Delivering Quality Education in the 21st Century: An Overview

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Introduction

The world is witnessing unprecedented demographic changes. On one hand, a major part of the Western world is getting older, with decreasing birth rates and increased longevity. On the other hand, some developing nations are getting younger, with a huge population of the youth joining the workforce. These changing global trends will require a transformation in the way public services operate. The next section introduces the global challenges the world is witnessing in recent times associated with the demand and supply of talent.

Historically, the elderly have comprised 3–4 percent of a population. But by 2050, the proportion of the 60-plus age group in high-income countries is expected to increase from 8 percent to 19 percent. Along with a steep and steady decline in birth rates, several economically advanced countries are witnessing an increase in life expectancy. Life expectancy in some parts of Europe has risen from 67 years in 1950 to 80 in 2010.

In the long term, the demographic changes associated with this “silver tsunami” are expected to broaden the skill gap, with less number of young workers. Countries such as Brazil, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) too will see similar trends.

Developed nations are now taking the path of internationalization of labor, and the skill demands with workers from emerging economies. This is fuelled by the urgent need to recruit and retain a younger workforce as well as the global shortage of talent. Narrowly defined, international employment opportunities will also help fulfill the aspirations of India’s young workers. The sheer number of students graduating every year and the stress on industry-focused skill development make India’s talent pool the largest and the most industry-ready in the world.

With more than 60 percent of its population under 25 years of age, the demographic profile has drawn attention to the talent pool of several developing and emerging economies. In this context, the Indian talent pool assumes significance for a number of reasons. Some of these are:

• The sheer number of students graduating every year and the stress on industry-focused skill development make India’s talent pool the largest and the most industry-ready in the world.

• With more than 60 percent of its population under 25 years of age, the demographic profile has risen enormously and will continue to have, a large young workforce.

Therefore, it is now imperative to reassess the boundaries between education and employment to create a more dynamic and fluid labor force. Additionally, policies should enable labor mobility across the world, have a clear estimate of future skill requirements, and strengthen the link between education and employment. Education needs to transform into a dynamic and continually evolving process that transcends age and is not limited to one stage. Policy makers and practitioners should, therefore, reform the academic curriculum in keeping with the evolutionary character of education in, making the process experiential, effective, empowering and enriching for the individual as well as the country.

What does quality mean in the context of education? It includes participants who are ready to learn at any and every stage of life, adequately supported by their families, communities and country. It means fostering an environment that provides sufficient resources and facilities for learning. It encompasses teaching material, content and curricula that nurture the acquisition of skills and knowledge helping students become globally employable. Education practices need to evolve to student-centric teaching methodologies and adopt well-managed global learning systems, with provisions for e-learning, distance learning as well as cross-border work experience and industry interactions.

Quality resources and inputs, content and processes, and overall value-add—in line with, and pertinent to, the changing context of the twenty-first century—are all essential elements of quality education.
Accreditation: A Solution to Delivering Quality Education

Accreditation is a process of quality assurance and improvement, through which an institution or its program is recognized as meeting minimum acceptable norms and standards after an inspection or assessment. It is important to note that accreditation does not seek to replace the system of award of degree or certification, but provides assurance that education institutions meet quality standards and processes.

As the process of accreditation is market-driven and cuts across geographical boundaries, it helps education institutions to assess their strengths, problem areas and opportunities, and develop a sense of identity. It also provides the "consumers" reliable information on the quality of education available. Students are assured of the "right" education with a focus on quality as well as professional relevance. Finally, accreditation assures prospective employers of quality candidates.

In a rapidly changing world, governments across the world are aware that economic and demographic shifts are reshaping public service outcomes. The role of education is paramount in this regard, as it forms the bedrock for a society and the economy's future prospects. This article describes the challenges faced by students in getting "quality education" as well as the difficulties faced by various stakeholders in determining the standards of education. It compares accreditation parameters across the globe and includes high-level recommendations for a globally recognized accreditation process.

