



From Peer Review to Algorithmic Assurance: A Conceptual Framework for Institutional Data Readiness under India's Binary Accreditation and Maturity-Based Graded Levels System

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeeks-05-07-004>

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Article Info: - Received : 19 May 2026

Accepted : 25 June 2026

Published : 30 June 2026

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NAAC changed its methodology in February 2025 more than at any point since 2007. Out went the familiar CGPA letter grade, A++ down to C. In its place: a two-tier model built around a Binary Accreditation outcome, Accredited or Not Accredited, with institutions that clear the bar then placed on a five-level Maturity-Based Graded Levels (MBGL) scale. The new model leans hard on artificial intelligence for document verification, and it cross-checks whatever an institution claims against other government data systems it already feeds — the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), UDISE+, and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) chief among them, under what officials describe as a One Nation One Data Platform approach. None of this is cosmetic. Quality assurance no longer asks for a well-written Self Study Report assembled once every five years; it asks for a continuously maintained, cross-referenced, machine-verifiable evidence base, and that is a very different thing to build. Our argument in this paper is that Indian higher education institutions are underprepared for that difference, not for lack of commitment to quality, but for lack of a structured way to think about data readiness as something distinct from quality itself. We draw on the literature on institutional quality assurance, learning analytics adoption, and data-driven decision-making in higher education to propose a five-dimension Institutional Data Readiness (IDR) framework, spanning data infrastructure, evidence governance, cross-platform interoperability, human and digital capability, and continuous assurance, coordinated through the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC). The paper sets this framework against the specific mechanics of the 2025 reform, compares the old and new accreditation regimes side by side, and closes with what it means for institutional leadership, where a conceptual treatment like this one runs out of road, and what empirical work would need to come next.

Keywords: NAAC; Binary Accreditation; Maturity-Based Graded Levels; Data Readiness; IQAC; Learning Analytics; Algorithmic Assessment; Indian Higher Education.



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1. Introduction

Until quite recently, quality assurance in Indian higher education ran on a fairly predictable rhythm. Prepare a Self Study Report once every five years. Host a peer-review visit. Receive a letter grade somewhere between C and A++. Then wait five years before thinking hard about any of it again. It had faults, plenty of them, well documented in the years leading up to 2025 — but it was at least a known rhythm. Institutions knew the deliverable, the timeline, and the human beings they were writing for.

That rhythm is gone now, at least in the form institutions grew used to. NAAC announced a reform on 10 February 2025 that it frames, in its own words, as the most substantial change to its methodology since it adopted CGPA grading back in 2007. Following the recommendations of a committee chaired by Dr K. Radhakrishnan, the eight-tier letter grade gave way to a binary determination — Accredited or Not Accredited — reached through AI-supported document verification rather than a traditional peer-review visit. Clear that binary threshold and an institution may then land somewhere on a five-level Maturity-Based Graded Levels (MBGL) scale, from Level 1 (Basic) up to Level 5 (Global Excellence). Lower levels get assessed almost entirely through digital submission; higher levels keep a hybrid or on-site component.

What matters most for this paper is not the binary outcome itself but the verification mechanism sitting behind it. Under the One Nation One Data Platform approach, an institution's claims get cross-checked against other national data systems it already reports to — AISHE, UDISE+, NIRF — and some accounts of the reform put the overlap between NAAC, NBA and NIRF data requirements at roughly 68 percent. So a NAAC submission can no longer be a standalone writing exercise, polished in isolation from whatever else the institution has already told other regulators. Say one thing to

AQAR and something else to AISHE, and in principle, a machine will catch it.

Our central claim: this shift changes what institutional preparedness even means, far more than it changes the substance of quality assurance. Under the old peer-review regime, a good writer, a competent IQAC coordinator, and a few intense weeks of document assembly could carry a reasonably good institution through. None of that guarantees readiness for a regime demanding year-round, cross-platform, machine-verifiable evidence. Being a genuinely good institution and being a data-ready one are related, but they are not the same condition — and confusing the two is, we think, a real risk for the sector right now.

