

# CONTRIBUTORY PAPERS

**THEME-1**

**Accreditation Global Best Practices**

# Nordic Epitome of Public Confidence to Tow Accreditation

**Amol Gore**

*Deperatment of Operations Management, University of Mumbai alf Institute of Management Studies and Research  
E-mail: dr.amolgore@yahoo.com*

## ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions world over are under more pressure than ever to demonstrate quality improvement and accountability for all programmes they offer in a rapidly changing Government-Academia relationship. While Universities in many countries are formulating a separate structure for accreditation with the hope of providing assurance to stakeholders, it is noteworthy that the customary education quality processes in Nordic (Northern European) countries simply translate into accreditation criteria focused on learning outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to consider the Nordic model on a general quality assurance schema and provide an explanation for the ease of achieving set accreditation norms or renunciation otherwise. Based on the qualitative survey methodology along with the established theories and literature, the aim is to examine the Nordic system and best practices, and present the relevant evidence. Our analytical contribution shall enable scholars and policy makers to trace patterns and conduct dialogue to improve accreditation for the overriding public interest in higher education.

**Keywords:** Nordic, Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Best Practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher Education systems across the globe are in a fluid state following the emergence of knowledge society and subsequent economic uncertainties that have fueled speculations in political circles about the responsibilities that academia should shoulder in a hypermodern society. Although governments have always expressed interest in the goals laid down for higher education institutions (HEIs), today there is an intense political pressure on HEIs to show that their programmes meet national and international accreditation standards [1, 2]. In Europe, following the Bologna Declaration and New Public Management, higher education reforms are realigning the education in terms of learning outcomes and accreditation procedures have become an important method for external quality assurance [3]. Accreditation passes a verdict on whether programmes, degrees or institutions meet certain outside standards or requirements [4, 5] and enables higher education institutions to maintain and improve quality through measuring the extent to which the institution meets standards of quality. It is a process based on self and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Nevertheless, it must be realized that in many countries and particularly in Europe, individual national higher education systems are still anchored in country-specific regulatory and coordinative regimes, which to a great extent reflect the national historical and institutional developments [6]. Thus, mechanisms to drive accreditation vary depending on country concerned ranging from setting up separate structures at University level to reliance on

national agencies or even renunciation by splitting quality assurance into components including institution level quality audits, evaluation of subject areas as well as accreditation of institutions and courses. The Nordic (Northern European) countries namely Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland, present a unique case since the quality processes are inherently outcome-based and departments in HEIs assume responsibility for development and quality assurance of their activities. Moreover, the Nordic model involves a mix of different types of external quality assurance and focuses on overall development of higher education. However, the system offers a rather independent and “accreditation-like” status that is at odds with the general guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education. Currently, efforts are underway to theoretically meet the European guidelines and roll out the new format in 2016. Nevertheless, the arguments continue as indicated by a Rector who stated, “Excellent programmes, attractive to top students and with good records from the labour market, are deemed “not good enough” and others the reverse...” Therefore, the research questions central to this paper are:

1. Why the customary education quality processes in Nordic countries simply translate into accreditation criteria?
2. Can the best practices in Nordic HEIs be emulated or incorporated to improve accreditation?

Formerly in the Nordic countries, policy formulation mainly took place on the national level, often as an outcome of committee work commissioned by government or national agencies and policy realization on the local level through the efforts of a well-developed bureaucracy and loyal academic leaders and staff members [7]. Recently, the devolution of authority has brought forward the institutional level for policy formulation and departmental level for policy realization and hence HEIs need leaders who can turn complexity into meaning and establish quality through dialogue and improvement orientation. According to a leading Swedish Government Bill on Quality in Higher Education, greater autonomy entails greater responsibility for the HEIs to structure their activities so that high quality is developed and sustained [8]. Nordic politicians are as such questioning how to and whether to integrate two different purposes in the national system viz. providing government with information about quality in higher education and encouraging the internal quality work within the academic institutions. In order to provide a forum for such issues, Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) was established a decade ago. NOQA comprises of organizations engaged in evaluation and quality assurance of higher education namely Swedish Higher Education Authority SHEA, Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC, Danish Accreditation Institution, Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education RANNIS, and Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education NOKUT.

