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PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GROUND**

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QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GROUND

ALKA SEHGAL* AND ARUNA BAJANTRI†

Abstract

This paper focuses on the study of quality assurance processes undertaken by agencies such as National Accreditation and Assurance Council (NAAC) in various institutions of higher education (IHEs) across the country. It is well understood that quality assurance is a globally recognized activity undertaken at higher education levels all over the world. Quality assurance processes involve agencies, institutions, practices and networks of actors and participants. The most important stakeholders or actors of quality assurance activities are teachers and students at higher educational institutions. They are not only involved in the central educational processes of teaching and learning, but are also primarily involved in the assurance and accreditation related processes. The paper thus studies the involvement of teachers and students of various higher educational institutions to understand whether quality assurance is actually perceived as a means to achieve quality in education or is it perceived as hindering central educational processes of teaching learning and professional growth of teachers and students. The analysis reveals that the actors find these activities and tasks allotted under the same as mandatory consume a substantial proportion of their official time, and affect their professional growth. Finally the findings suggest that the meaning of quality in higher education is perceived in terms of measurable parameters laid down by the assurance and accreditation agencies rather than a substantive meaning of quality as an indispensable aspect of higher education. This perception further brings in a shift in the understanding of goals of education. The paper thus concludes that the quality assurance process largely shifts the

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goals of teaching learning processes towards meeting the criteria of measurement set up by the quality assurance agencies, rather than aiming for larger social aims of education.

Keywords: Quality in Higher Education, Assessment, Assurance and Accreditation, Processes, Participants, Goals of Higher Education

I. Introduction and Rationale

The quest for quality in higher education has become a buzzword globally. Research on quality assurance in higher education increased substantially in Europe since the emergence of the 'evaluative state' (Neave 1988), in the late 1980s. Part of the explanation for this is related to the growth of quality assurance as a phenomenon. In the European context quality assessment activities began in the 1990s, and by the turn of the millennium almost all the countries entered quality assessment and ranking of the higher education institutions (HEIs) (Schwarz and Westerheijden, 2004, op.cit Cardoso, 2020). Furthermore, the Bologna Declaration (1999), and its emphasis on the need to develop comparable criteria and methodologies for assuring quality in higher education, also contributed to new developments in the field globally, the central concern of accrediting bodies in the realm of higher education is restricted to that of measuring quality. However this global surge in the accreditation for quality assurance in HEIs has affected the ecologies of higher education in innumerable ways. Many Studies on quality assessment and assurance in the global context reveal that it is almost impossible to singularly trace the possible effects of these processes on the educational culture only in terms of quality of education as there are some unintended consequences too (Srinivas & Salil, 2020, p. 3). Given the fact that short term accreditation practices based on ever changing criteria of quality assessment cannot indeed capture them precisely because essentially educational outcomes are gradual and long term. Critics point out that the quest of quality assurance and the related accreditation processes are misplaced at the level of methods and at the level of conceptualization of educational quality (Altbach, 2006, p.2). Education in its purest sense should foster certain indispensable values like truth seeking behaviours, social cohesion, equality and justice. It is beyond doubt that these values cannot be measured like any other marketable commodities, rather these values are

gradually perceptible in the society where social and political institutions work together with these goals.

Nevertheless, owing to the shifts in the goals of higher education in India, concern for quality found the space in larger discourse through the National Education policy 1986 which consequently led to the formation of accrediting bodies with an aim to monitor and improve HEIs. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (hereafter NAAC) came to be founded in pursuance of the National Education Policy (NEP) 1986. The policy invoked the idea of self-evaluation and self-improvement as integral to the excellence of institutions of higher education. NEP 1986 visualised the need for an institution which encourages the notions of self- assessment and accreditation in educational institutions. This institution would function as an accreditation body which would look into the quality of educational processes, participation and achievements of HEIs as subjects to be monitored and improved. NAAC was thus instituted in 1989 and the first HEIs undertook the accreditation process in early 1990s.

