

A WEB-BASED PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM FOR IHE

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With the projected steep increase in enrollment, accountability in Indian higher education (IHE) is going to assume importance in the years to come. The existing institutional level accountability efforts cannot satisfy the diverse needs of the various stakeholders. The need of the hour is a public accountability mechanism that can provide the stakeholders with comprehensive up-to-date data on the performance of the higher educational institutions in the country. This paper proposes a web-based, distributed, automated accountability system to monitor and compare the performance of the higher educational institutions in the country.

Keywords: Accountability System, Indian Higher Education, Performance Indicators.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhushan and Anitha [1] reported that despite recent growth in the size of the Indian higher education system, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is still less than half the average for the Asian region (22 percent). It is projected that in order to meet the targeted growth in enrolment, there be at least a six-fold increment in the number of universities and other higher educational institutions in the country by 2020. With this projected growth in the number of higher educational institutions, the prospective entrants will have more choices. To assist the students and parents, there exists a public accountability mechanism that helps them make the choice by comparing the cost and performance of the various institutions. The need of an efficient accountability mechanism is also imperative for monitoring the performance of the higher educational institutions in the country to influence policy making and decisions. Accountability in higher education is going to assume greater national significance in the years to come and will serve as the benchmark for policymakers, educational leaders, administrators, parents, students, employers, legislators, professional associations, accrediting agencies, and other stakeholders to base their decisions. Although the IHE system is currently over-regulated, it lacks a formal, efficient, systematic, transparent and standard accountability mechanism for its universities and colleges that will help improve performance in a complex, decentralized system of higher education. This paper suggests a remedy for this malady by suggesting a nation-wide distributed web-based system for maintaining an up-

to-date comprehensive databank on the performance of the higher educational institutions across the country. This databank then can be utilized to address the diverse needs of the various stakeholders.

2. THE ROLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Edward and Charles [2] define accountability as the public presentation and communication of evidence about performance in relation to goals. Accountability systems are built with data from assessments - but accountability is not achieved simply by making the results of those assessments available to the public. To ensure accountability, evidence about performance must be defined in the context of institutional and social goals that reflect a public agenda. And that evidence must be communicated in a way that is broadly accessible. Since accountability relates to the mission, goals, and expectations of higher education held by various stakeholders such as policymakers, educational leaders, administrators, parents, students, employers, legislators, professional associations and accrediting agencies, the term accountability, in terms of perception, meaning and components, means different to different stakeholders. A systematic accountability mechanism can meet the requirements and needs of these different stakeholder groups. In general terms, an accountability system should provide each individual stakeholder with a way for measuring the effectiveness of each higher educational institution and the higher education system as a whole. In particular, the accountability system should assure the public and the policy makers that the higher educational institutions of the country are utilizing their resources wisely, encourage the higher educational institutions to continually improve their programmes and operations, fostering innovations that will better serve their customers' needs, and provide information to assist parents, students, employers,

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and other consumers in making appropriate choices about higher education options. Anaheaw [3] reported that ideally, an accountability system should do the following: a. aligns institutional and state-level priorities with the higher education goals of the country, b. allows students, legislators, leaders of educational institutions, business leaders, and others interested in higher education to view progress toward those goals, and c. provides a basis for making policy decisions.

3. ACCOUNTABILITY IN IHE

Institutions of higher education in the country already undergo several forms of assessment and accountability measures through different kinds of programme reviews, accreditation reviews, data submission, financial audits, and regular trustee or governing board oversight as part of the governmental regulations and controls exercised through various central and state level apex bodies. Though such reports are not lacking in volume or detail, these institution-focused efforts that are often fragmented and not effectively communicated have proven inadequate in addressing the diverse needs of the various stakeholders of the Indian higher education.

