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GAMING METRICS: THE BUSINESS OF NAAC ACCREDITATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was instituted in 1994 to ensure quality assurance and accountability in India's higher education sector. However, in recent years, allegations of corruption, grade manipulation, and bribery have marred its credibility. This paper explores the growing perception that NAAC accreditation has evolved into a commercial enterprise—a "gaming metric" where universities purchase grades to enhance prestige, attract funds, and increase student enrolment. Drawing upon recent academic literature and verified cases, the paper investigates how accreditation processes are compromised through conflicts of interest, lack of transparency, and systemic inefficiency. The report concludes by recommending governance reforms and independent quality assurance mechanisms to restore integrity and fairness to India's academic accreditation ecosystem.

KEYWORDS: *NAAC, accreditation, corruption, higher education, quality assurance, gaming metrics, India, university rankings, accountability, governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is globally recognized as a cornerstone of quality assurance in higher education. In India, the **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)**, under the University Grants Commission (UGC), has long been responsible for evaluating higher education institutions (HEIs) on parameters such as curriculum design, research output, teaching-learning processes, and institutional governance. Despite these intentions, NAAC's

operations have increasingly come under scrutiny for ethical lapses, alleged bribery, and opaque evaluation practices (Mehrotra & Upadhyay, 2025).

Recent investigations and media coverage highlight how accreditation grades—once a symbol of institutional merit—are now often obtained through informal payments or personal connections. The **removal of 900 assessors by NAAC in 2025** on grounds of misconduct underscores how widespread the problem has become. As **Sabharwal and Freeman (2025)** note, accreditation in India has transformed from an academic exercise into an "instrumental business model," incentivizing institutional compliance with bureaucratic metrics rather than educational excellence.

The broader implication is the **erosion of academic integrity** and the marginalization of century-old public universities in favor of newly established private institutions that can afford to "game" the system. This report positions NAAC accreditation as an example of a **gaming metric**—a process that once sought accountability but now rewards manipulation.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this report are:

1. To analyze the structural and ethical issues underlying corruption in NAAC's accreditation process.
2. To document verified cases and institutional evidence of malpractice in accreditation.
3. To explore the economic and reputational incentives driving institutions to buy NAAC grades.
4. To assess the impact of these practices on legacy government universities and emerging private universities.
5. To propose policy-level recommendations for reform and transparency.

3. The Business of Accreditation: A Conceptual Overview

Accreditation, ideally, is meant to ensure accountability. However, when evaluation metrics become **quantifiable and reward-based**, they invite manipulation. **Kumar, Gawande, and Sane (2025)** argue that accreditation mechanisms in India have "gradually assumed a market orientation," where institutions treat NAAC grades as commodities for market positioning.

3.1 Economic Incentives Behind Corruption

Private universities, often established in the last decade, depend heavily on branding and reputation for student recruitment and investor confidence. An **'A+' or 'A++' grade** directly affects tuition pricing, foreign collaborations, and eligibility for government grants. As **Varghese (2024)** notes, this has led to a parallel economy where grades are negotiated through **"consultancy intermediaries"** or retired assessors who offer guidance—sometimes extending to outright bribery.

3.2 Systemic Weaknesses

The assessment system relies heavily on peer reviewers—academics appointed as **NAAC assessors**. With limited oversight, many assessors have been accused of accepting **"hospitality" payments** or institutional favors. The recent **removal of 900 assessors** in 2025 was a corrective response to years of malpractice but also a tacit acknowledgment of systemic rot (Mehrotra & Upadhyay, 2025).

4. Case Studies and Evidence

Case 1: Removal of NAAC Assessors (2025)

In 2025, the **NAAC revoked the empanelment of nearly 900 assessors** after internal audits revealed conflicts of interest and irregularities in report submissions. Many assessors were found to have visited the same institutions repeatedly or colluded with universities for favorable reports (Kumar et al., 2025; Mehrotra & Upadhyay, 2025).

Case 2: Differential Treatment of Private vs Public Institutions

According to **Nandi & Chattopadhyay (2016)**, newly established private universities in states like Gujarat, Haryana, and Rajasthan secured high NAAC grades within five years of establishment, while older public universities—struggling with funding and bureaucratic constraints—received lower scores. This suggests **systemic bias** rooted not in quality but in financial leverage.