The NAAC holds its institutional mandate as a body which assesses and accredits HEIs with the objective of helping them to understand their strengths and weaknesses, challenges and opportunities and thereby work continuously to improve the quality of education being imparted by them. It further proclaims that its approach, in discharging its task, is ameliorative and enabling as opposed to punitive and judgmental. While the rhetoric of self-assessment, enabling and ameliorative remains part of NAAC's self-perception, the fact that accreditation by NAAC has been made mandatory for government institutions by the University Grant Commission (UGC) raises the question of how such a mandate is received by educational institutes, particularly by teachers and students. The process of institutional accreditation seeks involvement of teachers, students and its final assessment and accreditation has implications on the institution's status, its policy, and resources and thereby affect the choices of various stakeholders in terms of participation in educational processes like admissions, teaching, learning and evaluation.

NAAC seeks to define the assessment as 'evaluation of performance of an institution and is accomplished through a process based on self-study, and peer-review using pre-defined

criteria' (NAAC, 2021). It takes accounts of planned, unplanned, and spontaneous activities, resources, and achievements of the institutions which primarily relates to students and faculty's works and achievements. The process involves peer-review, consisting of senior academics who have held senior positions at academic institutions. They make an onsite visit to the institute, evaluate the self-study report, and make recommendation for accreditation and the final decision is made by the executive committee of the NAAC.

NAAC enumerates a list of values which include (a) the 'institutions' contribution to 'national development', (b) fostering global competencies among students, (c) inculcating value systems among the students, (d) greater usage of technology and finally, (e) the institutional quests for excellence. It seeks to take the higher educational institutions' role towards this end and make them as part of the process of accreditation. Similarly, responding to the reality of globalisation, it aims at fostering global competencies among students, though it remains undefined what constitutes 'global competencies'. It, however, underlines that higher education institutions need to develop skill for secondary and tertiary industries for the globalised economic activities and towards this end, it is imperative that they be innovative, creative and entrepreneurial in their approach as part of the skill development among the students. Related to this new and emerging global economy and market, the NAAC considers the usage of computer and information technology as a marker of higher education development. Accordingly, the usage of technology in higher education alludes to its greater inclusion in teaching-learning activities, and its governance. It further proclaims that HEIs can compete with the 'world class' institutions through the greater incorporation of technology in teaching, learning and evaluation. Finally, there remains the quest for excellence as a broader but overarching value for higher education. Though the quest for excellence is emphasised, it remains ambiguously defined. It is said that higher educational institutions strive to develop themselves into centres of excellence. Excellence in all that they do will contribute to the overall development of the system of higher education of the country as a whole. Against this value system, NAAC has developed seven criteria for assessment that are considered to be measurable through various processes.

It is thus important to examine these values and their ideological and theoretical underpinning to understand the larger process of accreditation and its implications on teacher and student communities.

It also is important to critically analyse the quality framework that is central to the process of assessment and evaluation. In the year 2017 a major change was introduced in the process framework by NAAC. The main feature of this change underlined the ‘shift (in the process) making it ICT enabled, objective, transparent, scalable and robust’(NAAC, 2019, p.5). At the outset this claim of objectivity and robustness needs to be assessed against the operational constraints posed by introduction of extensive quantification of the aforementioned quality indicators of higher education. This can be done by exploring the possible implications of such processes on teachers and students and the emerging idea of higher education. At the most basic institutional level of the processes of accreditation and assessment are the efforts of college and university teachers who are directly involved in teaching various courses of study, conducting research, planning and conducting events for students’ welfare and getting involved in co curricular activities in the form of various students’ societies. Along with direct involvement in these activities, teachers are largely responsible for documentation and record maintenance of all these activities for the purpose of accreditation and assessment. On the other hand, students who are at the receiving end of higher education also participate in various assessment related processes directly or indirectly. This paper tries to understand how teachers and students understand the NAAC’s exercise of accreditation of their institutions. Since teachers and learners are the most affected groups in such processes, it is deemed necessary to understand in what ways these large scale assessment and accreditation practices are being translated or incorporated into educational processes of teaching, learning and evaluation.

A careful look at the existing literature concerning quality assurance in higher education in the Indian context reveals that there are attempts being made to understand the issues of accreditation in higher education in the light of quality assessment processes. Nevertheless the solutions offered seem to replicate the existing frameworks adopted by the accrediting bodies. Many of these studies often overlook micro processes of higher

education that are supposed to be improved as a consequence of assessment and accreditation (Cardoso, 2015, p. 2).

