ACCREDITATION AND WORLD RANKINGS: THE QUALITY CRISIS OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT
Indian higher education system is undergoing a quantitative expansion since the recent past with the establishment of a large number of new higher education institutions including universities to make educational facilities available to all. The irony is that the quality of education is conveniently forgotten during this quantitative growth. Indian higher education institutions are lagging behind the higher education institutions of comparable nations in different world university ranking systems, which are considered as a measure of institutional quality. Some of the famous world ranking methodologies and indicators are analyzed in this paper to identify their key focus areas. The ranking criteria are then compared with the quality assurance system of National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India to identify the similarities and differences, if any. The possible reasons for the sub-standard performance of Indian higher education institutions in the international ranking are being explored. Finally the paper suggests some adoptable measures to overcome the quality crisis of Indian higher education system.
KEYWORDS: Quality; Higher Education; Accreditation; World Ranking; Quality Crisis

INTRODUCTION

India is the second populous country in the world. The nation has an approximate population of 1.21 billion people as per 2011 census and 1.27 billion people at present and still counting. Approximately 50% of this population is below 25 years (Population of India, 2014). Around 110 million of Indian population (roughly 8.7% of the total) is in the age group of 20-25 years (Census of India 2011, 2014), which underlines the need and significance of a quality driven higher education system for the nation. The nation's development and progress depends on the youths' achievements and accomplishments. The herculean task is to make them educated and employable, which need an increased investment and exponential development of higher education system, without losing the ultimate aim of education as envisaged by the great leaders of this nation.

To broaden the accessibility and ensure equity in higher education, India needs to have more number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). As on September 2014, India has 322 state universities, 128 deemed to be universities, 45 central universities and 192 private universities (UGC, Universities in India, 2014). Around 90 autonomous HEIs too are functional along with the universities. In India, there are around 33,000 colleges too which offers higher education opportunities to the population. Faced with the growing population and the appetite of masses for learning, the Indian Planning Commission has set a target to create capacity for an extra 10 million students over the next five years on top of the existing 25.9 million in the system in 2011-12 (Morgan, 2013). Because of the huge demand for higher education and to meet the needs and aspiration of the growing population, a proliferation of higher education institution took place across the nation during the last few years. But the concern is the quality of education that is being offered. Why India is not been able to find a place in the World Ranking of Universities even though it has such a huge quantum of institutions and well equipped human resources with some mandatory national level quality assurance mechanisms? It is being doubted that either the quality assurance system is not effective or during assessment, the crucial indicators of quality are not provided with due importance. Does the quantitative expansion of HEIs in India is taking place at the cost of quality?

Another concern that stems out is that whether the world ranking of universities can be believed blindly or not? Is it a fool proof mechanism of assessment and does it consider the various quality practices prevalent across the nations? Or is it something which gives more weight to quantifiable measures and later translated the measures in to ranks? Does a high rank really mean that the institution is having exceptional quality? If so, can quality of

education be considered as a set of criteria, which is predefined and is equally applicable to nations across the globe?

The pertinent issues here are the inability of Indian HEIs to find a ranking in the world rankings and the integrity of world rankings itself. It is high time to identify the path ahead for Indian HEIs to achieve the quality of education, which is being lamented by the visionaries and great academicians of the nation as values, virtues and ways of life, even though, it does not find a place in world rankings.

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY

Quality is any of the features that make something what it is. The term also means the degree of excellence, which a thing possesses. The British Standard Institution (BSI), (British Standards Institution , 2007) defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. Quality can be used both as an absolute and as a relative concept. Quality in every day conversation is mainly used as an absolute. The relative definition views quality not as an attribute of a product or service, but as something, which is ascribed to it (Sallis, 2002). The product must do what they claim to do and what their customers expect. That is, it must be fit enough to convene the purpose. Hence measuring up to specification and meeting customer requirement are the two aspects that come under the relative meaning of quality. It is the consumer and not the producer who ascribes the attribute of quality.

The meaning of quality becomes nebulous when we consider the quality of education. There is no universally accepted view of what is excellence in education, and there is no agreement on the degree of excellence either (Aggarwal, 2002). Since quality of education is so hard to define, it has eluded reliable and valid measurement. Since education is a service rather than a production process, its quality depends on the satisfaction of the customers of education. Hence the concept of quality of education becomes relative.

It is the responsibility of the nation-state to assure quality education to its citizens who study in various educational institutions across the nation. This is one among the various reasons which mandates quality assurance in education. Competition among educational institutions, demand for quality teaching from the customers' side, the perceived potential of the quality institutions to attract good students and funds (Mishra, 2006) are some of the reasons which necessitates quality assurance of all educational institutions in general and higher educational institutions in particular.

