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PROFILE

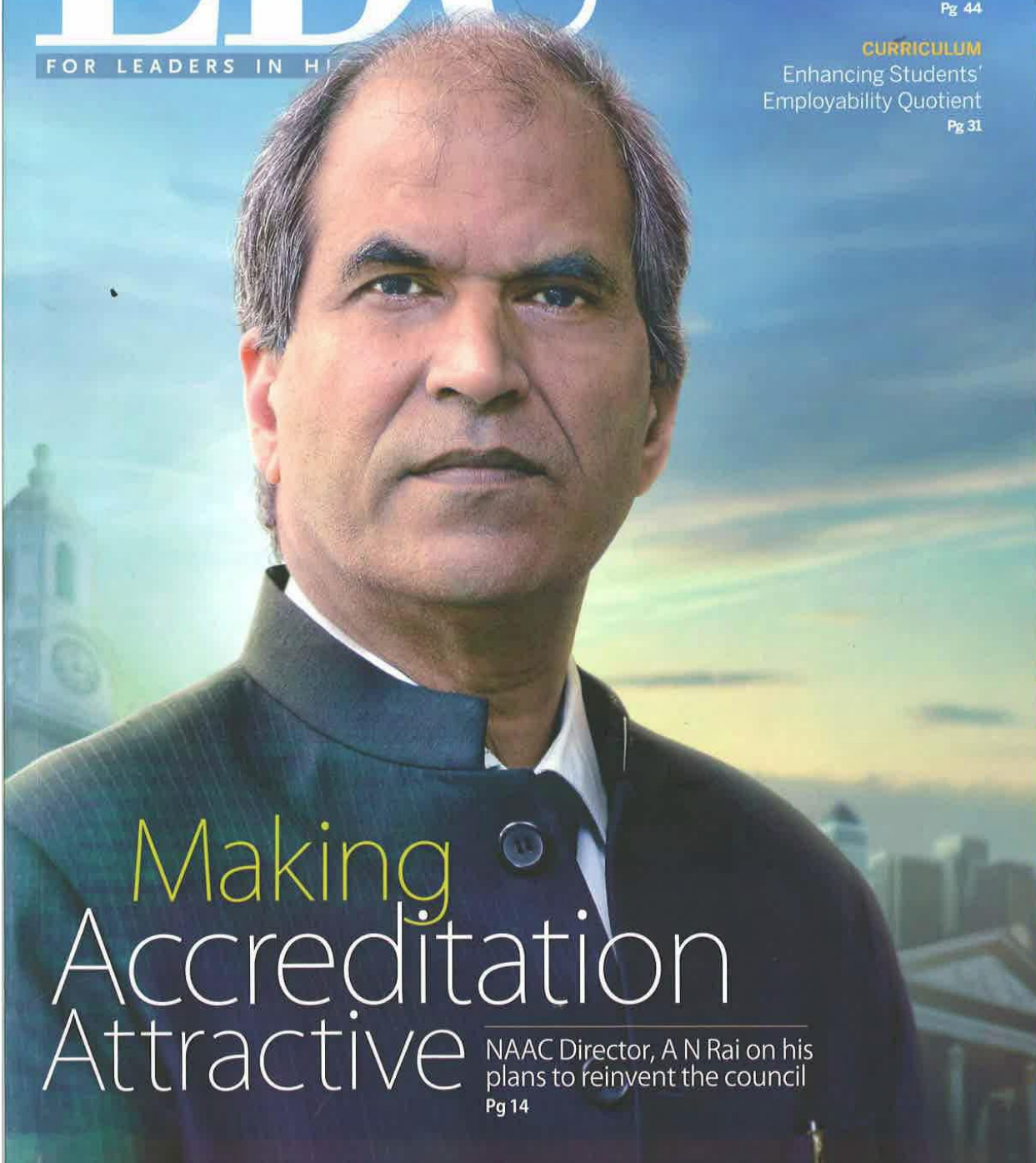
Rishiksha T Krishnan,
Director, IIM Indore

