

It's here and just in time

Indian schools should learn from the American debate on the relevance of the accreditation system

Two publications in a span of one year (*Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2015, and *New York Times*, 20 October 2016) shook the world of accreditation. They literally rejected the nearly-a-century-old system of quality benchmarking widely practised in the world's best business schools accusing them of connivance and cartelisation to help the colleges and universities accredited by them to qualify for state funding and academic support.

WSJ's editorial accused accreditation agencies of forming a cartel among themselves to decide on what should be the definition of quality in MBA education. And, *New York Times*, quoting the high profile Senator Marco Rubio (Republican Party's Presidential runner-up), saw red in the sudden collapse of two accredited colleges, Corinthian Colleges and ITT Technical Institute. It blamed the accreditation agency – Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) – the nation's largest accrediting body for-profit schools which eventually led to the starting of the process of winding up of this agency – the first such decisive action against any agency in a century of accreditation practice.

It took Judith Eaton, chairman, Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the American regulator, to defend and save the accreditation system from an impending disaster of being rejected outright. It would have had a major cascading effect on nearly 2,000 schools that come under the accreditation tag. "Our higher education system is controlled by what amounts to a cartel of existing colleges and universities,

which use their power over the accreditation process to block innovative, low-cost competitors from entering the market," Senator Rubio had stated. Having said that, he pushed for a voluntary certification process for vocational and non-traditional education.

"Accreditors themselves are asking the tough questions and taking on innovative challenges," was Judith Eaton's counter. "They are engaged in expanding competency-based education, replacing or augmenting time on task with evidence of student skills. They are engaging partnerships between their accredited institutions and innovative providers, such as 'massive open online courses' (MOOCs). They are exploring ways to better assist institutions where graduation rates need to improve and default rates need to diminish." In the Indian context too, a sort of duopoly exists in the accreditation business, with two agencies, set up under the aegis of the government, active in the field. They are: National Board of Accreditation (NBA), under the ministry for HRD, and National Accreditation & Assessment Council (NAAC), under the University Grants Commission (UGC). Accreditation, for all practical purposes, is compulsory in India, with many aspects of business education, such as seat expansion, new campus opening, autonomy status, etc, being closely tied to the accreditation status by one or the other of these two agencies.

No level playing field

"After more than a decade of international accreditation experience, the overseas accreditation still does not enjoy a level playing field with the local accreditation, which has kept accreditation as an exclusive preserve of the government," comments

one of the directors of Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), who did not want to go on record, as IIMs are under the ministry, which controls the accreditation agencies as well. "It is our desire and earnest hope that international accreditation is officially recognised in India," says Jeffrey Alderman, president, Accreditation Council for Business Schools & Pro-

grams (ACBSP), Kansas city, USA, arguably the largest accreditation agency in terms of accredited member schools (numbering over 1,100).

John Fernandes, former president, AACSB International, had initiated formal discussions with the influential government and academic leadership for such recognition almost a decade earlier, with no tangible outcome. "We have been working with India for over a decade and many an academic leader of Indian origin has been advising us about this," John told this author when he met him at Tampa, Florida, the global headquarters of the agency that celebrated a century this year.

Though accreditation agencies, such as AACSB; ACBSP; Association of MBAs (AMBA) London; European Federation for Management Development (EFMD), Brussels; and International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE), Kansas city; among others, are powerful brands themselves. They have their own specific sphere of influence worldwide. Official recognition confers its own benefits, not so much for the agencies to operate in the given geography, but to its member schools, which in turn would also impact on the agency's own growth of business in the country they operate in.



