the context. Every context demands a different type of quality. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) even affirms by quoting that, “depending on the field of activity, the definition of quality assurance may differ.”. Being the central and the only Accrediting body of India, NAAC is continuously adapting itself with the National Education Policy 2019 [12] where the key objective is to revamp the higher education system, creating a world class multidisciplinary higher education institution across the country & increase GER to at least 50% by 2035.

In view of the requirements of the 21st century, the aim of any quality Higher Education Institution must be to develop well rounded, and creative individuals. This must enable an individual to study specialized areas of interest at a deeper level, while at the same time building character, ethical values, intellectual curiosity, and capabilities for the twenty-first century in a variety of disciplines, including the sciences,

liberal arts, arts, humanities, skilled, scientific, and vocational crafts. Personal achievement and enlightenment, public engagement, and societal contribution must all be possible through high-quality higher education. It must equip learners for more important and comfortable life and work roles, as well as provide them with financial stability. As a result, quality education must strive to be both a joy and a chance to which all people must have direct exposure if they so desire.

Higher Education Regulatory Framework in India

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of the Government of India is the highest authority in the Educational system. The human resource development in India is the responsibility of the MHRD. The Ministry is distributed into two departments: The Department of School Education and Literacy, which is responsible for primary, secondary, and higher secondary education, as well as adult education, and the Department of Higher Education, which is responsible for higher education, technical education, stipend, policy formulation, regulation, and accreditation. MHRD being the apex policy making body in India in higher education is working with other regulatory and accreditation educational bodies for assuring quality in education.

In 1945, another body called as University Grants Commission (UGC) was proposed to assess the work of the three Central Universities of Aligarh, Banaras, and Delhi. The Commission was charged with the responsibility and accountability of overseeing all established universities in 1947 [13]. Besides UGC, India has many Statutory, Regulatory councils to regulate & provide advice to various professional degree providing educational institutions like Bar Council of India [14], Pharmacy Council of India [15], Medical Council of India [16], AICTE (All India Council of Technical Education) & many more. Fig. 1 shows the regulatory framework of Indian higher education in brief.

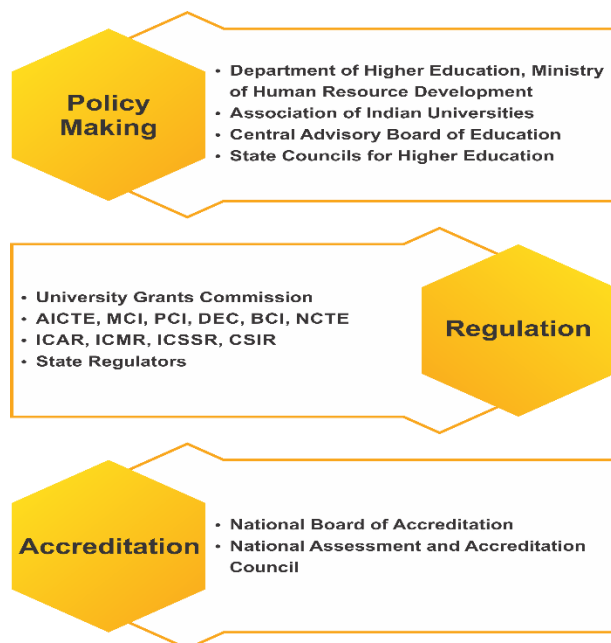


Fig. 1: Higher Education Regulatory Framework in India.

Challenges of Quality Assurance & Accreditation

Quality should not merely be defined as good or better. Rather the nature of quality must also be ensured. For the pragmatist, quality can be defined as non-superiority or superiority of something, whereas capitalist define it is a product which can satisfy the consumer needs and expectations. If it fails to satisfy the need of the customer, then the

product or higher education (in our context) can be categorized as “bad”. Quality can be measured in its consistency of its nature. Measuring the quality of higher education would therefore be fruitless until seen in due context and with a specific desired approach.

Despite rapid strides, it is also a fact that although the access to higher education has increased, the creativity has not improved. We are not producing Nobel Prize winners in the sciences, thinkers and scholars of international repute. Establishing nodal centers of research to attract best students to science is the road to excellence in Higher Education, thus increasing the overall ranking of India’s Higher Education Institutions giving a boost to creativity, inquisitiveness, innovation, collaboration [17] and interaction, leading to interdisciplinary approaches in Higher Education [18].

