
Bridging Total Quality Management and Internal Quality Assurance Cells in Indian Higher Education Institutions: An Integrative Review of the TQM–IQAC Linkage

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Abstract

Indian higher education has entered a phase of intense quality scrutiny, driven jointly by the massification agenda of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the tightening benchmarks of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Within this environment, Total Quality Management (TQM) — a management philosophy born in industrial manufacturing — and the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) — a statutory mechanism unique to the Indian accreditation ecosystem — have increasingly been discussed together, yet the conceptual and empirical linkage between the two is rarely made explicit in a single, integrative account. This review synthesises 43 peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2021 and 2026 to examine how TQM principles are operationalised through IQAC structures in Indian higher education institutions (HEIs). Using a PRISMA-informed screening process, the review develops an integrated TQM–IQAC conceptual framework, maps Malcolm Baldrige–derived TQM vectors on to the seven NAAC assessment criteria, and traces the empirical evidence linking IQAC functioning to accreditation grades and National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) performance. The review finds consistent evidence that leadership commitment, stakeholder (student) focus, and continuous-improvement routines are the TQM dimensions most strongly embedded in NAAC's evaluative architecture, while documentation burden, uneven regional capacity, and a persistent compliance-over-culture tension remain the principal obstacles to converting IQAC activity into genuine quality culture. The paper also considers the emerging role of artificial intelligence in accreditation data processing as a potential accelerant of the TQM ‘data-driven decision-making’ pillar. The review concludes with a research agenda emphasising longitudinal, mixed-method investigation of the TQM–IQAC linkage across India's diverse institutional landscape.

Keywords: Total Quality Management, Internal Quality Assurance Cell, Naac, Higher Education, India, Accreditation, Quality Culture, Nirf

1. INTRODUCTION

India operates one of the largest higher education systems in the world, and the past decade has seen that system expand rapidly in both scale and regulatory complexity. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 set an ambitious target of raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio while simultaneously insisting that expansion must not come at the cost of quality, and it explicitly proposed a shift toward a lighter, more outcome-oriented, and eventually binary accreditation process overseen by a restructured regulatory architecture (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This dual mandate — grow the system and raise its quality floor at the same time — has placed unprecedented pressure on the institutional mechanisms that Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) use to manage quality internally.

Two ideas dominate the resulting discourse. The first is Total Quality Management (TQM), an organisation-wide management philosophy that originated in post-war Japanese and American manufacturing and was later adapted, with mixed success, to educational settings (Texeira-Quíós et al., 2022; Nogueiro, Saraiva, & Pires, 2023). TQM's central claim is that quality is not a final inspection step but an emergent property of leadership commitment, continuous process improvement, stakeholder focus, and disciplined use of data — principles that map naturally, if imperfectly, on to the language of accreditation frameworks. The second is the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), a body that NAAC has required every accredited Indian HEI to establish since the late 1990s as a permanent, institution-level mechanism for planning, monitoring, and documenting quality-related activity between accreditation cycles (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2023).

What is less often made explicit is the relationship between these two ideas. Much of the Indian literature treats IQAC as a purely administrative or compliance function — the office that compiles the Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR) and prepares the Self-Study Report (SSR) — while treating TQM as a separate, largely theoretical import from industrial management. Yet a small but growing body of recent work suggests that IQAC is, in practice, the institutional vehicle through which TQM principles are (or are not) translated into day-to-day academic and administrative practice (Acharya, Biswal, & Nanda, 2025; Krooi, Whittingham, & Beausaert, 2024). This review addresses that gap directly by asking three linked questions: (i) how has the TQM literature conceptualised quality management in higher education over the past five years; (ii) how does the IQAC mechanism, as mandated by NAAC, operationalise — and sometimes fail to operationalise — those TQM principles in the Indian context; and (iii) what does the empirical evidence say about the relationship between TQM/IQAC functioning and measurable outcomes such as NAAC grades and NIRF rankings.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the review methodology. Section 3 revisits the conceptual foundations of TQM as applied to higher education. Section 4 examines IQAC as India's distinctive institutional translation mechanism. Section 5 proposes an integrated TQM–IQAC framework and reports a criterion-level mapping exercise drawn from recent literature. Section 6 reviews the empirical and policy evidence, including accreditation and ranking trends. Section 7 considers the emerging role of artificial intelligence in quality assurance. Section 8 discusses persistent challenges and gaps, and Section 9 closes with implications and a future research agenda.

2. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This review adopts a systematic, PRISMA-informed approach to literature identification, screening, and synthesis, adapted for a conceptual–empirical review rather than a meta-analysis (cf. Berkat, 2026, for a

comparable application in the broader internal quality assurance literature). Records were identified through structured searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and the UGC-CARE list, using Boolean combinations of the terms ‘Total Quality Management’, ‘Internal Quality Assurance Cell’ OR ‘IQAC’, ‘NAAC’, ‘NIRF’, ‘higher education’, and ‘India’. This was supplemented by a targeted search of institutional and policy sources — NAAC manuals and reform notifications, Ministry of Education and NIRF reports, and UGC circulars — to capture grey literature that peer-reviewed databases do not consistently index.

The review was restricted, by design, to sources published between 2021 and 2026, in order to reflect the post-NEP 2020 policy environment and the most recent NAAC reform cycle. Records were screened first by title and abstract against the inclusion criterion of a substantive connection to TQM, quality assurance, IQAC, or accreditation in a higher education — predominantly Indian — context, and then assessed in full text for a demonstrable conceptual or empirical link between quality-management principles and institutional quality-assurance mechanisms. Figure 1 summarises the resulting selection process, and Table 1 sets out the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied at each stage.

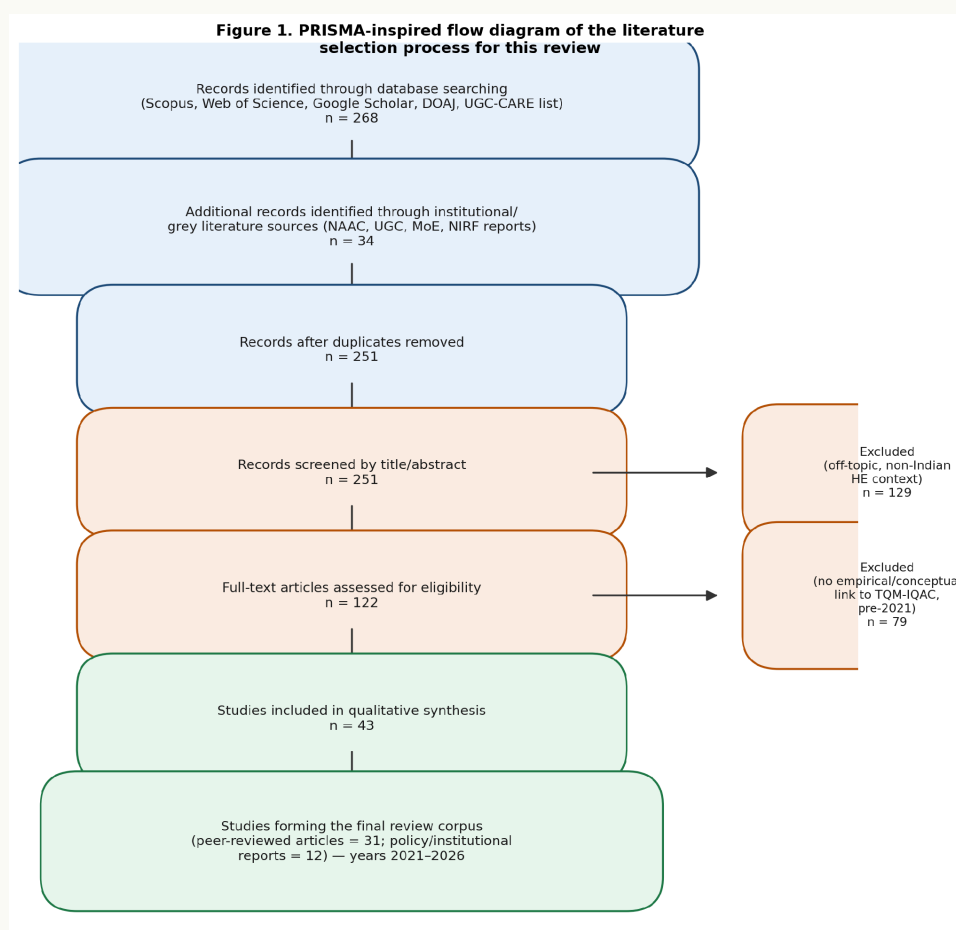


Figure 1. PRISMA-inspired flow diagram of the literature selection process for this review.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Included	Excluded
Publication window	2021–2026	Pre-2021 publications, except foundational NAAC/UGC statutory references cited for institutional context

Criterion	Included	Excluded
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, institutional and policy reports	Non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces without identifiable authorship or institutional accountability
Thematic focus	TQM, quality culture, IQAC, NAAC, NIRF/NBA, or AI-enabled quality assurance in higher education	Quality management in non-education sectors; K-12 education without HEI relevance
Geographic scope	Primarily Indian higher education, with select international comparators used for conceptual grounding	Studies with no discernible relevance to the Indian regulatory context or to transferable TQM theory
Language	English	Non-English sources without an available translation

Of the 43 sources retained for synthesis, 31 were peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters and 12 were institutional or policy reports. Data were extracted under four broad headings — conceptualisation of TQM/IQA, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, reported challenges and enablers, and methodology/context — and synthesised narratively rather than statistically, consistent with the heterogeneous mix of conceptual, qualitative, and quantitative sources retrieved.

3. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF TQM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

