

Rethinking Accreditation Standards in Indian Universities: A PRISMA-Guided Scoping Review, Comparative Evidence and an Integrity-Centred Reform Framework

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Abstract

Background: India sustains one of the largest higher education systems in the world, yet the machinery meant to certify its quality reaches only a minority of institutions and has recently faced serious questions about credibility.

Objective: To re-examine accreditation standards for Indian universities by combining a scoping review, a comparative analysis of international quality-assurance architectures and a quantitative reading of official statistics.

Methods: A PRISMA-ScR-guided scoping review screened a 117-record institutional bibliography against a temporal boundary (publication in 2024 or earlier) and topical relevance, then added 48 purposively selected official, scholarly and press sources, giving 59 sources for narrative synthesis. Descriptive indicators were computed from published government data and compared with the European, American and Australian models.

Results: In parliamentary data from February 2023, 37.6% of universities and 20.7% of colleges held NAAC accreditation, leaving 695 universities and 34,734 colleges outside the system. Only about 11.1% of the institutions registered in the national survey had applied to the national ranking framework in 2024. Reaching the 50% gross enrolment target for 2035 requires a rise of about 1.66 percentage points a year, roughly 2.5 times the pace recorded between 2014-15 and 2021-22. The literature converges on five weaknesses: compliance-oriented evidence, impression management, vulnerable verification, uniform standards and weak follow-up.

Conclusions: The paper proposes the PROVE framework (Proportionate standards, Results-based evidence, Open process, Verified assessors, Enhancement support) under independent meta-accreditation, and advances six testable propositions for future research.

Keywords: accreditation; NAAC; quality assurance; Indian higher education; binary accreditation; outcome-based education; academic integrity; scoping review

1. Introduction

Few national systems have expanded as rapidly, or as unevenly, as Indian higher education. The most recent All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), for 2021-22, registered 1,168

universities, 45,473 colleges and 12,002 standalone institutions, enrolling about 4.33 crore students at a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 28.4% for the 18-23 age group [1]. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 commits the country to a GER of 50% by 2035 [2]. Growth on this scale reproduces, in compressed form, the pattern that students of global massification have described: access expands faster than the institutional capacity to guarantee what graduates actually learn [3,4]. Accreditation is the principal public instrument through which India has tried to close that gap.

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994 as an autonomous body offering voluntary, peer-based institutional assessment [5]. Its method combined a self-study with a peer visit against pre-set criteria and produced a public grade that remained valid for a fixed period [5]. Accreditation was later converted into a formal regulatory expectation through a UGC gazette notification in January 2013 [6]. Three decades after the agency's creation, however, the system presents a paradox. Parliament was told in February 2023 that, of 1,113 universities and 43,796 colleges, NAAC had accredited 418 universities and 9,062 colleges, so that 695 universities and 34,734 colleges were operating without accreditation [7]. An instrument described as mandatory, yet absent from most of the institutions it is meant to govern, has not yet achieved its regulatory purpose.

A second difficulty concerns credibility. In late February and early March 2023 the then chair of NAAC's executive committee alleged, in correspondence with the UGC, that vested interests and malpractices were enabling some institutions to obtain questionable grades, and he resigned citing the need to safeguard the sanctity of the office [8,9]. Press reporting of a review panel's findings indicated that the way experts were chosen to review applications had been neither random nor sequential [10]. These episodes were allegations and reports rather than adjudicated findings, and they are treated as such in this paper. They nevertheless exposed a structural vulnerability that the scholarship on corruption in higher education had long identified: accreditation and licensing decisions combine high stakes with wide discretion, and therefore invite improper influence [11,12].

The policy response was swift by the standards of Indian regulation. A committee chaired by K. Radhakrishnan, constituted by the Ministry of Education after these events, submitted its final report on 16 January 2024 [13,14]. Eleven days later NAAC's executive council announced that the existing letter-grade scheme would give way to binary accreditation (accredited or not accredited), to be followed by maturity-based graded levels from one to five, with the second phase planned for December 2024 [13]. India therefore stands at a rare point at which the architecture of standards, and not merely the procedures used to apply them, is open to redesign.

Meanwhile the international literature has become increasingly sceptical about whether external quality review reliably improves teaching and learning [15,16]. Indian scholarship has examined NAAC from many directions, including its role and impact in quality assurance [17], its effectiveness in improving academic excellence [18], its quality indicators [19], its outcome-based orientation [20], the implementation challenges of its reforms [21], its connection with student learning outcomes [22], its influence on research and innovation [23] and the strategic planning undertaken by institutions preparing for assessment [24]. What remains missing is an integrated reading that places coverage statistics, integrity risks and international design alternatives within a single analytical frame and converts the result into proposals about the standards themselves.

The stakes of getting accreditation right extend beyond administration. Accreditation outcomes influence student choice, institutional reputation, eligibility for public programmes and, increasingly, the strategic behaviour of institutions seeking to climb ranking tables [25,26]. A standard that is weakly valid or open to manipulation therefore misallocates trust, rewards institutions for the wrong reasons and leaves students, especially first-generation learners, with unreliable signals. A standard that is credible, proportionate and developmental can instead function as a public good that raises the floor of quality across a very large and diverse system.

This paper addresses four research questions. RQ1: what does the available evidence reveal about the reach and credibility of accreditation in Indian universities? RQ2: what do related studies, Indian and international, report about the outputs and limits of accreditation? RQ3: how do India's arrangements compare with the European, American and Australian approaches? RQ4: what redesign of standards would best align accreditation with proportionality, outcomes and integrity? The contribution is threefold: a transparent PRISMA-guided evidence map; a quantified diagnosis of coverage, participation and workload; and the PROVE framework, accompanied by six testable propositions intended to be cited and tested in later work. All evidence is restricted to sources published in 2024 or earlier.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Quality as a contested concept*

Accreditation standards are only as defensible as the idea of quality behind them. Harvey and Green distinguished five notions: quality as exceptional, as perfection or consistency, as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformation [27]. Indian accreditation implicitly blends several of these. Letter grades signal exceptionality, compliance checklists express consistency, and the public-funding rhetoric that surrounds the UGC invokes value for money [5]. The notion that receives the least explicit measurement, transformation of the learner, is precisely the one that Harvey and Newton argued evaluation systems neglect when they

concentrate on process and compliance [28]. A first test for any revision of standards is therefore whether it offers a defensible account of what it is trying to certify.

