

Accrediting Self Financing Colleges of Education: Perspective of an Assessor

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Abstract

Accreditation has been made mandatory by the University Grants Commission (UGC) three years back and hence many colleges have started submitting their Self Appraisal Reports (SAR). Preparation of Self Appraisal Reports and for Peer Team visits are challenging indeed, especially for the institutions aspiring for first accreditation. This article focuses on the assessor's point of view, written with the expectation that this would serve as a useful guideline for such colleges. The earlier part of the paper deals with the author's own experience as an assessor and the later part gives an account of dimension wise analysis of quality aspects stipulated by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council.

Keywords: Accreditation; Assessment; Consultancy; Curriculum; Governance; Self Appraisal Report; Student Progression; Student Support Services.

The provision for enhanced access to higher education as an inclusiveness initiative presupposes public-private partnership as a large number of youths is yet to get this facility. Hence, our Government encouraged starting of several self financing colleges of arts, science, engineering, education and medicine with the hope of increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio from 20.4 to 30% by 2020. The role played by self financing institutions is par excellence in joining hands with the Government in providing access for youths to higher education. There are very good such institutions which have grown into universities that enhance employment opportunities to several educated youths. However, the mushrooming of such colleges started without any man power planning has resulted in deterioration of standards of education especially at higher level.

Since accreditation has been made mandatory by the University Grants Commission (UGC) three years ago, many colleges have started submitting their Self Appraisal Reports (SAR). Assessing thousands of colleges is a mammoth task, but has to be done at any

cost. The first conscious quality initiative by any educational institution is this.

The author has visited over 70 colleges including a university for the purpose of accreditation, affiliation or recognition. Hence, it was felt that sharing of experience will be of help to the institutions aspiring to undergo this exercise.

The author wants to initially present her own experiences in a University where she served in the capacity of the Dean and the Head, Faculty of Education. The university had to submit a detailed self appraisal report for the assessment period of five years. Preparing for first cycle of accreditation by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was a challenging, thrilling and sometimes exhaustive task too. As the first initiative, disposal of condemned and damaged furniture and obsolete instruments was done. This task alone took a few months. After disposing them of, many departments got extra rooms and space; this was a revelation that NAAC visit gave the staff. Filling up dozens of forms with umpteen numbers of columns, rows and questionnaires was the next task which indeed sensitized the teachers on quality dimensions and expectations of assessors. The author shockingly realized it was a big mistake not properly recording events or keeping files of a number of activities of the department such as organizing refresher courses,

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summer training programmes, seminars, conferences, workshops, guest lecture programmes, participation by staff as resource persons in conferences, academic visits, curricular innovations, revisions, introducing innovative curriculum transaction strategies, visits by experts from abroad, inter- departmental and inter- faculty exchanges of expertise of the teachers, achievements by present and old students in academics, co-curricular activities and sports, outreach programmes, camps, rallies, non traditional organizational arrangements, publication activities of teachers, awards and recognitions received by the faculty members and the like. The significance of recording, maintaining and prompt updating of files dawned on the minds of every one. Thanks to the authorities who insisted on undergoing this wonderful exercise.

After a frantic search, nay rather hunt for half-written, damaged and misplaced files, some 50% of the work done by the department could be retrieved, arranged and submitted to the university as the SAR of the Department.

The Internal Steering Committee coordinator along with the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) coordinator consolidated the SAR of the Departments, Constituent colleges, Centres, Cells and Clubs and prepared a master Self Appraisal Report of the University for submitting to NAAC. After the visit dates were agreed upon, rehearsals started. The author was fortunate to serve a university blessed with excellent Vice Chancellors who clearly directed the entire team of staff. The first step was a power point presentation of the SAR by the Head of the Department or the College in the presence of the colleagues. Then, after incorporating their suggestions, the School level, Faculty level presentations were made in the presence of a larger audience of staff who were part of the School and the Faculty. After reviews, criticisms, modifications, enrichments, the power point slides were ready for presentation by all the Heads of Departments in the presence of the Vice Chancellor. This exercise facilitated enormous inter-departmental collaboration and cooperation and above all mutual learning, enrichment and enlightenment. The mock visit instilled confidence and helped to adjust timings and to decide on highlights of presentation.

The author feels that a compilation of strategies and methods adopted by 'A' grade institutions in the form a publication would serve as a guide for those first time aspirers. Besides, a workshop by Deans may be organized for the needy to disseminate the new knowledge.

Now the scenario in self financing colleges is discussed. NAAC accreditation of a college is instrumental in alerting on quality dimensions of an institution of higher education with its strengths and limitations. This academic self-auditing makes everyone conscious of the need to sustain quality since education is a service. The NAAC Peer Team members give the management and the staff ample directions for the institution's growth, aspects of consolidation and expansion with a clear perspective plan.

