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## NIRF Rankings, Accreditation Pressures and their Impact on University Work Environments: A Review of Indian Higher Education Studies

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews how the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and accreditation systems influence the work environment within Indian universities. Drawing from secondary literature, it synthesizes insights on the effects of rankings and accreditation on faculty responsibilities, the role of administrative staff, workplace culture, and employee morale. While these frameworks help improve accountability, funding access, and infrastructure, they also bring new challenges such as compliance burdens, heightened work pressure, and a focus on metrics over holistic development. The review highlights key paradoxes—for instance, how these systems encourage excellence but also risk burnout—and identifies gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of focus on non-teaching staff, psychological stress, and long-term impacts. The paper concludes that although rankings and accreditation are firmly embedded in India's higher education system, reforms are needed to broaden the criteria for evaluation so that quality improvement does not come at the cost of workplace well-being.

**Index Terms:** NIRF, accreditation, work environment, Indian universities, faculty performance, higher education policy

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Indian higher education has expanded rapidly, now encompassing more than 1,000 universities and 40,000 colleges (Tilak, 2016). Along with growth has come a strong push for accountability, competitiveness, and quality assurance. Global rankings such as Times Higher Education (THE), QS, and ARWU brought worldwide attention to performance evaluation, and in response, India launched the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2015. Managed by the Ministry of Education, NIRF assesses institutions across multiple parameters including teaching and learning resources, research, graduation outcomes, inclusivity, and perception (Sheeja, Mathew, & Cherukodan, 2018).

Alongside NIRF, accreditation bodies such as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) play a crucial role. Unlike rankings, which are comparative, accreditation certifies whether institutions meet quality benchmarks and encourages continuous improvement. Both, however, create strong pressure for institutions to align strategies with external criteria, maintain extensive documentation, and improve measurable performance indicators (Ali, 2022).

While rankings and accreditation help institutions secure visibility, attract funds, and strengthen global reputation, they also reshape internal work cultures. Faculty are expected to publish more, obtain grants, and deliver outputs tied to rankings, while administrative staff carry much of the compliance and reporting load. This paper reviews existing studies to understand how NIRF and accreditation shape workplace dynamics in Indian universities. It explores three central questions:

1. How do NIRF rankings and accreditation influence organizational culture and workplace practices?
2. What are their effects on faculty and non-teaching staff in terms of performance, well-being, and morale?
3. Where are the gaps in current research?

## II. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a review of secondary literature rather than primary data. Sources were drawn from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, UGC-CARE listed journals, Shodhganga theses, and official reports from NAAC, NBA, and NIRF. Search terms included *NIRF rankings India*, *accreditation pressures universities*, and *work environment higher education India*.

Inclusion criteria:

- Publications between 2016 and 2025
- Focus on Indian higher education
- Examination of rankings, accreditation, or workplace issues

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies limited to student outcomes
- Articles without relevance to the Indian context

The review spans conceptual and empirical studies, including Kumar, Tandon, and Taneja (2020), Sheeja et al. (2018), Tilak (2016), and Ali (2022).

## III. RANKINGS AND INSTITUTIONAL BEHAVIOUR

The rise of NIRF has pushed universities to recalibrate their priorities, with research output now strongly tied to rankings (Sheeja et al., 2018). Institutions in South India often perform better due to stronger research productivity, reinforcing a “publish or perish” culture. In many cases, research has overshadowed teaching, raising concerns about pedagogy and student engagement.

Interestingly, rankings do not always influence student choices. Kumar et al. (2020) found that factors such as location, fees, and institutional reputation mattered more than NIRF ranks when students selected management schools. This mismatch questions whether the current ranking focus truly aligns with stakeholder needs.

Ali (2022) also points out methodological issues in NIRF, which relies heavily on self-reported data. This creates opportunities for inflated claims, while teaching quality and alumni perspectives often remain under-evaluated. As a result, institutions may chase scores rather than engage in genuine quality improvement.

## IV. ACCREDITATION PRESSURES AND WORK ENVIRONMENT

Accreditation systems like NAAC and NBA encourage universities to strengthen infrastructure, faculty profiles, and governance. Yet, they also bring heavy documentation requirements. Faculty often spend time compiling reports instead of teaching or researching, and administrative staff face intense workloads during accreditation cycles.

Tilak (2016) observed that India’s pursuit of global “world-class” models has led to conformity at the cost of innovation. Accreditation, therefore, becomes both an enabler and a constraint: it upgrades systems but fosters compliance-driven work environments.

Accreditation outcomes also shape funding opportunities, with A-grade universities qualifying for grants and autonomy. While this can uplift institutions, the preparatory processes—such as preparing annual quality assurance reports—demand enormous administrative effort. Non-teaching staff, particularly in Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), often work overtime without additional recognition or compensation. This hidden workload directly affects morale.