2.2 Accountability and improvement

Quality assurance is routinely asked to serve two masters. Ewell described the tension between accountability, which requires standardised and externally comparable evidence, and improvement, which requires candid, context-sensitive and internally owned inquiry [29]. Williams observed that the relationship between assurance and enhancement is often assumed rather than demonstrated [30], while Elken and Stensaker proposed shifting attention from procedures to the quality work that academics and institutions actually perform [31]. When a single instrument is used for both purposes, as when one grade informs students, regulators and funders simultaneously, the accountability function tends to crowd out the improvement function.

2.3 Audit culture and metric distortion

A substantial critical literature explains why verification systems drift away from their purposes. Power argued that audit produces rituals that reassure outsiders without necessarily improving the underlying activity [32]. Strathern, and Shore and Wright, documented how audit cultures reshape academic behaviour toward whatever can be counted [33,34]. Campbell's law, formulated for social indicators in general, holds that the more an indicator is used for consequential decisions, the more it is exposed to corruption pressures and the more it distorts the processes it is supposed to monitor [35]. Muller later generalised the concern as metric fixation [36]. For accreditation the lesson is practical: every quantitative threshold needs an accompanying plan for verification and an expectation of strategic response.

2.4 Outcomes and constructive alignment

The international movement toward outcome-based standards rests on two foundations. Spady's outcome-based education placed demonstrable learner achievement at the centre of curriculum design [37], and Biggs's constructive alignment proposed that intended outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks should be mutually consistent [38]. Ewell argued in an influential occasional paper that accreditors should move toward student learning outcomes as primary evidence [39]. In the Indian setting, the outcome-based turn has been analysed in NAAC's context as carrying strategic implications for institutional planning and academic practice [20], and it has been linked to the improvement of student learning outcomes in Indian colleges [22].

2.5 Integrity as a design variable

Corruption in higher education is not merely a moral failing; it is an institutional design problem. Heyneman and colleagues described how corruption erodes the public value of

credentials and the legitimacy of institutions [11], and Hallak and Poisson identified accreditation, licensing and quality assurance among the domains most exposed to improper influence [12]. Research integrity forms a parallel concern. Ethical issues in social science research [40] and the detection of plagiarism [41] bear directly on the research-related criteria that accreditors use, because publication counts and similarity indices are themselves open to manipulation.

2.6 Analytical lens

Drawing on these strands, the paper evaluates accreditation standards against four tests. Validity asks whether the standards measure what they claim to certify. Proportionality asks whether the burden of evidence is matched to institutional type and risk. Integrity asks whether claims and decisions can be independently verified. Developmental utility asks whether the process helps institutions improve after the visit has ended. These tests organise the analysis in Sections 5 to 9.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and reporting

The study is a structured scoping review, chosen because the topic spans regulatory documents, statistics, empirical studies and policy commentary that cannot be pooled in a conventional meta-analysis. The design follows the methodological framework of Arksey and O'Malley [42] and is reported against the PRISMA-ScR checklist [43] and the flow conventions of the PRISMA 2020 statement [44]. It is not a systematic review: no protocol was registered, and no formal database-wide search was conducted. This distinction matters for interpretation, and it is repeated in the limitations.

3.2 Evidence streams

Two streams of evidence were assembled. Stream A was an institutional bibliography of 117 records supplied for the study, comprising journal articles, working papers and unpublished items. Stream B comprised sources identified purposively through targeted searches of government and regulator publications, parliamentary replies reported by news agencies, and the scholarly literature on quality assurance, accountability and corruption in higher education. Stream B was selected for relevance and verifiability rather than exhaustiveness.

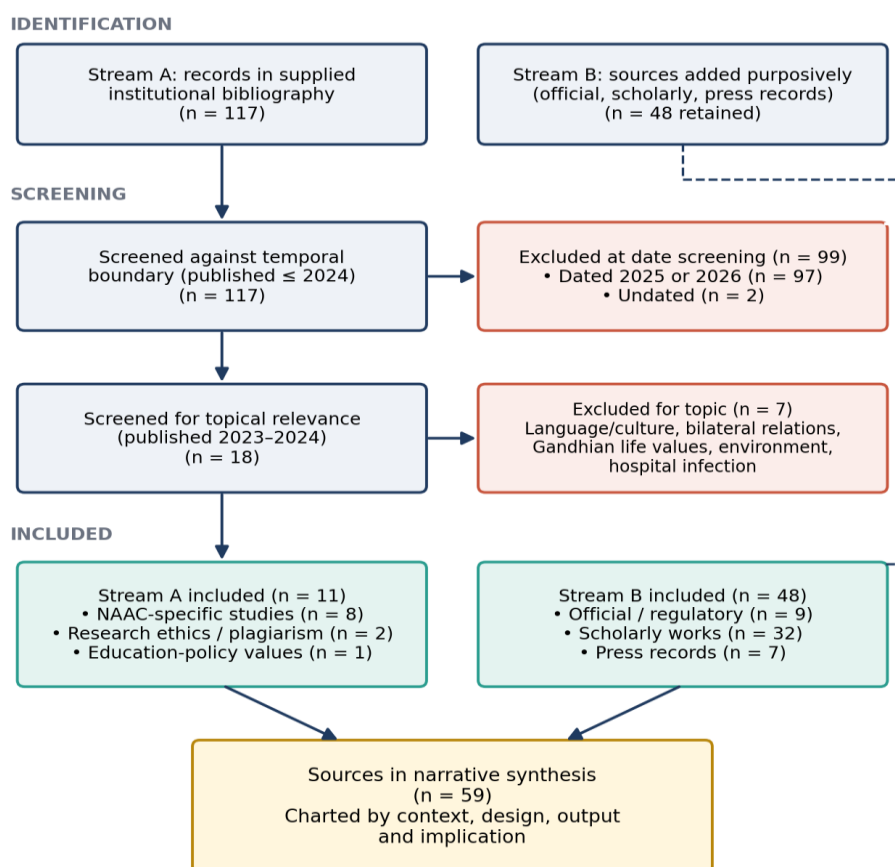
3.3 Eligibility criteria

Because the manuscript is intended for a 2025 back issue, a strict temporal boundary was applied: only sources published in 2024 or earlier, and data referring to years up to 2024, were eligible. Sources had to concern accreditation, quality assurance, rankings, higher education governance, or research integrity in relation to quality systems. English and Hindi sources were

eligible. Developments after 2024 are deliberately not reported, even where they might otherwise be relevant.

