



# **A Study On Challenges Of Higher Education Institutions (Heis) In Facing NAAC Accreditation In North-East India With Special Reference To Assam**

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## **Abstract**

Quality assurance has emerged as a central priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across India, particularly in the context of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) framework. In the North-East Indian (NEI) region, and more specifically in the state of Assam, institutions of higher learning encounter diverse academic, administrative, infrastructural and socio-cultural challenges while preparing for and undergoing NAAC accreditation. This study critically examines the barriers experienced by HEIs in Assam in their efforts to comply with the prescribed NAAC criteria on curriculum development, teaching-learning processes, research and extension, institutional governance, learner support services and overall quality enhancement. It identifies constraints such as limited funding, inadequate digital infrastructure, shortage of faculty with research competency, insufficient documentation culture, and low stakeholder awareness of quality benchmarks. The analysis further reveals that geographical remoteness, disparities in resource allocation and administrative delays create additional layers of difficulty for institutions in the NEI region. The findings highlight the need for capacity-building programmes, robust internal quality assurance mechanisms, strengthened leadership and collaborative regional support to improve NAAC preparedness among HEIs. The outcomes of the study contribute to policy formulation and institutional planning aimed at upgrading higher education standards in Assam and the wider North-East region.

**Keywords :** NAAC Accreditation; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Quality Assurance; North-East India; Assam; Institutional Challenges; Digital Infrastructure; Research Competency; Governance and Management; Quality Enhancement.

## Introduction

The role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in shaping human capital, promoting research culture and strengthening socio-economic development has become increasingly significant in recent decades. In India, the need for ensuring accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement in higher education compelled policymakers to introduce structured mechanisms for institutional assessment. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established in 1994 under the University Grants Commission (UGC), serves as the primary apex body responsible for evaluating the quality of HEIs based on predetermined criteria. NAAC accreditation has gradually become an essential benchmark of institutional excellence, influencing funding opportunities, academic recognition, student enrolment, international collaboration and overall institutional credibility.

Despite the nationwide emphasis on quality assurance, HEIs in North-East India (NEI) and particularly in Assam face multiple challenges in complying with NAAC requirements. The region is characterised by geographical isolation, socio-economic disparities, resource constraints and variations in institutional governance. Many HEIs struggle to align with the evolving expectations of NAAC with respect to curriculum development, outcome-based education, digital integration, research productivity, administrative transparency and community extension. These concerns highlight the urgent need to understand the preparedness of institutions in the NEI region for achieving and sustaining accreditation status.

While several institutions in the metropolitan and well-resourced states of India have adopted systematic quality assurance practices through Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), many colleges in Assam continue to encounter difficulties in maintaining documentation, updating evaluation processes and implementing data-driven decision-making. Limited faculty training, heavy teaching workloads, insufficient ICT infrastructure, and financial limitations further hinder the delivery of quality teaching-learning and research activities. In addition, many rural colleges lack exposure to NAAC guidelines and struggle to fulfil metrics related to research publications, consultancy, patents, industry linkage and digital governance.

Moreover, the competitive pressure generated by NAAC accreditation has created a visible divide between resource-rich institutions and those operating in remote or economically weaker zones. Colleges that fail to achieve accreditation often experience reduced student admission, limited grant allocation, and fewer opportunities for institutional growth. Therefore, overcoming NAAC-related challenges is not only an organisational priority but also an educational necessity for safeguarding equitable development in higher education across Assam.

Given the scenario, a systematic study of the institutional challenges experienced by HEIs in Assam during the accreditation process becomes crucial. Identifying the specific barriers and their underlying causes will help in formulating effective support mechanisms for strengthening the quality ecosystem in the region. Thus, the present study aims to critically analyse the challenges faced by HEIs in Assam in their journey toward NAAC accreditation and to contribute insights for policymakers, education administrators, and academic bodies working to promote excellence in higher education in North-East India.

