Nimrat KD Khandpur
nimrat.kaur@azimpremjifoundation.org

Operationalizing the Quality of Teacher Education Institutes: Principles and Challenges

Abstract

The paper briefly reviews the issues and challenges related to the quality of teacher education in India. It then traces efforts towards assessment and accreditation of teacher education institutes with specific reference to National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) and National Assessment and Accredition Council (NAAC), highlighting major critique of the same. A discussion of what the purpose of accreditation should and how this purpose can be achieved is followed by a recommendation for a comprehensive, developmental framework for assessment of teacher education institutes which can be used for self-assessment by the institute and accreditation by an external body. The development of such a framework is illustrated with a discussion of challenges inherent in such a task, and the principles that emerge.

Context

The phrase 'quality of education' seems almost incongruous – after all, if formal education does not adhere to certain basic standards, then should such an education be permitted at all? This question is particularly relevant in the context of teacher education institutes in India, and particularly poignant, given that what happens in our teacher education institutes directly impacts what happens in our school classrooms, thereby affecting the lives of innumerable children.

The history of teacher education in India is fraught with neglect and adhocism, despite best intentions, amidst which the Report of the Justice Verma Commission stands as a landmark in the history of teacher education in the country. The Justice Verma Commission was a High-Powered Commission appointed by the Supreme Court in 2011 while hearing Special Leave Petitions filed by 291 teacher education institutes against a High Court order that stated that grant of recognition to these teacher education institutes was in breach of the Government of Maharashtra's directive that no new institute offering the elementary teacher preparation program should be opened in Maharashtra.

The Commission was required by the Hon'ble Supreme Court to 'examine the entire gamut of issues which have a bearing on improving the quality of teacher education as well as improve the regulatory functions of the NCTE.'

The Report of the Commission emphasized the symbiotic relationship between school and teacher education. It highlighted the fact that while 80% of elementary school children were educated in State schools, 90% of teacher education institutes are in the non-government space, thus necessitating an appropriate regulatory framework for quality standards in teacher education. It pointed out that

NCTE, even as a statutory body, had not been able to control the proliferation of sub-standard teacher education institutes, leading to commercialization of teacher education in the country.

An indication of the magnitude of uncontrolled proliferation of teacher education in the country can be inferred from the fact that the number of programs recognized by NCTE in 2007-08 had increased to11863 from 1215 in 1995-96. The growth was skewed in terms of number of programs recognized by NCTE in each of its Regions; in 2007-08, the Southern, Western and Northern Regions offered programs from 2500 upwards while the Eastern Region offered only 511. More recent data is not available in the public domain.

The Report of the Justice Verma Commission states that while the expansion of a system per se may not be 'objectionable, it becomes problematic when the major part of this expansion is of poor quality institutes. It is pertinent to note that this expansion has largely happened in the private self-financing sector.' The Report attributes this growth to the fact that NCTE allowed self-financing institutes to offer teacher education programs in consonance with the policy of liberalization and privatization in other sectors.

The concern expressed by the Report of the Justice Verma Commission regarding the quality of teacher education is manifested in the poor quality of teachers, and therefore poor learning outcomes in schools.

Practices to assure quality of teacher education institutes

A review of practices across the world reveals different models to assure quality of higher education institutes; these could even be specific to institutes within a country. Generally, these models focus mostly on processes and emphasize the development of a system of quality assurance within the institute itself. Thus, self-evaluation is the most prevalent means of quality assurance, with the intent to facilitate continuous improvement, but in order to add value to internal quality and quality assessments, external quality monitoring is also in practice all over the world.

In case of teacher education, there is no specific teacher education accreditation agency in most countries but a higher education accreditation agency takes care of teacher education as well. According to the literature, there are basically two models of quality assurance in teacher education – the first is affiliation to a university and the second is accreditation by an independent body. Broadly speaking, there are three major ways of assuring quality - self-evaluation, bench-marking against standards – which may be based on best practices as evidenced by literature, conceptual frameworks for teacher education, and lessons from the field – and external quality monitoring.

India is peculiar in that programmes of teacher education are offered both as part of the Unversity system and in stand-alone teacher education institutes. However, regulation of all programmes of teacher education is done by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), established by an Act of Parliament (Act No.73 of 1993) "with a view to achieving planned and coordinated development of teacher education system throughout the country, the regulation and proper maintenance of norms and standards in teacher education system and for matters connected therewith".

In addition to NCTE, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an autonomous body established by the University Grants

Commission (UGC) of India to assess and accredit institutes of higher education in the country. It is an outcome of the recommendations of the National Policy in Education (1986) which laid special emphasis on upholding the quality of higher education in India. To address the issues of quality, the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Plan of Action (POA-1992) advocated the establishment of an independent national accreditation body. Consequently, the NAAC was established in 1994 with its headquarters at Bangalore.

