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Assessing the quality of academic staff colleges in India

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ABSTRACT

Quality has become one of the major concerns of higher education at all levels. With Globalization of economy, a demand for quality in higher education has become all the more prominent, so that no other choice except to meet the global standards. Accreditation is an activity widely accepted in developed countries but generally is not known in many other countries. In India, the task of assessment and accreditation of universities and colleges has been assigned to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), an autonomous body established by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

The objectives of Academic Staff Colleges are to enable the newly appointed lecturer to:

- Understand the significance of education in general and higher education in particular in the global context,
- Acquire and improve basic skills of teaching and learning with innovative and advanced methods.
- Utilize the time to improve the personality of the teacher.

As the Academic Staff Colleges are now considered as important units to improve quality of Teaching- Learning process in The Country, its quality assessment is critical for the future of higher education. Therefore, this study is designed to examine the set of criteria to assess the quality of institutions.

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Introduction

Higher Education in the 21st Century has become an economic goods rather than a merit want. The withdrawal of the state from its traditional function of providing free education to people has adversely affected the education system in general and higher education in particular. The situation has helped the emergence of a strong private sector in the provision of higher education. The WTO¹, particularly the adoption of General Agreement in Trade in Services, promoted the trade in educational services at a global level. It is commented by scholars that higher education in the less developed countries like India, is affected by this new phenomenon. Several international agencies from the advanced countries like USA, UK and Australia, etc., have established their off - shore campuses in India and are offering courses. These institutions have attracted the rich and the talented. Therefore, the attention of the educational commentators is focused now on these institutions, as they are concerned about the quality of these courses. Because, some of these institutions are not accredited in their home countries, some may be spurious and still some are dubious. It is in this context, the assessment of the quality of higher education is necessitated.

Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy the stated or implied needs. In the context of education, quality refers to the features of education that has to satisfy the needs of students,

parents and the society at large by developing appropriate knowledge and skills. Quality in education refers to the availability of competent teachers, an ideal student, teacher ratio, adequate infrastructure facilities and the like. Quality assurance in education implies ensuring the maintenance of set standards from the planning stage till the feedback stage of any program (Prema, 2004).

In order to determine and maintain standards in universities, the University Grants Commission (UGC)² was established in 1952 and was constituted as a statutory body under the Act of Parliament in 1956. The primary responsibility of the Commission is to promote and coordinate university education in the country and to ensure that the standards are maintained in teaching, research and examinations (1998). In India, the task of assessment and accreditation of universities and colleges has been assigned to the (NAAC)³, an autonomous body established by the (UGC) In 1994 to be a catalyzing agent to motivate institutions of higher learning to achieve excellence in all spheres of academic activity and to impart quality education which equips students to face the challenges of modern life, and to promote the idea of accountability among the academia (2006). The NAAC remarked that, "assessment means performance evaluation of an institution or programs".

- World Trade Organization
- University Grants Commission
- National Assessment and Accreditation Council

Quality assessment is frequently undertaken in response to external authorities that expect clear, ratified criteria to be used in the accountability process. If the assessment is to be beneficial, change must be effected from within the institution. This means that administrators, faculty members, and students also need an understanding of the criteria that can guide and facilitate improvements in the way they function. Thus to be both valid and useful, the approach taken to assessment must be aligned or consistent with the goals of the institution assessment must be creditable and incorporate (Patil, 2003).

Significance of the study

According to Malcom Frazer (Sharma, 2007) Quality in higher education is a complex idea but above all it is about what students have learnt as a result of their interaction with their teachers, departments and University.

Quality is value, it is not a unitary concept, and it is a multiple concept in higher education. It embraces the quality of input such as students, faculty members, the infrastructure and the process of education, covering learning activities, extra-curricular activities, community development activities and the quality of the output, in terms of students and graduates.