To take care of these changing dynamics, to meet the changing characteristics of the population's demand for higher education, entrepreneurship, and research, the government has established a new education policy, which intends to make India a superpower by supporting its students with knowledge and skills and to eliminate the shortage of manpower in the areas of science, innovations, academics, and economy.

As Indian higher education evolves from an elite to a mass system, innovative learning tools for delivering content in novel ways, and matching the momentum of quickly shifting labor markets with cutting-edge programs such as liberal arts, are emerging. The traditional approaches to QA are a big question mark. Quality Assurance is a prerequisite for accreditation, Higher Education Institutions are constantly evolving, and accreditation is based on an evaluation done at a specific point in time, normally with reference to specific areas of the Institution leading to awarding a certificate or recognition that Institution or part therefore meets standard. Thus, accreditation cannot be considered complete unless the stakeholders' expected outcomes in ensuring the quality of a growing range of nontraditional and traditional education and training providers are met. Fig. 2 depicts major changes underway in higher education.

The current regulatory framework of India, including accreditation raises many questions to all the stakeholders. Are the current foundations and values of Higher Educational Authorities and Institutions compatible with the demands for uniform standards and public accountability as

investments in Higher Education increase? Can a system be developed for traditional institutions and programs and carried out by Academics and Administrators from the same to ensure the quality of a growing number of nontraditional education and training providers?

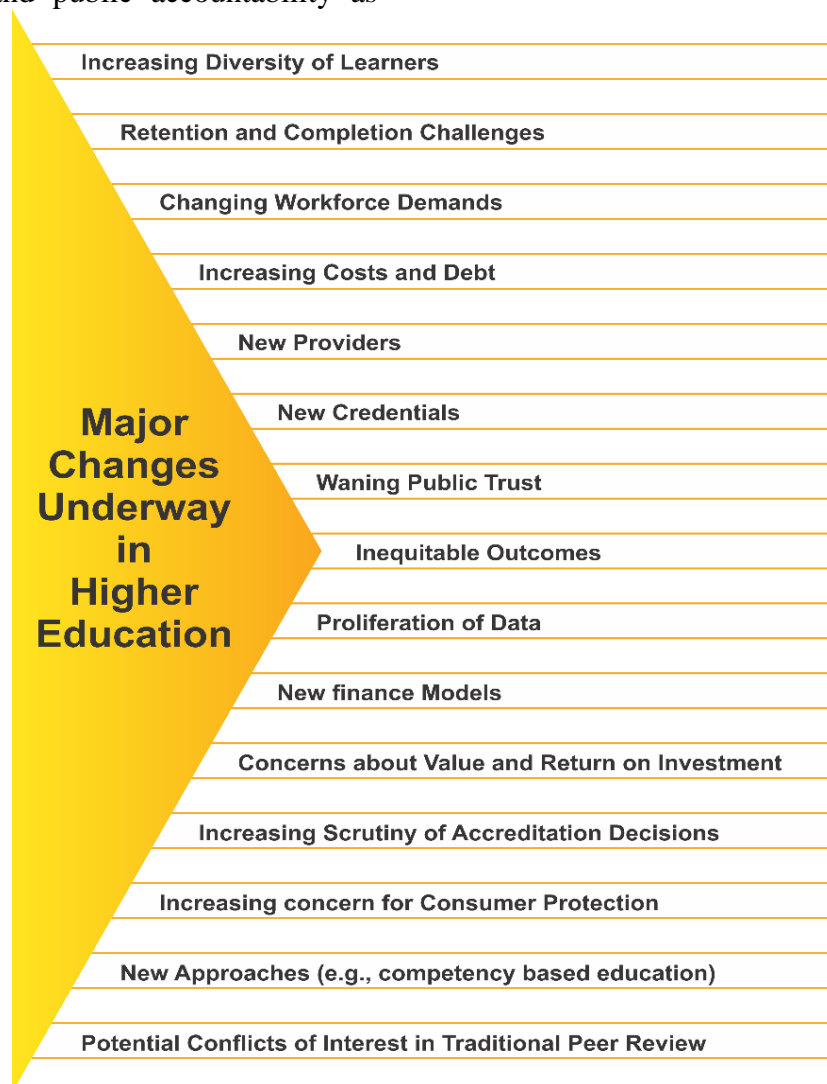


Fig. 2: The significant changes in higher education system of India

Given today's rapidly changing higher education context, numerous elements of accreditation may be out of line with these changes, including:

