

Redefining “BEST Practices” Template for Higher Education Institutes

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ABSTRACT

BEST practices constitute a key indicator prescribed by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for accreditation of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in India. NAAC has prescribed six metrics for assessing and rating BEST practices across the board. These templates are essential, but not adequate for telling the complete story about the success or the lessons learned. In response to this, the author has proposed a simpler and user-friendly template called “BEST template” to represent the four developmental stages of any innovation or BEST practice: Beginning, expansion, success, and take home. A narrative based on these four components can be effectively used by the HEIs for self-evaluation as well as for motivating others to initiate similar efforts. A suggestive checklist has been provided to objectivize the process of narration. Guidelines have been given for the effective implementation of the template.

Keywords: Accreditation, Appreciative inquiry, Higher education, Quality assurance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in India are assessed and accredited by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), which is responsible for quality assurance. Toward this end, NAAC has introduced a detailed “Manual of Health Sciences for the Universities” specifying various criteria, key indicators for each criterion, and metrics for each key indicator.¹ One of the areas of great significance is “Institutional Values and BEST Practices (Criteria VII).” According to NAAC, “any practice or practices that the Institution has internally evolved and used during the last few years leading to positive impact on the regular functioning of the Institution can be identified as *BEST practice/s*. These are not any activity prescribed by some authority. At some point in time the Institution evolves some innovation or a change in some aspect of functioning. This practice is relevant mainly within the Institution at a given point in time.”

The BEST practice key indicator (key indicator 7.2) under NAAC criteria 7 consists of a qualitative description of six metrics, viz., the title, objectives, the context, practice, evidence of success, problems encountered, and resources required for implementation. While these metrics are quite useful for the assessors to assign scores, They may not be adequate for telling the complete story about the practice developed by the institutes. The institute might have done a lot of hard work and seen “ups and downs” over the years, before getting the fruits of success. Indeed, these experiences and insights are more useful for others to initiate similar work, instead of “reinventing the wheel.”

NAAC metrics are based on “cross-sectional examination” of practice, rather than “longitudinal account.” They focus on the comparison and rating of an institute, in a competitive framework. Post-COVID era has opened up our eyes to shift the emphasis on education and training from competition to cooperation. We need to encourage BEST practices from every institute in a collaborative spirit. This implies that we focus on the efforts made by every institute in developing its BEST practice, the way it began, expanded, got success, and ready to offer take home. Such

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information will be useful not only in helping the HEIs to make further progress but also in stimulating other HEIs to emulate such practices in their institutes.

The conventional scoring system of NAAC aims at “objective assessment” and “proving” the standard of practice based on the fixed metrics. While this may be needed for the purpose of objective grading, what is desirable is the “subjective reflection” and “improving” the standard. The HEIs should, therefore, focus on appreciating the efforts made by each other and share their stories of success as well as failures in a collaborative spirit.

BEST PRACTICE TEMPLATE: NEW ACRONYM

The suggested template proposed by the author is a simple narrative tool that can be adapted and adopted by HEIs in India. The acronym itself is “BEST.” The four letters B, E, S, T represent beginning, expansion, success, and take home, respectively (Fig. 1).

HOW TO USE THE BEST TEMPLATE?

Writing a good narrative is an art. However, bringing all relevant information based on evidence is science. In order to see that the narrator does not lose sight of the main focus of narration, a checklist has been provided (Table 1).

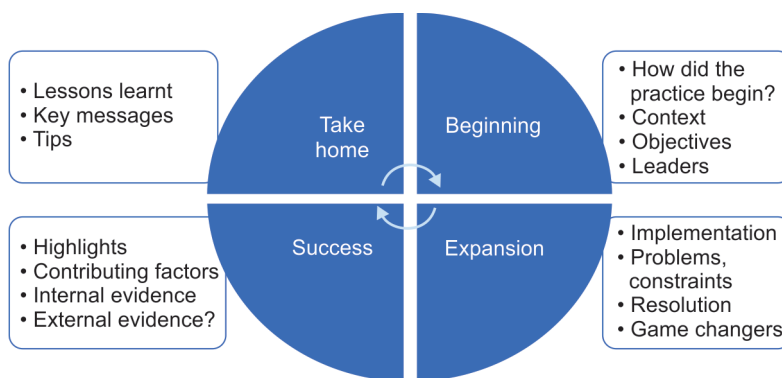


Fig. 1: BEST acronym and the matrices

Table 1: The four components of BEST template and a suggested checklist

Component	Suggested checklist for writing narrative
Beginning (200–300 words) How did you begin?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin your story by giving a brief idea about your institute or department • Describe your context and compelling reasons for starting this practice • The objectives or outcomes expected in the practice; how are they aligned with the core values of HEIs? • Name(s) of leaders who were instrumental in starting this innovation/ BEST practice
Expansion (300–500 words) How could you expand your initiative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was the innovation/ BEST practice implemented and expanded gradually? • What were the constraints, problems, and challenges encountered? How were they resolved? • How did your institute/department sustain this innovation/ BEST practice? (Managing resistance to change, motivation of staff, addressing workload, cost-effectiveness, and competitiveness, any other problem) • Were there any game-changers?
Success (300–400 words) Tell us about your success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluate your success and highlights • What factors led to your success? • What evidence do you have to showcase your success*? (Attach evidences in support of your claim)
Take home (200–300 words) What is your key message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What lessons did you learn at the end of the day? • What keys message(s) do you wish to give to others? • Would you like to share a few tips?