Quality assessment in higher education is of global interest; government and public demand for accountability from higher education institutions has steadily increased over the past decade (Brennan, Fedrowitz, Hubber, shah, 1999). Quality assessment is frequently undertaken in response to external authorities that expect clear, ratified criteria to be used in the accountability process. If the assessment is to be beneficial, change must be effected from within the institution. This means that administrators, faculty members, and students also need an understanding of the criteria that can guide and facilitate improvements in the way they function. Thus to be both valid and useful, the approach taken to assessment must be aligned or consistent with the goals of the institution assessment must be credible and incorporate.

Different types of stakeholders in higher education- the public administration, faculty or students have their own perspectives and goals; they assign different values to criteria of quality. The public wants students to graduate with general abilities and emphasizes criteria such as communication skills (Cave and Hanney, 1992), University administrators are expected to show that resources are being used efficiently and effectively; for them, student completion of program requirements is an important criterion (Nadeau, Donald and Konrad, 1992). Faculties hence focus on criteria such as the ability to think critically (Barnett, 1988). Students meanwhile are increasingly pre-occupied with career concerns; they value criteria such as the ability to get to job (Dey, Astin and Korn, 1991).

The education Commission (1964-66) has rightly mentioned, "of all the different factors that influence the quality of education and its contribution to national development, the quality, competence and character of teachers are undoubtedly the most significant" It is felt that the reputation of an institution and its influence on the life of the community is invariably determined by the kind of teachers working in it. We may therefore, restate the obvious fact that the teachers are the backbone in an educational system.

The UGC has introduced National Eligibility Test as a prerequisite for being considered for appointment as Lecturers in Universities and Colleges. The UGC started academic staff colleges during the seventh plan period to refresh the teachers

and enhance and update their knowledge and develop pedagogical skills-a unique experiment possibly not tried in any other university system in the world. There are around 50 academic staff colleges functioning today. They offer a four-week orientation program for newly appointed teachers and run three week refresher courses for more experienced faculty members for updating them in them in their different areas of specialization. Along with academic staff colleges, various potential departments are conducting the refresher courses in different universities and institutions of national importance.

UGC has several schemes for upgrading the professional competence of teachers. These are: National Fellowship, Visiting Associate ship, Visiting Professors/Fellows, Teacher Fellowship, Research Scientist, Emeritus Fellowship, Career Awards, Research Associate ship, Major and Minor Research Project for Teachers.

Studies on Performance

Scholars and government agencies to assess the performance of higher educational institutions have undertaken several studies. The rate- of-return studies, studies on productivity of education and the estimation of performance indicators of universities are the major themes on which scholars have produced voluminous literature. However, these studies relate to the aggregate system of education and its performance without any specific reference to quality component. The quality is indirectly related, but not with any concentration on the type of institutions where the education is offered. The unit of analysis in such studies is not necessarily an institution like university, college or department. Therefore, educationists and policy makers have devised separate tools of analysis to assess quality of individual institutions. Further, governments and the public have become so quality conscious when education became a commodity and all kinds of institutions are offering the commodity in the market. To instill confidence in public, accredited organizations have been established to assess and accredit such quality institutions and they are supposed to be recognized by the government on the basis of some criterion. Today, almost all countries where private sector operates have established credible accreditation organizations to ensure quality of education both to the parents and to the government. These organizations have developed several techniques to assess the quality of education. The QAA⁴ for Higher Education, UK has developed benchmark statements and adopted a six point criteria similar to that of NAAC.

In the Western Europe, three instruments; the institutional appraisal, performance indicators and peer review are being used to ensure not only quality but also accountability. Thus assessment of quality or performance of higher education has already come of age (Stella, 2001).

The NAAC Criteria of Quality

In India, the NAAC has developed scientific procedures, methods and tools to undertake the exercise of assessment of institutions. The process of assessment involves preparation of self-study report by the institution, validation of the self-study report by a team of peers on the basis of on site visit and final decision of accreditation to be made by the NAAC committee. So far around 350 institutions have been accredited. Though some universities have shown reluctance in the beginning, they are all now following the line to get accredited by NAAC. The

⁴ . Quality Assurance Agency

NAAC has been using a set of criteria with the following seven items to assess the institutions.