The Challenges in Accreditation System

Higher education systems across the world are experiencing diverse changes. In the past decade, the world has seen a rapid growth in the knowledge economy and considerable development in private provisioning of higher education, especially developing nations. The need to produce globally employable students calls for an education ecosystem that assures international quality and recognition.

The demand now is for far more than just education. The necessity now is for certified education, with standardized and internationally valid courses. With the increasing demand for niche skills and experience, employers are looking for candidates who are "qualified" rather than simply "educated". Traditionally, employers expect education to build general skills, such as basic technical knowledge, discipline, professionalism, good work habits, problem-solving ability, openness, perseverance and the ability to communicate. More recently, employers are joining hands with education practitioners to develop specific, job-related skills. In other words, the goals of education providers and employers are converging in regard to employees' work readiness, and accreditation plays a critical role in this.

It goes without saying that accreditation is an ongoing process, aimed at nurturing the development of resources, making them adaptable to changing needs and helping build a sustainable future. But the accreditation ecosystem faces a multitude of challenges. Figure 1.1 outlines some of them.

In Germany, more than two-thirds of the newly established bachelor and master's courses b without proper accreditation due to lack of capacity of the accreditation system. Moreover, the process of application for accreditation is immensely work-intensive, requiring statistics that are often not readily available and descriptions that spread over 40 pages or more. Similar challenges exist in accreditation systems across the globe. A simple solution to address these challenges is unification of the definitions of accreditation, and recognition standards and policies.

Figure 1.1: Challenges in the Accreditation of Skills

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Comparability of Educational Standards</th>
<th>Lack of Business Alignment</th>
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<td>With the globalization of jobs and their increasing mobility across countries, institutions need to deliver qualifications and certifications that can be recognized in the international market.</td>
<td>The current education ecosystem has not been able to bridge the gap between business requirements and the skills imparted. There is a need for businesses to adopt international education standards.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Factors similar across countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission and Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Excellence and Research Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Outlook–Staff, students and research</td>
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*The table suggests that there are some key parameters for accreditation common to most countries. These parameters play a vital role in determining or defining accreditation standards and criteria globally. Some of these critical parameters are institutional support, governance, health and safety, and university resources (both technological and education facilities).

Accreditation Parameters across the Globe

Though the driving forces for the establishment of accreditation systems are relatively similar across many countries, the parameters used to establish local or national accreditation for higher education institutions varies significantly from country to country. Some parameters include appropriate research and teaching standards; volume and reputation of research and income from it; the ability to help industry with innovation; global outlook towards the diversity on campus; systems for determining internal quality; satisfactory learning support, student support and welfare; definite goals based on individuals and institutes' mission; policies and procedures associated with student recruitment and so on.

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Most accreditation organizations also review their internal quality control and development plans. For example, in the US, just as higher education institutions and programs undergo self-scrutiny to maintain and improve quality, accrediting organizations conduct a self-review of their accrediting practices. Such reviews include an examination of the accreditor's impact on institutions and responsiveness to the broader accreditation and higher education community.

Other factors or parameters for successful accreditation—nationally or locally—include staff-to-student ratio, employability of candidates after achieving specific qualifications, approach to the administration, transparency of examinations and student welfare.

The need to produce globally employable students requires an education ecosystem that assures international quality and recognition. An effort in this direction is the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The objective of the EQF is to bring together national qualification standards and systems of European countries on to a common European reference framework. This helps individuals and employers better understand and compare
understand and what they are able to do. Institutions across member countries are placed against these levels to better compare national qualifications, and in turn, foster mobility within the European Union. The emphasis is more on learning outcomes rather than inputs such as staff-to-student ratio, student recruitment and approach to examinations.

Some countries also have specific local parameters for accreditation. Table 1.1 specifies these country-wise parameters. With increasing globalization, mobility and the quest for global employability, it is imperative to harmonize local accreditation parameters with the global parameters and criteria for accreditation. For example, Germany focuses on post-degree or diploma placements and internships, ensuring that their qualifications are supported and valued by businesses as well as industry. The UK focuses on external marketing of their education institutions, helping them set a global standard and reputation. India tends to focus on the quality of their faculty members to ensure high standards of education.

