

Emerging with Innovative Best Practices via Brainstorming and Benchmarking in Eleven steps.

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Abstract:

NAAC has revised the Assessment & Accreditation Process with effect from APRIL 2012. In its new format for AQAR, IQAC is expected to submit some best practices as a separate annexure to AQAR. For this, every IQAC is expected to implement some best practices to activate the system and raise the institutional capabilities to higher levels so that the institution makes continuous improvement in Quality. In the present paper we suggest the mechanism of eleven steps to come up with the truly best practices by following which the colleges can emerge with the new significant and meaningful Best Practices and achieve remarkable enhancement in the quality in every criteria in the process of assessment and accreditation.

Quality makes education as much socially relevant as it is personally indispensable to the individual. Hence, quality becomes the defining element of education. In this context quality and excellence should be the vision of every higher education institution. Acquisition of quality and excellence is the great challenge faced by all higher education institutions. Institutional excellence in higher education is the aggregate of the best practices followed in different areas of institutional performance, which is assessed on the scale of quality index.

Best Practices as Institutional Quality Index: Point of view of NAAC

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is advocating the best practices benchmarking approach for quality enhancement in higher education. Best practices add commendable value to an institution and its various stakeholders, are considered as reliable benchmarks or standards of quality. The best institutions are those which widely use the best practices. Establishing benchmarks through best practices is not a new concept in higher education. The benchmarking is the systematic means of measuring and comparing the

work processes of an organization with those of others. “The best practices as benchmarks” approach is widely discussed in the various publications of NAAC which help institutions to find their anchor for self-improvement. The NAAC uses the best practice benchmarking in the form of criterion statements to assess the level of performance of higher education institutions.

“Four I and D Model”:

The successful application of the best practices approach depends on our ability to adopt the five-stage strategy. The approach can be described as “Four I and D Model”.

1. Identification of best practices
2. Implementation of best practices
3. Institutionalization of best practices
4. Internalization of best practices
5. Dissemination of best practices

For the **I**dentification of best practices, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) suggested some guidelines for the identification and application of good practices. The best practices should be dynamic and revisited periodically; recognize diversity and cultural and historical contexts; not lead to dominance of one specific view or approach; and promote quality of performance. These principles should be interpreted and applied appropriately to different contexts, while identifying the practices.

However, difficult it may be, for the **I**mplementation of best practices in all our busy day to day schedule of the educational activities when we have some gut feeling of what best practices are. Academic world generally suffers from two limitations. Firstly, we are fond of debates and discussion and consider words as wisdom. Aristotle deprecated this tendency long back and considered action as virtue. He rightly observed: “Virtue is an activity not a capacity”. Due to these two D’s there are some genuine limitations in the application of best practices, out of which many are imaginary. Instead of finding solutions to problems, sometimes our ‘academic eminence’ leads us to find problems in every solution. The implementation strategies include planning, resource mobilization, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation. The implementation approach focuses more on performance than on promises. Here quality is considered as attention to details.

Once implemented and found beneficial, **I**nstitutionalization of the best practices is essential. The NAAC has organized the National Conference on Best Practices in Higher Education at Goa on 26th and 27th July 2004 in which around ninety heads of colleges and

universities participated and shared their experiences of application of best practices. During the deliberations of the conference for two days two major points relevant to the present discussion had emerged. Firstly, many best practices are institution-specific and individually managed. In most cases, that individual happens to be the leader or head of the institution. Institutionalization is an effort to make it more institution centric than leader or individual centric and also to make the best practices as a normal practice.

After carrying out the practice as a normal practice for few years, there expected is the **Internalization** of best practices. Internalization refers to making things a part of one's nature by conscious learning and assimilation. Internalization of best practices means making excellence an integral part of one's habit and nature. Aristotle rightly observed that: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit". Such internalization may also be looked upon as making permanent the principle and essence of the best practices as part of the characteristic performance of an institution. Quality in many respects is an attitude of mind. There is a strong feeling among many that quality education is resource specific. The advocacy for quality education is countered many times by resource specific arguments. These arguments are only partially valid. However the experience shows that it is the attitude and not the resources play a more crucial role in quality assurance. Internalization is an attitude formation conducive to sustaining quality via the best practices in higher education.