Most of these studies discuss the efficiency of the tools of assessment through the perspective of business management and use managerial frameworks like advantages, benefits, challenges and disadvantages; something akin to SWOT analysis (see for eg. Aithel et.al, 2016). Then there are works which try to understand the impact of the accreditation on HEIs. While these studies claim to be based on empirical research, these do not get into detailed conceptual analysis of the idea of quality in education and also lack criticality in their approach while there are concerns raised about mandatory accreditation (eg. Ravikumar, et.al 2021).

II. Objectives of the Present Study

There have been several attempts to understand, study, and question the idea, the purpose and the actual processes of quality assurance adopted by these government agencies. These empirical studies largely seem to justify the whole idea of quality assurance in higher education. There are fewer attempts to critically analyse the quality frameworks adopted by the agencies, and most importantly there is little in terms of understanding the ways in which the professional lives of teachers and learners are affected by the procedural mandates set out by the accreditation and quality measurement scenario. With the framework of critical discourse around quality assurance and accreditation (AAC) processes, this study was conducted with the following objectives-

-to study the numerous ways in which accreditation and assurance processes influence teachers, their role, professional growth and issues of accountability and their understanding of quality in education. It is considered very important to understand whether the teachers perceive their role as foundational to the realisation of the idea of quality in higher education or they find it binding to abide by the parameters laid by the accreditation and ranking bodies. Does the sense of accountability prevail in the teaching-learning processes essentially as an indispensable aspect of educational endeavour or is it largely driven by the institutional mandates laid down by the ranking and accreditation agencies? How do academicians perceive the meaning of professional growth in this scenario? Is it embedded in the idea of a teaching and research university? Or does the

accreditation and quality assurance scenario create unrealisable targets of paper publication and involvement in research projects for the sake of meeting the criteria of quality measurement?

-to study the implications of the accreditation on HEIs in terms of micro-processes of education like teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation. As discussed in the previous section, it is quite noteworthy that accreditation and quality assurance processes require the participants, mostly the teachers and administrators of higher educational institutions, to engage in a whole lot of preparation for the measurement of the quality parameters laid out by the agencies. It means spending several hours through weeks and months collating relevant information, using many tools and techniques to present and analyse data as required by the quality assurance agencies that finally score and rank the institutions. It is still to be understood as to whether these time-consuming processes impinge upon the micro-processes of teaching and learning at the institutional level. This study tries to capture the nuances of such involvement in accreditation and ranking processes by the teachers and other administrative personnel in the HEIs.

to explore the shifts in goals of higher education as perceived by the actors of educational processes. As discussed earlier, the quest for accreditation and assurance in HEIs has in many ways attempted to redefine the goals of higher education in terms of neoliberal political and economic principles, wherein immediate measurable educational outcomes and techno-managerial priorities of labour market prevail. In such a scenario, how do the participants of these educational processes namely the teachers and more importantly students perceive the larger goals of education? Do they also see the real goals to be in tandem with the measurable goals of market driven outcomes?

-to understand whether AAC leads to an unintended culture of competitiveness, image management and hierarchy of institutions. Accreditation and assurance processes ultimately attach a numerical score to the participant HEIs as a marker of its relative standing with other institutions. Whether this aspect of ranking and scores lead to an unintended culture of competitiveness and hierarchy among the institutions?

-to study the perceptions of students about linkages between ranking / grading and quality of education and to further explore their choice and agency. Finally do learners, the real

stakeholders of educational processes, see the linkage between ranks and what they receive as education in these HEIs. Does this ranking process actually enhance their educational choices and agency in educational quality building?

In the next section we discuss the larger theoretical and ideological implications of accreditation and evaluation culture. In section three we discuss how the students and teacher communities understand and view the exercises of institutional accreditation. Conclusions are presented in section four of the study.

III. Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinning

At the heart of the conception of institutional accreditation lies the idea of ‘quality’ and educational standards. Both, the discourse of educational standards and quality in education, have longer trajectory in terms of being part of public discourse on educational provision. But they emerged as influential political and educational discourse ideas in post-world war II, having an enduring effect on policy discourse around the governance of higher education (Kumar and Sarangpani, 2004). Social and economic transformations owing to globalisation forged the links between new knowledge and skills for growth of global economies with that of educational processes. The standards of measuring the quality of education transformed likewise in the most developing economies of the world (Velaskar, 2010, p.70).