Understanding variance in the type of Institutions, the seven criteria have been allotted differential weightages marked below are used for calculating the institutional score.

Table 1. The criteria of assessment for various types of institutions

Criteria	Universities	Units of Assessment	
		Affiliated /Constituent Colleges	Autonomous Colleges
Curricular Aspects	15	10	15
Teaching – Learning and Evaluation	25	40	30
Research, Consultancy & Extension	15	05	10
Infrastructure & Learning Resources	15	15	15
Students Support and progression	10	10	10
Organization and Management	10	10	10
Healthy Practices	10	10	10

- I. Curricular aspects, which includes initiation and design of courses, feedback, etc.
- II. Teaching, learning and evaluation, which includes educational technology, pedagogy, recruitment of faculty, etc.
- III. Research, consultancy and extension, that includes research output, freedom to publish, academic-service interface, etc.
- IV. Infrastructure and learning resources, which includes physical facilities, lab, library, auxiliary services, etc.
- V. Student support and progression that includes financial aid to students, student destination, counseling, etc.
- VI. Organization and Management, which includes the administrative mechanism, its automation, budgeting, Resources mobilization, etc.
- VII. Healthy practices in an open ended item that may include anything that promotes academic ambience.

The above seven points are assigned with different weights depending upon the unit of accreditation. The universities are given one kind of weightage system and the affiliated and autonomous colleges are weighted differently ultimately to arrive at a single weighted average, to assign grades such as stars or points, etc. This method is followed to avoid any problems in the inter-institutional comparison of scores (Mohanty, 2003).

After granting status of accreditation, university or college is expected to comply with the deficiencies and maintain accreditation standards continuously. Accreditation status to any university or college is granted for a period of five years and accordingly after five years it is reviewed again.

Quality assurance has four important components (Prasad, 2006): Everyone in the system has a responsibility maintaining the quality of the product or service; Everyone in the system has a responsibility of enhancing the quality of the product or the service; Everyone understands, uses and feels ownership of the system which are in place for maintaining and enhancing quality; The management and sometimes the customer or client regularly checks the validity and reliability of the systems for checking quality.

It is clear from the above criteria and the sub units of each criterion that the assessment has not taken the teaching-learning process, particularly the functions of the teachers very seriously. It is quite right and justified in the overall assessment of the institution. But, when the quality of teaching that is crucial for the overall quality of higher education is assessed, the present criteria appear to be inadequate. Further, the criteria cannot be applied to assess an individual unit like the Academic Staff College that is established specifically to improve quality of teaching in India.

Objectives of Academic Staff Colleges

Though Academic Staff Colleges are established as a part of the university system, they are in fact independent institutions of the UGC. Except for administrative supervision, the ASCs⁵ are totally financed and controlled by the UGC. The ASCs have emerged as units of UGC over a period of time and they are now rightly called as UGC-Academic Staff Colleges with diversified and enhanced responsibilities.

Three kinds of courses are organized by ASCs; Orientation for newly appointed, Refresher Courses for Senior Teachers and short term training courses for administrators.

The objectives of ASCs are to enable the newly appointed lecturer to:

- (a) Understand the significance of education in general and higher education in particular in the global context.
- (b) Acquire and improve basic skills of teaching and learning with innovative and advanced methods.
- (c) Utilize the time to improve the personality of the teacher.

In addition to above, the senior teachers are offered refresher courses in the subject of their teaching. Here, the major objective is to provide latest and up to date knowledge in the discipline and to familiarize the teacher with the operation of the advanced equipment. Educational administrators like the principal, Registrar, Accounts Officer and Heads of Departments, etc., are also provided opportunities of short term training course through Academic Staff Colleges to improve the quality of management.

