Accreditation Council revisited

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WHAT is Accreditation? Accreditation is a kind of certification based on detailed peer reviews by an independent neutral high powered globally recognized agency, commonly known as Accreditation Council (AC) to the effect that the institution seeking accreditation has institutionalized a functioning academic system geared to providing, on regular basis, higher education of high quality, to advancing knowledge through faculty scholarship (research and publications), and to producing graduates who have achieved specified learning goals (working as highly skilled manpower and professional leaders). Accreditation relates to good academic standing of the university or its constituent component such as college of business or college of engineering. Accreditation is granted after the institution seeking accreditation fulfils a given set of conditions that leads to academic quality assurance. A university or any of its academic programs if accredited is usually considered of better quality than those which are not accredited. Countries having many universities are likely to have accreditation council. AC may be privately sponsored or state sponsored. As per Article # 38 (1) of the Private University Act 2010, Bangladesh, the government will establish an Accreditation Council for private universities.

Accreditation Process

With a view to determining the level of quality assurance, many types of assessments are carried out both by the applicant university and the AC. Whether the university is qualified to impart progressively high quality higher education is assessed and documented at two stages during the accreditation process.

Stage 1: the applicant university is required to prepare a "self-assessment report", and submit the same to the accreditation agency for peer review.

Stage 2: the accreditation agency reviews the "self-assessment report" submitted by the applicant university, along with additional quality assurance dimensions not clearly dealt with in the "self-assessment report"; thereby completes what is called "peer review report", and then declares whether the accreditation is granted or not.

The activities undertaken at stage-1 and stage-2 tend sometimes to overlap, although they are by and large distinct. Description of the activities in these two stages as given below, show fulfillment of the accreditation criteria leads to quality assurance.

Stage-1: The first step for the university interested in accreditation is to notify the AC to the effect that it seeks accreditation. The process of getting accredited is long. It is also quite expensive. Actual initiative is taken by the university long before the application is submitted. For example, the concerned university before submitting application may constitute a permanent working group consisting of senior professors and administrators. It is usually called "quality improvement cell" or "accreditation cell". It is similar to the "Internal Quality Assurance Cell", Bangladesh Private University Act 2010 wants all the private universities to establish under Article # 36. Its function is to recommend measures to improve the university quality so as to enable it to gain accreditation. It may also be assigned to prepare a "self-assessment report". The self-assessment, also called self-audited report focuses on the strength and weakness of the university or any of its specific programs. While doing this self-auditing exercise, the applicant university uses a set of assessment criteria contained in the accreditation Manual supplied by the AC. During self-assessment exercise, the university records why particular programmes are strong and other programmes are weak. It also describes the management and governance practices that influence the academic performances of the university. The self-assessment report in fact contains credentials/qualifications with documented evidences the applicant university claims to be good enough to win accreditation.

Stage 2: The self-assessment report is reviewed and validated by several on-site visits of a team of external peer reviewers designated by AC. During on-site visits, the peer review team meets the members of the "quality improvement cell", all senior teachers, chairmen, deans, pro-vice chancellor and vice chancellor and senior administrators and exchange views on the contents of the documents attached to the self-assessment report. The peer review team suggests the areas where the university needs to improve. For example, although teachers are well qualified, their teaching load may be too high, say, on average, a fulltime teacher is required to teach five courses / sections. If this is the situation, research is likely to be neglected. Unless teaching load is reduced by hiring more teachers or the number of sections per teacher is reduced, the university is likely to be only a teaching university. As a result accreditation may be deferred.

Accreditation is granted after detailed assessments of the academic performance of the applicant university or its constituent college/department. It is to be noted that most assessments are done jointly by the applicant university and the AC in a cooperative environment. This is carried out using a globally accepted predetermined set of criteria such as academic and research profiles and scholarly recognition of teachers, demonstrated academic achievements of the students (high quality students), research facilities and other necessary supports available to the teachers and students, degree of internationalization (number of students from foreign countries and high profile visiting professors from world class universities), and all kinds of infrastructural facilities necessary to enrich teaching-learning environment including the best management practices and good governance. These are only a few examples of criteria. There are many assessment criteria, and they may vary depending on the type of the university seeking accreditation. If a university fulfils the conditions embodied in the criteria stated in the accreditation Manual it is almost certain that the university concerned will provide best quality education and stand as world class universities.