Why does this distinction matter in practice and not just on paper? Under the old regime, a strong institution with patchy record-keeping could, in effect, out-write its data problems. A skilled IQAC coordinator built a coherent narrative around the gaps; a sympathetic peer team, genuinely impressed by what it saw during the visit, had room to weigh impressions alongside the paper trail. Binary Accreditation closes off most of that room. Check a claimed faculty count against the institution's own AISHE return for the same period, and a mismatch is a mismatch — no amount of good writing changes that, and neither does genuinely strong teaching or research. This is not a minor procedural tweak. It moves a meaningful share of accreditation risk away from academic substance and onto data hygiene, which is exactly the terrain this paper's framework tries to cover.

Here is the shape of what follows. The next section works through three strands of literature that speak to this problem from different directions — established scholarship on Indian quality assurance and IQAC functioning, the actual mechanics of the 2025 reform, and the wider learning-analytics

literature, which was never built with accreditation in mind but turns out to be useful anyway. After that comes a straight comparison of the old and new accreditation regimes, followed by the paper's main contribution: the five-dimension IDR framework itself, coordinated through the IQAC. The closing sections turn to what this means for leadership and policy, where a purely conceptual paper like this one has to stop, and where the empirical work still needs to go.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Quality Assurance and the IQAC in Indian Higher Education

The Internal Quality Assurance Cell has held a central place in Indian quality-assurance scholarship ever since NAAC first recommended it as a permanent, institution-level mechanism for sustaining quality. One theme keeps recurring: IQACs are supposed to move institutions away from compliance-driven behaviour — reacting to an approaching assessment cycle — toward something closer to an ongoing quality-conscious disposition. How far any given IQAC actually gets there depends heavily on leadership support and resourcing, and that varies a lot. Descriptions of the well-functioning ones keep circling back to the same activities: internal benchmarks tied to national frameworks, periodic academic and administrative audits, systematic collection and analysis of stakeholder feedback, and, more and more, digital dashboards for tracking institutional performance instead of relying purely on end-of-cycle paperwork.

One data point here is worth dwelling on. During the 2024-25 academic year, NAAC's transition to the new framework meant HEIs were not, for a stretch, required to submit the AQAR that had anchored their year-to-year reporting rhythm. What happened next is telling. Institutions whose IQACs had already built a habit of continuous internal monitoring kept their quality-improvement work moving through the gap. Institutions that had organised everything around the AQAR deadline did not; the activity visibly slowed. It is an early signal, informal as it is, that the coming shift toward continuous, cross-platform evidence rewards IQACs that already function as ongoing

coordination hubs rather than periodic report-writing units.

How uneven is IQAC capacity across the Indian HEI landscape, really? Quite uneven — and the literature tends to note this without doing much about it. Guidelines call for the IQAC to be chaired by the institution's head and staffed by heads of key academic and administrative units, which gives it institution-wide reach on paper. In practice, a well-resourced university and a small affiliated college both tick that structural box while sitting worlds apart in staffing depth, technical skill, and the time actually available to the cell. One IQAC might have a full-time coordinator, a data analyst, dedicated KPI-tracking software. Another might be a single senior faculty member squeezing the role in around a full teaching load, with no support staff whatsoever. Any framework prescribing new IQAC responsibilities has to reckon with that gap rather than assume a baseline capacity that, in practice, simply is not there.

2.2. The 2025 NAAC Reform: Binary Accreditation and MBGL

The mechanics of the reform are documented well enough at this stage, though the AI-based assessment piece is, by NAAC's own admission, still piloted rather than mature. Under the Binary Accreditation Framework, a submission gets assessed through AI-supported verification of its Data Capture Formats — a standardised digital evidence structure that arrived alongside the reform — checked against a threshold on what NAAC calls an Institutional Grading Matrix. Out comes a plain Accredited or Not Accredited. Notably, there is no soft landing built in anywhere. The old system let an institution that narrowly missed A++ still land on A+ or A. The binary model gives nothing for falling just short.