Evaluation of the Work of Staff Colleges

The Academic Staff College scheme of the UGC brought a serious debate in the country when it was introduced in 1987. Later, it was accepted by the teaching community as a necessary process to be undertaken by every teacher in the system of higher education. The Pay Commissions of UGC have linked the career advancement of teachers with the attendance at the Academic Staff Colleges as one of the important criterion. This has attracted scholars to study the effectiveness of the scheme. Apart from Ph.D. dissertations in the departments of education, independent scholars who are intimately connected with the scheme have undertaken studies to assess the quality of the programs (Chalam, 2002). In his study used the feedback data supplied by the 44 staff colleges in the country and concluded that the impact of the scheme on the quality of education is positive. (Rao, 2003) in his study, developed a separate tool to collect data from all the 44 colleges and concluded that the independently obtained participants feedback rated contents, faculty, organization facilities etc., are unsatisfactory compared to the positive feedback given directly to ASCs. This study was undertaken at the end of the 5th year of the scheme. As he was in charge of the scheme in UGC, he has implemented some of the recommendations that arose out of his study. This has strengthened the scheme. (Sisodia, 2003), collected data from faculty, heads of departments, principals, etc., who have participated in ASCs programs. After a careful review of the literature on staff development and with the help of the statistical data, he concluded that, “there is optimism in the academic community about positive changes that these programs are bringing towards better teaching-learning environment in the institutions of higher education”. However, he has suggested that follow up programs are to be undertaken by the universities even after the teachers attend the ASCs to strengthen the quality

⁵ . Academic Staff Colleges

of teaching in India. These evaluation studies relate to the Eighth and Ninth Plan period. They provide us with a mixed feedback about the success of the scheme. As the scheme is one of the largest staff development programs in the world with a structured content and mandate, its success in realizing the objectives depends upon the quality control mechanisms that include the assessment of the colleges by an external agency like NAAC. The UGC has so far constituted committees under the plan grant scheme to assess the performance of the colleges and used only ad hoc criteria. It is time that a systematic and scientific criterion is to be evolved to ensure quality and assure the system that the Academic Staff Colleges will improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the country.

The Criteria to Assess Quality of Staff Development

The departments of higher education in the advanced countries are now aiming at the excellence in teaching and scholarship. The bearing report and the recent white paper of the Department of Education and Skills of the Government of UK clearly indicate this change. The UGC is supposed to maintain standards in higher education in India and in accordance with the mandate perhaps it has established Academic Staff Colleges to improve quality of teaching in the country. There is a tendency among some officers of UGC to implement some of their programs through the colleges without realizing the limited mandate of ASCs. The colleges have developed their own ethos and work culture that need to be kept in mind in the assessment of quality. They have emerged like Inter University Centers with a broad framework of self-assessment. But, there seems to be very little impact on the quality of the ASCs through this self-assessment. It is time now to devise criteria to assess and assure good quality in staff development. We suggest the following criteria to assess the quality of Academic Staff Development in India.

❖ *The content of the course offered* (It deals with the designing of the course). The exercise involved in devising the content, compatibility of the content with the objectives of the course, the level of the standard, the time devoted (hours of work) in designing the course content and the people involved in the exercise and others.

❖ *Academic background of Resource Persons* (It deals with the competency and the efficiency with which the faculty transact the content with participants) Educational qualifications, experience and expertise in the subject, national and international recognition, publications, facility in using advanced methods of teaching, research output, punctuality, communication abilities, interaction with participants, etc.

❖ *Relevance of Course Content to UG/PG Syllabus* (This is related to the content of the course to the UG and PG syllabi). The relationship of the topics to the core content of UG/PG syllabus, consulting the university syllabus of the concerned discipline, whether latest additions in the syllabus are considered as content, and others.

❖ *Innovations in Methods of Teaching and Evaluation* (This is important in terms of the latest developments in pedagogy). The use of innovative methods of teaching including lecturing, classroom management, use of educational technology including the computer, internet, web pages, and evaluation methods used as feedback; seminar papers, review of books, microteaching exercise and others.

❖ *Reading Material* (The quality of reference material and books provided to the participants). Reference books available in

the library during the course, journal articles suggested, reading material related to the content of the course, web pages suggested, CDs, etc.

