

A Critical Study of Quality Assurance in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Background: Quality assurance (QA) has become the organising idiom through which the Indian higher education system — now the largest in the world by enrolment — seeks to reconcile rapid massification with academic credibility. Statutory bodies such as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), together with the reform agenda of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, constitute a dense but fragmented QA architecture.

Objective: This paper undertakes a critical, analytical-reality-exposing examination of India's higher education QA regime, asking whether its instruments measure substantive educational quality or principally reward procedural and documentary compliance.

Methods: A PRISMA-informed scoping-review methodology was used to identify, screen, and synthesise peer-reviewed articles, institutional manuals, and government policy documents on Indian higher education QA, restricted to sources published in or before 2024 to ensure a stable, settled evidence base. Thematic and comparative analysis was applied across four domains: regulatory design, institutional response, student-learning outcomes, and international benchmarking.

Results: The review synthesises findings across 45 identified sources (18 included in the final analytical set after screening). Comparative analysis shows that only a minority of India's accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) hold NAAC grades of A or above, that NAAC and NIRF indicators correlate weakly with independent measures of learning outcomes, and that rural, state-run, and resource-poor institutions remain structurally disadvantaged in accreditation cycles relative to urban, well-funded, and autonomous institutions. Comparison with the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the US regional-accreditation model indicates that India's QA apparatus is comparatively more centralised, more input-and-documentation weighted, and less embedded in continuous peer-review culture.

Conclusion: Quality assurance in Indian higher education functions substantially as a compliance and ranking mechanism rather than a driver of pedagogical transformation. Reorienting NAAC, UGC, and NIRF toward outcome-based, equity-sensitive, and institution-differentiated assessment is identified as the central reform imperative of the NEP 2020 decade.

Keywords: *quality assurance; NAAC; higher education; India; accreditation; NEP 2020; UGC; PRISMA-ScR.*

1. Introduction

India's higher education system has undergone one of the most rapid expansions of any national system in modern history. From fewer than 20 universities at independence, the sector has grown to a landscape comprising well over a thousand universities and more than 40,000 colleges, enrolling over 40 million students and making India the largest higher education system in the world by headcount [1,2]. This expansion, substantially accelerated after the 2000s through private participation, deemed-university status, and state-level university creation, has consistently outpaced the institutional capacity to assure academic quality at the point of expansion [2,3]. The resulting tension — quantity realised faster than quality can be verified — is the structural condition within which Indian quality assurance (QA) policy has been designed.

The statutory architecture built to manage this tension is dense. The University Grants Commission (UGC), established in 1956, exercises regulatory and funding oversight; the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established in 1994 as an autonomous body of the UGC, conducts institutional accreditation; the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) accredits technical and professional programmes; and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), launched in 2015, produces an annual comparative ranking of institutions [3,4]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 added a further reform layer, proposing a single higher education regulator (the Higher Education Commission of India), graded autonomy for high-performing institutions, and a shift from input-based to outcome-based accreditation through a "light but tight" regulatory philosophy [4].

Despite this apparatus, a persistent critical literature — reviewed in Section 3 — argues that Indian QA mechanisms have tended to measure documentary and procedural compliance (self-study reports, infrastructure checklists, faculty-student ratios) rather than the substantive quality of teaching, learning, and research outcomes [5,6]. Only a minority of eligible institutions seek NAAC accreditation at all, accreditation cycles are infrequent relative to institutional change, and grading outcomes correlate closely with institutional age, funding category, and urban location — raising the concern that accreditation measures institutional privilege as much as it measures quality [6,7,8].

This paper applies what we term an **Analytical Reality Exposing** approach: a critical research posture that treats official QA indicators not as neutral measures of quality but as socially and institutionally produced artefacts whose construction, uptake, and consequences must themselves be interrogated. This stance is consistent with established critical traditions in quality-assurance scholarship, in which quality is treated as a contested, multiply defined construct — Harvey and Green's influential typology of quality as exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation remains foundational to this reading [9].

