

Graded Autonomy and Accreditation Dynamics in Indian Higher Education: A Longitudinal Comparative Study of the Pre- and Post-NEP 2020 Reform Period (2005–2024)

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Abstract

This study analyses the evolution of graded autonomy and accreditation dynamics in Indian higher education through a comparative structure from 2005 to 2024. Institutional autonomy and quality assurance have become central pillars of governance reform under regulatory oversight of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced a structural shift by promoting graded autonomy, multidisciplinary transformation, and universal accreditation objectives. Using year-wise institutional data, the study applies statistical analysis and mean comparison techniques to examine differences between the Pre-NEP (2005–2019) and Post-NEP (2020–2024) periods. Findings show a significant rise in the approval of autonomous colleges after NEP 2020, along with sustained expansion in accreditation coverage despite small interruptions during the pandemic period. The comparative evidence confirms that NEP 2020 functioned as a reform breakpoint in India's higher education governance architecture. The results show the growing interdependence between autonomy expansion and accreditation-linked accountability mechanisms. The study contributes to policy evaluation literature by offering systematic empirical evidence on institutional reform trajectories in an emerging higher education system.

Keywords

Graded Autonomy; NAAC Accreditation; NEP 2020; Higher Education Reform; Institutional Governance; Quality Assurance; Comparative Policy Analysis

1. Introduction

Indian higher education went through a structured transformation over the past two decades. Autonomous status grants academic and administrative flexibility to colleges, while the NAAC accreditation ensures quality assurance. NEP 2020 sharpens the reforms by promoting graded autonomy and mandatory accreditation. This

paper investigates year-wise growth patterns to assess reform impact.

2. Objectives of the Study The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the year-wise growth of autonomous colleges in India from 2005 to 2024.
2. To analyze the longitudinal expansion of NAAC-accredited higher education institutions from 2005 to 2024.
3. To create a comparative model, distinguishing the Pre-NEP and Post-NEP reform phases.
4. To measure the change in institutional autonomy and accreditation after NEP 2020.
5. To evaluate whether NEP 2020 functions as a structural reform breakpoint in higher education governance.
6. To derive policy indications for aligning graded autonomy with accreditation-linked accountability mechanisms.

These objectives collectively enable a systematic evaluation of autonomy and accreditation dynamics in the Indian Higher education reform trajectory.

3. Literature Review

Existing scholarship suggests institutional autonomy enhances curriculum flexibility, innovation, and governance efficiency. Quality assurance through NAAC accreditation ensures accountability. NEP 2020 integrates both aspects through graded autonomy and universal accreditation objectives.

4. Data and Methodology

The study uses compiled year-wise data from UGC autonomous lists and NAAC summaries (2005–2024). Descriptive statistics, mean comparison, and graphical trend analysis are applied.

5. Year-wise Data Table (2005–2024)

YEAR	Autonomous Colleges	Total NAAC Accredited HEIs
2005	138	3120
2006	150	3635
2007	175	4350
2008	210	5170
2009	230	6190
2010	260	7210
2011	300	8230
2012	350	9260
2013	380	10300
2014	400	11140
2015	450	11580
2016	575	11920
2017	600	12170
2018	575	12384
2019	650	12600
2020	650	9480
2021	832	11000
2022	871	13650
2023	1050	16321
2024	1222	8950

