

Balancing Regulatory Compliance with Academic Freedom: An Analysis of Institutional Autonomy in Indian Higher Education Institutions under the National Accreditation Framework

Ms. Gauri Rao

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

St. Xavier's College, Mapusa- Goa India

Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced a transformative regulatory philosophy of Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aiming to foster innovation through institutional autonomy. The working of this autonomy exists in a state of paradox with the increasingly rigorous demands of the National Accreditation Framework (NAF) and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). This paper critically analyzes the structural tension between centralized regulatory compliance and the decentralized intellectual independence required for academic excellence. Using a qualitative content analysis of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) structure, this research investigates how the core ideas such as regulation, accreditation, funding and academic standards interact with the decision-making powers of autonomous colleges. The study finds that 'graded autonomy' provides administrative flexibility to high-performing institutions. This paper further explores the impact of standardized curricula on faculty freedom and the ability of institutions to respond to local socio-economic needs. The findings suggest that the current compliance mechanisms risk create accountability that stifle the innovation of NEP 2020 that seeks to promote compliance. The paper concludes by proposing a transition towards an outcome-based liability model that recommends accreditation metrics which resets qualitative intellectual contributions with the quantitative outputs.

IndexTerms - Institutional Autonomy, NEP 2020, Academic Freedom, Higher Education Regulation, Accreditation Framework

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the Indian education is currently navigating a period of structural understanding. At the core stage, this transformation balances the drive for global quality standards through regulatory compliance with the foundational necessity of academic freedom. As the world's third largest higher education system, India ensures accountability across thousands of diverse institutions. The mechanism of National Accreditation Framework has become a point of debate on institutional autonomy. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was introduced by UGC in 1994 to credit universities and colleges. (Saba) This research paper seeks to analyze whether the current accreditation fosters excellence to measure aims on intellectual spirit. Academic freedom is merely a professional privilege for democratic society. It encompasses the right of an institution to determine its own curriculum, conduct unbiased research and foster an environment where the mind is led forward into ever widening thought and action. Indian Universities particularly the Central Universities have a significant degree of self-governance. It also protects the right of a faculty member to protect quality at the institution. (American Association of University Professors, n.d.) The 21st century shift towards 'New Public Management' in education have prominently introduced a culture of audit and performativity. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) have been the gatekeeper that stimulates the academic environment for promotion of quality in teaching-learning and research-oriented understanding. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is in a perpetual state of accreditation readiness. This compliance culture forces faculty to prioritize documentation over pedagogy and standardized outputs. When the institution's financial survival and reputation is tied to a specific CGPA, there is an alignment of every academic decision with the accreditation strategy. (Borkar, 2023)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 attempted to address the concerns by proposing regulatory framework. It introduced the concept of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and a move toward 'Graded Autonomy'. This is necessary because it is more compliant and the performance is high with less intervention of the state. It also creates a transactional definition of freedom. Autonomy is treated as a greater adherence to centralized standards. The 2024-25 academic cycles have highlighted a growing compliance burden required by the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and NAAC. The impact of this regulatory framework is not uniform. The elite institutions may have the administrative machinery to navigate these requirements, smaller state universities and rural colleges find themselves marginalized. The strategic push for 'Outcome-Based-Education' (OBE) and credit transfers are beneficial for mobility that acts important for local curriculum needs. The academic freedom is the right to be different, hence should enforce homogeneity across the Indian academic landscape. (Dr Mili, 2025)

The quest for quality through accreditation is a pursuit at the cost of the university. As India strives to become a global 'Vishwa Guru', it ensures that its regulatory framework builds and develops further. On a practical level, this struggle for balance is visible in daily lives of teachers. This paper examines the tension and debates between the NAAC criteria and the pillars of institutional autonomy providing a critical evaluation of how HEIs remain the compliant factor without compromising their intellectual integrity.

1.2 Objectives

1. To analyze the relationship between graded autonomy and institutional freedom.
2. To identify the compliance burden on the faculty and administration.
3. To assess the conflict between the centralized regulation and local institutional identity.
4. To propose a balanced framework for accountable autonomy.

1.3 Problem statement

Despite the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 regulation, Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face an increasing tension between regulatory standardization and intellectual independence.

