

# Institutional Accreditation in India

**Anthony Stella**

*Anthony Stella is deputy adviser, National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2/4 Aragini Bhavana, Rajkumar Road, Rajajinagar, Bangalore, India. E-mail: <Stella@india-naac.com>.*

The Indian higher education system has inherited many regulatory mechanisms from the British legacy of higher education. While the regulatory mechanisms have ensured satisfactory functioning of the system with unprecedented quantitative expansion, raising the standards of higher education could not be achieved. With 259 university-level institutions, more than 10,750 colleges, 8 million students, and 400,000 teachers, India has one of the world's largest higher education systems. While the numbers may look impressive, they cover only 6 percent of the relevant age group, and 88 percent of student enrollments are in undergraduate education. Ensuring the quality of education provided to this small percentage is vital to the success of the nation.

The situation gets further complicated with colleges taking a lead in undergraduate education and the affiliating system that loosely connects the colleges and universities. Most Indian universities are of the affiliating type where the affiliating university legislates on courses of study, holds examinations centrally on common syllabi for its affiliates, and awards degrees to successful candidates. With the larger affiliating universities having more than 400 affiliated colleges, the academic leadership provided to affiliates has come under severe criticism. Many of the preconditions that ensured educational quality, while granting affiliation to colleges, have now been either ignored or softened, with the result that many substandard institutions have come into existence, with the possibility of many more to come.

The growth of private initiatives has also increased the concern for quality. To increase access to education, India has encouraged private initiatives. The government-run colleges are few, and privately managed trusts or societies have founded the greater number of colleges—about 70 percent of the total. Most of the private colleges established before the 1980s get more than 95 percent of their financial support from the state government, and they are called grant-in-aid colleges. With limited resources, government could not extend financial support to the private initiatives established after the 1980s. These colleges run on student fees, and they are known as self-financing colleges. Though self-financing, they have to comply with the rules of the government and the affiliating university. The growth in the number of self-financing colleges adds to the

pressure on the affiliating universities. The direct public expenditure on the public-funded institutions, the high fee structure of the self-financing colleges, and the substandard facilities available in some of these institutions have raised the question of “value for money” and hence the need for an effective mechanism for quality assurance. Accreditation by an autonomous body was seen as an appropriate strategy for quality assurance. Consequently, as a part of its responsibility for the maintenance and promotion of standards of education, the University Grants Commission (UGC) established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994.

The methodology is in line with the international trend—a combination of self-evaluations and peer review based on predetermined criteria for assessment. It is a voluntary process, and the final outcome of the process is an overall grade on a five-point scale and a detailed assessment report, valid for a period of five years. Both the grade and the report are made public. Although the NAAC has the provision to do both institutional and departmental assessment, during the first cycle, institutional accreditation has been promoted consciously. By the end of 2001, the NAAC has assessed around 200 institutions of higher education, and it recently conducted a study to analyze the impact of accreditation on the institutions of higher education.

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## *The Impact Analysis*

The analysis revealed that the NAAC's impact has been felt by institutions in all aspects of their functioning—pedagogical, managerial, and administrative. Institutions took up initiatives beyond the mandatory requirements of the affiliating system. Management was often able to introduce major changes on the grounds that it would demonstrate a commitment to quality. Introduction of needs-based programs and curricular reforms were observed. Student support services and learning resources were greatly improved. Initiatives that require confidence, self-reliance, team spirit, and potential bloomed. There was a change in the perception of the management on issues of faculty workload, supporting the research culture and encouraging faculty development. The interpersonal relations between the management and the faculty improved.

### *Concerns and Challenges*

The impact could also be seen in ways that were not very pleasant. In spite of emphasizing that institutional uniqueness will be taken care of, institutions have started copying the top-bracket institutions, which may lead to a decrease in diversity among institutions. Some institutions had spent much time preparing documents and plans that would impress the peer team. In some instances the assessment report seems to be used for purposes that may not be appropriate to the intended outcomes.

In addition to the unintended consequences, as time passes, the NAAC faces new challenges—some are methodological issues and the rest relate to implementation of policies. The follow-up strategy to be adopted and the safeguards to uphold the objectivity of accreditation are emerging as challenges to be addressed immediately.

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In the first phase, the NAAC focused on institutional accreditation. Today, there is a growing demand for departmental accreditation, and the institutions that have completed three or more years with accredited status are keen to gear up their activities to face the next cycle of assessment. Whether the NAAC will include major changes in its assessment procedures for the next cycle is to be discussed. As the volume of assessment increases the scope of the NAAC's assessment, its capacity to handle assessment if it is made mandatory and the question of establishing regional offices have also come up.

In addition, with India being seen as a big market by developed countries for the export of education, quality assurance of transnational education becomes a concern and so far it remains an uncharted area. Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom are active in promoting the export of their educational services to India. A recent estimate indicates that U.K. institutions alone have around 400 collaborative arrangements with Indian institutions to offer their programs in India. This does not include the e-learning and the Open University offerings that do not rely on a physical campus or a collaborative arrangement with a local partner. In this context, the need to strengthen the regional and international dialogue with other quality

assurance agencies and strengthening the research on quality related issues have become vital areas.

From the policy perspective, when the NAAC was established it was given the mandate to advise the UGC and the Ministry for Human Resource Development on standards of higher education, and a formal mechanism to dispense this function is yet to be put in place. Although established and funded by the UGC, the extent to which the NAAC's advisory role will have a direct bearing on policymaking is not yet clear.

The impact of the NAAC's assessment on funding decisions is also not clear. There is a consensus that in a developing country like India, which has a long way to go in increasing access to higher education, linking assessment with basic funding may not be appropriate. But the expectations of stakeholders on incentives cannot be ignored. The UGC has announced that it would sanction "development grants" only to the accredited institutions. While this is a positive development, the extent of its impact is questionable. The UGC is a major provider only to the central universities which number 18, colleges affiliated to Delhi and Banaras Hindu Universities and some of the institutions accorded the status of "deemed to be universities." State universities and colleges receive UGC support (less than 5 percent of their budget in most cases) only for certain development schemes. Their major providers—the state governments have yet to take note of the assessment outcome of the NAAC in a major way. So far the NAAC has enjoyed the privilege of being in the initial stage of stabilizing its methodology. Now that it is eight years old, the stakeholders have started expressing that they expect more tangible outcome from the NAAC on shaping funding policy.

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The international experience indicates that these challenges and concerns are part of the developmental stage of any quality assurance mechanism. The way the NAAC would proceed to face these challenges is bound to enrich the international development of quality assurance. ■