Bijoy Sahoo
Former Dean, NCCU



Amy Memon
Manager,
Accreditation of
AACSB International

At the moment, India has about 38 international accreditation processes completed in 34 colleges. Among the, XLRI Jamshedpur (AACSB & AMBA) and M.S. Ramaiah Institute of Management Bengaluru (ACBSP & IACBE) have two accreditation each, while Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, have emerged the first Indian school to have a triple crown (AACSB, EFMD-EQUIS and AMBA). It joins the league of about 54 schools around the world, which have this distinction. Adding to the international league is a home-grown accreditation system called South Asian Quality System (SAQS), aimed at the South Asian market under the aegis of SAARC. It now has some 15 schools under its ambit and is part of the Association for Management Development in South Asia (AMDISA), Hyderabad.

Onward for big push

Realistically, the country could have had more accreditation globally, the industry pundits say, since it had started out more than a decade ago. It was thwarted by the restrictive regulatory regime. However, this is about to undergo a drastic change, with the increasing onslaught of global Ivy League universities and colleges in the business education sphere. Initially, they are looking at the executive MBA space, which admits students with five-to-10 years of prior experience. The mainstream business education even today admits mostly students with little or no industry experience.

Industry experience and overseas exposure are essential pre-requisites for most accreditation systems. "Our MBA accreditation system insists that the cohort strength should have an average three years of experience prior to joining the graduate programme," explains Mark Stoddard, director, operations, AMBA, the



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London-based accreditation agency. According to Stoddard, most Indian schools could qualify only for the Master of Business Management (MBM) accreditation, which does not require prior industry experience, but retains the same rigour of the top-of-the-line MBA programmes. "Our PGDM schools are the best bets for this sort of accreditation," explains the acting

director of the Management Development Institute (MDI) Gurgaon (now Gurugram). MDI, incidentally, was the first school to be internationally accredited by any agency, when it obtained its accreditation from AMBA in 2006.

Accreditation systems around the world seek to ensure that the processes being adopted are top-of-the-line, practical and application-oriented while also having the potential for continuous improvement and sustenance over a period of time. The systems essentially should adhere to the mission set for the school and any deviation from this mission should

be fully justified by the school, while the accreditation process is on. The process is almost universal across all the accreditation systems around the world and even among the two Indian accreditation systems – NAAC and NBA. Both have only recently reworked their process documentation, in line with the competitive accreditation systems prevailing around the world.

Generally, two types of accreditation system prevail in the industry – programmatic and institutional. The programmatic approach is to scrutinise and improve the MBA of PGDM courses and gauge individual programme quality from the point

of its content, delivery and learning outcome for the students from the specific course. On the other hand, institutional accreditation looks at the institution as a whole, to decide whether or not the institution is capable of offering world-class programmes. "Essentially, both arrive at the same goal – improvement of student learning process and the institutional impact among its peers", explains Bill Parrot, former director, IACBE (International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education), Kansas city, USA.

According to Parrot, who is now with Peregrine Academics, Wyoming, as one of its directors, the goal of any accreditation agency is to build the capacity and ability of the business school and sustain it over a long term. "I see accreditation as

a vehicle to improve our all-round processes and systems, which is what happened to us, when we went through the ACBSP," explains Rajesh Khajuria, director, C.K. Shaw Vijaipurvala Institute of Management (CKSVIM), Vadodara, Gujarat, which is now an internationally accredited school.



Dr Mahboob
Dean, NorthSouth
University Dhaka

Mentor as the key

The self-assessment document is an essential part of the accreditation process, as it amplifies the mission and vision statement of the school. It also gives a fact check of the current level of preparedness of the school, to take up a detailed accreditation process, spread over a period of time, mutually agreed by the mentor and the school. The role of mentor, therefore, becomes essential and efforts are constantly underway in all the accreditation systems to help the mentoring process more dynamic and proactive.

The mentor is a sort of bridge between the school and the agency. He or she is supposed to bring to the table the collective learning of the agency to verify against the school's best practice, which he would help identify in the first place. The mentor is also someone who would be



Dr Mark Stoddard
Director Operations,
Association of MBAs
AMBA London

able to quickly point out any deviation from the mission statement and steer the school towards actualising the mission statement as the process is on.