NAAC has established assessment and accreditation norms for higher education institutes providing professional programmes, including teacher education institutes. In addition, in 2015, NCTE signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Quality Council of India to accredit teacher education institutes preparing teachers for the elementary stage.

However, several issues plague the accreditation process in our country. Criticism of these accreditation processes includes the concern that, too often, they are based on minimal information and quantitative measures, and often focussed on physical infrastructure or simply on learning outcomes without examining processes and the quality of provision other than physical infrastructure or qualifications of faculty, etc. Standards and criteria are criticised for being too narrow and often missing out on the context of institutes, and are often so theoretical that they miss out on the realities of the field. Where the qualitative aspects are in focus, there is the issue of variation of judgments within and between inspecting teams. While self-evaluation reports are required from teacher education institutes, the unwillingness of some of the peer teams to take tough decisions, and the overemphasis

and liberal attitude of few others has resulted in distrust in the process and dissatisfaction with the outcome.

Another major issue is that the NAAC accreditation results in assignment of a grade to a teacher education institute but does not provide any detailed or comprehensive feedback on how to improve processes and outcomes. Thus, the focus remains on catering to the immediate need to improve observable criteria rather than effect a deep and wide ranging, sustainable change. Often, the notion of quality remains limited to that defined by the NAAC indicators, often preventing contextualised and out-of-the-box approaches to improving quality. While indicators and criteria help in assessing particular aspects, they are often limiting and mechanical, often leading to a losing sight of the larger goals of teacher education.

While the NAAC framework endeavours to cover all aspects of quality, it is basically generic rather than geared towards teacher education institutes. Also, the tools to gather data are insufficient and focussed on records and observable criteria. At best, in the absence of internal quality mechanisms, which are not a mandatory requirement, the NAAC assessment becomes a one-time event to check quality against certain indicators as opposed to a continuing pursuit of excellence. At worst, stress on aspects like documentation as a source of evidence could put pressure on teacher educators to 'generate' evidence.

To make matters worse, NCTE has been plagued with a number of issues, ranging from an absence of institutional mechanism to review norms and standards, recognition of courses rather than institutes, lack of guidelines for innovative programmes of teacher education, expertise of pre-

recognition visiting team members, and so on. Thus, teacher education is doubly troubled – from inception of institutes to ceertification of their quality.

What should Accreditation do and how?

As opposed to being an inspectorial or critical process, accreditation must have two purposes –quality assurance and institutional development. It must encourage accountability with a culture of continuous improvement and reflection. A rigorous and transparent accreditation system must help identify exemplar institutes, those that need support, and those that are in violation of regulations and therefore need to be closed.

The value of accreditation is different for different stakeholders. For an institute, it helps determine if it meets or exceeds standards of quality and is a recognition of efforts to develop and improve. For students, it helps them choose good institutes for enrollment. For schools, it helps to determine whether a future teacher to be hired has received a degree from an accredited institute. For teacher educators, it provides an indication of whether the institute will provide them an academic culture within which they can realize their professional identity. Finally, for the public, it is an assurance that there is conformity to general expectations based on external evaluation.

It follows that the purpose of accreditation must not be to label or rank but to improve quality, and for degree equivalence across institutes, or certification of programmes. In order for this to happen, a comprehensive framework which can be used by institutes for self-assessment is required. This framework must be dynamic; periodic review should be undertaken to ensure it is aligned to contemporary policy and discourse in education.

Such a framework must have a comprehensive range of indicators, both qualitative and quantitative. While quantitative indicators lend themselves to robust and objective measurement, it is equally important to have indicators that reflect the nature and quality of processes. Hence, the indicators should be a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures.

The larger ecosystem influences the functioning of an institution; in turn, the functioning of the institute affects the performance of an individual. Hence, a holistic and comprehensive approach to assessment through involvement of multiple stakeholders tracked through multiple data points or evidences is recommended. Therefore, the indicators could include 'enablers' (a mix of inputs and academic support processes– e.g. resources as well as capacity building) which facilitate the achievement of performance or outcomes in a system.

Much can be said in favour of both programme and institutional accreditation – while institutional accreditation is necessary for the development of institutional culture, environment and processes which enable implementation of programmes of quality, programme accreditation is focused and specialized. However, focusing on the programme to the exclusion of the larger universe it is situated in is taking a narrow approach – the context of the University the department of teacher education located within in, or the other engagements of the teacher education institute, determine the culture of the teacher education programme plays out in, and significantly impacts its quality. Thus, an institute would necessarily have to engage with both, preferably in the mode of self-assessment. This is especially relevant given that initiating a teacher education programme requires

approval from NCTE, the statutory body for teacher education, which gives recognition to programmes, and not institutes. While there are certain principles which inform the entire variety of teacher education programmes, a clear distinction can be made between a programme preparing elementary teachers and one preparing teacher educators. Similarly, a programme intended to prepare teachers for physical education classes has different requirements from that preparing teachers for social science classrooms. To reiterate once again, care must be taken to include indicators which are not limited to infrastructure and overt aspects of processes and outcomes but also consider the qualitative nuances.