3.4 Selection of sources

Figure 1 summarises selection. Of the 117 records in Stream A, 97 carried publication dates of 2025 and two were undated; all 99 were excluded under the temporal boundary. The remaining 18 records (2023-2024) were screened for topical relevance. Seven were excluded because they addressed language and culture, bilateral relations, Gandhian life values, environmental conservation or hospital-acquired infection rather than accreditation or research quality. Eleven were retained: eight NAAC-specific studies, two on research ethics and plagiarism, and one on values and life skills in education policy. Together with 48 purposively added sources (9 official or regulatory documents, 32 scholarly works and 7 press records of official statements or events), the synthesis rests on 59 sources.



Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 / PRISMA-ScR templates. Formal exclusion counts were not recorded for Stream B (dashed route), which was selected purposively.

Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR-style flow diagram of source identification, screening and inclusion (author's compilation, adapted from the PRISMA 2020 template [44]).

3.5 Charting and synthesis

Each source was charted for context, design, principal output and implication for accreditation standards. Items from Stream A were charted on their stated aims and scope rather than on numerical results, because the synthesis drew on bibliographic descriptions and not on full-text data extraction; their contribution here is therefore thematic, and no empirical finding is attributed to them beyond what their scope indicates. Findings from other sources were extracted as reported. Evidence was graded informally in three tiers: official statistics and legal instruments (Tier 1), peer-reviewed or scholarly-press work (Tier 2), and press reports of official statements or allegations (Tier 3). Tier 3 evidence is used only to document events and is worded as report or allegation wherever findings were not adjudicated.

3.6 Quantitative component

Descriptive indicators were computed from published figures: shares of accredited and non-accredited institutions, growth in ranking participation, the ratio of ranking applicants to registered institutions, the annual rise in GER required to meet the 2035 target, and an illustrative assessment-workload estimate. The calculations are the author's own, are shown transparently in Section 6, and remain indicative because source years and institutional counts differ across datasets.

4. Evolution of the Indian Accreditation Architecture

4.1 From policy intent to a national agency

The Indian discussion of quality preceded formal accreditation. The National Policy on Education of 1986 and its Programme of Action of 1992 set out the creation of an independent national accreditation agency, and NAAC began operating in 1994 [5,6]. The first cycle was voluntary and institution-wide. It used a self-study and peer review, issued an overall grade on a five-point scale together with a detailed report valid for five years, and made both public [5]. By the end of 2001 around 200 institutions had been assessed [5]. The design reflected an international trend toward self-evaluation followed by peer review, and it was explained at the time as a response to concerns about value for money in a sector marked by affiliating universities, rapid private growth and uneven standards [5,45].

The early impact analysis also noted an important structural feature: most Indian universities were of the affiliating type, in which a university legislates on courses, conducts common examinations and awards degrees for colleges that may number in the hundreds, and about seventy per cent of colleges were privately managed [5]. This structure still shapes accreditation today, because the quality of the undergraduate experience depends on thousands of colleges that have limited autonomy and uneven resources, while the accreditor's most visible output has historically been the grade of the institution applying for assessment [1,5].

4.2 Mandatory expectations and technology-enabled assessment

The January 2013 UGC notification made assessment and accreditation a formal requirement for institutions [6]. NAAC then revised its approach substantially. In July 2017 it introduced a process described as ICT-enabled, objective, scalable and robust, and on 17 December 2019 it published modified manuals with a smaller number of qualitative and quantitative metrics [46]. The framework is organised around seven criteria, and its indicator structure has been examined comparatively with respect to best practices and challenges [19]. Programme-level accreditation of engineering and technology courses developed in parallel through the National Board of Accreditation, which moved toward outcome-based assessment and, in 2014, became a signatory to the Washington Accord on engineering degrees [20,47].

4.3 Rankings as a parallel regime

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) was launched in 2015, and its first India Rankings appeared in 2016 [25]. By 2024 the exercise covered sixteen categories and subject domains, compared with four in 2016 [25]. Rankings are voluntary and comparative, whereas accreditation is criterion-referenced, yet in practice the two regimes compete for the same institutional attention and the same data-collection capacity. The international literature on rankings warns that institutions adapt their strategies and behaviours to the indicators that rankings reward [26,48], a warning that applies equally to any accreditation metric.

4.4 Policy blueprints for restructuring regulation

Two earlier national reports had already argued for restructuring higher education regulation. The National Knowledge Commission recommended an independent regulatory authority for higher education, and the Yash Pal Committee proposed a single overarching commission for higher education and research [49,50]. NEP 2020 revived this logic in the language of light but tight regulation, graded accreditation, and a National Accreditation Council functioning as a meta-accrediting body above the individual accreditors; it also expects institutions to attain the highest level of accreditation over the following fifteen years [2,7,9].

4.5 The 2022-2024 reform cycle

During 2023 NAAC announced short-term corrective measures, including one-time-password verification for student satisfaction surveys, while the Radhakrishnan committee worked on long-term reform [14]. The committee's recommendations, as reported in January 2024, directed metrics toward processes, outcomes and impact rather than inputs alone, replaced grades with a binary decision and added five maturity levels in which levels one to four denote institutions of national excellence and level five denotes institutions of global excellence for multidisciplinary research and education [13]. The timetable announced in January 2024 envisaged binary accreditation within four months and graded levels by December 2024 [13].

This paper therefore treats the reforms as announced design intentions whose operational performance cannot yet be evaluated with data from the reference period.