This paper is organized as follows: First we include the necessary literature review and existing theories and then proceed to outline the methodology employed in the study. Further, results are presented along with pertinent discussion and remarks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality in higher education has now become an international issue through developments associated with globalization and indeed quality assurance is now a central thrust in the HEI reforms. However, Nordic countries have for long expected HEIs to inherently build quality into their programmes. The Nordic ideology advocates that quality and relevance of the higher education system is about its ability to educate people in various areas at a high academic level that measures up to the best

internationally and enables supply society with a spread of competencies to match the commercial and employment needs of society [9]. Hence the state-control theory is closer to the Nordic ideology rather than Anglo-American market-oriented model and the Humboldtian tradition of academic self-rule. At the same time, HEIs openly question whether teaching and research should focus on what the academic faculty or state deems most important or what students wish to learn and what the market demands. According to [10], the constitutive logic of a state-centered higher education system is the implementation of pre-determined national objectives and universities are comprehended as rational instruments employed to meet national priorities. Consequently, Nordic countries have developed semi-independent national quality assurance agencies and stressed institutional accreditation. In the last five years however, the focus has shifted to programmes as well and the quality assurance framework has marked two elements namely programme evaluation and accreditation with outcome orientation. In Denmark, accreditation of higher education was introduced by law in 2007 and programme accreditation today is performed on the basis of five criteria: needs and relevance, knowledge base, objectives of learning outcomes, organization of the programme and completion rate of students, and development of quality. Similarly in Finland, HEIs have a legal obligation to regularly undergo external evaluations of their operations and quality systems through FINEEC. In Sweden, the SHEA assures the quality of higher education and the model emphasizes qualitative targets and internal work on quality assurance at the HEIs. In Norway and Iceland, programme accreditation has been established but institutional accreditation dominates. NOKUT is more about stimulating the quality development of higher education activities. Thus, in spite of a general reluctance to run explicit accreditation programmes there are still quality assurance activities in place in the Nordic countries that are essentially accreditation although they may or may not carry that label. A common denominator between Nordic countries is that they attempt to establish a relationship with HEIs based on trust and are more tuned to concepts of “absolute truth” and “public confidence” in higher education. It is not surprising that evidence [11] suggests Nordic countries rank among the least corrupt and most honest countries in the world.

## METHODOLOGY

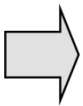
The qualitative survey methodology was utilized and the design considered qualitative multidimensional descriptive analysis to be juxtaposed with the existing theories in order to draw inferences on a general level, and provide explanation and new insights. According to [12, 13], qualitative survey is the study of diversity, and that this type of survey does not count the number of people with the same characteristics (value of variable) but it establishes the meaningful variation (relevant dimensions and values) within that population. The aim is not about establishing frequencies, means or other parameters rather it is about determining the diversity of topic within a given population. The approach chosen is not a real case study in the traditional sense, but a series of qualitative interviews with interview- observation schedule and a positivistic assumption. The inspiration sought from the methodical approach meant that the text was read several times to obtain a sense of whole and then organized in a way that mirrored the central content in the interviews. The term

“Higher Education Institution” used in this paper practically means “Universities” since only Universities of Technology and their Business Schools were pursued and the Nordic commonalities were examined.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nordic countries have unique aspects and tend to transcend the choice of acquiring accreditation or approaching certification body. This section presents the results as shown in the Figure 1 and also provides further analysis in response to the research questions.

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Nordic Perspective and Enablers</i>
Institution-Government Relationship	Trust-based Relationship
Industry-Institution Relationship	Employers do not argue that graduates aren't ready; Industry funding for research
Relevance	Programme-Labour Market Relevance; Teachers' contact through professional networks and informal dialogue
Representatives from Stakeholders	Healthy Participation and Influence in Panels
Concept of Competence	Subsequent use in a specific context and learning.
Focus of Government	Efficiency in higher education; Participative Governance
Public Perception of Politics and Politicians	High level of political trust; Credibility and Transparency
Public Confidence in Higher Education	High confidence; State-centered mechanism and publicly funded system; Minimum threshold is met means programme quality is high; Only one major agency for quality assurance
Generators of Knowledge	Self-Evaluation; Knowledge generated by the Institution itself and in collaboration with the surrounding world
Research	Applied; Binding teaching, research, and consulting
Rewards	Award of Excellence stimulates quality improvement; Share information about practices
Student Involvement and Evidence of Students' Learning	Student Representation; Students' projects are an important element and projects are anonymized and appraised
International Cooperation	Regular Feature; Context-based
Adherence to other Accreditations e.g. European Framework	Favourable to a limited extent; Detailed accreditation norms questionable and undesirable