Any institute (or department within a larger institution, or a network of institutes as in a University) acts as a part of a system comprising interdependent yet interacting elements embedded in a particular context from which the institutes obtains inputs or resources, uses the input to organize academic processes, and produces outputs. Institutional survival and growth depend on adapting to and influencing the changing environment, as well as on producing outputs that are valued by external stakeholders – which again enables the institute to obtain resources (e.g. either locally or from the government or another source). The context provides incentives to the institute(s), stimulating them to act in certain manners. Some incentives foster productivity, growth and capacity development, others foster passivity, decline or even closure. Therefore, efforts to enhance institutional quality may often be best served by addressing both internal and external factors; a one-dimensional approach is unlikely to succeed. At the same time, institutional development efforts must, for several reasons, be addressed strategically and in a sustained and long-term manner for them to succeed.

Developing a Framework for Assessment of Teacher Education Institutes

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the first step towards a robust system of assessment and accreditation to assure quality would be to develop a comprehensive and rigorous framework for assessment of teacher education institutes.

While from a theoretical perspective the development of an assessment framework for teacher education institutes should be a fairly straightforward task, there are several challenges inherent in such an exercise. The process itself is fraught with certain questions, being, at its most simplistic, a struggle between what can be measured and what ought to be assessed

The first of these is the format of the framework. The essential components of such a framework would be indicators and criteria – indicators are literally indicators of quality, while criteria operationalize these indicators into tangibles. For example, while quality of research would be a necessary indicator in a framework to assess teacher education institutes, how can quality of research be observed, and therefore assessed, would be the criteria. While there is no single set of criteria that would fulfil the indicator, a choice needs to be made regarding how quality of research may be operationalized – these would be the criteria. For example, Conducting and documenting research studies and projects, Mentoring research studies and projects, and Dissemination of Research Findings could be some criteria to operationalize the quality of research.

The next question is – do we need to categorize these indicators or will a laundry list suffice? And if we categorize them, will there be overlap? Is it possible at all to categorize, given that each of the indicators are so interlinked – e.g. is it possible to speak of quality of teaching-learning without speaking of infrastructure and learning resources? Or of quality teaching-learning without research? The answer is that categorization is necessary, and not only to make the framework more manageable through breaking up a large laundry list into domains on the basis of similarity of indicators and the criteria describing each. It is also necessary to give each institute being assessed a chance to showcase their successes, and to determine whether these successes can leveraged to improve their quality, along with dissemination to other institutes. For example, if an institute is not strong on research but strong on connect with school, it can be encouraged to leverage this connect to conduct school based research. And its success can be disseminated to other institutes.

While it is well established that indicators and criteria are definitely required, the question arises – how do we identify the level of functioning of an institute and also indicate the roadmap for further improvement? As discussed earlier, often, it is possible that institutes have a limited understanding of the parameters of quality, often restricted to the indicators, and/or criteria, that are part of the institutional accreditation process. This question can be addressed through having levels in the framework. These levels should be in the form of a developmental continuum of evidence in the form of institutional practices for each of the criteria. The advantage of having these levels, which are in the form of rubrics, is that they indicate progression across levels based on increasing complexity of practice or the appearance of new practices. This can help place an institute at a certain level based on evidence related to a certain criteria within an indicator, and then indicate to the institute expectations from them in order to progress along the continuum. For example, let us consider the case of an indicator which examines in-service programmes conducted by a District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). This indicator could have the criteria of planning, implementation of in-service programmes etc. For the criterion 'planning in-service programmes', the first level could entail supporting in-service education activities organized by other agencies (SCERT, CTE/IASE, SSA and RMSA, etc.) as well as undertaking assigned responsibilities related to programmes initiated at state level. The next could be developing a plan for initiatives at the Block level based on the identification of development needs through engagement with teachers, and Block and Cluster level Resource Persons. A third could be facilitating establishment of learning communities and activities like teachers' forums, seminars/conferences, etc to support capacity development at the DIET level. The next level could be putting in place training management systems and maintaining records of individual teachers' participation in professional development activities. Finally, the criterion could be further operationalized at the last level as facilitating Cluster level Resource Persons in the implementation of an individualized development plan for each teacher (shared with the Head Teacher).