Clear that threshold, and an institution can pursue the Maturity-Based Graded Levels track: five levels, Basic Compliance up to Global Excellence. Verification differs by level. Levels 1 and 2 stay fully digital. Level 3 mixes digital review with sample physical verification. Levels 4 and 5 go further still, with on-site validation and direct expert interaction. Institutions already holding a grade under the older Revised Accreditation Framework keep that grade valid

for its original five-year term — a transition runway, not an abrupt cutover.

What ties all of this together, and what this paper is really about, is the cross-platform validation layer. Checking institutional claims against AISHE, UDISE+ and NIRF data the institution has already filed elsewhere effectively merges what used to be separate reporting obligations into one internally consistent data estate. That fits the broader push under NEP 2020 toward digital governance and lighter compliance burden. It also means something less comfortable: data inconsistency, once a matter of internal housekeeping, now carries direct accreditation risk.

2.3. Learning Analytics and Data-Driven Decision-Making: A Borrowed Vocabulary

Accreditation research and learning-analytics research have grown up largely apart from each other, but the latter hands us a useful vocabulary for what NAAC's reform is actually demanding. Learning-analytics scholars separate descriptive analytics — dashboards summarising what already happened — from predictive analytics, which forecasts what is likely to happen, and prescriptive analytics, which tells you what to do about it. Systematic reviews of institutional dashboards keep finding the same thing: most stay descriptive, predictive shows up less often, and prescriptive is rarer still. A separate strand of the same literature, less concerned with individual learners and more with institutional management, treats data-driven decision-making as something HEIs are increasingly pushed toward given how much institutional data now exists and how much evidence-based governance is expected of them — while documenting, just as consistently, that the barriers to adoption are organisational and cultural at least as much as technical.

How does this connect to Indian accreditation? Fairly directly, as it turns out. NAAC's AI-supported verification is, functionally, a descriptive-to-predictive analytics exercise the regulator now runs on institutional data — checking whether an institution's claimed inputs and outputs actually hold together and cross-verify. If the regulator is running analytics on you, running comparable analytics on yourself, continuously and in advance, stops being optional. It becomes table stakes. That said, the learning-analytics literature does not pretend this is easy. It is candid that sustained institutional adoption runs into barriers that are technical, pedagogical, and organisational in roughly equal measure — a caution worth carrying into the framework below.

Put the three strands together and they back up the position taken here. Indian quality-assurance scholarship makes the IQAC the natural coordinating unit for any institution-wide quality effort. The 2025 reform shifts what that unit is evidentially responsible for, from periodic document assembly to continuous, cross-platform, machine-verifiable data management. And learning analytics supplies both the vocabulary and the warning label for what building that capability actually takes. None of the three, alone, gives us a framework built for exactly this intersection. That gap is where the next section starts.

3. Comparing the Pre-2025 and Post-2025 Accreditation Regimes

Before building the conceptual framework, it helps to lay out, side by side, exactly what changed between the regime institutions were designed around and the one NAAC introduced in February 2025. Table 1 does that across the dimensions that matter most for institutional preparedness.

Tabl-1: Comparative overview of the pre-2025 and post-2025 NAAC accreditation regimes.

Dimension	Pre-2025 Regime (RAF / CGPA)	Post-2025 Regime (Binary + MBGL)
Outcome format	Letter grade, A++ to C, on a continuous CGPA scale	Binary outcome (Accredited / Not Accredited); graded institutions additionally placed on a 5-level MBGL scale
Primary assessment method	Self Study Report plus a scheduled peer-team visit	AI-supported verification of standardised Data Capture Formats, with peer/on-site review reserved mainly for higher MBGL levels
Evidence timing	Concentrated in the months before the visit, anchored to a five-year cycle	Expected to be continuous and year-round, since claims are cross-checked against live data in other systems
Cross-verification	Largely self-contained; SSR content checked mainly by the visiting peer team	Claims cross-validated against AISHE, UDISE+ and NIRF data under a One Nation One Data Platform approach
Margin for error	A near-miss on one grade could still land on an adjacent lower grade	No partial credit; falling short of the binary threshold returns Not Accredited
Validity period	Grade valid for the RAF cycle then in force	Accreditation cycle described as five years, with re-accreditation to be initiated in the fourth year
IQAC's practical role	Coordinating SSR preparation and hosting the peer-team visit	Maintaining a continuously updated, cross-platform-consistent evidence repository

Every row of Table 1 points the same way. The newer regime trades a periodic, human-mediated, self-contained process for one that runs continuously, partly on autopilot, cross-referenced against data whose timing and format the institution does not fully control. That shift is where the framework below actually starts.