“Our job is essentially a hands-off one,” explains Doug Gilbert, an ACBSP mentor to an Indian school. “We are not supposed to intervene in the running of the school per se or direct the school to modify their original mission. We are there simply to steer the school in the right path, as it starts working on the various standards laid down by the accreditation body”.

“It is a tough call to begin with, to get the school and faculty to start out on the accreditation path as, essentially the argument would be, we are in any case doing well, what is the big idea of trying to upset the applecart, most faculty ask,” says Mahboob Rehman, dean, North-South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. His university successfully underwent the ACBSP process, which was mentored by Bijoy Sahoo, former dean, North Carolina Central University (NCCU).

Awareness is being built

“Our experience in India is that most of the top schools we worked with were already quite aware as to that was in store when we take up accreditation, thanks to the pioneering and almost a decade-long work done by the Standards for Educational Advancement & Accreditation (SEAA) Trust, New Delhi,” affirms Stoddard. “The process becomes smooth when everyone comes on the same page right at the start,” he adds. But this may not always be the case, as the example of one of the top south-based universities shows.

This university was one of the earliest to take up a leading American accreditation and had even spent considerable amount of man-hours and money on the accreditation process spread over three years period. But successive deans at the



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Academics, Gillette
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helm (and, in the latest instance, the new vice-chancellor himself) wanted changes not just in the accreditation processes, but also the agencies themselves. After going through three different accreditation systems, the university simply gave up accreditation altogether. “We have the Indian NAAC. Why do we need another?” is the wry comment of a dean with the university, who

did not wish to go on record.

The southern university’s example is not uncommon, as accreditation can put off a lot of people in the management as well as faculty ranks, because it essentially involves plenty of work and expenses, without any tangible results on the ground. “Accreditation essentially is an attitude which you need to wear in your sleeve,” says B.V. Krishnamurthy, who oversaw three different accreditation processes completed in two different universities he worked with, as the dean of their business schools in Bangalore. “There is no way to quantify and justify the expenses or time involved in pursuing this, otherwise”.

“We have gone in for AACSB knowing that it is not going to happen in a hurry,” says Pramod Thavenoor, CEO, SCMS, justifying his decision to go for AACSB, after being an ACBSP accredited school earlier. “But being a part of the top accreditation system itself should give us a momentum”.

The reasons could be many. For some, it is a quick way to learn and benchmark with the best practices from around the world. For others, it is a wake-up call to get things right at the campus level. For still others, it is a wonderful and legitimate networking opportunity to inspire their faculty.

In India, IIMs are the Amazons and Googles of the MBA education and it pays to get into the league of accredited schools for them, though initially, most of the top IIMs resisted getting on to the bandwagon. In fact IIM-A and IIM-B took some five

years to get to EFMD’s EQUIS and IIM-L and IIM-K followed suit with AMBA accreditation. IIM, Calcutta was the last to get into the accreditation loop but also became the first triple-crown accredited school. All other new IIMs have also thrown their hats in the accreditation ring, without exception, opting for AACSB International.

Accreditation process also involves continuous assessment and improvement of standards, as the schools go through the laid-down procedures. “The process is rigorous and a number of changes may be taken place in the way the school would run its academic, student engagement and faculty effectiveness and retention process”, comments Olin Oedekoven, president, Peregrine Academics, Wyoming. It has its footprint in 35 countries worldwide and has been working in India with accredited schools and candidate schools for accreditation for over five years in association with SEAA. “Our common professional component based assessment tests are used as best datasets for determining the student learning outcome in most campuses,” adds Oedekoven.

“Continuous improvement and sustainability is the hall mark of an accreditation process,” endorses Amy Memon, manager, accreditation, AACSB International, headquartered in Singapore. Seen from this perspective, chances of the accreditation agencies themselves serving a negative role in aiding and abetting the not-so-fair business schools practices, even if inadvertently, clearly does not arise, the industry pundits aver.

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