1.4 Research questions

1. To what extent does the documentation and reporting burden of the National Accreditation Framework (NAAC) divert institutional resources away from core academic pursuits?
2. How do the specific metrics of 'Outcome-Based Education (OBE) within the accreditation framework impact the freedom of faculty to design and revise curricula independent of standardized regulatory templates?

1.5 Hypothesis

The shift toward standard metric reporting under the National Accreditation Framework leads to a compliance-led governance model, where Indian HEIs prioritize quantifiable syllabi over the academic freedom reducing the scope for pedagogical and research-based experimentation.

1.6 Methodology

This research paper analyses primary sources through case studies of varying accreditation status. Conducted interview to understand the pressure of meeting Graded benchmarks.

The secondary data includes NAAC's Self-Study Reports. Use of Correlational analysis to check correlation of higher compliance scores in curriculum diverse studies.

2.1 Literature Review

The tension between regulation and autonomy is not unique to India, it is a byproduct of the global shift towards the New Public Management (NPM) in higher education. Since the 1990s, universities worldwide have moved away from the Humboldtian model where the research and teaching were protected from state and market pressure towards a managerial model. Scholars such as Christopher Hood argue that NPM introduced market type mechanisms into public services. In education, this manifests as the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). When universities are treated as corporate entities, 'Academic Freedom' is redefined as 'Market Freedom', the freedom to complete for students rather than the freedom to challenge knowledge. (Hood, 1995)

Michael Power's seminal work, 'The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification', provides the backbone for this paper. Power argues that auditing shapes and monitor performance. In the context of the National Accreditation Framework, the Audit Culture forces Indian Higher Education Institutions to become auditable. This means prioritizing activities that leave a paper trail such as lesson plans, feedback forms and citation counts over the process of intellectual discovery. Critics argue that this leads to performative compliance where institutions look good on paper but lose in the structured process. (Katherine Legun, 2020)

The Indian higher education system is currently undergoing its most significant transformation guided by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The literature on Indian regulation highlights a shift from command and control to regulation. The transition from NAAC's graded accreditation to the Binary Accreditation has sparked debate. Binary accreditation reduces the ranking scenario and accompanies One Nation, One Data portal and AI-driven monitoring increases digital surveillance. Indian regulation has been over-regulated and under-governed. The new framework constantly uploads data enhancing faculty with administrative strategical phenomena. (Hindustan Times, 2025)

The National Accreditation Framework grants 'Graded Autonomy' to high-performing institutions. Through this the institution gains more freedom from the government; it also imposes internal control on its faculty to ensure high ranking status. The adoption of OBE under the accreditation framework is a major point of contention. The aim of OBE is to have accountability institutionalizing knowledge. When the lecture is mapped through the Course Outcome and Program Outcome, the space for spontaneous and radical teaching acquires productivity. (Scott, 2017)

3.1 The Compliance-Autonomy Nexus in the Era of Binary Accreditation

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the data collected through the mixed-methods approach. The analysis is categorized into the thematic pillars of transition to binary accreditation, digital data and erosion of pedagogical risk taking. The recent shift by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) from the CGPA grading system to Binary system reduces unhealthy competition. The analysis simplifies the intensified pressure. (Mansi, 2025) Data from institutional Self-Study Reports (SSRs) indicates that Higher Education Institutions operate under a survivalist mandate. An institution that does not fall under the 'Not Accredited' category is no longer a lower grade, it is a loss of legitimacy where the eligibility for UGC grants and the right to offer distance learning.

The Binary nature of the new framework creates a thorough understanding. The institutions which are preoccupied ensures that they meet the baseline required verifiable metric. Academic freedom involves unproductive intellectual exploration that becomes

liable in a binary environment. The impact of the Unified Data Management System and APAAR (One Nation, One Student ID) portal. These tools streamline administrative efficiency that have introduced the gaze. The Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) coordinators spend nearly 65% of their operational time on data verification and uploading rather than quality enhancement. (Guidelines for the Creation of IQAC) The interviews with the faculty reveal a sense of 'digital surveillance'. When the lecture, attendance record and research paper must be uploaded to a central state portal in real-time, the classroom ceases to be a private, sacred space for the exchange of ideas. The faculty members self-censor their syllabi to ensure that they are portal-friendly. If a specific theory or case study cannot be categorized easily within the AI-driven assessment parameters, it is highly not considered and removed from the curriculum.