❖ *Quality of Infrastructure* (This deals with the quality and adequacy of learning resources and hospitable conditions). Classrooms, guest house facility, dining hall, library, laboratories, computer and educational gadgets, AC, separate office, internet, phone and others.

❖ *Flow of Funds* (ASC courses are short-term fellowship programs and therefore relate how the funds are received at the ASC). The release of funds by UGC on time, the time gap between requisition and the receipt of funds by the ASC, UGC guidelines followed in spending, submission of accounts, cooperation from the host university, qualified accounts staff, others.

❖ *Organization and Management* (The criterion relates to the use of / manpower and the expertise in management). Full time Director, staff position, functions of staff specified, advisory committee meetings, Vice Chancellor's attitude to ASC, cooperation from affiliated colleges, communication techniques used, staff meetings, leisure and entertainment, others.

❖ *Potential for Implementation* (This takes into account how the training is ultimately passed on to the students at the institution level). Enthusiasm of the college/department to implement new ideas, interest of participants to implement, student's feedback, principal/head opinion and others.

The above criteria can be used to assess the quality of staff development programs offered by Academic Staff Colleges in India. The ASCs are offering broadly three categories of programs and the focus of each course differs. As there are nine items of reference here and each item points out at a specific purpose, they are to be weighted depending upon the type of course involved for assessment. The orientation course is a basic course for newly recruited teachers for four weeks and the refresher course is of three weeks duration for senior teachers. The training program for administrators is of short duration and is not related to any service condition. Therefore the following weightages are assigned to each category of the course out of a total score of 100.

Table 2. The Criteria to Assess Quality of Staff Development

Sl. NO	Criteria	Orientation Course (U1)	Refresher Course (U2)	Admin Training (U3)
1	Content of Course	10	15	15
2	Academic background of RP	15	15	10
3	Relevance of course content to UG/PG syllabi (present work)	10	15	5
4	Innovations in methods of teaching and evaluation	15	10	10
5	Reading material	10	10	10
6	Quality of infrastructure	10	10	10
7	Flow of funds	10	10	10
8	Organization and Management	10	5	15
9	Potential for implementation	10	10	15

The above criterion wise weightage is assigned keeping in mind the purpose and goal of each course.

Since the Academic Staff College offers all the three courses, a composite index combining the scores of the three can be calculated. In the case of each unit of the ASC, the following formula can be followed to arrive at a score.

$$\text{Unit Score} = \frac{\sum C_i W_i}{\sum w_i} \quad (i=1,2,\dots,9)$$

Where w_i = weightage of the i^{th} criterion

c_i = score of the i^{th} criterion obtained

The institutional composite score = $\frac{U1 + U2 + U3}{3}$

The scores are obtained once the visiting committee or peer team validates the self study report submitted by the Academic Staff College for evaluation on the basis of the on site visit. The grade or rank to each college can be given after the evaluation of all the colleges in the country. As the weightage system is uniform and unbiased, the scores are comparable across the country. The same criteria should also be used to assess the quality of courses offered by independent RC centers in India. This will facilitate the assurance of quality of staff development that has a seed value for the overall development of higher education.

Conclusion

With the advent of globalization the character of higher education is set of change. Higher education to be meaningful and productive must have avenues for excellence to flourish and develop. There will be a premium on quality with bench making of programs assuming importance. The impact of technologies will progressively increase. So universities need to look and ahead and prepare themselves for far reaching changes. Unless the quality aspects are not taken care of the malady that exists in higher education will never be eliminated. Academic Staff Colleges are established to provide opportunities of staff development to teachers in higher education. During the last 20 years of their existence, the colleges have created an academic culture of self-development among teachers. The courses are linked with the career advancement of teachers. However, the evaluation of the programs by the UGC through the visiting committees has not produced any concrete estimate. As the ASCs are now considered as important units to improve quality of teaching-learning process in the country, its quality assessment is critical for the future of higher education. 9-point criteria are suggested here to assess the Quality of Academic Staff Development in India. This will go a long way in assuring quality of the academic staff programs.

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