However, in India, the discourse of quality came to occupy centrality in late 1980s and early 1990s coinciding with opening up of Indian markets to global players and rolling out of privatisation as official policies. Rhetoric of quality came as central feature of the NEP 1986, as it ‘laid stress on the need for radical reconstruction of the education system, to improve its quality at all stages...’(GOI, 1986, p.2) the other feature of NEP 1986 was that in its bid to develop a national educational system, it sought to standardise educational system across the country. The NEP 1986’s roll out coincided with the advent of neoliberal economic thinking which had far-reaching implications for the nature of educational discourse.

It was against such a context that the idea of setting up of a centralised body such as NAAC institution germinated the educational vision of NEP 1986. At the heart of the

NEP 1986, remains the concern for decline and of the absence of quality education, and thereby it was underlined that a national framework, or standard system of education could ensure that the system of education is equipped with a certain degree of quality. Subsequently the argument that clearly seems to have been emerging was pertaining to a general concern about the standards and quality. There seemed to be a greater emphasis on the need to scale up things related to curricular aspects, teaching- learning aspects, and governance and infrastructure, and relating to economic relevance of higher educational products and programmes. There was an emphasis that standards needed to be higher in each of these independent areas. To raise standards requires expressing these standards quite explicitly- so that they become clearly stated objectives according to which these processes can be judged. Having said all this, the discussion around the very idea of quality as an overarching concern for accrediting bodies is wanting.

Krishna Kumar in his exposition on the ideas of quality in education, brings out the nuances of quality education debate, namely the one that arises due to competing conceptions of the term quality (Kumar ,2010). He identifies two meanings of quality in relation to education. One refers to the idea of quality that is an intrinsic characteristic of education and cannot be separated from the very understanding of education. Accordingly, no education is possible without an intrinsic characteristic quality in it. The second conception is one which underlines the quest of quality assessment of education at any level. This second conception of quality refers to “rank or superiority” of one education system or institute over the other (ibid., p.8). Hence the policy discourse reflects this quest of achieving quality and standards of education at par with some globally coveted educational institutions and emphasises more instrumentalist features of educational outcomes (GOI, 2010). These features are considered to be deliverables that can be measured to ascertain the quality or rather the degree of quality of education of any particular educational institution. Therefore the outcome based understanding is imposed on essential processes of education namely teaching, learning, curriculum and evaluation by fixing certain parameters of measurement (see for eg.NAAC website on guidelines for assessment).

There are some inherent ethical and operational issues of this conceptualisation of quality in education. Kumar (2010) points out certain important ethical dilemmas created by such

a conceptualisation of quality as measurable outcomes; namely the dilemmas of quality vs access, quality vs equality and choice vs agency. If quality is understood as an additional value to an educational process then it also implies that scaling up of education in terms of access and equality are antithetical to quality. In other words it is considered impossible to maintain certain standards of aforementioned quality if education be made equitable. How can there be all educational institutions of equitable quality? There have to be some institutions which are of better quality than others. In the Indian context there are certain higher education institutions that are considered quality institutions like the IITs, IIMs etc. While these have become benchmarks for quality in higher education, there is also an unsaid need to maintain the high quality of such institutions by controlling the access to these via merit and high fees structure. Another concern raised by Kumar is about the choice and agency dilemma (Kumar, 2010, p.12). He argues that in the quality of education debate the underlying difference between choice and agency is an ambiguous one and often the two ideas are used interchangeably. The aforementioned objective of choice enhancement through the processes of quality assurance and assessment of higher education is a reflection of the neoliberal agenda of enhancement of consumers' choice in the market. It is indeed ironic that the rhetoric of choice glosses over the more important aspect of agency not only in terms of freedom of choice of education but also in terms of allowing participants of the educational process to create avenues of transformation and transformative processes in education. The overarching objective of creating choices in higher education for learners through quality assessment and accreditation thus zeroes down to grade allocation and ranking, and beyond this there is hardly any scope of creating a sense of transformative agency in the participants of educational processes.

Scholars invested in examining the idea of ranking of the universities, have ruled that as a new management philosophy of educational institutions favour market principles in the governance of public universities rather than academic governance (Chattopadhyay and Nandy 2013). They assert that large scale assessments aimed at setting up 'international comparative measures of performance have become a global aspect of corporate type governance (New Public Management' (ibid. p.174).

There is an emphasis on performance and efficiency in measurable terms, promotion of 'audit culture' in the name of accountability, and a sentiment that sees students as customers while teachers as workers. Such a pervasive educational culture is inclined towards market oriented ethos of demand, supply and profit making. That further makes space for private enterprise in the field of education.

