Why a national depository for academic records is an idea whose time has come

THE NATIONAL ACADEMIC DEPOSITORY (NAD) will be used to hold academic awards i.e. mark sheets, convocation certificates, transfer certificates, in a dematerialized form to enable electronic and authentic verification by institutions, employers and other verification agencies

The Finance Minister had announced in his budget speech for 2016-17 about the setting up of an Academic Depository on the pattern of a Securities Depository. The Government of India under the aegis of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) / University Grants Commission (UGC) subsequently nominated CDSL Ventures Limited (CVL) to operate the National Academic Depository (NAD) which would be used to hold academic awards i.e. mark sheets, convocation certificates, transfer certificates, issued by the academic institutions making it mandatory for them to participate in the dematerialization of student academic records and enable electronic and authentic verification of the same by institutions, employers and other verification agencies. NAD would be available online 24×7 access to the stakeholders. The experience of CDSL running a securities depository for nearly 20 years was considered relevant while deciding to award the academic depository project. The President of India formally inaugurated the project on July 9, 2017 in a grand function at New Delhi.

The NAD project is planned to cover around 1500 institutions which constitute 40,000 colleges. In addition, all central and state board results (10th and 12th standard) and their constituent schools/colleges will come under the NAD project. "We have as on date signed up over 150 academic institutions and Boards who are in various stages of uploading/ updating awards in the electronic form in the NAD system. We have a cumulative count of nearly three lakh awards in the system, which can be verified by the institutions / companies who are registered with us," says Joydeep Dutta, Executive Director and Group CTO, CDSL.

The important thing about this project is that the certificate / award data that is available on the platform is digitally signed and pre-verified, with the verifiers having to go no further than download / peruse the record and treat the same as verified, after the student has given his consent and the verification fees have been paid through the payment gateway.

The type of verifiers can be employers, background checkers, academic institutions, banks, visa consulates, evaluation bodies, etc. The verification can be initiated by both domestic and foreign verifiers after they are registered in the NAD system. The fees collected are usually higher for foreign verifiers and decided by the respective academic institutions.

Some of the various types of awards that can be lodged in the system are as follows.

- Degree Certificates
- Diploma Certificates
- Mark sheets
- Provisional Certificates
- Skill Certificates
- Transcripts
- Need for NAD

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Joydeep Dutta
Executive Director & Group CTO, CDSL

This initiative has been a long felt need and brings together institutions at disparate levels of IT maturity to participate in the national digital academic depository ecosystem. Academic institutions need not invest in high end IT infrastructure and software and have their systems available 24×7 and internet facing. Therefore, cyber security compliance is less of a worry to the academic institution.

The entire verification request process, namely request by verification agency, consent by student, payment for verification services and showing the final image to the verifier can be achieved in minutes which could take up to a month if the verifier is in another location and more if in another country. Moreover, the student is able to view all his academic records on one platform.

Other stakeholders

The new projects, business development and operations were primarily involved in the NAD project. There were multiple discussions with the ministry and UGC during the concept and planning phase. A technical committee with independent experts was also set up by the ministry to discuss technical challenges and issues. The new projects and IT team were instrumental in conceptualizing the business functionality and technical specifications of the project. Inputs and learnings from operations were useful in replicating some of the practices from the securities depository business. Awareness sessions in conjunction with the MHRD/UGC officials have been conducted in different cities across the length and breadth of the country, where the dean and registrars of the institutions and other officials have been invited to introduce the concept of NAD and explain how the entire process of award lodging, verification and other services will work. The legal department was involved in preparing and validating the SLA and NDA documents between CVL and the institutions, and separately between CVL and the ministry. This was to ensure that all stakeholder responsibilities and expectations were documented. The business development team contacted the institutions and front-ended the relationship before the IT team started engaging with them for technical discussions.

Key benefits

- **Convenience and efficiency:** 24×7 uptime and near real-time academic record verification irrespective of stakeholder location resulting in convenience to the student and verifiers.
- **Security:** Digitally signed institution authenticated awards available online. Near total elimination of fake and forged awards. There is no risk of loss of physical awards since the same is available online and no need to have attested copies.
- **Cost savings:** Storage of physical records can be reduced or nearly eliminated since the same is online. No need for institutions to have IT infrastructure with historical data by offloading it to the depository database. Freeing up of administrative staff of manually serving students for issuing, attesting or verifying academic awards.

NAD is expected to achieve the following benefits:

- Central platform for academic institutions to issue and manage digital academic awards
- Enhance efficiency in providing services to NAD stakeholders
- For students – secure, convenient to receive, store their academic awards and share with authorized users for verification
- For verifiers – easily, quickly, securely verify academic awards online, post student consent
- Strong deterrence to fake and forged awards – mitigates reputational risk
- Eliminate undesirable practices such as corruption, manipulation of records, etc. and brings in transparency
- Eliminate corruption of touts and agents currently facilitating services
- Reduce administrative work of universities due to automation of manual work
- Reduce staff headcount for some of the work which will get automated resulting in cost savings
- Reduce the need to store physical records once uploaded in NAD system
- NAD will provide print services at competitive rates eliminating the need to appoint print vendor
- In future some institutions may stop printing physical awards altogether to further save cost
- Robust process of student identification and certificate mapping
- Payment gateway integration for verification fee collection
- Provide unified platform for grievance lodging and the redressal mechanism
- Help in education policy formulation with accurate MIS/analytics.

As told to Abhishek Raval

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