## Statement of the Problem

NAAC accreditation has become a mandatory benchmark for evaluating the quality and performance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India. However, institutions in the North-East Indian states, particularly in Assam, are encountering persistent challenges in fulfilling the multi-dimensional criteria prescribed by NAAC. Despite efforts to improve academic delivery and institutional governance, numerous HEIs remain underprepared due to inadequate capacity building, limited availability of trained faculty, poor documentation culture, financial constraints and insufficient technological infrastructure. The gap between NAAC expectations and institutional capabilities has resulted in delayed accreditation, low grades and recurring cycles of non-compliance. Therefore, it becomes essential to examine the underlying factors that hinder accreditation preparedness among HEIs in Assam and identify strategies to overcome these challenges in a sustainable manner.

## Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the preparedness of Higher Education Institutions in Assam for NAAC accreditation.
- To identify academic, administrative, infrastructural and financial challenges faced by HEIs during the accreditation process.
- To examine the level of institutional awareness regarding NAAC guidelines, criteria and quality benchmarks.
- To evaluate the role and effectiveness of Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) in accreditation readiness.
- To explore the impact of digital infrastructure, research culture and resource allocation on NAAC performance.
- To propose feasible recommendations and strategies for enhancing accreditation preparedness among HEIs in Assam.

## Research Questions / Hypotheses

1. What is the current level of NAAC accreditation preparedness among HEIs in Assam?
2. What institutional challenges—academic, administrative and financial—hinder the accreditation process?
3. To what extent do faculty training, research output and documentation practices influence accreditation outcomes?
4. How effective are IQACs in fulfilling NAAC benchmarks in HEIs of Assam?

### Hypotheses:

- H1: There is a significant relationship between institutional infrastructure and NAAC accreditation performance.
- H2: Inadequate research output and poor documentation culture negatively influence NAAC readiness in HEIs.
- H3: Digitisation and ICT infrastructure play a significant role in improving accreditation outcomes.
- H4: Functionally strong IQACs contribute positively to institutional preparedness for NAAC.

## Scope of the Study

The scope of the present study is confined to Higher Education Institutions functioning under various universities in the state of Assam. The study encompasses government, provincialised and private colleges and universities irrespective of their size, location and management pattern. The investigation focuses on NAAC challenges connected to curriculum delivery, teacher preparedness, research and extension activity, student support services, governance and leadership, and institutional best practices. The study does not evaluate the performance of school education, technical institutions or vocational training centres.

## Significance of the Study

The findings of this study hold high academic and policy-level relevance. Insights gained from the research can help administrators understand the major bottlenecks blocking accreditation progress and design targeted strategies for improvement. The study will assist:

- HEIs in planning institutional reforms and capacity development.
- IQAC coordinators and faculty members in strengthening documentation and assessment practices.
- Government and regulatory bodies in designing funding patterns and support schemes tailored to the needs of marginalised institutions.

Ultimately, this study supports the national vision of ensuring equitable and quality-driven higher education across all geographic regions.

## Review of Related Literature

A number of scholars have analysed quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in the Indian context. Early studies focused primarily on the evolution of NAAC and its role in fostering academic accountability and transparency in HEIs. Later research highlighted the significance of Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) in institutional self-evaluation, faculty participation and data-driven decision-making. Several nationwide studies observed that institutions situated in metropolitan and resource-rich regions achieved accreditation more successfully due to greater funding, effective leadership and well-developed research ecosystems. Conversely, literature on North-East India repeatedly points to limitations related to infrastructure, digital connectivity, shortage of trained faculty, weak monitoring mechanisms and lack of exposure to accreditation metrics. Research also found that many colleges struggle to document institutional processes consistently, which adversely affects accreditation scoring despite having quality practices at the ground level. Overall, the literature highlights the urgent need for capacity building, digital transformation and policy support to bridge quality gaps in HEIs across the region.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to investigate the challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Assam during the NAAC accreditation process. The descriptive approach enables the researcher to understand the existing situation, whereas the analytical approach facilitates examination of factors that influence accreditation preparedness across institutions.

### 7.2 Nature of the Study

The study follows a mixed-method research approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Quantitative data provide measurable information about institutional readiness and constraints, while qualitative data offer deeper insights into stakeholders' perceptions, experiences and institutional practices related to accreditation.