At the academic level, curriculum reforms linked to accreditation sometimes prioritize score-improvement over meaningful innovation. Faculty frequently report that classroom realities and student learning are sidelined in favor of documentation, contributing to frustration.

## V. EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE AND WORK CULTURE

Rankings and accreditation have fostered a performance-driven culture. On one hand, institutions with strong accreditation attract resources and talent, improving facilities and professional opportunities. On the other, the relentless focus on metrics has intensified workloads, creating stress and even encouraging unethical practices like publishing in predatory journals (Sheeja et al., 2018).

Administrative staff, though vital in preparing data for rankings and accreditation, often remain invisible in reward systems. Their undervaluation contributes to low morale.

Another emerging feature is the rise of “academic capitalism,” where faculty are judged by revenue-generating activities such as patents and consultancies. While this supports NIRF’s “research and professional practice” parameter, it can divert attention from teaching and socially relevant research. Work-life balance is another casualty, with faculty working extended hours to meet deadlines. Women, who often manage dual responsibilities, face particular stress, though research on gendered impacts remains sparse.

## VI. TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST ISSUES

Critics argue that reliance on self-reported data weakens NIRF’s credibility. Some institutions inflate placement figures or research output, leading to sudden ranking jumps or drops that raise doubts about reliability (Ali, 2022). Faculty and staff tied to these fluctuating scores experience anxiety and cynicism.

Teaching quality, central to higher education, remains poorly assessed in rankings. Alumni and employer feedback could fill this gap but is inconsistently applied. This focus on research over teaching risks sidelining the primary mission of universities.

Without independent audits, rankings risk becoming reporting exercises rather than authentic quality measures, eroding trust among employees who work diligently to provide accurate data.

## VII. POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF ACCREDITATION

Despite challenges, accreditation has brought several benefits. Universities with strong grades often gain better infrastructure, stronger governance, and enhanced faculty development programs. These improvements help create professional and accountable institutional cultures. Accreditation has also encouraged universities to establish internal quality assurance systems, which, though resource-intensive, can drive long-term improvement.

## VIII. GLOBAL LESSONS FOR INDIA

Looking abroad, Tilak (2016) highlights how countries like China and Singapore invested heavily in select institutions to climb rankings. India, in contrast, has spread resources across a wide base while also creating “Institutes of Eminence.” This approach risks widening the gap between elite and resource-strapped institutions.

For India, the key lesson is balance. Rather than imitating global models wholesale, rankings should reflect local priorities such as inclusivity, teaching quality, and social equity.

## IX. POLICY DEBATES

Supporters argue that rankings and accreditation have infused accountability into Indian higher education, giving universities incentives to strengthen research and record-keeping. Critics, however, warn against “league table obsession,” where institutions prioritize scores over holistic education (Tilak, 2016).

Policies like the Institutes of Eminence scheme and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 add further complexity. While NEP emphasizes holistic learning, its integration with NIRF remains unclear. Regional and rural universities, already disadvantaged, risk further marginalization without targeted support.

A more balanced framework would recognize institutional diversity, combining accountability with flexibility.

## X. DISCUSSION

The review shows that rankings and accreditation bring both opportunities and challenges. They enhance accountability and funding but also create overwork, stress, and compliance-driven cultures. Faculty and staff often feel caught between the pursuit of excellence and the burden of metrics.

Concepts such as institutional isomorphism explain how universities mimic each other's strategies, leading to homogeneity. Meanwhile, the resource-based view highlights how accreditation success can unlock resources that genuinely improve work environments. The challenge is to ensure accountability mechanisms serve as growth drivers rather than stress amplifiers.

## XI. RESEARCH GAPS

Several gaps remain in the literature:

1. Limited research on non-teaching staff perspectives.
2. Lack of longitudinal studies on evolving pressures.
3. Minimal focus on stress, burnout, and mental health.
4. Neglect of regional and lower-ranked institutions.
5. Insufficient attention to teaching quality.
6. Few public-private comparisons.
7. Limited application of theoretical frameworks.

## XII. CONCLUSION

NIRF rankings and accreditation deeply shape Indian university workplaces. While they improve accountability and open up resources, they also create compliance burdens and morale issues. Policymakers need to broaden evaluation frameworks to include teaching quality, well-being, and institutional culture. Universities, in turn, should balance ranking pursuits with employee welfare by recognizing administrative contributions and supporting mental health.

Future research must expand beyond faculty to include non-teaching staff and psychological dimensions, ideally through longitudinal and comparative studies. Ultimately, rankings and accreditation are permanent fixtures—but their value depends on whether they drive real quality improvements without undermining the people who sustain higher education.

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