

## NAAC Lessons on How Not to assess a Varsity

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A week before the prospective groom's family were to visit my uncle's house, the preparations had started. The outside and the drawing room were quickly whitewashed, the furniture cleaned and polished, the flower pots in the garden got a fresh coat of *geru* and the crockery for the high tea was cleaned multiple times.

The best part though was the behavior of my uncle in front of the groom's family. He, who had a reputation in the family for being extremely stern and tyrannical, was uncharacteristically obsequious and servile. As a teenager, I found the whole thing quite amusing.

I was reminded of this episode recently during the visit of the NAAC team at our university. NAAC, for the uninitiated, is the National Assessment & Accreditation Council whose mandate is to make "quality assurance an integral part of the functioning of Higher Education Institutions". The process involves the institution collecting huge amounts of data, preparing a voluminous report to submit to the Council. A team of evaluators then visits the institution to make a first-hand assessment of the quality.

Till recently, the Council used to grade institutions on a letter grade system. This system was notoriously amenable to gaming by unscrupulous elements within the academic ecosystem. There were allegations of systemic irregularities and corruption, something pointed out by the CAG as well as the erstwhile CEO of the organization in his resignation letter. This scandal resulted in the adoption of a two tier gradation- in the first tier a binary system of accredited and non-accredited would be given. In the second tier, accredited institutions could go for a Maturity-Based Grade Accreditation which would be on a 5 point scale. How this will be different from the earlier letter grade system has not been made clear.

It is of course hard to argue with the desire to improve quality in any organization, whether an automobile factory or a university. For universities, especially those funded by the state, it is also important that the resources are prudently managed. However, it seems self-evident that the quality would mean different things for an automobile plant than it would be for a university simply because the two serve very different purposes. This of course would imply that the benchmarks and methodology used for measurement in an academic institution needs to be different than other types of organizations.

Unfortunately, this elementary fact seems to have escaped the attention of the boffins in the UGC. For them, academic quality is to be measured by data- data on everything from student enrollment, student placement, research and teaching by the faculty, data which is painstakingly collected by the university and then supplied in numerous spreadsheets, pie charts and presentations. The mandarins seem to be obsessed with the corporate quality control maxim: "What cannot be measured does not exist".

Numerous studies have shown that quality in an academic institution cannot be measured solely by numbers. Data can be of use though quantitative data lends an aura of spurious precision and accuracy which may be deceptive. Metrics of all kinds can help only if they do not replace judgement which is based on experience. Relying solely on metrics instead of a holistic analysis indicates two things- first, an inherent mistrust of academicians which seems to prevail among the education administrators and secondly, a singular obsession with the ranking tables which has gripped our educational bureaucracy of late.

The preparations in our institution started weeks before the expected visit by the NAAC team. Departments were asked for all kinds of data, which many professors spent hours collecting; buildings which had not been whitewashed for years got a new look; signboards were put up all over the university; junk furniture and instruments which had not been moved for years were moved to a site where the NAAC team would not be taken. Much like the polishing of furniture in my uncle's house, things which should be part of routine maintenance and functioning were now being done for the purpose of impressing the team.

The desire to please however took on farcical proportions. A week before the actual visit, the university sent out an order banning all vehicles inside the campus. One was

supposed to park at a remote place and walk to one's office. The connection between a campus bereft of vehicles and the quality of teaching and research in the university remains mysterious.

The visit of the prospective groom's family to my uncle's house was fruitful and they agreed to the match. Whether it was the quality of the polish on the furniture or the fact that his daughter was exceptionally talented which impressed the groom will never be known. The university administrators might similarly be hoping for a positive result from the NAAC team's visit. Whether the evaluators were sufficiently impressed by the sight of empty roads within the campus will remain one of the great mysteries of this farce.

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