Why NAAC accreditation system needs a rethink

BY INVITATION

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The recent arrests of key figures within the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for alleged bribery and misconduct have sent shockwaves through the higher education sector. This crisis is deeply concerning, not just for the institutions involved, but for the credibility of the accreditation process, which is meant to be rigorous and impartial.

The evaluation of an institution's quality based on academic standards, faculty strength, research output, and infrastructure is tied to funding and regulatory approvals. Institutions with high ratings qualify for greater autonomy and access to govt grants. NAAC also plays a crucial role in shaping how universities and colleges are perceived both nationally and internationally. However, for years, there have been murmurs within academic circles about inconsistencies in its ratings. Some institutions with subpar infrastructure and weak academic credentials received higher grades than well-established universities. The recent arrests only confirm what many have long suspected, eroding trust in accreditation and leaving students, faculty, and policymakers in a difficult position. While India grapples with these challenges, it's worth examining how other countries structure their accreditation processes to minimise corruption and maintain transparency. Here are key reforms India needs to undertake keeping in mind global best practices:

1. Decentralise & diversify: India needs to move beyond NAAC's centralised control and establish multiple independent accrediting agencies, like in the US and Germany. This prevents excessive power concentration and allows institutions to choose accreditors that align with their academic focus. Institutions in the US undergo rigorous self-evaluations before external reviews, fostering accountability and continuous improvement. A peer-review model, involving vetted academicians, ensures ethical assessments resistant to corruption, while accreditation decisions and detailed reports are made public, enhancing transparency. In contrast, NAAC only publishes final ratings without sharing detailed reports. Some of our Institutions of Eminence and top universities should come together to create not-for-profit accrediting bodies with well-defined operating procedures. These agencies should have the same authority as NAAC, fostering competition based on credibility, rigour, and transparency. Ratings should rely on thorough peer reviews by vetted academicians and industry experts, ensuring fair and informed evaluations. This will create a system where institutions are judged on academic merit rather than bureaucratic discretion.

2. Shift focus to outcomes: Accreditation should focus on outcome-based metrics rather than just inputs like infrastructure and faculty numbers. Australia emphasises research impact, graduate employability, innovation, and societal contributions, and India should too. This shift will make accreditation a driver of institutional excellence rather than just another regulatory hurdle. Institutions must also commit to continuous improvement, integrating student feedback and faculty development into the accreditation framework. Instead of rigid grading, a more qualitative, improvement-driven approach, like the UK's, will push institutions to aim for long-term excellence rather than short-term compliance.

3. Strengthen governance and transparency: Strong governance mechanisms are essential to maintain the integrity of accreditation. Strict penalties for malpractice must be enforced, and any agency found violating standards or engaging in corruption should face severe action, including disqualification.

Transparency is non-negotiable. Instead of just publishing ratings, detailed accreditation reports must be publicly accessible, giving students, parents, and stakeholders a real picture of an institution's strengths and weaknesses. A risk-based evaluation model, like Australia's TEQSA, will ensure that regulators focus resources on institutions showing signs of underperformance or misconduct. High-performing universities should be rewarded with greater autonomy and less frequent reviews, reducing unnecessary regulatory burdens while keeping oversight where it's needed most.

In response to the crisis, NAAC has introduced new frameworks, along with online and hybrid evaluations. However, without deeper structural reforms, flaws will persist, driving talent toward foreign institutions. Let's use this moment to create a more transparent and fair accreditation process, one that genuinely upholds the academic excellence we strive for. ■

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