5. Related Research: Outputs, Results and Perspectives

5.1 Empirical evidence on NAAC

The earliest systematic account came from NAAC's own impact analysis after the first cycle. It found effects on pedagogic, managerial and administrative functioning, including initiatives beyond what affiliating universities required, needs-based programmes and curricular reforms, markedly improved student support services and learning resources, and a shift in management attitudes toward faculty workload, research culture and faculty development [5]. The same account recorded unwelcome consequences: institutions copying top-bracket peers at the cost of diversity, heavy time investment in documents designed to impress the peer team, and uses of assessment reports that were not intended. It also flagged unresolved questions about follow-up strategy, the safeguarding of objectivity and the unclear link between accreditation outcomes and funding [5].

A doctoral study of institutions in Gujarat reached a more sceptical conclusion, reporting that the process influenced only the fringes of quality and recommending that assessment be made mandatory, that continuous evaluation be introduced and that transparency be strengthened [51]. A later review of NAAC's quantitative metrics observed that, despite twenty-five years of monitoring and assessment, the outcome in terms of the number of great institutions was not encouraging, and identified a gap between the assessment process and institutional preparedness, a gap that the revisions of 2017 and 2019 attempted to narrow [46]. Taken together these three sources, separated by roughly two decades, show a stable pattern: accreditation improves visible institutional functioning but does not reliably produce excellence.

5.2 International evidence on the outcomes of quality assurance

Stensaker's review of knowledge, methodology and validity concluded that evidence about the outcomes of quality assurance is limited and difficult to attribute, because effects are mediated by institutional context and are easier to detect in structures and procedures than in teaching practice [15]. Newton's study of academics' perceptions found that quality monitoring was frequently experienced as externally imposed, burdensome and weakly owned by those it was supposed to improve [52]. Harvey and Williams, reviewing fifteen years of scholarship in the field, drew attention to persistent questions about impact [16], and the comparative volume edited by Westerheijden and colleagues showed that quality policies are translated differently in each national setting rather than transplanted intact [53]. These findings do not argue against accreditation; they argue that its effects depend on design, ownership and context.

5.3 Recent Indian scholarship on NAAC (2023-2024)

A cluster of 2023-2024 studies broadens the Indian evidence base. One examines strategic planning for NAAC accreditation as a roadmap for institutions seeking excellence [24], which positions accreditation preparation as a managerial planning exercise. A comparative analysis addresses NAAC's role in promoting research and innovation across Indian universities [23]. A case study of Indian colleges concerns the improvement of student learning outcomes through assessment and accreditation [22]. A comparative analysis of quality indicators weighs best practices against challenges [19], while a case study considers the strategic implications of NAAC's outcome-based approach [20]. A critical analysis of NAAC's role and impact in enhancing quality assurance [17] and an assessment of the effectiveness of accreditation in improving academic excellence [18] bear on whether the system delivers what it promises. The most recent in the series is an empirical study of implementation challenges and opportunities in NAAC reforms [21].

Read together, these eight studies show that Indian scholarship has framed accreditation simultaneously as a planning instrument, an indicator regime, an outcome-oriented reform and a contested quality-assurance mechanism. Several pair challenges with opportunities or best practices, a framing consistent with a developmental rather than purely punitive view of accreditation. Their principal limitation, from the standpoint of this review, is that they are institution- or sample-bound; a system-level synthesis combining national statistics with international design comparison, which this paper attempts, remains scarce.

5.4 Integrity, rankings and research ethics

Work on corruption in higher education identifies accreditation and licensing as areas where discretion and high stakes coincide [11,12]. Studies of rankings show that institutions reorient strategy and behaviour toward the indicators rewarded by league tables [26,48]. The research-integrity literature is relevant because many accreditation criteria reward publications and research output: discussions of ethical issues in social science research [40] and of plagiarism detection techniques and tools [41] establish that integrity safeguards are a precondition for treating research metrics as evidence of quality. Educational values also enter the picture. Analysis of Gandhian education policy highlights ethics and life skills as educational aims [54], a reminder that accreditation criteria on institutional values and best practices need operational definitions that go beyond documentary assertion.

Table 1 synthesises the principal outputs of the related research reviewed above and the implication each carries for the design of standards.

Table 1. Synthesis of related research: context, principal outputs and implications for accreditation standards.

Source	Context / design	Principal output or finding	Implication for standards
Stella (2002) [5]	NAAC impact analysis after the first cycle (about 200 institutions assessed)	Improved pedagogic, managerial and administrative functioning; better student support and learning resources; but mimicry of top institutions, document-heavy preparation and unresolved follow-up and funding links	Build follow-up and diversity-preserving criteria
Sharma (2012) [51]	Doctoral study of institutions in Gujarat	Process influenced only the fringes of quality; recommended mandatory assessment, continuous evaluation and transparency	Continuous monitoring and open reporting
Mythili (2021) [46]	Book chapter reviewing NAAC metrics after 25 years	Outcome in producing great institutions not encouraging; gap between assessment and preparedness; 2017 and 2019 revisions	Align metrics with institutional capacity; reduce complexity
Stensaker (2008) [15]	Conceptual-methodological review of QA outcomes	Knowledge of outcomes is limited and attribution is difficult; effects easier to see in structures than in teaching	Evaluate the impact of the system itself
Newton (2000) [52]	Qualitative study of academics' perceptions	Quality monitoring experienced as imposed and burdensome, with weak ownership	Engage academics as co-owners
Harvey and Newton (2004) [28]	Critical analysis of quality evaluation	Evaluation concentrates on process and compliance, neglecting learner transformation	Add outcome and learning-gain evidence
Heyneman et al. (2008); Hallak and Poisson (2007) [11,12]	Analyses of corruption in higher education	Accreditation and licensing identified as exposed domains where high stakes meet discretion	Procedural safeguards: rotation, transparency, audit
Hazelkorn (2011); Marginson and van der Wende (2007) [26,48]	Studies of ranking effects	Institutions reorient strategy and behaviour toward ranked indicators	Anticipate gaming of any metric
Ewell (2009) [29]	Policy analysis of assessment and accountability	Accountability and improvement purposes pull in different directions	Separate or sequence the two functions
Ahluwalia series, 2023-2024 [17–24]	Eight NAAC-focused analyses, including case studies and comparative analyses (stated scope)	Address NAAC's role and impact, effectiveness for academic excellence, quality indicators, outcome-based approach, reform implementation, strategic planning, research and innovation, and student learning outcomes	Thematic breadth; need for system-level, outcome-based evidence

5.5 Synthesis: five convergent findings

Five findings recur across the reviewed sources. The first (F1) is that accreditation changes structures and documentation more reliably than classroom learning [5,15,51]. The second (F2) is impression management and mimicry, in which institutions prepare for the peer team and

copy leading peers [5,33,52]. The third (F3) is vulnerability of verification, evidenced by the corruption literature and by the 2023 allegations about questionable grades [8,10–12]. The fourth (F4) is a mismatch between uniform standards and heterogeneous institutions, visible in the gap between the assessment process and institutional preparedness [46] and in the efforts to cut metrics and fees for colleges [7]. The fifth (F5) is weak follow-up and an unclear link to incentives [5,51]. Section 6 examines whether the national statistics are consistent with these findings.