Accreditation

Institutional

New Programme

Existing Programme

Aims:

- Development
- Information
- Comparison
- Control

**Fig. 1:** Key Facets of the Nordic Pattern

The conventional higher education quality processes in the Nordic countries have largely evolved from the specificities of governance, industrial configurations, economic size and competitiveness. Therefore, quality assurance stems from a multidimensional view of quality namely threshold, excellence and transformation, with inherent expectation of outcome orientation. Accreditation then is more of a formal statement about an institution or a programme and usually a developmental one. HEIs are presumed to have reasonable internal systems for quality assurance and this kind of

empowerment brings in an internal feeling of strength and power. However, the Ministry can withdraw the authority of the institution or department should the systems prove unsatisfactory. The HEI may not lose its accreditation as an institution for its existing provisions but would lose the authority to establish new programmes. Even specialized programmes with their own criteria such as core requirements, work-orientation, contents and objectives, education process, pedagogical arrangements, practical arrangements, and continuous improvement, need to be acceptable. Although each of the Nordic countries has its own way of balancing roles of institutions, national quality assurance agency and the government, and accreditation or accreditation-like procedures vary to some extent, it is still typically Nordic feature that the external assurances vis-à-vis the government are to inform and advise whereas the government has the last word in questions of accreditations. Nevertheless, the relationship between the HEI and the Government or entities is based on trust, dialogue, improvement and not just control. The best practices of this sort are highly dependent on Nordic specificity and hence difficult emulate. Yet, there are extensive public debates whether HEIs should meet other accreditation guidelines or European framework [14], which indicates that the public confidence in higher education and political trust actually tows accreditation and not the other way. Further, rigidity of accreditation norms is shunned causing a clash with accreditation agencies and European partners, and already for this reason some compromise is envisaged. The customary programmes in Nordic countries are supported by the industry in multifarious ways through direct funding, research sponsorship, consulting contracts, informal contact with professors, data support for building a body of knowledge, representation in programme quality panels, and so on, and consequently the labour market relevance or employability is not really an issue. Moreover, competence gained at HEIs is of multiple forms such as subject-specific, relational, and personal. The quality processes could be designed to achieve an award of excellence or range from student representation for legitimacy to the concept of absolute truth with accreditation as an “essential” connotation. Therefore, the proposition is that quality assurance through accreditation in developing countries as opposed to the highly developed Nordic countries, may be judgmental or case based rather than parity seeking or holistic, on a global platform, and this can be considered for future research.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper indicates that maturity level of accreditation is dependent on several factors and may not be homogeneous across the world. The conventional quality processes that are necessarily outcome oriented in the Nordic HEIs still provide assurance to stakeholders and public at large, and accreditation dialogues are on a different plane. The practices in Nordic accreditations or otherwise provide interesting insights and directives however they seem regional and difficult to replicate. Future research that provides more conclusive and generalizable evidence about the phenomenon and proposition would be of interest.

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## Dr. Amol Gore

*Professor, Department of Operations Management, University of Mumbai al/ Institute of Management Studies and Research*



Dr. Amol Gore is currently working as Professor (Operations Management) at the University of Mumbai al/ Institute of Management Studies and Research approved by the All India Council for Technical Education AICTE, New Delhi. He was the European Commission Scholar for Post-Doctoral research and his book in the area of Operations Management has been published by Cengage Learning. Dr. Amol Gore has been faculty for many programmes in India and other countries including France, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Mexico, *et al.* He has also worked with reputed companies and his research has been conducted in collaboration with or concurrence of a number of companies from Europe and India. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management. He was the organizer of the Conference on Business Excellence in 2015.