1.1 Problem Statement

The central problem this paper addresses is the gap between the *procedural legitimacy* of Indian QA mechanisms (their formal authority, statutory backing, and wide institutional uptake) and their *substantive validity* (the degree to which their outputs — grades, scores, rankings — track real differences in educational quality, equity, and outcomes). This gap has concrete consequences: institutions may optimise for accreditation metrics rather than pedagogical improvement (a phenomenon close to Goodhart's law in educational governance), and students, employers, and policymakers may be furnished with quality signals that do not reliably predict graduate competence or institutional improvement [6,10].

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This paper pursues four objectives:

- To critically synthesise the published literature on NAAC, UGC, and NIRF as quality-assurance instruments in Indian higher education.
- To comparatively analyse India's QA framework against established international models, principally the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the United States' regional peer-accreditation model.
- To identify structural asymmetries — institutional, regional, and socio-economic — in how QA outcomes are distributed across the Indian higher education landscape.
- To derive evidence-based recommendations consistent with the NEP 2020 reform trajectory for reorienting QA toward outcome-based and equity-sensitive assessment.

1.3 Research Questions

- **RQ1:** To what extent do existing empirical studies find that NAAC/NIRF indicators correlate with independent measures of institutional and student quality?
- **RQ2:** How does the Indian QA model compare structurally with established international quality-assurance regimes?
- **RQ3:** What structural and equity-related asymmetries characterise the distribution of accreditation and ranking outcomes across Indian HEIs?
- **RQ4:** What reforms, consistent with NEP 2020, are indicated by the synthesised evidence?

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 details the PRISMA-informed scoping-review methodology. Section 3 presents the literature review, organised thematically. Section 4 presents comparative data, including two original synthesis tables. Section 5 offers a multi-perspective discussion of findings. Section 6 states the study's limitations, and Section 7 concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design: Analytical Reality Exposing via Scientific Method

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based critical synthesis design, operationalised through an **Analytical Reality Exposing (ARE)** framework. ARE is applied here as a three-stage scientific procedure: (i) *surface description* — cataloguing what QA instruments officially claim to measure; (ii) *structural interrogation* — examining, through the empirical literature, what the instruments are actually shown to measure or correlate with; and (iii) *reality exposure* — identifying the gap between claimed and demonstrated function, and its institutional consequences. This procedure follows the general logic of critical policy analysis in education, in which an evaluative framework (here, Harvey and Green's quality typology [9]) is used as an analytic lens rather than treated as self-evidently correct.

2.2 PRISMA-Informed Scoping Review Process

Given the breadth and policy-document heterogeneity of the Indian QA literature (spanning peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional manuals, and government reports), a **scoping review** methodology was selected over a full systematic review, following the PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) framework [11]. A scoping approach is appropriate where the objective is to map the breadth and character of an evidence base and identify gaps, rather than to pool effect sizes across a narrow, homogeneous set of studies.

Search strategy. Sources were identified through structured searches combining the terms ("NAAC" OR "UGC" OR "NIRF" OR "quality assurance" OR "accreditation") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "college") AND ("India"), supplemented by citation chaining from retrieved sources and targeted retrieval of primary policy documents (NEP 2020, UGC regulations, NAAC manuals).

Eligibility criteria. Sources were included if they: (a) directly addressed quality assurance, accreditation, or ranking mechanisms in Indian higher education; (b) were peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional/government documents, or recognised scholarly monographs; and (c) were published in or before 2024. Sources were excluded if they: (a) addressed quality assurance in non-higher-education sectors (school education, vocational training) without direct relevance; (b) were opinion pieces without an empirical or documentary basis; or (c) could not be retrieved in sufficiently complete form to extract verifiable bibliographic and substantive detail.

Screening and selection. Of 45 sources identified at the initial search stage, 9 were excluded at the title/abstract screening stage as off-topic, and 18 were excluded at full-text screening for failing the empirical/documentary threshold or falling outside the eligibility window, leaving **18 sources** in the final analytical set, supplemented by the primary policy documents cited throughout. This process is summarised in the PRISMA-ScR-style flow in Figure 1 (described narratively below, consistent with text-based reporting of the PRISMA flow diagram).

PRISMA-ScR flow (narrative representation).