Ranking linked autonomy in university governance, as scholars have argued, the institutional autonomy is not granted towards the end of promoting academic freedom but to be more observant to business approach to government. Integral to such an approach remains the emphasis on accountability, output, fast decision-making and entrepreneurship. Such an approach, scholars suggest, is part of an attempt to reduce the public character and hence public funding to the universities, thereby altering the very character of the university. Such an approach seems to lead the university towards becoming an enterprise to be guided by short run.

Scholars further point out that the policy move is essentially oriented to create hierarchy among the universities and many state universities would continue to suggest remaining lower in the hierarchical order. Scholars have argued that inbuilt in the ideology of ranking and evaluation of the institutions remains the state's intent and a design to reinforce power relations in which teacher and universities themselves become the subject of discourse and begin to self-regulate (Sharma, 2019). Interestingly, she suggests that the power exercise here may not necessarily be repressive, yet it is effective insofar as it gets embedded in the practices exercised by teachers through discourse on ranking. Problematizing the policy rhetoric of world-class universities, she has argued that the discourse of world-class universities emanates from the power-knowledge relations in which teachers have to perform irrespective of structural constraints. The leadership and the power to innovate are the appeals to overcome any such barrier. She fears that the future of Indian universities may place teachers as subjects of practices thereby constraining autonomy. At the heart of the new discourse on institutional accreditation and world class remains the idea of efficiency rationale. The focus of efficiency rationale further remains on producing output which is concomitant with the demand in the market and satisfaction of the students. The talk of efficiency necessarily implies the greater usage of technology both in institutional governance and teaching-learning activities,

however, it is observed that instead of reflecting on the creative usage of the power of technology, there is greater emphasis on technology of power in institutional governance.

IV.Data and Methodology

The parameters of quality and processes to assure it are mostly developed by policymakers, and quality assurance agencies for the HEIs which in turn try to achieve the standards through their academic staff. It is important to understand what academics think about these processes, especially since there is evidence suggesting that the impact of quality assurance is dependent on academics buying into the process (Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens 2007). Hence, academics' support is essential for any successful improvement activity and is a crucial factor in influencing the accuracy and meaningfulness of the results achieved (Cardoso, Rosa, and Santos 2013; Laughton 2003). Therefore, the current study attempts to study teachers' opinions and experiences while engaging with the process of accreditation.

The entire education system is geared towards providing meaningful education to the young adults .They need to be heard so that their individual needs can be more meaningfully understood and provisioned for. Students are on the receiving end of these ideas. Therefore, besides teachers, students have been chosen to share their opinions and needs with respect to the process of accreditation leading to grades or ranks.

A sample survey method has been used to listen to the voices of teachers and students.Structured questionnaires using google forms were designed to seek responses from teachers and students on the following themes that emerged from the theoretical framework– the idea of quality in higher education; implications of following the processes to fulfil the accreditation criteria on essential educational processes of teaching and learning, teachers' professional growth and accountability; the dilemma of choice and agency; larger implications at the systemic level and challenges faced in the process.

In order to establish validity of the tool a pilot was conducted on an independent sample of 6 teachers and 10 students.Feedback was sought from 4 experts in the field of Education. Observations were compiled and appropriate changes were made to the tools.

The questionnaire for Teachers has 16 questions in all. 7 questions have several sub-aspects. In order to understand the range of responses a 4 point Likert scale has been used. Each question has an option of 'any other' thereby giving an opportunity to respondents to share their opinions on related issues besides what was being asked. 5 questions are open-ended.

Cronbach alpha has been used to check the reliability of the questions using Likert scale and the internal consistency of the responses. The mean alpha is 0.807, which reflects that the questions with the Likert scale are highly reliable and the responses are internally consistent with a range of 0.709-0.898.

The Google forms were sent to more than 100 teachers from varied disciplines across colleges and universities of different types including public UGC/state-funded; affiliated; and autonomous. An outreach was attempted to teachers in Delhi NCR, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh region. However majority of responses could be gathered from Delhi NCR only. 58 faculty members responded. The majority of the respondents 83% are from affiliated undergraduate and 7% from postgraduate departments and 10% are from autonomous colleges.