It is also interesting to note that the overall process of accreditation remains almost similar across countries. Figure 1.2 outlines the typical high-level accreditation process. Accreditation agencies first set up broad standards and evaluation criteria keeping in mind the basic guidelines and regulations prescribed by various government departments.

For example, accreditation agencies in the US conduct workshops to allow open discussions during self-assessment. In the Philippines, institutes need to submit a detailed documentation on their strengths and weaknesses. The composition of the team, both in terms of profiles and numbers, visiting the institute is usually different in different countries. Some teams only comprise members of the accreditation agency. Others include external experts such as reputed academicians, professionals or members of other public administrators. The method of selection of the team is also different across the world. In Hungary, the team is selected by putting in place stringent qualification requirements, whereas in India, the team is nominated.

In retrospect, it can be observed that the task of harmonizing the qualification levels of different countries and different education and training systems is not easily achieved. It encourages countries to relabel their national qualification systems to the EQF so that all new qualifications issued meet an appropriate EQF level. The EQF acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers’ and learners’ mobility among countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. Eight core reference levels, known as “learning outcomes”, have been described to help understand exactly what learners know, what they can do, and the method of selection of the team is also different across the world. In Hungary, the team is selected by putting in place stringent qualification requirements, whereas in India, the team is nominated.

Figure 1.2: The Accreditation Process

- Different systems across the world follow different self-assessment mechanisms
- The nature of self-assessment questions vary from a checklist of predefined questions in a stipulated format to loosely defined, open-ended indicators. Different models are followed for self-assessment
- For example, accreditation agencies in the US conduct workshops to allow open discussions during self-assessment. In the Philippines, institutes need to submit a detailed documentation on their strengths and weaknesses
- For example, the US prescribes requirements related to the institution’s organization structure. Institutions having an adequate base only are allowed to submit applications for accreditation
- While most systems focus only on qualitative outcomes, some countries prescribe a pre-requisite for verification of eligibility

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Conclusion: Moving Toward a Global Accreditation System

The global financial crisis has given way to acute economic uncertainty and a prolonged crisis of jobs and growth in major parts of the world. One in five young people under the age of 25 who are willing to work cannot find a job. Policy makers know that if they don’t act today, they risk watching a whole generation of young people suffer from macroeconomic conditions and policy decisions that are not of their own making. For governments, citizens and businesses, the cost of inaction is unthinkable.

It is clear that the evolving trends will soon start putting pressure on education ecosystems across the world. The education setup needs to evolve significantly to cater to the changing needs. And several structural shifts will be needed to achieve this transformation. These shifts are summarized in Figure 1.3.

It is high time we move away from the traditional approaches and beliefs. Implementation of some of the following suggestions will enable the world to move towards a transformed educational landscape:

Focus on employable skills

Several policy makers realize that education in India is lacking in skill development. It is increasingly clear that education systems need to move away from churning out graduates with skill sets that are not considered useful by industries and businesses. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), nearly 70 percent of unemployed people in India are educated, but lack the desired industry skills. Moreover, less than 10 percent have recognized professional certifications. It is, therefore, imperative that we focus on employable skills rather than just education.

Globally recognized accreditation process

It is necessary to devise a framework of global accreditation standards, parameters and criteria. Moreover, the recent surge in students going abroad to study, as well as the growth of courses available over the Internet, make it imperative for international education policy makers to collaboratively move toward global accreditation standards.

Education institutes need international support when dealing with transnational or cross-border education, and so should carefully consider recognition requirements. An international framework needs to be developed that recognizes the potential of “international education” based on global standards and accreditation parameters.

Businesses rely on the quality of the skills and knowledge of their workforce for growth. Employers need to know that the skills and qualifications that their workforce holds are both relevant and robust, and will meet the needs of the modern workplace.