If the quality of education is perceived as relative, then there cannot be universally accepted criteria for quality. There can be regularly influential indicators or critical process indicators (Carri, 2011) of quality across institutions, but it does not mean that it is all about the concept quality of an institution. It can only be argued that the possibility for measurement and quantification of critical process indicators would be easier than other lengthy procedures of quality assurance, but still it does not give a final verdict of institutional quality. The quality culture and practices vary from institution to institution and each institution has their unique way to maintain its quality culture. It would be difficult for anyone, unless he/she is part and parcel of that institution, to understand and document those practices that drive the quality culture of a particular institution. Still against certain benchmarks, the external quality assurance systems measure the quantifiable aspects of quality and predict the institutional quality.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HEIs IN INDIA

In India, University Grants Commission (UGC) is the statutory body to maintain the quality of higher education. Section 12 of the UGC act (1956) made UGC responsible for "the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations and research in the universities" (UGC, The University Grants Commission Act, 1956 and Rules and Regulations Under the Act, 2002, p. 10).

As per the suggestion of National Policy on Education (NPE) and the Programme of Action (PoA) (1986), UGC took the initiative to establish an accreditation and assessment council as an autonomous body. This led to the establishment of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). NAAC grades the institutions of higher education and their programs. It helps to improve the quality of teaching and research activities in these institutions and supports the academic growth of these institutions. NAAC is responsible to assure the quality of colleges and universities.

National Board of Accreditation (NBA), which is established by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) accredits programs and courses of technical institutions. Engineering and technology, management, architecture, pharmacy, hotel management and catering technology, town and country planning and applied arts and crafts are some among the various disciplines which are accredited by NBA.

At present NAAC is having the responsibility to assess and accredit the higher education institutions in India. For this purpose NAAC has identified seven key areas called as criteria, which are considered as the most important contributors to the quality of higher education. The overall quality of a higher education institution depends on the scores they obtained for each of these criteria.

Under each of these criteria, NAAC identified various quality aspects that may help to accomplish the criteria since they are the functional part of the criteria. To measure the quality aspects, various indicators are also identified which is the operational part of the quality aspect. These indicators are focusing on certain specific dimensions of the quality aspect. Suitable weight is given to each indicators based on its relative significance. So, measurement of various indicators under a specific quality aspect together would give an idea about the overall level of attainment or performance of an institution or a program with regard to the selected specific quality aspect. Pooling the institutional accomplishment in each of these quality aspects contribute collectively towards the respective criterion and when the levels of attainment of institution or the program for each of these criterion are taken together, it will give the overall quality of the institution and/or specific program of the institute. In the present assessment model for higher education institutions (HEI) effective from April 2007, NAAC has identified 36 key aspects under seven criteria. The key aspects have differential weights depending on the nature of the HEI (affiliated college, university and so on). 196 assessment indicators are pooled under the 36 key aspects. In the latest revision, the numbers of assessment indicator considered are 204 under 32 key aspects and seven criteria. A total of 1000 points are divided among the 7 criteria taking in to consideration the type of institution such as university, autonomous college or affiliated college.

The procedure to be adopted and the indicators identified are perfect for measuring the quality, if it is being done in a proper manner. A better accreditation status of an institution is a sure means to attract more students (Carri, 2011) and funding from agencies (Prabhu, 2012). Now the stakeholders are searching for loop holes in the accreditation procedures to reap its benefits unethically. They are making use of their personal relations to do this (Teachers, Personal Communication, 2013). If this is the case, then how far the accreditation can be considered as a measure of 'true' quality?

In the current Indian context, people from academic spheres are talking about the world university ranking and are 'worried' about the relative lower position of Indian universities and other HEIs in the rankings. What exactly these rankings mean? How far it is better or different from the NAAC's quality assessment?

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING AGENCIES
The most popular rankings of world universities and higher education institutions are published by three different agencies. One is Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) world university rankings (QSWUR) and another is Times Higher Education (THE) world university rankings (THEWUR) (Wikipedia, QS World University Rankings, 2014). Both these organisations, from 2004 to 2009 worked together to publish World University rankings (WUR), later on working separately. The third one is Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), which is also known as Shanghai Ranking which was started from 2003.