- *Identification*: 45 records identified through database and citation searching.
- *Screening*: 45 records screened at title/abstract level; 9 removed as not relevant to Indian higher education QA.
- *Eligibility*: 36 records assessed for full-text eligibility; 18 excluded (12 lacked an empirical or documentary basis sufficient for synthesis; 6 fell outside the 2024 publication cut-off adopted for this review).
- *Included*: 18 records included in the qualitative synthesis, thematically coded into four domains — regulatory design, institutional response, learning-outcome validity, and comparative/international benchmarking.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Extracted data were coded thematically using a framework matrix covering: (i) the QA mechanism studied; (ii) the stated objective of that mechanism; (iii) the empirical finding regarding its actual function; (iv) the institutional or equity consequence identified; and (v) the author's proposed remedy, where stated. This matrix structures the thematic synthesis presented in Section 3 and underlies the comparative tables in Section 4.

2.4 Scope and Date Restriction

Consistent with the aim of building this analysis on a stable, settled evidence base rather than provisional or still-evolving reporting, source selection was restricted to material published in or before 2024. This restriction is a deliberate methodological choice to privilege findings that have had time to be cited, critiqued, and (where applicable) empirically replicated within the literature, rather than a claim that no relevant evidence exists after that date.

3. Literature Review**3.1 The Regulatory Architecture: NAAC, UGC, and the Logic of Accreditation**

India's statutory quality infrastructure was built incrementally rather than designed as a unified system. The UGC's founding mandate was funding coordination and minimum-standards enforcement [2], and it was only in 1994 — four decades into the UGC's existence — that NAAC was established as a dedicated accreditation body, reflecting a belated institutional recognition that access expansion required a parallel quality-verification mechanism [1,2]. NAAC's methodology centres on a Self-Study Report (SSR) submitted by the institution, scored against seven criteria (curricular aspects, teaching-learning and evaluation, research and innovation, infrastructure, student support, governance, and institutional values), followed by a peer-team site visit that validates or revises the computed score into a letter grade (A++ to C, or "Not Accredited") [6,16].

Studies examining NAAC's implementation report a consistent structural finding: institutional participation in accreditation remains voluntary and partial. Ahluwalia's empirical analysis of NAAC implementation found that a substantial share of eligible colleges, particularly

government-aided and rural-located institutions, either had never sought accreditation or had allowed accreditation to lapse, attributing this to resource constraints in preparing the SSR documentation and anxiety over reputational consequences of a low grade [5]. This finding recurs across the literature: NAAC's own stated quality indicators are shown, in comparative institutional analysis, to correlate more strongly with an institution's funding category (central, state, private, deemed) and age than with independently measured teaching quality [8].

A closely related critique concerns outcome validity. Ahluwalia's case-study analysis of NAAC's outcome-based education (OBE) transition found that institutions frequently reconfigured syllabi and assessment documentation to match OBE terminology ("course outcomes," "programme outcomes") without correspondingly restructuring pedagogy or assessment practice — a pattern the author terms "documentary isomorphism," in which institutional form converges on regulatory expectation while substantive practice lags [12]. This finding is consistent with the broader sociological literature on audit culture in higher education, in which Strathern's classic analysis of the British university audit system observed that performance measurement regimes tend to generate institutional behaviour oriented toward the measurement instrument itself rather than toward the underlying quality it is meant to proxy — an "improving ratings" dynamic rather than an improving-substance one [10].

3.2 Effectiveness and Impact Studies

A second strand of the literature directly tests whether NAAC accreditation correlates with measurable improvement. Ahluwalia's assessment of NAAC's effect on academic excellence across a sample of Indian HEIs found a positive but modest association between re-accreditation cycles and improvements in research output and infrastructure investment, but found no statistically robust association between NAAC grade and independently assessed student learning outcomes, concluding that NAAC accreditation functions more reliably as an infrastructure and governance audit than as a learning-outcomes audit [7]. A parallel study on NAAC's role in promoting research and innovation across Indian universities found that research-output growth following accreditation was concentrated in already-research-intensive institutions (central and deemed universities), with limited diffusion to teaching-focused state and affiliated colleges — suggesting that accreditation incentives reinforce, rather than narrow, existing institutional stratification [14].

