

Education reforms, accreditation and the role of academies

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The editorial entitled ‘Higher Education: Rocky Road to Reform’¹ and subsequent articles that appeared in *Current Science*^{2,3} have been debating the proposed Government reforms in higher education. In particular, there has been intense debate on the first version of the draft Bill on the proposed National Council for Higher Education and Research (NCHER). A general criticism has been that this draft Bill is full of bureaucratic procedures, undermining the basic objectives of the original recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission – to preserve the autonomy of the universities and to ensure that a system of accreditation is set up to monitor the quality of the Indian higher education system. It was felt that the proposed NCHER Bill would lead us to a ‘dead end’ in the path of education reform². As a result of the debate and several other meetings with a number of groups throughout the country, the Government is now reformulating the earlier draft of the NCHER Bill. The future of the University Grants Commission (UGC) is to be decided by the fate of the NCHER Bill which, in its draft form, had recommended subsuming UGC in the proposed new Council. It is understood that there is considerable opposition to this concept from several quarters. The Government thus has not been able to take a final decision on the state of the proposed NCHER. The fact that medical education is not included in the purview of the Bill was another debated issue.

Apart from the NCHER Bill, four new bills on education reform are being considered (www.edgeforum.in/2010/education_bills.php) and to be introduced in the Lok Sabha. These bills have so far not been formally introduced in both houses of the Parliament, but could be introduced during the next Parliament session. All these bills are expected to affect the functioning of the academic institutions, with perhaps a bigger role given to the academic community. *The question that will be discussed here is whether the academic community is willing to take up a greater responsibility in governance of its own institutions by actively participating in the reform process.*

The present note focuses on ‘The National Accreditation Regulatory Authority

for Higher Educational Institutions Bill, 2010’ expected to be introduced in the Parliament. The Bill demands mandatory accreditation of all the higher educational institutions if they have to be recognized by the Government. If this is to be done for all our universities and colleges running into thousands, we will need a large number of recognized accreditation agencies to do the job. Presently, the accreditation for higher learning is overseen by the following 15 autonomous institutions established/recognized by UGC (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_recognized_accreditation_associations_of_higher_learning#India).

- All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), which may be superseded by the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) for technical and management colleges
- Distance Education Council (DEC)
- Indian Council for Agriculture Research (ICAR)
- Bar Council of India (BCI)
- National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)
- Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)
- Medical Council of India (MCI)
- Pharmacy Council of India (PCI)
- Indian Nursing Council (INC)
- Dentist Council of India (DCI)
- Central Council of Homoeopathy (CCH)
- Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM)
- GGS Institute of Information Communication Technology India
- National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)
- Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).

The Government is now proposing to set up an independent ‘National Accreditation Regulatory Authority’ that will take measures to develop and regulate the process of accreditation of higher educational institutions (and programmes conducted therein), and to further monitor the functioning of the numerous independent accreditation agencies that are expected to be set up and approved to meet the large need of accreditation.

As of now, the Chairman of UGC will be an ex-officio member of the committee that has been proposed to select the Chairman and four other members of the proposed apex National Regulatory Authority. The main features of the Bill, and some comments on them, are as follows:

1. The new bill has made accreditation by a recognized accreditation agency a mandatory requirement for all universities and higher educational institutions. The criteria and methodology for recognizing independent private/public accreditation agencies have been given in detail in the Bill. A multiplicity of accreditation agencies is provided for.
2. This bill, unlike the NCHER Bill (which is applicable to whole of India), is not considered to be applicable to Jammu and Kashmir. (It is believed that this feature is likely to be modified to make all the reform bills uniformly applicable to the entire country.)
3. The proposed bill will be also applicable to medical education and research, unlike its exclusion provided for in the draft NCHER Bill. (The cases of corruption against the President of MCI and the subsequent dissolution of the erstwhile Council, have perhaps enabled this positive change to be brought about. The Ministry of Health may still have some concern about this provision.)
4. The issue of gender has been brought to the fore by ensuring that the five-member new Authority will have at least one woman member.
5. The selection of the Chairman and four other members (including one woman) proposed in the new Authority will be done by a *single* selection committee. (The provision in the draft NCHER Bill had a multi-layer system of selection, one for the Chairman and another for the other members.)
6. A point to be noted is that the committee to be set up for selecting the Chairman and members of the Authority is to be chaired by the Cabinet Secretary. The Secretary, MHRD and the Chairman, UGC are ex-officio

members. *There is an expert from the medical community, one from the agricultural community, one from the legal community, but none from the science, technology and engineering community. This needs to be corrected.*