To effectively monitor the performance of the individual institutions and the IHE system as a whole, IHE system needs a formal, efficient, systematic, transparent and standard accountability mechanism that focuses attention on national priorities and challenges both policymakers and educators to shoulder their share of the responsibility for achieving them. The system should provide dependable, valid information to monitor results, target problems, and mobilize the will, resources, and creativity to improve performance. The primary task of a nation-wide accountability system, as distinct from an institution-focused accountability system, is ascertaining whether and how the IHE system as a whole is meeting the needs of the nation and where adjustments need to be made in policy, strategy, or resource allocation.

In Indian scenario, as reported by Stephen and Patricia [4], every institution must, at least, observe three types of accountability – legal, fiscal and programmatic. Legal accountability implies the obedience to regulatory authority. Fiscal accountability is the most common form of accountability and it implies that the authority is responsible for ensuring that the financial resources are spent in appropriate categories and in proper amounts. Programmatic accountability ensures whether the institution has met publicly stated goals and objectives. The proposed accountability system would collect data with a view to maintaining legal, fiscal and programmatic accountability.

4. THE PROPOSED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

The proposed accountability system will have a web-based distributed multi-tier architecture. The set of databases

at the bottom layer acts as the databank. To reduce the data traffic, the databases, if needed, can be distributed over different states. Separate databases can be maintained for universities, affiliated colleges, autonomous institutions, health science institutions, technical institutions and teacher education institutions. The purpose of these databases is to collect comprehensive data on institutions such as institutional details, affiliation, programme details, admission procedure, reservation policy, quality of the enrolled students, faculty quality, facility quality, institutional quality, programme expenditure, concessions and loan facilities, fellowships, faculty details, details of the students admitted to various programmes, infrastructural and learning resources, research and library facilities, accommodation, access, technology integration, student, faculty and institutional competitiveness, research output, extension works, collaborations, student support, effectiveness of the programmes as reflected by the success in the competitive examinations, placements, pass percentage, etc, institutional-level governance, financial sources, financial management, recruitments, links to business and community, utilization efficiency and other relevant details. These databases will be integrated into a logical databank at the next higher level, which can be accessed by all stakeholders. Access to the databank should be monitored but access to it should be free, easy and user friendly. The databank should be under the responsibility of a competent national authority. The databank should serve as a portal including the up-to-date information of recognized higher education institutions in the country. It should be made mandatory for all recognized higher education institutions to enter and update the data in the database on a regular basis. A login account can be given for each recognized higher education institution for the purpose. A user-friendly search mechanism would help the research.

The proposed system will be operational at three different levels – institutional, state and national levels. Since the institutional priorities may differ from priorities at the state- and national-levels, the proposed system should support institutional level accountability that can monitor the performance of the individual institutions. Similarly, each state may have its own missions, goals, policies and priorities on higher education. Naturally the proposed system should also support state-level accountability provision that can monitor performance of the higher education institutions at state-level. The accountability system at the top level will align the institutional and state-level priorities with the higher education goals of the country.

5. COMPONENTS OF THE PROPOSED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

The essential components of the proposed accountability system are public agenda, performance indicators and data-driven decision-making.

The vital component of the accountability system is the creation and successful execution of an actionable public agenda that a. communicates core goals, objectives, and strategies to stakeholders, b. tracks or monitors the status of the development of the strategic plan, and gives key stakeholders immediate and ongoing access to the plan and its supporting information, c. establishes performance metrics and lets every component of the accountability system track performance against the goals and objectives and d. meets changing conditions or priorities quickly. The public agenda at the institutional and state-levels will be the subset of the public agenda at the national level. In the Indian scenario, the national level agenda may contain objectives like ensuring success of all students, particularly students from groups underrepresented in higher education, creating a responsive higher education system that produces graduates at all levels who meet the demands of the economy, increasing student learning and improving skill levels of students so they can compete effectively in the global market place, contributing to the development of the country's economy that is competitive in the global market through research, workforce training, and other appropriate means and providing access, affordability, and choice for all students.