Pg 44

CURRICULUM

Enhancing Students'
Employability Quotient

Pg 31



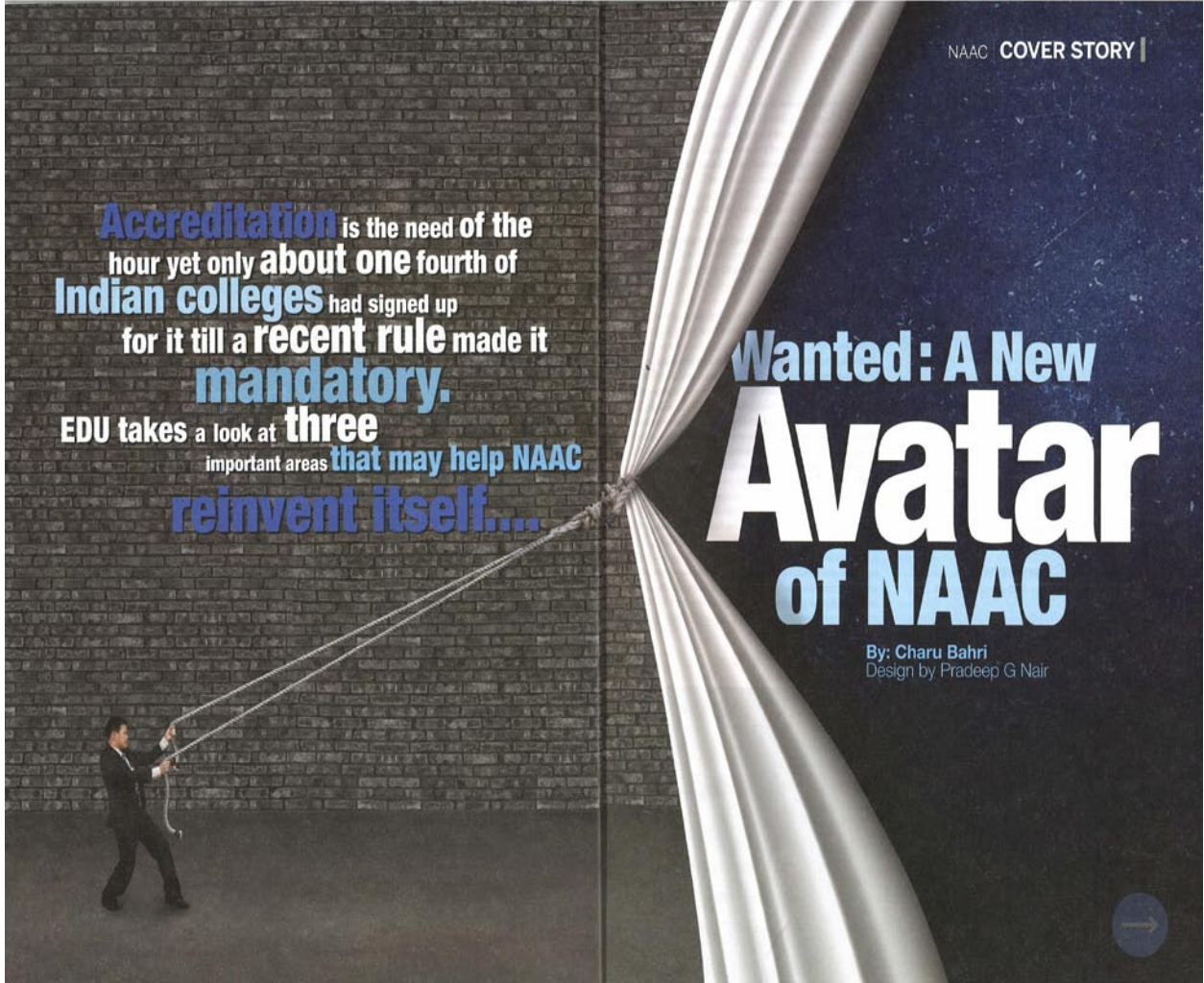
Making Accreditation Attractive

NAAC Director, A N Rai on his
plans to reinvent the council
Pg 14

Accreditation is the need of the hour yet only **about one fourth** of **Indian colleges** had signed up for it till a **recent rule** made it **mandatory.** EDU takes a look at **three** important areas **that may help NAAC reinvent itself....**

Wanted: A New Avatar of NAAC

By: Charu Bahri
Design by Pradeep G Nair



NO

one can deny the usefulness of a credible, independent opinion on the quality of education imparted by colleges across the country. "Mapping the education sector topography gives students and their parents a universal metric for all institutes, one that compares them across specialities," says **N Chandramouli**, CEO of TRA, a brand intelligence company.