The new proposed 'Authority' has suggested the setting up of a number of accreditation agencies by a body of professionals in various disciplines. These new agencies will have to seek the approval of the Authority to function as accreditation agencies. The role of NAAC, AICTE and MCI and other Government-sponsored bodies is not clearly specified, but they may also have to be approved by the new Authority. This model of allowing the setting up of a number of accreditation agencies (but to be approved by the Government) is similar to the US higher education model, where the private organization of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; www.chea.org), works closely with the US Department of Education (USDE) when accreditation of institutions using US Government funding is involved. In the US model, however, not all accreditation agencies have to be recognized by USDE, but only those that would accredit an educational institution that is receiving Government funds. Members of the public and the academic community respect the accreditation given by an agency formally recognized by CHEA.

Under the new reforms in the process of accreditation, the new accrediting agencies to be set up will be autonomous organizations, independent of the Government system. Also, these will be available for individual universities for getting accreditation for a specific purpose relevant to the expertise of that agency. The autonomous accreditation

agency could be a company registered under Section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956; a society formed and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860; a Trust formed under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882, or any other law in force at the time.

As mentioned earlier, we have only a limited number of recognized accreditation agencies in the country. The need is enormous. In the US, there were 80 recognized accrediting agencies under CHEA, as reported in 2007. If the task of accreditation is made mandatory in India, there will be a need of setting up such agencies in a big way. *The question now is: 'Who will come forward to form such accreditation agencies?'* Do we have, in India, a large number of professional bodies (including all the science and engineering academies) who would be willing to set up such agencies of their own? Are the professional societies which carry out activities like publication of journals, organizing seminars and workshops and publishing reports keen and competent enough to start such agencies? How will they finance and structure themselves for these activities? Do they believe in, and are they committed to, the fact that they have the ethical and moral responsibilities to see that their specialized areas of education and research are pursued with high quality in the university system? Apart from this, they need to be suitably equipped to undertake this complex job of accreditation.

If the various academies and professional bodies do not come forward to take up this additional responsibility of setting up accreditation agencies, it is likely that pseudo professional groups would set up 'fly-by-night' operations, if they see financial benefits (including possibilities of using unethical practices) in such enterprises. This happened when we opened the channel of setting up of

private educational institutions. Certainly one has seen some good private initiatives, but there have been some equally dubious educational institutions that were started under the garb of providing quality education. We have yet to come out of that phase when serious issues were raised in certifying 'deemed to be universities' and the unfair practices of some of them. The national academies such as the Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc), Bangalore and others have to take a lead and shoulder this responsibility of ensuring quality education in our system. The Government has opened the doors to such academies to take up this responsibility if they so wish to do so. Questions may be raised by the 'ivory-tower' regarding the role of the academies. One can only quote from the well-drafted section on 'Role of the Academy' in the *Year Book* of the IASc, which states:

'...the Academy considers that the scientific community has a unique contribution to make not only to the flowering of science in India but also to national character'.

In my view, ensuring the pursuit of high-quality science and engineering in our university system, with the academies taking this role of accreditation, is certainly one way of adding respect to our national character. Will IASc take the lead?

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 595–596.
2. Lavakare, P. J., *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 1157.
3. Chaddah, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 1419.

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Seed-cane marketing – a multi-million industry in the offing

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Diversification of more than 10 mt of food grains for bio-energy production by one of the most developed nations has opened a new discussion on the lack of biomass for energy production. The

sources of biomass in India are even more meagre and are in perpetual competition with the food grains. The shrinking per capita land area coupled with increasing demand for energy has generated

enough heat in the political, social and scientific circles. The ever-increasing inflation rate is mainly attributed to the increasing energy costs, mostly in the form of transport fuel.