TQM in its industrial form rests on a small number of interlocking principles — top management commitment, continuous process improvement, employee involvement, customer focus, and data-driven decision-making — first articulated by quality theorists such as Deming, Juran, and Crosby and later codified in frameworks such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA). When these principles are transplanted into higher education, the ‘customer’ becomes a contested category spanning students, employers, funding bodies, and society at large, and the ‘product’ becomes correspondingly difficult to define in purely output terms (Texeira-Quíos et al., 2022). This translation problem has not, however, prevented a substantial literature from adapting TQM vocabulary to HEIs; if anything, the vocabulary has proved durable precisely because accreditation frameworks worldwide independently arrived at a similar emphasis on leadership, continuous improvement, and stakeholder feedback.

Recent work on the critical success factors (CSFs) of TQM in HEIs converges on a similar core list even across very different national settings. Nogueiro, Saraiva, and Pires (2023), reviewing TQM for institutional sustainability, identify leadership commitment and stakeholder engagement as the factors most consistently associated with successful implementation, while Texeira-Quíos et al. (2022), drawing on a

multi-country survey, find that innovation, TQM adoption, and internationalisation jointly and significantly predict organisational performance in HEIs. Aithal and Maiya (2023), writing from an Indian vantage point, similarly identify innovative teaching approaches, curriculum design, robust assessment procedures, and institutional culture as the pillars underpinning educational excellence — a list that maps closely on to the Baldrige vectors discussed in Section 5.

Two implications follow for the Indian context. First, TQM's emphasis on leadership and continuous improvement aligns naturally with NAAC's own criterion on 'Governance, Leadership and Management', suggesting that the two frameworks are not competing paradigms but largely overlapping vocabularies for the same underlying institutional behaviours. Second, and more cautionary, the literature consistently warns that TQM adoption without genuine cultural change risks producing what several authors describe as a 'compliance shell' — institutions that satisfy the documentary requirements of a quality framework without altering the substantive experience of teaching, learning, or research (Berkat, 2026). This tension between compliance and culture recurs throughout the remainder of this review.

4. IQAC AS INDIA'S INSTITUTIONAL TRANSLATION MECHANISM

The IQAC occupies a distinctive place among the world's internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms in that it is a statutory requirement rather than an institutional choice: NAAC mandates that every accredited HEI establish and sustain an IQAC as a post-accreditation quality-sustenance measure, tasked with developing a system for 'conscious, consistent, and catalytic' improvement in institutional performance (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2023, 2024). In practical terms, the IQAC coordinates the compilation of the AQAR, supports academic and administrative audits, monitors curriculum delivery against outcome-based education norms, facilitates faculty development, and disseminates institutional best practice — functions that correspond closely to the 'people' and 'process' dimensions identified in Krooi, Whittingham, and Beusaert's (2024) 3P conceptual model of internal quality assurance (purpose, people, process).