Other stakeholders benefit too. Faculty can better judge their prospects in different institutions. Recruiters can estimate the quality of an institution's graduates and postgraduates. Donors and private investors can evaluate the institution's need for assistance and the likelihood of their investment delivering desired returns. As for the institution itself, it gets to know where it stands, in comparison to the highest standard and vis-à-vis its peers. It gets to know its strengths and weaknesses.

It was to meet these requirements, that the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994.

The positives

St. Xavier's College Mumbai has always enjoyed an impeccable reputation. Yet it opted to go for accreditation by NAAC in 1999. Last year it was re-accredited for the third time with an 'A' grade. Explaining why St. Xavier's chose to go for an accreditation, its principal Dr. Frazer Mascarenhas SJ says, "Getting an external opinion on the quality of education of a college is always a good thing. More than the accreditation itself, the process of getting accredited has proved enormously beneficial. This exercise in introspection has helped to usher in quality awareness and consciousness and the will to continuously improve. Whereas only a section of faculty was driving the accreditation in 1999, now a larger number of stakeholders are interested in the process. Teaching as well as non-teaching staff are eager to introduce change for the better—be it to improve infrastructure, get involved in research or start new courses."

Dr. Mascarenhas' experience is that accreditation helps bring into the spotlight issues that NAAC emphasises, which otherwise might not have received the same emphasis. Good examples are the concept of inclusion and the need for interdisciplinary courses.

Dr. G. R. Damodaran College of Science, a self-financed college graded 'A' by NAAC has had a similar experience. It's principal, Dr. T. Santha, says that they have made impressive growth in every aspect since being accredited—in teaching, faculty development, research, paper publications, infrastructure, and even in the quality and number of placements. She says, "After going through the process of NAAC accreditation, teaching and non-teaching staff know what is expected of them and are keen to fulfil that criteria to improve the institute's brand image."

The question marks

However, the fact that only 5538 of 35538 colleges across India have been accredited so far shows that some segments of the higher education community still harbour doubts about the relevance of NAAC accreditation. In July 2014, it was decided that NAAC would snap ties with the UGC, thus ending the commission's two-decade-long supremacy.

At that time NAAC's former executive council chairman Goverdhan Mehta had said: "The regulator and the assessor cannot be the same body; they must be independent. How can assessment be carried out by a body of your own creation?"

It looks like NAAC is now poised for a makeover. It is perhaps the right time for it to sit back and review its systems. What are the issues educationists think NAAC needs to address?

Here are the three major questions that NAAC may want to consider to reinvent itself:

➤ Is there a way to measure subjective elements?

St. Stephen's College is going in for NAAC accreditation only now after the UGC has issued the Mandatory Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Educational Institutions Regulations, making accreditation mandatory for all eligible higher educational institutions. So far, the college steered clear of the

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process because Delhi University had not prioritised it. Also, it has reservations about the scope of accreditation.

"Top grade accreditation does not necessarily equate with rigorous education or with ideal governance. An accreditation agency may evaluate objective criteria such as the physical facilities and infrastructure of an institution, the credentials of faculty more easily than an institutional culture," opines Dr. Karen Gabriel, St. Stephen's College's media coordinator & associate professor in the Department of English. Essentially, she wonders if and how subjective aspects such as the culture of excellence, work ethic and so on will be factored



Current status of NAAC grading



TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIVERSITIES

700



TOTAL NUMBER OF COLLEGES

35538

Source: UGC Publication "Higher Education in India at a glance" June 2013 and Interview with NAAC Director AN Rai



UNIVERSITIES ACCREDITED BY NAAC (VALID)

189



COLLEGES ACCREDITED BY NAAC ((VALID)