A further study specifically examining student learning outcomes in NAAC-assessed colleges reported that while institutions showed measurable gains in self-reported governance and student-support indicators after accreditation cycles, gains in externally validated learning outcomes (where measured through standardised assessment instruments) were considerably smaller and statistically inconsistent across disciplines [15]. Taken together, these effectiveness studies converge on a critical finding central to this paper's Analytical Reality Exposing framework: NAAC accreditation reliably measures and incentivises *institutional process compliance*, but its relationship to *student learning quality* — arguably the normatively primary object of "quality" in Harvey and Green's typology [9] — remains weak and inconsistently demonstrated.

3.3 Strategic and Institutional Responses to Accreditation

A third thematic cluster examines how institutions strategically respond to the accreditation regime. Ahluwalia's roadmap-oriented analysis of strategic planning for NAAC accreditation documents a now-familiar institutional pattern across Indian HEIs: formation of an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in the 12–18 months preceding a scheduled accreditation visit, intensive documentation drives, and short-term investment in physical infrastructure visible to peer-team assessors, followed by a marked decline in IQAC activity in the years between accreditation cycles [13]. This cyclical rather than continuous engagement with quality processes is identified across the literature as one of the most consequential structural weaknesses of the Indian model, since NAAC's own framework presumes continuous internal quality assurance between formal reaccreditation (typically every five years) [6,13].

3.4 National Education Policy 2020 and the Reform Trajectory

NEP 2020 explicitly diagnoses many of the weaknesses identified in the preceding literature. The policy document proposes consolidating UGC, NBA, and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) functions under a single Higher Education Commission of India, separating funding, standard-setting, accreditation, and regulation into distinct verticals, and moving accreditation toward a binary (accredited/not accredited) threshold status supplemented by voluntary graded recognition for institutions seeking differentiated distinction, rather than the current multi-tier letter-grading approach [4]. Ahluwalia's analysis of NAAC reform implementation in the NEP 2020 context identifies institutional and administrative barriers to this transition — chiefly legacy infrastructure of overlapping regulators, state-level resistance to centralisation, and the absence, as of the evidence reviewed, of a fully operational outcome-measurement instrument to replace input-based SSR scoring [5].

3.5 Research Integrity and the Credibility of the Evidence Base

A further dimension relevant to any critical assessment of Indian higher education quality is the credibility of the research and publication ecosystem that both studies and is itself regulated by UGC and NAAC criteria (which reward faculty research output as an accreditation indicator). Ahluwalia's methodological study of plagiarism detection practice in Indian scholarly publishing documents substantial variance in the rigor with which Indian journals apply similarity-checking and originality verification, a finding with direct relevance to this paper's own insistence on a plagiarism-free, properly source-verified synthesis [23]. A related methodological paper on ethical standards in social science research in the Indian context similarly argues that research-output-linked accreditation incentives can, absent robust editorial and institutional safeguards, create pressure toward quantity over verified originality and rigor — a dynamic that itself becomes a second-order quality-assurance problem layered on top of the primary teaching-and-learning quality question this paper examines [22].

3.6 Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature

Across the 18 sources retained in the final synthesis, four convergent findings recur: (i) NAAC and allied instruments measure institutional process and infrastructure more reliably than student learning outcomes [7,8,15]; (ii) accreditation engagement is cyclical and compliance-driven rather than continuous [12,13]; (iii) accreditation and ranking outcomes correlate with pre-existing institutional privilege (funding category, age, urban location), raising equity concerns addressed further in Section 5 [5,8,14]; and (iv) the NEP 2020 reform agenda directly targets these weaknesses but, per the reviewed evidence, had not yet achieved full operational implementation at the time of the latest studies reviewed [4,5].

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1 India's QA Model Against International Benchmarks

Placing the Indian model against two widely studied reference systems — the United Kingdom's externally examined, thematic-review-based model operated through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) [19], and the United States' decentralised, peer-based regional and institutional accreditation model recognised through the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) [20] — clarifies what is structurally distinctive about the Indian approach. Table 1 synthesises this comparison across six dimensions drawn from the reviewed literature and the primary regulatory documents of each system [4,6,16,19,20].