6. Quantitative Diagnosis: What the Official Numbers Show

6.1 Coverage of accreditation

The parliamentary reply of February 2023 supplies the clearest coverage data. Of 1,113 universities, 418 (37.6%) held NAAC accreditation and 695 (62.4%) did not; of 43,796 colleges, 9,062 (20.7%) were accredited and 34,734 (79.3%) were not [7]. Across both categories, 9,480 of 44,909 institutions (21.1%) were accredited. Colleges make up 97.5% of the institutions counted, so the coverage gap is overwhelmingly a college gap. This matters because 78.9% of students are enrolled in undergraduate programmes [1], which are delivered mainly through colleges. The reply did not disaggregate coverage by ownership, state or institution type; such disaggregation is a prerequisite for targeted policy and is itself a gap in public information.

6.2 Accreditation versus ranking participation

Participation in the NIRF presents a contrasting trend. Unique institutions applying for ranking rose from 2,426 in 2016 to 6,517 in 2024, an increase of 168.6%, and total applications across categories rose from 3,565 to 10,845, an increase of 204.2% [25]. Set against the 58,643 institutions registered in AISHE 2021-22 (1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges and 12,002 standalone institutions) [1], the 6,517 unique ranking applicants represent about 11.1%. The denominators come from different years and sources, so the ratio is indicative only. Even so, the figure shows that a voluntary comparative regime has attracted a participation base of the same order of magnitude as the stock of accredited institutions (9,480), despite the absence of a regulatory mandate. One plausible reading, offered here as interpretation and not as established fact, is that institutions respond readily to visible comparative signals and less readily to documentation-heavy criterion-referenced processes.

6.3 Illustrative workload arithmetic

If the 34,734 unaccredited colleges were to be brought into the system and every accredited institution were reassessed on a five-year validity cycle [5], the annual flow would be about 6,947 first-time assessments (34,734 divided by five) plus about 1,812 reaccreditations (9,062 divided by five), a total of roughly 8,759 institutional assessments each year, or about 24 for

every calendar day. Each assessment draws on several peer assessors and on administrative verification. The arithmetic is illustrative, since it ignores universities and assumes a uniform cycle, but it demonstrates that universal coverage under a full-scale peer-visit model is not feasible without proportionate, tiered and technology-assisted assessment. It also shows why binary accreditation with lighter entry requirements is a logical, if untested, response [13].

6.4 The enrolment trajectory

GER rose from 23.7% in 2014-15 to 27.3% in 2020-21 and 28.4% in 2021-22 [1]. Closing the distance to the 50% target for 2035 [2] requires 21.6 percentage points over thirteen years, or about 1.66 points a year, against an observed pace of 0.67 points a year between 2014-15 and 2021-22; the required pace is therefore about 2.5 times the historical pace. Enrolment grew from 3.42 crore to 4.33 crore over the same period, an increase of roughly 26.5% [1]. Equity gaps persist beneath the national average: the GER of Scheduled Caste students stood at 25.9% in 2021-22, below the overall 28.4% [1]. Government universities, 58.6% of all universities, account for 73.7% of enrolment [1]. If expansion accelerates, the accreditation system must certify quality for large numbers of new and first-generation learners in institutions that have little experience of external review.

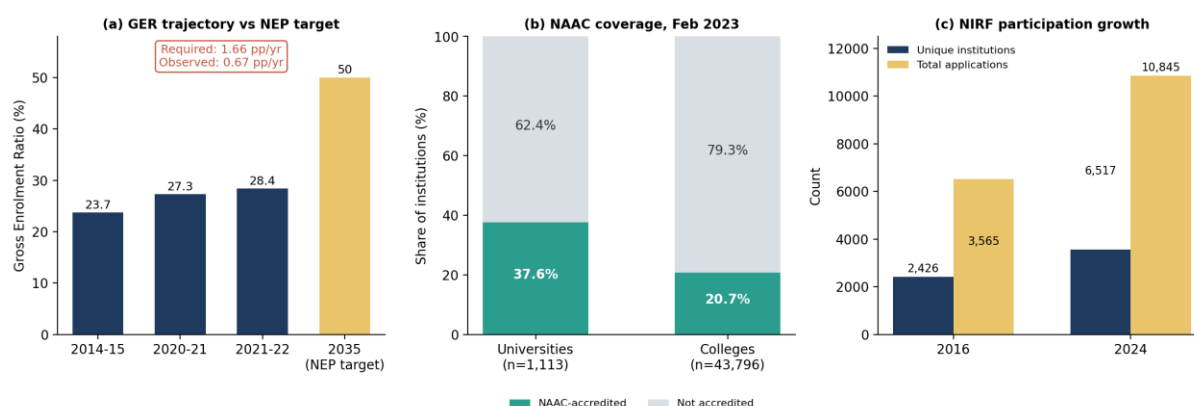


Figure 2. Quantitative diagnosis: (a) GER trajectory against the NEP 2020 target [1,2]; (b) NAAC accreditation coverage of universities and colleges, February 2023 [7]; (c) growth in NIRF participation, 2016 and 2024 [25]. Percentages and required annual GER increments are the author's calculations.