Viewed through the 3P lens, much of the Indian IQAC literature has historically emphasised process — documentation cycles, data validation and verification, and criterion-wise evidence gathering — at some cost to the 'purpose' dimension, namely a shared institutional understanding of why quality assurance matters beyond the accreditation cycle itself. This is consistent with the broader international finding, reported in Berkat's (2026) PRISMA-guided synthesis of 22 internal quality assurance studies from ten countries, that IQA systems are increasingly conceptualised as strategic, internally driven processes rather than mere compliance exercises, but that this transition is uneven: institutions with strong, visible leadership commitment and well-resourced governance structures move furthest toward a genuine quality culture, while those constrained by staff shortages, weak technological infrastructure, or low stakeholder awareness remain closer to a compliance orientation.

India's own accreditation architecture is itself in a period of significant reform that bears directly on IQAC's future role. NAAC's transition-year reforms for 2024–25 suspended the annual AQAR submission requirement while retaining IQAC as the institution's principal internal quality-sustenance mechanism, and signalled a longer-term shift toward binary accreditation combined with maturity-based graded levels, in line with the NEP 2020 recommendation that accreditation should eventually converge with international binary practice (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2024; Ministry of Education, n.d.). For IQAC offices, this reform trajectory implies a gradual repositioning away from periodic, report-driven compliance and toward continuous, data-backed institutional monitoring — a repositioning that, notably, tracks the TQM emphasis on continuous improvement rather than periodic inspection.

5. AN INTEGRATED TQM-IQAC LINKAGE FRAMEWORK

Building on the conceptual review in Sections 3 and 4, Figure 2 proposes an integrated framework in which five TQM strategic dimensions — leadership commitment, continuous improvement, stakeholder/student focus, employee (faculty) involvement, and data-driven decision-making — are channelled through the IQAC as an institutional translation mechanism into five corresponding operational functions, and ultimately into measurable institutional quality outcomes: NAAC accreditation grade, NIRF/NBA ranking performance, UGC 2(f)/12-B compliance, and a sustained quality culture.