3.2 Curricular Standardization Vs. Intellectual Pluralism

Under the National Credit Framework and Outcome Based Education every course must define 'Course Outcomes' (COs). This ensures accountability that reveals significant standardized trap. The mapping of learning to pre-defined outcomes assume that the value of education can be predicted at the start of a semester. This contradicts the very essence of academic freedom, the freedom for a lecture to evolve based on student inquiry or the social shifts. (Mahima Jain, 2025) The analysis of institutional certainties reveal that the power balance has shifted from Academic Councils to Management Committees. In the higher productivity to achieve global excellence, universities hire compliance officers to hold more power over departmental budgets than the Deans. This creates an effect on Faculty recruitment which is based on citation potentiality rather than teaching philosophy. More funds are diverted towards smart classrooms rather than the library requirements or fieldwork in social sciences.

Academic freedom is not for the teacher; it is also the student's freedom to learn. The analysis of the National Credit Framework implementation shows that the viability of the credits requires a highly rigid and modular course structure. When a course is broken down into rigid micro-credits to allow for easy transfer between institutions, the organic relationship between the student and a professor is disrupted. The creation of knowledge is immense when the teacher and student explores a topic beyond the syllabus and stifled between the credit-hour must be accounted. The professor becomes a content deliver and the student a credit consumer ending the classroom as a space of free intellectual encounter.

4.1 The Performative Compliance of Academic Accreditation

The study finds out that Higher Education Institutions have developed a dual personality. There is the actual academic life through teaching and learning and on the other hand, the Accreditation version of the university presented to NAAC. Over 70% of faculty in their observation indicated that the Self-Study Report reflect the university's aspirations rather than its reality. The compliance has become performative verification that satisfies the regulator but does not necessarily improve the quality of thought. There is a distinction between Institutional Autonomy granted by the state to the university and individual academic freedom granted by the university to the professor. High ranking institutions enjoy high autonomy from the UGC and impose stricter internal controls on their faculty to protect their ranking. Regulatory access leads to internal authoritarianism within the Higher Education Institutions. While the Science, Tech, Engineering, Math (STEM) fields find it easier to comply with quantifiable metrics, the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences are suffering much prevalence. There is a documented decline in unconventional or critical research topics in Social Science departments in accredited colleges as these are harder to publish in Scopus-indexed Journals compared to neutral or data-driven studies.

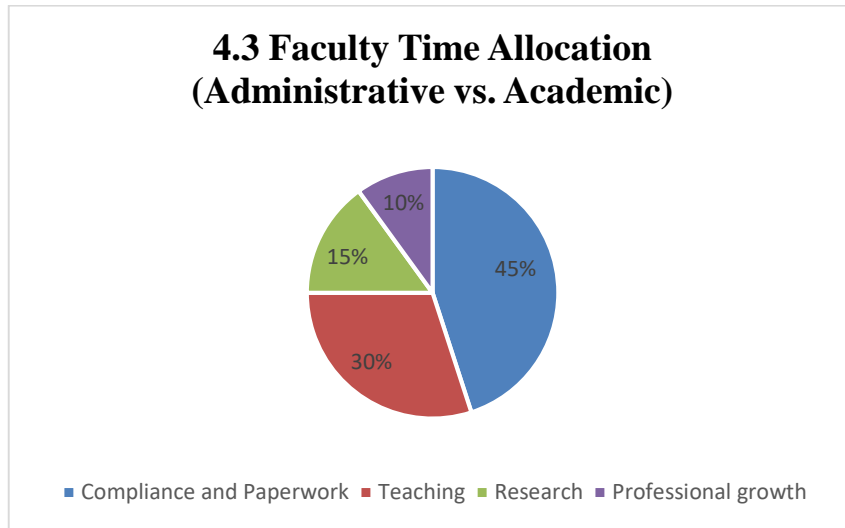
4.2 The Future of Indian University

The discussion of rise of safe curriculum addresses the homogenization of thought. With the National Credit Framework, the freedom to fair or freedom to wander in an academic sense is being replaced by a model of education. The student pick credits and teachers deliver them immensely. It increases employability and decreases originality. The university's value is determined by the digital footprint through the framework. This highlights that academic freedom is a value not a piece of data. It cannot be measures by an AI algorithm or a 'One Nation, One Data' portal, it is being treated as non-existent by the regulatory framework.