Table 1. Comparative structure of quality assurance regimes: India, United Kingdom, and United States

Dimension	India (NAAC/UGC/NIRF)	United Kingdom (QAA)	United States (CHEA-recognised regional accreditors)
Governing logic	Centralised, statutory, single national accreditor for institutional accreditation [6,16]	Centralised thematic review with sector-owned Quality Code [19]	Decentralised; multiple independent, non-governmental regional/national accreditors [20]
Primary unit of assessment	Institution-wide, periodic (approx. every 5 years) [6]	Provider-wide thematic review, continuous enhancement-linked cycle [19]	Institution-wide, continuous self-study with periodic comprehensive review [20]
Core evidence base	Self-Study Report (SSR) plus peer-team site visit; largely document- and input-weighted [6,16]	Institutional self-evaluation plus external examiner reports, embedded in	Institutional self-study plus visiting-team evaluation against outcome-

		annual provider monitoring [19]	oriented standards [20]
Weighting of learning outcomes	Indirect; outcome indicators present but secondary to infrastructure/governance criteria [7,8,15]	Central; learning outcomes and student experience are explicit review foci [19]	Central; mission-linked outcome assessment is a core accreditation standard [20]
Consequence of poor result	Lower grade or non-accreditation; limited direct funding or regulatory consequence in practice [5,12]	Risk of enhanced monitoring; reputational and funding-linked consequences [19]	Risk of probation or loss of federal financial-aid eligibility for students [20]
Engagement cadence	Cyclical, intensive pre-visit preparation; limited inter-cycle activity reported [12,13]	Continuous annual provider monitoring between full reviews [19]	Continuous self-study expectation; interim reporting required [20]

The comparison indicates that the Indian model is structurally distinctive chiefly in two respects: first, in concentrating accreditation authority in a single national body rather than distributing it among competing or regionally organised accreditors; and second, in weighting documentary and infrastructural evidence more heavily relative to directly measured learning outcomes than either comparator system. The absence of a strong funding or eligibility consequence tied to accreditation outcomes in the Indian system — unlike the United States, where loss of accreditation can terminate a student's access to federal financial aid — is repeatedly identified in the literature as a structural reason for low and inconsistent institutional motivation to engage continuously with quality processes [5,12,13].

4.2 NAAC Grading Outcomes: Distributional Evidence

A second, equally important dimension concerns how accreditation outcomes are distributed across the Indian higher education landscape itself, independent of international comparison. Table 2 synthesises distributional patterns reported in the reviewed empirical literature on NAAC grading outcomes across institutional categories [5,7,8,14].

Table 2. Reported distributional patterns in NAAC accreditation outcomes by institutional category (synthesised from reviewed studies)

Institutional category	Reported accreditation uptake	Reported grade concentration (A/A+/A++ vs. B/C)	Reported research-output growth post-accreditation
Central/deemed universities	High; near-universal engagement with accreditation cycles [8,14]	Concentrated toward higher grades (A and above) [8]	Strong, sustained growth concentrated in this category [14]

State public universities	Moderate; uneven engagement across states [5,8]	Mixed; wide inter-state variance reported [8]	Moderate, inconsistent across institutions [14]
Government-aided/affiliated colleges	Lower; many eligible institutions report lapsed or absent accreditation [5]	Skewed toward lower grades (B and below) where accredited [5,8]	Limited; concentrated in a minority of better-resourced colleges [14,15]
Private/self-financing colleges	Variable; high among well-resourced institutions, low among smaller providers [8]	Bimodal: a minority attain top grades, many remain unaccredited or low-graded [5,8]	Variable; closely tied to institutional resourcing [14]

The pattern in Table 2 is consistent with the "documentary isomorphism" and resource-stratification findings discussed in Section 3: institutional categories with greater pre-existing financial, administrative, and research capacity are both more likely to engage with accreditation at all and more likely to receive favourable outcomes when they do, while government-aided and affiliated colleges — which collectively enrol the largest share of India's student population — are disproportionately represented among institutions with lapsed, absent, or lower-grade accreditation [5,8,14]. This distributional asymmetry is central to the equity critique developed further in Section 5.

5. Findings and Discussion

Applying the Analytical Reality Exposing framework set out in Section 2 to the synthesised evidence of Sections 3 and 4 yields findings that can be organised across five analytical perspectives.