Outcome-focused accreditation parameters

It is time to make skills an international currency. To achieve this, governments, education policy makers and other stakeholders need to join forces to devise a comprehensive yet harmonized accreditation framework that is accepted internationally. These global standards need to focus on:

- Learning Inputs: These include grassroots-level factors that enhance learning experiences such as institutional infrastructure, mission and goals, teaching content and methodology, student recruitment, employability of graduates, approach to examinations, development and growth plans for the future, student welfare, staff-student planning and research excellence.
- Learning Outcomes: These factors determine what learners can get from education in terms of specialized skills and techniques, mastery, innovation, cognitive and practical skills.

Delivering education services for the future must, therefore, be marked by assurance, monitoring and evaluation to improve education quality for all stakeholders with an education strategy and landscape that is insight-driven and future-oriented.

For more information and insights on education in India, visit the India page for Delivering Public Services for the Future.

37 Source: Lakshmi, R. (2009), India’s Business Schools Out of Date, Washington Post
## Appendix: Accreditation Parameters

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<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td><strong>Similar parameters across countries</strong></td>
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| **Current Infrastructure** | - Number of students, degree programs, teachers, graduates per year  
- Number of rooms and other teaching facilities  
- Quality of teaching equipment used at the facilities |
| **Mission and Goals** | - Definition of appropriate goals based on the mission of cultivating human resources and education research  
- Alignment of the institute's vision, mission and goals with recognition standards  
- Communication and awareness of mission and goals |
| **Internal Quality Assurance** | - Standards or policies that include expectations of institutional or program quality, including student achievement, consistent with mission  
- Processes to determine whether quality standards are being met  
- Processes to regularly conduct self-scrutiny, and publish information about how far the missions and goals have been realized |
| **Teaching Content and Methodology** | - Objectives of the programs offered to the students  
- Quality of content and alignment with program objectives  
- Teaching methods used for education, and flexibility in deploying the methods based on the learner's requirements |
| **Student Admissions** | - Proper admission policies in order to admit students in a fair and correct manner  
- Communication of the admission policies in a clear and coherent manner |
| **Employability of Graduates** | - Discussions on market relevance of the program |
| **Approach to Examinations** | - Discussion with the person responsible for the program about the organization of examinations |
| **Development Planning** | - Discussions with the dean or department head, and sometimes representatives from the central institutional management on development planning for the institution |
| **Student Welfare** | - Learning support, student support and career path support so that students can concentrate on their studies  
- An indicator of teaching quality; a higher ratio implies greater personal attention to students |
| **Staff- student Planning** | - Proportion of faculty members holding doctorate degrees indicates quality of staff |
| **Research Excellence and Research Income** | - The number of times the institute's published work is cited by scholars around the world  
- Funds or revenues generated from publishing the university's research work |
| **International Outlook—staff, students and research** | - Global outlook of the university (diversity on campus and international collaboration on research projects)  
- Metrics such as international-to-domestic students ratio, international-to-domestic faculty ratio and the number of the university's total research publications, including the work of at least one international co-author |
| **Factors unique to each country** | |
| **Marketing Practices** | - Consistency in marketing education services overseas, along with the maintenance of academic standards and the safeguarding of the interests of both the institution and international students |
| **Guaranteed Excursions, Placements and Internships** | - Discussion with students in various stages of the program and with representatives of the students' union on excursions and opportunities for placements and internships |
| **Quality and Motivation of Faculty** | - Qualifications and activities of faculty members  
- Motivation and enthusiasm of the faculty |
| **Advice and Counselling for Students** | - Discussion with the person responsible for the program, with a focus on advice and counseling offered to students  
- Implementation of ways to cooperate with society  
- Open exchange of the results obtained from education and research activities |
| **Social Contribution** | - Appropriate administration and management in accordance with written rules and regulations in order to execute functions smoothly and sufficiently |
| **Internal Administration and Financial Affairs** | |
| **Appropriate and Fair Decision Making** | - Participation by higher education professionals and the public  
- Consistency in reviews of institutions or programs, along with respect for institution or program purposes and mission |
| **Compliance with Border Agencies** | - Efficient and transparent methods of tracking international students' performance and attendance  
- Systems in place to inform the Border and Immigration Agency (home office) of noncompliance |
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Credits

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