Education is a social process. The institutions not only have the social responsibility of application of best practices, but also an equal social responsibility of **Dissemination** of these practices for wider application in the system. Many higher education institutions do not attempt certain practices due to lack of information about the feasibility and adaptability of the best practices. It is observed that the best practices are the borrowed practices. No doubt, we must learn and benefit from each other's experiences but there is great scope for having tailor made practices meant just for the institution. The best practice benchmarking approach is an inductive approach to quality management in higher education institutions with a focus on practice and continuous improvement. The five-stage approach will help institutions of higher education to play their role effectively in quality sustenance and enhancement.

Role of stakeholders:

Stakeholders can contribute differently for the realization of the goal of quality and excellence to be provided by the institutions. Policy makers in education have an important responsibility of creating an enabling policy framework for effective functioning of the institutions. The Management should ensure proper infrastructure and effective governance

systems. Teachers have a critical role in building competencies of learners through best pedagogic practices. Finally, students, for whom the whole system is designed, should desire and demand the best. Then everything else will follow.

Novel Approach of Best Practices through Benchmarking:

NAAC has revised the Assessment & Accreditation Process with effect from APRIL 2012. Also it has published new format for AQAR. It focuses on some areas such as general profile of the institution, IQAC activities, Academic and Research Outputs, Student Mentoring and Support System and Governance and Innovation wherein, IQAC is expected to submit some best practices as a separate annexure to AQAR. For this, every IQAC is expected to implement some best practices to activate the system and raise the institutional capabilities to higher levels so that the institution makes continuous improvement in Quality.

However, to implement any new practice as a best practice is a difficult task. The very idea of NAAC regarding best practices is not yet clear to the college IQACs. Therefore there is a great possibility that they fill in the gap by calling any normal routine practice as 'Best Practice'. However, the term 'Best Practice' demands something else than it is interpreted by the colleges, something that is more innovative, unique, outstanding, amazing but meaningful, useful and significant. This very difference in the perception of the colleges is highly required to pursue the significance of such best practices to be identified and followed in the colleges.

Under each one of the seven criteria of assessment, the NAAC has identified the elements of the best practices that contribute to the efficient and effective functioning of the institution and they are called *criterion statements*. Instead of identifying the practices of the 'best-in-class' institution, the criterion statements focus on the norms that generate the practices. Benchmarking may be seen as an ongoing systematic means for determining the best practices of the best-in-class institutions, and using the information as basis for goals, strategies and implementation.

Benchmarking becomes relevant to higher education because of the external point of reference or standards it can provide to educational managers for evaluating the quality of the processes they manage. This approach is valuable for providing information to be used in the prioritization and decision-making processes of the institution. It is here that the application of the Best Practices Benchmarking can make a meaningful contribution to quality enhancement.

More simply best practices via benchmarking for quality enhancement would be 'finding and implementing the best practices which would lead to significant improvement in the quality of educational provisions'.

The role of NAAC in the quality assurance and sustenance is remarkable and accepted as well as appreciated by the colleges. In this light of quality enhancement, one has to look towards the newer things being suggested by NAAC. Best practices being one of them has obtained the weightage of a separate criterion i.e. Criterion no. VII Innovation & Best Practices. worth of 100 quality indicators in the place of previous criterion no. VII which was named as innovative practices of only 50 quality indicators' weightage. The format of the best practices has also been suggested which contains title, goal, the context, the practice, evidence of success, problems encountered and notes. However its left to the institutions to identify and report any practice as best practice.