5538



NAAC versus ISO

Dr G R Damodaran College of Science, Coimbatore, is autonomous and affiliated to Bharathiar University. In 2009, it was re-accredited with 'A' grade by NAAC. It also holds ISO 9001:2008 certification. According to principal Dr T Saritha, "NAAC's a more comprehensive evaluation system than ISO certification. ISO certification helps bring in quality by ensuring that teaching and other activities are documented. But NAAC covers more aspects of an institution such as its policies, best practices, its curriculum design, the research the college takes up, etc." Still, the college ensures it is re-certified by ISO every three years and conducts internal audits to ensure conformance with the ISO criteria every year. Why? "ISO is a global body, which makes ISO certification a global assurance of quality," she says.

into the final score—"St. Stephen's strives to orient its students toward excellence and social responsibility and social justice, its core values. How will such aspects of the educational process be captured or quantified? And how much will they be prized?"

Reputation for academic excellence is another subjective criterion that NAAC is currently not taking into account. The fact is—institutions like St. Stephen's College, which set their own standards and continuously raise the bar on excellence suo moto, would always have takers for their courses irrespective of whether they are NAAC accredited or not. Shouldn't this aspect factor into their grades?

➔ **Can the current criteria be made more realistic?**

In listing the criteria for evaluating colleges, NAAC has left no margin for taking cognizance of genuine practical challenges facing reputed institutions. In practice, sometimes, this leads to unexpected (and undesirable) results.

Consider Kolkata's Asutosh College. It has consistently made it to lists of best arts and science colleges of general interest publications. Earlier this year, it became one of only 92 colleges across the country (and four in Bengal) to introduce the UGC approved bachelors course in vocation studies along with the community college scheme. Still, in

2002 Asutosh College made headlines for being graded a dismal C++ by the NAAC. At the time, Asutosh College was only the second college in West Bengal to apply for NAAC accreditation, after Loreto College, a private institution that was awarded a high five-star rating in 2000.

In hindsight, current principal (then professor) Dr Dipak Kumar Kar believes Asutosh College applied for NAAC accreditation prematurely, without giving enough thought to the various criteria it would be judged on—"We never imagined that being centrally located in a dated building in the city centre, with no scope to expand the main structure horizontally or vertically, would go against us."

The bottom line is that the lack of space doesn't mean that Asutosh College was no good to start with—"which is what the C++ grade made us look like," says Dr Kar. Lack of space is a genuine constraint, one which only significant time and substantial finance can remove, and which Asutosh College is working on. It has since created a second Annex building where six post graduate programmes in the arts and sciences are being offered. "We have also established a post graduate study centre under our directorate of distance education offering post graduate education in four more subjects. And in 2003, we introduced undergraduate programmes in newer areas like business administration, communicative English, computer science, journalism, electronics, biochemistry, psychology, environmental science, fisheries and microbiology," he adds.

More post graduate programmes in emerging areas, research facilities, a hostel for girl students (currently the college only has a boys' hostel) and a guesthouse for visiting faculty are on the anvil, but on the college's new 11 acre second campus coming up near Joka.

In the years ensuing Asutosh College's accreditation debacle, other colleges in Kolkata with a lesser academic and infrastructure standing applied for accreditation and got a higher grade. So in 2005, Asutosh College appealed against the grade to NAAC's Redressal Cell. NAAC was gracious enough to respond positively, agreeing to re-evaluate the college at its own cost. But Asutosh College's management decided otherwise. "We felt there is no way a C++ grade would



NAAC Grades

NAAC has developed and is implementing a three letter (A/B/C) grading system and Cumulative Grade Point Average (1-4) marking to evaluate the overall performance of higher education institutions. Assessment and accreditation is based on seven criteria covering 32 key aspects. The seven criteria are: curricula; teaching learning and evaluation; research, consultancy and extension; infrastructure and learning



Rating a programme versus rating an institution

CRISIL, a global analytical company providing ratings, research, and risk and policy advisory services, offers the CRISIL Business School Grading to assess the quality of full-time management programmes.

➔ **Why B-School gradings?**

Anurag Jha, Director, CRISIL Education Gratings says, "Information relating to management programmes is available only for the top institutions, which account for less than 5% of business school admissions. India has more than 3300 business schools and there is a need for bridging the communication gap between the institute and students. CRISIL aims at extending its grading service to all educational institutions in future. However, given our close ties with industry and India's need to build human capital, we are presently only grading the quality of management education."