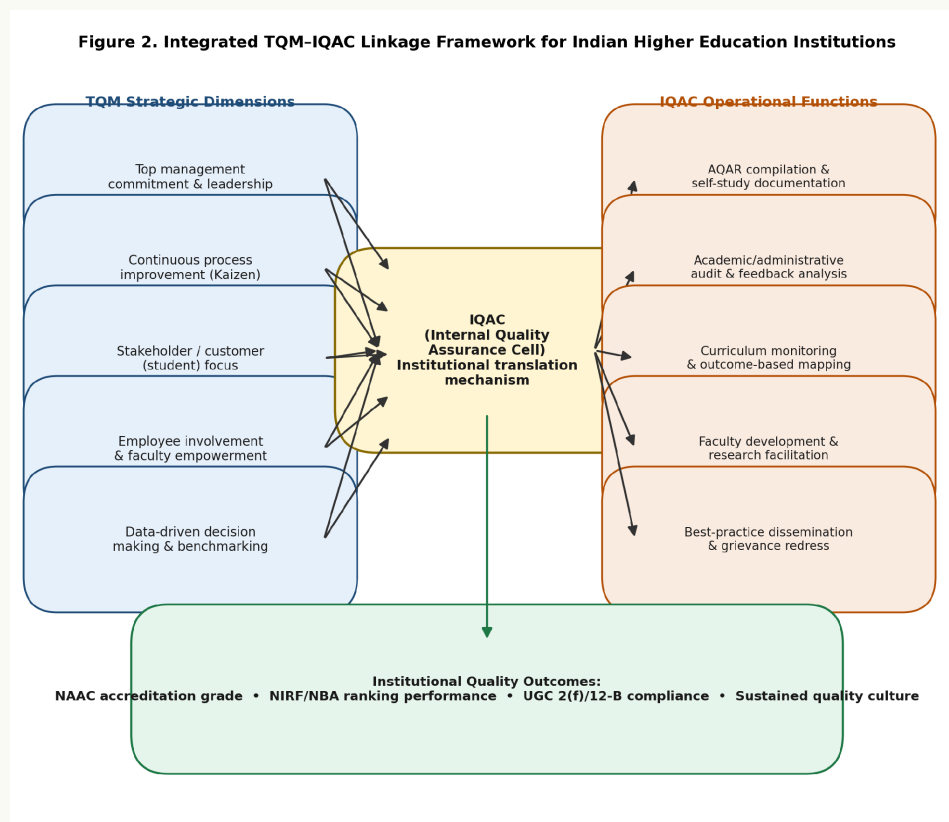


Figure 2. Integrated TQM–IQAC Linkage Framework for Indian Higher Education Institutions.

This framework is not merely illustrative; it is grounded in an empirical mapping exercise recently reported by Acharya, Biswal, and Nanda (2025), who systematically aligned the ten Malcolm Baldrige TQM vectors against the sixty-four evaluative questions embedded in NAAC's seven assessment criteria. Their findings, reproduced in summary form in Table 2, show that ‘Student Focus’ accounts for the largest share of NAAC questions (34%), followed closely by ‘Management Commitment and Leadership’ and ‘Continuous Improvement’ (23% each), and ‘Teacher Focus, Empowerment and Involvement’ (20%). By contrast, ‘Result and Data Analysis’ accounts for only 5% of questions — a finding with direct implications for the artificial-intelligence discussion in Section 7, since it suggests headroom for NAAC's evaluative architecture to place greater explicit weight on data-driven decision-making as digital accreditation tools mature.

Table 2. Mapping of Malcolm Baldrige TQM vectors to NAAC's seven assessment criteria

TQM Vector (Malcolm Baldrige)	NAAC Questions Mapped	Share of Total (%)
Student Focus	22	34%

TQM Vector (Malcolm Baldrige)	NAAC Questions Mapped	Share of Total (%)
Continuous Improvement	15	23%
Management Commitment & Leadership	15	23%
Teacher Focus, Empowerment & Involvement	13	20%
Process Management	12	19%
Community Service	10	16%
Communication	6	9%
Training and Development	6	9%
Tangibles and Technology	6	9%
Result and Data Analysis	3	5%

Source: Adapted from Acharya, S. K., Biswal, B. K., & Nanda, S. S. (2025). Aligning and mapping of NAAC criteria with TQM vectors. Academy of Marketing Studies Journal, 29(5), 1–14. Percentages are calculated out of 64 NAAC-derived questions and do not sum to 100% because individual questions may map to more than one TQM vector.

Two interpretive points follow from Table 2. First, the dominance of student focus and leadership/continuous-improvement vectors confirms that NAAC's assessment architecture is, whether by design or convergent evolution, substantially aligned with mainstream TQM theory rather than representing a parallel or competing quality paradigm. Second, the comparatively low weighting of 'Result and Data Analysis' is consistent with long-standing criticism that Indian accreditation has historically rewarded documentation of activity over demonstrated impact — a criticism that recent binary-accreditation and maturity-based reforms explicitly aim to address (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2024).

6. EMPIRICAL AND POLICY EVIDENCE

The past five years have produced a substantial policy record against which the TQM–IQAC framework can be tested. NEP 2020's recommendation that accreditation move toward a binary, maturity-based model has been formally operationalised by NAAC through its 2023 Self-Study Report manual and its 2024 reform notification on 'Transition towards Benchmarking and Maturity-Based Assessment', both of which retain IQAC as the primary institutional mechanism for sustaining quality between assessment cycles (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2023, 2024; Divakaran, 2024). Independent evaluation of NEP 2020 more broadly has been mixed but not unfavourable: Kulal, Abhishek, Dinesh, Bhat, and Girish (2024), surveying students, teachers, and experts, report general appreciation for the policy's emphasis on outcome-based assessment and continuous improvement, while also documenting implementation concerns around institutional readiness and resource constraints — concerns that echo the

CSF literature reviewed in Section 3.