In the present paper we suggest the mechanism of eleven steps to come up with the really best practices. By following the suggested mechanism the colleges can immerge with the new significant and meaningful best practices by which they can achieve remarkable enhancement in the quality of every other criteria and appreciable indicators/marks in the process of assessment and accreditation

Step I: SWOT analysis of the college: This can be done externally by getting help from the peer team from NAAC periodically during the A/A process or by collaboration with the IQACs of the neighbouring institutions. IQACs of the colleges are expected to take the feedback of all its stakeholders regularly on every aspect of the academic programmes and facilities and services provide by the institution. The exercise results into the correct reflection of the strengths weaknesses, opportunities and the threats of the institution.

Step II: Brainstorming of the stakeholders : To exploit the strengths and minimise the weaknesses with fullest utilization of the opportunities and facing all the odds, the stakeholders have the great responsibility to bring the standard of the institution up. Hence they all should meet in one way or the other to discuss the matters thoroughly. However the emphasis should be on the detection of the problem and finding the solutions to them in number of ways possible. The brainstorming should be as free and imaginative as possible to bring out the creative ideas of the stakeholders.

Step III: Enlisting the probable innovative ideas: All the clever as well as so called foolish ideas should be enlisted properly in their order of practicability, usefulness and innovative nature. The lists may be one or many depending on the criteria selected for the orderly placement of the ideas.

Step IV: Benchmarking of the expected outcome: However, for better results after following the innovative ideas, everyone should think of the probable outcome of the practice. The practice should lead to the up gradation in terms of the academic inputs, infrastructural facilities and services given to the students and it should be expected to reflect in terms of better grade points in the seven criteria. These highest expected outcomes can be considered as benchmarking.

Step V: Selection of one best practice for every criterion via brainstorming: Now the other higher level discussion and brainstorming is necessary to select few practices preferably one for each criterion.

Step VI: Designing the mechanism for the proper implementation of the best practice: The selected core members of the IQAC should design the mechanism such that the principles of decentralization, democracy, transparency and healthy conducive atmosphere of work culture is taken care of. The mechanism should be as open as possible, as transparent as possible and as democratic as possible so that the stakeholders will not find any problem of ego or burden on their part for the proper implementation of the practice.

Step VII: Actual implementation of the practice : The practice should be followed by all the stakeholders by identifying their individual roles in the implementation to bring it up to the level of meaningful significance. The mechanism suggested by IQAC should be followed faithfully entrusting the efforts being taken by the IQAC for the better future of the institution as a whole.

Step VIII: Monitoring of the best practice: The designers of the mechanism of the best practice, the IQAC members should also evolve with the mechanism of the monitoring and observing all pros and cons of the practice being implemented.

Step IX: Analysis of the implementation process: The implementation process being monitored by the IQAC should result into the analysis of all the process by various assessment methods like questionnaire, feedback, outcome gradation etc. to know the level of benchmarking achieved by the college.

Step X: Reformation of the mechanism: If required the mechanism of the implementation of the practice should be modified accordingly to get maximum results. Being open for correction approach makes the practice more democratic and more acceptable.

Step XI: Routinisation of the best practice: To keep on reaping the fruits of the best practices years long, the institutionalization and internalization of the best practice is essential. However, while routinising the practice the care should be taken that the practice, mechanism of implementation and assessment of the outcome all are properly communicated to all the

stakeholders thoroughly and proper publicity should be given to the practices.

Pedagogical implications:

In the current scenario of the higher education, where the marks obtained by the students and grades achieved by the institution matter the most as deciding factor for the so called market value of the both, one should start thinking from the end. Hence the implications and outcomes of the functions carried out by each and every stakeholder has a significant impact on the educational programmes delivered in the institution, the infrastructural facilities made available to students and also the services offered by the administrative staff. Hence to promote the better and better practices in every criteria of higher education, it is necessary to continue the best practices conducted so far and also to search for the newer practices every year to find us at the better place, in the better work culture with better academic standard in the higher education system.

Conclusion:

The suggested eleven steps will help the institutions to find and practice more and more significant best practices in their institutions meeting their own specialized demands and requirements, making them possible to reach the standards of the benchmarking they have decided to gain.