Since the preparation of SAR for the first time is a tough task, many colleges outsource it conveniently, which necessitated the NAAC to insist on getting an explicit certificate from the Principal or the Head that "the report was not outsourced"! However, for want of needed guidance for preparation of SAR, the heads or the managements seek the help of some persons well versed in writing the SAR. This has become a profitable business in the present context! Considering the number of colleges to be accredited, a one-day workshop may be organized by universities with potential for excellence to minimize the unwanted practice of outsourcing writing of SAR; this may be done charging a registration fee from the colleges which will be far cheaper than the amount charged by hired report writers. The Peer Team can easily find out the nonsensical and absurd statements in the outsourced reports. There are many absurdities, but to quote a few will be a warning for those who outsource- In an all women's college the report says 'men and women students are treated equally in this college' and in another report in a similar college there was a statement that 'there is no incident of harassment of girls by men students'! In some reports, in addition to unbearable linguistic and syntactic errors, inconsistencies and contradictions are very common. One can write a separate thesis on these reports based on an analysis. It may be presumed that the remuneration given by the NAAC to Peer team Members is mainly for reading the report in order to bring some sense out of nonsense! Thanks to the corporate culture which makes essential services commodities for purchase! So education is no more a service but a commodity for marketing and sale! During the gurukula days of ancient India, students came in search of Gurus (teachers) and now it is the colleges advertising attractively to entice the aspiring students; this is sishyakula indeed! (Sishya is the student)

In some good institutions, the preparation of SAR is done jointly by the teaching staff. In others, only one or rarely two prepare the report. In extreme cases, no one knows who wrote the report and when assessors ask questions or clarifications referring to

page numbers, the blank and miserable looks on the co-ordinators' faces stand as a proof to show how they are victims of the current market-driven trends in education.

In a few colleges, the reports were ideal, neat and theoretical. But the facilities and practices were only in paper and far from reality. In substandard institutions, the gap between the statements in the report and the actual experience in the institution was very wide. Rarely, there were two to three institutions with bad reports but were actually doing well. Ah, what a variety! One thing in common among all the self financing colleges is that over three-fourths of them expected to get an 'A' grade though not explicitly stated!

Stage management is obvious in most institutions; overdoing this irritates the assessors. As was mentioned earlier, a day's training for principals and management officials (correspondents, secretaries, directors, presidents) would be useful to present a clear idea about assessment and accreditation. Only very few institutions get the help of those already accredited with a good grade or are capable of making use of websites that give clear instructions or reading the SAR of good institutions online.

Once the dates of visit are finalized and the assessors' details communicated by NAAC to the institutions, it is expected that the institution would contact the peer team members well in advance. In general NAAC sends all the relevant materials and documents well in time. But experience shows that the response of 65-70 percent of the institutions is slow and almost nil as they are immersed in giving face lift to the college, file-writing, record and album preparation, not remembering the need either to speak to or send emails to the peer team members. Very often the peer team has to take the initiative of asking for the details of location (thanks to Google maps!) and contact person(s) receiving the team at the airport / railway station.

Now, a dimension-wise analysis of the trends in the activities of self financing colleges is taken up. What is true of colleges of education may be true of colleges of arts and science as well.

Curricular Aspects

The first dimension is 'Curricular Aspects'. In 99 percent of the institutions the scope for revision, innovation and updating is claimed to be limited, with every college stating that they simply adopt the curriculum prescribed by the affiliating university which is true also. In a few cases, there is no proper

link between the university and the affiliated colleges which, on account of location disadvantage or similar reasons, rarely receive communications from the university about the on-going programmes like refresher courses, seminars and expert lectures. If the colleges are left with a feeling of isolation, why do universities charge affiliation fee, re-affiliation fee, etc.? Staff from self-financing colleges reported that their suggestions and feedback, even valuable ones, were not considered by the Chairperson, Board of Studies. Why this isolation? Are these chairpersons know-alls from heaven? Absence of intellectual openness is a hurdle for academic growth on both sides - university and the affiliated colleges. Earnestness will be a rewarding experience and a sincere professional is ever humble to learn. On the other side, the author came across in some autonomous colleges even students have a say in curriculum update. In one girls' college in Tamil Nadu affiliated to the University where the author served, a second year undergraduate student of computer science suggested inclusion of a customised unit on current trends in computer science to justify the fast growth in the field. She also proposed a compulsory question be asked from the said unit. Her suggestion was incorporated by the members of the Academic Council. In 1976 when the University of Madras revised the curriculum for M.A. Indian Philosophy, the suggestion to include Christianity and Islam as subjects to be added to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, given by the author when she was a student, was well taken and incorporated in the syllabus.