6.5 Interpretation against the convergent findings

The statistics are consistent with F4 and F5. A system in which fewer than four in ten universities and about one in five colleges is accredited is not operating as a universal quality floor, and the workload arithmetic suggests that uniform procedures will not scale. The rapid growth of ranking participation, by contrast, is consistent with the rankings literature on strategic response [26,48]. The data cannot by themselves confirm F1 to F3, which require outcome and process evidence that national statistics do not provide; that absence is itself a finding about the evidentiary base of Indian quality policy.

7. Comparative Analysis of Accreditation Systems

Comparison clarifies which features of the Indian arrangement are contingent and which are inevitable. Table 2 contrasts India with the European Higher Education Area, the United States and Australia on six dimensions. These systems were chosen because each represents a distinct model: a shared-standards framework with registered agencies, a decentralised peer-review system tied to federal funding eligibility, and a statutory risk-based regulator [55–57]. Martin and Stella's guide to external quality assurance, and Sanyal and Martin's overview of accreditation, provide the general typology used to structure the comparison [45,58].

Table 2. Comparative features of accreditation and quality-assurance systems (author's synthesis from the cited sources).

Dimension	India	European Higher Education Area	United States	Australia
Basis of the system	Autonomous inter-university centre of the UGC (NAAC); programme accreditation by NBA; NIRF run by the Ministry [7,25,47]	Shared reference standards (ESG) applied by national agencies [55]	Private, non-governmental accrediting bodies recognised through federal and non-governmental recognition processes [56]	Statutory regulator established by the 2011 Act [57]
Standards	Agency-defined criteria; seven NAAC criteria [19]	Three parts: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, quality assurance agencies [55]	Agency-specific standards, with attention to mission and student achievement [56]	Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) [59]
Primary focus	Historically inputs and process documentation; reform toward processes, outcomes and impact [13,46]	Student-centred learning and institutional quality culture [55]	Institutional mission and student achievement; peer review [39,56]	Threshold compliance, regulatory necessity, risk and proportionality [57]
Review outcome	Letter grades to date; binary decision and levels 1-5 announced for introduction [13]	Varies by country: accreditation, audit or assessment [53,55]	Accredited or not accredited, with conditions and sanctions [56]	Registration and course accreditation with conditions [57]
Oversight of the reviewer	Meta-accreditation envisaged by NEP 2020 through a National Accreditation Council; not yet operating in the reference period [2,9]	Agencies externally reviewed at least every five years for registration [55]	Accreditors themselves reviewed for federal recognition [56]	Regulator accountable under legislation [57]
Link to resources and permissions	Development grants and regulatory requirements; ranking visibility [5,6,25]	Determined nationally [55]	Eligibility for federal student aid depends on accreditation [56]	Registration is a condition of operating as a provider [57]

Five design lessons follow. First, independence is audited, not assumed. The European framework requires agencies to undergo external review at least every five years as a condition of registration [55], whereas the Indian accreditor has not been subject to an equivalent operating meta-accreditation, although NEP 2020 envisages one [2,9]. Second, internal quality systems carry much of the burden in the European model, which reduces the weight placed on a single external visit [55]. Third, proportionality is a legal principle in Australia, where regulatory necessity, risk and proportionality guide the regulator's actions [57,59]; India's uniform criteria for institutions of very different scale and mission lack this principle. Fourth, American experience shows that tying accreditation to funding eligibility strengthens compliance but can politicise peer review [56], a trade-off relevant to India's debate about linking accreditation to development grants and regulatory permissions [5]. Fifth, the engineering sector shows that outcome-based accreditation can be internationally benchmarked, as India's membership of the Washington Accord illustrates [47], suggesting that the same logic could be extended with appropriate adaptation to other disciplines.

8. Analysis from Multiple Perspectives

8.1 The regulatory perspective

For regulators the aims are coverage, comparability and defensible decisions. Binary accreditation lowers the entry threshold and is expressly designed to bring more institutions into the system [13]. The risk is definitional: if the threshold is set too low, the label 'accredited' loses signalling value; if too high, coverage stagnates. The decision is political as well as technical, and it should be made with published benchmarks rather than discretion.

8.2 The institutional perspective

For institutions, especially affiliated colleges, the principal costs are documentation, fees and time. The government's own reply acknowledged the burden by pointing to reduced fees and fewer metrics for colleges [7]. Strategic-planning studies treat accreditation preparation as a managerial roadmap [24], which is constructive when planning is real and unhelpful when it becomes the production of documents for the peer team, the behaviour noted in the first-cycle impact analysis [5]. Institutions in under-resourced settings need support, not only assessment.

8.3 The academic and student perspective

Academics who feel that quality assurance is imposed tend to comply rather than engage [52]. Student voice is central to outcome-based approaches [22,55], yet the 2023 introduction of one-time-password verification for student satisfaction surveys shows that the credibility of student feedback had itself become a concern [14]. If students are to be treated as evidence sources, the instruments must be protected against manipulation.

8.4 The employer and societal perspective

The reviewed corpus contains little evidence on whether employers or families use accreditation grades in decisions, and it is likely that rankings and brand reputation mediate such judgements [26]. This silence matters, because the claim that accreditation provides a public signal of quality is only as strong as the evidence that the public reads the signal. Demand-side research on how stakeholders interpret accreditation labels is a priority.

8.5 The integrity perspective

The 2023 allegations of questionable grades and the report that expert selection was neither random nor sequential [8,10] illustrate how discretion in assessor allocation creates exposure. The international analysis of corruption suggests remedies that are largely procedural: transparency, rotation, conflict-of-interest rules and independent audit [11,12]. The research-integrity dimension adds a need for plagiarism checks and ethical review on which research-related criteria depend [40,41]. A system that rewards publications without verifying their integrity risks certifying volume rather than quality.

8.6 The methodological perspective

From the standpoint of measurement theory, the move from grades to a binary decision concentrates stakes on a single cut-off, and Campbell's law predicts that behaviour will cluster around it [35,36]. Input-heavy indicators are easy to document and to inflate [32]. A defensible scheme combines verified outcome indicators with qualitative peer judgement, publishes the margin by which institutions pass, and evaluates its own predictive validity over time. Comparative analysis of NAAC's quality indicators already points to the coexistence of best practices and challenges in the current set [19].