4. The Institutional Data Readiness (IDR) Framework

If continuous, cross-platform, machine-verifiable evidence is now the currency of accreditation, an institution's ability to produce that evidence reliably is a capability in its own right — separate from how good its teaching, research or governance actually is, and worth naming as such. We call that capability Institutional Data Readiness (IDR), and build it out across five dimensions, coordinated through the IQAC. Figure 1 lays the whole thing out schematically.

4.1. Data Infrastructure Readiness

Start with the most literal question. Does the institution have systems — a functioning ERP or MIS, digitised student and faculty records, a working LMS — able to produce the data points a Data Capture Format actually asks

for, without a last-minute scramble to reconstruct them? If faculty publication records, placement data, or the infrastructure inventory still live in scattered spreadsheets across different departments, the answer is no. That is true no matter how strong the underlying academic performance is.

4.2. Evidence Governance Readiness

Having the systems is one thing; having governed data is another. Who owns the accuracy of faculty qualification records? Who owns placement statistics? Who signs off on infrastructure claims? Is there any defined process for catching a discrepancy before external verification finds it, rather than after? Evidence governance readiness is, in the end, what stops the same fact being reported three different ways across AQAR, AISHE, and an internal placement brochure.

4.3. Cross-Platform Interoperability Readiness

Given that NAAC now cross-checks claims against AISHE, UDISE+ and NIRF, readiness depends on something quite specific: do the numbers already sitting in those other systems agree with what is about to go to NAAC? This is not the same as evidence governance — it is

about consistency across separate, externally facing obligations, not internal record-keeping alone. An institution can govern its own data beautifully and still fail here, if, say, last year's AISHE faculty count never got reconciled against a fresh round of hiring that shows up in the NAAC submission.

4.4. Human and Digital Capability Readiness

Systems and governance structures still need people who know how to run them. Can IQAC staff and departmental data coordinators actually work with structured data formats, basic dashboards, cross-referencing tools — or does the whole thing rest on one or two people whose departure would leave the institution unable to reconstruct its own evidence trail? The learning-analytics finding that adoption barriers are organisational and cultural as much as technical lands with particular force here. A data system nobody but the coordinator can operate is not, whatever else it is, a resilient one.

4.5. Continuous Assurance Readiness

This last dimension is a discipline more than a system. Does quality-related evidence get captured as it happens, all year round, or does someone reconstruct it retrospectively once a deadline appears on the horizon? The 2024-25 AQAR-suspension episode speaks to this

directly: IQACs already in the habit of ongoing internal monitoring kept that momentum going through the reporting gap, and IQACs organised purely around the AQAR deadline did not. Continuous assurance readiness is, really, the cultural precondition that keeps the other four dimensions alive rather than letting them collapse into a one-time compliance sprint.

4.6. The IQAC as Coordinating Hub

None of these five dimensions belongs neatly to one office. Data infrastructure sits with IT. Evidence governance splits across the registrar and academic offices. Interoperability crosses several external-facing reporting units. Capability-building usually falls to HR or training. Continuous assurance, left unassigned, ends up being nobody's job at all. The IQAC gets positioned here as the coordinating hub for a simple reason: it is already the one unit mandated to take an institution-wide view of quality, and its existing remit — benchmarking, audits, stakeholder feedback, best-practice documentation — already brushes up against every one of these five dimensions, even where current IQAC practice has not yet named data readiness as its own responsibility, separate from quality content.

