

National Academic Depository is now operational

The National Academic Depository changes the way degrees are preserved, the way verifiers access academic data of an applicant:

The National Academic Depository (NAD), the country's electronic depository for academic records and documents, is now operational, virtually offering demat accounts for students enabling them to keep track of their academic achievements and access to verifiers too so that they can establish the veracity of an educational claim made by, say, a job applicant. The NAD is a platform that holds all certificates, degrees, awards and other academic awards earned by students, in an electronic format so that these students can access them at any point of time, and at the same time ensure that the credentials are not damaged or forged.

The two securities depositories in the country, the Central Depository Services (India) (CDSL) and the National Securities Depository Services (NSDL), through their respective subsidiaries - CSDL Ventures and NSDL Database Management - were mandated to operationalize the NAD. It was the experience of the country's two depositories in running securities depositories for nearly 20 years that the government thought that their subsidiaries should be entrusted with the project. The NAD is expected to cover around 1500 educational institutions in the country and their 40,000 plus affiliated colleges. It is probably the first of its kind in the world. This initiative brings together institutions at disparate levels of IT maturity to participate in the national digital academic depository ecosystem.

DIGITAL DEGREES

Joydeep Dutta, ED and Group CTO, CDSL, says the NAD is operational wherein degrees, certificates and awards are stored securely, digitally on the platform and can be accessed at any given point of time in a secure manner. He says every certificate/award data that is available on the platform is digitally signed and pre-verified by the issuing academic institution. Those who want to verify the same can access the platform upon authorization by the student and a fee is paid through a payment gateway.



Joydeep Dutta points out that the National Academic Depository is a unique venture for the benefit of several stakeholders

"This will make the task of employers, background checkers, consulates and universities, who wish to check the veracity of the educational qualifications of an applicant, much easier," says he.

Besides educational certifications, degrees and marksheets, the NAD can also hold provisional certificates, skill certificates, transcripts, convocation certificates and transfer certificates, issued by academic institutions in a digital format. "Certificates from 10th standard are expected to be available in the NAD," says Dutta.

"We have already signed up over 220 academic institutions and boards who are in various stages of uploading / updating awards in the electronic format in the NAD system. We have a cumulative count of nearly 30 lakh awards in the system, which can be verified by the institutions / companies who are registered," says Dutta.

VERIFICATION PROCESS

Dutta mentions that the whole verification request process - request by verification

agency, consent by the student concerned, payment of verification fee and the display of the final image to the verifier - can be completed in minutes, which otherwise would take months, especially when a verifier is in a different location than the university concerned. Students too stand to benefit as all their academic credentials are available in one platform and digitally, says he.

The major benefit of this facility is the near total elimination of fake or forged documents/certificates. Besides, there is no prospect of any possible loss of the documents/certificates and no requirement of attestation.

APOSTILLE

The electronic process to automate Apostille authentication of the award documents confirming the originality by the external affairs department of the central government, after obtaining the authentication from the concerned state government departments as required, is also being evaluated to be implemented in the NAD. Countries which are a part of the Hague Convention falls under Apostille authentication. There are designated authorities in every country to issue Apostille certificates to legalize a document. The ministry of external affairs in conjunction with the state governments currently use outsourced agencies in this process. In the current process, students need to approach one of the agencies with the documents and required identity and address proof. The Apostille document can be either picked up where it is submitted or delivered to the student address or verifier.

MAIN FEATURES

Dutta says CSDL Ventures and NSDL Database Management have provided the hardware, software and networking system as well as security systems for the platform. The academic institutions / boards / eligibility assessment bodies are required to select either of the two depositories for entering into legally enforceable agreement for utilizing the services of the NAD.

Students and verification users are free to select either of the depositories to register on to NAD. Besides, there is portability wherein all awards would be available on both depositories - the students and verifiers can switch among the depositories if they are not satisfied with the services rendered.

