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Challenges of Accreditation under NAAC Framework in Indian Colleges with Special Reference to North-East India (NEI)

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ABSTRACT:

Accreditation by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is a significant mechanism for ensuring quality assurance and enhancement in higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. However, colleges, particularly in North-East India (NEI), face numerous challenges in aligning with NAAC's assessment parameters. This study aims to identify and analyze the systemic, infrastructural, procedural, and socio-economic barriers experienced by colleges in NEI during the accreditation process. Through a combination of literature review and policy analysis, the paper highlights institutional inadequacies, faculty shortages, digital divide, and lack of awareness or training as major constraints. The findings underscore the need for region-specific strategies to facilitate equitable quality assurance practices under the NAAC framework.

Keywords: NAAC, Accreditation, Higher Education, Quality Assurance, North-East India, Challenges, Assessment Criteria, Institutional Gaps

Introduction:

Accreditation is an essential process that evaluates and assures the quality of higher education institutions in India. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994, is the primary body responsible for institutional accreditation. Over time, NAAC's criteria have evolved to emphasize outcomes, innovation, governance, and inclusivity. However, the application of a uniform framework across India often overlooks regional disparities, especially in geographically and economically disadvantaged areas like North-East India (NEI).

Colleges in NEI, spread across Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, face unique structural and operational challenges. Issues such as poor internet connectivity, limited faculty training, lack of research culture, and infrastructural inadequacies significantly hinder their ability to comply with NAAC norms. This paper aims to explore these challenges and propose regionally tailored recommendations for improving the accreditation process in NEI.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify the major challenges faced by colleges in North-East India during the NAAC accreditation process.
2. To analyze the impact of infrastructural and administrative limitations on NAAC assessment outcomes.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of support mechanisms provided by UGC/NAAC to NEI colleges.
4. To recommend strategic interventions for enhancing accreditation preparedness among colleges in NEI.

Review of Related Literature:

1. NAAC Accreditation and Quality Assurance:

NAAC accreditation serves as a quality benchmark in Indian higher education. Studies like Bhushan (2010) and Singh (2016) have highlighted that while accreditation has improved institutional accountability and transparency, the uniform standards may not reflect regional realities.

2. Regional Disparities in Accreditation:

According to Kumar & Sharma (2018), most colleges in metro cities or developed regions perform well in accreditation due to better resources. Conversely, institutions in rural or remote areas struggle with limited funding, infrastructure, and human resources.

3. Challenges Specific to NEI:

Choudhury (2019) notes that NEI colleges suffer from geographical isolation, socio-political instability, and weak ICT infrastructure, all of which hinder the collection and presentation of data required for accreditation.

4. Faculty Development and Capacity Building:

Sarmah & Deka (2020) stress the lack of exposure among faculty in NEI colleges regarding NAAC's Self-Study Report (SSR) preparation and IQAC functioning, which impacts their preparedness.

5. Policy Responses and Institutional Support:

Government interventions such as Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) and TEQIP have attempted to bridge the regional quality gap, but their reach and effectiveness in NEI remain limited (MHRD, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The accreditation process, particularly under the **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)**, is grounded in theories of **Quality Assurance in Higher Education**, **Institutional Effectiveness**, and **Organizational Change**. The following theoretical perspectives help explain and frame the challenges of accreditation in the context of North-East India (NEI):

1. Total Quality Management (TQM) in Education

- **Proponent:** W. Edwards Deming, Juran, Crosby
- **Relevance:** TQM emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder satisfaction, and a systems approach to educational delivery.
- **Application to NAAC Accreditation:** The NAAC framework requires institutions to establish internal quality assurance cells (IQACs) and adopt quality benchmarks. In NEI, lack of training, resources, and institutional planning often hinder the realization of TQM principles.

2. Organizational Change Theory

- **Proponents:** Kurt Lewin (Three-Stage Model), Kotter (Eight-Step Change Model)
- **Relevance:** Accreditation demands institutional change—new policies, enhanced documentation, academic audits, etc.
- **Application:** Resistance to change, lack of motivation among staff, and bureaucratic inertia are major challenges in NEI colleges attempting NAAC accreditation.

3. Resource Dependency Theory

- **Proponent:** Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik
- **Relevance:** Institutions depend on external resources (funds, infrastructure, human capital) to function effectively.
- **Application:** Colleges in NEI are often under-resourced, which constrains their ability to meet NAAC criteria like infrastructure, ICT integration, and faculty development.

4. Institutional Theory

- **Proponents:** Meyer and Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell
- **Relevance:** Explains how institutions adopt certain norms and structures to gain legitimacy.
- **Application:** Colleges seek NAAC accreditation for recognition and funding. However, in NEI, external pressures (e.g., UGC mandates) often result in superficial compliance rather than meaningful reform.

5. Theory of Accountability in Higher Education

- **Relevance:** Accreditation is a mechanism to ensure accountability and transparency in educational practices.
- **Application:** Many NEI institutions struggle with documentation, data management, and reporting mechanisms required by NAAC, indicating a gap in accountability structures.