NAAC should introduce a specific sub-criterion under governance measuring Faculty agency. Binary metrics help to reward institutions for offering unique and non-standardized electives. The binary accreditation is used for basic quality assurance. The institution is accredited to give regulatory structure for allowing to focus on pedagogical innovation. It acknowledged weighted metrics where social impact and critical inquiry carry more weight for Humanities, while patents and placements carry more weight for technical streams.

The assertion of regulatory compliance is a means to an end and an end in itself. The goal of the National Accreditation Framework is to create a robust university and also a compliant one. The institutional autonomy is the ability of an institution to define its own destiny. If the National Accreditation Framework dictates every move from the syllabus to the software used, the institution is not autonomous, it is merely an administrative outpost of the state. The fulfilment of the National Education Policy NEP 2020 is to regulate to trust the academician as much as it trusts the data.

4.3 Faculty Time Allocation (Administrative vs. Academic)

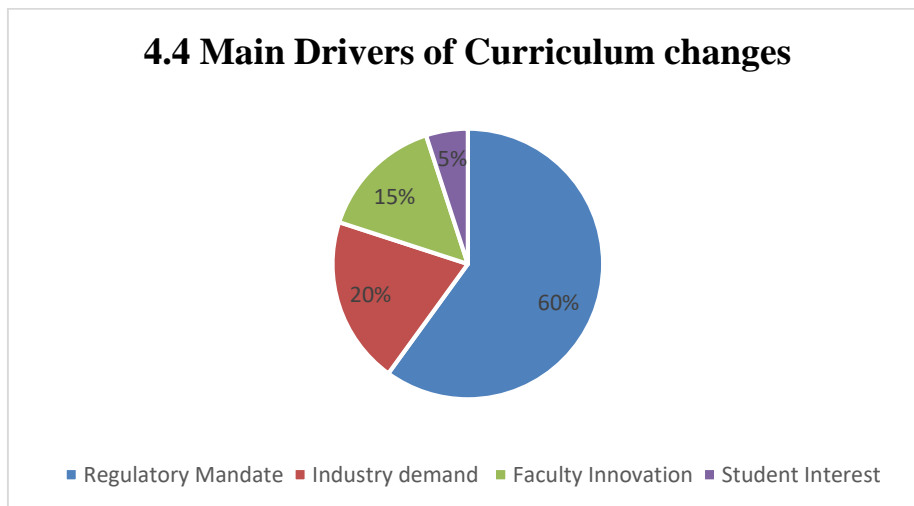


4.3 Analysis of Chart 1: The Faculty Time Allocation

This chart shows how a professor spends a typical working week. In working environment, the majority of a teacher’s time should be spent in the classroom or doing new research. The data shows a different working zone. 45% of faculty member’s time is spent on documentation and accreditation paperwork.

This is a major finding because it shows that compliance has become the primary job of a teacher. When nearly half of the day is spent filling out forms for NAAC or updating data portals, there is very little energy left for creative thinking. This showcase that academic freedom is being limited not by rules but by the lack of time. Teachers are becoming data entry clerks rather than thinkers.