8.7 The equity and values perspective

Accreditation operates in a society in which access remains unequal, as the SC enrolment gap in Section 6.4 shows [1]. Standards that reward resource-intensive inputs will systematically favour well-endowed institutions. Educational values also deserve explicit treatment: Gandhian education policy emphasises ethics and life skills [54], and the NAAC criterion on institutional values and best practices could be operationalised through observable practices, such as grievance redress, inclusive admission, and academic honesty, rather than narrative claims.

9. Rethinking Standards: The PROVE Framework

9.1 Design principles

The diagnosis points to four design principles that correspond to the tests introduced in Section 2.6: standards should be valid (focused on evidence of learning and institutional capability), proportionate (calibrated to type and risk), verifiable (open to independent audit) and developmental (linked to support after the decision). The PROVE framework in Figure 3

translates these principles into five pillars under a common governance roof of independent meta-accreditation.

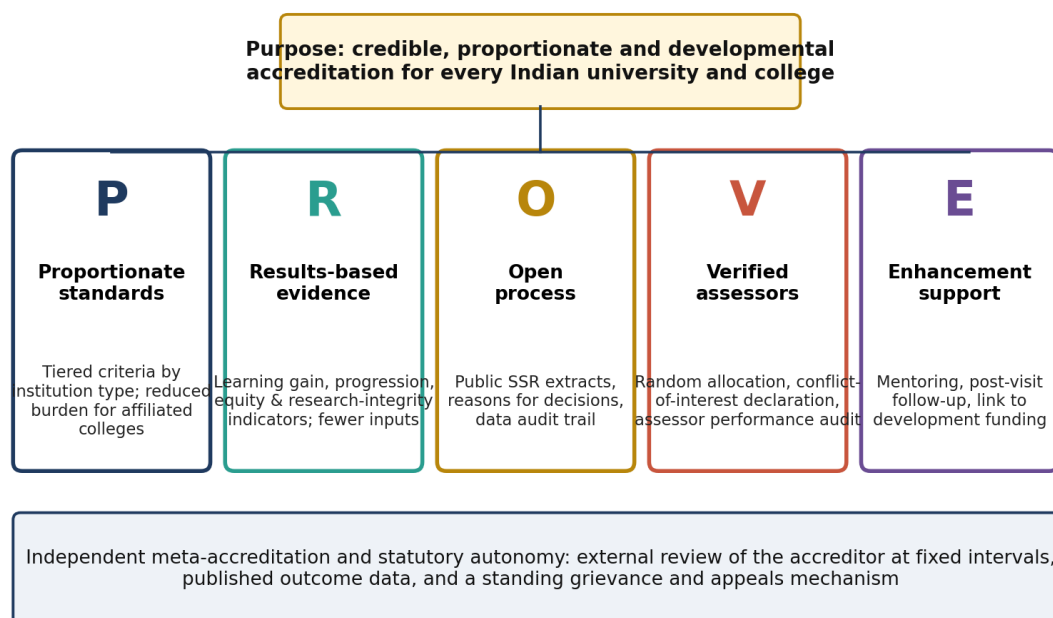


Figure: PROVE framework (author's synthesis)

Figure 3. The PROVE framework for rethinking accreditation standards in Indian universities (author's synthesis from the evidence reviewed [5,13,55]).

9.2 The five pillars

P: Proportionate standards. Criteria should be tiered by institutional type (research university, teaching university, affiliated college, specialised institution), with a lighter evidence burden for small and low-risk institutions and a deeper review for large and high-risk ones. The Australian principle of proportionality [57,59] and the documented concern about a mismatch between uniform criteria and institutional preparedness [46] support this pillar. Binary accreditation could serve as the entry tier [13], with deeper levels reserved for institutions seeking differentiation.

R: Results-based evidence. Standards should shift weight from inputs to verified results, including learning gains, progression and completion, graduate outcomes, equity of access and success, and research integrity. This reflects the logic of outcome-based education and constructive alignment [37–39] and builds on the Indian outcome-based analyses [20,22]. Indicators should be few, defined precisely, and checked against independent data.

O: Open process. Summary self-study data, assessment reports and reasons for decisions should be published in structured form. Transparency was among the recommendations of early

Gujarat research [51], and the NAAC policy of making grades and reports public [5] should be extended to include the audit trail of data verification. Openness lowers the cost of detecting manipulation and strengthens public understanding.

V: Verified assessors. Assessor allocation should be random within a qualified pool, conflict-of-interest declarations should be mandatory and checked, assessor performance should be audited, and any pattern of grade variance unexplained by institutional characteristics should trigger review. These measures respond directly to the vulnerabilities discussed in the corruption literature [11,12] and to the reported concerns about expert selection [10].

E: Enhancement support. A decision label alone does not improve institutions. Post-decision mentoring, structured follow-up and incentives linked to improvement plans should accompany the decision, answering the early question of what happens after the visit [5] and the distinction between assurance and enhancement [30,31]. Mentoring is particularly relevant to the 34,734 unaccredited colleges [7], many of which would need support to reach the binary threshold.

Governance roof: independent meta-accreditation. The accreditor itself should be reviewed at fixed intervals by an independent body and should publish outcome data, including grade distributions, appeal outcomes and assessor audits. The European model of agency review [55] and the NEP vision of a National Accreditation Council [2] are the reference points. Statutory autonomy should include protection of the executive committee from administrative interference, a concern raised by the 2023 resignation episode [8,9].

9.3 Transition roadmap

In the first phase (about twelve months), pilot the tiered criteria in a sample of universities and affiliated colleges, publish assessor-allocation rules, and introduce independent audits of data. In the second phase (two to three years), expand binary accreditation to all institutions with mentoring support for those near the threshold, and begin collecting results-based indicators. In the third phase (three to five years), introduce graded maturity levels only when predictive-validity evidence shows that the indicators distinguish institutions meaningfully, and commission the first external review of the accreditor.