Case 3: Institutional Gaming and Consultancy Firms

Gautam (2024) reports the rise of private "accreditation consultancy" agencies that assist institutions in fabricating data and manipulating student feedback to boost NAAC scores. These firms often employ former assessors as "advisors," creating a **revolving door** phenomenon between regulators and clients.

Case 4: Allegations of Grade Inflation

Sabharwal & Freeman (2025) document that between 2019 and 2024, the proportion of HEIs receiving grades A and above rose from 36% to nearly 64%, despite stagnation in measurable learning outcomes. This statistical inconsistency reinforces the view that **grade inflation** is engineered rather than earned.

Case 5: Peer Bribery and Informal Payments

Interviews conducted by **Iyer (2019)** and **Sankaran & Joseph (2018)** reveal that universities routinely budget "honorarium" or "hospitality funds" to influence visiting NAAC teams. Although not always categorized as bribes, these incentives blur ethical boundaries.

5. Gaming Metrics: The Manipulation of Evaluation

In digital governance and data systems, the term **"gaming metrics"** refers to exploiting quantitative benchmarks for unintended gains. Applied to NAAC, institutions prioritize scoring high in self-study reports (SSR) and key indicators rather than genuine academic improvement.

5.1 Quantitative Obsession

NAAC's current framework (Revised Accreditation Framework, 2017) assigns **70% weightage to data-based metrics** and only 30% to qualitative peer assessment. As **Manimala, Wasdani & Vijaygopal (2020)** observe, this creates perverse incentives for **data fabrication**, as numbers become easier to manipulate than academic culture.

5.2 Marketization of Education

S Singh (2024) and **Varghese (2024)** both describe this phenomenon as part of the "marketization of higher education," where universities act as corporations competing for visibility, not learning. Accreditation thus functions as a **branding mechanism**, commodifying education under the guise of quality.

5.3 Impact on Legacy Institutions

Older, government-funded universities such as Allahabad, Madras, and Calcutta have faced downgrades in recent cycles. As **Mehrotra & Upadhyay (2025)** note, these institutions lack financial agility and administrative resources to "play the metrics," while newer private universities—equipped with PR and data teams—excel in compliance documentation.

6. Analysis of the Political Economy of Accreditation

The **political economy** of accreditation in India intertwines with larger governance issues—regulatory capture, patronage networks, and bureaucratic corruption. **Sabharwal & Freeman (2025)** link this to "rent-seeking behavior," where actors within NAAC exploit institutional demand for grades to extract economic benefits.

Moreover, **state-private nexus** plays a role. State governments often prioritize private university expansion for economic growth, indirectly influencing accreditation outcomes. As **Shah (2015)** notes, regulatory frameworks like the Private Universities Acts in Rajasthan and Haryana explicitly condition operational legitimacy on NAAC or NBA accreditation—creating direct monetary pressure to obtain grades at any cost.

7. Personal Statement

As a researcher observing this trend from within the Indian academic ecosystem, I find the commercialization of accreditation deeply concerning. The NAAC was once a visionary institution that instilled self-evaluation and continuous improvement. Today, however, it represents a **broken trust mechanism**. When educational merit becomes purchasable, both students and scholars lose faith in the value of credentials.
In my view, NAAC's transformation into a **business-like entity** exemplifies how governance reforms without ethical oversight devolve into bureaucratic profiteering. The removal of assessors is a necessary start, but deeper reforms—rooted in accountability and transparency—are essential to restore credibility.

8. CONCLUSION

The NAAC accreditation system, envisioned as a benchmark of quality, has become a **gaming metric**—a system optimized not for learning but for scoring. While NAAC's institutional framework remains relevant, its operational integrity is compromised by human and structural corruption. The evidence reviewed—from **Sabharwal & Freeman (2025)** to **Kumar et al. (2025)**—indicates systemic manipulation, data inflation, and unethical assessor behavior.

If left unchecked, this will perpetuate a hierarchy where **resource-rich private universities dominate rankings**, while historically significant public universities are stigmatized as "underperformers."

India's higher education reforms must thus pivot from **metric-based compliance to moral accountability**, emphasizing transparency, independent audits, and real-time digital monitoring of assessor activities.

9. Further Scope of Research

Future research could explore:

- AI-driven integrity checks on accreditation data.
- Comparative studies of NAAC and global agencies like **ABET** or **EQUIS**.
- Longitudinal impact of grade inflation on employment and academic mobility.
- Behavioral economics of corruption in educational governance.
- Qualitative surveys of assessors' moral dilemmas and systemic pressures.

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