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Why it's hard to trust India's university rankings

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India is an academic powerhouse. At least, that is the picture you get from the records of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Of India's accredited universities, 140 or one of every three has a top A grade. Of these, 42 are at pole position with an impressive A++. When it comes to colleges, 546 have an A grade, 319 an A+ and 87 an A++. The stakes are high because such ratings allow a college to open its doors to foreign students, seek grants or even acquire autonomy to grant degrees. Eight universities, largely private and deemed, have so far been accorded scores by this body of evaluators that are even higher than those for the Indian Institute of Science, which is India's pre-eminent institute, according to National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) rankings. It's almost as if we live in a country that is the mecca of higher

education in the world.

However, a deeper look reveals that even the government's own NIRF ratings for the top 50 state universities are at odds with NAAC scores, not to speak of what industry experts in various fields say.

Evaluation System 'Manipulated'

Educationists say NAAC's inspections, though purportedly a rigorous four-step process (see box), have been a matter of controversy since 2010 when many institutes that were stripped of their deemed-university status received top grades from NAAC.

For years, there's been talk of how the evaluation system is manipulated. In 2015, at an executive committee meeting, it was revealed that a member of an inspecting team found an envelope containing Rs 1 lakh cash in a "gift bag" given to him by a college after assessment. A few years ago, NAAC even discovered identical self-study reports (SSRs) submitted by different colleges. These SSRs, which are meant to be submitted by the college under scrutiny, are a key step in the assessment

process. There have also been cases when two different sets of score sheets were submitted for the same college. Such instances of forgery by inspectors had then forced NAAC to approach the Central Bureau of Investigation.

More recently, in September 2022, NAAC had withheld the grading result of MS University, Baroda, after receiving an anonymous tip that university authorities tried to influence the peer review team with gold, cash and other favours. However, NAAC subsequently endorsed the improved grading, terming the allegations “false”.

Call To Investigate Processes

And now, NAAC is embroiled in another controversy. Bhushan Patwardhan, chairman of its executive committee, has stepped down after requesting an independent national-level inquiry into the processes and systems used by the assessment body on these very grounds of alleged corruption.

In his letter Patwardhan said, “After receiving various complaints from the stakeholders, and review committee reports, I had expressed my apprehensions earlier about the possibility” of the rating process being compromised, “leading to awarding of questionable grades” to some institutions of higher education.

Many educationists told TOI that Patwardhan was keen to “set things right” in a process that is ridden with inconsistencies and open to manipulation.

“Grades are not reflecting reality. The deeper problem is moral; the authorities know that, but there is complete inaction to resolve the problem,” said a former vice chancellor of a Central university.

Garbage Research, Fake Internships

Senior educationist and former All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) chairman S S Mantha said the main issue is that NAAC's evaluation, being a quantitative process, is now being “gamed”. Explaining the method, Mantha said, “Chart out all the 1,000 key indicators under the seven criteria and put down the maximum achievable score, and work backwards to create necessary documents. ”

He explained that, for instance, NAAC assigns 25% for research and innovation based on papers published by faculty. Towards this, PhD students are now enrolled in large numbers, especially in deemed universities, and each one is asked to publish at

least two papers. In a year, 5,000-6,000 research papers are churned out in this way, but their relevance and quality are a matter of debate. “It is just a big printing press.”

Internationally recognised rankings such as QS, Times Higher Education, or Academic Ranking of World Universities, too assign high weightage to research – about 50%. But while NAAC merely asks for the number of PhD students and papers published, other international ranking agencies further quiz universities on connecting research with industry, on patents granted or new products or processes devised. “Today, Indian deemed universities have a full-fledged patent office on their campus, the good ones and the ones pretending to be good. So, they know the game,” added Mantha.

Three years ago, the AICTE also mandated internships among the parameters used to judge an institute. Close to a million students now wait in queue for one every year. “In states like Kerala, Odisha and parts of the Northeast it is impossible that every child will get an internship because there are few industries. So today, India has many edtech firms that are ready to give internships to hundreds of students if a college agrees to use their software services. Similarly, in case of placements, companies offer thousands of jobs but these students are benched for months after their graduation. Has NAAC ever called a graduate to ask if s/he actually has a job?”

UGC Sitting On Recommendations

A former VC of Mumbai University described the rot as “very old”. A Niti Aayog committee appointed by the prime minister in 2017 said, “The existing accreditation system, driven by NAAC and NBA, suffers from poor coverage of institutions and lack of credibility among the public at large.” It had recommended that NAAC’s monopoly be broken and third-party agencies be allowed to accredit institutes. But these suggestions were not implemented by the University Grants Commission.

As a former IIT director said, “India has a regulatory system which was set up when the size of the higher education system was ‘x’. Today, the size is 4x. We need to reinvent mechanisms of governance. There is a stress on the entire system and the business of rating that India follows currently has been outdated for a decade.”

In fact, he added: “The real regulators are those in society at large, such as students, parents, industry. If there is transparency,

accountability and honesty on every front from institutions, there is no need for a rating. ” While that idea may be valid in an ideal world, multiple rating agencies that look at outcomes may still be the only durable and meaningful path to take.