The advantages of a developmental continuum also include the range it offers to operationalize a criterion. For example, from the mere presence

or absence of a criteria, or a limited description, the levels offer a representation of the various ways in which it can manifest. For example, the criterion 'use of technology in teaching-learning' could require a yes/no response. But if we define levels, then the possibility increases – we can offer the institute an opportunity to select from – technologies used to share resources, technology is used in the form of Power Point presentations, utilized technology for independent research, technology enabling self-directed learning, and so on. Now, the challenge here is to balance between macro-level descriptors and descriptors which go into too much detail. While cryptic or macro-level descriptors can lead to misinterpretation or confusion, too many details can also lead to confusion. For example, if an attempt is made to clarify criteria through liberal use of examples, there is a danger that the examples will be taken as descriptors. Thus, a balance must be maintained between complexity and simplicity while maintaining rigor. The thumb rule is that the framework must be accessible to the users, while providing a common vocabulary for discussions on quality.

The question now arises, given our current context, are the descriptions of levels too ambitious? With reference to the previous example, it might be asked - most DIETs lack basic physical and human resources; for them a holistic journey of institutional improvement can be seen as a huge leap of faith. Further, do the so-called 'negative' institutional practices or lack of practices also find a place in the framework? For example, if an institute does not have a library, or does not adhere to the guidelines for school internship programme, would this find a place in the lowest level? This question is also important since these 'negative'

or 'missing' practices are often seen in institutes, not because of absence of will or maleficent intentions on the part of the institute but simply as a result of insufficient funds or the lack of a supportive ecosystem, or inability to manage several demands placed on an institute deficit in resources. This question can be addressed through taking the approach that such practices do not find a place on a framework indicating the quality of an institute, simply since they do not operationalize quality, but the lack of it.

This takes us to the next question – is it fair to include in the framework criteria which are influenced by factors external to it? For example, the school internship involves a partnership with schools, and it is not possible to create a plan independent of schools. Thus, it is necessary to restrict the framework to practices which are within the purview of the institute, for example, in the case of school internship, the creation of a sustained and meaningful reciprocal relationship with schools, selection of schools for school internship and matching schools to student needs, orientation of schools, and so on.

The next question is – would it also make sense to articulate enablers? By enablers is meant the factors within the ecosystem in which the institute operates which would facilitate their quality. While the idea is sound, it would make the framework complex. At the same time, the presence of categories means that if an institute is deficit in, say, infrastructure, it follows that other indicators will also be compromised. Thus, a more sensitive approach to assessment ensues. The temptation of assigning arbitrary ranks and taking punitive action also gets reduced.

As far as the development of the framework is concerned, the initial draft can be created through collation of expert opinion and consultation with

a representative group of stakeholders, in addition to review of policy and literature (including analysis of conceptual models of teacher education). Another critical source is evidence from practice through observation of teacher education institutes – their facilities and processes – including necessary interactions with other stakeholders (e.g. practicing schools). Critical incident analysis/ behavioural event interviews may also be carried out to get a holistic picture of not only institutional practices but also of what motivated them, related reflections, etc.

The initial draft must undergo content validation by academics and practitioners (through dissemination of the initial drafts for review, intensive workshops, focus group interviews, surveys, seminars, conferences, etc) and endorsement by stakeholders (could be based on principles, such as flexibility, commonality of language, credibility, and simplicity and transparency). In addition to these, actual use of the framework by developers to assess quality of 'real' teacher education institutes is necessary so as to get an accurate assessment of its worth.

Thus, framework development and validation must happen through an iterative process of engaging with the field and secondary research.

Conclusion

If the discussion so far, and the experience with developmental frameworks, is to summarized, the greatest challenge is balancing comprehensiveness and simplicity while maintaining academic rigor, and while ensuring sufficient flexibility to allow the framework to lend itself to contextualization.

As far as possible, practices must be articulated so that they can be assessed but there is also a need to state intangibles (e.g. institutional culture) so that reflection and dialogue can be initiated around them. It must be ensured that each practice is articulated in the framework through elaboration along a developmental continuum, encompassing the stretch from ground reality to the aspirational.

The framework must facilitate self-assessment, identification of developmental needs and articulation of outcomes of teacher professional development programmes, while allowing for external validation of the institute's assessment. Ownership of stakeholders must be ensured through their involvement and appropriate dissemination. Care must be taken that the framework undergo review and be updated regularly. Finally, the framework must not be used for labelling individuals or assigning 'ranks'; it must not be a basis for punitive measures.

While such frameworks are often criticized for being reductionist and simplistic, for not being comprehensive enough or leaning towards what can be easily assessed, and so on, the fact remains that without operationalization, there is a clear and present danger that 'quality in education' will remain mere rhetoric.

Acknowledgement

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