CRISIL's B-school gradings take into account industry interface, management and governance, student selection process, student outcomes, faculty, research, curriculum and learning and physical infrastructure. But, the rating gauges the ability of a single programme to achieve the desired student outcomes. It does not cover the institute as a whole.

ever be revised to an A grade. So we decided to apply afresh, but only after implementing some of NAAC's suggestions," explains Dr Kar. Now that it has done so, Asutosh College plans to apply anew to NAAC next year, the college's centenary.

Is there a way to account for cases like Asutosh College and make the criteria more realistic?

➔ **Can the private sector be roped in?**

Since accreditation was made mandatory, NAAC has received a rush of accreditation applications. Just this year (until August), 2515 colleges have applied. In recent months, NAAC has taken steps to simplify and speed up the process of assessment and accreditation—such as forming a Standing Committee for the speedy declaration of assessment results, introducing online internal evaluation of quality by applicants, etc. Can a private player help process applications still faster?

Chandramouli favours private-public partnerships in accreditations—"where the efficiency of the private partner overcomes the delays and bureaucracy typically associated with the public sector." Essentially, he believes that the out-

comes of accreditation must justify the additional cost to the institution.

Pragmatic NAAC director Dr Amar Nath Rai believes private players could be allowed provided a clear set of objectives and transparency in operations exist. "Most important is that the process should be transparent, objective and free from biases, and achieve the aims of ensuring accountability of institutions and value for money education," he says.

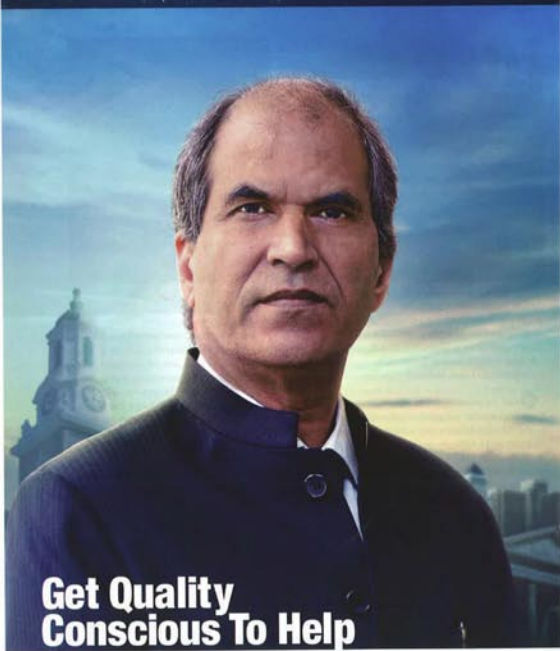
A private player could also introduce fresh ideas, on how to introduce subjective elements into the process and how to judge reputed institutions facing constraints. Accreditation by private bodies is a trend in the USA and other western countries. It is mostly developing countries in Asia that have accreditation systems (and many higher education institutions) funded by their respective governments.

That said, it would be challenging to find an existing grading private body that matches NAAC's vision. Certifying body ISO and analytical rating agency CRISIL, for instance, do not share NAAC's holistic institution-centric conceptual understanding of accreditation (see boxes for comparisons). And creating a new private body for the purpose will bring its own challenges.

NAAC has come a long way in the last two decades. Now it needs to adapt faster to the aspirations of all the stakeholders. That alone will bridge the gap between institutions' apprehensions over accreditation and their appreciation, across the higher education landscape.

(resources; student support and progression; governance, leadership and management; and innovations and best practices).

Cumulative Grade Point Average	Letter grade	Performance
3.01-4.00	A	Very Good (Accredited)
2.01-3.00	B	Good (Accredited)
1.51-2.00	C	Satisfactory (Accredited)
< 1.50	D	Dissatisfactory (Not Accredited)



Get Quality
Conscious To Help

Reinvent NAAC

NAAC Director Dr Amar Nath Rai talks about NAAC's achievements, hurdles and the way forward

Q What do you consider as some of NAAC's biggest achievements since it was formed?