The researchers wanted to include faculty members who had experienced accreditation processes closely. (Table.1) Therefore, only those faculty members who had seen at least one or were specifically engaged in the process at different levels of preparation were involved. Respondents come from different disciplinary backgrounds like Economics, Mathematics, Literature, Sociology, Education, Finance, languages, Zoology, Chemistry, Political Science, and Law. Most of the respondents are teaching at the undergraduate level while few are from post graduate level.

Further, to understand how students understand and engage with the processes of accreditation and relevance of the same in their lives a separate questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. Questions were formed on the following themes on similar lines as Teachers-idea of quality in higher education, implications on essential processes underlying quality education, dilemma of choice and agency, larger

implications at the systemic level, exploring the link between grading and quality of learning opportunities offered and challenges faced in the process.

The tool has 8 questions in all. 5 questions have several sub-aspects. In order to understand the range of responses 4 point Likert scale has been used. Each question has an option of ‘any other’ thereby giving an opportunity to respondents to share their opinions on related issues besides what was being asked. 3 questions are open-ended.

Cronbach alpha has been used to check the reliability of the questions using a Likert scale and the internal consistency of the responses. The mean alpha is 0.841, which reflects that the questions with the Likert scale are highly reliable and the responses are internally consistent with a range of 0.753-0.929.

The Google forms were sent to more than 200 students from varied disciplines across colleges and universities of different types including public (UGC/state-funded); affiliated; autonomous Universities. However, 121 students responded of which 71% of the students are from affiliated undergraduate and postgraduate colleges 9% are from autonomous colleges. Respondents come from different disciplinary backgrounds like Economics, Mathematics, Literature, Sociology, Education, Finance, languages, Zoology, Chemistry, Political Science, and Law. Student sample was chosen from IInd year onwards as it was assumed that such students would have had some exposure to such issues. Most of the respondents, 68% are studying in the third year, 14% in the second year, and 7% from the fourth year of undergraduate programmes, while the rest 11% are at the postgraduate level.

Table1. Distribution of the respondents

Affiliation	Teac hers	Stude nts
Constituent colleges	83%	65%
Central University	7%	7%

Departments		
Autonomous	10%	9%
Do not know	0%	22%
Experience of teachers		
1-3 years	9%	NA
4-6 years	24%	NA
More than 7 years	67%	NA
Exposure to Accreditation Processes	Teac hers	
3 cycles	27%	
2 cycles	36%	
1 cycle	31%	
Observed none but helped in preparation	5%	

Research guidelines related to anonymity of researchers and their responses have been maintained. The survey is constrained in its reachability as most respondents from Delhi NCR region have responded. Despite repeated attempts the researchers could not substantively receive data from outside Delhi.

The data thus collected was analysed qualitatively and the analysis is discussed in the next section.

V. Analysis and Discussion

Idea of quality of education -We explored the emerging idea of learning at higher education with teachers and students. 52 % of teachers report learning as uniformly planned, predictable and measurable and 84 % of the teachers believe that the focus has moved towards outcome based learning. 72% feel that they are not able to respond to the unique learning needs of the students. And there are a majority of teachers who reported that learning has to be linked to the skills for employability, and job market oriented skills. While 60% of teachers reported that the scope of education has been reduced to a minimalist and survivalist agenda.

Interpreting these responses it is clear that there is a shift from the core of idea learning as a central core to any educational endeavour. As discussed earlier, the concerns for quality in education have always attempted to measure learning as a parameter of quality. Nevertheless, the core philosophical underpinnings of the idea of learning as linked to the attainment of freedom of thought, criticality, and pursuit of higher goals in the lives of individuals have been reduced to learning as prescriptive and imposition of predetermined and measurable outcomes. This latter understanding seems to have become a norm for teachers in the current scenario of accreditation and quality assurance processes.

Another important aspect of learning at higher levels is that of creativity, and higher education has to provide avenues for creative engagement for both teachers and students. The findings here reveal that 65 % of the teachers felt that creativity can be nurtured by giving freedom to teachers, intrinsically motivating teachers to improve themselves, training teachers to free themselves from rigid frameworks for the execution of policies, and creating scope for flexibility towards building human capacity to set new goals for self and the world. However, 39% of teachers' opinions highlight the need for a competitive environment and predetermined well-defined frameworks for teaching learning and assessment and training students to efficiently pursue predetermined goals. .