*The evidence of success may include a variety of sources, program evaluation reports, documents, newspaper reports, social media handles, and the feedback collected from the users/beneficiaries. Some of these can become part of external assessment

THE KEY FEATURES OF THE SUGGESTED “BEST” TEMPLATE

The BEST template deals with the developmental aspect of a practice. It addresses the whole life cycle of a practice, the beginning, expansion, successful functioning, and readiness to help others by revealing its take home message. It, therefore, includes the process and outcomes, both of which are important for quality assurance. The knowledge of progress is vital for self-monitoring and self-audit.

Further, the narrative helps other institutes to follow such practices with local adaptation. At the same time, it saves them from “re-inventing the wheel.” Though BEST template highlights the success, it is a well-known fact that all innovations are bound to meet with a few failures and setbacks, during expansion stage, which have to be reported honestly and meticulously. The template being simple and self-explanatory, it is highly feasible for implementation in diverse settings. While the narrative ranges between 1000 and 1500 words, the evidence for success comes in the form of annexures, including text, documents, newspaper

reports, audiovisuals, web-links, and even social media handles, which are becoming popular day by day.

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE BEST TEMPLATE EFFECTIVELY

- The BEST template is not prescriptive, it is rather descriptive. It may be modified and customized by the HEIs, keeping in mind the local context and the nature of innovation.
- The narrative is a consensus document. It should not be the work of one person. Consultation of all internal stakeholders and their constructive feedback is essential to bring objectivity and credibility to the report.² In case of difference of opinion, consensus-building techniques can be used effectively.³
- A comprehensive collection of evidence-based information is essential for an authentic narrative. Any kind of narrative is vulnerable to “narrator bias.” However, this can be minimized by narrator’s self-declaration of bias and conflict of interest. The evidence from BEST practice can be validated by a peer review

process. Combining with NAAC review, it leads to a robust method of evaluating the BEST practice using “triangulation,” a powerful method used in qualitative research.

- Reporting BEST practice should not be a onetime activity during accreditation. It should be done periodically, preferably annually.
- A comprehensive system of feedback should be put in place to identify their strengths and weaknesses, without making any value judgment. Translating in terms of Kirkpatrick’s Model of program evaluation, it can address reaction, learning, and behavior. The final level of evidence of service or impact takes long time.
- While the HEIs are compelled to follow the templates recommended by the regulators, this BEST practice template may be complemented to bring value additions to promote quality enhancement across the board.

EVALUATION OF BEST TEMPLATE

While we need adequate evidence to prove the merit of BEST practice template, we can make a few comments about its strengths and weaknesses in the backdrop of theories behind this concept. Grossly, it has resemblance with NAAC templates, but the developmental focus separates them altogether. Another popular concept is SWOC analysis (strength, weakness, opportunities, and challenges), commonly used in program evaluation.⁴ Again SWOC analysis has a cross-sectional focus, which establishes the value of practice at a given point of time. The author is inspired by “appreciative inquiry,” a popular management technique that focuses on success story of an innovator and how such efforts can be replicated by others. It is described as a 4-D model consisting of discovery (identifying what worked well), dream (developing a vision of what should happen), design (developing a strategy to realize the dream), and destiny (evaluating the achievements and impact).⁵

SUPPORTING THEORIES

The BEST is backed by a plethora of learning theories. It is basically rooted in setting high goals propelled by intrinsic motivation, continuous practice, and reinforcement, which are the focus of behaviorism. Other supporting theories come from cognitivism and social constructivism, as the organizations derive synergy from collaborative learning experiences grounded in the real life, combined with reflection and feedback. Theories related to experiential learning (Kolb), role of continuous reflection and reflective practice, the social learning theory (Bandura), and its extension as zone of proximal development (Vygotsky) emphasizing the role of community of practitioners (Lave, Wenger) are all theories that support different facets of practice as it grows, matures, and excels.^{6,7} On the top of everything, the passion for excellence is inherent in the ancient Indian philosophy of Bhagavad Gita—“Do your duties, sincerely and honestly, without hankering about the fruits.”

CONCLUSION

Higher education in India is heading toward upheaval of its quality and standard as envisioned in the National Education Policy of 2020.⁸ The policy dreams of innovative research ecosystem to attain self-sustenance in higher education (Atmanirbhar Bharat). Toward this end innovations and BEST practices are like engines that move the wheels of development. While HEIs will continue to use the metrics prescribed by the NAAC, the BEST template proposed by the author gives one more opportunity for them to stimulate continuous growth. However, this requires implementation and feedback from the actual users and other stakeholders. Once such information becomes available, the regulators can consider this template as a complement if not supplement. However, nothing can prevent the HEIs from using this template as an effective value-added tool for introducing, monitoring, and sharing their innovations in a spirit of collaboration. This step is likely to increase the visibility of the institutes, career enhancement of the faculty, thus bringing benefit to the society, a win-win situation for all.

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