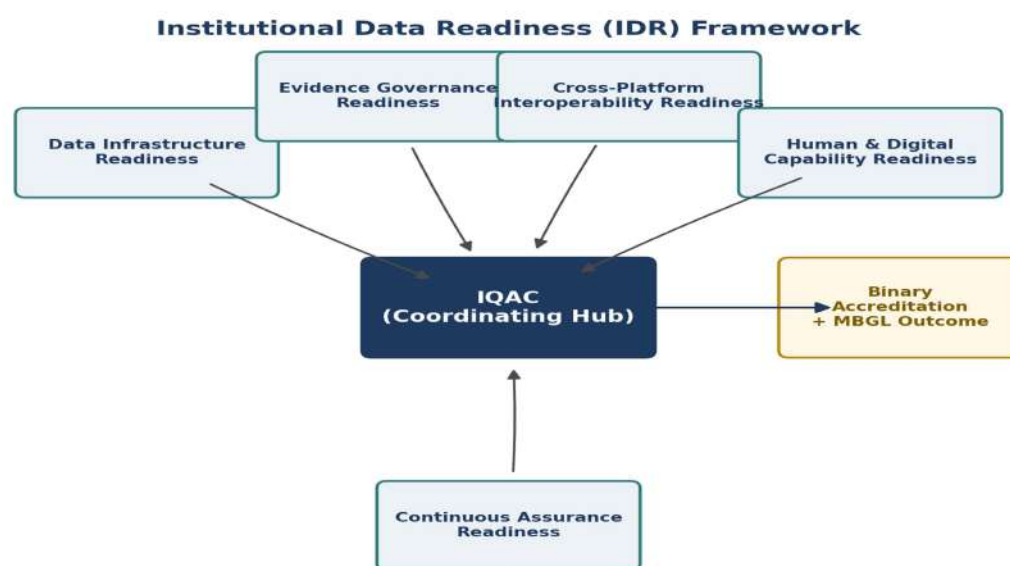


Figure-1: The Institutional Data Readiness (IDR) framework: five readiness dimensions coordinated through the IQAC, feeding into the Binary Accreditation and MBGL outcome.

Table 2 lays out illustrative indicators an institution could use to check its own position on each dimension. Treat these as a starting point for self-assessment, and as raw material for

whatever empirical instrument a future validation study ends up building — not as a finished, validated scale in themselves.

Table-2: Illustrative indicators for the five dimensions of the Institutional Data Readiness framework.

IDR Dimension	Illustrative Indicators
Data Infrastructure Readiness	Proportion of required Data Capture Format fields generated directly from an ERP/MIS versus manually compiled; existence of a single digitised student and faculty records system
Evidence Governance Readiness	Named data owner assigned for each major evidence category; documented reconciliation process for cross-checking figures before submission
Cross-Platform Interoperability Readiness	Frequency of reconciliation between AISHE, NIRF and NAAC submissions; time lag between an internal change (e.g., new faculty recruitment) and its reflection across all external returns
Human and Digital Capability Readiness	Number of staff beyond the IQAC coordinator able to operate core data and reporting systems; frequency of structured data-literacy training for departmental data coordinators
Continuous Assurance Readiness	Existence of a running, year-round evidence log rather than a pre-submission compilation exercise; continuity of quality-monitoring activity during periods when formal reporting requirements are paused

5. Discussion: Implications for Institutional Leadership and Policy

For institutional leadership, the most immediate takeaway is this: data readiness has to be named and owned as its own priority. It will not follow automatically from good academic and administrative performance, however tempting it is to assume otherwise. An institution can teach brilliantly, publish well, keep its students happy — and still land Not Accredited under the binary model if its evidence base is inconsistent, poorly governed, or does not cross-verify against AISHE and NIRF. That is a genuinely new risk. It did not exist in this form under the old peer-review regime, where a visiting team could, within reason, be won over by a well-argued written case even with minor gaps in the underlying data.

IQAC leadership needs a real shift in self-conception. Producing a strong document once every five years is no longer the job; maintaining a live, cross-referenced evidence infrastructure that the rest of the institution feeds into, continuously, is. That is a meaningfully different job description. Institutions that have long treated the IQAC as a part-time add-on to someone's existing academic post may need to ask, honestly, whether that staffing model can

support what continuous assurance readiness now demands.