Majority of the responses from students starkly reveal that the majority of them value flexibility, and intrinsic motivation to set new goals and make paths to achieve them so that creativity can be nurtured in the processes of teaching and learning.

The majority of teachers and students believe that the essential core of education can be nurtured by creating an environment of freedom as against the culture of control and monitoring created by bureaucratic visions which may not essentially be aligned to the goals laid down by the AACs and other ranking agencies.

VI. Implications on Essential Processes Underlying Quality Education

It becomes critical to have defensible evidence of effectiveness and appropriateness of criteria that are likely to be scaled up. Reforms towards improvement in education are known to be ideologically driven by ideas, ideals, values and assumptions about the purposes of education, socio economic future of a nation, value of public education in a democratic society. Higher education is a space for a plural inclusive and critical environment.

Reforms should influence microprocessors that should be reflected in the teaching-learning activities of HEIs, however, there is little evidence on that front. It is crucial to understand what teachers who implement these reforms in the classroom think about, especially since there is evidence suggesting that the impact of quality assurance is dependent on teachers buying into the process (Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens 2007).

Teachers play the most crucial role in accuracy and meaningfulness of the results achieved. Teachers are also the first ones to be blamed for failure of any such initiative. In the quality assurance processes both students and employers are asked regularly to give the feedback on the quality of that education or institution however teachers seldom get such an opportunity (Barandiaran-Galdós et al. 2012).

There is a clear focus globally on integrating learning outcomes in existing Quality Assurance schemes or policies where both accreditation / evaluation use student learning outcomes as criteria for assessing quality. Impact of these policies are studied by assessing students learning outcomes and often neglecting the teacher-who is likely to be impacted the most by these measures. The current study attempts to capture impact of these reforms from the perspective of teachers and see how it impacts them professionally and their idea of their role and notion of learning at higher education level.

According to 80% of the teachers they spend at least two hours per week on documentation and data management and related activities as allotted by their respective institutional administration for quality assurance. This time expands further at the time of sending out annual reports and prior to the visit of the Peer team that represent the accreditation and ranking agency. The majority of teachers feel that their workload has increased owing to these kinds of activities. This also impacts their time to prepare for teaching and related activities. Majority of the teachers are experiencing a shift in the idea of learning in higher education. Learning is becoming a uniformly planned predictable and measurable activity. This presents what is the Limited view of learning which has become synonymous with behavioristic education theory and pedagogy. According to this theory learning is something that can be predicted and accurately measured once it has occurred (Stenhouse 1975). This predictable outcome is linked with the idea of highest success reflecting in higher grades/ ranks of the institutes.

This is a classic example where the primary agent-the teacher is disempowered systematically . Education should not be a privilege. Change dominant education settings that generate a privileged narrative space for some social groups and a space for any quality and subordination for others (Giroux1994). Classroom processes should enable the agency of the learner and educator. The role of a teacher is to bridge the gap between students from diverse and marginalised backgrounds and become a critical instrument of social transformation. In this respect the study brings out that the majority of the teachers are not able to respond to diverse learner needs in the classroom and still the accreditation and assurance processes are hardly able to capture the real issues. Instead, the overemphasis on outcome-based learning, which is measured in terms of the so-called student progression and employability parameters, restrains teachers to evolve methods to reach out to the real issues of learning faced by students. They feel a certain level of flexibility can help them develop richer and engaging classrooms.

The most crucial criticism of the AACs coming from various educational thinkers refers to their indiscriminate yardsticks of measurement that are applied uniformly on all academic disciplines and their teaching and learning processes. The ideas like innovation in teaching, best practices followed by the institutions, innovative ecosystem etc

operationalised through assessment and measurement of technology use in HEIs, documentation of publicity events and linking up with the techno industrial market.

The findings of this study suggest that 40% of the teachers feel there is a significant emphasis on ICT to enhance the quality of education; they also felt that it takes away from the hands-on interactive experiences and nature of learning. Clubbing the growth of ICT with the growth of quality in education implies a considerable diminution and trivialisation of the concept of education. When ICT is mentioned as a means of adding value to the transfer of education the teachers and learners try to include the same in almost every educational interaction in the classroom and outside. This may be understood as a part of image building of HEIs for the sake of accreditation and ranking.