The quality aspects/areas considered for ranking by different agencies are almost similar with slight variations in the terminologies. However, the major difference among these agencies can be seen in the source from which they collect the academic accomplishment of an institution; it is identified in terms of citations of scholars of different universities. THE world university ranking depends on Thomson Reuters' data base to identify the citations of scholars from different universities since they separated from QS world University Ranking. Whereas QS depends on data from Scopus, part of Elsevier and still following the original methodology and ranking (Wikipedia, QS World University Rankings, 2014). ARUW considers citations from various sources to compile data.

'THE' WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING
THEWUR depends on 13 performance indicators grouped in to 5 different areas to rank universities. They are;

1. **Teaching:** aims to identify the learning environment both from the student and the academic perspective (worth 30 per cent of the overall ranking score)

2. **Research:** volume, income and reputation of a university in terms of research is identified through an annual academic reputation survey (worth 30 per cent)

3. **Citations:** research influence of a university (worth 30 per cent)

4. **Industry income:** ability of an institute to help industry through innovations (worth 2.5 per cent)

5. **International outlook:** Looks at diversity on the campus and international collaboration (worth 7.5 per cent) (Times Higher Education, 2014).

QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS
The methodology and the indicators used by QSWUR are slightly different from that of THEWUR. The major aim of this ranking is to help students to select their international study options (QS World University Rankings, 2014). The ranking is done on the basis of 6 indicators:

1. **Academic reputation:** Based on a global survey, where academicians are asked to identify the best institutions other than the one in which they work. (Worth 40% of overall score)
2. **Employer reputation:** It is also based on a global survey where the employers are asked to identify the universities they perceive as producing the best graduates. (Worth 10% of overall score)
3. **Student faculty ratio:** It is assumed that the best institutions should have small class sizes and better provision for individual supervision. (Worth 20% of overall score)
4. **Citation per faculty:** Aims to assess university's research output. (Worth 20% of overall score)
5. **International faculty ratio:** It measures the ability of a university to attract faculty from other nations. (Worth 5% of overall score)
6. **International students' ratio:** It measures the ability of a university to attract students from other nations. (Worth 5% of overall score)

ACADEMIC RANKING OF WORLD UNIVERSITIES
ARWU uses a set of different criteria for ranking the universities. The criteria and its explanation with the comparative weight are provided in table 1:

Table 1: Ranking Criteria of ARWU

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	20%
	Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories	20%
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science	20%
	Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index	20%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution	10%
Total		100%

Along with a number of websites, they make use of the data available from national agencies such as National Ministry of Education, National Bureau of Statistics, National Association of Universities and Colleges, National Rector's Conference etc. to compile and consolidate the data and to make the ranking (Shanghairanking, 2014). Like all other agencies ARWU too have subject wise as well as field wise ranking.

There are five universities, seven IITs (Indian Institute of Technology) and one IISc. (Indian Institute of Science) from India found a place in the rankings by different agencies. Even among these ranked institutions, many have found place only in Asia specific ranking and not in world ranking.

FOCAL POINTS IN WORLD RANKING METHODOLOGIES
It can be observed that in all these systems, the focus is on three major aspects: Quality of Education, Research Output and International outlook.

The quality of the teaching learning process, measured in different ways by different agencies. THEWUR tries to identify this through consulting experts. QSWUR measures it through surveys where the employer view is also being considered. ARWU considers a different and controversial means to identify this aspect, that is, through the number of awards/ Nobel prizes produced by the institution. The data is gathered through global surveys or through other objective and reliable measurements such as the opinion of experts in the field but not from the university which is being assessed.

Another major area stressed is the research output of the universities. In all cases, it is being measured in terms of citation index. THEWUR and ARWU also try to find out the contribution of universities to the industries or the society in terms of innovations. The citation indexes are collected from various databases and the industry contribution is collect through surveys.

The third focal point is the international outlook of the universities. The collaborations and the number of foreign faculty and students are taken in to consideration while doing this exercise by all the agencies except ARWU. This aspect too is measured in an objective and reliable manner.

It can be observed that among these areas, the maximum score is devoted to the quality of teaching learning atmosphere and the research component among others. All these ranking systems depend on objective and valid measurements. It does not solely depend on the information provided by the universities.

FOCAL POINTS IN NAAC METHODOLOGY
The methodology adopted by NAAC for assessment and accreditation, which is supposed to be a measure of institutional quality, is altogether different. The accreditation procedure of NAAC includes a self-evaluation by the institution that is expected to be done with honest introspection followed by an external Peer evaluation by NAAC (NAAC, 2013). In the Self Study Report (SSR), the institution should provide a criteria wise analytical report about all key aspects which includes a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges (SWOC) analysis. This exercise is followed by peer team visit, which consists of senior educationists and experts chosen from a nation-wide pool. The grading is done on the basis of calculated Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA).