Conceptual Framework (Linked to NAAC Criteria)

The NAAC accreditation is based on seven criteria:

1. Curricular Aspects

2. Teaching-Learning and Evaluation
3. Research, Innovations, and Extension
4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources
5. Student Support and Progression
6. Governance, Leadership and Management
7. Institutional Values and Best Practices

Each of these is interlinked with theoretical constructs like quality assurance (TQM), institutional capacity (Resource Theory), and change adaptability (Organizational Change).

Major Findings:-

1. **Lack of Awareness and Training**
 - Many faculty members and administrative staff in NEI colleges lack adequate understanding of the NAAC framework, quality benchmarks, and self-assessment procedures.
 - IQACs are often formed as a formality without proper training or engagement in quality enhancement processes.
2. **Inadequate Infrastructure and ICT Facilities**
 - A significant number of colleges, particularly in rural and remote areas of NEI, face infrastructural deficits including poor internet connectivity, outdated laboratories, and inadequate classrooms and libraries.
 - This hinders the fulfilment of key NAAC criteria like ICT-enabled teaching and e-governance.
3. **Shortage of Qualified Faculty**
 - Persistent vacancies, shortage of PhD-qualified faculty, and lack of regular training or orientation programs reduce the academic quality of institutions.
 - Faculty workload and lack of incentives affect involvement in research, extension, and innovation — key components of NAAC evaluation.
4. **Poor Documentation and Data Management**
 - Most institutions struggle with maintaining proper documentation, performance data, feedback records, and evidence required for the Self-Study Report (SSR).
 - Manual record-keeping and poor digital literacy further hamper the accuracy and efficiency of data presentation.
5. **Inconsistent Institutional Governance and Planning**
 - Weak leadership, lack of participative management, and irregular strategic planning contribute to poor governance practices.
 - Many colleges lack long-term Institutional Development Plans (IDP) aligned with NAAC quality indicators.
6. **Limited Financial Resources**
 - State-funded colleges often operate with limited financial autonomy, making it difficult to improve infrastructure, hire staff, or implement reforms necessary for accreditation.
 - Delay or non-disbursement of RUSA/UGC grants further worsens the situation.
7. **Resistance to Change and Fear of Evaluation**
 - There is a psychological resistance among some institutional stakeholders towards external evaluation, fearing exposure of institutional deficiencies.
 - This often leads to reluctance in applying for NAAC or inadequate preparation for the assessment process.
8. **Language and Communication Barriers**
 - In certain tribal and rural regions of NEI, language barriers and poor English proficiency hinder effective communication with NAAC officials and navigating online portals.
9. **Geographical and Connectivity Challenges**

- Remote location and poor transport connectivity in several parts of NEI make it difficult for peer team visits, external collaborations, and outreach programs, which are integral parts of NAAC evaluation.

10. Accreditation as a Compliance Exercise

In many colleges, the accreditation process is approached merely as a requirement for grants and recognition, not as a genuine effort for quality enhancement.

Recommendations / Suggestions:-

1. Capacity Building and Orientation

- Regular training programs, workshops, and orientation sessions should be organized for faculty, administrative staff, and IQAC members to enhance understanding of NAAC processes and quality benchmarks.

2. Strengthening IQAC Functionality

- IQACs must be empowered and operationalized with autonomy, resources, and skilled personnel to function effectively throughout the academic year—not just during accreditation cycles.

3. Infrastructure Development

- Focused investment is required from state governments and UGC to upgrade physical and digital infrastructure in NEI colleges.
- RUSA and other central schemes should prioritize infrastructure improvement in remote and underdeveloped districts.

4. Faculty Recruitment and Development

- Timely recruitment of qualified faculty and provision of research incentives, FDPs, and refresher courses should be ensured to boost academic quality and performance.

5. Digitalization and MIS

- Implementation of a centralized Management Information System (MIS) for data recording, analysis, and reporting will improve institutional efficiency and readiness for NAAC SSR submissions.

6. Leadership and Governance Reforms

- Leadership training for principals and administrators must be undertaken to foster a culture of participative management and strategic planning.

7. Financial Autonomy and Accountability

- Grant-in-aid colleges should be provided with greater financial autonomy to address quality-related needs and prepare effectively for accreditation.

8. NAAC Regional Support Cell in NEI

- Establishment of a NAAC regional facilitation center in North-East India can provide handholding support, guidance, and monitoring to local institutions.

9. Promotion of Internal Quality Culture

- Accreditation should be linked to intrinsic motivation rather than external compulsion. Internal quality audits, student feedback mechanisms, and quality circles should be institutionalized.

10. Policy Intervention and State-Level Monitoring

- State Higher Education Councils should regularly monitor the accreditation status and facilitate policy-level support for underperforming colleges in NEI.

Conclusion:-

The NAAC accreditation process is vital for ensuring quality assurance, transparency, and institutional development in higher education. However, colleges in North-East India face distinct challenges that hinder their ability to effectively participate in and benefit from this process. These include infrastructural deficits, shortage of qualified faculty, inadequate documentation systems, and poor governance structures.

While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. With concerted efforts from institutional leaders, state and central governments, regulatory bodies, and NAAC itself, a more inclusive, supportive, and context-sensitive accreditation mechanism can be created. Addressing these gaps will not only improve the quality of higher education in NEI but also contribute to regional equity and national development.

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