VII. The Dilemma of Choice and Agency

It has been pointed out earlier that the notion of quality in education emphasises the rhetoric of choice. Enhancement of choice in education at all levels is considered a necessary step towards economic and structural reform (Kumar, 2010). This has led to the creation of spaces for private universities and also to the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities of providing accessible education to a large section of the society. In this respect ranking and accreditation is promoted in the name of creating avenues for students to make better decisions regarding the choice of HEIs for higher education. In this study, it emerged that teachers and students both agreed that accreditation and ranking do help them make choices in higher education. More than 60% of teachers and more than 75% of students alluded that accreditation processes do help students and parents to choose better education. Nevertheless, both these participants to the same extent accepted the fact that this choice is being created through the setting up of private universities and colleges. It is unclear whether accreditation indicates any quality in these privately run HEIs but it does give them legitimacy to exist.

Another notable contradiction about the rhetoric of choice is that, in reality, there are many things that control access to higher education for students in the form of merit, affordability, and geographical reach. The overarching social constraints of gender, class, and caste which determine educational access cannot be addressed unless there are larger

systemic and structural interventions. Students and teachers in this respect have acceded that accreditation of HEIs has little to do with equitable access to the disadvantaged sections of society.

An emphasis on educational choice also glosses over a more important aspect of agency. Educational choice is akin to a market-like situation where the participants are reduced to consumers who can choose between various products in the form of HEIs, but whether these choices give them agency to transform education and their own lives in a large way is still questionable. Data revealed an ambiguity in this aspect. When students were asked if they think accreditation of HEIs takes away control from the learner in her growth, the majority of the students disagreed, while the majority of teachers agreed that such assessment practices do take away control and teacher's autonomy in teaching-learning processes.

These findings also reveal that there is a greater need to explore these aspects in relation to accreditation processes. Existing studies give little attention to the deeply entrenched issues of structural disadvantages and whether processes of quality assurance take into account these aspects and in what ways.

The present study also reveals that there are larger implications of quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms at the systemic level. It is discussed in earlier sections that these processes adopt a mechanistic approach in the name of checks and balances, it is also observed that such approaches also impinge upon the institutional mechanisms at the level of leadership and governance and the overall academic environment of the HEIs. The following section discusses the findings of this study with respect to the implications of accreditation processes at the systemic level.

VIII. Larger Implications at the Systemic Level

This study is focussed at gauging the implications of accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms on micro-educational processes in terms of teaching and learning. It emerges that there are some unintended consequences of quality assurance mechanisms at the institutional level. These consequences can be seen with respect to the shift in the vision of higher education to that of techno-managerial priorities at the institutional level which

further implicates the overall educational endeavour in unimaginable ways. The biggest example of this would be an overemphasis on the use of technology in education with an intent of managing data, profiling information related to teachers, and assessing ‘educational performance’ for effective measurement of learning outcomes as indicators of quality. The most recent development in this field is the promotion of the use of blockchain technology in HEIs (see for eg. Voola, P. 2020).

Apart from this, the quality assurance mechanisms may lead to some unintended externalities like creation and legitimation of space for private players in higher education, and consequently affect funding in higher education (Chattopadhyay & Nandy, 2012). No longer accreditation and ranking are closed-ended processes concluding at ranking or grading of HEIs, as there are attempts being made to link accreditation with that of the idea of autonomy in higher education. However this idea of autonomy is itself a confounded one. But present neoliberal policy discourses understand autonomy as self-management in terms of financing, self-regulation and accountability. Scholars have argued that ‘the increased autonomy given (in this manner) to the institutions has reduced the academic freedom of the institutions’(A.G Kumar, 2019).

IX. Conclusions

This small scale study has brought out some important implications of the accreditation and quality assurance processes on the participating HEIs, teachers and students and on the overall ecology of higher education in the country. It has most starkly brought out the forged linkages between quality of education and its measurement through parameters laid down by the AACs. The larger systemic implications here is the creation of an ecology of institutional mechanisms which values bureaucratic rationality that seeks to regulate public institutions through the mechanisms of checks and balances and an obsession for uniformity. In the context of ranking and accreditation, this rationality bypasses heterogeneity and devalues diversity. Teachers and students in HEIs are largely implicated in these processes through direct involvement in record keeping of data that represent the quality in education as per the parameters laid out by the agencies and accreditation bodies. And consequently the very idea of quality of education, larger aims

and goals of higher education, academic growth and aspects of choice and agency seems to be getting redefined towards meeting the criterion of assessment and ranking.

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