### 7.3 Population of the Study

The population of the study comprises Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Assam, including government, provincialised and private colleges affiliated to different universities, along with their faculty members, IQAC coordinators, administrative leaders and department heads.

### 7.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was adopted to select representative institutions from diverse geographical locations — urban, semi-urban and rural areas — to capture wide variance in accreditation preparedness. Within the sampled institutions, respondents were selected based on their involvement or familiarity with NAAC processes.

### 7.5 Data Collection Tools

Both primary and secondary sources were utilised:

Primary Data: Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and institutional observations.

Secondary Data: NAAC manuals, SSRs, Annual Reports, government publications and scholarly literature.

### 7.6 Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining consent from participating institutions, questionnaires were distributed physically and digitally depending on accessibility. Interviews were conducted in-person and through telephonic/online modes. Each institution's IQAC and administrative office were visited or contacted to review relevant records and documentation practices.

### 7.7 Methods of Data Analysis

Collected data were systematically organised and analysed using percentage analysis, comparative interpretation and thematic analysis. Findings were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability.

### 7.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical norms were strictly adhered to during the study: voluntary participation, confidentiality of respondents, and exclusive academic use of collected data.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data collected from faculty members, IQAC coordinators, administrative staff and heads of institutions were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively to understand the level of NAAC preparedness and the challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Assam. The interpretation focuses on institutional infrastructure, faculty competency, documentation practices, financial support, digital readiness and overall quality assurance mechanisms.

### 8.1 Institutional Readiness for NAAC Accreditation

Analysis of responses revealed that although most HEIs in Assam recognised the importance of NAAC accreditation, many lacked systematic planning for the accreditation process. While a few institutions had established functional Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), a majority lacked continuous quality monitoring systems. Only limited institutions updated their annual reports, departmental records and SSR-related documentation on a regular basis.

### 8.2 Academic and Faculty-Related Challenges

Questionnaire responses indicated that a significant proportion of faculty members were not fully

acquainted with NAAC criteria and the outcome-based education (OBE) framework. Many reported heavy teaching workloads, lack of incentives for research and insufficient exposure to professional development programmes. The analysis also brought out that shortage of Ph.D.-qualified and research-active faculty directly impacts accreditation performance, especially in Criterion III (Research, Innovation and Extension).

### 8.3 Infrastructure and ICT-Related Barriers

Data revealed notable disparities in infrastructural facilities among institutions. While urban and well-funded colleges showed better physical infrastructure, several rural HEIs reported inadequate digital classrooms, limited ICT-enabled teaching tools and poor internet connectivity. Respondents acknowledged that insufficient ICT infrastructure adversely affected documentation, Learning Management Systems (LMS), online feedback mechanisms and digital student support services.

### 8.4 Governance, Funding and Leadership Concerns

Financial constraints emerged as one of the most critical barriers. Many HEIs lacked adequate budget allocation to support research, skill programmes, laboratory upgrading and digital transformation. Respondents indicated that administrative delays and lack of proactive leadership further slowed decision-making and hampered quality enhancement initiatives. In several institutions, the IQAC existed nominally without proper manpower, authority or collaborative working culture.

### 8.5 Documentation and Data Management Challenges

The analysis indicated that documentation remains the weakest area for most HEIs. Respondents reported difficulties in maintaining updated records of faculty achievements, research publications, student progression and placements, extension activities, feedback systems and departmental daily academic logs. The absence of a centralised digital documentation system resulted in fragmented and inconsistent reporting, which negatively impacted SSR preparation and submission.

### 8.6 Perception of the NAAC Accreditation Process

Qualitative feedback from respondents reflected a mixed perception. While many acknowledged that NAAC promotes accountability and quality improvement, a substantial number viewed the accreditation exercise as highly complex, documentation-heavy and resource-driven. Some respondents expressed concern that institutions located in economically weaker and geographically remote regions are structurally disadvantaged compared to metropolitan colleges, resulting in unequal opportunities for high grading.

