

## India's New Accreditation Law

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In India, an unprecedented growth has been underway in the number of universities and colleges. During the past five years alone, 200 new universities and 8,000 new colleges were added, taking the totals to 525 and 25,950, respectively. This exceptional growth has raised concerns about quality. Voluntary accreditation established two decades ago is struggling to demonstrate its viability. Less than one-sixth of the colleges and one-third of all universities have obtained accreditation so far. The issue is not based on capacity alone; accreditation has no consequences and therefore not valued much. Most universities and colleges are unwilling to subject themselves to accreditation.

### *The New Accreditation Law*

A new accreditation law is currently before the Indian Parliament for approval. The law would provide mandatory periodic accreditation of all institutions and programs by registered accreditation agencies. Mandatory accreditation of over 26,500 institutions and a mind-boggling number of programs would require many competent and reliable

accrediting agencies. The law therefore provides for a National Accreditation Regulatory Authority for Higher Educational Institutions that will register such agencies and monitor and audit their functioning. The full text of the National Accreditation Regulatory Authority for Higher Educational Institutions Bill, 2010, is available at [http://164.100.47.5/newcommittee/press\\_release/bill/Committee%20on%20HRD/The%20National%20Accreditation.pdf](http://164.100.47.5/newcommittee/press_release/bill/Committee%20on%20HRD/The%20National%20Accreditation.pdf)).

Under the law, accreditation agencies would constitute nonprofit entities strictly regulated by the national authority and would run primarily on accreditation fees collected by them from institutions. Their ownership, governing board, and bylaws could only be changed with the approval of the authority. Further, the accreditation process and fees they charge would also be prescribed by the authority. Norms and standards to be followed by the accreditation agencies would, however, be specified by the concerned statutory regulatory bodies. The existing accreditation agencies, namely National Accreditation and Assessment Council and National Board of Accreditation, will both continue to function until they are registered with the new authority.

All new institutions would require compulsory accreditation before they admit students, although existing institutions and programs would get three-years time to do so. Those that are already accredited will go for accreditation only after their current period of accreditation expires. In the new law, for nonaccreditation, there are stiff penalties extending up to two years of imprisonment or fines up to one million rupees (US\$22,000), or both. Central government may, however, exempt some institutions from mandatory accreditation.

The law brings quality in higher education to the center stage. It provides an autonomous institutional structure with statutory backing to register and regulate competent professional accreditation agencies. The law makes the registration and accreditation process time bound, transparent, and reliable. It expects to provide credible information on academic quality and assist student mobility across institutions. India aspires to bring its quality-assurance practices at par with the global standards with this course of action. By favoring multiple agencies, the law provides choice to higher education institutions. However, given the size and complexity of the system, its implementation is going to be a humongous task.

### *Implementation Challenges*

Effective implementation of this law requires understanding of ground realities and resolution of several areas of ambiguities in the law itself. Accreditation and regulation are often interchangeably used. In some countries, accreditation means approval by a government authority, while accreditation practiced in India is a US import, with external quality assurance based on peer review. This pattern is aimed at maintaining and improving academic standards. It assures that students achieve specific levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities as a consequence of their engagement in a particular education program.

In the United States, accreditation includes consideration of physical infrastructure, human resources (including faculty), administration, and governance structures. For some professional fields, there may be additional licensing evaluations.

To be effective, India's accreditation practices have to build upon a prevailing system of recognition and approval of institutions and programs. The law seems to ignore them.

The law is based on unreal expectations. It assumes that several competent accreditation agencies will come up and accredit all institutions and programs in the next three years and then do so periodically thereafter. This process is unlikely to happen due to stringent (rightly so) eligibility conditions. For fear of prosecution, it is likely that many more institutions would submit themselves for accreditation, but it is doubtful if all of them would be accredited any time soon. Many institutions and programs would remain unaccredited and might face closure and stringent penalties. Closure of institutions and programs is not easy, given the fallout on students and that staff and that prosecution is often a long-drawn process.

In contrast, US voluntary accreditation derives its influence almost entirely from the fact that the national government utilizes institutional accreditation to determine college and university eligibility for federal student aid, which is an important funding source for most institutions. In addition, students from unaccredited institutions are unable to transfer to accredited institutions. As a result, students opt only for accredited institutions; unaccredited institutions are nonviable and hence wither away overtime rather than being prosecuted or forced to close.

### *A Way Forward*

Considering the mammoth task of accrediting about 26,500 institutions and hundreds of thousands of programs offered by them, it is necessary to design an effective quality-assurance strategy for the country. With 90 percent enrollment at the undergraduate

level and 60 percent at the postgraduate level in colleges affiliated to the universities, affiliating universities could play an important role.

Responsibility of accreditation could be shared. For instance, accreditation of arts and science colleges in the states (other than those affiliated to the central institutions—those funded by the central government) may devolve on the state government or agencies under them. Programs other than professional programs are usually not accredited, and their quality is assured through the institutional accreditation process. This would take away a large burden of program accreditation.

Specialized stand-alone professional institutions in areas such as engineering, architecture, pharmacy, and nursing could be accredited by the concerned professional agency avoiding duplication of efforts. There is a possibility of roping private agencies in as specialized programs of study like insurance, maritime education, and so on. Credit Rating and Information Services of India Ltd is already accrediting maritime institutions on behalf of the Directorate General of Shipping, a government agency. There could be a few more opportunities like this.

The remaining universities and colleges could be accredited by the National Accreditation and Assessment Council. This agency could be reorganized into five independent regional accreditation councils. Based on objective criteria and using exemption clause in the new law, some top research-intensive institutions may be declared as self-accrediting institutions in the spirit of giving them full autonomy. Thus, it is possible to cover all institutions and programs through a planned and decentralized approach and responsibility sharing.

In place of making accreditation mandatory by law, it would be more practical to create other requirements. Accreditation could be mandatory to access all types of government funds—institutional or research grants and student aid. By ensuring that accredited institutions do not take students on transfer from unaccredited ones, institutions that do not seek government funds could be brought into the accreditation fold. The power of student choice would make accreditation de facto mandatory.

### *Conclusion*

Implementing India's new accreditation into its present form, despite its laudable objective and pious intent, would be an uphill task and a long struggle. Accreditation as conceived in the new law is not really a quality-assurance practice but, rather, a binding government regulation that is unlikely to work. The new law should rely on linking accreditation to government funding and student transfer in place of stiff penalties. A holistic and structured approach with multiple agencies is needed to assure quality for the large and expanding Indian higher education.