

COUNTRY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Regulatory Challenges and Credibility Issues in Indian Higher Education

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The conversation surrounding Indian higher education is often about the government's overregulation of the sector and the need for less regulation. However, the problem appears to be as much or even more about the lack of suitable and effective regulation, which undermines the credibility of key government regulatory institutions as well as that of higher education institutions.

There is broad consensus in India that the higher education sector is overregulated. The government's new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 itself recognized that the "regulation of higher education has been too heavy-handed," and that "too much has been attempted to be regulated with too little effect." It called for a "complete overhaul" to make regulation "light but tight." Similarly, the government's annual Economic Survey 2024-2025 recommended regulatory reforms to bring about "transparency of key aspects in the functioning of a university such as finances, procedures, infrastructure, and faculty."

Many of the problems in India's higher education sector, however, have less to do with too much regulation than the right kind of effective regulation. Three recent examples are discussed below to support this assertion. Failings in the functioning of the government's key regulatory institutions erode the credibility of these institutions, as well as that of higher education institutions (HEIs).

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) Corruption Case

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an autonomous government body responsible for assessing colleges and universities and awarding them grades on the basis of criteria such as teaching, research, management, infrastructure, and others. NAAC grades are displayed prominently by HEIs and, in principle, help students make informed choices when selecting colleges or universities. NAAC appoints and sends expert committees to HEIs to verify the information submitted by them, after which it makes a decision about their quality. Earlier this year, members of one of NAAC's inspection committees (including professors) were arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation for accepting money from a private university in the state of Andhra Pradesh in return for giving it high grades in their assessment. This is not the first time that NAAC has come under scrutiny. In February 2023, its own chairperson alleged that the accreditation process was

manipulated, resulting in the awarding of questionable grades to some institutions. Subsequently, an inquiry committee discovered serious irregularities. NAAC's IT system was found to be compromised, and assessors were appointed on an arbitrary basis. In the end, the NAAC chairperson resigned.

Since the early 2025 corruption case came to light, NAAC reportedly fired 900 of its 5,000 or so assessors. It is speculated that in many cases this was because the employees were known to have carried out unfair assessments. However, the agency has not withdrawn the tainted grades already awarded to HEIs.

Interestingly, though all HEIs are required to obtain accreditation, not all of them do so, and there is no clear data regarding compliance. According to one report, 498 of the country's 1,168 universities and 10,652 of the 45,473 colleges were accredited in December 2024. According to NAAC, 991 universities and 18,992 colleges are accredited as of 2025, but there is no mention of the total number of HEIs. The Economic Survey 2024-2025 puts the numbers at 1,213 universities and 58,643 colleges as of 2022-2023.

The UGC-Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE) List of Journals

In 2010, facing growing criticism that India's universities were not producing sufficient research and therefore faring badly in world university rankings, the University Grants Commission (UGC)—the country's main regulatory body in higher education—introduced the University Grants Commission Regulations 2010 on Minimum Qualifications for Appointment of Teachers and Other Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Other Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education. One of its main components is the performance-based appraisal system, which relies on academic performance indicators and mandates publications for faculty across all types of HEIs. These regulations do not take into account the fact that the majority of India's HEIs are primarily teaching institutions and that most faculty at these institutions do not have suitable research training. Nor do they consider that

most HEIs lack adequate infrastructure for research, such as good libraries and laboratories, and that there is insufficient research funding and monitoring of published research.

The outcome of the UGC Regulations 2010 has been a significant increase in India's research output. However, a large amount of publishing has been in predatory journals. To address the problem, in 2018, the UGC created the Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE) list of journals to distinguish between legitimate and predatory journals. The consortium initially relied on recommendations by universities when compiling the list but found that the list of journals submitted included several predatory publications. The UGC then took up the task of preparing and updating the list itself. Though there were criticisms of the CARE list in terms of what was included or excluded, it became a useful reference.

Earlier this year, however, the UGC decided to scrap the CARE list and asked HEIs to establish mechanisms to determine legitimate journals and other publications. In the meantime, older and newer forms of research fraud have taken deep roots. For example, participation of Indian researchers in international research papermills is growing. According to Retraction Watch, which collects data on academic retractions worldwide, India is among the leaders in the number of paper retractions.

Lack of Credibility in National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) Rankings

In March 2025, responding to a public interest litigation petition, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court restrained the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) from publishing the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) rankings. NIRF was launched by

the NBA in 2016 under the Ministry of Education with the purpose of evaluating and ranking higher education institutions. In principle, NIRF rankings are more reliable than those prepared by India's leading newsmagazines, which benefit financially from advertisements by several private universities whom they assess and rank.

The petitioner claimed that NIRF rankings lack any basis, since the NBA obtains data on student and staff numbers, research, and funding from the universities themselves and does not verify the information. Many HEIs submit false data to boost their rankings in order to attract students. Therefore, the petitioner sought an intervention by the court to require the NBA to publish NIRF rankings only after verifying the data submitted by HEIs and to disclose their evaluation methods. NIRF rankings had been previously questioned by others, but the court case provided a fresh salvo that undermines the credibility of NBA and NIRF rankings.

Conclusion

A good part of the conversation on India's higher education is about overregulation of the sector and the need for less regulation. However, the problem appears to be often about the lack of suitable and effective regulation. For example, in the case of NAAC assessments, the issue is one of plain corruption. In the case of NIRF rankings, it appears there are no regulations in place which require the NBA to verify the information submitted by HEIs. Finally, in the case of UGC regulations for research, what we see is the scrapping of a set of rules that were reasonably effective and the shifting of responsibility toward HEIs, which have a mediocre track record on the matter. These shortcomings erode the credibility of the government's regulatory institutions, as well as that of the HEIs.

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