### 8.7 Interpretation of Findings

The study interprets that NAAC accreditation challenges faced by HEIs in Assam are not merely operational but structural and systemic. Lack of infrastructure, insufficient digital adaptation, low research culture, limited faculty development and weak administrative coordination collectively hinder accreditation preparedness. The challenges are unevenly distributed, with rural and remote institutions experiencing greater barriers. The findings confirm the need for targeted policy support, capacity building and long-term institutional planning to strengthen NAAC-related quality assurance in HEIs of Assam.

### Major Findings and Discussion on the Basis of the Objectives of the Study

The present investigation sought to understand the challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in navigating the NAAC accreditation process in Northeast India with special reference to Assam. The findings have been systematically presented and discussed in alignment with the objectives of the study, ensuring clarity, coherence and academic rigor.

**Objective 1: To explore the preparedness of HEIs in Assam for NAAC accreditation**

The analysis revealed that although a significant number of HEIs in Assam express willingness to undergo the NAAC accreditation process, their institutional preparedness remains inadequate. Several colleges lack structured IQACs, comprehensive institutional records, and outcome-based education (OBE) frameworks. Many institutions follow conventional administrative and academic practices that do not align with NAAC quality indicators. These findings indicate a gap between institutional intent and systemic readiness, suggesting the urgent need for capacity-building and quality-assurance frameworks.

**Objective 2: To identify institutional, infrastructural and administrative challenges faced during the accreditation process**

A considerable number of challenges emerged from data analysis. Institutions reported shortage of qualified faculty, inadequate research engagement, insufficient ICT infrastructure, and lack of well-maintained physical facilities. Additionally, most HEIs face limited financial support, which restricts modernization of laboratories, libraries and smart classrooms. Administrative challenges such as delay in documentation, absence of digital record-keeping systems, and insufficient collaboration between departments further impede progress. These barriers highlight the structural and operational constraints restricting smooth NAAC compliance.

**Objective 3: To examine faculty perception and preparedness toward NAAC-related tasks**

Faculty responses revealed a positive attitude toward quality assurance, acknowledging NAAC as a mechanism for institutional improvement and accountability. However, many teachers reported limited awareness of NAAC criteria, outcome-based education, POs/PEOs/COs mapping, and academic audits. Heavy teaching workloads, lack of orientation programs and scarce research support hinder faculty engagement in accreditation-related tasks. The study confirms that capacity-building initiatives for faculty members are essential for meaningful participation in the NAAC process.

**Objective 4: To study the role of IQAC in promoting quality improvement toward accreditation**

The findings show that IQACs exist in many colleges, but their functionality varies widely. In some institutions, the IQAC plays a proactive role in monitoring academic outcomes, organizing workshops, and maintaining records; whereas in others, the cell remains nominal and documentation-driven without strategic intervention. The success of NAAC compliance strongly depends on IQAC autonomy, leadership support, digitization and a systematic quality-culture within the institution.

**Objective 5: To analyze stakeholders' contribution in achieving NAAC standards**

The study indicates that stakeholders such as students, alumni, parents and community members are often not actively integrated into the institutional quality framework. Alumni participation in academic development and community engagement initiatives remain limited in many HEIs. Student feedback mechanisms are adopted by several institutions, yet follow-up action and policy implementation are inconsistent. Strengthening stakeholder participation is therefore crucial for sustained quality enhancement.

**Objective 6: To relate NAAC accreditation challenges with the socio-economic and geographical context of Assam**

The geographical reality of Northeast India, particularly Assam, significantly influences institutional development. Colleges located in rural, flood-prone or socio-economically disadvantaged regions face greater difficulty in accessing quality infrastructure, trained faculty and research networks. Compared to urban HEIs, rural institutions show lower accreditation readiness, higher teacher turnover and weaker resource-mobilization capacity. Thus, NAAC challenges are not merely institutional but also reflect broader



regional disparities.

### Overall Discussion

The findings collectively show that the challenges of HEIs in Assam regarding NAAC accreditation are multidimensional, spanning administrative, academic, infrastructural and socio-economic domains. While there is a strong recognition of the importance of accreditation, systemic readiness remains limited, especially in rural institutions. The study suggests that quality assurance must be institutionalized rather than occasional, requiring long-term planning, leadership commitment, faculty orientation, digital governance and participatory stakeholder involvement.