9.4 Indicator design and verification

A results-based standard is credible only if each indicator has a precise definition, a named data source and a verification route. Learning gain could be approximated through the proportion of graduating students attaining programme outcomes, evidenced by moderated samples of assessed work rather than by self-reported averages, consistent with the alignment of outcomes, teaching and assessment [22,38]. Progression and completion can be drawn from institutional records reconciled with university examination data. Equity indicators can use enrolment and

success data disaggregated by social category and gender, building on the categories already reported in the national survey [1]. Research integrity can combine similarity checks, ethics-committee approval records and retraction monitoring, so that publication counts are interpreted alongside verified integrity practices [40,41]. Student-experience data should be collected through authenticated instruments, mindful of the 2023 move to one-time-password verification [14]. Finally, each indicator should be reported with its distance from the threshold, so that binary decisions remain informative [13].

9.5 Testable propositions

The synthesis yields six propositions intended as citable and testable contributions.

- P1 (Proportionality). Expanding accreditation coverage will improve measured quality only where standards are calibrated to institutional type; uniform criteria will increase documentation effort without proportionate learning gains in small and affiliated colleges [7,46].
- P2 (Evidence). Verified outcome indicators will be less vulnerable to documentary gaming than input-based indicators, provided the data are independently checked [32,35].
- P3 (Integrity). Random, conflict-screened assessor allocation with published audits will reduce the share of grade variance unexplained by institutional characteristics [10,11].
- P4 (Threshold). A binary decision without published margin information will generate clustering of institutions just above the cut-off, and publishing distance-to-threshold data will weaken this effect [36].
- P5 (Development). Institutions receiving structured post-decision mentoring will show larger next-cycle improvement than institutions receiving only a decision label [5,30].
- P6 (Meta-accreditation). Periodic independent review of the accreditor will increase stakeholder trust in accreditation outcomes, measurable through repeated stakeholder surveys [2,55].

10. Discussion: Implications for Policy, Institutions and Research

The evidence assembled here supports a reframing of the accreditation question. The usual debate asks whether NAAC grades are reliable. A more productive question asks what each element of the standards is intended to certify, how it can be verified, and what the institution is helped to do next. By these criteria the existing system performs unevenly: it has a long record of institution-level engagement [5], but it covers a minority of colleges [7], depends heavily on documentary evidence [46] and has faced credible allegations about the integrity of its assessment process [8,10].

For regulators, the first implication is that reform of standards cannot be separated from reform of governance. A binary decision with lighter entry requirements may widen coverage [13],

but without audited assessor allocation and independent meta-accreditation it would simply move the integrity problem from grades to thresholds. The second implication is that data transparency is an enabling condition. Disaggregated public data on coverage, grade distributions and appeal outcomes would allow researchers and the public to test claims about quality, and would make it possible to evaluate the reforms announced in 2024 against a documented baseline [7,13].

For institutions, the findings counsel a shift from preparing for visits to building evidence systems that operate continuously. Strategic planning for accreditation is valuable when it creates internal quality processes [24], and it is most useful when it is linked to concrete improvements in learning outcomes [22] and research culture [23]. Institutions that treat accreditation as a documentation exercise are likely to reproduce the impression-management behaviour noted from the first cycle [5]. Affiliating universities have a particular responsibility, because they supervise the colleges where the coverage gap is concentrated [5,7].

For researchers, three agendas emerge. The first is evaluative: rigorous studies, ideally with comparison groups and longitudinal data, are needed to establish whether accreditation changes learning and graduate outcomes, the kind of impact evidence that the international literature finds scarce [15,16]. The second is demand-side: how students, parents and employers interpret accreditation labels remains largely unstudied in the reviewed corpus. The third is design-oriented: experimental or quasi-experimental pilots of tiered criteria, randomised assessor allocation and mentoring could test propositions P1 to P6 directly. Such work would convert a policy debate largely conducted through assertion into one conducted through evidence.

The comparative analysis also carries a caution against importing foreign models wholesale. The European framework depends on mature internal quality systems and a culture of agency independence [55]; the American model operates in a sector with a long tradition of voluntary peer review and a distinctive relationship between accreditation and federal funding [56]; and the Australian regulator operates in a small, concentrated sector [57]. India's sector is vastly larger, more heterogeneous and more dependent on affiliation. The PROVE framework therefore borrows principles, namely independence, proportionality, outcomes and enhancement, rather than institutional templates.

11. Limitations

Several limitations qualify the conclusions. First, this is a purposive scoping review and not a systematic review; no registered protocol, database-wide search or dual screening was used, and some relevant studies may have been missed. Second, the strict 2024 boundary excludes later developments by design. Third, items from the supplied bibliography were charted by stated scope and not by extracted results, so their findings are not reported. Fourth, the coverage

statistics rely on a press report of a parliamentary reply and on the AISHE survey, whose institutional counts and reference years differ; derived ratios are indicative. Fifth, press evidence on the 2023 allegations records reports and allegations, not adjudicated findings. Sixth, the PROVE framework and propositions are analytical constructs derived from the evidence and have not been empirically tested.

12. Conclusion

Indian accreditation stands between a legacy built for a smaller, more homogeneous sector and the requirements of a system that aims to double its participation rate within a decade. The evidence reviewed here supports three conclusions. First, reach is limited: in 2023 only 37.6% of universities and 20.7% of colleges held NAAC accreditation, and uniform full-scale peer review cannot be extended to all the remainder without roughly 8,759 assessments a year. Second, credibility depends on integrity architecture as much as on criteria: allegations in 2023 showed how discretion in assessor selection can undermine confidence, and the international literature on corruption and audit indicates that thresholds without verification invite strategic behaviour. Third, the effects of accreditation on learning are less well evidenced than its effects on structures and documents, a finding repeated from the first NAAC impact analysis to contemporary international reviews.

The reforms announced in January 2024, with their binary decision, maturity levels and emphasis on processes, outcomes and impact, point in a sensible direction. Their success will depend on four conditions that the PROVE framework makes explicit: proportionate standards, results-based evidence verified independently, open processes and audited assessors, and enhancement support under an accountable, independently reviewed accreditor. Research is now needed to evaluate the reforms empirically, to disaggregate coverage and outcomes by institutional type and region, and to test the six propositions. Accreditation will command trust only when it can show not merely that institutions have been inspected, but that students have gained and that the inspection itself can be inspected.

Data Availability Statement

All data analysed are drawn from the published sources cited in this paper. Derived percentages and ratios were calculated by the author from those figures, and the calculation steps are reported in Section 6.

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