Dutta lists some of the features of the NAD: "Firstly, the depository is operational in a fully online mode. Secondly, it allows lodging of academic records in a digital format, maintaining the integrity of access to the database and of the awards lodged in the database. The maker/checker facility for the institute strengthens the accuracy of the awards uploaded into the system by the institute officials. Then it allows students to retrieve their lodged academic awards at any time and prospective employers and verifiers to verify the authenticity of the claims of an applicant with prior approval of the applicant. Besides everything, the system maintains the authenticity, integrity and confidentiality of the documents stored."

All the institutions listed by name by the University Grants Commission will be covered by the NAD. Among them will be central universities, central higher educational institutions and institutions empowered by an act of Parliament or state legislature to grant degrees, central higher educational institutions awarding diplomas, state universities and deemed to be universities and private universities approved by the UGC, etc.

STAKEHOLDERS

The NAD will have as its stake holders, students/other award holders, academic institutions/boards/eligibility assessment bodies, verifying entities like banks, employer companies (domestic and overseas), government entities, academic institutions/ universities/ boards/ eligibility assessment bodies, UGC / MHRD and the two depositories.

According to Dutta, CDSL Ventures has conducted several awareness sessions in different cities to promote the concept and benefits of the NAD.

CHALLENGING TASK

He says the task that is set for the NAD

is challenging. "There is this question of revenue loss for the universities as they used to charge a fee for verification of certificates. We found a solution to this apprehension and we decided to incorporate the charges that the universities levy for the service in our commission, and in addition a nominal convenience charge is levied by the depository as agreed upon by the academic institution. But, see the benefits. The whole verification process would become real-time and would be affordable to a larger number of students. It would become hassle-free for students, who typically have to go from one place to another and often fall prey to touts. Also, they can get the verification done from anywhere in the world," he says.

There are also technological challenges that the NAD had to face. While some of the universities had a robust technology infrastructure, many of them lacked systems that can work seamlessly with a system that was developed for the NAD. Many of them use very old and outdated database systems or even spreadsheets. "To overcome these challenges that result from this multiplicity of platforms, systems and processes, we have created a lot of 'converters' to make the data uniform and in an uploadable format," says he.

The UGC / MHRD has advised the academic institutions to not only do prospective upload of the awards but over a period of time upload legacy data as far back as the data is available in the institute records. This is a big challenge for many institutes since the unique identifiers like email and mobile numbers were not being captured in the past. In case of prospective records, it is expected that the academic records of a student for a particular degree / diploma is entirely uploaded which would mean that even if the records start getting uploaded this academic year it may require loading the previous two or three years of data for the student's complete record to be available in the NAD.

The interoperability between depositories brings in challenges wherein record uniqueness and accuracy needs to be ensured. To ensure that both depositories have identical student award data and each depository is a true copy of the other, the modification of records are only allowed



The inauguration of the NAD

through the depository which initially uploaded the data. This also makes logical sense since the institute engages with one depository and not both while finalizing raw data formats and data conversion processes. In order for the student record to be mapped to his academic data, the Aadhaar ID or a system generated NAD ID is used as the linking field, which needs to be seeded in the academic record for it to show up under the student login.

PRECIOUS DATA

Datta says the data that will be available with the NAD is so precious that the government can at any time use it for analytical purposes. Even false claims of scholarships and grants can be detected and eliminated. In future education policies can be formulated based on analytical data available in NAD.

Academic institutions need not invest in high end IT infrastructure and software, and have their systems available 24x7 and internet facing. Therefore, cyber security compliance is less of a worry to the academic institution since it is taken care by the depository.

Dutta sums up the benefits of the NAD: "The system has 24x7 uptime and near real time academic record verification irrespective of stakeholder location resulting in convenience to the students and verifiers. It is digitally signed institution authenticated awards that are available online. There is near total elimination of fake and forged awards. There is no risk of loss of physical awards since the same is available online. Storage of physical records can be reduced or nearly eliminated and there is no need for institutions to have IT infrastructure with historical data as this data will be stored by the NAD."

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