1. Lack of attention to alternative providers.
2. Quality Scope, Descriptions, and Methodologies.
3. Public transparency and accountability aren't given enough consideration.
4. Academic Autonomy, Academic Freedom & Decentralization

The following points are identified as accreditation challenges:

QA & Accreditation Challenge # 1 – Alternative Providers for Higher education

Outside of conventional universities and colleges, rapid technological advancements have resulted in the emergence of new innovative education and professional training models. These models which are developed by massive open online courses (MOOCs) providers, hybrid online learning tools, have grown tremendously in recent years. Because all of these

initiatives fall outside of the conventional process of teaching and accreditation, the two main limitations are (a) unaccredited educational providers participate in various online open learning programs, and (b) no structured external quality evaluations are currently required of them.

QA & Accreditation Challenge # 2 – Scope, Definitions & Measures of quality

Current quality assessment methods are overly broad and overly focused on input criteria such as facilities and infrastructure, academic staff qualifications, and student support, rather than critical outcomes such as student learning, completion and achievement of educational objectives, and employment services in that specific field [19]. As India possesses only one national accrediting body at the institutional level with complex regulatory framework the current structure is not intended to develop or encourage “consensus standards” that are common in other sectors.

QA & Accreditation Challenge # 3 – Public accountability and Transparency

Looking to shift the government's focus from improving quality to public accountability, especially considering the rising investment in higher education. Because the accreditation system was not designed to serve the community, it may not be fully adequate or helpful to learners and other public stakeholders trying to seek technical information about academic quality [20]. This problem is exacerbated by interpretative and evaluation differences between accrediting bodies.

QA & Accreditation Challenge # 4 – Accessibility

India has about 993 Universities, 41901 Colleges, 10726 standalone, incorporating approximately 35 million students and 14.04 lakh teachers [1]. But if we look at the condition of these higher education institutes, there are a smaller number of colleges and universities who are being able to provide adequate resources to the students and most of these institutions are way behind in fulfilling the needs of the students as well as teachers. Out of these only 207 Universities and 1694 colleges are NAAC A accredited.

QA & Accreditation Challenge # 5 – Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom & Decentralization

UGC in the recent times has awarded autonomy from the central regulatory body of higher education e.g., UGC of two kinds, administrative autonomy, and financial autonomy to 52 universities and eight colleges on 20th March 2018. With that the Universities have done some affirmative changes to control their own administrative work like hiring of teaching and non-teaching staffs and to plan for their teaching and research without the interference of the government regulatory body. The bigger question is that now these universities which were funded by the state not to self-finance themselves for which the alternative is to increase the fee structure impacting students, and faculty members asked to go for the capacity building and training programs. This commercialization of education is a severe problem that we all are facing currently. So, this financial autonomy is not freedom for the students and teachers, but this notion of autonomy is nothing but relinquishment.

These significant issues put enormous pressure on the existing accreditation and quality assurance structure to restructure or make way for new entrants who will provide novel methods customized to suit these issues.

Conclusion

Quality Assurance and Quality in Higher Education are no longer luxuries in today's competitive and dynamic world where quality education has become a universal goal and only be neglected or ignored at the cost & risk of stagnation & worse. Continuous internal self-assessment through Internal Quality Assurance framework in line with national & International agencies of Rankings and Accreditations remains the only way to continually improve the systems and processes of an institution, leading to quality in higher education.

Undoubtedly external validation through Accreditation provides public confidence, trust and accountability ensuring the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of the mobility of academic personnel, and students improving professional pursuit practice. In the age of technology, the changing nature of higher education is challenging the key role, framework, and context of conventional, accreditation-based approaches to judging quality in higher education.

(i) Clarifying concerns about quality assurance management system in online & hybrid education, which insist rethinking of quality measurement instruments.

(ii) Accessibility to quality education by varied types of education providers in India, private institutions, public Institutions including affiliated colleges etc.

(iii) A disregard for public transparency and accountability.

(iv) Stringent regulatory framework in India resisting institutions to exert Institutional Autonomy, academic freedom & decentralization.

A combined effort between Statutory, Regulatory Bodies, to verify proper collaboration, higher education institutions and accreditation bodies are required, communication, and an adherence to a code of ethics for good practice, unbiased, reasonable, comprehensive, and accreditation addressing all the issues discussed above and helping us to understand key issue of 21st century education of Quality in higher education.

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