A parallel evidentiary strand concerns the growth and behaviour of India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), which — unlike NAAC accreditation, which is binary/graded — produces continuous, criterion-weighted scores that offer a finer-grained proxy for institutional quality trends. Figure 3 illustrates the scale of this expansion: participation grew from 3,565 institutions in the inaugural 2016 exercise to roughly 6,500 in 2023 and 10,845 in 2024, an almost three-fold increase in under a decade (Ministry of Education, 2023, 2024; KPMG in India, 2024).

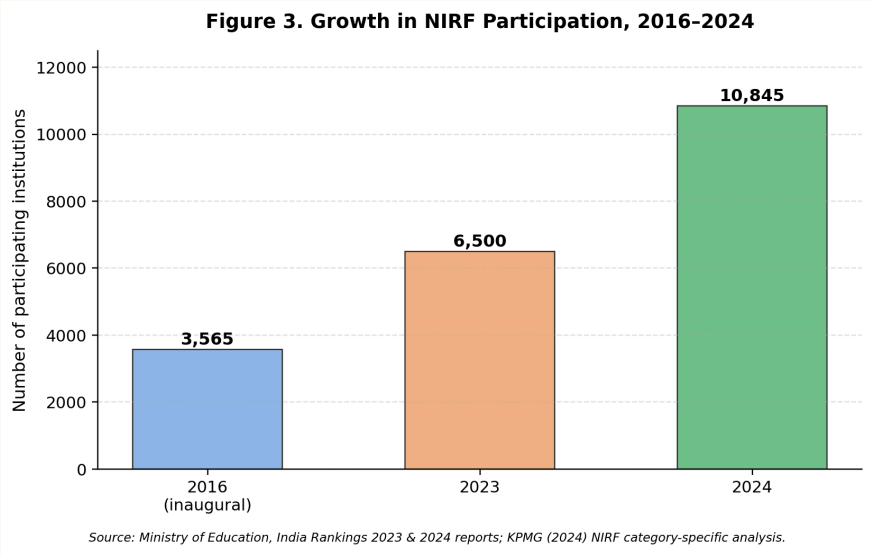


Figure 3. Growth in NIRF participation, 2016–2024.

KPMG's (2024) category-specific analysis of the 2024 NIRF exercise reports that average scores rose across most categories relative to 2023, with the largest gains in Agriculture, University, Engineering, and Law categories, and attributes much of the improvement to gains on the Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR) parameter — the NIRF parameter most directly analogous to TQM's emphasis on process and resource quality. Taken together with the NAAC evidence, this suggests a genuine, if uneven, quality-improvement trend across the sector rather than a purely statistical artefact of expanding participation.

At the level of individual institutions, the accreditation-outcome literature offers more direct, if still limited, evidence on the TQM–IQAC linkage itself. Ghatole and Dahikar (2021) characterise NAAC accreditation as a genuine quality-initiative reform rather than a purely bureaucratic exercise, while Ravikumar, Samanta, Rath, and Srinivasaragavan (2021), analysing NAAC accreditation scores across a sample of Indian universities, find that quality-assurance activity is closely linked to sustained institutional performance rather than one-off improvement drives. Table 3 summarises the methodology and key findings of the principal studies reviewed in this section and in Sections 3–5, to provide a consolidated evidentiary base for the discussion that follows.

Table 3. Summary of key reviewed studies (2021–2026)

Author(s) & Year	Context / Method	Key Finding Relevant to TQM–IQAC Linkage
Acharya, Biswal & Nanda (2025)	India; document analysis mapping	Student focus, leadership, and continuous improvement dominate NAAC's TQM