A closer look in to the SSR format and the information sought under each of the 7 criteria make it clear that the NAAC assessment effort is far more superior to any of the world ranking systems. But then what could be the barriers which prevent our universities and HEIs to find a place in any of the world ranking mechanisms and why they are much worried about world ranking rather than the indigenous system?

DRAWBACKS OF THE ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS
The over emphasis on citations and undermining universities that do not use English as their primary language are the major drawbacks of the THE World University Rankings system. The relative importance of citations may be helpful for science streams but put a roadblock for social sciences and humanities since their articles are rarely covered by citation records (Wikipedia, Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2014)

The QS World University Ranking has been criticized by many scholars for placing too much emphasis on peer review; which receives 40 percent of the overall score (Wikipedia, QS World University Rankings, 2014). The unscientific and weak methodology of QSWRU is often criticized (Marginson, 2012; Altbach, 2012; Blanchflower, 2011) and this observation indicate the prevalence of flaws in ranking procedures.

A flaw in the methodology of ARWU was highlighted by different researchers (Florian, 2007; Enserink, 2007). The Shanghai ranking considers the presence of Nobel Prize winners and other award winners in the universities as an important indicator of institutional quality. It has been argued that this does not measure the quality of teaching or the quality of humanities (Wikipedia, Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2014).

NAAC's assessment and accreditation procedure also has several drawbacks. During assessment, the specific characteristics of individual institutions or the large diversity exist among institutions across the nation are seldom taken in to account and similar set of criteria and indicators are used for all the aspiring institutions. This 'One Size Fits All' formula of NAAC is not suitable for assessing HEIs in a diverse nation like India (Zaidi, 2011). While delivering a keynote address in a national seminar, the former vice chancellor of Mangalore University, Prof. Savadatti mentioned that it is not possible to quantify the quality, innovation and excellence (The Hindu, 2012) without diluting the very meaning of quality.

It is found that the quality of the routine functions and teaching-learning process of an institution between two consecutive accreditation cycles are going un-monitored (Carri, 2011) and due to this fact, the institutions are least bothered about the quality concerns during this lean period. The study also revealed that it is difficult to identify the quality of an institution with a five days visit of peer team members. The team members solely depend on the information provided by the institutional authorities since it is difficult to identify the quality practices within such a short span of time. How far is it possible to rely on the information provided by the institutional authorities? It is obvious that no one would reveal their weaknesses or demerits voluntarily, rather

try to project and exaggerate their strengths, since the accreditation status and the release of funds are being linked with each other as well as an accredited institution is capable of attracting more students.

THE QUALITY CRISIS IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is now clear that all the assessment systems are having merits and demerits. The analysis shows that the NAAC assessment is no way inferior to any world ranking mechanisms. Still our highly graded institutions on the basis of NAAC's criteria too find it difficult to find a place in the world rankings.

This clearly indicates that the flaw is at the implementation or procedural level and not at the conceptualization. The possible reasons could be the following:

1. The accreditation takes place once in five years and other than the SSR report submitted by the HEIs, there is no way for the accrediting agency to get first-hand information about the activities that are taking place in the HEIs
2. The SSR report and the peer visit depends solely on quantifiable data since the visit lasts for a maximum of 4-5 days
3. It is easier to manipulate the quantitative data since it is difficult for the peer team to cross-verify the huge quantum of information provided by the HEIs through any other means due to paucity of time.
4. The customer satisfaction is comfortably forgotten in the SSR report and peer team visits since the chances for interaction with faculty and students are either uncommon or if at all it take place, it would be peripheral only (Teachers & Administrators, Personal Communication, 2014).
5. The peer team members' competency cannot be questioned but their languid approach and unassertive nature may lead to granting of higher grades to undeserving institutions (Teachers, Personal Communication, 2014).

When these factors work together, the final verdict would obviously favor an undeserving HEI in the form of higher scores. When it comes to world ranking, the procedure is more comprehensive and the technique those agencies adopt for measurement is totally different from that of NAAC. Hence it is obvious that only those institutions, which are really concerned about and are relentlessly working for the compliance of the laid down criteria of various quality assurance agencies, can find a place in any of the international rankings.