The peer team members have to guide the institution as to how the staff can make visible impact and be heard by the Chairperson, Board of Studies. Only a microscopic minority of teachers are in the Board of Studies. University regulations may be modified in order to include at least two senior teaching faculty members with consistently bright academic and professional record in the Board of Studies; where not possible, they have to be permitted at least as observers since it is they who transact the curriculum. Those who are interested can participate in the meetings of the Board of Studies as observers without claiming any allowance or fees, as the author did as a non-member during the earlier stages of her career.

Teaching, Learning and Evaluation

The second aspect is 'Teaching, Learning and Evaluation' for which maximum weight is allotted. Teacher educators have abundant knowledge of a

variety of instructional approaches and techniques; but unfortunately they adopt lecture as the only method which is rarely supported with technological devices. The hesitation to integrate technology into teaching is quite common even among the younger generation. E-resources which are gold mines of knowledge are either unutilized or underutilized.

Non traditional approaches to teaching could not be observed during the visits and interaction with teachers confirmed that innovative techniques are for theoretical presentations only. Experiential, observational, participatory teaching techniques are not employed while teaching. If teacher educators who are expected to be method masters do not employ such techniques, who else will use them? A good teacher is his/her own source of technology. The method masters are expected to provide direct, purposeful, experience to the learners; but in reality, students are given indirect, purposeless, theory! The assignments given to the students rarely demand their original thinking and creativity, as a result of which they conveniently resort to 'cut-copy-paste technique' making this part of internal assessment a mere ritual. A resourceful teacher would give assignments that are challenging, thrilling and hence enjoyable endorsing the units theoretically learnt through practical exploration. Our system of education sees to it that by the time a child enters the primary school, curiosity and creativity die a natural death! Then how to expect Nobel Laureates of both Indian origin and nationality?

Research, Consultancy and Extension

Next is the major aspect of 'Research, Consultancy and Extension'. Almost in 95% of the B.Ed. colleges research is a casualty. In one college though all the 10 teachers had Ph.D. qualification, not even one minor funded research project was carried out! A change in the outlook of doctorate degree holders that Ph.D. is not just an ornamental qualification but an introduction into the fascinating world of research should happen. If teachers realize that teaching and research are two sides of the same coin, then it will be easy for them to develop and imbibe research culture in the campus. Once the advantages of funded research projects in the form of generating human and material resources and deriving pleasure in bringing out useful policy changes are realized, then no force can stop the teachers from doing research. Since teachers are poorly equipped to carry out meaningful researches, the quality of research done in these colleges is far below the expected standard. In an institution, the author was surprised to come

across one M.Ed. thesis with the title 'Problems in Commerce Education' which could be an essay topic! If guides themselves have not done original researches, how can they encourage and insist good work from their wards? The rampant position corruption by the research supervisors in the form exploiting the wards in every possible manner kills the spirit of enquiry and happiness derived out of innovative researches by the scholars. It is high time that a serious research auditing was done.

About the quality of publications in the form of articles and books, the less said the better. How can good papers emerge out of sub-standard research work? Inconsistencies, language errors and plagiarism are commonly found in research articles published by some journals that charge a 'publication fee', which the author has never heard of two decades ago. People have started losing faith in the value of ISSN and ISBN numbers on account of recent developments in the procedure to obtain such numbers which the author does not want to elaborate.

The author wonders when people ask for the impact a research study in education has made. Here a clarification needs to be made; the R and D (Research & Development) link is quite strong in sciences on account of the immediate market value and applicability of the findings. But education takes years or even generations together for making perceptible impact which is long term, indirect and not necessarily in terms of individual returns but social benefits. To quote a famous saying:

'If you are planning for a year, plant paddy;

If you are planning for ten years, plant trees;

If you are planning for a century, educate'.

This means one has to be patient to reap the benefits.

Similarly, consultancy in education can be only informal and questions on patents and revenues generated apply to the sciences in general; hence assessors will have to keep these factors in mind while seeking information on this aspect.

The dimension of extension is taken up seriously by 30% of the colleges, whereas the rest do it as a mere ritual for satisfying the NAAC assessment requirement. An account of organization of Blood donation camps, voter and literacy awareness camps, women empowerment and AIDS awareness rallies are invariably found in almost all the SAR of the colleges. On account of stunted thinking extension work has not gone beyond this. For focused community outreach activities, it would be desirable if adoption of a village is done. Helping children learn English and Mathematics better, educating on safe use of

domestic electrical and electronic appliances and proper use of fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, creating awareness on Government welfare schemes for girls, women, expecting and lactating mothers, senior citizens, sensitizing on personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness are a few areas for concentration. The list is only suggestive and not exhaustive. If these activities are carried out in the village adopted by the institution, then some positive changes may be visible over a period of years.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources

The dimension of 'Infrastructure and Learning Resources' is helpful for self financing colleges to score maximum points. In general, the number of classrooms, halls, laboratories, computer room, staff and office rooms are more than necessary and well maintained with adequate budget allocation. But miserably they are underutilized. While Government and Government aided colleges face space and human resource crunch, they are plenty in private colleges. In one college of education, the author came across a science laboratory with permanent fittings (a rare thing to see in these colleges); but much to her dismay not even one experiment was conducted. Further, in another institution there was a smart classroom which was used only once in an academic year for teaching the microteaching cycle – a training technique adopted to carry out teaching initially in simulated conditions. Smart classrooms are rich learning sources helping in technology integration making teaching – learning a rewarding experience. In one University accredited by the author there was a spacious, well equipped and ventilated library with latest references, but the picture given by the librarian would make any serious academician unhappy. The borrowing of books both by the staff and the students was minimal. In a developing country like India, on the one side people lament on scarce resources; on the other there is underutilization of the resources available. This mismatch must be rectified by the planners. In many colleges the total number of books was just as prescribed to be the minimum requirement by the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE). It is strange that only in providing facilities or submitting assignments the minimum becomes the maximum!

Student Support and Progression

The fifth dimension is 'Student Support and Progression'. Depending on the need and demand, student support services are provided by all the institutions in general. However, information on their

progress is incomplete which points out to the need for a strong alumni association. In 99% of the colleges the alumni association was not registered and in over 85% they were formed for the purpose of satisfying the NAAC requirement. Both the college and the alumni need orientation about their roles in capitalizing on mutual strengths. Wash room facilities, safe drinking water, health facility, rest rooms, need based transportation and residential facilities are provided. In charging of tuition fee, there are wide inter-college, inter-university and inter-state differences. In one of the states while one college was charging Rs. 25,000 as the fee, a neighbouring college was charging Rs. 85,000 – both affiliated to the same university. How can this be allowed to happen? There is a need for proper regulation of fee and other charges taking into consideration the socio-economic status of the immediate community and geographical location of the college. In a Naxalite - inhabited area, even 50% of the students do not attend the college for the fear of being kidnapped. Assessors should keep such contexts in mind during their visit.

Governance and Leadership

'Governance and Leadership' is a dimension which scores uniform points in almost all the colleges; managements in general are supportive, proactive and keen in retaining the principal as it is difficult to get persons with the stipulated qualification. Though job hopping seeking greener pastures was common among teaching staff earlier, presently this trend has changed as the management is trying to keep the senior staff by giving incentives and increments. Good managements implement several staff welfare schemes such as maternity leave with pay, sponsoring staff for participation in conferences or refresher courses, fee concession or waiver for children of staff, free board, lodging, medical and transportation facilities. In many institutions the perspective plan is perceptibly missing. This may be developed jointly with active participation by all the stakeholders.

Innovative Practices

The last dimension of 'Innovative Practices' is the most misunderstood one; activities which are essential curricular requirements are projected as innovations! Unique strategies that differentiate the college from others should be presented highlighting specific achievements in each assessment dimension. This was not done barring one or two colleges. Introduction of new curricular units, new programmes, successful individualized non

traditional teaching strategies, giving assignments that demand original thinking and application of theory learnt, different seating arrangements to facilitate different types of group activities like quiz, debate, discussion, simulation, role playing, dramatization, brain storming, buzz, implementing new policy implication studies and evaluative researches of Government flagship programmes at various stages of implementation, adopting one most backward village for holistic outreach activities over two or three decades, adopting a poorly equipped primary or upper primary school, innovative use of infrastructure, forming an academic enrichment forum for exchange and dissemination of new knowledge generated through research and participation in national and international conferences, joint programmes with sister institutions, District Institutes of Education and Training, new approaches to teach children with special abilities and disabilities are a few ideas worth trying.

The peer team members should assume that they only 'visit' the institution and not 'inspect' it in the sense of an agency giving grant to the college. It is the duty of every member in the peer team to sensitize the staff, head and the management about the priorities

in higher education with a stress on quality. As first time aspirers are a bit nervous, they should assure that the team is a friendly one with no intention of finding fault with the college.

Objectivity, transparency, and an earnest concern for sustaining quality in the assessment and accreditation of educational institutions will ensure success of the noble journey towards the inclusive, accessible, quality education to everyone in need, especially those youths for whom the Government has encouraged establishment of the self financing colleges all over India. If the dream of making India an egalitarian socialistic republic should come true, then both the Government and the private institutions should realize that it is in their hands only. Empowerment of underprivileged men and women is the first step to make India a super power.

References

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