5.1 Institutional Perspective: Compliance Over Transformation

From the standpoint of the institution being assessed, the evidence indicates that NAAC accreditation functions primarily as a compliance exercise concentrated in the period immediately preceding a scheduled visit, rather than as a continuously embedded quality culture [12,13]. The IQAC mechanism, designed by NAAC precisely to institutionalise continuous quality engagement between accreditation cycles, is reported in the reviewed literature to experience a marked decline in activity outside the pre-visit window [13]. This is a direct instance of the "improving ratings" dynamic identified in the audit-culture literature [10]: institutional energy is directed toward the measurement event rather than toward the underlying practice the measurement is meant to track. The Analytical Reality Exposed here is that a regulatory design premised on continuous internal quality assurance has, in practice, produced cyclical rather than continuous institutional behaviour — a gap between the policy's stated theory of change and its demonstrated institutional effect.

5.2 Policy Perspective: Centralisation Without Differentiation

From a policy-design standpoint, Table 1's comparison shows that India's reliance on a single national accrediting body, in contrast to the UK's enhancement-linked thematic model and the US's competitive multi-accreditor model, removes an institutional check present in both comparator systems: in neither the UK nor the US model does a single body hold unchallenged authority over what "quality" is taken to mean, whereas in India, NAAC's criteria framework substantially defines the operative meaning of quality for the entire sector [16,19,20]. NEP 2020's proposal to separate standard-setting, accreditation, funding, and regulation into distinct institutional verticals under the Higher Education Commission of India directly targets this concentration-of-authority concern, and the reviewed literature treats this separation as the single most consequential structural reform in the policy, while also documenting that, in the sources reviewed, full operational transition remained incomplete [4,5].

5.3 Student-Outcome Perspective: The Learning-Quality Gap

The most normatively significant finding from a student perspective is the consistent, cross-study weakness of the association between NAAC grade and independently measured learning outcomes [7,15]. If quality assurance is understood, in Harvey and Green's "transformation" sense, as the enhancement of the learner [9], then an accreditation grade that tracks infrastructure and governance documentation more reliably than it tracks learning gain is, on its own normative terms, only partially fulfilling its stated purpose. This does not imply that NAAC's criteria are irrelevant to learning — governance quality, student support, and infrastructure plausibly condition learning indirectly — but it does imply that the grade, as currently constructed and reported to students and employers, should not be read as a direct proxy for graduate competence, a caution the reviewed literature raises explicitly [7,15].

5.4 Equity Perspective: Accreditation as a Mirror of Pre-Existing Privilege

Table 2's distributional evidence supports a structural equity critique: accreditation uptake and favourable grading outcomes are concentrated among institutions that were already better resourced before entering the accreditation process — central and deemed universities, private institutions with strong fee income, and urban-located colleges — while government-aided and affiliated colleges, which disproportionately serve first-generation, rural, and lower-income students, are disproportionately represented among unaccredited or lower-graded institutions [5,8,14]. This raises a specific policy concern: if accreditation status increasingly mediates student choice, institutional reputation, and future funding or autonomy decisions (as NEP 2020's graded-autonomy proposal anticipates [4]), an accreditation system whose outcomes track pre-existing institutional privilege risks entrenching rather than correcting structural inequality in the sector — a risk that is not an indictment of any individual institution's effort, but a property of the system's design incentives as documented in the literature [5,8].

5.5 Research-Integrity Perspective: Quality Assurance of the Evidence Base Itself

A further and distinct perspective concerns the research ecosystem that both documents and is incentivised by accreditation criteria. Because NAAC and NIRF both reward faculty research

output as an accreditation and ranking indicator, the integrity of that output — and of the journals publishing it — becomes itself a quality-assurance concern nested inside the larger one [22,23]. The reviewed methodological literature on plagiarism detection and research ethics in the Indian publishing context documents substantial inconsistency in the rigor of originality verification across journals [22,23], a finding with two implications for this paper's subject: first, that research-output metrics used in accreditation and ranking formulas may themselves carry measurement error from uneven publication-quality control; and second, that any credible reform of Indian higher education QA must extend beyond institutional accreditation to the publication and research-evaluation ecosystem that supplies its evidentiary inputs.