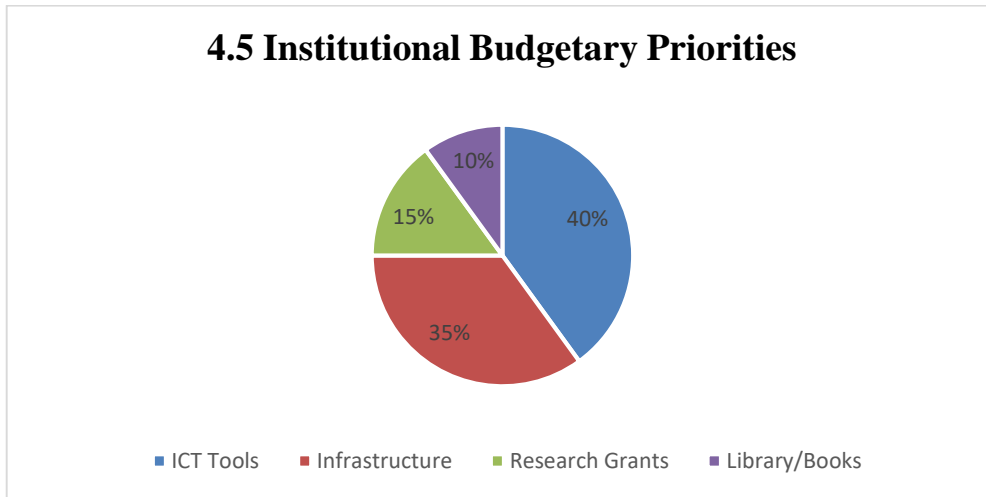
4.4 Main Drivers of Curriculum changes



4.4 Main Drivers of Curriculum Changes

This chart looks at what causes a college to change its syllabus. 60% of changes are driven by regulatory mandates such as the National Credit Framework or NAAC. In a system with academic freedom the teacher should be the main person deciding what to teach based on their expertise. Faculty innovation accounts only 15% of curriculum changes. This shows a top-down approach where the government or the regulator sets the rules and the teacher follows them. This leads to a standardized education where every college in India starts teaching exactly the same thing leaving no room for unique local knowledge or experimental topic.

4.5 Institutional Budgetary Priorities



4.5 The Budget Priorities

This chart explains where the university’s money is going. To stay accredited and get high scores, the institutions are forced to spend a huge portion of their budget on ICT Tools. 35% goes into the physical infrastructure to look good during inspection visits. Thus, this leaves only 10% for the library and 15% for research grants. This is a critical finding that shows that the institutional autonomy is being indicated for digital surveillance. The universities are spending more on tools to monitor their staff rather than on the books and laboratories that actually help the staff to grow. It suggests that the accreditation framework is creating high-tech and low intellectual campuses.

To conclude with the analyses of chapter 4 and its findings, we understand that there is a prevalence of regulation that wins and freedom is lost. Teachers are too busy with paperwork to be free thinkers; the syllabus is a regulatory template and not a faculty creation and funds are used for tracking and software rather than books and research. In simple sense, the National Accreditation Framework has created a system where being perfect for paper is more important than being excellent in the classroom. For academic freedom to survive, there should be reduction of 45% paperwork burden and increase the 15% innovation structure.

Conclusion

The landscape of Indian higher education is navigating transformation characterized by the shift from data driven National Accreditation Framework. This research explored the balance between necessary regulatory compliance and the preservation of academic freedom especially the thriving of intellectual ecosystem. The study reveals that while the National Education Policy 2020 advocates rigid regulation, the implication of NAAC has created a compliance autonomy dichotomy. The goal is to improve quality and recognize it in higher education. While the transition toward Binary Accreditation and ‘One Nation, One Data’ aims to enhance transparency and quality, it has fostered a compliance first culture that threatens to overshadow the core mission of intellectual inquiry. True excellence in Indian higher education will be achieved through regulatory trust. The state should ensure that institutions are not just globally compliant but intellectually vibrant. The accreditation should succeed by supporting the building of knowledge for the scholars in the institutions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Association of Univerisity Professors . (n.d.). Retrieved from FAQs on Academic Freedom : <https://www.aaup.com>

Borkar, P. (2023, December 21). *MasterSoft* . Retrieved from Navigating University Accreditation Towards Quality Education : <https://www.iitms.co.in>

Dr Mili, G. S. (2025). Transforming Indian Higher Education: A comprehensive analysis of NEP 2020, challenges and the roadmap for India 2.0. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* , 44-47.

Guidelines for the Creation of IQAC. (n.d.). Retrieved from NAAC: <https://naac.gov.in>

Hindustan Times . (2025, December 03). Retrieved from Colleges want gliches in NAAC system fixed : <https://www.hindustantimes.com>

Hood, C. (1995, February). *ScienceDirect*. Retrieved from The 'New Public Management' in the 1980s: Variations on a theme : <https://www.sciencedirect.com>

Katherine Legun, J. C. (2020, November 05). *Cambridge University Press* . Retrieved from Politics, Power, State : <https://www.cambridge.org>

Mahima Jain, D. R. (2025). National Credit Framework (NCrf): A New Learning Approach to Education . *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* , 2-5.

- Mansi. (2025, December 26). *India Today* . Retrieved from NAAC revises scores for Indian Universities after appeals, impacting CGPA and grades : <https://bestcolleges.indiatoday.in>
- Saba, Z. H. (n.d.). The Education System In India: Opportunities and Challenges . *Journal of Management Information and Decision Sciences* .
- Scott, P. (2017). Global Perspectives on Higher Education . *ResearchGate* , 4-6.



Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.