Accreditation is dynamic
Accreditation by a nationally or globally reputable accrediting agency is considered as an effective measure for quality assurance. It assesses if appropriate academic standards are maintained and a built-in mechanism operates internally to continually improve the quality of education. It is not static, that is, its process does not end with the achievement of a given level of quality. Rather, it is dynamic in the sense that accreditation calls for continual improvement in the education quality.

Accreditation is not ranking
Granting accreditation does not indicate any ranking of the university concerned, like the best or second best among a group of accredited universities. It is a global recognition and it enhances the university reputation. Once a university is granted accreditation by a globally recognised AC, it is generally perceived that the university is a top class university.

Quality Assurance
Quality assurance has emerged as the single most concern for the private universities in Bangladesh. But what is quality and how can quality be assured? Who judge quality?

Perhaps, it is the market that finally judges quality of education by hiring or refusing to hire the graduates of the university concerned. Another measure may be the recognition accorded to the demonstrated achievements of the graduates of the university by the global academic and scholarly community. For example, graduates with undergraduate degrees from the university concerned get admitted into graduate /Ph.D. programs with scholarships of top universities of the world. Or globally renowned scholars recognize papers published by the graduates of universities under reference in refereed journals. There are additional dimensions of quality that may be looked into. In reality, quality measurement is a very complex issue. For example, education is imparted to produce "enlightened persons" or "responsible citizens" or "persons of high moral value", or the university offers degrees that include socially undesirable courses, etc. People can struggle to define these types of educated persons or "socially undesirable courses" or for that matter, may try to define an agreed upon benchmark of quality. It is difficult to agree on the respective definition. Here I do not want to engage in a debatable situation; rather take an easy course and define quality/ quality assurance in a very crude and functional way.

There are 79 private universities in Bangladesh.

Our take on private universities

THE growth of private universities in the country in terms of both number and quality has often been the subject of discussion amongst the literati. The concept of allowing universities in the private sector was floated by some luminaries of the educational arena in the '90s. For these visionaries it was undoubtedly a journey through uncharted territory, which was fraught with many adversities.

Obtaining permission from the government and fulfilling a plethora of terms and conditions was the first hurdle to cross. It took strong arguments and sensible deliberations to convince the government, the University Grants Commission, to be in agreement. The fact that thousands of students who could not get admission in Dhaka University, BUET, DMCH etc., went abroad to pursue higher education in private institutes, became the strongest point of argument. They could convince the government that these students would stay home to study in private universities and thereby save our foreign currency. And thus the first university in the private sector was established nearly 20 years ago on the basis of the Private University Act 1992.

But getting permission was not everything. Finding suitable buildings, teachers, books, teaching materials, staff, etc., turned out to be equally exhausting. The next difficult and most important part was convincing guardians to send their boys and girls to study there. But the credibility of the initiators, investors, teachers and good PR work took care of that. Within the next five years a few more standard private universities came up with the noble mission of imparting quality education.

Today, there are nearly 60 private universities on the list of the UGC. Of them about twenty are operating with credibility and the rest are somehow managing to survive. The better performing ones have their own infrastructure, highly qualified faculty, rich library, a non-interfering Board and plenty of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

On the other hand, many private universities have been identified by the UGC as poor performing ones, hobbled by internal feuds and allegations of delving in anti-academic activities. The Trustee Boards of some of these universities are divided into two or more factions.

Even after repeated warnings from the UGC, things have not improved there. They continue to belittle the dream of the pioneers – to have an alternate channel of higher education in the country that would be of international standard and non-profit in nature. Many of the new investors came in with the motive of making money and using the institute to gain social and political mileage out of them.

It needs to be mentioned here that the better performing universities have already earned a name for themselves and now are concentrating on how to face the challenges of the times ahead. The challenges are coming from the high performing private universities in the country and those that are established in countries across South East Asia. The challenge ahead is to take the standard of our universities many levels up to meet global standards and be able to draw students from the countries surrounding Bangladesh. The challenge is to invest more in infrastructure development, faculty and student research, and prepare students to be global citizens. Without these goals a private university will only remain as a certificate selling agency.

For this supplement we have talked to some representatives of private universities in order to have an insight into the workings of these educational institutes and learn why they are better than the others.