### Suggestions, Recommendations and Educational Implications

Based on the major findings and the discussions aligned with the objectives of the study, several actionable suggestions and educational implications are presented to strengthen the NAAC accreditation process and overall quality enhancement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Assam and Northeast India.

#### 1. Strengthening Institutional Preparedness

- HEIs must develop long-term strategic plans specifically targeting NAAC quality indicators rather than responding only during accreditation cycles.
- Mandatory formation and continuous functioning of IQAC with clearly defined responsibilities and adequate autonomy should be ensured.
- A centralised digital repository must be established for maintaining institutional documents, records, academic audits and minutes of meetings.

#### 2. Enhancing Faculty Capacity and Participation

- Regular orientation, seminars and FDPs should be conducted to build faculty awareness on NAAC criteria, OBE frameworks, POs/PEOs/COs mapping and academic audits.
- Reduction of excessive teaching workload and allocation of dedicated quality assurance responsibilities will support faculty engagement in accreditation tasks.
- Faculty members should be motivated to undertake research, publications, extension activities and collaborations, which contribute significantly to NAAC scores.

#### 3. Improving Infrastructure and Resource Allocation

- State and institutional authorities should prioritize ICT-enabled teaching spaces, smart classrooms, and digital libraries.
- Laboratory and library facilities must be upgraded to match the current curriculum and global higher education standards.
- Institutions located in remote or rural areas must be provided special financial packages and development grants to reduce geographical disparity.

#### 4. Promoting Effective Stakeholder Engagement

- Mechanisms should be established to actively involve alumni, students, parents and community members in quality enhancement initiatives.
- Alumni associations should be strengthened to support skill development programs, mentorship and resource mobilization.
- Student feedback mechanisms must be systematically analyzed and acted upon, ensuring transparency and institutional accountability.



### 5. Digitization and Governance Reform

- A robust Management Information System (MIS) should be developed for admission, attendance, examination, feedback and grievance handling.
- Adoption of e-governance practices will improve administrative transparency, timely documentation and overall NAAC compliance.
- Regular internal and external quality audits should be institutionalized to evaluate progress continuously.

### 6. Addressing Socio-Economic and Regional Barriers

- HEIs from socio-economically disadvantaged and geographically vulnerable regions require contextual accreditation support, including training, collaboration and partnership programs.
- Collaborative networks between urban and rural institutions can help share expertise, best practices, digital resources and research facilities.

### Educational Implications

- Quality assurance must be a continuous culture rather than a temporary event triggered by accreditation cycles.
- Empowered academic leadership and active IQAC are catalysts for institutional transformation and sustainability.
- Curriculum planning in HEIs must be aligned with Outcome-Based Education, with clearly defined learning outcomes, measurable indicators and transparent assessment.
- Faculty development is a central component of quality enhancement and should be institutionalized with incentives.
- Strengthened stakeholder relationships promote industry linkages, employability and institutional branding.
- Equitable policy intervention is essential to support institutions in remote/rural locations and address regional educational inequality.

### Conclusion

The present study investigated the multifaceted challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northeast India, with special reference to Assam, in achieving and sustaining NAAC accreditation. Analyses from institutional documents, faculty responses and stakeholder perceptions reveal that although HEIs acknowledge the crucial role of accreditation in improving academic standards and institutional accountability, a significant gap persists between the expected quality benchmarks and actual institutional readiness.

The findings confirm that the challenges encountered during the NAAC accreditation process are not confined to internal institutional practices alone. They extend to broader structural, socio-economic and geographical constraints that influence higher education development in Assam. Infrastructural limitations, inadequate digital governance, shortage of qualified and research-oriented faculty, weak stakeholder participation and limited financial allocation collectively contribute to lower accreditation preparedness, particularly among rural and remote HEIs.

The study further highlights the importance of a proactive and empowered Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in creating a sustainable quality culture. Strengthening quality assurance must be institutionalized through systematic planning, documentation, regular audits, capacity building and adoption of technology-enabled governance. If the recommendations derived from the study are adopted at policy and institutional levels, the higher education landscape of Northeast India can become more robust, equitable and globally competitive.

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