A The concept of external quality assurance started to take shape in India around the time the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) came into existence. NAAC has helped usher in quality consciousness among higher education institutions, and push educationists into learning a new vocabulary and set of processes related to assessment and accreditation.

Despite being voluntary until the year 2013, NAAC completed 7529 assessments and accreditations (first cycle 5722, 2nd cycle 1001, third cycle 105). Out of these 5727 are valid (180 universities and 5538 colleges) as on September 24, 2014. Of these 5727 institutions, 1097 are graded 'A', 3787 are 'B' and 843 are 'C'. We see this as an achievement.

To introduce internal quality assurance processes in institutions, NAAC is sponsoring nation-wide workshops, seminars and brainstorming sessions designed to sensitise different stakeholders to the concept. All accredited institutions have established Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) for sustaining and enhancing quality and submit an online Annual Quality Assurance Report to NAAC. NAAC provides IQACs financial assistance as well as resource persons to conduct two day seminars on Best Practices and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education for vice chancellors, professors and principals. Through such events NAAC has reached out to more than 1000 institutions. NAAC is also a source for books and monograph manuals on Assessment and Accreditation.

The council has also helped to establish State Level Quality Assurance Cells to serve as an interface between NAAC and state higher education departments.

Higher education must adapt to meet the challenges of internationalisation and globalisation. NAAC encourages institutions to imbibe the flavour of internationalisation by becoming members of regional and international quality assurance networks.

NAAC has introduced transparency in

higher education by uploading assessment reports of institutions on its website for easy access by various stakeholders: students, parents, employers, regulatory bodies, etc.

Q What are NAAC's biggest challenges in carrying out its work?

A Staff shortage has been our biggest bane. It is being addressed. A proposal for strengthening and expanding NAAC is currently under consideration by the UGC and MHRD.

“Despite being voluntary until 2013, NAAC has completed 7529 assessments and accreditations”

Q What is the reason for only a low percentage of the total colleges/universities having opted for accreditation so far?

A Probably many institutions want to improve their quality standards and meet NAAC parameters before applying for assessment and accreditation. Also, new concepts take time to build momentum. Whatever success NAAC has achieved so far is because of its outreach initiatives and capacity building activities.

Q What are some of your new plans to promote accreditation and take it to the next level?

A One of NAAC's focus areas is awareness building and popularising and promoting quality assurance by mentoring institutions. NAAC conducts workshops on quality assurance for university authorities, faculty, principals and senior officials of state higher education departments. NAAC plans to conduct 100 workshops across the country—in regions and places populated by a large number of non-accredited institutions. NAAC off-

cers have been set targets for organising awareness programmes depending on the number of colleges to be assessed and accredited in their respective regions. This activity will be organised in close collaboration with the affiliating universities.

Another focus area is building a collegium of Assessors. Senior academicians and heads of institutes are intensively trained in NAAC processes over two day Assessors Interaction Meetings. They are prepared to peer team members to assess applicant institutions as well as help and encourage their own institutions and neighbouring ones to become quality conscious and apply for assessment and accreditation. Last year, 88 participants were trained in two meetings. During 2014, NAAC has scheduled eight Assessors Interaction Meetings and aims at preparing 300 assessors from different streams—three programmes are far from General Liberal Arts and Science, one is for Teacher and Physical Education experts, one for Health Science experts, two for Technical and Management Education experts, and one for Special Resource Persons. We are trying to improve the gender ratio of participants from 20% women participants to at least 30%.

A third priority area is support to Internal Quality Assurance Cells for organising workshops and seminars. NAAC has set a target of 100 workshops for the current year on the theme Quality Enhancement, ICTs and Role of IQACs in Quality Improvement.

Q Is there a message you would you like to give the higher education community?

A I appeal to the governments at the centre and at state levels and to the managements of higher education institutions to channel adequate funding into quality improvement and to adopt a policy framework to promote quality standards, implement academic and administrative reforms, and provide students with good learning resources. Regulatory bodies must ensure adherence to standards. Large faculty vacancies are a major concern. Managements must fill these and governments must ensure it is done. **ENR**