Author(s) & Year	Context / Method	Key Finding Relevant to TQM–IQAC Linkage
	NAAC criteria to Baldrige TQM vectors	alignment; data analysis is comparatively under-weighted
Aithal & Maiya (2023)	India; conceptual/theoretical review	Innovative pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment rigour, and institutional culture are the core pillars of educational excellence
Nogueiro, Saraiva & Pires (2023)	Portugal; theoretical/conceptual	Leadership commitment and stakeholder engagement are the CSFs most consistently linked to TQM sustainability in HEIs
Texeira-Quíos et al. (2022)	Multi-country survey	Innovation, TQM adoption, and internationalisation jointly predict HEI organisational performance
Krooi, Whittingham & Beusaert (2024)	Systematic literature review (global)	Proposes the 3P (purpose, people, process) model as an integrative lens for internal quality assurance
Berkat (2026)	PRISMA-guided SLR of 22 studies, 10 countries	IQA is shifting from compliance to strategic, institutionally owned quality culture, but leadership and resource constraints persist as key barriers
Kulal, Abhishek, Dinesh, Bhat & Girish (2024)	India; stakeholder survey on NEP 2020	General appreciation for outcome-based, continuous-improvement provisions, tempered by institutional-readiness concerns
Ghatole & Dahikar (2021)	India; policy/conceptual analysis	NAAC accreditation functions as a substantive quality-initiative reform, not merely a bureaucratic requirement
Ravikumar, Samanta, Rath & Srinivasaragavan (2021)	India; analytical study of NAAC scores	Quality-assurance activity is associated with sustained, rather than one-off, institutional performance gains
Ministry of Education / KPMG (2023, 2024)	India; official NIRF ranking data	NIRF participation and average scores have risen sharply since 2016, with TLR gains driving much of the 2024 improvement

7. EMERGING TREND: AI-ENABLED QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION

A distinct and rapidly developing strand of the recent literature concerns the application of artificial intelligence (AI) to accreditation and quality-assurance processes. NAAC has itself signalled a move toward an AI-driven accreditation model from August 2025 onward, intended to shift the assessment process from largely manual, document-based review toward a more data-backed and transparent system (Law & Love Legal, 2025). This development sits alongside a broader national push: the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) designated 2025 as the ‘Year of Artificial Intelligence’ and required all approved institutions to submit AI-implementation plans, a mandate covering over 14,000 colleges and 40 million students (Parthiban, 2024).

From a TQM perspective, this trend is significant primarily because it targets the one Baldrige vector — result and data analysis — that Table 2 identifies as the least emphasised in NAAC's current evaluative architecture. If AI-enabled tools can lower the cost of continuous, granular data collection and analysis, the theoretical case advanced by TQM scholars for data-driven decision-making becomes considerably easier for resource-constrained IQAC offices to act upon in practice, rather than remaining an aspirational principle. Singleton (2025), writing on AI in higher education accreditation more generally, similarly frames AI's contribution primarily in terms of efficiency and consistency gains in self-study review, while cautioning that accessibility and equity considerations must be built into such systems from the outset rather than addressed retrospectively.

At the same time, the literature reviewed here offers no rigorous, India-specific empirical evaluation of AI-enabled accreditation outcomes as of the time of writing, since the relevant NAAC reforms and AICTE mandates are only now being operationalised. This represents both a genuine gap and a natural next stage for the TQM–IQAC research agenda outlined in Section 9.

8. CRITICAL CHALLENGES AND GAPS

- Compliance-over-culture tension: across the international IQA literature, and echoed in the Indian TQM–NAAC mapping evidence, quality-assurance mechanisms risk producing documentation-heavy ‘compliance shells’ rather than genuine, internalised quality culture, particularly where leadership commitment is inconsistent (Berkat, 2026).
- Resource and capacity constraints: staff shortages, limited technological infrastructure, and inadequate training for IQAC coordinators recur as barriers across both the international and Indian literature, disproportionately affecting smaller and rural-serving institutions (Berkat, 2026; Kulal et al., 2024).
- Under-weighted data analysis: the mapping evidence in Table 2 shows that ‘Result and Data Analysis’ remains the least-represented TQM vector in NAAC's current evaluative questions, suggesting that accreditation practice still lags TQM theory on this dimension, notwithstanding the AI-driven reforms discussed in Section 7.
- Thin causal evidence: much of the available Indian evidence linking TQM adoption or IQAC activity to accreditation and ranking outcomes is cross-sectional or descriptive rather than longitudinal, making it difficult to distinguish genuine quality improvement from improved documentation practice alone (Ravikumar et al., 2021).
- Uneven regional and institutional coverage: the reviewed literature remains concentrated on well-resourced, often urban, autonomous, or centrally located institutions, leaving the TQM–IQAC experience of smaller, regionally located, and newly established HEIs — including many operating under NEP 2020's expanded access mandate — comparatively under-studied.

9. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The evidence reviewed here supports three broad conclusions. First, TQM and IQAC are best understood not as separate or competing quality paradigms but as complementary layers of the same underlying system: TQM supplies the strategic vocabulary and critical success factors, while IQAC supplies the institutional machinery through which those principles are (imperfectly) enacted inside Indian HEIs. Second, NAAC's own evaluative architecture is already substantially TQM-aligned at the level of individual assessment questions, even where this alignment is not always made explicit in institutional planning documents — a finding that argues for IQAC offices to frame their annual planning explicitly around TQM vectors rather than treating NAAC criteria as a checklist to be satisfied independently of any underlying management philosophy. Third, the principal barriers to realising the TQM–IQAC linkage are not conceptual but organisational: leadership consistency, resourcing, and data infrastructure, all of which are amenable to institutional-level intervention independent of further policy reform.

For IQAC practitioners, these findings suggest a practical reorientation: rather than treating each NAAC criterion as an independent documentation task, IQAC offices could organise their annual quality-improvement cycle explicitly around the five TQM strategic dimensions in Figure 2, using the criterion-level mapping in Table 2 to identify where existing institutional evidence is thin (most notably around data analysis) and where it is already comparatively strong (student focus, leadership). Table 4 translates this reasoning into a short set of stakeholder-specific recommendations.

Table 4. Stakeholder-specific recommendations arising from this review

Stakeholder	Recommended Action
IQAC coordinators	Organise annual quality-improvement planning explicitly around TQM strategic dimensions (leadership, continuous improvement, student focus, faculty involvement, data analysis) rather than criterion-by-criterion documentation alone
Institutional leadership	Treat IQAC as a standing strategic function reporting to senior management, not a peripheral compliance office, to address the leadership-commitment gap identified across the reviewed literature
NAAC / policy bodies	Continue strengthening the weighting given to data analysis and demonstrated outcomes as AI-enabled accreditation tools mature, to close the gap identified in Table 2
Researchers	Prioritise longitudinal and mixed-method designs capable of distinguishing genuine institutional quality improvement from improved documentation practice
Smaller / regional HEIs	Pool IQAC training and technological resources through university-cluster or state-level consortia to offset the capacity constraints identified in Section 8

10. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This review has synthesised the 2021–2026 literature on Total Quality Management and Internal Quality Assurance Cells in Indian higher education to argue that the two are best understood as an integrated system rather than parallel frameworks. Drawing on a recent empirical mapping of Malcolm Baldrige TQM vectors on to NAAC's seven assessment criteria, the review shows that Indian accreditation practice is already substantially, if implicitly, TQM-aligned, with student focus, leadership commitment, and continuous improvement most strongly represented, and data-driven decision-making comparatively under-weighted — a gap that emerging AI-enabled accreditation tools may help to close over the coming reform cycle.

Future research would benefit from three developments in particular: longitudinal designs capable of tracing institutional trajectories across successive NAAC and NIRF cycles rather than relying on cross-sectional snapshots; comparative studies spanning India's diverse institutional landscape, including smaller, regionally located, and newly established HEIs that remain under-represented in the current literature; and empirical evaluation of the AI-enabled accreditation tools now being introduced, to test whether they genuinely strengthen the data-analysis dimension of the TQM–IQAC linkage or simply digitise existing documentation practice. Addressing these gaps would allow the field to move from the largely conceptual mapping offered here toward a more rigorous, causally informed understanding of how quality management principles translate into measurable institutional outcomes across Indian higher education.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability

This is a literature-based review article; no new primary data were generated. All sources synthesised are cited in the reference list.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used an AI-based writing and literature-retrieval assistant (Claude, Anthropic) to support literature aggregation, drafting, and formatting. All sources cited were independently verified against their original publications, and the author reviewed, edited, and takes full responsibility for the content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this article.

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