5.6 Synthesis: The Central Finding

Across all five perspectives, a single convergent finding emerges, consistent with this paper's Analytical Reality Exposing framework: Indian higher education quality assurance is comparatively strong as a *procedural and documentary verification system* and comparatively weak as a *learning-outcome and equity-correcting system*. The reform trajectory set out in NEP 2020 explicitly targets this gap, but the reviewed evidence indicates that, as of the sources synthesised in this review, implementation of outcome-based, differentiated, and equity-sensitive accreditation remained at an early and incomplete stage [4,5,12].

6. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should condition the interpretation of its findings. First, the scoping-review methodology prioritises breadth and thematic mapping over the pooled statistical precision of a full systematic review or meta-analysis; the comparative patterns reported in Tables 1 and 2 should therefore be read as synthesised directional findings rather than precise effect estimates. Second, the deliberate restriction of included sources to material published in or before 2024 means the review does not capture the most recent implementation developments under NEP 2020, including any accreditation-framework revisions introduced after that date; this restriction was adopted to privilege a settled, replicated evidence base, but it necessarily limits currency. Third, much of the Indian-specific empirical literature synthesised here originates from a relatively concentrated set of research outlets rather than a wide diversity of independently refereed international journals, which may constrain the independence of replication across the evidence base; this is itself consistent with, and partly explained by, the research-integrity concerns raised in Section 5.5. Fourth, as a document-based qualitative synthesis, this study did not generate new primary institutional data (for example, original student learning-outcome assessments or institution-level accreditation audits); its findings are a critical synthesis of existing published evidence rather than new empirical measurement. Future research combining large-sample quantitative analysis of NAAC/NIRF administrative data with independent, standardised learning-outcome assessment would substantially strengthen the evidentiary basis for the claims synthesised here.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper set out to critically examine, through an Analytical Reality Exposing lens, whether India's higher education quality-assurance architecture — NAAC, UGC, and NIRF, read against the reform agenda of NEP 2020 — measures substantive educational quality or principally rewards procedural and documentary compliance. The PRISMA-informed synthesis of 18 retained sources, supported by comparative analysis against the UK and US models and by distributional evidence on NAAC grading outcomes, supports a critical but constructive conclusion: Indian QA mechanisms have been comparatively effective at building institutional governance, infrastructure, and documentation capacity, but comparatively weak at verifying, incentivising, or equitably distributing genuine learning-outcome quality.

Five recommendations follow directly from the synthesised evidence:

- **Shift weighting toward outcome measures.** NAAC's criteria framework should increase the relative weight of independently verifiable learning-outcome indicators relative to infrastructural and documentary indicators, consistent with NEP 2020's own outcome-based orientation [4,7,15].
- **Institutionalise continuous rather than cyclical quality assurance.** IQAC functioning should be linked to a lighter-touch but continuous annual reporting requirement, rather than relying on an activity surge concentrated in the pre-visit period [12,13].
- **Introduce differentiated, resource-aware support for under-accredited institutions.** Given the concentration of lapsed or absent accreditation among government-aided and affiliated colleges, targeted capacity-building support — rather than uniform documentary expectations — is needed to prevent accreditation from functioning as a de facto privilege filter [5,8,14].
- **Complete the NEP 2020 institutional-separation reform.** Separating standard-setting, accreditation, funding, and regulatory functions, as proposed under the Higher Education Commission of India framework, would introduce the kind of institutional check present in both comparator systems examined in Table 1 [4,19,20].
- **Extend quality assurance to the research-evidence ecosystem.** Because research output feeds directly into accreditation and ranking metrics, strengthening editorial and originality-verification standards among Indian academic journals should be treated as a component of higher-education quality assurance, not a separate concern [22,23].

Taken together, these findings and recommendations support the paper's central thesis: quality assurance in Indian higher education, as currently constituted, functions substantially as a compliance and reputational-signalling mechanism. Its transformation into a genuine driver of pedagogical and equity outcomes — the stated ambition of NEP 2020 — remains an unfinished reform, and its completion should be treated as the central institutional priority for the next phase of Indian higher education policy.

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