PATH AHEAD FOR QUALITY

Any higher education institution, if aspires to become an institution of excellence, the quality of teaching learning process and the quality of research being carried out by its faculty members should be improved. The satisfaction of the students should be the foremost concern of any institution. For this the teachers of the HEIs should internalize a quality culture. The quality culture cannot be imposed from outside, but each individual should develop it from within through their personal effort. Identify the students as own children and provide inputs to them in such a manner as an individual do for their-own kids. Once the academicians develop a quality culture, it gradually ingrain in each of the institutions. Later on it would be identified as the specific quality culture that particular institution and there would be a corresponding improvement in the satisfaction level of students which invariably lead to better learning outcome. Better learning outcomes improve the employability of the graduates and once they are hired, then they would act as the best advertisers of the institution which moulded them.

Once the academic atmosphere of a HEI improves due to the quality culture it acquired, the institution could be able to attract more and more students and teachers across the globe. This in turn develops the international outlook of the institution. Specific to Indian context, the academic sphere of India should be free from its regional sentiments. The selection of teachers and students should be free from all kinds of biases and should be transparent and qualitative. The regional or local sentiment and/or biases in recruitments and student selection actually hinder the progress of the academic atmosphere that should prevail in HEIs.

Lack of funding, hard regulations and frustrations due to administrative hardships hinder the smooth conduct of any kind of research activities in HEIs. Many inspired talents do not venture in to research activities or get disheartened in due course due to these factors (Teachers, Personal Communication, 2015). A disturbed mind cannot do any qualitative work. The government and the university administrators should take initiatives to overcome these issues. Then the institutions can produce qualitative research output, innovative ideas and even patents, which can be later converted in to an income source for the institution by collaborating with industries.

If the research atmosphere improves, it also leads to publications of quality papers and quality books. This would help to improve the scoring of an institution in another core area, citation index. At the same time it

cannot be forgotten that the citation as a criteria would be suitable for science and technology disciplines whereas it is difficult for social sciences and humanities to surpass this hurdle, because of the very nature of researches carried out by them.

The newly introduced Academic Performance Indicator (API) system instead of improving quality is helpful in increasing quantity. The proliferation of national and regional seminars and paid and unpaid journals underline this. The teachers cannot be blamed since it is associated with their promotion and an increased income. But in this rat race, the quality of teachers and that of the institution is being sacrificed. The teaching and student related activities (both scholastic and co-scholastic) are forgotten or being carried out for namesake and the teachers are busy in writing papers for journals and seminars. The tragic reality is that none of these works come out from a creative thought or novel idea, but are being done for the sake of points. If it is being implemented in the present fashion, further degradation of quality and students' success is not very far.

While implementing or developing any new paradigms for improving higher education, the socio-cultural and other related areas of the nation should be considered. A system or procedure, which is very successful in a country, might be an utter failure elsewhere. The implementation of API system for teachers in Indian HEIs is a clear example of this. The role of a teacher in Indian HEIs and that of a western country is not the same. Without considering the ground realities prevailing in a nation, if something is implemented without any adaptation, it actually deteriorates the quality of the system.

SOLVING THE QUALITY CRISIS

NAAC can play a lead role for real quality improvement of Indian HEIs. The council should devise some mechanism by which the progress of an institution can be monitored and measured throughout the assessment period. Instead of peer team visit, they can depute different teachers to other universities or HEIs for a month or so, twice or thrice in a year, so that they can act as an evaluator of quality processes that are taking place in the institutions as well as can undertake routine activities of a teacher. This could help the council to understand the ground realities prevailing in each institution throughout the assessment period.

Teachers themselves should take initiative to overcome the quality crisis that the Indian HEIs are facing. They should develop a quality culture. It is human nature to find loopholes and device escape mechanisms when something is being imposed upon them. Exactly the same is happening when the quality assurance is done externally. If the value of quality in its relative sense is being internalized, then it is not necessity to impose it externally. In unavoidable circumstances, if at all it is imposed externally, it neither threatens the psyche of a teacher nor affects their integrity.

Along with this the educational administrators and planners and the government mechanism for education of its citizens should be proactive to remove the hardships faced by the academicians in terms of funds, regulations and so on, so that the teachers can put their entire energy in to quality teaching and research. Mahatma Gandhi, while speaking about the *Nai Talim* ('New method of education' but the English phrase 'Basic Education' is usually used in translation) pointed that the education should not be a foreign importation or imposition, but is consistent with the environment in India and education should bring equilibrium between the body, the mind and the spirit of which man is made (Prabhu & Rao, 1967). If these happen, a day would come, when the Indian universities and HEIs would stand at the top of other universities and HEIs not in terms of quantitative ranking but in terms of quality education.

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