For policy-makers, there is an equity concern worth naming plainly. Institutions with stronger IT infrastructure and more diversified administrative staffing will likely reach data readiness faster than smaller, resource-constrained ones — and not because the smaller institutions are academically weaker. If binary accreditation really offers no partial credit, an infrastructure gap risks turning straight into an accreditation gap, entirely apart from academic quality. That distributional consequence cuts directly against the reform's own stated aim of drawing in smaller and regional institutions, and it would need active countermeasures: shared data-infrastructure support, perhaps, or phased interoperability requirements for institutions with fewer resources.

There is also a question of sequencing, for institutions deciding right now where to put limited resources. Cross-platform interoperability readiness probably deserves the earliest attention, of the five, precisely because it cannot be fixed retroactively at submission time — a mismatch between an AISHE return filed a year ago and a NAAC submission being prepared today has no last-minute fix; only advance

reconciliation works. Data infrastructure and evidence governance are at least somewhat recoverable under time pressure, if uncomfortably so. Continuous assurance and human capability move slower still, more cultural than technical, least amenable to a pre-submission sprint, most dependent on habit built over time. Which is exactly why the framework leans on the IQAC's coordinating role, more than on any single dimension in isolation, as the thing institutions most need to get right first.

6. Limitations of the Conceptual Approach

This paper is conceptual, and it says so plainly. The IDR framework and its indicators have not been tested against data from institutions actually navigating Binary Accreditation and MBGL, partly because the reform itself is still young and its AI-based verification remains, by NAAC's own account, piloted rather than mature. Read Table 1 and the Section 4 framework, then, as a structured starting hypothesis, not a validated model. There is a related limitation worth admitting: parts of Sections 2 and 3 lean on institutional websites, consultancy commentary and news coverage of a fast-moving regulatory change, simply because peer-reviewed literature analysing the 2025 reform has not had time to accumulate yet. Where possible, this paper has stuck to NAAC's own stated framework details, and it has tried to flag, rather than paper over, areas — the AI system's actual accuracy chief among them — that remain genuinely unsettled.

A further limitation concerns the very variation this paper keeps pointing to. A five-dimension framework general enough to cover a research university, a small affiliated college, and a standalone technical institute all at once will need local adaptation before any one of them can actually use it for self-assessment. Adequate data infrastructure readiness for a college with a few hundred students looks nothing like what it means for a multi-campus university with several thousand. What this framework offers is a shared vocabulary and structure for thinking about the problem — not a one-size-fits-all checklist — and any instrument built from it would need separate calibration by institution type and size.

7. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

NAAC's move to Binary Accreditation and MBGL is not just a relabelling of grades. It changes what kind of institutional capability gets rewarded in the first place. This paper has argued that Indian HEIs need to treat data readiness as its own organisational capability, distinct from academic quality, and it has proposed a five-dimension Institutional Data Readiness framework — data infrastructure, evidence governance, cross-platform interoperability, human and digital capability, continuous assurance — coordinated through the IQAC, as a way of giving that capability a name and a shape.

What comes next, naturally, is an empirical study — one that tests this framework against institutions actually living through Binary Accreditation and MBGL. Which of the five dimensions actually predicts a successful binary outcome best? Do smaller, resource-constrained institutions really face the disproportionate readiness gap this paper speculates about? How are IQACs, in practice, restructuring staffing and workflow in response? And as NAAC's AI verification system moves out of pilot and into full deployment, there is a clear opening for future research into its actual accuracy and whatever systematic biases it might carry — a question this paper can only raise, not answer, until someone gets empirical access to institutional outcomes under the new system.

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Cite this article as: Shoubhanik Saha et al., (2026). From Peer Review to Algorithmic Assurance: A Conceptual Framework for Institutional Data Readiness under India's Binary Accreditation and Maturity-Based Graded Levels System. International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies. 5(6), pp. 1016–1024.
<https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-05-07-004>