6. Longitudinal Trend Analysis

Figure 1: Autonomous Colleges Trend

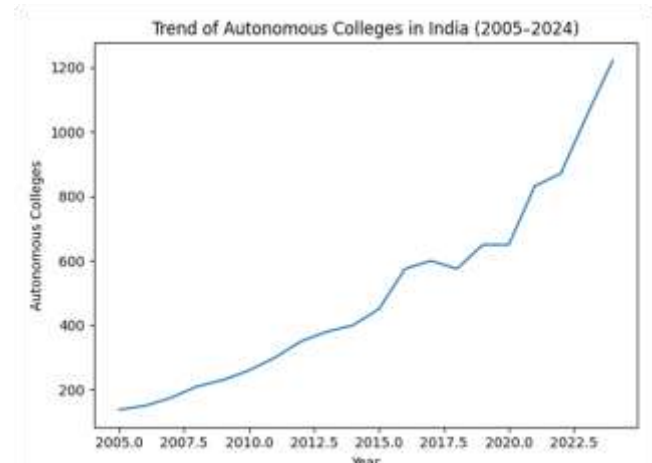
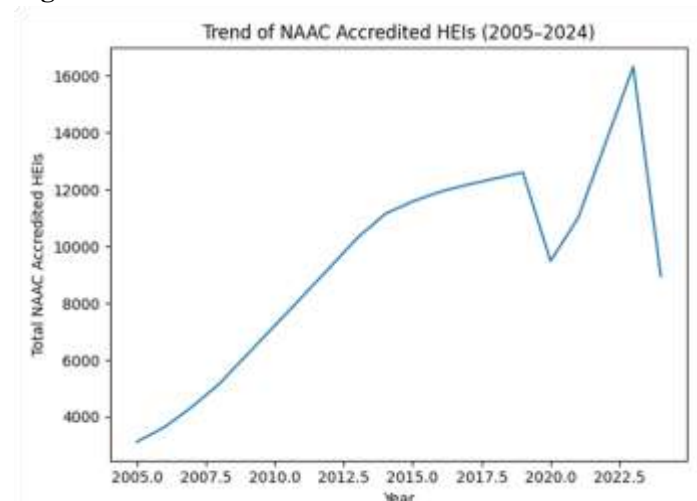


Figure 2: NAAC Accreditation Trend



7. Pre-NEP vs Post-NEP Comparative Model

Indicator	Pre-NEP (2005–2019)	Post-NEP (2020–2024)	Difference (Post - Pre)
Autonomous Colleges (Average)	362.87	925.0	562.13
NAAC Accredited HEIs (Average)	8617.27	11880.2	3262.93

- Average Autonomous Colleges increased from 362.87 (Pre-NEP) to 925.0 (Post-NEP).
- The average NAAC-accredited HEI increased from 8,617.27 to 11,880.2.
- This demonstrates strong structural reform acceleration.

Figure 3: Comparative Autonomous Colleges

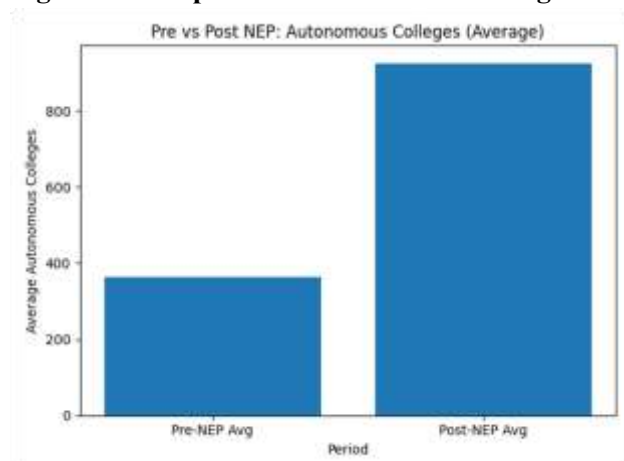
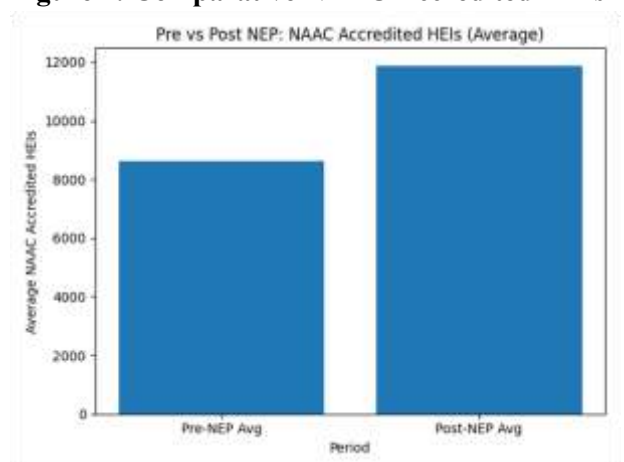


Figure 4: Comparative NAAC Accredited HEIs



8. Results and Discussion

The results confirm three phases: gradual expansion (2005–2014), reform acceleration (2015–2019), and policy-driven expansion under NEP 2020. Autonomous colleges expanded drastically post-2020. NAAC trends show pandemic disruption but overall expansion.

9. Policy Implications

Autonomy must be supported by administrative capacity building. Accreditation cycles require stability. Data transparency is essential for monitoring.

10. Conclusion

The comparative and longitudinal evidence demonstrates that NEP 2020 significantly accelerated institutional autonomy reforms in India.

References

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