Performance indicators are data, usually quantitative in form, that provide a measure of some aspect of an individual's or organization's performance against which changes in performance or the performance of others can be compared. Performance indicators, as the term itself suggests, are not an exact measure of achievement but rather provide an indication of entity performance. To be useful to government officials, the public and other stakeholders, performance indicators must be appropriate, relevant, accurate, timely, complete, and comprehensive. They should focus on the primary purposes of the institution or system of higher education. While defining the performance indicators, the unique characteristics of the institutions and priorities and policies of the states must also be taken into consideration. David [5] presented a compilation of the various performance indicators found in literature, categorized in terms of quality, access, competitiveness, and utilization.

Measures of Quality: Student Quality - Entering students: a. score in the qualifying examination by region, gender, religion, caste, etc. at various levels of higher education and b. number or percent of students in need of remedial and developmental courses. Graduating Students: a. proportion demonstrating written communication and quantitative skills and b. student performance on assessments of general education and in major fields of study. Faculty Quality: a. percent of full time faculty, b. percent of classes taught by full-time faculty, c. number of articles published, d. teaching load, e. number of complaints of unethical/unprofessional conduct, f. number of allegations of illegal

practice referred for prosecution, g. number of patents, prestigious faculty awards, and research expenditures per faculty member, h. academic credentials of faculty, i. availability of faculty to students, j. post tenure review of faculty, k. performance review of faculty and l. student credit hours by full-time faculty. Facility Quality: a. student opinions of facility quality, b. passage rates in competitive and certification exams, c. class size and student/teacher ratios and d. proportion of programmes accredited. Institutional Quality: a. student satisfaction survey results, b. percent of business and non-business employers satisfied with competence of graduates and c. percentage of students enrolled in higher level upon completion of the lower level.

Measures of Access: Access through Affordability: a. tuition and fees compared within the state and compared to national peers, b. amount of financial aid per student at various levels of higher education and c. percent of tuition income from financial aid. Access of Underserved Populations: a. region-, religion-, caste-wise breakdown of enrolled students at various levels of higher education, b. rates of application, acceptance, and attendance by religion, by caste, by gender, and by region at various levels, c. number and proportion of student population from minority groups at various levels and d. percent of enrollment of disabled students. Access through Technology: a. percent of library users accessing library on-line and b. distance education enrollment. Overall Access: a. amount of increase in number of students served.

Measures of Competitiveness: Student Competitiveness: a. percent of pass-outs remaining in the state, b. salaries of pass-outs, c. percent of pass-outs who obtain jobs in their field and d. proportion of pass-outs employed within one year of graduation. Institutional Competitiveness: a. research funding compared within the state and compared to national peers, b. cost and revenue compared to the nation, c. per capita costs of educating students within the state compared to other states, d. number of out-of-state students enrolled and number of students from the state who go out of state to college, e. state and local support of higher education compared to nation and f. amount of merit-based aid.

Measures of Utilization: Utilizing Links to Business: a. number of partnerships with business through internships and research and b. shared use of technology, supplies, equipment, and programmes with business. Utilizing Links to the Community: a. amount of public service by faculty and student groups, as well as through publications. Utilizing the Institutional Facilities: a. space utilization rates of classrooms and labs, b. use of best management practices, c. financial expenditures in many different ways, d. enrollment in non-degree, non-credit courses and e. elimination of administrative and academic duplication.

An automated data-driven decision support system integrated with the accountability system is the third essential component of any accountability system for ensuring that policy making and decisions are well informed by good data in a timely manner. The decision support system helps link data available in the databank to clearly articulated policy goals and objectives that are aligned with indicators of performance. The decision support system should support the decision-making at institutional, state and national levels as per the need of the stakeholders.

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the projected growth in the number of higher educational institutions in the country it emerges that a transparent public accountability system that can satisfy the diverse needs of the stakeholders is the need of the hour. However, extreme care should be taken in its implementation so that it would not end-up as another regulatory mechanism in an already overregulated higher education system. The organizing principles of the proposed accountability system must be pride, not fear and high aspirations, not minimum

standards. Accountability based on fear and minimum standards is destined to fail.

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